POKÉMON(ORACIAL): J-POP AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF MIXED-HERITAGE JAPANESE AMERICANS

A thesis submitted to the faculty of San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of The Requirements for The Degree
Master of Arts In Ethnic Studies

by
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May 2016
I certify that I have read *Pokémon(oracial): J-pop and the Marginalization of Mixed-Heritage Japanese Americans* by Morgan Michele Melendres Mentz, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree: Master of Arts in Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University.

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This thesis deconstructs the use of Japanese popular cultural iconography by art and community festival spaces in Bay Area Japantowns and critiques the ways in which they reinforce traditional and new Orientalist stereotypes of the Japanese American community. Through use of Japanese popular culture these spaces create a visual narrative that promotes homogenous and monoracial stereotypes of the Nikkei community. Leveraging ethnographic observations of community gallery and festival spaces this work investigates how meaning is constructed and derived within Japantown spaces through the use of Japanese popular culture imagery. Furthermore, this thesis explores how such imagery reinforces Japanophilic delineations of the Nikkei community that distort the heterogeneous mixed-heritage make-up of the Japanese America.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Beyond the Surface: Problematizing Japanese Popular Culture ..............1

Chapter 1: Racial Essentialization, Mimicry, and Orientalism in the Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival and San Jose’s Obon Festival.............................13

  Racial Homogeneity in the Cherry Blossom Festival................................14
  Presenting Homogeneity through Racial Mimicry at Obon......................33
  Looking Forward.......................................................................................44

Chapter 2: Maintaining Difference: Third Wave Japanophilia and Racial Reductionism Present in Bay Area Japantown Galleries and Community Art Projects..................................................................................................46

  New People Gallery:..................................................................................47
  The Japantown Mural Project:.................................................................64
  New Definitions:........................................................................................78

Conclusion: Turning The Page: Implications and New Foundations .........................79

Works Cited....................................................................................................90
INTRODUCTION

"Beyond the Surface: Problematizing Japanese Popular Culture"

Popular culture may seem benign and superficial, but its images hold significant power in impacting how we look at the world. This study addresses the ways in which Japanese popular culture (also referred to as J-pop), presented in Bay Area Japantowns, impacts the larger Nikkei community by producing stereotyped imagery. Prompted by personal experiences in which J-pop impacted my daily reality as a mixed heritage Nikkei motivated this research topic. In the Spring of 2013, I was having tea with a friend of mine at a local cafe in downtown San Jose. As we sat on the cafe patio beneath the speckled sunlight shining through the tall sycamore trees that line Third Street, I listened to my friend elaborate on his interest in J-pop. Assuming I was an expert in J-pop because I am of Japanese ancestry, he began to elaborate on his vast knowledge of manga (Japanese graphic novels) and anime (Japanese animated series) that he had consumed since childhood. Expressing that I did not recognize many of the titles or stories he referenced, he in turn responded with, “Oh my gosh, you’ve never heard of any of these? I’m way more Asian than you,” when he is in fact

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not Asian at all. This instance, among many, in which friends and strangers alike measure my ethnic authenticity against my knowledge of Japanese popular culture, assumes that J-pop consumption must be a prerequisite for being considered Japanese. His understanding that J-pop must be an overarching marker for Asian identity was essentialist, racist, and belittling to say the least. However, upon learning that he grew up in San Jose’s Japantown where he first learned of and consumed J-pop from stores like Nikaku Gifts located on Sixth Street and Jackson Street gave him his sense of legitimacy to assume J-pop represents all of contemporary Nikkei identity.

This made me question how we as a community are positioning ourselves through J-pop iconography in Nikkei spaces and how it impacts stereotyped understandings of our heterogenous experiences. Examples like this have become all too common in my life as Japanese popular culture becomes ever more prevalent within the American mainstream. Such experiences are the inspiration for this thesis, which investigates how we as a community are participating and contributing to the dominant culture’s stereotyping of heterogeneous Nikkei communities through reductionary displays of J-pop. Looking specifically at San Francisco and San Jose Japantowns, I investigate the relationship between Japanophilic presentations of J-pop and (mis)representations of community heterogeneity in the Cherry Blossom and
Obon festivals and the New People Gallery and San Jose Japantown Mural Project. Ultimately, the goal of this project seeks to understand how Japanese popular culture, signified in Bay Area Japantowns, contributes to the persistent stereotyping and minimizing of diverse Japanese identities.

Literature documenting the growing visibility of J-pop within the American mainstream discusses the genre as a fascinating visual and cultural study. Mainly focused on consumerism, these texts by authors such as Roland Kelts and Anne Allison highlight J-pop’s crossover success with toy franchises and television series that speak to American youth. More critical scholars however, looked beyond consumerism into legacies of American Japanophilia and Orientalism as a driving force in this consumption. Most of the authors draw on Edward Said’s argument that Western stereotyping of Eastern cultures as homogenous and without complexity makes the consumption of Eastern culture easy, if not encouraged, to establish Western ideas of superiority.²

Penetrating the American mainstream can be tough for foreign companies unless they can tap into the American culture of consumption. Kelts documents J-pop’s success in accessing American consumer markets through television in the nineteen nineties with the introduction of popular anime series airing on

primetime American television. From there, the genre grew in popularity among American youth with toy franchises like Sanrio’s Hello Kitty, and the many Pokémon characters that have become recognizable figures in the average American household. Anthropologist Anne Allison also highlights the success of J-pop’s immersion into the American dominant culture noting how television series Sailor Moon, Pokémon, and Yu-Gi-Oh offered a freshness in visual and literary design for endless storyline possibilities and an ability to speak to multiple age groups and gender identities of youth in a way that American cartoons could not. Giving further explanation beyond consumer culture, Kelts notes that another contributing factor to the growing consumption of J-pop by Americans stems from a third wave Japanophilia, which continues legacies of exotification. However, Kelts positions this third wave Japanophilia as a harmless practice of American Otaku (obsessive collectors of J-pop).

Yet, legacies of Japanophilia have in fact proven to be harmful in creating demeaning stereotypes of Japanese communities. This tradition built upon historical foundations of Western Orientalism stems from what art historian

4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
William Hosley identifies as *japonisme*, or Japanophilia, that impacted music, theater, art, and the Western imagination during the Victorian era. Beginning in this first wave, consuming Japanese iconography, aesthetics, and cultural artifacts became a staple practice for the Orientalist wishing to quench their thirst for the exotic. In addition to collecting objects, Western participants of this first wave Japanophilia created the tradition of Japanophilia through racial mimicry of Japanese femininity.

Mari Yoshihara deconstructed visual distortions of Japanese identity in popular plays like *Madame Butterfly* that burgeoned during the first wave of Japanophilia. Yoshihara notes how racial mimicry by white actresses in these plays hinged upon Orientalist fantasies and consumerism by the audience in their need to stereotype Japanese objectivity as feminine, simple, docile, and without dimension. She continues explaining how these performances reinforced Orientalist narratives of Western virility and Eastern effeminacy. The popularity of these practices created a framework for understanding Japanese peoples through a paternalistic lens positioning Asian aesthetics as inferior and

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9 Ibid.  
11 Ibid
subordinate without heterogeneity or complexity rendering them easily consumable.\textsuperscript{12}

Christine Yano additionally argues that consumption of contemporary J-pop connects to Orientalism. Carefully dissecting the variant layers of Western obsession with the Sanrio character Hello Kitty, Yano track’s Kitty’s rise from Nikkei community icon to dominating major American retail venues.\textsuperscript{13} She attributes the character’s success to Sanrio’s positioning of Hello Kitty as commodified cuteness tied to stereotypes of Asian femininity.\textsuperscript{14} Hello Kitty’s objectivity and blankness becomes an open space to be filled with Orientalist desire.\textsuperscript{15} Yano as well as Kelts offer a well-constructed layout of J-pop’s complex and problematic rise in popularity within the American mainstream.

New literature on the subject points to a shift in practices of contemporary Orientalists depictions of Asian communities. Kim Middleton Meyer defines New Orientalism as being similar to its traditional counterpart that defines Eastern identities as subordinate. However, by looking at popular novels \textit{Snow Falling On Cedars} and \textit{Memoirs of a Geisha}, Meyer deconstructs how such literature adheres to traditional Orientalist homogenization, but does so

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
differently by framing such depictions through a culturally pluralistic lens.¹⁶
Unlike Said's Orientalism used as a tool of colonial domination, Meyer argues that New Orientalism works within a multicultural framework in which contemporary Westerners require themselves to be accepting of ethnic others while maintaining their difference.¹⁷ American hegemony or whiteness still becomes reinforced in the reading of such texts through a positioning of Asian as "other." Meyer further demarcates, "The ‘Asian’ is the new ‘Oriental,’ a linguistic shift that designates a change in the tenor of perception."¹⁸ Thus, the New Orientalist creates the facade of being sensitive and inclusive of ethnic others, while maintaining ideologies of difference with the continued exotification and homogenization of Asian cultures.

These various sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and cultural critics raise important questions about American consumerism of Japanese popular culture in past decades and whether such practices risk distorting Japanese culture and identity by imbuing it with Orientalist projections. They also successfully point to foundational theories delineating the historical racism of Orientalist culture that potentially drives J-pop consumption in America. These important critiques highlight the possible harm Western consumption of J-pop

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
has in reinforcing Orientalist and Japanophilic stereotypes and their projection onto contemporary Asian communities. While many of these publications offer foundational arguments in deconstructing the various reasons for the growth in American consumption of Japanese popular culture, their work does little to address the role J-Pop imagery itself plays in reducing diverse Japanese American communities. Additionally, their work does little to address the role that Japanese American communities themselves contribute to stereotyped J-pop iconography.

Particularly, in regard to presentations of local Nikkei communities, images that promote homogeneous and Orientalist projections within community spaces ignore the large multiethnic experience growing within each community. As of 2000, the mixed-heritage population comprised nearly one-third of the entire Japanese American community nationwide. As the community expands and new generations emerge, this percentage of mixed-heritage experiences can only increase making issues of representation that omit ethnic heterogeneity of the community highly concerning. American Studies scholar Lisa Lowe warns against such essentialization explaining that these limiting markers of racial identity constrain our communities into a homogenous groups that ignore group

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particularity and diversified experiences. Promoting monoracial, essentialized, and stereotyped imagery within community spaces ignores Nikkei diversity and worse, potentially risks invalidating and isolating the large mixed-heritage and gender plural populations that do not fit within these limited frameworks. Thus, this study looks at presentations of J-pop in Bay Area Japantowns and interrogates how they problematically correlate to static representations of Japanese identity. Lastly, this thesis explores how such visual signifiers of Japanese culture in J-pop become disjunctive from heterogeneous realities of the community.

I chose the San Francisco Cherry Blossom festival and San Jose Obon festival spaces for data collection as they draw in both community insiders and outsiders to share in the celebration and visual affirmation of contemporary Nikkei culture. The New People Gallery in San Francisco and the Japantown Mural Project in San Jose are also of focus in this study for their strong visible presence and engagement within Japantown community spaces. I leveraged both ethnographic observations from October 2013 to May 2014 and a semiotic analysis of onsite, online, and print content within the previously mentioned

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community spaces to provide evidence in their usage of homogeneous J-pop iconography to represent the larger community.

The spaces chosen for primary focus in this study speak to the historical, popular cultural, and traditional aspects of the Japanese American community. A combination of ethnographic observations in San Francisco and San Jose Japantowns, interviews, and a critical analysis of community displayed artwork were used as primary data collection methods for my research. Latent coding of interviews and research from online content deconstruct how each organization and location addresses and represents the Japanese American community through usage of J-pop iconography. Utilizing these methods, I then deconstruct J-pop imagery used to delineate the Bay Area Japanese American community.

This study is broken down into two sections focusing on festival and art spaces. The first chapter, "Racial Essentialization, Mimicry, and Orientalism in the Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival and San Jose Obon Festival," addresses issues of visibility and use of Orientalist tropes within festival spaces. Recognizing how festivals serve to create social cohesion for the community made these events important for investigation of visual content used to signify the community as a whole. This chapter also looks at how various visual signifiers utilizing J-pop perpetuate racial reductionism and essentialization of complex Japanese identities.
The second chapter “Maintaining Difference: Third Wave Japanophilia and Racial Reductionism Present in Bay Area Japantown Galleries and Community Art Projects” addresses the transference of traditional Orientalist tropes onto contemporary J-pop iconography within gallery art and consumer goods perpetuating hyper-sexualized, effeminized, and racially reductive imagery of Japanese identity. This chapter looks at two locations prominently displaying Japantown artwork, the New People Gallery in San Francisco and the Japantown Mural Project in San Jose. Looking at the visual iconography promoted within both spaces, chapter two assesses how oversimplification of J-pop imagery within these projects removes subversive Japanese style movements from their original contexts while reinforcing traditional orientalist tropes of the Japanese community.

Observing the rapid growth of J-pop imagery and how it has impacted my own experience as a mixed heritage Nikkei has shown me the power J-pop possesses in influencing how the dominant culture perceives Japanese identities. Nikkei diversity grows with each generation and new cultural definitions emerge each day. Yet, their unique experiences risk becoming invisible unless we address Japanophilia and Orientalism. If we remain uncritical of community spaces that promote reductionist Japanophilic iconography, then we exclude the heterogenous cultural landscape comprising Japanese America. This study
investigates the ways in which J-pop iconography signifies stereotypes about Nikkei culture and draws attention to their implications for the community.
Social gatherings play an important role in shaping community by creating and maintaining a sense of a social cohesion for the collective identity of a group. Community festivals and communal celebrations of ethnic specific holidays within Japantowns are a part of this production and sharing of culture. In an attempt to positively affirm the diversity of the Nikkei community, festivals in Japantowns celebrate contemporary and historical Japanese American culture. Festival gatherings play a significant role in the creation and signification of community through the production of visual and discursive texts that represent culture. In this chapter I investigate festival spaces in Bay Area Japantowns that distort Nikkei diversity by perpetuating homogeneity through Orientalist fantasies. Particularly, I focus on how the San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival produces traditional and new Orientalist tropes in addition to the utilization of San Jose’s Obon Festival as a space to act out Orientalist fantasies through racial mimicry. This section addresses essentialized language and racialized presentations of Japanese American identity within festival spaces that
perpetuate limiting Orientalist understandings of Japanese and Japanese American subjectivities that negate the community’s cultural diversity.

Racial Homogeneity in the Cherry Blossom Festival

In the heart of San Francisco’s Japantown on Webster between Geary and Post Street thousands of gatherers fill the roadways walking between metal barricades that block street traffic for the 2014 Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival. Along Webster Street aromatic smoke from grilled meats rises from a long line of white-tented food booths offering an eclectic array of Japanese cuisine. Many of the dining options present at the festival infuse traditional Japanese dishes with other ethnic culinary delights like American style burgers seasoned with teriyaki sauce and kettle corn mixed with furikake (seaweed flake seasoning) and arare (rice cracker). Culturally hybrid foods like Spam musubi and other ethnic cuisines such as Korean barbeque spare ribs also stand out. The combination of various Japanese and Japanese American infused cuisines exhibit a diverse display of ethnic heritage through food present at the festival that coincide with the festival’s mission.

The Cherry Blossom Festival’s official website delineates that the purpose of Cherry Blossom festivities are to celebrate and represent the community by “showcasing the color and grace of the Japanese culture and the diversity of the Japanese American Community.” The emphasis on observing the diversity and multifaceted “color” of the Nikkei community in the website’s description draws awareness to the inherent heterogeneous aspect of Japanese America. The mixed-race or mixed-heritage population comprising over one-third of the Nikkei community largely contributes to its heterogeneity. Thus, it makes sense for the Cherry Blossom Festival’s yearly celebration of a largely mixed-heritage community would focus on displaying the community’s diversity. Consequently, promotional images and advertisements demarcating the various food booths became increasingly problematic during my ethnographic observations they did not match the diversity of the cuisine or the festival’s mission.

Ironically, the visual texts that advertised the mixed-ethnic cuisine within the food-booth area revealed a presence of homogeneous and static visual displays of Nikkei identity. This became evident after I circled the entirety of the food section searching for some comfort food and eventually found myself at the “Kitsune Udon” booth. Feeling satisfaction as I slurped my way through an

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22 Ibid.
entire bowl of thick udon noodles in a hot dashi (fish base) stock topped with scallions, tempura flakes, kamaboko (fish cake), and added kimchi (pickled cabbage) that transformed my childhood comfort food into a new sizzling flavor. While eating I thought how interesting that like myself being mixed heritage Nikkei my bowl of udon was also reflective of cultural mixing. Looking at the food booth sign and menu I searched for visual signifiers that would reinforce this reflection of mixed ethnic perspective evident in the cuisine. However, the sign advertising udon stated in bold pink text “Kitsune Udon,” which traditionally would never include kimchi, with various pink hued sakura (cherry blossom) scattered around it. Along the banner that hung beneath the serving table depicted J-pop stylized kokeshi dolls dressed in brightly colored kimonos with a few of them with tiny chopsticks pointing out of their hair. The tiny J-pop figures dressed in cartoonish kimonos utilized to advertise a mixed ethnic cuisine instead emphasized a hyper-feminized monoracial depiction of Japanese culture.

Additionally, the use of doll images on the “Kitsune Udon” banner evoked a literal objectifying of Japanese femininity. Since dolls hold no autonomy or subjectivity of their own they function for the sole pleasure of their consumers. The palpable image of the kimono to signify an essentialized idea of “Japanese-ness” attaches a hyper-feminine gender to Nikkei identity that is non-inclusive of the pluralistic genders within the community and signifies
nothing about the cultural hybridity of the food. Women dressed in yukata
(summer kimono) and pale face make up standing directly next to the udon booth
advertising and amusing those standing in line at the “Soko Tarumikoshi Ren”
food-booth also heightened the hyper-feminized portrayal of Nikkei cuisine and
culture. While the kimono does play a significant role within Japanese history
and presentations of past cultural traditions it becomes unattached to such
meanings when dramatized and exotified in order to sell food. The use of kimono
and hyper-feminized images to advertise various food booths renders the kimono
into a limited image of Japanese objectivity that historically has been used by the
western dominant culture to signify Japanese culture as perpetually foreign,
consumable, and exotic. Iconic American films like Sayonara\textsuperscript{24} and Memoirs of
a Geisha\textsuperscript{25} that tell similar narratives of forbidden love involving Japanese
women both exemplify the tradition of Western viewers associating the kimono
with hyper-sexuality and eroticism of Japanese culture. Drawing on these
representations of Asian femininity on screen, filmmaker and Asian American
studies scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu deconstructs how roles like the “china
doll” and “geisha” figures construct a racialized hyper-sexuality placed onto

Pictures Entertainment, 2005
Asian female bodies.\textsuperscript{26} She complicates how pleasure is drawn from these roles and exposes the potential agency that Asian and Asian American women can practice within the confines of these racialized stereotypes.\textsuperscript{27} Analyzing Western pornographic films Parreñas Shimizu identifies a common thread visible in the marking of Asian objectivity through use of racially charged costumes, such as the kimono or geisha outfit, that denotes Asian hyper-femininity and exotic other.\textsuperscript{28} This tenuous relationship of exotification and hyper-sexuality between Asian visibility and the Orientalist desires of the dominant culture complicate the use of kimono as costume for advertisement at Cherry Blossom.

The use of homogenized visual texts to signify and represent the Nikkei community tangible at the food booths coincided online with online content using similar Orientalist tropes flattened Nikkei heterogeneity. When looking at social media usage to promote the 2014 festival a post by the JapanExpo left on the official Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival’s Facebook page stood out. The post advertising to those who wish “to learn more about Japanese / Japanese American culture,” depicts four older monoracial Nikkei women dressed in bright yellow kimonos with a red crisscross pattern standing alongside two phenotypically white women appearing to be in their twenties wearing

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
cosplay outfits. The tallest white woman centered in the photo wears a long blonde wig with pink and blue highlights and a large fuzzy lavender bow propped up on the corner of her face with a matching white blouse and candy printed blue and pink skirt and matching knee-high socks. The other young woman to the right of the photo wears a grey wig with an off-white rose hair clip and a black lace blouse underneath a purple gothic Lolita style jumper displaying a large bow on her chest. The older women wearing kimono superimposed by the depiction of contemporary “Japanese-ness” by the white women dressed in J-pop cosplay fashions utilizes Orientalist and hyper-feminine tropes to represent the Nikkei community. Mixed-ethnic cultural hybridity, gender diversity, or other heterogeneous aspects of Japanese and Japanese American culture are invisible in this advertisement for the Cherry Blossom Festival.

Simplified and static delineations of the Japanese American community online continued to be evident in the discursive language used by the festival website to define various presentations of Japanese cultural traditions. For example, the delineation of Tea Ceremony as a Buddhist ritual and representative of a “harmonious and tranquil expression of friendship” vaguely highlights the complexity of Japanese tea traditions. In fact, the cultivation of tea and its

29 “Japan Expo USA,” Facebook (Web: April, 1 2014) May 2014
<https://www.facebook.com/JapanExpoUSA?ref=stream&hc_location=timeline>
treatment during Tea Ceremony has an extensive history dating back to the eighth century when Japan adopted tea customs from China and ritualistically transformed the treatment of tea over the centuries culminating in the modern tea ceremonies now practiced. Flattened and ill defined language like "harmonious" and "tranquil" inadequately informs festival participants the complex multicultural history of tea ceremony and reinforces static idealizations Japan’s cultural past. Additionally, this language evokes an Orientalist vocabulary that relegates Japanese culture to a space of objectivity. Edward Said notes that Europe’s literary and educated elite during the eighteenth century developed the Orientalist idea of passivity and objectification by linguistically positioning the east as a passive exotic other in order to justify western colonization and occupation of eastern territories. Lexicologist Ronald Barthes exemplifies this tradition by linguistically engaging in the idea of Japan where he can position it as being far away and even “treat it declaratively as a novelistic object.” The simplistic delineations of the Japanese tea ceremony on the Cherry Blossom Festival website coincides with such Orientalist consumption of complex cultural traditions and repositioning them simple, passive, and flattened. Additionally, the emphasis on “friendship” in order to be welcoming to

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non-Nikkei guests also coincides with reductionary language throughout the festival in order to position the community as non-threatening and hospitable. This tactic evocative of similar linguistic tricks leveraged in the post WWII era restructures how Western viewers perceive Japanese populations. Steering away from the wartime fear of “Yellow Peril,” imagery of Japanese culture becomes docile, effeminate, and consumable. During this period numerous Japanese gardens and tea ceremony presentations displayed across the United States reshaped the Japanese image from menacing into a defeated people ready to serve the Orientalist desires of a rising American empire.33

Additionally, the positioning of Japanese culture as exotic other for consumption by the Cherry Blossom Festival problematically perpetuates similar linguistic discourses that historically justified the marginalization of the Nikkei community.34 Evidence of this linguistic objectification of Japanese and Japanese American culture resides within best selling novels *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Snow Falling On Cedars*. Popular culture critic Kim Middleton Meyer denotes that these novels propagate the new Orientalism that positions Japanese American identity as other using linguistic functions of difference to ease

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multicultural anxiety and cater to Western fetishes. Similarly, Gary Okihiro documents how the linguistic positioning of Asians as ethnic other in novels like *Rising Sun* function to reinforce a Japanese objectivity as an oppositional other to American whiteness. Similar discursive texts that reduce Japanese culture into a homogeneous other employed by the Cherry Blossom Festival juxtapose the festival’s mission of representing Nikkei diversity.

Additionally, the signification of J-Pop for the festival becomes increasingly problematic when reinforced and presented to youth in the community at the Sanrio Kids Corner. The 2014 Cherry Blossom Festival’s Kids Corner attempts to celebrate Nikkei culture to youth in the community, but problematically reinforces limited delineations of Nikkei youth identity through a fixation on J-pop. The Kids Corner occupies a small section of the festival at the west end of the Post and Webster Street intersection near the food booths. Under a large white tent two signs hang on each side displaying Hello Kitty in a red kimono with soft and bright pink hued *sakura* flowers surrounding her. The sign on the left of the tent reads “Tickets” and the sign on thee right states “Prize Redemption”. The “Tickets” sign displays Hello Kitty holding a pale blue fan while the “Prize Redemption” sign has her holding a pink rectangular prize with

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a blue and pink sakura floral pattern on it while Kitty demurely covers her nonexistent mouth with her paw. Two young Nikkei girls about nine years old stand in front of me waiting to select the particular prize of their choice. The girl on the left with hair tied neatly in a high ponytail waits patiently for the middle aged white woman wearing a sequent red Hello Kitty bow working the prize booth to assist her. The young girl wearing a pale pink backpack with white and hot pink sakura flowers with Hello Kitty printed on its front pocket in a pink and green kimono and also covering her nonexistent mouth with both paws similar matches the image on the prize sign. The girl and her friend look at the prizes laid out upon the fold-out prize table covered in a red table cloth.

Hyper-feminized and homogeneously racialized gender tropes overwhelm the prize table as exhibited through the dominant presence of Hello Kitty products. Practices of oversimplification through singular tropes of hyper-femininity pervasively dominate the Sanrio Kid’s Corner through use of Hello Kitty iconography. Starting on the right of the prize table the first column for one ticket rests Hello Kitty pens, a small Hawaii Hello Kitty note pad, a Hello Kitty pin-wheel, and note book. The second column for two tickets has a red Sanrio water bottle with Hello Kitty and friends printed on it in white, Hello Kitty statuettes about two inches tall one pink one blue, a pink Hello Kitty notepad, and a pack of Sanrio character stickers with Hello Kitty, Batz Maru,
Kerropi, and Tuxedo Sam. The third column for three tickets has two packaged notepad and pen sets with Hello Kitty on one and Hello Kitty with friends on the second notepad. In the fourth column for four tickets a plastic three-inch Hello Kitty doll with pink bow, yellow sweater and blue jeans is visible alongside two pencils cases. The first case is red with Hello Kitty in black-framed glasses, plaid bow, and matching skirt and the other pencil case is blue with Kerropi and friends printed in a poka-dot pattern on all sides of the case. The fifth and final column for five tickets offers a pink Hello Kitty water bottle. While a few different Sanrio characters make an appearance in various columns Hello Kitty visibly over shadows them on the prize table with multiple novelty goods donning her face in each column.

The centrality of the white cat is further seen in the Hello Kitty spin and win game set up directly across from the ticket and prize booth and next to the Tuxedo Sam Bow Tie Bounce. A young girl appearing to be around eight years old with shoulder length straight black hair held in place by a pearl colored plastic headband waits to spin Hello Kitty’s spinning wheel that is roughly two and a half feet in diameter. The wheel swirls rapidly then slowly approaches a stop with the top pointer hitting each rod jutting out from the wheel to designate the prize award. The awards are gauged from first a white cow, second with a brown dog, third with a small blue mouse, and the grand prize slot with Hello
Kitty raising her arms. In the center of the wheel a giant red circle encapsulates Hello Kitty’s giant white face that spins around staring at the eager player awaiting their prize score. A handful of children also gather around Tuxedo Sam’s Bow Tie Bounce with the giant blue penguin painted on a large board reaching over five feet with pegs sticking out in a crisscross pattern all the way down the board. Circular placards with bowties printed on them are placed at the top of the board and released to bounce downward on random pegs until it reaches the bottom of the board. At the bottom various Sanrio characters divide the bottom into different zones to designate different prize points. Past the games and ticketing tents a handful of large brown fold out tables offer craft and art-making activities for youth. A sand-painting station offers different Hello Kitty scenes to be decorated with brightly colored sand. A puff-paint section also offers a bunny, police car, and Hello Kitty predesigned placards to be decorated with an array of puff paint colors.

Hello Kitty imagery and paraphernalia colored in hues of red and pink overwhelmingly dominate the Kids Corner landscape shadowing the other Sanrio characters or other non-feminine gendered color schemes that may also be present. This hyper-feminine positioning with Hello Kitty at the center of the Sanrio Kid’s Corner aligns with what anthropologist Christine Yano demarcates as a globalized consumer culture of cuteness mostly dictated by the worldwide
distribution of Hello Kitty imagery. Such imagery leveraging iconography like the kimono or cherry blossoms exotify Hello Kitty for consumers and reproduces racial essentialization and Orientalist stereotyping of Japanese identity. The purpose of the Kids Corner to include the younger (and predominantly mixed heritage) Nikkei generations again falls short in aligning with the festival’s purpose to celebrate the “color” and diversity of the Nikkei community. Instead the only representation being made is that of an Orientalist and hyper-feminized Hello Kitty franchise.

The centrality of Hello Kitty within the Kids Corner potentially stems from an amassing presence of Hello Kitty within mainstream American popular culture. At over thirty-five hundred novelty stores worldwide Sanrio sells hyper-feminine J-pop commodities propelled by consumer obsessions with Hello Kitty and all she symbolizes. Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison notes Sanrio’s gendered products are geared towards a childlike girlhood culture of cuteness that plays a significant role in their global economic franchise. Hello Kitty’s superiority and dominant presence over other characters like Keroppi and Batz-Maru within the Sanrio Kids Corner aligns with this practice of placing a heightened emphasis on cuteness and girlhood presenting a singularly gendered

and monoracial idealization of Japanese youth identity that is not representative of Nikkei youth and their diversity. As noted by anthropologist Christine Yano, the cuteness and objectivity of Hello Kitty renders her into a symbol of “feminized blankness” that allows for her consumers to imbue and create meaning within the void of her character. However, in the context of the Cherry Blossom Festival as a marker of contemporary Nikkei identity the use of Hello Kitty in kimono signifies the opposite with her highly feminized and homogenous stereotyping of Japanese culture.

The use of Hello Kitty to symbolize Nikkei identity becomes even more confusing and disturbing as she is actually British in her character story living just outside of London with her family making her both ethnically white to match her physical whiteness. This complicates the meaning of Hello Kitty depicted in kimono on the Sanrio Kids Corner ticketing stand, prizes, crafting activities, and even on a community youth’s backpack. For festival viewers she embodies a simplified image of Japanese identity dressed in Orientalist tropes, but adding her origin as British confuses this display and positions Hello Kitty as a white cat dressed in Yellow Face. With no context other than the Orientalist and simplified imagery coding the character as hyper-feminine and cute leaves

only the singular image of essentialized Japanese femininity. Constructing Hello Kitty as a representative of Japanese youth within the Kids Corner insufficiently represents the sizeable mixed-heritage and diverse youth population within the community. If Hello Kitty is a void to be filled by the projections of her consumers than such essentialized images already assigned to her at the festival leave little room for youth to project their own heterogeneous identities on a statically racialized character.

The presence of J-pop at the Cherry Blossom Festival also exemplifies the broadened locales of traditional Orientalism and a shift towards new Orientalism. Meyer delineates that while traditionally the Oriental/Occidental binary existed between the Middle East and Europe the new language of difference now positions Asians and Asian Americans as a contemporary exotic cultural other.41 This perception maintains a post-civil rights attitude of cultural inclusivity and acceptance groups that exist outside of American whiteness, but still maintains Orientalist binaries through a language of other. While the Cherry Blossom Festival and the dominant American culture embraces hyper-feminized and racialized Hello Kitty imagery there has been resistance to the use of these images to represent Japanese identity. In “Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on

Wheels’ Denise Uyehara critiques the meaning ascribed to Hello Kitty as a cute and happy consumer product and deconstructs the cat as a signifier of Asian objectivity and static femininity that caters to Orientalist desire. However, the overwhelming persistence of Hello Kitty products and kimono wearing Kitty images present at the 2014 Cherry Blossom Festival even in the face of community critique of her static imagery made in 1995 exhibits the increased power of J-pop iconography as representative of a generalized Japanese identity. In this framework new Orientalism is concerned with celebrating Japanese culture while keeping the subjectivity and inclusivity of it separated from a dominant culture by racializing it through Orientalist binaries. In doing so this also maintains the continued issue of positioning Asian communities as homogeneous exotic others.

Third Wave Japanophilia coincides with new Orientalism through the practice of Western consumers sensationalizing and celebrating J-pop in such a way that feeds back into Orientalist binaries that exotify and otherize the contemporary cultures of Japanese communities. Roland Kelts delineates that the fanatic consumption of J-pop by American otaku, fanatics and collectors of Japanese popular culture, drives third wave Japanophilia. Recognizing the

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connection between J-pop's popularity and new Orientalist frameworks allows for a deeper investigation and raises concerns about the use of J-pop to represent youth within Bay Area Nikkei festivals. The homogeneous racialization of J-pop iconography constructed to represent a heterogeneous Nikkei youth population at the Sanrio Kids Corner deceitfully diverges from the festival’s mission of promoting community diversity.

Often fixed in a world of fantasy, J-pop cannot sufficiently represent the heterogeneous realities of Nikkei youth and the wider community. Additionally, the idealization of Hello Kitty who literally has no mouth for which to speak also risks signifying gendered stereotypes of docility and meekness that has stereotyped and silenced Japanese communities within Western discourse. This begs the question of how the Sanrio Kids Corner is actually serving the festival’s agenda to promote diversified Nikkei culture especially to a youth population that is largely mixed-heritage. By using J-pop and Sanrio corporate icons to signify and celebrate identity to youth in the Bay Area Nikkei community propels and encourages the visibility of a modern Nikkei identity from a position of consumer culture driven by new Orientalism and a Japanophilic consumption of J-pop.

Also, it is concerning that flattened J-pop iconography utilized within spaces like the Cherry Blossom Festival limit space for mixed-heritage and other Nikkei populations to visibly see a reflection of their own diverse individualities. Perpetuating and celebrating these images as being synonymous with the Nikkei experience risks isolating those in the community who do not identify with such narrow archetypes or pressure them to conform or even hyper-identify with such images in order to legitimate their participation within the community. The latter of these is of particular interest as many mixed-heritage persons with hybrid and multifaceted ethnic identifications become disjunctive or denied inclusion within their respective communities when they do not conform to essentialized presentations of race.

The way in which racial identity is performed within the Cherry Blossom Festival pageant scholarship contests also exposes these concerns in recognizing the Nikkei community as heterogeneous. Sociologist Rebecca King O'Riain extensively documents the experience and history of mixed-race Nikkei contestants in Cherry Blossom Festival beauty pageants in Hawai‘i and on the West Coast. She discusses how mixed-race contestants are often pressured to utilize a type of race work “that takes bodily, cultural, and political effort by

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social actors to assert, maintain, and challenge racial meanings. In order for mixed-race Nikkei contestants to solidify their ethnic authenticity to pageant judges and the wider festival audience, a race work of proving culturally essentialized knowledge of the Japanese identity must be performed. While the presence of mixed-heritage visibility within the pageant challenges racial meaning the enforcement of cultural homogeneity within various aspects of the Cherry Blossom Festival still limits spaces in which heterogeneous narratives of Nikkei identity can be represented.

The pressure for mixed heritage pageant contestants to hyper-identify and perform race work to legitimate their status as community member exemplifies a potential model for other marginalized populations in the community to follow. Those coming into community spaces being bombarded by monolithic signifiers of Nikkei culture, but do not fit within such limiting confines may especially feel isolated. The same way in which mixed heritage pageant contestants feel constrained by performing essentialized presentations of Nikkei culture to legitimate their participation, mixed heritage community members may also feel such pressures when presented with homogeneous presentations of “Japanese-ness” at the festival. The flattened and stereotyped J-pop images

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present at the Cherry Blossom Festival signify Orientalist and Japanophilic archetypes of Nikkei culture that create and reinforce these boundaries of what it means to be Japanese and Japanese American. If racially reductive images are allowed to continually signify Japanese identity from an Orientalist perspective the Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival jeopardizes doing the opposite of its mission to celebrate Nikkei diversity. By promoting a static objectivity of Japanese culture the festival isolates and ignores the transformative and diverse heterogeneous identities that comprise the community.

*Presenting Homogeneity through Racial Mimicry at Obon*

Obon is a summer festival and time of gathering for the San Jose Nikkei community to celebrate and remember ancestors and those who have passed on. On Fifth Street directly in front of San Jose’s Betsuin Temple both younger and older generations circularly dance together around the odori band stage. Paper lanterns made by youth in the community hang in rows that illuminate the street once the sunlight fades. One painted like a basketball, another appearing as a pokéball from the popular anime Pokémon, and many donning the face of Hello Kitty visually represent the influence of J-pop within the San Jose Nikkei
community. Festival participants also play games like bingo and pull-tabs, in addition to consuming a variety of Japanese American and Pan-Asian cuisine like sushi, chicken teriyaki, udon, strawberry shortcake, and boba (tapioca drinks). Additionally, the San Jose Japantown Betsuin Temple sells flower leis, evidence of Hawaiian influence and cultural hybridity of the Nikkei community, and bouquets to help raise money for the temple. The odori dance however is the focal point of the festival.

During odori many Nikkei sports teams, dance troupes, bands, and martial arts groups dance together with matching happi coats or t-shirts while others dress in traditional yukata (summer kimono). Many newcomers as well participate in the dance potentially as a means of learning and engaging in the Japanese American community. At the 2013 Obon festival numerous white women participated by dancing alongside Nikkei community members. A particularly noticeable blonde woman appearing to be in her mid-twenties danced in kimono, pale face make-up, and dramatized colors upon her lips and eyes. In her blonde hair flawlessly styled in a complex network of waves and curls placed on top her head displayed three ornate hashi (chopsticks) sticking out diagonally from the side of her bun. And while dressing in yukata is

traditional for the event, many Nikkei youth wear happi coats or even casual street clothes instead highlighting that fact that the ceremonial dancing is more important than one’s attire. However, this young blonde woman and many others like her at the 2013 Obon festival seem to leverage a dramatized and extreme appearance to legitimize their participation in odori. Her presentation of what she believed to signify a Japanese identity appears similar to the example of Phoebe Kropp’s documentation of 1930s Olvera Street in Los Angeles where white patrons visiting the Mexican cultural space would often dress in racially essentialized clothing to dramatize their experience. Also, in addition to the young blonde odori dancer in fetishized geisha like attire, older white women in “ethnic” clothing were also visible wearing less exaggerated Japanese dress as a means to authenticate their participation. One older tall white woman with shortly cropped curly red hair appearing to be in her sixties danced in a royal blue patterned happi coat and a plastic red and white circular fan with a black plastic handle. A friend of mine attending the festival with me had recognized her as an acquaintance. Curiously, I inquired if she was possibly a grandparent to one of the many mixed Nikkei youth also participating in odori, but he explained that the older woman had no connection to the Nikkei community other than

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recently moving within the vicinity of San Jose's Japantown. Thus, with minimal connection to Obon as a community event centered in the remembrance of the deceased and simply dressing up in traditional Japanese clothing becomes a centerpiece for white patrons participating in Obon. Historian Eric Lott notes how such performances of race where community outsiders dress in ethnic costumes for pleasure coincide with how blackface minstrelsy allowed whites to reinforce their hegemonic power while enjoying what they believe to be authentic presentations of racial otherness. These performances mimicking Japanese identity by both old and young non-Nikkei dancers problematically permits stereotyping of the community to thrive within festival spaces and further marginalize heterogeneous celebrations of Nikkei culture.

Notably, many other non-Nikkei dancers in the 2013 Obon festival were mainly white women dressed in dramatized costumes that emphasized Japanese femininity in particular. The example of the stereotypical geisha costume complete with chopstick hair accessories worn by the blonde odori dancer speaks to the legacy of racial mimicry by white women in racist Orientalist performances like Madame Butterfly. As noted by Mari Yoshihara, Madame Butterfly symbolizes the relationship between the U.S. and Asia, positioning the

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West as a site of virility and Asia as the effeminate. Additionally, this pairs with Said’s theory of traditional Orientalist binaries locating the East as an exotic other for Western consumption and conquest. The availability and passivity of the Japanese feminine body is palpable throughout the play. For example, Yoshihara documents the patronizing comments of a white blonde actress’s reference to the Japanese female character of Cho-Cho-San as a “plaything” for the pleasure of herself and the white audience. Yoshihara also asserts that any interpretation of Madame Butterfly must also be cognizant of the white male perspective from which it was written in addition to the intentions of the white females participating in the racial performance of Japanese identity.

Furthermore, this legacy of exotifying Japanese culture through racial mimicry allows whites to imagine themselves at the center of a Japanese fantasy and denies Japanese culture to be seen for its true complexity. Homogenized images of Japanese femininity produced by this Orientalist tradition reinforces racial stereotypes involving the availability and passivity of the Japanese feminine body as an objectified “plaything” for the pleasure of its consumers. Within this context patrons of Obon like the young blonde odori dancer wearing kimono, exaggerated makeup, and chopsticks in her hair evokes a homogeneous and

52 Ibid.
distorted illustration of Japanese identity that is hyper-feminized. Additionally, the increasing visibility of these racial performances at Obon undermine the festivals signifier as a celebration of a historically marginalized community and allows such observers to co-opt Obon as a stage for their own Japanese fantasy. Their mimicry of Nikkei identity becomes a tool of power that is dependent upon a distinction of Japanese otherness so they might take pleasure in it while maintaining Orientalist binaries. The racial mimicry performed by the blonde dancer and numerous others within festival spaces risks reinforcing racially homogeneous demarcations of the Nikkei community through Orientalist tropes that negate the diversity and dimensionality of the community.

Reverend Gerald Sakamoto from the San Jose Japantown Betsuin Temple that holds Obon each year commented on the growing presence of non-Nikkei participants attending Obon and the rising visibility of racial performances. He stated, “Obon attracts a larger community of non-Nikkei” which is evident in the participation of “nearly half if not more non-Nikkei attendees at the Obon now.” He explained that as a Buddhist holiday, Obon creates an inclusive space for all cultures and all peoples who wish to know the Dharma. In regards to the racial performance during odori the Betsuin Temple reverend noted that, “cosplay people that come to Obon are different from dancers who come to really dance for tradition and have been for years, [while] the cosplay people are portraying
things that they think are Japanese." His use of the word cosplay to demarcate these participants is notable in recognizing the influence of J-pop within festival spaces. Costume play or cosplay involves the practice of dressing up as J-pop characters often ascribed to an anime series or Japanese gaming character rooted in fantasy.\textsuperscript{53} In particular a study of American cosplay culture by Patrick Benesh-Liu revealed that the allure of cosplay is rooted in its allowance of participants to further engage in the escapism they find desirable in J-pop fantasy. Thus, cosplay allows them to enter another world to live out their desires.\textsuperscript{54} Additionally, Benesh-Liu concludes that cosplay has grown beyond anime into other platforms within America such as new American fantasy sci-fi characters and in the case of the white odori dancer to racist stereotyping of Japanese femininity in the geisha costume. Needless to say the legacy of racial mimicry and Orientalist desire in the west would naturally develop foundations in American cosplay as it offers a space for racial performance untethered to the responsibilities of realistic community representation. Fantasy provides a protective space that removes the accountability of the wearer misrepresenting community identity while simultaneously allowing them to mimic the culture of their desire. Reverend Sakamoto continued to explain that cosplay performances


allow these participants to express their appreciation of Japanese culture.

However, I would argue that these participants are not appreciating anything more than their own fantasies of "Japanese-ness" informed by Orientalism. The need to essentialize Nikkei identity, specifically Japanese femininity, in their attire requires a homogeneous perspective that coincides with Orientalist tropes. Were these participants to critically engage in Obon by recognizing the community's heterogeneity it would shatter the Orientalist fantasy motivating their participation in Obon.

As delineated by Lott racial mimicry stems from a place of power that reinforces racial boundaries by the performance itself emphasizing stereotyped ideas of ethnic others and discounting their heterogeneity. The presence of cosplay dancers in the San Jose Obon Festival who participate by performing homogeneous presentations of what they perceive as Japanese identity suggests a growing popularity and interest in Japanese culture through J-pop consumption. These racial performances within the context of the Obon festival demarcate an evolving understanding of Nikkei identity as being synonymous with J-pop. Journalist Roland Kelts explains that growing interest in J-pop by American consumers drives third wave of Japanophilia and has developed from a

long-standing tradition of cultural appropriation and commodification by Western Orientalism. Also, art historian William Hosley articulates the origins of Japanophilia with European and American consumption of Japanese cultural items, art, fashion, dress and religious paraphernalia beginning during the Victorian era after the West’s forced entry to Japan ending the country’s isolationist period. Japanophilia as a mere tradition of consumerism functions not to explore a true reality of Japanese subjectivity, but instead serves Orientalist agendas to otherize Japanese identity through the objectification of cultural paraphernalia. While modern critiques establish mimicry as a racist and offensive practice, the fantasy framework and consumable nature of Obon and surrounding community spaces perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes allows cosplayers a new space to practice racial essentialization with minimal repercussion as such performances are rooted in pop-cultural fantasy.

Understandably, one might ask what is the difference between a Japanese American participant and a non-Japanese American participant wearing similar kimono and hair accessories to dance in Obon? While this question engages other perspective this section focuses on critiquing the intended meaning derived

from such actions of non-Nikkei dancers and addresses the impact of their
reading Japanese culture through racial reductionism and stereotyping.

Connecting these practices to historical traditions of racial mimicry highlights
the true devious nature of such legacies. Similar to Yoshihara’s example of white
performers in Orientalist plays of the early twentieth century, leveraging mimicry
to reinforce racist constructs over Japanese identities exhibits the seriousness of
this tradition and the power it wields when utilizing spaces of popular culture to
perpetuate these ideas. In particular Yoshihara’s reference to actress Blanche
Bates using her Japanese maid to inform her stereotyping of Japanese femininity
displays how these pop-cultural practices can impact reality for Japanese
peoples. Bates describing her maid as being “sweetly pathetic” and correlating
this perspective to her onstage performance exemplifies how the dominant
culture take from communities of color what they want to produce flattened
representations in their racial mimicry. Bates’ performance and Orientalist lens
represents the tradition of Western marginalization of Japanese identity and
reinforces positions of power between white privilege and ethnic other. Similarly,
cosplayers at Obon utilizing race knowledge informed by Japanophilic
consumption of J-pop to justify their mimicry problematically perpetuates the

59 Ibid.
same Orientalist stereotypes. This raises concerns of whether Obon truly helps patrons like these cosplayers to learn about Japanese American culture or instead serves as a space for these participants to use Obon as a backdrop in their own Japanese fantasy.

Displays of racial performance within festival spaces risks allowing these community events to become spaces for the perpetuation of harmful Orientalist tropes. The static model of Japanese femininity in kimono and geisha-like costume visibly present during odori reinforces racial essentializations that negate the reality of the Nikkei community as heterogeneous and comprised of new cultural hybridities and mixed heritage traditions. If allowed to continue without critique racial mimicry at community festivals risks becoming overtaken by them and will further demarcate Japanese culture as flattened, exotic, and other. Heterogeneous experiences that comprise Nikkei community, including the growing mixed-heritage population will not fit within the limited identity frameworks set forth by these presentations of racial mimicry. The importance of this critique brings awareness to how racial mimicry at Obon risks reinforcing Orientalist tropes that harm the Nikkei community at large, and problematizes the community’s function in allowing such images to exist within festival spaces.

Community exposure to these racially essentialist and fetishized performances of Japanese femininity limits the true diversity of Japanese
identity. These performances display persistent stereotyping and racial reductionism by the dominant culture and exposes a new resurgence of racial mimicry masked by the consumption of J-pop. This reductionism negates and refuses the recognition of Japanese identities as heterogeneous or mixed heritage as such realizations are diametrically opposed to Orientalist fantasy created by festival cosplayers. Critiquing these performances at community festivals addresses the reality of their danger in diminishing space for emerging and fluid community perspectives to be validated.

Looking Forward

If the Nikkei community wishes to be recognized as a diverse group with fluid and dynamic cultural identities, then visual and discursive presentations within community festival spaces must expand beyond homogeneous and essentialist demarcations of Japanese identity. For this to manifest, festival spaces celebrating Nikkei culture need to display the multi-cultural, gender plural, and mixed-heritage experiences comprising the community. Current uses of Orientalist tropes by the Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival and the racial mimicry present at San Jose’s Obon Festival are counterintuitive to legitimating and recognizing diverse Nikkei populations. Allowing festival spaces to sell Japanese homogeneity through usage of J-pop and serve as a
backdrop for Orientalist fantasies gives consent for the dominant culture to continue its racial essentializing of Japanese identity. This is not to say that culture should never be shared, but in order for the community to maintain and demand an autonomous voice to delineate our own identities as Nikkei we must begin to diverge and expand the language in which we speak of a multifaceted Japanese or Japanese American subjectivity.
CHAPTER 2

Maintaining Difference: Third Wave Japanophilia and Racial Reductionism

Present in Bay Area Japantown Galleries and Community Art Projects

Visual constructs play a pivotal role in the creation of culture as they symbolize and affirm communal identity through the construction of cultural codes. However, the malleability of constructing visual texts leaves them susceptible to distortions such as stereotyped imagery that negatively affects visual readings of certain communities. This chapter looks at Orientalist iconography produced and promoted within Bay Area Japantown spaces and interrogates how these sites perpetuate stereotypes of Nikkei identity as hyper-feminized, homogeneous, and monoracial. By investigating how such images stem from historical legacies of Orientalism and Japanophilia I assess how this tradition affects contemporary significations of Nikkei identity within Japanese American community spaces. The positionality of these cultural codes within spaces, specifically Bay Area Japantowns, codifies the boundaries of a contemporary Japanese identity rendering any prominent visual signifiers in community spaces extremely important. This chapter specifically focuses on

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connecting presentations of J-pop as a driving force in third wave Japanophilia. With J-pop's growing visibility in community spaces and consumption by the American dominant culture as Roland Kelts substantiates, the growing prevalence of J-pop while seemingly fun and innocent connects to a deeper legacy of fetishization by the West.61 Looking at San Francisco Japantown's New People Gallery and the San Jose Japantown Mural Project I address how their use of J-pop iconography draws on Orientalist codes to signify contemporary images of Japanese identity. By challenging these visual texts I hope to draw attention to the deeper impacts that Orientalist legacies have in shaping current visual narratives of Nikkei identity and expose their risk in flattening the vastly plural experience of contemporary Japanese America.

New People Gallery

Standing three stories tall in the heart of San Francisco's Japantown the New People Gallery attempts to symbolize the expansion and exposure of Japanese popular culture in the West.62 Offering an array of J-pop commodities the gallery sells a plethora of consumer goods such as phone accessories, bags,
clothing, novelty toys, pens, notebooks and other items. Its modern sleek glass exterior outlines three visible levels displaying the gallery’s interior like a fishbowl exposing the J-pop paraphernalia and commodities available inside. The gallery’s physical positioning at the center of San Francisco’s Japantown across the street from the Nijiya Market and the Japan Shopping Center gives it a strong visual presence within the community. The New People Gallery’s distortion of subversive J-pop modalities from their original contexts reassigns Orientalist codes of hyper-feminization and racial otherness to the artwork. The gallery within San Francisco’s Japantown also creates a space of encouragement for non-Nikkei patrons to satiate Orientalist desires. Lastly, I problematize this gaze by critiquing how it reinvests in essentialized and homogenous tropes to define the entirety of Japanese America.

Upon my initial visit of many to the gallery during Spring 2014 I noticed three prominently visible mannequins dressed in J-pop fashions lining the windowpanes of the bottom level. The first mannequin draped in a cream colored dress with a floral print and ruffles stitched along the shoulders tapered off at the bust line. The others exhibited sharp black, royal blue, and ruby red color designs. One dressed with a British flag printed t-shirt paired with a red plaid skirt and the third also with a similar graphic t-shirt displaying a cartoon pizza centered on the front with a school uniform style pleated skirt to match.
Seemingly innocent and fun upon initial inspection the gallery’s fixated display of J-pop as hyper-feminized girlhood aesthetic as commodity became increasingly visible.

This fixation on girlhood and its problematic positioning within a community space arose when I noticed three young women adorning themselves in similar fashions to those in the gallery’s display window. As I advanced towards the front door of the New People an older Nikkei woman about four and a half feet tall walked towards me from the opposite direction. Her face accentuated by deep creases upon her cheeks and forehead framed by her shortly cropped salt and peppery hair. In her hands she held two brown paper grocery bags with the blue Nijiya Supermarket logo printed on each side. Just before I reached the door to the gallery, three young white teenagers exited the gallery together. Their skin, like porcelain highlighted by red blemishes that dotted their cheeks and chins like freckles. Two of them wore character hooded sweaters, one in black with bunny shaped ears, the other in a deep purple with large round eyes on the top of the hood with pointed horns at the corners. The third girl wore a black lace bonnet with a bill that stretched nearly five inches above her forehead. Her bonnet matched her dress also black with lace trim and a similar cut to the cream floral dress in the gallery display window. With black lace on the shoulders of her dress it tapered from beneath the bust line and was cropped just
below her knees displaying matching black mesh cut tights that encased her slender white legs. The elderly Nikkei woman clutching her Nijiya shopping bags gazed in the direction of the young women exiting the gallery. Her wide-eyed look pushed back her eyelids exposing the white around her irises. With her eyebrows raised she exhibited a look of puzzlement as the three young women passed between us walking towards the Japan Shopping Center. Sharing the same inquisitive look as the elderly Nikkei woman this encounter motivated me to question the deeper implications that these young white cosplayers pose and ask what their increasing visibility invading Nikkei community spaces signifies.

Further investigating this phenomena upon multiple visits to the New People Gallery I documented other women prominently seen wearing J-pop fashions accentuated by a singular hyper-feminine girlhood aesthetic left little visual room for gender plural perspectives. Covered in lace and effeminate floral patterns these young women committed to these J-pop fashions appeared to be adorning themselves for the specific occasion of shopping within the space of Japantown. Nearly all of these women were teenagers or young adults, white, and wearing either character inspired cosplay outfits or Lolita styled dresses. As discussed in the previous chapter Benesh-Liu delineates how this action of costume play allows J-pop fans to dress up as a desired character or personae
granting them access to a fantasy world in real life. In particular, Lolita fashions popularly worn by the many young white female cosplayers I observed visiting San Francisco’s Japantown are a main attraction at the New People Gallery. The J-pop style characteristically representing a reimagined Victorian era fashion aesthetic is often embellished by lace fabrics and floral patterns evoking an image of childhood innocence. Theresa Winge specializing in subcultural costume performance defines the Lolita style as “young women and men who dress as anachronistic visual representations of Victorian-era dolls.” The moniker’s etymology she explains can be traced to the sexualized young girl character from Vladimir Nabokov’s 1995 novel Lolita. However, she notes that the Lolita subculture is prominently occupied by young women, not female children, who merely dress in clothing associated with childhood focused on cuteness and not necessarily with the sexualization of children like Nabokov’s eroticized character. Lolita fashions available on the first and second floor of the New People Gallery by designers Liz Lisa, Tra La La, and Maruq follow the same guidelines of producing childlike hyper-feminized fashions signified by

65 Ibid.
ruffles, bows, floral patterns, and poka-dots on an array of women’s blouses, skirts, dresses, shoes, coats, and even electronic accessories.

The hyper-feminized signification of Lolita fashion on the first two levels of the New People continues to promote a singular gendered perspective. This distortion of the gender plurality of the Lolita and other J-pop fashion genres reinforces codes of singularized femininity akin to traditional Orientalist tropes. For example, as Winge notes how male participants of Lolita fashion often dress in both male and female Victorian attire playing a significant role in disrupting heteronormative fashion standards. Possibly due to the capitalist consumer model that the New People Gallery functions under these visual texts of J-pop offer little context to their gender plural origins and instead focus on consumption. The absence of male fashions and lack of male or other gender participation flattens the subversive roots of these style genres and contributes to a continued reading of Japanese culture through tropes of homogeneity. Such an environment whether intentional or inadvertent encourages an essentialist perspective of J-pop paralleling classical Orientalist practices of reducing and commodifying complex Japanese traditions by effeminizing them for Western consumption.

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66 Ibid.
This gender reductionism and fixation on singular femininity became more problematic by the gallery’s connecting contemporary J-pop visual iconography to classic tropes of the Japanese hyper-feminization through the use of the kimono. Celine Parreñas Shimizu explains that historically the kimono used within Orientalist contexts signifies exotic sexuality or the hypersexualization of Asian women. Considering this historical context of stereotyping Japanese femininity through usage of the kimono makes the gallery’s display of the traditional garment as commodified culture for Western consumption inappropriate. The kimono screening inside the gallery’s second floor shop displayed on a large flat screen computer monitor titled “Summer Kimono ‘Yukakta’ Fashion” featuring American YouTube fashion icon Bethany Mota played on a table centered within the retail space so it might be visible to all who entered. Out of all my visits to the gallery this video was the only signifier of J-pop that added verbal delineation to the visual display of J-pop fashion products. The video explained different fashion nuances and intersections between traditional yukata and contemporary kawaii fashion traditions during an interview with Mota guided by two Japanese interviewers. During the video Mota discusses her fashion career and the interviewers share their insights into

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modern yukata trends. Rather than using descriptive terms noting the creativity or dynamic usage of patterns, colors, or textures within the fashions displayed in the video Mota’s repeated statements “its so different” solely focuses on a language of other and foreignness to describe Japanese fashion contributions.68 This aligns with Edward Said’s Orientalism as a diametrically opposed binary between the elite and virile West and the effeminate East.69 This aspect of the interview immediately establishes a discursive language of otherness to discuss J-pop. The video’s reinforcement of this Orientalist trope of otherness clashes within the positionality of Japantown as a space that is in reality both Japanese and American. To reinforce an Orientalist binary within this community space disjunctively negates the functionality of Japantown and assumes its positionality and that of the surrounding community to be inherently non-Western. The video continues as a tutorial for hair arrangement, makeup, and dressing in yukata. After the transformation Mota in full yukata states in an American accent, “I love it, its very Kah-way-ee (Kawaii)” reinforcing her touristic gaze.70 This tutorial dangerously encourages racial mimicry by Mota and those viewing by allowing her to utilize yukata to reinforce her American identity, which she understands as being inherently non-Japanese as evident in her use of a traditional Orientalist

68 Ibid.
language. This essentialization of J-pop fashion within a monoracial and hyper-feminine fixation offers potential insights to the consumer desires of the white patrons like the numerous young women frequenting the gallery in cosplay attire. The exotifying and otherizing of J-pop fashion in this video tutorial flattens heterogeneous Japanese perspectives and in doing so celebrates Western consumption and simplification of Japanese fashion culture and even identity. This video’s encouragement of reductionist language to mark J-pop fashion and its positioning as the only verbal delineation to provide context to the items sold at the gallery signifies a consent for patrons to utilize the gallery space as a stage for Japanophilic consumption and Orientalist fantasy.

Moreover, while the hyper-feminization of J-pop by the New People Gallery parallels Orientalist traditions of feminizing Eastern cultures this critique does not negate the productive use of femininity by various J-pop fashion movements for self-determination. It is important to recognize that some J-pop genres have leveraged feminine visual texts to combat and critique oppressive constructs of gender and sexuality for women. Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison documents this by drawing parallels between hyper-sexualized depictions of contemporary Japanese femininity in various J-pop fashion circles to the iconic manga and anime character Sailor Moon. Moon’s character functions in her society as a regular adolescent school-girl that becomes endowed
with supernatural powers after undergoing a sexualized metamorphosis each time she faces an evil opponent.\textsuperscript{71} She parallels Moon’s ascension to recent fashion movements of Japanese young women modifying school uniforms characterized by pleated skirts and button-ups signifying conformity and rigidity and sexualizing them not as symbols of sexual objectification, but as subversive actions to legitimate their sexual agency.\textsuperscript{72} However, such images presented without this context and by western eyes becomes lost and repurposed for Orientalist desire.

The critique of hyper-sexualization within this chapter focuses on how such sexualized or hyper-feminized imagery becomes distorted through the application of ascribing Orientalist language and racialized perspectives onto Japanese cultural iconography. For example in Seth Green’s recent national television sitcom series Dad’s, he utilizes the sexualized Japanese school girl uniform as comedic parody depicting actress Brenda Song who plays an office assistant to Green’s character parading around the office as a means of entertaining Japanese clients.\textsuperscript{73} This example is merely one of an all too common


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

acceptance of visual codes that signify Japanese subjectivity as hyper-sexual, consumable, and objectified for Western desire and not for sexual agency. Similarly, the vague context given by the New People Gallery to delineate Lolita style legitimates the flattening of these fashion trends as essentialized “Japaneseness” that is infantile, hyper-feminine, and exotic.

Promotion of essentialized J-pop symbols within community spaces further risks consenting to the current mimicry of Japanese popular culture by the West. Similar to the Orientalist tropes utilized in Seth Green’s Dad’s pop-singer and fashion icon Gwen Stefani also models this flattening of J-pop through Orientalist essentializations in her Harajuku Lovers fashion line and musical performance. On the Harajuku Lovers Tour Stefani vocally affirms her desire for fashions from Japan. During the performance back-up dancers, all young Asian women (individual ethnicities are not defined, but the context suggests Stefani’s desire of showcasing them as Japanese), twirl around her as she sings over ambiguous Asian instrumental sounds. Her performance reinforces traditional Orientalist binaries by positioning herself as an American girl (American being synonymous with whiteness) gazing at the Harajuku culture and delineates her fetish for objectified Japanese women and their fashion culture. Two problematic

assumptions arise from her binary and Orientalist depiction of Harajuku. The first, similar to Mota's perspective in the yukata tutorial, dismisses any recognition of Nikkei subjectivities by assuming all Japanese experiences to be foreign and exotic rendering endemic Japanese subjectivities and diasporic Japanese populations in America and elsewhere to be homogeneous and indistinguishable from one another. The second assumes the entirety of Japanese women to identify with the Harajuku fashion phenomenon negating male or other gendered participation in the development and creation of J-pop fashion. Like the Japanophiles of the Victorian era Stefani reinforces dualistic tropes of Orientalism onto contemporary Japanese visual cultures by exotifying, commodifying, and homogenizing them for her own Orientalist desires.

Additionally, Stefani's lyrical establishment of J-pop as "a ping-pong match between East and West" evokes historical symbolism of a fight between two diametrically opposed sides of the West and East reaffirming Said's model of Orientalist binaries.75 Her Western gaze upon Harajuku culture hinges upon a language of other to position J-pop as homogenous and exotically foreign, and were her perspective to be inclusive of the heterogeneous reality of Japanese identity it would shatter the foundations of her Orientalist fantasy. Furthermore, her use of Japanese dancers to authenticate her appropriation of J-pop parallels

75 Ibid.
the legacy of Orientalist racial mimicry delineated by Mari Yoshihara’s
documentation of the Japanese maid used by white actress Blanche Bate’s as a
tool or accessory to legitimate Bates’ racist performance of Japanese identity.
This Western exploitation of Japanese femininity to substantiate Orientalist
fixations redefines their own racial superiority as white by reinforcing Asian
femininity as object.76 Like the Japanophiles of the Victorian era, New
Orientalists such as Stefani and Green, propel third wave Japanophilia and give
mainstream approval to essentialize J-pop and use it to racialize Japanese culture
and peoples. Drawing back to the prominent display of young white women
dressed in similar Harajuku fashions at the New People gallery calls into
question if the gallery functions to spread cultural diversity in bringing J-pop to
the West or if it instead caters to the dominant culture’s Orientalist obsession
with J-pop.

Fashion author Tiffany Godoy draws attention to this issue of Western
appropriation, commodification, and flattening of the complex and subversive
histories of the pop-cultural fashions emerging from Harajuku by providing a
greater context to their subversive origins. She explains the early fashion
movement began in the 1960’s in the international district of Harajuku where

Japanese and American military families coexisted together. As a multicultural community, diverse styles developed at a time when Japanese youth were watching the revivification of a previously occupied country rising to become a major first world economic power. In a fashion world dominated by European designers, fashion artists from Japan bought store-fronts that doubled as living spaces in the cheap district of Harajuku and created a fashion movement that decentered Western monopolies in the fashion world. She continues to explain that harajuku over time has developed into an assorted culture with diverse sub-styles of Kawaii, Cyber-Punk, Goth-Loli, Ura-Hara, and Fushgi-chan. Of these Kawaii and Gothic Lolita styles are the most visibly prevalent at the New People gallery. The second floor of the gallery holds an entire section dedicated to the Lolita style alone with store clerks mostly Asian and a few white (all of them female) dressed head to toe in ruffled, lace, and floral patterns ready to assist clientele interested in purchasing such fashions. Other than the merchandise available for purchase there are no signifiers, wall placards, or pamphlets describing the history of each style genre, artist, designer, or the intention delineating the complexity of each piece. While most gallery’s include names of the artists and short biographies delineating the art pieces, such

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78 Ibid.
accoutrements are absent on the New People Gallery second floor. Without explanation to provide context to the gallery art there is nothing to motivate observers to develop a deeper comprehension of the iconography displayed. Rather than creating a platform for cultural sharing and learning, the gallery instead is set up as a shopping space that encourages the commodification of J-pop and Japanese culture. Contradictory to the gallery’s mission of bringing complex J-pop traditions to the West such pieces are flattened and presented as mere consumer items detached from their complex and subversive histories.

Additionally, the New People Gallery’s mission to expose J-pop to the West as a fellow contributor to the global art and fashion world becomes confused by its positionality within San Francisco’s Japantown. If the gallery was placed within a more international or non-ethnic specific space, it would have greater access to populations more unlikely to have been exposed to J-pop thus succeeding in giving the gallery greater visibility to Western audiences. Instead, its location renders Japantown as a backdrop for Orientalist consumer desire and caters to an audience seeking to associate J-pop with homogenous perspectives of Japanese identity. As noted previously the J-pop fashion iconography once rooted in complex art forms becomes lost within the gallery’s consumerist focus. This exotification belittles the art from its intended meaning and promotes visual significations that homogenize the local community. Dorrine
Kondo notes that the Western need to racialize fashion and consumer items from Japan stems from an “Orientalist melancholia” where an inclusive Western consciousness that does not discursively position Asia as exotic other threatens Western privilege and views such inclusivity as a “perceived impending loss of his/her object of study.” Kondo’s theory offers an explanation to the projection of Orientalist tropes onto the items present at the New People as a possible means to stave off the onsets of this melancholia.

This is also evident in the New People Gallery’s explanation that it, “promotes the latest examples of Japanese popular culture” and the significance of its positionality “in the heart of historical San Francisco's Japantown” makes the space “a unique must-see attraction of the city's cultural landscape.” One might wonder if the goal of the gallery is to increase exposure of J-pop then why not position it within a space like San Francisco’s famous Union Square alongside other international high fashion retailers? Instead, staging the gallery in Japantown keeps J-pop within the box of ethnic otherness and alleviates any Western concerns of Orientalist melancholia. The New People’s context within Japantown as a touristic “attraction” of the local landscape also reaffirms a

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flattening and exotification of the products to be seen through a touristic lens as a selling point. This positioning and promotion of the gallery’s allure by its affiliation with Japantown problematically essentializes the local community as ethnic other. This tenuous relationship between J-pop and representations of Japanese homogeneity crucially impacts realistic understandings of the surrounding Japantown community as it becomes increasingly gender plural and ethnically diverse. The New People Gallery’s standing within Japantown and positioning of its products as signifier of contemporary “Japaneseness” risks excluding and isolating those diverse populations of Nikkei and community members that fall outside of the stereotypical ideologies it promotes.

The un-contextualized J-pop paraphernalia, racial mimicry by patrons, and positionality of the New People Gallery speaks to the growing association of J-pop with contemporary Japanese subjectivities. Under Sturken’s model of creating cultural meaning through the negotiation of visual texts between producers and consumers, the New People Gallery exemplifies the visual utilization of J-pop to reinforce Orientalist binaries that minimize the recognitions of Japanese heterogeneity. The emphasized allure of Japantown as a marked space for the practice and production of contemporary Japanese and Japanese American culture problematically assigns cultural codes signifying

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82 Ibid. 77.
J-pop as synonymous with the Japanese American experience. Additionally, the New People Gallery’s presentation of J-pop through visual modalities like the Bethany Mota’s *yukata* fashion tutorial and hyper-feminized presentations of Lolita and other J-pop styles sold at the gallery promote a semiotic language of ethnic otherness that strips J-pop of its subversive roots and legitimates homogeneous perceptions of contemporary Japanese identities. In spite of the puzzled gaze given by those in the community like elderly Nikkei woman questionably eyeing the young white cosplayers upon my first visit there has been little critique of the greater impacts that spaces like the New People Gallery have within our communities. While popular culture is often understood as a benign leisure activity we must be ever vigilant of the power these visual constructions have in reinforcing harmful distortions like the essentialist projections utilized within the New People Gallery to promote its products.

*The San Jose Japantown Mural Project*

Emphasizing the pivotal role visual constructs play in signifying culture the San Jose Japantown Mural Project curated by Rasteroids Designs and the City of San Jose Public Art Program exemplifies how cultural codes become constructed through visual images. Completed by 50 local artists the Mural

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83 Ibid. 56.
Project attempts to display the cultural vivacity and dynamic history of the Japantown community. Intended to beautify a vacant lot enclosed by a chain-link fence located on Fifth Street between Taylor Street and Jackson Street on the outskirts of San Jose's Japantown, the project blossomed into a community wide project bringing together local Nikkei and non-Nikkei artists, business owners, and other community stakeholders. The resulting project transformed the bare chain-link fence into an open air gallery showcasing colorful mesh printed canvases displaying diverse panoplies of Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, Chicano, and other cultural representations that signify the multifaceted nature of San Jose’s Japantown. While some of the pieces recognize the rich history of immigrant struggle in Japantown as it first began as a Chinatown, many of the artists, mostly non-Nikkei, centered their visual submissions on their perception of contemporary Nikkei culture within Japantown. This section addresses the perspective of these specific artists and their contributions to the Mural Project by problematizing elements of traditional and new Orientalist tropes utilized in their work. Many of them non-Nikkei did not grow up in the area and have only recently frequented Japantown as spectators making their perspectives insightful.

in understanding how the contemporary Japantown community is perceived by
the dominant culture and community outsiders.

Sponsored by the San Jose Art Commission the Japantown Mural Project
intended to capture the essence and history of San Jose's Japantown through the
work of resident artists from the Nikkei community who grew up in Japantown
and local artists who live there currently. Tamiko Rast of Rasteroid Designs who
spearheaded the project, thoughtfully worked alongside the San Jose Art
Commission in selecting artists for inclusion into the project. The goal of the
artist selection was to choose artist whose work would displayed the
heterogeneous aspects in a historical and contemporary visual narration of
Japantown. The selection of non-Nikkei artists in the project was done to
diversify the artist pool and the collective work the project produced. In an
online interview by Soceicity\(^{85}\), a collaborative group of artists and writers, Rast
explains how the history of Japantown initially began as a Chinatown and
transformed with complexity over the decades creating the community that exists
today.\(^{86}\) She states how the project was collaborative between the city and the
artists she represented and how she struggled with the decision to bring in

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\(^{86}\) Ibid.
outside artists but that the project ultimately brought the community closer together.

Many of the artists from the Nikkei and local community contributed diverse works that complicated and expanded the visual text of San Jose’s Japantown. Diverging from monoracial or essentialist narratives of Japantown many artists such as Yurika Chiba’s “Family Portraits” and Jerrold Hiura’s “Painting Miro” contributed abstract and modern visual texts to represent their community experience. However, this section will focus on the implications of the work by four white artists not from the community, and interrogate how the inclusion of their pieces in a Japantown project problematically exotifies, essentializes, misrepresents local community. Using semiotic analysis of their art pieces I deconstruct how the inclusion of their work attempts to visually display intimate portrayals of Nikkei culture, tradition, and identity through racially reductive tropes of Orientalism. Additionally, I utilize discursive analysis of their artists biographies posted on the Mural Project’s website to locate the intended meaning of their visual texts and further analyze their use of Orientalist language to explicate their depiction of Japantown and Nikkei subjectivities.

While this project inclusively produced heterogeneous and complex works from a multitude of Japantown community stakeholders, the inclusion of these specific pieces problematically homogenizes Nikkei identity through their use of Orientalist and Japanophilic tropes. In this section I investigate the impact of these artworks and their contemporary projections of Orientalism and third wave Japanophilia onto the space of San Jose’s Japantown. These pieces signify stereotyped delineations of Nikkei identity that risk homogenizing the largely mixed heritage and multifaceted experience of local community.

Lacey Bryant’s “The Sakura People” displayed along the chain link fence lining 6th Street and also visible behind Rast in the Sociecity video interview has a strong visual prominence within the project as one of the few selected pieces for display in the open air gallery. Bryant’s piece depicts seven Japanese young girls with jet-black hair reaching towards the sky transforming into sakura (cherry blossom) branches with pale pink cherry blossoms scattered in each lock of their hair. In her artist profile on the Japantown Mural Project website she states it was her desire to do something for the community she lived in, so she could feel connected to it. She further explains that her submission was inspired by her visits to Japantown and that the subjects in her painting each hold objects.

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that “were associated with Japantown for me.” The origin of the piece testifies to her perspective of touristic gaze instead of community stakeholder.

Throughout her bio she interchanges Japan and Japantown as being culturally synonymous. This is further emphasized by each young girl in the painting holding something of cultural significance in their hand. Starting from the left to right the objects presented are a lotus flower, parasol, origami crane, open palm, cup of tea, bowl of noodles, and a kokeshi doll. Bryant explains this symbolism functions to welcome patrons to Japantown and that, “the people in the piece are dressed in rich textiles of Japan” to “represent a variety of walks of life, each offering some aspect of Japanese culture, inviting the viewer to experience all that they have to offer.”

Bryant’s intention to invite viewers to experience the diversity of Japantown town and all that Japanese populations have to offer does the exact opposite. Her visual narrative and discursive delineation positions the Japantown community to be monoracial just like the the young women in the painting with dark eyes, fair skin, and black hair showing no ethnic or racial variance amongst each other. The only visible difference between them appears in their attire that depicts them holding material objects symbolizing Japanese homogeneity. Even

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91 Ibid.
though one of the girls wears overalls, and a few others wear shirts and long skirts, the invoking of the kimono on three of them reproduces a traditional Orientalist gaze of contemporary Japanese culture and again presents the community through the lens of exotified femininity.

The large heterogeneous mixed heritage and gender diverse population comprising the Japantown and surrounding Nikkei community is utterly absent in her piece in spite of her efforts to display all that the community has to offer. Her assumption and presentation of the community as monoracial also negates the cultural pluralism of San Jose’s Japantown local business community comprising of Pinoy, Native Hawai’ian, Chinese, Chicano, and even Hip-Hop vendors. The use of cultural symbols within each female subject’s hand as offering to community outsiders also signifies Japantown as a space to serve Western desire and consumption. These traditional Orientalist tropes of Eastern objectification to serve the desire of Western viewers falls short of Bryant’s intention to define the community’s diversity.

Continuing these tropes of hyper-feminization and monoraciality Katrina Marie Loera’s piece “The Perfect Blend” contrary to its title boldly depicts similar static Orientalist language. Again female as object dominates the piece’s narrative of Japantown as it centralizes a female subject donning white make-up, blue almond shaped eyes, red lips and long flowing straight black hair. The
evocative geisha narrative is hard to miss even alongside the woman’s left arm exposed from the elbow up displaying a circular armband of tribal tattoos. Superimposed on a blue background white origami cranes dangle as cultural accoutrements the women’s homogeneous ethnic depiction. In describing the piece Loera explains that it is “my way of representing the perfect blending of cultures we have in the downtown area and specifically Japantown.” Differing from Bryant’s voyeuristic perspective Loera though she is white uses “we” to linguistically position herself as insider of the Japanese subjectivity her piece depicts. She continues explaining how she has always enjoyed the art of various cultures and believes it to be beautiful when cultures blend in a community that becomes one. This multicultural positioning utilized by Loera to justify her appropriation of Nikkei cultural aesthetic exemplifies Kim Meyer’s theory of New Orientalism that maintains traditional Orientalist binaries within multicultural contexts. Loera’s limited recognition of diversity within Japantown upholds Meyer’s theory of New Orientalism by attempting to be inclusive of the San Jose Japantown community, but ignoring its heterogeneity entirely. She instead works to maintain her whiteness through linguistic and semiotic functions to continue to otherize and exotify the Japantown community. The

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merging of cultures she attempts to emphasize only partially signified by the blue
eyes and tattoo on the exposed arm of the Japanese woman in Loera’s piece does
not overshadow the potent hyper-feminized cultural codes of the kimono and
geisha make-up drawing on historical stereotyping of the Japanese culture.
Gender plurality and mixed heritage experiences prevalent within the Japantown
community are drowned beneath Loera’s fixation on hyper-feminized
delineations of Japantown as exemplified by her female subject.

Similarly, Michael Foley’s piece “Matsuri No Oni” focuses on ethnically
essentialized femininity to represent Japantown by centering the piece on a
female subject with black hair in a bun held by a pink hair clip. Foley’s female
subject wears a floral print mustard yellow and orange kimono with red obi
fastened around her waist. Behind her stands the San Jose Betsuin Temple, above
her multicolored paper lanterns commonly seen at the San Jose Obon Festival.
To her right stands a male San Jose Taiko drummer and on her left a horned
monster happily plays a string instrument. Scattered across the scene pink petals
from a cherry blossom tree float in the backdrop and J-pop stylized kokeshi dolls
wearing yukata and colorful afro hair styles litter the landscape. Lastly, on the
golden path leading to the San Jose Betsuin Temple a maneki neko (welcoming
cat) sits alongside the path and waves towards the viewer from the background
of the painting. One of the more visually complex of the pieces Foley explains
that it represents "a celebration of the variety and passion of the people in our small community." Like Loera, Foley through his use of "our community" situates himself as a community insider even though his work positions Japantown as ethnic other.

Also, similar to the previously discussed pieces, a centralization of hyper-feminine "Japanese-ness" embodied by the female figure wearing kimono dominates the painting. This singularly gendered idealization falls short of inclusively celebrating the Japantown and the local Nikkei experience as diverse and instead reaffirms traditional Orientalist fantasies of hyper-feminine objects. While the kimono in Foley's piece symbolizes an essentialized Japanese past, his use of J-pop kokeshi dolls represents contemporary visual markers of "Japanese-ness." His inclusion of the Betsuin Temple and Taiko drummer also constructs a contemporary presence of religiosity and festival culture in San Jose's Japantown that diverges from the static fixation of Japanese past. However, the Temple's presence alongside other essentialist cultural codes like the female in kimono, kokeshi dolls, and cherry blossoms position the Temple through an Orientalist lens. Religious studies scholar Jane Iwamura identifies this racial reductionism of contemporary Buddhist iconography as "Virtual

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Orientalism,” in which the dominant culture flattens Japanese religiosity for western consumption and leverages Buddhist imagery to re-racialize Japanese populations.\(^9^4\) She delineates how Japanese religiosity, in particular soto Zen, in the post-WWII era widely circulated throughout a culturally changing America sparking Orientalist interest in consuming Eastern religious practices.\(^9^5\) She notes how white practitioners often diverged from the intended teachings of complex Eastern religious traditions by racializing and exotifying them as Foley does in his fantasy depiction of the Betsuin Temple in his painting.

Foley’s piece gives no recognition of Nikkei festivals as spaces for actual community members, but instead replaces such narratives with depictions of fantasy and spectacle. Instead he centralizes monoracial Japanese cultural markers to delineate the surrounding community. The large scale maneki neko and the copious amount of J-pop kokeshi dolls portrays Japantown as a space for fantasy. The woman centralized in the painting imbuies homogeneous and hyper-feminized tropes onto the diverse Japantown community. Ultimately, Foley’s piece utilizes traditional tropes of Orientalism and blends them with contemporary J-pop iconography to reinforce a Japanophilic depictions of Japantown ignoring the greater complexity of the local community.


\(^{9^5}\) Ibid.
Lastly, Kate Moak’s photo collage titled “Japantown Details” depicts various Japanese and J-pop commodities as an affirmation of Japantown. Beginning on the left the first photo shows four yellow toy dispensers placed in front of Nijiya Super Market near the corner of Jackson and Sixth Street where the Mural Project is displayed. Inside the toy dispensers Hello Kitty key chains, Marvel superhero dolls, and other toy products from Japanese toy companies fill each bin. The middle picture showcases a small rectangular teal pouch with two cartoon imaged kokeshi dolls printed on top, one with black hair dressed in pink kimono and the other with pink hair in a yellow kimono. Pink flowers rest in the corners of their hair, and hot pink blush upon their cheeks. The last photo in the collage on the right shows packaged potato ball cookies displaying colorful wrappings of cartoon blue elephants and orange foxes. Behind the cookies a string of fish chip bags fill the backdrop. While the intended meaning of the photo project, as signified by the title “Japantown Details” aims to capture particular intricacies of San Jose’s Japantown Moak instead focuses solely on consumable products that emphasize J-pop imagery rather than the whole of Japantown’s ethnically plural consumer market.

Comparable to the previous pieces Moak’s submission similarly centers on hyper-feminine tropes to signify Japanese objectivity with two J-pop styled dolls in kimono and exaggerated makeup positioned at the center of her work. Moak
explains her choice of photographing these objects as she felt they represented her sensory experience living in Japantown. She states, “The flavor of Japan is everywhere from the benches and banners to the happy candy packaging on the market shelves.” Instead of claiming herself as a part of the Japantown community like the Foley and Loera, Moak shares the same voyeuristic gaze as Bryant by reinforcing the community as exotic other from her outsider positionality. Moak exemplifies Meyer’s Orientalist melancholia as she clutches onto the need to depict Japantown as ethnic other and maintains an Orientalist perspective of homogeneity negating the ethnic multidimensionality and gender plurality visible within the true details of Japantown. Her monoracial focus as signified by J-pop and Japanese imported items ignores the diverse consumer spaces in Japantown like the popular Chicano and Pinoy (Filipino) themed products found at the Cukui clothing store or predominantly Hip-Hop and male occupied spaces like the hat store Headliners and the sneaker specialty shop on the same block. Her negation of the numerous ethnically diverse details found throughout Japantown reduces the image of the community to an essentialist fetishization of Japanese paraphernalia.

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The common thread of hyper-feminine and monoracial coding of Japanese identity utilized by each artist oversimplifies, singularizes, and flattens the community. Their fixation on monoracial feminine subjects to signify “Japaneseness” delineates the continued projection of Orientalist tropes onto the community by leveraging Japanophilic tropes like the kimono and J-pop iconography like Hello Kitty. In place of holistic representations of Japantown’s heterogeneity a touristic Western gaze emphasized in each piece maintains the dominant culture’s positioning of contemporary Japanese subjectivities as effeminate, exotic, and perpetually foreign. The prominent displaying of these pieces along Sixth Street risks repositioning Japantown as a space for Western exotic voyeurism and culture consumption instead of its initial function as a space of self-determination for marginalized populations that fall outside of the dominant culture. These perspectives submitted to represent the diversity of Japantown do the exact opposite and their display within Japantown exposes the dominant culture’s continued negation of the Japantown community as heterogenous.
New Definitions

For any visual texts to holistically signify Bay Area Japantowns they must be representative of the diverse and heterogeneous populations that comprise these communities. Homogenous presentations within community spaces pose a risk in erasing the largely mixed heritage and diverse gender populations comprising these communities. Constructs of hyper-femininity and monoraciality as presented in the J-pop fashion iconography at the New People Gallery and the essentialized perspective of various artists within the San Jose Japantown Mural Project fall short of creating open and inclusive narratives of the Japantown experience. The situational context of these hyper-feminized and eroticized showcasings of the Japantown community in local artwork and J-pop imagery reaffirm traditional Orientalist narratives that have historically flattened and racially reduced Japanese American communities. Continued allowance of these images to dominate the landscape of Bay Area Japantowns without critique diminishes the importance of these locations as safe spaces for the self-determination and full expression of the Japanese American community. The function of artwork and visual narratives within community spaces must continue to be interrogated if we are to address these systemic issues of racial reductionism and homogenization that invalidate the heterogeneity of our collective experiences.
CONCLUSION:

Turning The Page: Implications and New Foundations

This investigation of J-pop’s visual presence and implications within Bay Area Japantowns speaks to the power of cultural iconography and the responsibility of those producing these works. As a mixed heritage Nikkei youth, images of J-pop permeated my world. I remember loving the long drives with my family from San Jose to San Francisco during the holiday season to visit one of the few Sanrio stores in the Bay Area at that time originally located near Union Square. Each year I was eager to acquire all my favorite characters, Pochaco and Keroppi, with their familiar faces printed on pencils, pens, and notepads needed for the school year. Now as an adult observing the expansion of J-pop imagery has been bitter sweet.

As a youth my exposure to J-pop was enjoyable, but recently has begun to take on more negative connotations. Beginning with instances like when I ran into a grade school acquaintance whose first reaction to remembering me was to show me her Hello Kitty purse and matching wallet set because somehow she assumed that I would shared her fetish for Hello Kitty since I was Japanese American have left me feeling condescended and belittled. Unfortunately, these experiences in which I am confronted by individuals that assume me to be an
expert in all things J-pop based on my ethnic identity ever increases. This irritable assumption that J-pop fanaticism equates to a working knowledge of the Japanese American experience has propelled this thesis topic and motivated this question as to the deeper meaning of J-pop in Bay Area Nikkei spaces. This investigation shows how J-pop depicted through a hyper-feminine and flattened lens within community spaces, visually minimizes the heterogeneity of the larger community.

As seen in first chapter the importance of social gatherings like festivals help to shape social cohesion for the community. Given this significance a persistent vigilance of visual signifiers at such events must be conducted to ensure they represent the community in its entirety. For the Nikkei community comprised of large mixed heritage, multi-generational, and diverse gender populations the visual texts presented within festival spaces have a responsibility to reflect the various identities of the community they are representing. Inability to do so propagates the continuous stereotyping of Nikkei culture and further marginalizes the diverse narratives our community has to offer.

Even with the intention of the Northern California Cherry Blossom Festival’s mission to showcase “the diversity of the Japanese American Community,” aspects of these events fall short of fulfilling such duties to
holistically representing the community as a whole. The San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival’s fixation on Hello Kitty and kimono imagery promotes hyper-feminized and Orientalist tropes that deny space for gender plural and mixed heritage identifications to be expressed. Imagery and paraphernalia celebrating Hello Kitty in hues of pink cherry blossoms and adorned in kimono upholds static identity models for Nikkei youth that further diverge from the festival’s mission. Also, the added fixation on hyper-feminized and racialized J-pop imagery beyond the Kids Corner visible with the popular food booth area and even in the online promotion for the festival further reinforces these limited identity models. Also, such visual texts like the cartoonish J-pop cartoons dressed in kimonos to advertise the “Kitsune Udon” stand, and the women dressed in kimono advertising the “Soko Tarumikoshi Ren” booth propel hyper-feminized and monoracial archetypes of Japanese identity. Pair these physical presentations at the event with virtual online content displaying Japanese women in kimonos alongside white women in cosplay encourages participants to attach classic Orientalist hyper-feminine projections onto J-pop culture and position it as a wearable stereotype of contemporary Japanese identity.

The inescapable thread of Orientalist imagery fixated on monoracial Japanese hyper-femininity presented within these festival spaces falls short in validating any recognition of the cultural hybridity, gender diversity, or heterogeneous aspects of Japanese and Japanese American experience they seek to represent. Such contributions of Orientalist productions through the use of J-pop iconography disallows youth in our community to project their own unique identities onto such images. Thus, stereotypical imagery within our festival spaces must be addressed if we are to validate and inclusively affirm the growing mixed heritage populations that comprise Japanese America. Legitimating the dominant culture’s obsession with Japanophilic iconography through flattened and hyper-feminine displays of J-pop within Bay Area Japantowns egregiously invalidates the reality of our community.

Active awareness and responsiveness to visitors at community events must also be a priority in our critique of how J-pop functions within community festivals. In ensuring that our festival spaces affirm expansive and fluid models of the Nikkei experience we must be vigilant and actively responsive to those who are to utilizing such spaces for the harmful practice of cultural appropriation and racial mimicry. This means engaging in healthy dialogues about cross-cultural participation at community events and openly critiquing the offensive actions of those who participate in festivals like Obon using the event
as an Orientalist backdrop to their Japanophilic fantasies. The problematic participation of individuals like the young white woman dancing in kimono with dramatized geisha makeup and numerous others like her at Obon allows these individuals to use the surrounding community as accoutrements in acting out their Orientalist desires. Apathy to such performances at community festivals risk transforming such spaces originally intended to celebrate community self-determination into places where stereotyping and racial mimicry run rampant. Such homogeneous visual presentations have no place within community festival spaces and only reproduce ideas that harmfully distort the entire community.

Additionally, if we are to respond to the harmful visual texts celebrated by community outsiders we must also be self critical of our own endorsements of similar presentations. In particular we cannot confront racial mimicry by community outsiders at our festivals spaces without first the being self critical of the exotified environment we create in said spaces. The example of the Lolita fashions showcased at the New People Gallery exemplifies complex issues of community contributions to existing Japanophilic projections onto J-pop and the risk this poses in negating visual affirmations of community heterogeneity. The New People Gallery’s leveraging of Japantown to position the commodities within as exotic signifiers of “Japanese-ness” exemplifies an acceptance of
homogeneous presentations within community spaces. These visual texts dismissing the complex history of J-pop further validates Orientalist and Japanophilic perspectives that reduce contemporary Japanese experiences. From the embellished laced Lolita attire to the pleated school uniform skirts all the products within the gallery fixate on hyper-feminine girlhood aesthetics to promote J-pop. This monolithic re-enforcement of effeminized Orientalist tropes by the gallery objectifies complex Japanese subjectivities for Western consumerism. The placement of the gallery supports the association of J-pop being synonymous with all of Nikkei culture. Such positioning of J-pop by the New People Gallery only validates the dominant culture’s stereotyping of contemporary Japanese experiences as synonymous with the Japanophilic consumption of J-pop.

Not self-critiquing these static productions of J-pop also allows for community outsiders to visually rewrite their own Japanophilic narratives onto the community as seen in the examples of Lacey Bryant, Michael Foley, Katrina Marie Loera, and Kate Moak’s contributions to the Japantown Mural Project. These artists positioned themselves as non-Nikkei community insiders yet leveraged Orientalist tropes through geisha imagery to depict the entire community. As seen in the common thread of hyper-feminine and monoracial cultural codes utilized by these artists their depictions of contemporary
Japantown all promote an oversimplified, singularized, and essentialized vision of Japanese identity. Such perspectives dismiss the contemporary cultural pluralism of San Jose’s Japantown comprised of Pinoy, Native Hawai’ian, Chinese, Chicano, and Hip-Hop visual, cultural, and consumer spaces. The fixation by each of these artists on monoracial female archetypes to convey the contemporary Nikkei community exhibits a persistent legacy of Orientalist tropes that continue to threaten how we as a community are perceived. The leveraging of Japanophilic iconography like the kimono and J-pop feminized figurines like the dramatized kokeshi dolls of Foley and Moak’s submissions or the kimono donning monoracial women surrounded by objects like the paper cranes and other ethnic accoutrements in the Bryant and Loera’s pieces all fall short of celebrating a holistic narrative of Japantown heterogeneity. These portrayals celebrate a Western gaze of Japantown and erase the complex and rich narratives continuously emerging from the community as it grows both generationally and multiculturally. If we are to maintain the important function of Japantown as a space for the self-definition and determination of historically marginalized populations then we must hold these distorted perspectives accountable and critically engage all stakeholders in how we can collectively affirm fluid and diverse presentations of Japantown.
As the Japanese American community becomes ever more diverse with a growing mixed-heritage population expanding the boundaries of cultural definition we must seek to validate these diverse experiences through the visual presentations we promote within our community spaces. For this to manifest Japantowns supporting festival events, shopping spaces, and community artwork must equally celebrate the contemporary reality of a fluid cultural landscape that comprises Japanese America. Moving beyond static representations as those seen in the Japanophilic demarcations of J-pop currently displayed in Bay Area Japantowns means creating new definitions of tradition and social cohesion, which cannot occur without divestment from static Orientalist tropes promoting community homogeneity. If these limiting visual signifiers persist, we as a community risk isolating our current and upcoming generations who offer new definitions of cultural identity, and could miss out on the invaluable perspectives they have to offer. The diversity of the Nikkei community as expressed in new stakeholders like Cukui clothing store and gallery that, “is rooted from a melting pot of chicanos, south pacific islanders, tattoo artists, and graffiti heads,” visually affirms the cultural hybridity and fluidity of a new emerging San Jose Japantown community.98 Similarly, community organizations like GenRyu Arts ran by

Melody Takada in San Francisco’s Japantown validates the visibility of new mixed heritage generations by providing programming to our youth that connects multiple generations through the practice and performance of Taiko drumming. For visual demarcations of community heterogeneity such as these to combat the stereotyped and homogeneous imagery they must be celebrated and widely promoted within community spaces. If spaces and community groups like these were to be validated and given proper visibility they could significantly challenge the Orientalist and Japanophilic promotion of J-pop currently dominating the visual landscape of Bay Area Japantowns.

Affirming these emerging visual narratives from our mixed heritage and heterogenous populations within Bay Area Japantowns is necessary in developing a broader discursive language that better delineates contemporary Japanese America. Such redefinitions and visual affirmations also connect local Nikkei populations to other diverse communities and transform cultural traditions.

Classic Lowrider culture with its unique nuances cultivated within the Chicano/a community is currently finding a new home within the Bay Area Japantown community as exhibited in events like Deadend Magazines “Far East

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Speed and Style” photo exhibit hosted by Cukui in February 2015. The event transformed the Japantown landscape as beautiful custom built and colorfully painted cars lining Jackson Street brought together multiple community participants to enjoy the cars, photography, and artwork by local tattoo artists. Visibility and celebration of new movements and events such as these combat racial reductionism by creating new spaces for mixed heritage and heterogeneous identities to be visually affirmed within community spaces. Furthermore, expansionist language that is visually inclusive of community fluidity shatter the frameworks of persistent Japanophilic and Orientalist foundations. However, validating these new and expansive definitions cannot occur without critique of the current visual constructs leveraging J-pop for static definitions of Japanese culture.

The historical functions of traditional Orientalism and the development of new Orientalism in regards to how they impact and shape community representations must be understood in order to develop a new language to discuss Japanese subjectivities. Discursive and visible delineations that truly represent the diversity of Nikkei culture would express to community outsiders the pluralism, complexity, heterogeneity of Japanese America. Moving

representations of Japanese culture beyond Orientalist tropes and hyper-feminine fixations on J-pop iconography can open new spaces for legitimating Nikkei diversity. Doing so will bring deeper meaning for us as a community to invite others to come and respectfully engage community spaces. Only by critiquing the presence of Orientalism and racial reductionism persistent within Bay Area Japantowns can we broaden the language of Japanese identity and begin to uplift the heterogeneous voices within the Nikkei community.
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