Denying Difference: 
Japanese Identity and the Myth of Monoethnic Japan

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*Ariana Miyamoto, the first biracial Japanese woman to be crowned Miss Universe Japan

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Abstract

In this thesis, I tackle the notion of identity within the very specific sociocultural space of Japan. I critique the conception of Japanese identity as it has emerged in concert with the West through the 19th and 20th centuries. Though there exists a plurality of identities in Japan, there also exists a dominant ideology that selectively denies difference in favor of a monolithic “Japanese” people. Tracing the historical factors leading to its creation, I examine the (naturalized) exclusionary practices that serve to mediate the perception and marginalization of certain bodies within Japan. I bring this problematized “Japanese identity” into the zone of close contact with the experiences of black women in contemporary Japan. Using the methodology of black feminist autoethnography, I explore the ways in which one specific “non-Japanese” body is marked out and not permitted to fully participate in this Japanese space. My own autoethnographic analysis is placed in concert with stories gleaned from other diasporic black women. I choose black women because our stories have a history of invisibility and erasure, and our bodies represent the “extreme Other” with respect to conceptions of Japaneseness.

I conclude by returning to the persistent challenge that marks this thesis: the critique of the carefully nurtured ideology of Japan as a homogeneous nation. I argue that Japan has been multiethnic since at least the late 19th century, and that ideas of monolithic Japanese identities were developed in reaction to Western threats, and further that these notions of “Japaneseness” can – and should – be deconstructed. In striving for a more inclusive definition of “Japanese,” we allow for a much larger number of people to coexist within this Japanese sociocultural space in relative harmony.
To Lex.

Here’s to future collaborations.
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Introduction

The Face of Japan

On a stage in Tokyo¹, two Japanese women stand facing each other, holding hands. Behind them stands an array of Japanese women, all in slim, colorful dresses, with one hand on their hips and the other down at their sides. Hanging down across the torso of every woman is a white sash with bold letters; the names of Japanese prefectures. The women are participants in the Miss Universe Japan beauty pageant.

The two women in front continue to hold hands as the announcers give a few final words before the winner is announced. “It’s a nervous atmosphere, isn’t it?” a female announcer says as the lights dim. The announcers continue speaking for a few more minutes, apologizing for the wait. Finally, they are ready to crown the winner of Miss Japan 2015.

“Miss Universe Japan 2015 is…”

The lights go out, and spotlights shine across the stage, like flashes of moonlight across the faces of the contestants. Uplifting music starts to play, adding to the regal atmosphere. It plays for a moment, swelling to a crescendo and stopping abruptly. At the same time, the spotlights go out, and a soft blue lighting falls over the two women at the front of the stage, still holding hands.

“Miss… Nagasaki!”

The lights and music return amid a roar of applause. The two women at the front of the stage drop hands and step into an embrace, and the rows of women behind them continue to clap.

¹ To access full video, see maidigitv (2015).
in congratulations. One by one, other contestants step forward to hug the winner. As they return to their spots, the woman crowned Miss Japan 2015 steps forward into the center of the stage.

She stands out from the rest of the women on the stage, and it is not only for her exceptional beauty. There is something identifiably different about her, something separating her from every other contestant on the stage: the color of her skin.

It is light brown in color, what many might consider “caramel,” but it is still shades darker than the skin of the dozen or so women that dot the stage behind her. This woman has thick black hair pulled back into a ponytail, and facial features distinct from those of the other Japanese women that surround her. She is 20-year-old Ariana Miyamoto, the first mixed race contestant to be crowned Miss Japan.

Ariana was born to an African-American father and a Japanese mother. Born and raised in Nagasaki, Ariana has Japanese citizenship; and though she went to high school in the United States, she considers herself Japanese.²

Unfortunately, many other Japanese people don’t.

In her first interview after being crowned Miss Japan,³ Ariana – in flawless Japanese⁴ – gives voice to some of the challenges she’s faced as a half-black, half-Japanese woman slated to represent Japan in the Miss Universe Pageant:

> By nature I’m what’s called a “half”…and in my heart, I thought that because I am half, I wouldn’t be chosen [to represent Japan]. But despite that, I decided to challenge myself.

> If I were to become a world citizen, I would want to be the type of woman who gives

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² To access full article, see Akcasu (2015).
³ To access full video, see Miss Universe Japan (2015).
⁴ Original Quote: 「元々、私はハーフということで。。。内心、私が正直ハーフなので、「選ばれないな」と思いながらも、こう挑戦してみたんですね。で、もし私が世界人になったら、こうやって「ハーフ」とか「人種」の関係なくいろんな人に勇気と自身を与えられるような素敵な女性になりたいなと思っております。」
people courage and confidence, without focusing so much on race or being “half.”

[translation mine]

It seems that Ariana knew before entering the Miss Universe pageant that the fact of her being “half” Japanese could be a major factor in whether or not she was chosen. But even after being crowned Miss Japan 2015, Ariana faced considerable backlash from other Japanese who didn’t believe that she could adequately represent the “face” of Japan.

An article by the Washington Post displayed some of the more prominent accusations against Ariana that were made public through the social media platform Twitter (Holley); however, since publication of the article many of the original tweets – especially those criticizing Ariana for her inability to represent Japan as a “half” – have been taken down. But other sites on the web persist where Japanese sentiments towards Ariana are still publicly available. Girls Channel is an online community targeted towards Japanese women; like the popular English-language website Reddit, users submit links or start topics and other users can comment on these posts anonymously. Comments can then be up-voted or down-voted by other users. On March 30, 2015 a new thread\(^5\) was started to discuss the crowning of Ariana as Miss Japan 2015.

There are over a thousand comments on the site, so to provide an overview of the negative criticisms directed towards Ariana, I have included a sample of comments that have been up-voted by at least 800 other users, meaning that at least 800 other people have agreed with the statement provided (the site has restrictions so that each user is only allowed to vote once). The total number of likes/up-votes is indicated in brackets following the quotes.

アジアンビューティーのほうがいい気がする。(+2178)

\(^5\) To access full article, see “ミス・ユニバース：日本代表に長崎の20歳 宮本エリアナさん「ハーフの私でいいのかな’” [Japanese only]
An Asian beauty would feel better to me."

正直、美人！って感じしない…(+1117)

[I don’t get that feeling like, “Wow! She’s beautiful!”]

とても綺麗だけど、日本代表となるとがっかりだな。日本人らしい美しさが楽しみなんだけどなー。(+833)

[She’s really pretty, but I’m kind of disappointed she’s representing Japan. I would have liked to see someone with a Japanese aesthetic.]

日本代表なら純日本人がベストだよね…(+847)

[A pure Japanese would be better to represent Japan…]

外人に見える(+1340)

[She looks like a gaijin.]

The article itself has a large number of dislikes: 928 as of this writing. It is impossible to say whether this is due to dislike of Ariana as the representative for Japan, or simply Japanese women’s indication that they are uninterested in the topic in general. Still, given the large number of up-votes for criticisms against Ariana, I am inclined to believe that the reason leans more towards the former. However, these sentiments are not shared by all Japanese; the single most up-voted comment on the thread, with +3244 up-votes is the following:

綺麗だけど確かに、ハーフもありなんだ。日本代表とは一体何なんだろう。

(+3244)

[She’s pretty alright, but you can tell she’s half. But what exactly is a “representative of Japan” anyway?]
Though there are those within Japan who are supportive of Ariana and certainly believe that she is capable of representing Japan, criticisms abound, and Ariana herself has cited them as a reason for why she might not be chosen to represent Japan in the Miss Universe pageant. Indeed, looking at the comments from Girls Channel, ideas about “Asian beauty,” a “Japanese aesthetic,” and “pure Japanese” are central to many of the statements that Ariana is incapable of representing Japan. In other words, there are some qualities that Ariana possesses – like the color of her skin – that makes her incapable of being seen as a “full Japanese,” regardless of where she was born and raised – in Sasebo, Nagasaki, Japan.

**Methodology**

I am dealing with a very broad topic – the notion of identity – and one that has been dealt with before. In this thesis, I focus on these issues within the very specific space of Japan, which has its own broad geographic and ideological influences. A good place to examine identity is at the extremes of the spectrum of identification. It is here where the most information is exchanged: at those intersecting points where non-Japanese bodies come into contact with Japanese spaces, a dialogue is sparked.

Using the method of black feminist auto/ethnography (BFA) as a framework and mode, I will explore the ways in which one specific “non-Japanese” body – that of the black woman – intersects with the Japanese sociocultural space by examining my own personal experiences as a black woman in Japan. In her book *Black Feminist Anthropology*, Irma McClaurin defines BFA as “[a form that enables the writer] to [create a] combination of personal memories and general description” (66). In other words, through BFA I am able to use my own personal experiences to

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provide insight into what it means to be a black woman. I focus on the black woman\textsuperscript{7} because our bodies are situated at the extreme ends of the spectrum as far as Japanese identity is concerned. I also focus on the black woman because we have very little representation in Japanese society. Americans have had contact with Japan for a very long time, and we know that blackness, in recent centuries, is not foreign to Japan either.\textsuperscript{8} So why is it that these accounts of black women in Japan don’t exist?

Many of these stories have been lost or erased from history. We know for certain that there have been black women in Japan since at least 1945, but the black female experience in Japan remains unaccounted for, and black women remain invisible in the Japanese media. What remains are the stories that exist in a vernacular made possible through social media; but these stories as well are transitory, and their histories go untold as YouTube channels go dark and domain hosting for blogs runs out.

In this space of erasure and occlusion, I am intervening.

BFA is a way for black women to situate our stories within academia; to write about ourselves in a way that demands recognition. It is fundamentally feminist in that we, as black women, take it upon ourselves to speak out and tell our stories in our own way. McClaurin notes how the autobiographies of white men and white women are valorized to the point of required reading in our high schools; whereas those of black women – other than a few select ones, like Maya Angelou – are not celebrated to the same extent, if they are recognized at all. Other scholars – such as Robin Boylorn and Rachel Alicia Griffin – use this method in their work, and

\textsuperscript{7} For the purposes of this thesis, the “black women” I am referring to include women of African origin; more specifically, Americans of West African descent, people of African origin voluntarily living outside the continent, and half/mixed-race women (i.e. one parent is of African origin). I include Japanese halves, even though they may have no connection to America, because they may face the same experiences that African and African-American women experience in Japan due to salient features that mark them out as Other.

\textsuperscript{8} See Horne; Condry; Okada.
so by following in their footsteps I am allowed to situate my own personal experiences at the heart of my academic writing while also giving voice and visibility to the uncelebrated and unacknowledged lives of other black women.

Through autoethnography, I will examine how “the Other” is marked in Japanese society, and how bodies without Japanese blood (and those marked as not having a “Japanese identity”) are not permitted to fully participate in this “Japanese” space. I place my autoethnographic account of my own experiences in Japan in conversation with stories gleaned from other diasporic black women, mostly of African-American descent. To contextualize these experiences and situate them within the broader Japanese social, historical and cultural context, I will outline the development of a “Japanese identity” and trace the historical factors that led to its creation. Then I will examine the ideologies that resulted from this development, specifically the ideologies of a monolithic “Japaneseness” and the monoethnic “Japanese.” Though there exists a plurality of identities in Japan, there seems to be a belief in some monolithic “Japanese identity” that serves to mediate the perceptions and incorporation (or lack thereof) of certain people into Japanese society. I intend to problematize this “Japanese identity,” as well as the (naturalized) exclusionary practices that serve to keep “outsiders” right where they should be – out. Finally, I bring this problematization of Japanese identity into the zone of close contact with the experiences of Black women in contemporary Japan, centered around my own autoethnographic analysis.

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9 I am able to use this American theoretical framework of BFA in the context of Japan because – though they possess their own understanding of blackness – some conceptions of blackness in Japan have roots in Western views of blackness, making analysis through BFA an appropriate method with respect to some aspects of the Japanese cultural context.
Overview of Thesis

Chapter one begins with an exploration of two concepts: the rise of the nation-state and the formation of identity as outlined by Bucholtz & Hall. Their process of identity formation is one way to think about the creation of a monolithic identity. Using these concepts, I then look at prewar Japanese history with respect to the construction of a monolithic Japanese identity. This was a conscious process put forth by the Meiji Government in order to combat feelings of threat incited by the West during the first opening of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1853. In order to create Japanese identity, regional and class differences between the Japanese had to be suppressed in favor of the “modern state subject.” Thus, the rise of a national Japanese identity went hand-in-hand with the creation of the Japanese nation-state. Moreover, early ideas about the Japanese asserted that Japan was in fact a multiethnic nation. This ideology was propagated throughout the Imperial Era and provided support for imperialist expansion. This chapter ends with the prewar period and the rise of Japan as a colonial/imperial power.

Chapter two focuses on the postwar era and the rise of Nihonjinron, or the “discourses on the Japanese.” After the defeat in the Pacific War, all ideas of a “multiethnic” Japan became delegitimized: it was impossible for one to speak of a multiethnic Japan without invoking the image of Imperial Japan. Further, the collapse of the Japanese empire made it appear as though Japan truly was only full of “Japanese.” Having lost Korea, Taiwan and other colonies in the Pacific, the Japanese empire shrank by more than two-thirds, and many previous colonial subjects were repatriated into their countries of origin. As such, the Japanese – defeated by war,

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10 A qualification to my historical trajectory: I am utilizing a particular paradigm within a complicated history in order to examine a small piece of the historical trajectory concerning identity and exclusion in Japan. I am not a historian and have no historical training; therefore, my explanation may come across as simplistic to those with a more in-depth understanding of Japanese and East Asian history. However, the information provided is accurate to the best of my knowledge, and contains sources for those who wish to delve deeper into the history. I encourage these readers to bear with me as I trace these processes historically, as they are crucial in situating the bulk of my thesis – the third chapter – in the Japanese sociohistorical and cultural contexts.
starved for peace, and occupied by U.S. troops – began to search for a new way to define themselves. The notion of Japan as a small, homogeneous island nation took root at this time. After Japan’s quick entrance onto the world stage due to rapid economic growth (the so-called “second opening of Japan”), this discourse on the Japanese, or the *Nihonjinron*, skyrocketed. In this chapter I define “Japaneseness” and iterate some of the variations on *Nihonjinron* discourse. I also work to delineate who exactly “the Japanese” are – those members of Japanese society who are assumed to possess those qualities of “Japaneseness” – and provide a critical analysis of the criteria on which this identification is based. Throughout this chapter, I articulate the ways in which “Japaneseness” has developed in conjunction with a perceived “Western threat”: fear of being colonized by the West has characterized much of the creation of this monolithic Japanese identity. This is interesting because Japan has a history of viewing the West as superior, and has for a long time integrated Western ideas and behavioral patterns into their society. However, this can be understood through the idea of integration and assimilation. Western culture becomes “metabolized” upon entrance into the Japanese sociocultural sphere, becoming “Japanese” in nature and therefore non-threatening. Unless the foreign object can be digested and transformed into something uniquely Japanese, then it has to remain outside. There are certain foreign objects that are very difficult to make Japanese, simply because they exist so far on the opposite end of what is considered to be “Japanese.” One of these objects is the bodies of black women.

Chapter three views these processes – of identity formation and exclusion – in the intimate spaces of everyday lived experience in order to provide an account of what happens when a non-Japanese body comes into contact with the Japanese sociocultural sphere. Using the BFA methodology explained above, I interrogate my own lived experience through the established lens of “monoethnic Japan” and ideas about a monolithic Japanese identity. My
stories are analyzed in conjunction with those of other black women to weave a more complex narrative of what it means to be a black woman in present-day Japan. These experiences are situated within the larger historical context of the development of Japanese identity and its related racial/ethnic exclusionary practices.

I conclude by returning to the persistent challenge that marks this thesis: the critique of the carefully nurtured ideology of Japan as a homogeneous nation. Many apologists cite “homogeneous Japan” and “Japanese culture” as reasons to ignore the discrimination that happens towards foreigners in Japan. By refusing this idea of “Japaneseness,” arguments against combating discrimination likewise become irrelevant. Summarizing the arguments and analyses from the thesis, my conclusion states that Japan has been a multi-ethnic nation-state since at least the late 19th Century. I argue that ideas of homogeneity can be due to the erasure of the stories of certain peoples. We can see this explicitly with the lack of available information about black women in Japan, even though we know through Okada that they have existed since at least the end of the Pacific War. Bucholtz & Hall, who established ideas about identity formation at the beginning of the first chapter, emphasize the necessity of denying difference in order to create similarity. Moreover, these differences are not standardized; they fluctuate across space and time, and change depending on who is drawing the lines (Lie 166). Further, I argue the importance for deconstructing these ideas of “Japaneseness” due to the detrimental effects that unconscious ideologies can have on those who are victimized by their presence. These are taken-for-granted assumptions (Strauss) that are acted on and that socially shape the subject. Though they are created, they have real effects and real consequences for the people who live under their power. By deconstructing “Japanese” – by re-examining what it means to “be Japanese,” and perhaps
widening (or even collapsing) the definition of “Japanese” – a much larger number of people will be able to coexist within this Japanese sociocultural space in relative harmony.
Chapter 1

Before my foray into Japanese society, I’d read accounts of how typical interactions between “foreigners” and “Japanese” played out. Tired refrains (“Where are you from?” “When are you going home?” “Can you use chopsticks?”) were repeated, and many seemed to revolve around the differences between foreigners and Japanese. Often, misunderstandings were elided or glossed over with the dismissive phrase, “You’re not Japanese, so you couldn’t understand.”

When I set foot in Japan for the first time, I was a participant in these interactions. I received comments on my visibly black hair; I had my skin rubbed and my face touched by curious Japanese. I was the recipient of intense stares on the train, and the cause of an unfortunate incident resulting in a screaming toddler. Almost everywhere, I felt singled out, marked as a black body in a Japanese world.

But foreigners in Japan are not a rare commodity. In fact, non-Japanese bodies have moved throughout Japan for centuries. Further, black male bodies have been present in the Japanese sociocultural space since at least the arrival of Commodore Perry (Keith), and black female bodies since at least the mid-1940s (Okada). Why is it, then, that the Japanese seem to react with surprise and disbelief when there is a black body – a foreign body – in their midst? Why do they continually assert that “we” will never “be Japanese”? And where did this idea of a singular, monoethnic Japanese identity come from in the first place?

The Formation of Identity

*All people, all cultures, spin around themselves myths of self-regard.*

Ihab Hassan, *Between the Eagle and the Sun*

Who are “the Japanese?”
Every group of people on earth tells stories about themselves. Origin stories shape our perceptions of ourselves, and give us a sense of solidarity around which we can rally. We have a history to be proud of. The old adage that one must know where one came from to know where one is going is oft repeated as we journey through life.

“The Japanese” are no different. They have told stories about themselves for centuries, and continue to do so now, and will continue to do so for as long as the concept of the story holds meaning and power for human lives. In this they are no different from any other people on Earth. America tells the story of freedom and the American Dream; we need something to make us different, to mark ourselves out, to set us apart from others. We need stories to create ourselves.

Sociocultural linguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall state that the term “identity” is a direct reference to the concept of “sameness” (369). Along with the notion of “difference,” these two key concepts provide the foundation for understanding the creation and maintenance of identity within various social groups. Invoking sameness allows for a number of individuals to coalesce themselves into a solid grouping (Lie 163), whereas the invocation of difference provides a way to distance themselves from those they perceive as unlike them.

To imagine a Group A, one must be able to identify members of Group A, as well as recognize when a person is not a member of Group A. To do so, one must also recognize the existence of other groups – Group B, Group C – to be foils against the perception of a shared identity (Bucholtz & Hall 371). These may be imagined others (the monolithic “West,” for example), but they can have real-world implications, especially when members of Group A and Group B or C come into contact with one another. It is at these junctures where identity is brought to the fore as the dominant, salient characteristic. It is used to reify the distinctions
between people from disparate Groups who are brought into contact, willingly or not. It is used to maintain distance between members of Group A and those who are seen as a threat, such as foreign workers flooding into one’s homeland (371).

Bucholtz and Hall tell us that the invocation of difference is necessarily a hierarchical process (372); one thing is “better” than the other. The norms and values of Group A are better than those of Group B. Therefore, the members of Group A may come to see themselves as superior to those of Group B (Lie 151). In so doing, Group A may (unconsciously or actively) establish a hierarchy placing themselves at the top. Beneath them is all that “differs.” Through this process of hierarchical differentiation, Group A elevates their identity to the status of an “unmarked norm,” the standard towards which all who hope to be recognized as members of the group should strive (Bucholtz & Hall 372).

In so doing, any difference comes to be seen as deviations, as “failures to measure up to an implied or explicit standard” (Bucholtz & Hall 372). Would-be members of Group A who do not conform to the expected standard can be subjected to accusations of inadequacy and inauthenticity. And members of Groups B and C may find it impossible to ever fully become a part of Group A without significant efforts at assimilation. The struggle to be seen as a valid and legitimate member of a group can have serious effects on one’s livelihood and well-being (Sue).

Thus, identity is not an inherent, essential product of an individual or a group; it is an active cultural invention, created through agency and propagated through the display of power. All social groups invent myths around which to rally themselves, because doing so may benefit them in some way –social, cultural, economic, militaristic, defensive, etc. they invent myths through which they can exclude others, for much the same reasons.
Whether through Orientalism, Occidentalisim, Eurocentrism or Nihonjinron, this process of identity formation of the Self and Other has played out over the course of centuries. In today’s world, the human need to define ourselves is taking place on a much larger scale and shifts are happening much faster, the ramifications of which go on to affect the lives of millions of people every day.

**The Rise of the Nation-State**

*Thus, the Nihonjinron are merely a Japanese variant of the universal discourse of modern nation-states.*

John Lie, *Multietnic Japan*

The nation-state is a modern conception that fuses a political unit with a social group (Batten 52). It arises through the process of modernization. The concept of the “nation” is meant to supersede previous historical classifications of people, whether by differences class, status, regional or linguistic variation. Before the modern era, people were divided along different categorical lines: class, religious affiliation, tribal membership, etc. Strict vertical hierarchies categorized people into groups by status, lines across which persons found it very difficult to cross. Rulers reigned over myriad peoples who spoke varying linguistic varieties. Further, structural institutions such as empires and city-states did not have the resources in place to instill a uniform national identity over an entire region. It isn’t until a government begins to establish schooling, a standardized linguistic variety, transportation, communication and mass media, and some form of equality amongst citizens – “the background of modern state-making” – that the concept of a “national identity” can come into play, and ethnicity arises as a salient category (Lie 113). Thus, only
when a country attempts to modernize – and nationalize – can they begin to have a concept of a salient national identity.\textsuperscript{11}

The rise of the nation-state began in Western Europe, with several transformations that led to the conflation of nation and identity. Andresen and Carter argue that before this, political boundaries were fluid and changed with war and marriage. Power was contained in a central geographic region and radiated outwards to ambiguous borders. However, there occurred in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century a shift in what was perceived to be the cause of political instability – from religious (Lie 182) to linguistic, racial and ethnic diversity. In order to preserve stability, those in power sought to rally their politically bounded social groups around uniform characteristics. The restructuring of political power led to the solidification of nation-states and the erection of specific boundary points between countries. The nation-state became a single, unified entity, projected onto the past as if it had always existed (Andresen & Carter).

The myth of Japan as a monoethnic nation is, as such, not unique. It is merely another take on the worldwide phenomenon of nations trying to achieve cultural and linguistic unity of the diverse peoples that live within their political boundaries (Lie 178-179). Before, this would have been impossible to achieve; the peoples of Hokkaido and Okinawa – descendants of the Ainu and the Ryukyu Kingdom – had no sense of belonging to a monolithic “Japan” until the Meiji government began the process of national unification (Mouer & Sugimoto 247-248).

The concept of the nation-state made its way to Japan, along with Western conceptions of race, culture, and ethnicity, during the Meiji period (Batten 87). There had been no common notion of “the Japanese” until around 700 CE, and even then, only amongst societal elites. This

\textsuperscript{11} Though there is no doubt that a concept of a “Japanese identity” existed much earlier, later conceptions conflated it with a salient national identity in order to combat feelings of threat incited by the Western powers. The fields of ancient studies and Japanese studies began developing in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries; later developing into the \textit{kokugaku} (“native studies”) field, this was a reaction by scholars such as Motoori Norinaga against the domination of Chinese, Confusion and Buddhist ideologies in favor of Japanese and nativist theories.
core identity slowly evolved over time, ready to be taken up at the end of the 19th century, when the concept of the Japanese nation was being formulated in reaction to the re-arrival of the West and the forced opening of the country.

**An Implausible Beginning**

*The vapidly reiterated refrain underlying the literature on Japanese identity is that of uniqueness.*

*There must be some meaning or function beneath or behind what appear to be logically incoherent or empirically meaningless ideas.*

Peter Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*

Japan is famously depicted in popular accounts as a homogeneous society. This refrain has been repeated by Japanese sociologists, Western scholars of Japan, and Japanese and foreign laypeople for decades. Whatever foreigners do reside in the country, the number is generally seen as too small to be of significance (1% is a common figure, though by 2014 that number has risen to 2%). The many Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos, Brazilians, Americans, Australians, Indonesians, Nigerians, Iranians, Russians, Peruvians, Vietnamese, Turks, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and members of various other nationalities may be conveniently ignored when the makeup of Japanese society comes into question. The multiracial, multiethnic history of Japan has been occluded by an ideology that seeks to erase difference and deny diversity.

The contemporary discourse of Japaneseness – books and articles penned by Japanese and non-Japanese citizens, journalists and scholars – presents Japan is a country of “one nation, one people” (Lie 113). This discourse claims the Japanese are monoethnic, and that Japanese society is a nationally and culturally homogeneous one. Moreover, the discourse maintains that
monoethnic Japanese and homogeneous Japan have existed in this way since time immemorial. Japan has always been an isolated island nation, and interaction with foreigners has been sparse. Seclusion and isolation are cited as evidence that Japan, indeed, has always been closed (or at least extremely inaccessible) to foreigners, and that this contributed to their development of a monoethnic and culturally homogeneous identity.

But these conceptions of Japan as untainted by foreign influence are not possible. Firstly, trade by sea is an immensely lucrative endeavor (Lie 96), meaning an island nation would have powerful incentive for interacting with its neighbors and vice versa. The island of Great Britain need only be listed as an example of a “secluded island nation” that has made great reaches outside of its borders. Secondly, Japan has in fact never been completely closed to foreigners. The country has had extensive relations with countries in Europe and Asia for centuries. The earliest written records about Japan come from China in the 3rd century. Over time, Chinese writing and culture (including Chinese religion, philosophy and law) helped to shape Japanese society. Emissaries were sent back and forth between the countries to further the exchange of goods and ideas. Likewise, Japan has interacted with Korea for over 1500 years, starting diplomatic exchanges as early as the 3rd century. Japanese contact with Europe was established much later, around the mid-16th century. Japan’s exchange with foreign countries has continued relatively uninterrupted for hundreds of years.

I say “relatively” because there is one period in Japanese history that many point to as evidence for Japan’s lack of contact with foreign societies: sakoku, or the period of seclusion enacted by the Tokugawa (1603-1868) shogunate, beginning in 1633 and continuing for almost 200 years. This policy of national isolation prohibited trade with foreign countries and prevented foreigners from entering Japan and Japanese from leaving. However, the state
monopoly on trade did not completely obstruct the flow of foreign goods and ideas from entering the country (Lie 24).

There are a lot of misunderstandings surrounding this period of national isolation. In his book *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*, Ronald P. Toby sheds light on many of the popular misconceptions that abound about Japan’s policy of *sakoku*. One is that seclusion meant Japan would no longer trade with foreign countries, when in fact this was not the case, especially for other Asian countries. Trade with China continued, and trade with Korea and the Ryukyu Kingdom began to blossom *after* the *sakoku* policy went into effect. The exchange of material goods – as well as Japanese bodies – between Japan and their Asian neighbors was not only permissible, but promoted by the Tokugawa shogunate. In fact, even exchange with Europe was maintained, albeit in a limited fashion: the Dutch East India company remained a constant point of contact between Japan and the West (Toby 3-7).

However, the most important point provided by Toby is the following:

*The idea of the Tokugawa seclusion was not born at the same time as the phenomena which that idea purports to describe... [Those in power at the time would not] have recognized the term we most commonly see for their policy. That term *sakoku*, a term which has dominated the modern historiography of the Tokugawa period, was not a contemporary seventeenth-century term.* (11)

The terms in use at the time were more along the lines of “prohibitions,” not “closed country.”

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12 In fact, Toby (11-14) notes that the development of the term *sakoku* was simply a matter of words getting lost in translation: a Japanese scholar based his creation of the term off of an English mistranslation of a German document by Engelbert Kaempfer, who supported the idea of Japan remaining shut off to the world. In any case, the conception of “*sakoku*” that we have today was not common until the nineteenth century. This speaks to the way in which ideology becomes instantiated through the occlusion of history.
exchange; they did not attempt to close the country to the outside world. In fact, they carefully planned out alternate trade routes before expelling the Portuguese from Japan in 1639 (Toby 11). This was a conscious and strategic effort. They simply wanted to conduct their foreign relations with whom they saw as “compatible foreign peoples.”

Some foreign peoples were not seen as compatible: Catholics and Catholicism. Catholics were considered the enemy due to suspicion that their missionary practices would upset the social order (Elison). Tokugawa leaders used the seclusion edicts to curb Catholicism, enacting bans on Catholic travel to and the presence of Christianity within Japan. They regularly rejected all requests to trade that came from anyone with a relation to the Catholic Church. Those who were not seen as a threat were taken into consideration: the Tokugawa approved a request to reopen trade with modern-day Thailand in 1674, forty years after the seclusion policy was enacted (Toby 12-14). Japan was still very much open to the possibility of foreign relations, at least with those they viewed as “compatible.”

A Reaction to the Western Other

*The representation of ‘self’ is determined by the representation of ‘Other’. Those who had once represented themselves solely as Germans and Latins, or Catholics and Protestants, began to identify themselves as ‘Europeans’ and ‘Caucasians’ when they met in Africa and Asia. Likewise, Members of the Satsuma and Mito feudal domains in Japan discovered themselves to be fellow ‘Japanese’ as a result of the impact of the American ‘Black Ships’.*

Eiji Oguma, *A Genealogy of “Japanese” Self-Images*
Not all those deemed as “incompatible” were content with being turned away from Japan’s ports, however. U.S. Navy officer James Glynn\(^\text{13}\) sailed to Nagasaki in 1849 on a mission to free American sailors who had been imprisoned there. He forced his way into the port and threatened U.S. intervention if the Japanese did not comply. Glynn was successful in negotiating with the Japanese for the release of the American prisoners. Following his voyage, he propositioned the United States government to again try establishing relations with Japan. He advised them to use force if necessary (Arnold).

Soon after, in 1853, Commodore Perry forced Japan to open to the world. On a mission to establish trade treaties, he sailed his Black Ships into a harbor near present-day Tokyo with guns pointed towards the capital, ignoring entreaties by Japanese officials that he relocate to Nagasaki, where foreign communications would be received. An account of the Perry mission to Japan paints a very threatening portrait:

\[\text{The presence of the Americans in the bay of [Edo] was evidently exciting a very lively apprehension among those on shore, for guns were frequently firing, signal rockets shooting up into the air, soldiers parading about the batteries on the various headlands, and at night bells were tolling and beacon-fires were blazing and illuminating the long extent of shore.} \text{(Beasley 157)}\]

Perry promised certain destruction if the Japanese refused to comply with his demands. Overwhelmed by the might of Western technology, they agreed to receive him. The Japanese officials had no way of defending themselves; they could not compete with Western technology, military or economic might and, as a result, were forced to comply with Western demands. Treaties requiring Japan to trade with the United States led to the proliferation of

\(^{13}\text{See United States Navy (Senate executive document, 31st Congress, 1st session, no. 84).}\)
similar treaties by Russia, Britain and France, all of whom were looking for viable overseas markets into which they could expand the trade of their manufactured goods (and from which they could extract raw materials). Western traders brought their currency, competing with that of Japan’s. Further treaties resulted in more inroads by Western powers: concessions were granted to permit foreigners to reside in certain designated areas within cities (Columbia).

Forcibly opening the country through unequal treaties placed Japan in a position subordinate to that of the Western countries. The small, weak country began to suffer from an inferiority complex against the greater Western powers, who continued to colonize and conquer the nations of Asia and Africa. Japan was concerned about how to maintain its independence when faced with the dominating power of the Western world. As such, a discourse on nationalism began to flourish “in order to combat the threat posed by the colonization of Asia by the Western Powers” (Oguma 9-12).

Here we see the notion central to the argument of my thesis, that the invocation of a “Japanese identity” occurs at a tense point of contact with a threatening “other”—in this case, the rapacious figure of Western imperial nations. Indeed, as stated by Bucholtz and Hall, “Ethnic identity…generally emerges under conditions of contact…as a way of reifying distinctions between people who live in juxtaposition to one another” (371) [emphasis mine].

Thus, the very first iteration of the concept of a “Japanese identity” occurs at the first major tension point with the Western Other (Dale 50). The “nationalist impulse” would emerge only against a foreign threat. A tacit awareness of foreign countries at once became a concrete experience. This is a time when, instead of regional differences, global identities – that of Japanese or Western – come to the fore: “The shock of the new—the modern West—entailed encounters with strange people, goods, and ideas, which accentuated the sense of
Japanese identity that superseded differences among the Japanese” (Lie 120). Before, Japan was able to physically exclude threatening bodies from its borders by literally banning them from stepping foot inside the country. Now, with the threat of Western destruction, the Japanese were forced to allow these threatening foreign bodies to exist within the interior. As a result, they employed a new strategy of inclusion to maintain distance between themselves and this foreign threat: the development of a monolithic Japanese identity.

The Western Threat and the Meiji Restoration

*The Western threat—from the Russian encroachment in the late eighteenth century to the coming of Commodore Perry—generated manifold discourses on the Japanese nation and nationalist ideals.*

John Lie, *Multiethnic Japan*

The first conceptions of “Japoneseness” arose in the late 1800s as a conscious response to a sudden influx of Western culture (Lie 39). Residents, frustrated over Western demands and the inability of the shogunate to resist them, led to an overthrow of the Tokugawa regime and the reinstatement of the Emperor in 1868, harking the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. Now, Japan was to be “re-created in the image of a modern Western nation-state.”

Recognizing that to compete with the West, Japan would have to modernize through the incorporation of Western technology and ideals, the country began to idealize the Western powers during the early Meiji (1868-1912) period (Oguma 10). Viewing the Western powers as superior meant that Japan was, as a result, inferior. This is because, as Lie said, the “desire to catch up is to acknowledge backwardness.” This struggle to catch up to the West became one of the most important decrees of prewar Japan, as evidenced by the slogan *Datsu-A Nyū-O.* Meaning “Escape Asia, Enter Europe,” the Meiji government sent Japan on a mission to shed
itself of Asian inferiority and enter the world of the modernized, superior West. The extent to which Japan tried to “enter Europe” is evidenced by the penchant for Europhilia during this period in their history. Western aristocratic culture and Western civilization were glorified; the West became a cultural center, and Japan sought to emulate it through political, militaristic, economic, technological and educational means (Lie 34-40).

However, there were those who had a more ambivalent reaction against the West. While recognizing the need for Western modernization and technology in order to compete, some scholars noted that the Japanese were, in fact, considered an “alien race” by the West, and that unabashed acceptance of foreigners would continue to see Japan subjected to Western power (Oguma 16-17). Many thinkers insisted on the importance of having a solid Japanese identity in order to prevent being overrun by the “Western machines.” There arose from within Japanese academia – and the wider culture – calls for Japan to define for itself what it meant to be “Japanese” (Oguma 9-13).

There arose two dominant theories on the origins of the Japanese nation, fragmented currents that were fully developed by the 1880s: “One was the mixed nation theory which argued that the Japanese nation consisted of a mixture between a conquering people and a previous aboriginal people and others, while the second was the homogeneous nation theory, which argued that the Japanese nation had lived in Japan since time immemorial and that their lineage had been handed down to contemporary ‘Japanese’” (Oguma 15). The mixed nation theory was quite similar to early Western theories stating that Japan was a mixture of myriad peoples from various places, whereas the homogeneous (monoethnic) nation theory was viewed by scholars as the way to maintain independence from Western ideologies. Unfortunately for these scholars, there was a lack of anthropological evidence to prove the homogeneous/monoethnic nation
theory credible. The mixed nation theory, however – having been developed by Western anthropologists – had the advantage of modern (Western) science to back it up (Oguma 14). As stated above, the Japanese saw imitation of the West as the way to compete. The mixed nation theory, scientific and modern, seemed to have an advantage in this regard.

As such, the problem was not to be resolved for some time. Speculations on “the Japanese” continued to flourish throughout the late 19th century with the publication of newspapers, magazines and journals dedicated to studying “Japaneseness” (Lie 150); the discourse on the Japanese raged within the public media. A growing sense of “Japaneseness” further emerged through subsequent public schooling and military campaigns put forth by the Meiji government (Lie 118). In particular, the educational system was used to put forth the notion of Japan as a family state with the Emperor as its head, and that all Japanese were connected by a divine line of Emperors back to the descent from heaven (Batten 99; Oguma 32).

But this “Japanese identity” would not limit itself to the contemporary inhabitants of Japan alone. For the next half a century, a series of events made it necessary for the Japanese to incorporate a number of diverse peoples into their conceptions of “Japaneseness”: the expansion of the Great Japanese Empire.

A Rapid Expansion

[The Great Japanese Empire] had to justify colonial rule beyond naked power.

Hence, from the annexation of Taiwan in 1896 to 1945, the fundamental impulse of imperial Japan was to assert the multiethnic origins and constitution of Japan…imperialist multiethnicity superseded monoethnic nationalism.

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14 Batten and Andresen & Carter point out that print capitalism (along with the novel and German Romanticism) was one of the catalysts for the creation of the modern nation-state, allowing a sense of commonality to be disseminated through stories.
The Meiji leaders accelerated the process of modernization for Japan. Territorial claims were staked on Hokkaido and Okinawa, and these regions were consolidated into the nascent empire (Lie 101). Kokutai, or the national polity theory, came to be the dominant ideology of the Great Japanese Empire, and postulated the Japanese state as a family protected by the Imperial Family, with the Emperor as its head. National polity re-emerged in the late nineteenth century and was able to gain footing as the principal ideology of the nation after the overthrow of the feudalistic system. It easily reconciled the ideals of the homogeneous nation theory. However, there soon existed an inconsistency between the claim that all imperial subjects were “members of a single nation who shared pure and homogeneous origins” and the growing realities of the Japanese Empire (Oguma 31-32).

The First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 saw Japan’s victory, the annexation of Taiwan, and an influx of Chinese and Taiwanese aboriginal peoples into the Empire. In addition to putting to rest any fears of being colonized by the West (Morris-Suzuki 88), there was a newfound need to find a way to coexist with these “foreigners” underneath the sign of the Japanese Empire. There was no longer a need to espouse ethnic homogeneity but at the same time, a pure, uniform national ethnos was no longer viable as an anchoring, legitimizing theory for imperial power and national identity. In this way, even the national polity theory was forced to concede to the notion of Japan as a mixed nation (Oguma 37-39; 45-46).

The mixed nation theory was “unstoppable.” The argument shared by many in the public sphere was that it was useless to insist that Japan was composed of a single race. How could the Great Japanese Empire continue its expansionist regime if the dominant ideology was one of monoethnicity? Conquering territory served to weld together a national pride but
the realities of a multi-ethnic empire could no longer be ignored. The imperial desires of Japan and its delayed entrance into the business of colonization required an instrumentalized shift in ideology around the nation.

To explain the presence of non-Japanese within the Japanese empire, imperial leaders insisted on the assimilation of the Taiwanese after the “old tradition” of assimilating and mixing with other nations (Oguma 48). In other words, not only had Japan always been in touch with foreign countries, but foreign objects were also assimilated into Japanese society. This argument became an integral part of the justification of Japanese colonial expansion.

The notion of assimilation was crucial to Japan’s subsequent annexation of Korea. As justification for this move, leaders adhered to either the theory that Japan was a mixed nation, or that Japan shared a common ancestor with Korea. Mixed nation theorists lauded the annexation in the press. Many publications emphasized the connection between Japan and Korea; the Japanese assimilative ability to turn others into “Japanese”; the notion that the Japanese were a composite mixture of races from all around the globe; the idea that Japan included the blood of many naturalized peoples; and the argument that successful assimilation in the past will continue to lead to successful assimilation in the future.

The theory of assimilation itself was reinforced and strengthened through a second point of tense contact with the West: discrimination. The 1920s saw the proliferation of anti-Japanese movements and discrimination in the States, harshly reinforcing the inferior position of a Japan that had tried so hard so become a part of the West. Indeed, the Empire had expanded and become a multi-national Eastern Power, and was compared to the similarly powerful colonial empires of Great Britain and America. However, America had rejected Japanese migrants, with Britain refusing to support Japanese proposals for racial equality (Oguma 186-187). It became
impossible for the Japanese to conceive of themselves as in any way related to these racist nations; Japan came to consider itself “the ‘minority of international society’” (Oguma 333).

As such, Japan needed to distance itself as much as possible from the Western powers it had previously lauded. To do so, Japan argued that they were, in fact, superior to the West because they chose to assimilate foreigners, rather than discriminate against them:

*The mongrel, coloured Japanese nation, it was argued, was the victim of Western racism but at the same time enjoyed superior adaptability and powers of assimilation, and possessed a natural vitality unblemished by the poison of civilisation.* (Oguma 332)

Unlike the Western Powers, the Japanese could not claim to spread civilization and democracy to the peoples they colonized. The West, with its technology and concepts of modernization, was already doing this; to claim a similar reason would be to align Japan with the West, and – as victims of Western discrimination – Japanese leaders did not want to do this. Luckily, the territory Japan had its sight set on were in close proximity to the empire. This was a result of Japan’s late-developing imperialism; they could not invade territories in regions far away from them. As such, the government began to make the claim that the people of these regions were related to the Japanese (Oguma 328).

There arose, around this time, a new Asian mode of thought that worked to outline alternative approaches to economic development. Much of the discourse surrounding this idea alluded to the West as an “enemy” that sought to impose Western ideals onto Asia, a form of “ethical imperialism.” This “Asian” mode of thought led to a situation in which the populations of Asia became subjected to a kind of “forced postindustrialization” in an attempt to try and mitigate the consequences of the West’s “encroaching economic imperialism” and
its “multinational enterprises.” This new conception of Japanese identity – that of a multiethnic Japan that sought to incorporate other members of the “Asian race” – led to the imposition of Japanese values onto members of the regions they colonized: “if one concedes that there is a certain racial and ethnic homogeneity in [Japan] which is less common in other parts of Asia, the ideological thrust is nevertheless one of unification, homogenisation, and assimilation” (Mouer & Sugimoto, 240-241).

Thus, the Great Japanese Empire was one seemingly blessed with powers of assimilation, a “melting pot” that worked to absorb colonial subjects into “complete” Japanese (Morris-Suzuki 175; Ching). Japan was lauded as a place where various peoples (Korean, Chinese) and cultures (European) could be included. It is important to note that these conceptions of Japan were fundamentally placed in opposition to the Western Powers, and used to overcome their requisite inferiority complex: unlike Europe, the Japanese Empire possessed a special characteristic of assimilation: “expansion to incorporate the same race” (Oguma 88). The result of this was the emergence of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a “master ideology” by which Japan promised Pan-Asian liberation from the Western Powers. Although the colonized peoples did not necessarily subscribe to this ideology, it had a major effect on the way in which the Japanese perceived themselves (Lie 101-102).

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15 Some readers may have the impression that here I have framed the prewar ideology as an exploitation. The Pan-Asian movement had a global resonance; in fact, many African-American scholars and thinkers in the early twentieth century characterized Japan as the “champion of the colored races” and viewed them in a relatively positive light. However, colonized peoples in Asia continued to struggle with exploitation and assimilation at the hands of the Great Japanese Empire. For more on this, see Kearney (1998); Reis (2009).
Chapter 2

Over the years, Japan came to dominate various regions of Asia and the Pacific, including Sakhalin, the South Sea Islands, South East Asia, and Manchuria. Changes in textbooks show that the existence of alien peoples within the Great Japanese Empire was a lived reality for all members of Japanese society. State-approved textbooks highlighted the multitude of races all living in within the Empire; not one mentioned a description of a pure-blood, homogeneous Japanese nation (Oguma 133-138). Ideas of a monoethnic Japanese identity had slowly disappeared from the public sphere. No writers maintained that the Japanese were of pure blood or homogeneous/monoethnic descent (Oguma 81-85). This theory served as the ideological foundation for Japan’s escalated imperial project. The idea of Japan as a multiethnic nation became the norm, the dominant ideology salient in the minds of Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

A Postwar Transformation: The Collapse of Multiethnic Japan

The proliferation in the mass media of the mixed nation theory during the time of the annexation of Korea was in stark contrast to the year 1944. Around this time, the war was no longer in Japan’s favor, and the discourse on Japan’s multiethnic origins had almost completely disappeared from the national magazines, and even from state-sponsored textbooks.

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16 The cynical nature of this ideological move lies in the policy of assimilation itself. The process of incorporating Korean and Taiwanese subjects into Japan meant denying their foreignness; they were seen as “Japanese,” albeit “defective” or “incomplete” ones. Still, this harks to Japan’s earlier tradition of metabolizing any potentially threatening foreign object into something “Japanese enough” so that it no longer presented a threat. In the case of colonial subjects, it was feared those who retained any semblance of their non-Japanese identity would look to the West to seek retribution. By instantiating a singularly Japanese identity into the colonial subjects themselves, it was believed that the possibility of them betraying Japan by seeking Western assistance decreased dramatically. For more information, see Oguma 296-297.
Victory was not in the cards this time; and on August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers and lost its colonial empire. Many colonial subjects were repatriated from Japan back to their countries of origin, dramatically reducing the amount of ethnic diversity that was visible in Japan (Lie 125). The numbers of non-Japanese that were a part of the empire suddenly dropped substantially. Koreans and Taiwanese subjects, conscripted for the war effort and brought to Japan to work and fight for the Japanese empire, were repatriated to their countries of origin.

In 1945 Japan was occupied by the United States of America. Americans flooded to Japan and found themselves in the midst of remnants of a broken empire (Yoshino 8). During the Occupation, many fundamental changes were applied to the structure of Japanese society. Dominant imperialist structures disappeared or were changed beyond recognition. Japan’s constitutional monarchy was converted to a democracy, and the Emperor went from “sovereign deity” to a mere human symbol of the nation. Culturally, Japan shifted from a sense of militarism to pacifism, and demographically from an agrarian society to an urban one. The hierarchical domination of status was replaced by an ideology of egalitarian social interactions (Oguma 125-126). Any ideologies that appeared remotely “Japanese” were delegitimized and dismissed (Lie 134). The dominant discourses on the Japanese in the 1950s negated the idea of Japan and focused on the shortcomings that led to the Empire’s demise (Yoshino).

The seeming destruction of an institutionalized vertical society as well as the sudden decrease in the number of visible ethnic minorities in Japan led to an upsurge in national consciousness: “The sense of belonging to the Japanese nation, rather than to a particular region, became paramount…the claim of cultural homogeneity became plausible to ordinary Japanese people” (Lie 126). But this upsurge was only due to Japan’s newfound “homogeneity”
relative to the size and scope of the Great Japanese Empire. A Japan confined to the archipelago seemed much smaller than one with colonies overseas, and the Japanese people appeared much more homogeneous after colonial subjects returned to their colonized countries. However, there were many colonial subjects who remained in Japan even after the war. Although the collapse of the Great Japanese Empire saw a stark decline in the numbers of visible foreigners in the archipelago, the reality was that a number of Koreans, Chinese, Ainu, Burakumin, Okinawans and other former imperial subjects continued to eke out a living in Japan (Lie 125). How is it, then, that the myth of homogeneity was able to take root?

The collapse of the empire saw the delegitimation of all ideologies that had come before it (Lie 129). Because they had been defeated, the past rhetoric no longer held sway, leading to the loss of the one framework with which Japan could talk about ethnicity within its borders. Several scholars found it difficult to speak about ethnicity without also invoking imperialist expansion. One of the most prominent examples is the scholar Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), whose ideas about “the Japanese” changed greatly as the tides of war shifted:

[Tetsujirō] thus used the mixed nation theory to argue for overseas expansion and assimilation at a time when the areas under Japanese occupation were expanding, but emphasized homogeneity and advocated union once Japan was driven on to the defensive. (Oguma 296) [bold emphasis mine]

Thus, even the beliefs of one and the same scholar could not resist the extent to which prewar ideologies were considered taboo.

Formulations of new visions of ethnic coexistence, or new theories about Japanese multi-nationality, were almost nonexistent (Oguma 298). For many, “multiethnic state” meant “world empire,” and the Japanese, tired as they were of war, did everything in their power to
shed this conception of their country. For many, the only logical opposition to multi-national state was a homogeneous one (Oguma 315) because to be multiethnic meant to be a colonial power. Japan now, with humbler, post-war ambitions, was for the Japanese alone.

The Japanese needed a new way to define themselves. Prewar Japan was able to use its military might to deal with any foreigners in the interior who tried to resist assimilation; postwar Japan didn’t, and so denying the existence of alien peoples was an attractive alternative. The concept of Japan as a peaceful, monoethnic island nation with no trace of foreigners was desirable to a country devastated by war (Oguma 299-305).

A Quest For a New (Monoethnic) Identity

Having made great strides towards becoming a World Power, Japan once again felt the devastating crush of the West, and saw a revival in their sense of inferiority (Takeyama). Through occupation and rapid Americanization, there emerged in the 1960s a postwar nationalism that, in fact, celebrated economic recovery and corporate capitalism; a pro-West, pro-American stance that dominated after the loss of prewar ideals (Lie 133-134). There was a belief that the Japanese were, in a way, culturally bankrupt, and European and American imports continued to be exalted (Lie 38-39).

It wasn’t long, however, before Japan found itself at the mercy of yet another foreign threat: recognition by the international community. The rapid economic growth of the 60s, the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, and endaka (“high yen”) in the 70s forced the country into a “second opening,” where Japan was made to recognize their place on the international stage (Lie 129-130). As they rose through the ranks to become the world’s second-largest economy, the Japanese became concerned with their status, and how they were viewed by those overseas (Oguma 319). Indeed, the valuation of Japanese currency in the 70s made it necessary that Japan
recognize its position in the global economy. Why was it that the Japanese were seeing such rapid economic growth?

Foreigners and Japanese alike had begun to question what it meant to be Japanese. As stated above, many institutional structures were dismantled following the collapse of the Empire, and the Japanese lost their main framework of differentiation and began to shun prewar ideals. Otherwise, more plausible candidates for Japanese uniqueness – the way of the samurai, or the divine nature of the Emperor system – would have sufficed. Today’s discourse on the Japanese emerged to fulfill the need for a usable narrative of Japanese identity (Lie 130). The ideas of monoethnicity and homogeneity – developed in reaction to the void left by the destruction of prewar ideals – became Japan’s principal capital in proving itself to curious foreigners, and Western writers took these conceptions back to their own countries, faithfully reproducing the notion of monoethnic Japan (Lie 131).

Once the ideology of monoethnicity became entrenched in Japanese society, few took it upon themselves to question its origin. There were few compelling alternatives, and Westerners and Japanese alike began to repeat this refrain of monoethnicity in their conceptions of “the Japanese” (Lie 131). Several factors served to reinforce this mythology in the minds of Japanese society. One factor was generational change: this was a significant shift in erasing the memory of multiethnic Japan. In addition to conscious negation and dismissal of prewar ideologies, the simple passage of time caused the realities of a mixed nation to slip from the minds of the nation. The postwar generation had no recollection of war-time Japan and thus a new conception of Japan could be overlaid in this historical void (Lie 136).

Lie also argues that the Tokyo-centric media was another crucial factor that helped fuel the myth of monoethnicity. It was difficult to ignore the existence of ethnic others in Hokkaido
or Osaka, where ethnic Japanese came face-to-face with the realities of Korean Japanese, Burakumin and Ainu on a daily basis. In contrast, a city where everyone tries to pass as a native Tokyoite (including rural ethnic Japanese themselves) makes it difficult to distinguish ethnic minorities from ethnic Japanese (Lie 136).

Further, Minorities, fearing discrimination and other negative consequences should they be “outed” in a society increasingly hostile to those who might claim both Japanese and Other identities, frequently choose to try and “pass” for Japanese when they can (Lie 138). For those versed in the sociohistorical context of the United States, this hearkens back to a time when biracial black/white Americans would try to pass as white in order to navigate more easily through racist and segregated American society.

Those who were not “racialized” – meaning “not physiologically or culturally distinct from the ethnic Japanese population” – were able to capitalize on the benefits of “being Japanese.” Marked minorities did not receive much protection from the government. The Ainu culture was practically destroyed; Okinawa had been occupied by the U.S.; and the Korean Japanese, Burakumin and foreign workers were residentially segregated in neighborhoods not sanctioned by the Japanese government. Discrimination against these groups meant they had few opportunities to work alongside and interact with ethnic Japanese. Some were told to go home. Geographical and social isolation led to invisibility and silence. The ideology of “monoethnicity” absolved the government of any responsibility towards ethnic minorities (Lie 138-139). These minorities were not full citizens and were not guaranteed the care that the government would show to those who possess Japanese citizenship.

The category of Japaneseness has considerable social significance. As in other nation-states, citizenship provides various privileges, ranging from suffrage, to welfare benefits, to
employment opportunities. But being Japanese is one of the fundamental ways in which society is organized (Lie 166). Fitting that image of “Japaneseness” – fully embodying what it means to be “Japanese” – is crucial to anyone who wants to be seen as a viable part of Japanese society.

“Japaneseness”

_Thus the essentialised Japan is a standardized Japan with uniform characteristics disallowing internal variation. This Japan is largely the making of the central government since the Meiji period, bent on creating a unified, uniform and homogeneous nation. This essentialised Japan is an imagined community far from the reality the country presents._

Harumi Befu, _The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture_

This actively created, essentialized notion of Japan has been expressed over the years through the discourse on “the Japanese.” Known collectively as _Nihonjinron_, or theories about the Japanese, these works represent “the commercialized expression of modern Japanese nationalism. The rubric resumes under one genre any work of scholarship, occasional essay or newspaper article which attempts to define the unique specificity of things Japanese” (Dale 14). The discourse serves to assert the uniqueness of the Japanese people, and spell out exactly what it is that makes them so unique (Befu 25). Lie notes that it is important to understand that discourses of uniqueness are not unique to Japan; any nation state may possess a number of writings that attempt to constitute their national identity (151). The _Nihonjinron_ is simply Japan’s take on what it means to be “Japanese,” and how they differ from the multitude of other social groups that exist.
So what is it that makes the Japanese “unique”? The *Nihonjinron* discourse points to a multitude of reasons: their biological constitution; their ancient cultural development; their impossible-to-master linguistic system; their literary aestheticism and philosophical modes of thought; their human relations and social structure; their basic personality and characterization (Befu 25; Oguma; Ueyama et al.; Ōno; Kuki; Nakane; Watsuji; Doi). These reasons tend to be subjected to linguistic reductionism, a process by which one word is used in an attempt to “encapsulate the entire mentality or at least a major culturally defined thought pattern of the Japanese” (Mouer & Sugimoto 241). Modern phrases such as *ie shakai* (the “Family State”) and *gaman* (“endurance”) are variations on the same theme of uniqueness, echoing earlier discourse phrases like *amae* (“dependence”) and *haji* (“shame”) that were used to explain what it was that made “the” Japanese unique.

These “qualities” are said to have existed in the Japanese since the beginning of time (Befu 26). Further, the umbrella terms – like *gaman* and *amae* – are used with the implication that they are imbued with a special meaning that is impossible for non-Japanese to grasp: “that the term ‘the Japanese’ means something, that there is a unified concept, ‘Japan’, which means the same thing to all Japanese” (Mouer & Sugimoto 241-242). Dale agrees that phenomena invoked in the *Nihonjinron* discourse are utilized with the presumption that they are unique to Japan, that they do not occur anywhere else in the world, and that they cannot be perceived or even understood by foreigners (25). (For example, the concept of *amae*, loosely translated as “dependence”, is believed not to exist outside of Japan, or is believed to be a particularly special and unique trait possessed by Japanese and foundational to Japanese society).\(^{17}\)

The following selections from literary theorist Ihab Hassan’s *Between the Eagle and the Sun* is one variation on the *Nihonjinron*, in order provide a glimpse into the ways in which these

\(^{17}\) See Doi.
characterizations may be expressed by the Japanese themselves and by those who repeat their
discourse:

*The Japanese are the most impassive, formal, enigmatic people on earth, more
inscrutable than Easter Island monoliths...the enigma of a teasing calm remains with
every visitor to Japan, prompting him to wonder what lies behind the mask?*

*The Japanese are the most courteous people in the world... Witness the bowing in all its
exquisite degrees, the delicate locutions of language, the rituals of self-deprecation, the
calibrated exchanges of gifts, above all, the genius for avoiding embarrassment, to others
first, to oneself next.*

*The Japanese are the most cohesive, conformist, tribal, well, yes, racist people around.
They are also the most loyal. Like a circular coral reef, like a silvery school of sardines,
in stillness as in motion, they adhere.*

Ihab Hassan, *Between the Eagle and the Sun*

Hassan goes on to deconstruct each of these myths, offering anecdotes of “Japanese” who
disagree with the above characterizations and questioning their validity (76-88). Yet, it is
important to note that these kinds of characterizations are not uncommon; and that there exist
equal and opposite ones that have also been used to characterize the “unique” nature of the
Japanese. For example, with respect to the notion that the Japanese are “impassive, formal, [and]
enigmatic,” there are many Japanese who believe that (compared with the “logical” West) the
Japanese are more emotional, sensitive and natural (Hassan 77; Oguma 278).

However, this sort of cognitive dissonance – the existence of contradictory and mutually
exclusive conceptions of what makes the Japanese “unique” – does not matter in the long run,
because the *Nihonjinron* discourse is not meant to describe Japanese people as they actually are
(Dale 26). It is an idealized, essentialized ideology, a monolithic “Japanese identity” with which “Japanese people” are supposed to identify. These conceptions of “the Japanese” are at once products of nation-building and of reactions against the Western Other (Lie 150). They were meant to foster a sense of solidarity, not take into account the nuances of people living within Japan. Through these conceptions, the Japanese are able to maintain their sense of identity, especially when it is most vulnerable.  

To this end, *Nihonjinron* discourse absolutely *must* downplay differences. This is a key process of social grouping and identity formation (Bucholtz & Hall 371). *Nihonjinron* must ignore differences in daily patterns of living between “the Japanese” themselves: regional culture (agriculture, architecture, clothing, rituals, food) and linguistic variations are disregarded in favor of “standard Japanese” language and culture. It must ignore the myriad foreign influences – from China, Korea, and the West – that Japan has incorporated into its culture (Befu 26). In all, Mouer and Sugimoto list this in addition to three other key components in their summary of the *Nihonjinron* methodology: willful ignorance of variation within Japanese society; use of linguistically reduced concepts to describe all of “Japanese society”; assumption of the inherent and heritable nature of cultural tendencies; and sweeping generalizations of Self and Other (241). Through its use, “Japan emerges as a valid unit of generalization, which is unchanging, homogeneous, and distinct” (Lie 159).

**“The Japanese”**

*The category of Japanese-ness appears innocent and obvious. After all, there are Japanese people who are identified as Japanese by themselves as well as by others.*

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18 The argument of the *Nihonjinron* as a defense mechanism is supported by Christopher (187) and Oguma (69). My further belief is that the *Nihonjinron* came to the fore again in modern years because of the Lost 2 Decades leading to a period of listlessness and hopelessness – once again, Japan felt vulnerable and pulled back in on itself, using the *Nihonjinron* to solidify identity and offer some sense of national pride.
Indeed, one of the characteristics of being Japanese is the ability to distinguish Japanese from non-Japanese people. It seems only natural, then, that people should generate generalizations about them. However...the logic of classification that people employ can be different and contradictory.

Hence, as much as some people are confident in declaring sources of Japaneseness, many others are confused about what in fact makes people Japanese. What no one questions is the starting point.

John Lie, *Multiethnic Japan*

Classification of “the Japanese” – delineating exactly who does and does not belong to this prestigious category – is much more difficult than proffering ideas about what makes them “unique.” This is because the rules of classification are very rarely explicitly stated, leading to a mixture of (ultimately personal) definitions (Lie 143). In his chapter on classification and signification, Lie offers three vignettes that showcase the different criteria by which “the Japanese” tend to classify themselves. Some believe it is a matter of assimilation; others a matter of race and physiognomy; still others believe it is a matter of linguistic and cultural competence (142-143).

The definition appears elusive. On what criteria should one base an assessment? Befu tells us that the typical approach is to consider a number of “objective” criteria: state affiliation, along with knowledge of the language and culture (29). He goes on to outline the typical definition of a “Japanese” person as such:

*A person who was born in Japan of Japanese parents, is a native speaker of Japanese, and embodies Japanese culture through enculturation and socialisation processes from birth is considered ‘pure’ or ‘typical’ Japanese.* (Befu 29)
Mouer and Sugimoto emphasize the importance of thinking very critically about these sorts of definitions. According to them, any viable definition – such as the one above – must, at the very least, satisfy five criteria:

1. Possession of Japanese citizenship
2. Native proficiency in the Japanese language
3. Current residency in Japan
4. Biological Japanese pedigree
5. Japanese cultural literacy (as “officially sanctioned” and “imprinted on the minds of most Japanese” through schooling and mass media)

Mouer and Sugimoto state that the number of persons who truly satisfy all five criteria may not be as numerous as one might think, even going so far as to point out that there would be many “Koreans” (presumably of mixed parentage) who would “qualify as Japanese on all five counts.” Further, they problematize the list by asking if, for instance, a Japanese businessman working abroad – though still retaining all other factors of “Japaneseness” – would no longer be considered “Japanese” because of his currently residing outside of Japan (243-245).

There are people who would agree that a Japanese person taking a stint overseas would, in fact, “lose” some of their “Japaneseness.” This is a common reason given by kikokushijo, or returnee schoolchildren, who some may say have been “tainted” by the West (Christopher 184; Hassan 84). In any case, Mouer and Sugimoto note that difficulty in defining “Japanese,” due to the differences in classification.

Still, that does not prevent people from attempting to classify others. But why create these boundaries in the first place? Why is it so important for “the Japanese” – and by extension, “non-Japanese” – to be clearly defined?
Self and Other

*Ethnic groups have a built-in need for real or imagined counterparts and thus for ethnic boundaries of one kind or another.*

Bruce Loyd Batten, *To the Ends of Japan*

The answer to why these boundaries are clearly defined ultimately lies in the interplay between power and identity (Bucholtz & Hall 370). The development of Self necessarily implies the existence of an Other, something that is not-Self. As I have shown, the concept of “the Japanese” arose during sudden contact with something that was threateningly “not Japanese” – namely, the Western Other.

As a result of its complex history with the West, Japan has always been placed in a precarious balancing act between East and West. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), one of Japan’s most influential thinkers, saw Japan as not belonging to Asia or the East; Japan had modernized, and modernization was a product of the West. This was a development based on American conceptualizations of race, which were imported into the country near the end of Tokugawa (mid-1850s):

*[Perry’s] crewmen placed the Japanese upon [a] previously established racial hierarchy—putting them above Africans, Latin Americans, and other Asians, but squarely below Western Anglo-Saxons.* (Keith 186)

Japan – eager to emulate the West in order to modernize, as I’ve shown – accepted their place in this racial hierarchy. Constant defeat by the West and imperial expansion throughout Asia would only have served to underscore its validity. Truth be told, all of Japan’s conceptualizations of self
were placed against – not the East – but the West (Lie 40). Japan’s postwar economic success continued to place it is stark distinction from the rest of Asia (McCormack).

In this way, Japanese identity came to be formulated and understood in stark contrast to “the West” – the predominantly white, male colonial powers that shaped Japan from its forced opening in the mid-nineteenth century to its economic boom in the late twentieth.

By excluding the Other, one is able to mark the boundaries within which one defines the Self. Before the arrival of Commodore Perry’s Black Ships, the Japanese were able to literally exclude anyone they saw as incompatible from Japanese society. Foreign bodies were physically turned away at Japanese ports. After the Western Other imposed itself upon the country, Japan could no longer resort to physical distance as a mechanism for maintaining boundaries. The Japanese had to resort to a non-physical method of exclusion: the social construction of a Japanese society impermeable by outsiders.

However, the boundaries of Japanese identity were not the same for everyone. The degree to which a person was included or excluded from Japanese society can be seen based on where they are positioned within the hierarchy outlined above. White bodies are treated with ambivalence: Japan has allowed white bodies into their country and viewed them with a mix of fear (of being subsumed underneath them) and admiration (of wanting to be like them in order to raise Japan’s own standing). Asian bodies are treated differently, depending on their ability to be assimilated. As I outlined previously, Koreans and Taiwanese were incorporated into the Japanese empire by asserting that they were “really Japanese.” Further, it was easy for persons of Korean and Chinese descent to “pass” as Japanese in order to avoid discrimination. We’ve noted before that the Japanese are relatively tolerant of foreign objects that can be metabolized into a “Japanese” aesthetic; thus, Korean and Chinese bodies would be more acceptable than bodies
more difficult to assimilate. These bodies – South and Southeast Asian, Latin American, and African bodies – were too marked to be assimilated or metabolized into something “Japanese” (Christopher 182). The tacit Japanese acceptance of their place on the lowest rungs of the Western hierarchy certainly didn’t help their case.

In this way, the bodies that find themselves within the sociocultural space of Japan – Japanese bodies, white bodies, Korean and Chinese bodies, Filipino bodies, black bodies – are given differential treatment based on Western conceptions of race and Japanese conceptions of what it means to “be Japanese.”
Chapter 3

In this final chapter of my thesis, I will interrogate my own lived experience – as well as those of other black women – through the cultural lens of the Japanese uniqueness myths I have formulated in my previous chapters, in order to understand Japanese racial/ethnic constructs and how they become salient in the lives of the people who live and work in Japan. Specifically, I will examine what happens when a specific kind of body – a black female body – comes into contact with the Japanese cultural sphere. Drawing on the foundation laid in the first two chapters that details the history of monoethnic Japan and the idea of the monolithic Japanese identity, I situate these experiences within the larger historical context of the development of Japanese identity and its related racial/ethnic exclusionary practices.

I will use the methodology of black feminist auto/ethnography (BFA) in order to examine my own individual experiences. This method is crucial for black women in particular because it allows us to examine a store of transient histories that are not well-known: the stories of black women in Japan have been isolated, fragmented, and not retold as part of a shared history, nor have they been assembled as part of the Other against which homogeneous Japan knows itself. Robin Boylorn explains the method as follows: “As an auto/ethnographer I examine my lived experiences through a cultural lens, using creative writing techniques and research methods to interrogate my experiences while making sense of cultural phenomena” (74). While I will primarily focus on my own experiences, I recognize that they are not completely unique to me. These experiences are something I know is shared by other women in black skin, and I find their contemporaneous stories springing up across social media and other Internet platforms. Without reducing our shared experiences to a monolithic narrative, I will also analyze the experiences of other black women in order to show the diversity of experience, as well as the shared terrain, that
women who look like me (and I like them) possess as we encounter the sociopolitical and sociocultural sphere of Japan. I will examine the ways in which we, as black women, encounter these prevailing identity constructs through the lenses of Fascination/Curiosity, Exotic Objectification, and Discrimination. I draw together these stories to present a broad picture of what it’s like to be a black woman in contemporary Japan. Therefore, within my autoethnographic analysis I interlace my own stories with the stories of nine other black females, situating mine in connection to theirs, and with them I will craft a more complex narrative comprised of various experiences, woven together, with my own thread running strong through the center.

The stories I touch upon are communicative acts steeped in negotiations.¹⁹ No one interpretation can suffice for these anecdotes; they are situated in a sociohistorical and cultural context, embedded within a multitude of other speech events, and involve a multitude of diverse speakers and listeners whose identities are similarly negotiated through interaction.²⁰ In this thesis, I focus on only one possible interpretation of these communicative events: that they are discriminatory in nature. There may be other interpretations to these stories that readers will point out. However, the purpose of this thesis is not to prove with absolute certainty the

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¹⁹ This is a rough sketch of what is known as the speech act model; developed by Roman Jakobson, this model states that any given speech act or communicative event is a negotiation of at least six different factors fighting for dominance in a shifting hierarchy. The six factors are: the speaker; the hearer; the context; the contact; the language; and the message. For more information, see Jakobson (1985).

²⁰ West & Zimmerman argue in their work *Doing Gender* that identity is a fundamental aspect of the situation, not of individuals or groups. As such, identity is not an inherent quality possessed by an individual; rather, it is an emergent factors that is negotiated through situations, such as events we’ll see in this chapter. Therefore, one is not “Japanese” or “black” until one is immersed in a situation in which those identities come to the fore. Further, identity formation is not an individual process; the role of the observer is a key facet of identity assessment. One may be ascribed a certain identity whether one agrees with it or not because others choose to define one in a certain way. Thus, half-black half-Japanese women who do not identify with their African or African-American roots can be assessed as “black” by other people, no matter what they perceive themselves to be. Similarly, as we shall see, my desire to take on a Japanese identity does not require others to perceive myself in the same way; they may just as readily refuse to ascribe that identity to me based on their own criteria. For more on identity and identity assessment, see West & Zimmerman (1987)
discriminatory nature of every communicative event I analyze, nor is it to claim that all such events are inherently discriminatory in nature. It is merely to look at one possible interpretation of these events, an interpretation that highlights the potentially devastating nature these speech events have on those who are subject to them (Sue).

The concepts that form the core of my thesis – Japanese identity, global race/ethnic relations, prejudice and discrimination – are important to examine, not only from an abstract, theoretical and historical point of view, but also from a personal standpoint. This is because these tensions are played out every day in the realm of lived experience, and they have real consequences for those who are forced into these tense points of contact. As black feminist autoethnographer Rachel Alicia Griffin states: “In short, the stories we tell about our lives matter. Stories can inspire self-reflexivity, expose the intricate workings of power, and bring complicity and complacency with domination to light” (151). Through examination of my personal history within the larger framework I have outlined in my previous two chapters, I hope to shed light on the everyday politics of identity and recognition, the relentless presence of various myths, the power of ideology to shape and inflect everyday encounters, and the complacency that keeps them alive.

**Black Faces, Japanese Spaces**

Black women are everywhere in the world, including Japan. And the reasons for their being there are diverse and varied. As I describe in the previous two chapters, the ideas surrounding Japanese relations with foreign countries shifted around the demands of foreign nations, the needs of colonial expansion, and the presence of U.S.-imposed democratic ideals. Still, throughout history, Japan has had extensive contact with foreign peoples, including black women.
In his article “Negotiating Race and Womanhood across the Pacific: African American Women in Japan under U.S. Military Occupation, 1945-52,” Yasuhiro Okada notes that this was the first time in the history of U.S.-Japan relations where there was extensive interaction between African American servicemen and women and Japanese citizens. He notes that black women are “underrepresented in the gender-skewed discourse of the postwar black-Japanese encounter” (72). Still, lack of representation doesn’t mean a lack of presence in-country: we now know that there have been black women living and working in Japan since at least the mid-20th century.

But working in Japan – or being a trailing spouse to a husband who works in Japan – is not the only reason why black women would be there. Gabrielle Daniels, who authors a blog centered around black people, womanism, race, and related topics, states the following in a post titled “Why Should Black People Care About What Happens To Japan? Because Black People Live and Work in Japan, That’s Why” that explains why African-Americans should be sympathetic towards victims of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami disaster:

...there are about 5,000 black American expatriates who live and work in [Japan...]. They are not always military stationed in Okinawa; they pursue careers there... They speak both English and Japanese and perhaps other languages. They have married and/or have had children with Japanese; they maintain their American citizenship and have a residency status in Japan... and they do not merely congregate in Tokyo or other major Japanese cities. They also live out in the countryside.

Black people are everywhere in the world, just like other peoples and other human beings. They will also love anyone who loves them, and will live and work wherever they are given room and some understanding. (blksista)
One can think up several reasons as to why a black woman would find herself within the Japanese sociocultural sphere. Some may end up in Japan as a consequence of work, like 21-year-old beauty ambassador Seven Smith, who as of this writing works as a professional cosmetologist and makeup artist in Tokyo, and vlogs about her experiences in Japan on YouTube. Many black women may have “fallen in love” with Japan after engaging with exported Japanese cultural products, especially in their youth. Nandie Taylor, a writer and blogger currently living in Tokyo, states that she heard about the JET program her first year of college and wanted a chance to see the country that brought her “Final Fantasy, Dragon Ball Z and neon leg warmers.” Susan Berhane describes herself on her blog SimplySue in 2012 as “a HUGE Japanese drama and Korean culture fan.”

Some black women come to Japan as their choice for studying abroad. Takara Swoopes Bullock, a southern girl from Decatur, Alabama, said that her interest in Japan began when she was a little girl and learned that her name meant “treasure” in Japanese. She took Japanese classes in university and decided to get a deeper feel for the language and culture through study abroad in the early 2000s. Similarly, Kimberly Kayla moved to Japan in July 2011 to study abroad for a year in Mitaka, Tokyo, documenting her journey through her blog “Tales of Japan” and through YouTube vlogs on her channel “The Masqueraid.”

Like the black women who study abroad, other black women are simply bitten by the travel bug, and Japan just so happens to be their next (or final) destination. Vanessa, who has a combined time in Japan of 9 years, as of March 2014 lives in Chiba, about an hour outside of Tokyo. She moved to Japan as a recent grad who wanted to travel. Fellow jet-setter Alafia Stewart moved to teach English in Japan after she graduated from college. Her passport is also

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21 See MissBerhane10.
stamped with Germany, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, Canada, France, Puerto Rico, and Nigeria.

There are other black women for whom Japan was their first home: they are usually half-black, half-Japanese, and live with the Japanese parent (usually the mother) in Japan. An assistant language teacher in Japan gives an account of one of her students, who she calls B: a quiet and shy 13-year-old girl, B has a Japanese mother and a father from Kenya. She speaks both Japanese and Swahili at home. Like B, Tia Sekiguchi is also half-Japanese: on her YouTube channel, where she vlogs about her personal life, she describes herself as a “Japanese/American Blasian.” Tia grew up in Tokyo with her Japanese mother and moved to America at age 4; she has moved back and forth between the two countries for most of her life.

And some black women need a way to escape the unsatisfying racial constructs in which they are currently living: a sort of “racial utopia” where they can step out of their marked selves, an uncomfortable shell, and into another version of themselves. Okada mentions how the African-American servicewomen in Japan “defined, asserted, and performed alternative racial identities, gender roles, and class positions to achieve their own empowerment within the ‘trans-Pacific’ boundaries they encountered as ‘occupiers,’ as well as racial and gendered minorities” (72). For these women, Japan offered an alternative zone onto which their desires of enhancing their own status could play out, even as they were expressly there to ensure the domination of the victor over the conquered.

Like this last group of women, I saw Japan as an opportunity to fashion for myself a new identity, one that would enhance my status and would free me from the confines of the American racial construct in which I’d found myself trapped. For me, the imaginary of “Japan” offered an appealing option: a space for a new kind of self-creation.
Growing up as a young black female in the South, you become very aware of your racial identity, no matter how many times you try to deny it. And deny it I did – apparently I was not happy when my mother explained to me, one fateful night in my younger years, that I was not, in fact, white.

She was standing in the kitchen with my eldest aunt, and I was sat at her feet, listening intently to their conversation, though not necessarily understanding what they were saying. I did, however, notice that my aunt had used a peculiar word to describe me – she’d called me “black” – and I, being six or seven years old, didn’t understand what she meant by that.

At the next break in the conversation, I took the chance to ask, “Mommy, why did auntie call me ‘black?’”

She and my aunt laughed, and my mother bent down to my level, looking me straight in the eye. Taking my hand, she gave me a quick overview of what it meant for my skin to be the color that it was, and that, no, I wasn’t the same as the blonde-haired, blue-eyed dolls I played with, or the girls I watched on my favorite TV shows.

I sat on the floor and cried.

Though I had some trouble understanding myself as “black,” there was no denying that Ebonics – or African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) was my mother tongue. I spoke the linguistic variety fluently, to the point where, when I began writing at around 11 years old, the stories were written in AAVE. I didn’t fully understand the stigma that came with the language until I moved to the “white” area of my town; my mother wanted me to go to a school with a higher academic standing, and those just so happened to consist of predominantly white students.
It was here where I began to sense a palpable conflict between my identity as a speaker of Ebonics and my identity as an intelligent, curious child.

Because moving to white schools taught me that to “talk black” was to be signified a certain way: it was to be uneducated, lazy, and ignorant, and I did not want to be coded in that way. In the world in which I lived, to “sound white” meant to “sound smart,” and I wanted to be smart, meaning I also had to “be white.” So I slowly began to distance myself from that variety, choosing to tailor my speech towards the Standard American Variety that was held in such high prestige.

But even this didn’t get me the peace that I wanted. Still, I continued to be signified as “black” – this time, not because I “talked black,” but because I was “acting white.” White people would tell me that I was “the whitest black girl” they knew, and would praise me for my “good English.” In a similar vein, other blacks would chastise me for “acting white” by nurturing my love of reading and continuing to speak Standard American English.

Thus, I found myself in a Catch-22: trapped between two identities in which I was both too black to be white, and too white to be black. I could not pass for either, because I had characteristics of both (black skin, white presentation) that were too salient for each group to be able to accept me as their own. I found myself caught in limbo, unable to locate a solid point of identification within either community. Du Bois terms this dissonance “double consciousness,” the feeling of having two or more social identities. Developing a cohesive sense of self becomes difficult, because one is always viewing oneself through the lenses of multiple communities. If these communities are at odds with each other – historically, blacks and whites in America, for example – then it becomes difficult to form a unified self that integrates those contrasting (and sometimes mutually exclusive) identities (Du Bois).
So, if I’m not white enough, and I’m not black enough, then why not become a third thing?

At 13 years old, I was introduced to Japanese culture by another black girl who had brought a Japanese manga to school. Throughout the book, there were strange symbols positioned about the pages, sometimes in large, jarring font, sometimes in small, wispy font. Curious, I searched online until I found out that the symbols were Japanese characters – katakana, to be exact – that represented the sound effects going on in the book. I thought the symbols looked pretty cool, and decided I might learn them. I began dabbling in Japanese, but my studying wasn’t intense.

A few days later, that same friend sent me a video, telling me that I had to watch it. It was a music video, for a Japanese visual kei rock band. Visual kei (ヴィジュアル系, vijuaru kei, “visual style”) is a movement within the Japanese music scene that emphasizes flamboyant dress, over-the-top makeup, extravagant hair-styles, and androgyny. This group, Alice Nine, was a prime example of bands that subscribed to this visual style. To put it simply: they were really freaking hot.

It’s not uncommon for young teenage girls to become obsessed with their favorite idols, and I was no exception; visual kei became an extremely important part of my life for the duration of middle school and all of high school. The obsession was to the point where one of my goals in life was to marry one of these Japanese men; but to do that, I had to be able to speak Japanese.

This was when my Japanese studies began to soar. I enrolled in weekend classes, and spent school hours copying down the lyrics to my favorite rock songs so that I could learn common words. Some songs were used as openings in famous anime, so I watched those. I made

\[22\text{ See D’espairRay.}\]
friends who were into anime, friends who introduced me to more manga, and to Japanese dramas and movies. Over the years, my interest in the Japanese language and culture continued to grow, and my level of interaction with Japanese cultural products continued to solidify my growing sense of a (hybrid) Japanese identity.

I don’t think I truly understood the full extent to which I strove to “be Japanese” until recently, when I rediscovered an old blog that I kept during my early years in high school. The following entry – titled simply “;_;”\textsuperscript{23} – is representative of the tone of the rest of the blog\textsuperscript{24}:

*Firefox is killing my youtube.*

*(T________T) so many things i wanted to watch and listen to...*

*WHY MUST YOU BE SO CRUEL KAMISAMA!??!*\textsuperscript{25}

*WHY WHY WHY!!!!1!!!1! ｡・°・°・((p(≥□≤q)))・°・°・°・ウワーン！！\textsuperscript{26}*

*And these surveys will take forever to input. (﹏_;)/~~~*

*UGH and I can't has no more cookies. WHY CAN'T I HAS NO MORE COOKIES.*

*Ragh. I'm hungry.*

*...effort is hard...*

Throughout the blog there are several instances of my use of Japanese words, emojis, and slang. My writing was heavily signified linguistically to line up with that of Japanese girls my age, who I wanted to align myself with. At the very least, I don’t sound like a “little black girl” in these blog posts – show this entry to anyone and I highly doubt they’d guess a southern black girl wrote it. One could argue that the use of inverted and improper grammatical structures (“I can’t has,” “why can’t I has”) is resistive of the “educated, white” identity as well. In a way, there’s a

\textsuperscript{23} See neko_chan_1993.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
double code-switching where I reject any attempt to position me as either black or white. Because the identity I was striving for in these blogs wasn’t black or white: it was Japanese.

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Aneta Pavlenko, in her study of/discussion on/analysis of tells us that speakers don’t just reject their mother tongues on their own; there are social, economic, political, and ideological factors at play: “they have been pushed along, internalizing the prevalent attitudes visible in public discourses” (200-201). If one’s language is highly stigmatized, and one doesn’t want to be associated with that stigma, one will do everything in one’s power to distance one’s self from that language. Yet in doing so, one may end up losing that very self they strove to protect; as the first language is viewed by many to be “the language of the self, of the heart, of one’s ethnic, national, and cultural identity,” and losing that language can be “tantamount to losing one’s self” (Pavlenko 200).

In my quest to be seen as an educated young girl, I coveted what Pavlenko terms “that precious commodity, an English-speaking identity, the key to the white world” (213). By speaking standard English, I was able to align myself with the educated, “white” world; but the color of my skin, and other physiognomic features, continued to position me as part of the stigmatized, “black” world. In this way I became positioned on the borderline between two communities: Performing both black and white, I became neither black nor white in the ways that were expected of me.

Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha titles this form of difference “mimicry,” defining it as “almost the same but not quite” – playing with words to take it a step further: “almost the same but not white” (Bhabha 89). The following quote explains why it is that I could not be both black and white at the same time:
...the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting... ‘Black skin, white masks’ is not a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once that makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable évoluté [native African who has become Westernized through education and assimilation of European values and behavior patterns]...to accept the colonizer’s invitation to identity: ‘You’re a doctor, a writer, a student, you’re different, you’re one of us’... [an impossible object:] the white man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body. (Bhabha 44-45)

The simple act of wearing a white mask in my black skin made it impossible for me to identify completely with whites (even if that were possible), even though my forms of difference – my writing ability, me command of Standard English – made me the “same” as them. Within that identification is the knowledge that it always comes with the caveat that the blackness within me must be downplayed and denied.

Feeling uncomfortable being placed in this unresolvable binary, I chose a third option: “the production of an image of identity and the transformation of [myself] in assuming that image” (Bhabha 45). I chose to take on a Japanese identity, rejecting both the black and white ones, to make myself whole, give myself an identity that didn’t bear “the mark of splitting” that having to choose between black or white would burden me with.

Second languages offer new opportunities: upward mobility, social advancement, as well as the creation of “more prestigious and powerful selves”; they are a desirable alternative for those who have rejected their mother tongues and are in need of “a new, capable, and powerful identity” (Pavlenko 209). Bhabha describes the search for identity as “the problematic process of access to an image of totality...it makes present something that is absent” (51) [bold emphasis mine]. Identification allows a “normative, normalizing place” and “the elusive assignation of
myself with a one-self” (Bhabha 52). By “becoming Japanese,” I was given two things: a sense of a whole, normalized, and solidified identity. This “strategy of subversion” allowed me to “manipulate [my] representation” and give myself a third option. Appropriating the Japanese language and culture for myself allowed me to fashion an identity irrespective of the stigma/prestige of the black/white binary I was given as my only choice.

Unfortunately, our images of utopia rarely play out the way we expect them to; and no matter how deeply I believed myself to be Japanese, I could not force anyone else to view me as such, least of all ethnic Japanese people living in Japan. When I finally came into contact with these people, it was not my Japaneseness, but my foreignness – my black female body – that rose to the fore.

**Hesitancy and the Fear of Discrimination**

“Discrimination. That’s the big thing, right? People want to know do black people get discriminated against in Japan.”

In a video titled “Japan Vlog #50 日本にいる黒人 Being Black in Japan,” Kimberly so aptly voices one of the main questions that most black people ask before taking off on a voyage to Japan.

Her sentiment echoes the worries and anxieties of other black females who have found within themselves a desire to go to Japan, and a need to know whether or not they will be treated any differently because of the color of their skin.

Nandie, who talks about this in a blog post suitably titled “How I faced my fears and moved to Japan,” says that she was apprehensive about the negative things she’d read online about what life was like for foreigners in Japan:

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25 See TheMasqueraid.
Mixed in with stories about ultimate temple crawling and sushi so delicious it could bring peace to the Middle East were anecdotes about racism in Japan: TV shows that catered to stereotypes, Black Sambo dolls, Mr. James (a caricature of a clueless Caucasian foreigner used in a McDonald’s ad campaign) and silly questions and comments like, “do you play basketball?” (if you’re a black foreigner), or “foreigners can’t learn Japanese”.

Even back in 2003, Takara found herself searching online for hours for anything she could find about being a black woman in Japan. “I wanted my first experience going outside of the borders of the United States to be a positive and memorable experience,” she writes.27 “I wanted to learn about another culture, learn another language, and meet as many people as I could. I didn’t want my experience to be filled with four months of derogatory comments and racist reactions from people judging my skin color.”

Before my own trip to Japan, I spent hours upon hours in front of my laptop, scouring the web for any insight on what “black girls in japan” had experienced. However, I experienced a problem that Takara herself had gone through almost a decade earlier: “Though I found several informative ‘being in Japan’ blogs and website [sic] from the white-male and female perspective, with the exception of Black Tokyo… I found a more diverse perspective to be lacking.” This led Takara to create her own blog, Sista in Tokyo28, in August 2003.

Still, even ten years later Sista in Tokyo was one of the only places I could go as a young black girl to find out what it was going to be like for me, specifically, in Japan. There were one or two other prominent black-female-in-Japan personalities I was aware of, but they weren’t talking about the “heavy” stuff that I needed to know about.

26 See Nandie.
27 See Swoopey.
28 Ibid.
Why should I have been worried about whether I would be treated differently in the first place? Alafia phrased it nicely when she says, in a video titled “Racism in Japan [Part 2]”29: “As African-American people, we are the most apt at finding the underlines of racism regardless of how subtle it is, and it’s because we live in a country where we’ve been taught we have to fight from the day we walk out of the womb ‘til the day we die for equal opportunity.” Growing up in the South, the hotbed of the Civil Rights Movement, it was impossible to grow up without an awareness of race relations. I was keenly aware that the color of my skin was going to impact how I was perceived by others; this was the experience I had grown up with my entire life. It was only natural that I should take that same apprehension with me to other parts of the world.

As black women, we tried to prepare ourselves as best we could for what we would encounter once we’d stepped foot into Japan. There, many of us found ourselves in Japan for the first time, suddenly confronted with the everyday reality of what it meant to possess a black female body in a place where there were very ingrained conceptions of identity and an intense policing of identity boundaries. Now, we were dealing with real people, some of who were encountering black women for the first time in their lives. The situation is even more dire for half-black, half-Japanese women born and raised in Japan, who have no place else to run to if the pressure of being different becomes too much.

**Fascination/Curiosity**

_I’ve been living in Japan for eight months now, and though I had always feared it might happen, not once has a child run screaming or starting crying at the sight of my blackness._

_Not until yesterday that is._

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29 See Dear Life.
I was shopping at Don Quixote... when I spotted a black man with an adorable half-black, half-Japanese two year old daughter. As I try to do when I see another person who looks like me in Japan I gave “the nod” of acknowledgment, which opened the doors for conversation.

“Where are you from?” he asked, with an African accent. I told him I was from Canada.

“Are you a student?”

“No I’m a teacher”

“Oh, I’m looking for someone to teach my daughter English, and I want her to have more interaction with the black community.”

It was at this point that the little cutie started crying.

“She must be tired,” I commented naively.

“No, whenever she sees a black face, or anyone not Japanese, she gets scared. She’s only used to me.”

Whaaaat? She’s afraid of...me? Little old me?

The irony, that the first child who cried at the sight of me was half black. Don’t that beat all huh?

Excerpt from “Blacks in Japan: She Was Scared of Me!” by Nandie Taylor

A group of study abroad students had gone out to a karaoke place in Aratamabashi for seven hours of Grammy-Award-winning singing. As if that wasn’t bad enough, a little something that happened on our way home was the icing on the cake.

I was coming down the stairs with my fellow gaijin when I rounded a corner and came face-to-face with a baby. To be honest, it was more like shins to face, since toddlers are short, but it might as well have been face-to-face because when that little thing saw me it stopped dead in its tracks.
Now I love babies, but this was definitely a situation I would rather not be in. I felt like the world went still and my eyes grew large as I watched that child’s face scrunch up into what was undoubtedly a look of abject terror.

The baby opened its mouth wide and screamed.

That baby hadn’t just screamed, though. It turned and hauled ass in the opposite direction.

To be honest, it wasn’t just me - there was a group of distinctly non-Japanese-looking people all coming down from the stairs at once, enough to put any inexperienced child in a tizzy. But I locked eyes with that child, and I couldn’t help thinking that it only screamed at the sight of me, that it ran away only from me.

Which I hated more than anything, because I love babies and children, and causing one such obvious distress was one of the worst things that has ever happened to me.

“What?” I thought bitterly. “Haven’t you ever seen a black person before?”

The answer to which, truthfully, should have been “No.”

There were many things I was expecting about coming to Japan, but one of them was definitely not the number of persons of African descent I saw walking around.

But they were everywhere. A black couple walking down the street. A young black female teaching Japanese to a person of Asian descent. A half black Japanese student who attended the university I was studying abroad at. And a professor who worked at the university! Not to mention a few other girls in my study abroad program itself.

Like I said, not at all what I expected.

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Even though we know that there are black women everywhere in the world, and that there are legitimate reasons for them to be in Japan, it’s not as though they make up a sizeable portion
of the Japanese population. As of 2014 there were 50,515 documented Americans in Japan, as well as 11,969 Africans, with most hailing from Nigeria, Egypt and Ghana.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, of the more than 2 million foreign residents residing in Japan, the number of blacks – and the number of black women – is relatively small. This can only be assumed, however, because the number of African-Americans is not specifically delineated in the number of Americans that these statistics provide. Those bodies are rendered invisible yet again, subsumed under that of the monolithic West.

There does seem to be an expectation that African-American bodies do not exist in the sociocultural space of Japan. Even I didn’t expect to witness the presence of so many black bodies as I did, but they were everywhere: A black couple walking down the street. A young black female teaching Japanese to a person of Asian descent at a food court, every Tuesday, like clockwork. A half-black Japanese student who attended the university where I was studying. Even a professor who worked at the university! Not to mention a few other girls in my study abroad program itself. It seemed unfathomable that so many black bodies would somehow have made their way across the Pacific Ocean and into Japan.

This incredulity may be offered as an explanation for why African-Americans tend to be marked out. “I don’t think they [ethnic Japanese] see a lot of African-American people,” says professional cosmetologist Seven\textsuperscript{31}, “unless they’re like Nigerian or either they live, like, on/off base or whatnot…but yeah, you’re gonna get stared at a lot.”

When confronted with a strange object or unknown person that they don’t understand, people tend to stare. This can because the unfamiliar – and especially strangers – can be associated with danger, an adaptive trait that has allowed humanity to continue to survive (Buss

\textsuperscript{30} To access these statistics, please visit \url{http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/List.do?lid=000001127507}.
\textsuperscript{31} See Seven Smith.
39). Once cause of this sort of social fear is the social novelty just described; another cause is the concept of “intrusiveness,” by which the unknown person is seen as either physically or psychologically approaching too quickly, or being too close for comfort (Buss 40).

The level of staring that a foreigner receives definitely depends on the area of Japan in which they currently reside, and how many other foreigners that area tends to see on a daily basis. Susan, in a video titled “What do Japanese Think of Me Being a Black Japanese Major student? 黒人の外人と日本人をインタビューです!”32, asks her Japanese friend Yurie whether there are many blacks in Japan:

黒人さんいるよ。たくさんいる。でもびっくりする人もおるかもしれへん。

[There are. There are lots of them. But I’m sure there are still people who will be surprised to see them.]

However, it’s important to take into account the fact that Yurie is a university student, studying at a university that has a program dedicated to bringing foreigners into Japan to study abroad. It makes sense that she would run into black people – and maybe even black women – on a regular basis. The situation may be completely different for someone living or working in a place that does not so easily cater to foreigners. Yurie is speaking in a Kansai accent, meaning that she may either be from or currently residing in the Kansai area; and Kimberly, who visited Kansai, found that her skin color was not as prominent in that area.

You get stared at a lot...If you’re black, you may get stared at a little bit more, cuz you do stand out. But it really depends on where you’re at. Like in Tokyo, people don’t really stare that much, but when I went down to Kansai [or up north towards Hokkaido], Iwate

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32 See MissBerhane.
prefecture, when I went to volunteer, uh, yeah, people did stare, a lot... It's not normal. I mean it's very rare to see like, uh, someone of my skin color, or very dark skin colors out there.

For black women who are not in a place where contact with foreigners is the norm, their experiences of being black-bodied in Japan can be very different from a black woman who is confined to spaces full of study abroad students. Tia, who begged her mother to let her go to a “normal” Japanese middle school, was definitely a stranger among her classmates:

フィリピンとか中国人とかいっぱいいたけど、こう「アメリカハーフ」とか「黒人ハーフ」って言うのが、アタシが誰一人もいなかったから、やっぱりすごい目立

[There were lots of Filipinos and Chinese, but as for this kind of “American half” or “black half,” there was no one else but me, and of course I stood out a lot.]

Like Susan’s friend, I saw a lot of black people – a lot of other black women – because I was studying abroad at Nanzan University during my time in Japan. Most of my social interactions happened within the context of the study abroad program, so it wasn’t that surprising that I spent a lot of time with other foreigners.

I saw a lot of blacks because I studied abroad. These all happened at university. When I actually went out into Nagoya, that’s when I started to experience more of what Kimberly spoke about.

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I was at Aeon with a group of friends on our weekly “gaijin Tuesday” outings - a nice evening of McDonald’s-induced clogged arteries and riveting English conversation. Like most

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33 See TiaSekiguchi.
days, my sweet tooth was killing me, and I headed over to the Baskin Robbins to get some ice
cream.

Whilst deliberating what I should get (a needless endeavor - I got the same thing every
time), I noticed in my peripheral vision a little girl and her mother standing nearby and looking at
the menu. I had the strongest urge to look, because cute children!, but my friends always tease
me about my baby obsession, so I tried my best to ignore them.

I thought I heard her say something - but, you know, ignoring them and all. Then out of
the corner of my eye I saw her walking towards me, and she said it again. Finally I turned and
looked at her, to make sure she was talking to me, and this time I heard it clearly.

“Ms. B!”

I resisted the urge to point my index finger to my nose and ask, “Who, me?” But as I
looked into her face and she was smiling brightly up at me I couldn’t help but think, Child, I
don’t know you!

Her mother comes up to me to rescue the day and explains that the girl goes to an
international school nearby and that she has an African-American teacher.

Which is great and all, and I tell her as much, but I’m still standing there thinking how
funny it is that she called me by her teacher’s name, just because we were both black.

Most occurrences like these I’d try to forget about right after they happened. What I
couldn’t let go of, however, was the girl staring at me on the train ride home later that night. She
couldn’t have been more than ten or twelve, and my god was she boring a hole straight through
my head. I mean, if looks could kill. She stared at me the whole forty five minutes home, like I
was some sort of strange specimen that she just couldn’t wrap her mind around. I tried to smile at
her, appear friendly. She didn’t react.
As black women, we are at the absolute end of the spectrum on what is considered the Extreme Other, as far as Japanese identity goes. We represent what Michael Molasky calls “a more radical alterity – a darker shade of difference” (74). The color of our skin is such a rare sight within the confines of this island nation, that the Japanese can’t help but stare when they come into contact with one of us.

I argue that this speaks to a lack of visibility of black women in Japan. Perhaps Japanese are so shocked to see us there because it isn’t fathomable that we could exist in their country.

13-year-old B’s teacher, Sophelia, who worked as an ALT at the school B went to, wrote on her blog34 that watching B interact with the other Japanese students as a half-black, half-Japanese child opened her eyes to the lack of visual representations of black women in Japan:

Advertisements feature Japanese or Korean models, occasionally Chinese, often white and almost never middle-eastern, South Indian, south-Asian or Black models. Sometimes sports magazines or music posters feature Black men, but I don’t recall ever seeing a Black woman prominently depicted anywhere. This is a subjective observation, but judging by the students’ reactions I guess their experiences are similar.

Sophelia’s quote points to something else: it is not just black women, but people of darker skin from various countries, who are underrepresented in the Japanese media. Japanese, Korean, Chinese and whites form the majority of faces one would see in the ambient environment of Japan. Whites are positioned at the top of the status-hierarchy of peoples of the world (Lie 35-37); to the point where a “white” aesthetic was the goal to which many Japanese would strive (Oguma 144-147). Koreans and Chinese, on the other hand, could “pass” as Japanese due to

34 See Sophelia.
assimilation (Lie 140), so it would not be quite so jarring to see their faces in the media. In this way, the Japanese media becomes dominated, as Sophelia so keenly pointed out, by Japanese faces, and Asian faces that could easily be mistaken for Japanese. The other types of people that exist in Japan – save for whites, who the Japanese have historically held in admiration (Molasky 73; Tipton 164) – are not represented as much. We know from previous chapters that the Tokyo-centric media is offered as a reason the idea exists that these other minorities do not exist in Japan (Lie 136). But even out in Kansai and up north near Iwate – 250 and 286 miles from the major urban center of Tokyo, respectively – black women continue to be stared at, as Kimberly experienced for herself. They continue to be marked as not belonging to Japanese society through the simple presence of the Japanese gaze. Other minorities are explained away: “For them [the Japanese who continue to believe they live in a monoethnic society], Ainu, Okinawans, Burakumin, Koreans, Chinese, and others are about to disappear, are really Japanese, or are foreigners… [they] are not granted their place in Japanese society…[and] because they don’t exist, they can’t rectify their place in Japanese society” (Lie 171).

Black women do not fit into Japanese society. We cannot pass as Japanese; our skin marks us as too different, too “Other.” We may be transient, study abroad students, assistant language teachers, temporary workers; we could disappear at any moment. We are foreign; we do not belong in Japan. We have our own homes to return too. All of these beliefs lead to the lack of representation of black women – why bother to represent someone who is not Japanese, who will not remain in Japan, and who, fundamentally, cannot belong?

One place where black women are prominently represented (though even this may be a stretch to say) is in the American media, and Lie notes that many representations of African-Americans that the Japanese see come through the various forms of American media that make
their way to the country (Lie 174). Incorporating these images, ethnic Japanese may choose to respond to black females with these American representations as their framework, the only one they have to work with. Vanessa, when asked what it’s like to be a black woman in Japan,\textsuperscript{35} was confronted by this: “Usually people are drawn to my hair, or expect me to sing well! I had a friend once who insisted that I join her at church and sing gospel songs. Its [sic] as if they are testing to see if certain stereotypes are indeed true.”

Adequate media representation is one way to systematically dismantle certain stereotypes; and its lack, coupled with the prevailing cultural attitudes imported from the West, can lead to situations like Vanessa’s, where black women are responded to through the lens of stereotypical representation. This can lead to exotic objectification of the black female body.

\textbf{Exotic Objectification}

I’m headed down to Sakae to see the 2014 Japanese premiere of \textit{Thor: The Dark World}. It’s my first time going to a movie theater in Japan, so I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. I should have known better; Japan had been full of surprises, as far as my being a black woman was concerned.

The theater was located on the top floor of a shopping complex. I thought this was so amazing; I’d never been to a theater that was on top of a building before! I was very excited to take the elevator all the way to the top.

I stepped in to the first available elevator, along with a couple other Japanese people, and immediately headed for the back corner. The elevator was glass, and I wanted to look down so I could scope out the rest of the mall on my short trip up. I wasn’t looking at any of the other

\textsuperscript{35} For full interview, see JenJen2010.
people in the elevator, so I don’t know if they were staring at me or not. But I do know that the very next person to get on definitely noticed me. He made it very apparent.

When the doors opened, I glanced up to see who our new companions would be, and I spotted a salaryman (a Japanese businessman) who had definitely spotted me. When he stepped into the elevator, I could see his eyes widen as noticed me, and watched the beginnings of a grin start to curl on his lips.

Staring straight at me, I watched as he opened his mouth and said: 髪型がすごいね。（kamigata ga sugoi ne, “Your hairstyle is really cool.”)

But he didn’t stop there. He continued, making this twisting motion with his fingers near his temples, and then saying – in heavily accented English – “I like your dreads.”

Immediately, I felt two things hit me at once. First, they’re not dreads, they’re braids; but I figure I should give the guy a pass. I get the same comment from persons-not-of-African-descent back in the States who know nothing about black hair. Second, he repeated his statement to me in English, on the basis – I assume – that I, as a black woman, could not speak Japanese.

Unfortunately, I was not adequately prepared to deal with situations like this – instances where my blackness and my foreignness would be so saliently pulled to the fore – and I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. Do I explain to him the difference between braids and dreads? Do I mention how it’s rude to translate your sentence without being sure that I can’t speak Japanese?

In the end, I wasn’t sure. I decided a 30-second elevator ride wasn’t worth the hassle of getting into a deep discussion about blackness, and that I should probably just let this one go.

So instead, I smiled and said thank you – in Japanese.

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For Westerners, Japan was the Oriental Exotica, since the forced opening of the country to the time of the occupation and, arguably, through the 80s, as the image of Japan as a techno-utopia flourished overseas. Western ideas of Japan ranged from the late 19th century conception of the Japanese as a “duplicitous, lewd, and effeminate [race]” (Keith 186) to the mid-20th century iconic images of the black market merchant, the war orphan, and the prostitute (Molasky 103). Japan was site of radical otherness without danger, holding only alluring difference and hypersexualized lust during the Occupation. The image of the pan pan – the red-lipped, cigar-smoking “woman of the dark” – began with the establishment of prostitution districts for American soldiers, rising to become a characteristic figure of postwar Japan (Tipton 164).

However, the history of the Western presence in Japan has been long and complicated, and there existed much ambivalence towards the West on the part of the Japanese due to the constant threat of colonization/Americanization/Westernization to the detriment of Japanese identity. Molasky points to African-American anthropologist John Russell to explain the way in which Japan tries to mediate its identity in relation to the West, and notes that one way Japan does this is through the use and appropriation of black bodies:

[Russell] has long insisted that modern Japanese discourses on blackness are primarily a means for resolving ambivalent attitudes toward whites and, by extension, for redefining Japanese identity in a white-dominated world. (Molasky 72)

Molasky writes that in the mid-1980s two published books sparked a “black boom” in the Japanese press, inciting a media frenzy in which black bodies (especially black male bodies) were fetishized and African-American culture commoditized. This commodification of black bodies continued to persist at least until the time of Molasky’s publication in 1999 (72-73). Japan,
once an object of oriental fascination, had come to find – and continues to find – its own identity and desire in blackness.

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On my last day in Japan, I was looking around Osu Kannon, doing some last-minute shopping for souvenirs to take back home. I was nearing the end of my list; I just needed to buy something for a family friend. Walking through the open streets, I came across an alternative shop that seemed to have exactly what I was looking for. T-shirts with snarky sayings hung outside the shop and sat folded in stacks on tables around the door.

I spent some time lurking about outside, looking for the perfect shirt. When I finally found it, I picked it up and headed inside the store to make my purchase.

The check-out counter was hidden in the very back of the store; and standing behind it was a Japanese girl – with the most alternative style I’d ever seen so far in Japan. There were piercings in her lips, and blonde dreadlocks hung thickly about her face. I was probably just as surprised to see her as she was to see me.

I walked up to her with my purchase and when she caught sight of me, her face lit up.

“Id like your dreads!” she said to me in Japanese.

Again, the comment about dreads. I’m not quite sure what my reasons were for not deciding to press the issue. Perhaps it was because she spoke to me in Japanese, and not English. Perhaps it was because I was going to be on a plane home the very next day, and this incident seemed to pale in comparison. Perhaps it was because she had dreads herself, and so I was willing to give her a pass.

I looked up and my eyes met hers. “Thanks!” I said, and smiled.

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For the most part, I saw my experiences as Japan no different from my non-black gaijin friends. By the end of our stay, we’d all gotten used to being a gaijin in Japan. I feel like many of us came to accept the sea of homogenous faces, the eyes on the backs of our heads, and the knowledge that we looked drastically different from everyone around us.

But I won’t deny feeling like my experience was slightly different due to the color of my skin. I did have experiences that were unique to me – like when two girls who I didn’t know came up to me at my study abroad program’s closing ceremony to touch my face, rubbing my skin, saying how it was so *sube sube* (meaning “silky smooth”).

Being singled out for the color of my skin – and especially my hair – was an experience unique to me as a black woman in Japan. It echoes the stories of other black women, who find themselves confronted by curious Japanese on a regular basis.

“If you have hair like mine, people are gonna be really curious and they might wanna touch your hair,” says Kimberly in her video on being black in Japan. “And there’s a lot of people that came up to me and said, ‘Oh my gosh, can I touch your hair?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah! Go ahead, go ahead.’” In the video, she raises her hand to her hair and scrunches her curls between her fists. She’s says it’s rare to see someone in Japan with a legitimate afro. She’s one of the few who has one.

But is this necessarily a bad thing? To have one’s physical attributes be a source of fascination and admiration – many people dream of this. And the response to foreigners who complain about such treatment tends to run along the lines of, “What’s so bad about it? It’s just a compliment!”

Unfortunately, these interactions can take a turn for the worse. The problem lies in the fact that positive acts of objectification aren’t the only ones to happen.
Kimberly, so willing to let eager Japanese touch her exotic hair, later talks about the experiences she’s had with Japanese men who have hit on her. She says they approached her with a variety of phrases: “I like your hair”, “I like black girls”, or “I like hip-hop.” While the obvious stereotyping in these phrases is evident, the most surprising one was the Japanese man who tried to pick her up saying, “What’s up, my nigga?” In her analysis of these encounters, Kimberly suggests that the word “nigga” didn’t mean anything to the Japanese man. However, I assert that it most certainly did; it meant the marking out of Kimberly as a black body and – through the act of trying to pick her up – a black female body in particular. Would this Japanese man have used the same phrase to try and pick up a white woman? It’s doubtful.

As I argued in the section on Fascination/Curiosity, stereotypes tend to be the predominant framework through which Japanese interact with black bodies, and black women. Vanessa’s encounters with Japanese men echo those of Kimberly:

[With respect to stereotypes], some Japanese men believe black woman [sic] to be promiscuous and have big sexual appetites. In one encounter with a Japanese man, who approached me and said, “Can I talk to you now? I heard black women are genki.”

(Genki meaning energetic)

Black female bodies become racialized, sexualized objects within the context of Japan. But black hair and black skin aren’t always idolized; for the half-black, half-Japanese females whose stories I’ve analyzed, both underwent negative social experiences, with their hair and skin as the focal points of these interactions.

Shy and quiet B found herself a constant target of bullying at her school due to the color of her skin. Sophelia, B’s teacher, noticed that “the history of seeing black skin as unclean gives [B’s] bullies a ready-stocked arsenal”: 
Her figure, facial features, hairstyle, family name and Christianity are the target of considerable negative interest... She does not fit Japan’s narrow ideal of female beauty.

B’s classmates spare no mercy in reminding her of this. Sophelia notes that whenever the textbook deigns to feature black characters, the other schoolchildren erupt into fits of hysterics, crying out “Look, B is in the textbook!”

Tia Sekiguchi also had a very hard time as a half-black child in a mainstream Japanese middle school. Although she begged her mother to let her go to a normal Japanese school at the age of 10, Tia found that her hair was a source of considerable negative interest for the other Japanese children. The other Japanese girls would tease her for her hair’s texture, saying: そこのかえみたい (soko no ke mitai, or “It looks like hair from ‘down there,’” with “down there” referencing the pubic area). Near the end of the video, Tia explains how she has grown to embrace her curly hair, and that she feels confident in herself and in going out into the world as a half-black woman. The unfortunate inference that follows from this is that, at one point in her life, Tia did not want to go outside (into Japan) because she was half-black.

Thus, blackness can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is seen as something cool and sexy, making one the object of endless fascination and curiosity. Nigerian-American Alafia Stewart notes in her video on racism in Japan that many diasporic blacks from Africa choose to identify themselves as African-American in Japan, because of the positive stereotypes that are associated with them:

A lot of African-Americans, as soon as they step on the ground, they have an instant fanbase, especially among young Japanese people who listen to hip-hop, have a genuine

See Dear Life.
interest in black culture, have a genuine respect for black culture, but the only black
culture that they know about is from the United States... [Unlike being simply African,]
being African-American you are the coolest thing walking down the street; which is also
not very good, because the only African-Americans that [the Japanese] know of and the
only things that they see or have a genuine respect for are entertainers and athletes.

Alafia notes the privilege that African-Americans have with respect to Africans in the context of
Japan, but she also points out something else: that the “positive cool” factor that the Japanese
associate with African-Americans is just as stereotypical as their understanding of Africa as “the
dark continent.” We see this in the interactions that Vanessa and Kimberly have had with
Japanese men: black women are hypersexual, and that salience arises through the texture of their
hair and the color of their skin.

Thus, the distinction between Africans and African-Americans seems to fade into the
background as the salient characteristic – black skin – rises to the fore.

Though black bodies may be portrayed as “cool,” it is still with the eyes of the Japanese
gaze through which this is done. They become a source of desire and exotica for the Japanese
themselves – a way for them to mediate their own identities in relation to the West (Molasky 74).

Because blackness is merely a tool through which the Japanese come to understand
themselves –and I argue in earlier chapters that this need to understand oneself in relation to the
foreign other is the cornerstone of Japanese identity mythos – the Japanese have no need to truly
understand what blackness means, in the context of their society or any society in which blacks
may be found. They dismissively use the word “nigga” when picking up black women. They
expect black women to be able to sing, or to be a hypersexualized caricature. They paint their
faces black with the intent to perform on national Japanese television – as evidenced by the
recent blackface controversy with Momoiro Clover Z (Osaki) – and cite it as “homage,” without
understanding the tense and painful history behind the use of blackface, and how it can be seen as offensive by the very people they claim to be paying respect to. When explaining the images of blackness that circulate through the Japanese media, Molasky succinctly sums up Japan’s relationship with blackness as such:

Blacks themselves have been given practically no voice in shaping this racial discourse, other than by providing soundbites or stereotypical, disembodied images. This discourse on blackness is a monologue, not a dialogue, and is concerned above all with interrogating Japanese identity, achieving a personal transformation through the phallic power of the racial other… transformative powers, which can be internalized and mobilized within Japanese society. (72)

The appropriation and subsequent dismissal of black bodies – their objectification and subjection to imported racial constructs – can lead to differential treatment based on external observed characteristics. As evidenced by Tia and B’s experiences, blacks – and black women – are singled out due to their physical characteristics and may become victims of the prevailing stereotypical images of the day.

**Discrimination**

A group of thirteen year old girls are standing in a circle, chatting between classes. Another girl walks over and tries to join them, hovering awkwardly over their shoulders when no one moves aside to include her in the circle. “Hey” she says, lightly touching the arm of the girl in front of her. “Ewww, gross!” The girl who has been touched recoils as though burned. The other girls cover their mouths and giggle in a mixture of shock and hilarity. They disperse back to their desks but continue talking to one another, still excluding the Other girl.
Discrimination is the process by which a person receives prejudicial treatment – is treated through the framework of preconceived notions or stereotypes – on the basis of belonging to a certain category, such as blacks people, black women, or foreigners.

One way in which foreigners are consistently discriminated against in Japan is by being spoken and responded to in English, regardless of their level of Japanese ability. This phenomena is so widespread that it has become parodied. In a YouTube video titled “But we’re speaking Japanese!”37, a Japanese waitress refuses to acknowledge Japanese-speaking foreigners in favor of trying to communicate with an Asian female, who may look Japanese, but doesn’t actually speak the language. Regardless of how many times the foreigners try – in Japanese – to communicate with her, she is simply unable to assume that she could share a common point of linguistic understanding with people who are visibly not Japanese. Though the video is a parody, it has almost one million views on YouTube. The nearly three thousand comments are rife with people acknowledging the unfortunate accuracy of the video, and sharing their own personal experiences of being treated differently because of their physical appearance.

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I’ve had my own fair share of “foreigners can’t speak Japanese” experiences during my stay in Japan. Most were small instances: the Japanese man in the elevator translating his compliment for me; or a Japanese waiter consistently responding to me in English, regardless of the Japanese responses I was giving back to him.

It was very disheartening as a Japanese speaker to have my linguistic capability consistently questioned, remarked upon, or outright denied by the very people I wanted to

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37 See helpmefindparents.
converse in Japanese with. I was constantly praised for my Japanese skills, my lack of an accent, was told how much I sounded like a Japanese person. It seemed unfathomable to everyone but myself that I could be good at Japanese. Kasumi, another Japanese girl with whom I’d interacted with in Japan, agreed to review a short Japanese essay I’d written. To my chagrin, she seemed surprised that I was able to write Japanese at such a level. In the excerpt from a personal correspondence below, she expresses her surprise as follows:

ジャイヤ、日本に来たときから上手だったけど、この文章見てびっくりしたよ～！！！

(Your Japanese was good when you got to Japan, but when I read this essay I was pretty shocked!) [inferring that my Japanese was good, but she couldn’t imagine that it was to a level where I would have acceptable literacy]

Inferring from the conversation, Kasumi believed that my Japanese was relatively good, but she couldn’t have imagined that it was to a level where I would have acceptable literacy; this, despite her knowledge that I’d lived in Japan for 5 months at the time of this writing. There is a Japanese word that adequately sums up this reaction: びっくり, bikkuri meaning “surprise.” Japanese people were surprised that I spoke Japanese as well as I could. It seemed an unsurmountable linguistic goal, and they were all surprised as to how I had done it. I suppose that being able to tackle the Japanese language was a threat to some of their uniqueness myths – that the Japanese language was the hardest one in the world, and that foreigners could never master it.

I’m not the only foreigner – and not the only black woman – who’s seen Japanese people react with surprise to their level of Japanese fluency. In her video, Kimberly tells the story of a fellow black female friend whom Kimberly considers to be relatively fluent in Japanese. The two were heading to McDonald’s for food. The Japanese person working at the counter, upon seeing
Kimberly’s black friend, immediately flipped to the English menu. In the video, Kimberly laughs at the situation, even saying that she considered the whole thing to be “a laughing moment.”

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In previous chapters, I argued that Japanese were perfectly willing to comply with the existence of foreigners, so long as they could be assimilated, metabolized or “Japanized” in such a way that they posed no threat to Japanese society. Foreign bodies that cannot be assimilated are permitted in the country, because they are seen as “transitory” and are expected to “return home” one day.

Yet any visibly non-Japanese body that poses the threat of remaining in Japan challenges established notions of “Japaneseness.” This is why foreigners who attempt to assimilate into Japanese society are so routinely thwarted:

*As a general thing, Japanese are prepared to treat foreigners with great courtesy and often with genuine warmth—provided that they are only visitors or, if resident in Japan, content to remain essentially foreign in their attitudes and life-styles. But if a gaijin shows signs of successfully mastering the nuances of Japanese culture and social behavior, the [usual] Japanese response is to grow uneasy and to seek to freeze him out by somehow reminding him of his ineradicable foreignness.* (Christopher 186) [bold emphasis mine]

Any non-Japanese body that tries to establish a place in the Japanese sociocultural sphere will be excluded. One is constantly reminded that one does not belong.

I believe that this concept – the threat of a non-Japanese body residing in Japan and challenging established notion of “Japaneseness” – explains why the treatment of half-Japanese in Japan is so much harsher than the discrimination that “transitory” foreigners receive. I noticed
through my analysis that Japanese treatment of non-Japanese blacks served to remind us of our foreignness and our lack of a space in Japanese society; whereas Japanese treatment of half-Japanese, half-blacks was quite unforgiving. This is because, as half-Japanese people, these black bodied women do have an established place in Japanese society. They have Japanese blood running through their veins. They conduct themselves in a Japanese manner. And they do it all with a distinctly non-Japanese aesthetic. They are the literal definition of discomfort, and Japanese treatment of them reflects this.

Sophelia, the assistant language teacher ever-watchful of her half-black, half-Japanese student B, noted on her blog several instances of discrimination in her classroom. She points out that B’s name is written on her uniform in Rōmaji, the Roman alphabet, instead of Japanese characters. While these may seem inconsequential, using Roman characters to write B’s name further serves to discriminate – to differentiate – her from the other students. She is not considered Japanese so much so that she isn’t even allowed to use the Japanese script to write her own name. (Not to mention that if she had, her name would most likely be written using katakana, the Japanese script reserved for “all things foreign.”)

Sophelia’s classroom is also where discrimination began to rear its ugly head on a more institutional level:

*The teacher singled her out though, repeatedly asking her “Did your father tell you that? Is that something you learned at home? He’s Black; don’t listen to his Japanese because it’ll definitely be wrong.”*

Here, we very explicitly see the correlation between Japanese-speaking ability and possessing a Japanese body: those who do not have a Japanese body cannot speak Japanese; and if they do, their Japanese is probably not “correct,” because they are not “really” Japanese. B’s teacher
specifically told her not to listen to her black father, because any advice he gave her on the Japanese language wasn’t to be trusted, based on the simple fact that he wasn’t Japanese.

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Smaller acts of discrimination – like believing that “foreigners can’t speak Japanese” and then treating all “foreigners” as such – tend to be symptomatic of the presence of larger stereotypes, such as “foreigners commit crime” and “non-Japanese will never truly be part of Japanese society.” Alafia Stewart, in her video on racism in Japan, notes that a lot of discriminatory occurrences are dismissed:

There have been what we would consider racist instances here in Japan that get swept under the rug... Like you hear about the “no foreigners allowed” clubs, or you hear about someone coming out of a store and telling you, a black person, or a person of African descent not to touch anything, I am afraid of you because you are black.

These prejudicial stereotypes and preconceived notions are played out every day in the interaction between people, and they can have an adverse effect on the lives of those who are victimized by them. What’s more, the comments made by B’s teacher show how these conceptions of foreign others become institutionalized into hierarchical power structures, thereby making them much more difficult to combat.

The black women whose stories I’ve analyzed have come into contact with these higher forms of discrimination – those happening at an institutional level – and they’ve experienced setbacks in their personal lives due to these interactions. Tokyo writer Nandie explains her story on her blog as follows:

The racism is systematic and well known among the non-Japanese community. It’s not strange for a bar to have a “no foreigners” sign or for non-Japanese to be denied an
apartment because the landlord “doesn’t rent to foreigners.” And you’ll have people on top of trucks in front of stations sometimes yelling for foreigners to go back home. I do feel it’s a little worse for people of color (African descent, Chinese, Indian, Korean, etc.) than it is for Whites. I had my own issues when trying to rent an apartment.

In a separate post titled, “How to Rent a Mansion in Tokyo,” she further elaborates on exactly what happened when trying to get an apartment as a black woman in Japan:

I found that when I made an appointment to see the places, a lot of the time they were either already rented, or the landlord didn’t actually want to rent to foreigners. That was the most difficult part of the search for me. If anything has made me feel like a second-class citizen in this country it’s apartment hunting.

Takara Swoopes Bullock, author of the blog Sista in Tokyo, had a similar experience with differential treatment at a Japanese bank, where she was relentlessly questioned while trying to withdraw funds as to why she needed the money and what exactly it was going to be used for.

In both instances, these black women were singled out because of their physical characteristics and treated accordingly. This shows very explicitly the ways in which Japanese ideologies about foreign others are acted out every day at tense point of contact between Japanese bodies and non-Japanese ones. Belief that foreigners cannot speak Japanese, that foreigners are criminals, that the foreign is something to be afraid of, lead to situations where foreigners are treated differently simply because they are foreign: from something as small as being given the English menu, to being treated like a suspect in a crime at a bank; from not being rented an apartment, to being banned from public and private establishments, and bullied by your peers, all due to the color of your skin.

*__*_
Many of these women believed that their experiences had nothing to do with their being black women. However, when watching their videos and reading their blogs, I couldn’t help but wonder if they weren’t simply trying to make the best of a bad situation. I can’t imagine any other reason why a black woman would say that a Japanese man trying to pick her up using the phrase “What’s up, my nigga?” didn’t mean anything by it, and definitely didn’t say it because she was black.

We know that Japan imported racial constructs and ideas about blacks in particular from the West. We also see – through the firsthand accounts of black women themselves – that the kind of discriminatory treatment that black women face is intricately related to salient properties of their black bodies. It should therefore be impossible to conclude that one’s experiences in Japan have nothing to do with the black body that one resides in. We did not ask for these bodies. And we do not ask for the discriminatory treatment that we receive when we step into a space that is hostile to them. We cannot change the color of our skin. We are already fragmented others, floating between multiple conceptions of ourselves. Being denied a space to exist fully within any given society leaves us straddling jagged lines with no place to comfortably set ourselves down. In the case of half-Japanese, half-black women, who know Japan to be their home, the presence of a dominant monoethnic Japanese ideology can lead to detrimental effects on their livelihood and well-being, sometimes for the rest of their lives.
Conclusion

On Deconstructing “Japanese”

Although useful generalizations may be made about Japanese society as a whole, they should not be regarded as expressing the underlying unity and uniformity of Japanese people. Any serious study would inevitably uncover a messy reality—complexity, diversity, and change.

...To assume the singularity of Japanese people, or essential features of Japanese identity, misses the fundamental fact that there is no Japanese people as such.

John Lie, Multiethnic Japan [bold emphasis mine]

Throughout this thesis, I have worked to problematize the ideology of monolithic Japanese identity as constituted by a monoethnic Japan. This ideology was the result of the conscious deployment of two strategies: the construction of the nation-state and the formation of identity. After Commodore Perry’s black ships forced Japan open in 1853, the Meiji government scrambled to create a unified nation-state full of national subjects. Class and regional differences between those already in Japan during the late 19th century were downplayed in favor of the notion of a singular Japanese identity for all citizens to share. This pluralized identity, initially intended to cohere a range of potential subjects within a defined and confined population, was instrumentally expanded to include the colonial subjects of Korea and Taiwan in an effort to legitimize imperial expansion and incorporate these new, Other subjects. As an ideology, “Japanese identity” was consciously created and purposefully propagated to the extent that “multiethnic” Japan was taught in public schools sanctioned by the Ministry of Education.

However, the same ideology of “multi-ethnic Japan” was delegitimized after the defeat in the Pacific War. Anything that could be seen as connected to the Emperor or Imperial Japan
swiftly became taboo, including all notions of Japan as a multi-ethnic nation-state. Other factors – including the empire’s sudden collapse back to the islands of the archipelago (albeit with the earlier colonial territories of Hokkaido and Okinawa still intact) and the repatriation of colonial subjects – contributed to the development of the notion of Japan as a monoethnic nation.

These ideas were further developed during the postwar Occupation of Japan by America and the subsequent economic boom. Americans noticed how all Japanese seemed to look the same (Lie 137), and other curious foreigners, traveling the country during the 1964 Olympics, wanted to know what it was that made the Japanese “unique?” A number of historical factors coalesced such that only one viable option remained: Japan was a small, peaceful and homogeneous island nation.

I noted how this notion of “Japanese identity” was always invoked vis-à-vis the West. Throughout history, Japan’s relationship to the West has been ambivalent: the Japanese fluctuated between admiration of Western goods and systems, and fear of being overtaken and subsumed by those self-same products and structures. Thus, Japan has attempted a balancing act between appropriation and exclusion in regards to the West. Those things that could be taken and metabolized into Japanese society, such that they could be domestically managed, were readily assimilated; those that could not, were excluded.

Material goods and intellectual capital weren’t the only objects that were selectively assimilated or excluded from Japanese society. There were also marked that interacted with ethnic Japanese on a daily basis. The presence of an ideology of a monolithic Japanese identity made it impossible for seemingly non-Japanese bodies to take their place within the sociocultural sphere of Japan:
Despite Japan’s ethnic diversity, many Japanese continue to believe that they live in a monoethnic society. For them, Ainu, Okinawans, Burakumin, Koreans, Chinese and others are about to disappear, are really Japanese, or are foreigners. Non-Japanese Japanese are not granted their place in Japanese society, either in the present or in the past... Because they don’t exist, they can’t rectify their place in Japanese society. (Lie 171)

For those that did find their place, this usually only came when they chose to “pass” as Japanese, in order to avoid the inevitable exclusionary practices they would meet otherwise:

Passing as a widespread individual strategy closed the vicious circle of monoethnic ideology...Both Burakumin and Koreans could become Japanese as individuals, but, in doing so, they could not, as collectives, become part of Japan. (Lie 140)

This allows bodies that can pass as Japanese to find a place in Japanese society, albeit with the caveat that they renounce any markers of non-Japaneseness.

For others, it is impossible to pass as Japanese. There are some features – such as the color of one’s skin, the texture of one’s hair, or the structure of one’s body – that marks one out so distinctly as “Other” that they simply cannot be metabolized and assimilated as “Japanese.” To do so would challenge the idea of “Japaneseness,” because to accept a marked Other as “Japanese” would mean to re-think the definition of “Japanese” itself: A pure-blooded descendant of the Yamato clan, born, raised and currently residing in Japan, speaking the Japanese language from birth, who exudes the ineffable and qualities that constitute a singular notion of “Japaneseness.”

In this way, the bodies of African and African-American women are particularly marked out in Japanese society. We—those people in this body-- are located well outside the boundaries
of what is seen as acceptably “Japanese” such that it might be said that the Black body constitutes the ultimate limit of the outside of Japanese ethno-cultural identity. We will never become fully integrated into Japanese society because we are always transitory creatures who are expected to return to their “rightful” homes someday (Christopher 186; Lie 147-148). In instances when non-Japanese bodies do make the attempt to fully integrate – by “successfully mastering the nuances of Japanese culture and social behavior” – then many Japanese tend to “freeze [them] out by somehow reminding [them] of [their] ineradicable foreignness” (Christopher 186).

The situation is much more dire for half-Japanese bodies. In the above quote, Lie notes the way many Japanese deal with non-Japanese bodies: by delineating them as foreign, really Japanese, or simply nonexistent. In the case of half-Japanese bodied persons, they are both foreign and Japanese; and in the case of half-black, half-Japanese bodies, they are unable to pass the way a Korean-Japanese bodied person might be able to.

These bodies – at once Japanese and not Japanese – are told that their skin is dirty because it is so dark, that the hair on their heads resembles the hair between their legs, and that they cannot possibly represent the face of Japan, simply because their faces are “not Japanese.” I argued that these attacks are much more harsh because, as half-Japanese bodies, these women continually challenge what it means to be Japanese.

This is a challenge that needs to be undertaken. We’ve seen that the monolithic ideologies of “Japaneseness” and “Japanese identity” do not hold when examined historically. We also see the harm they cause to those who are victims of these ideologies, and we know that constant discrimination can negatively affect a person’s overall health and well-being (Sue). But deconstructing “Japaneseness” is important not just for the non-Japanese and half-Japanese
bodies that reside within Japan; it is also crucial to alleviate the anxieties of ethnic Japanese themselves who sometimes fell as though they don’t quite fit the mold.

*One consequence of the discourse of Japaneseness is that it circumscribes the culturally accepted boundaries of Japanese utterance and behavior. Strong norms about what it means to be Japanese translate into strong sanctions to squelch deviance.*

*It is precisely because of the persistence of strong norms that many Japanese are wont to remark that “I am not really Japanese.” What they mean, of course, is not that they doubt their citizenship or ethnonational membership, but that they find it difficult to conform to societal norms. The quality of being Japanese is not so much descriptive as prescriptive.* (Lie 165)

Mouer & Sugimoto note the difficulty in delineating someone as “Japanese” due to the strict measures that “Japaneseness” is premised upon. They shed light on an interesting problem these criteria create: myriad iterations of “Japanese” people who can technically be considered “non-Japanese” under those standards (243-245). What of the *nikkeijin* (Japanese emigrants and their children) who grow up abroad and speak a dominant language that is not Japanese? What of a Japanese worker employed overseas, retaining their citizenship? What of a Japanese worker employed overseas who chooses to renounce their citizenship? What of *zainichi* Brazilians who have moved to Japan? What of the scores of foreign workers who contribute to the Japanese economy and Japanese society, and who know well the areas of Japan in which they reside? Do these people suddenly gain – or lose – their “Japaneseness” as they move throughout their lives? Where, exactly, do those lines reside?

The boundaries of Japanese identity are drawn differently depending on who’s holding the pencil (Lie 166), and they fluctuate over time and across space. What this tells us is that the
essentialized quality of “Japaneseness” doesn’t hold under close scrutiny even as it may provide the ideological underpinnings for the nation at different historical points. We see it for what it truly is: a consciously invented cultural construct, usually invoked vis-à-vis a perceived Western threat, what Christopher describes as “the defense mechanisms by means of which Japan has traditionally sought to maintain its special identity” (187).

The concept of a monolithic “Japaneseness” is a result of inventing similarity by downplaying difference. Anything that does not conform to these *a priori* standards is denied in favor of this “singular” Japanese identity. Nancy Stepan echoes identity scholars Bucholtz & Hall when she writes: “Similarity is not something one finds but something one must establish.” Once established, the created identity must be maintained. Assimilation to the norm is rigorously enforced to the extent that it works to exclude anything “non-Japanese” from Japanese society, in order to preserve “Japanese identity” in a world where absorption into the West is seen as a constant threat.

Even though these ideologies are consciously created, they become unconsciously ingrained through repetition and can instantiate themselves in the minds of citizens who come to take their “truth” for granted (Strauss). Indeed, repeated refrains by Japanese scholars (Lie 170) and Western scholars alike (Lie 156) allow these ideologies to continue to proliferate and affect all those who interact within the Japanese sociocultural space. Further, they have a real and tangible influence on the lives of those who are on the receiving end of their negative consequences. As part of a larger project of decolonization, the destruction of harmful ideologies left in the wake of Western powers, and the cultivation of radical encounters with difference, we must begin to rethink what it means to “be Japanese.”
We must consider widening the definition of “Japanese” – as Mouer and Sugimoto suggest (244-245) – in order to allow for the inclusion of many different kinds of “Japanese” people into Japanese society, such that Japan itself becomes more open and positively oriented towards the fluidity of the boundaries of identity in general, and of Japanese identity in particular. This includes ethnic Japanese who do not fit the mold of the monolithic Japanese identity (Mouer & Sugimoto 248). By rethinking what it means to be “Japanese,” re-examining the criteria by which we designated a person as possessing the qualities of “Japaneseness,” and redefining our notion of “Japanese identity,” I believe that we can come to a solution that allows for the richness of diversity that exists within the Japanese sociocultural sphere to be recognized, valued and accepted.

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It’s almost 4 a.m., and my eyes are bloodshot, having stared at the computer screen for so long. I couldn’t tell you how many hours it’s been, but I’m closing in on the end of my thesis, and need just a bit more research for the introduction.

The video38 I’m watching opens up to the soft strums of a distinctly Japanesque instrument I can’t remember the name of. An image of a spinning globe zooms in, quickly overlaid by a map of Japan and the words “2015 Miss Universe Japan: Nagasaki.”

In the next shot, a woman sits in a straight-backed white chair, near a window in a plain white room. The only colors in the room are the green of the plant behind her; the black of her shirt and the letters of Nagasaki written on her sash; and the caramel shade of her skin. The hair on her head is dark and pulled back away from her face. The lines of her body are long and slender, sloping downwards from her shoulders to the tips of her fingers; hands folded, one on top of the other, in her lap. She kind of looks like me, I think.

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38 See Miss Universe Japan.
Ariana begins to speak in the flawless Japanese that is her first language. As I watch her, I can’t help but feel overcome by a hint of sadness. From a corner of my mind I have no control over, thoughts I wouldn’t have dared to voice out loud before embarking on this project rise to consciousness: Is this what I could have been like? Could this have been me, in this life or another one? I’m thrust on a trip down memory lane, traveling roads not taken since I was a young girl striving so hard to be something it was impossible for me to be.

I think back to that girl, my 13-year-old self, the one who tried so hard to create a sense of wholeness out of an identity that wasn’t hers. I think of her, and I sit here and listen to the Japanese words coming out of this black-bodied woman’s mouth. The culmination of every unrealistic hope and dream that 13-year-old girl had is staring me right in the face. And here I am, eight years later, watching Ariana with my own two eyes.

I now know that it is possible for black skin and a Japanese mask to coexist in the same body. This is the childhood dream come true that I was never aware of. Hungering for more of this black-skinned/Japanese-masked identity, I watch other videos of Ariana, click through to articles featuring interviews with her, scroll through the Miss Japan Instagram feed, feeling some once-insatiable need inside of me finally getting the attention it’s been starving for. Everything I’ve ever imagined my Japanese identity could be like, every secret, radical transformation I’ve wanted to enact from the depths of my heart: they stare back at me in hi-def photos of this black body in a Japanese kimono. They flood my mind’s eye, filling me with visions of what I could have been like, in another life; in another Japan, where – just maybe – no one would be shocked to see a black girl wearing a Japanese mask.

In arguing for a different, more open Japan, I invoke Bucholtz & Hall one last time: Identity is invented similarity that downplays difference. During the Meiji Restoration (1868),
those already residing within Japan – separated by class and regional differences – were able to unify under the notion of a single Japanese identity by downplaying the differences between them. I believe it is possible for this to happen again: where, by downplaying the differences between Japanese, half-Japanese and non-Japanese bodies, a multitude of diverse peoples can, if they so choose, come to identify themselves under that selfsame Japanese identity.

My thesis argues for the deconstruction of “Japaneseness” and a more fluid understanding of “Japanese identity.” Now, as I sit with images of this half-black, half-Japanese woman flashing across my computer screen, I realize that this process is already underway.

Ariana’s victory in being crowned the face of Japan is testament to the fact that Japan is willing to change, and that Japan is currently changing. There are those within Japan who are ready to realize the possibility of a Japan that accepts difference within its conception of “Japaneseness.” The idea of a monolithic Japanese identity has already begun to crumble. In its place, a very radical way of being is blossoming: one that allows the aesthetics of Japaneseness to flow outside the borders of a constrained Japanese identity and take up space within those who have the courage to defy those expectations.
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