Consuming Anime

Television & New Media
14(5) 440–456

DOI: 10.1177/1527476412436986
tvnm.sagepub.com
SAGE

Dana Fennell[1], Ana S.Q. Liberato[2], Bridget Hayden[3], and Yuko Fujino

Abstract

Researchers are increasingly recognizing anime and manga as worthy of scholarly examination. However, relatively little research examines how fans synthesize the cultural content of anime. This paper provides an analysis of representations of race/ethnicity and gender in two televised anime, and contrasts the understandings of scholars to fans. As anime can weave together images from Japanese culture, other cultures, as well as fantasy, anime presents many faces to fans. Fans do not necessarily see all of these faces at once, and they interpret the cultural content of anime differently. As a result, anime has the potential to generate different types of cultural influence.

Keywords

anime, race, ethnicity, gender, fans, power

While the economic power of anime is obvious, anime is also a cultural product. Saitō refers to anime as Japan's "greatest cultural export," perhaps more "globally relevant" than the content transmitted in Japanese universities (2007, 238). However, what is this cultural content, and how do viewers interpret it? Varying competing theories exist, but need more empirical support. This paper examines fans' understandings of the cultural content in anime, more specifically English-speaking viewers' interpretations of race/ethnicity and gender in two anime series: *Bleach* and *The Wallflower*. We

[1]University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, USA
[2]University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA
[3]University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, USA

Corresponding Author:
Dana Fennell, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5074, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001.
Email: dana.fennell@usm.edu

first provide a brief analysis of the content of both series, followed by an analysis of fan postings on three Internet forums. By doing this, we can: better understand if fans reflect on constructions of race/ethnicity and gender in anime, explore if/how they associate such images with Japan, contrast the theories of scholars to the perspectives of fans, and consider the potential of anime as a source of cultural power. Anime's ability to serve as a soft power resource for Japan in the traditional sense appears limited if viewers do not see anything Japanese in anime.

Our research demonstrates that fans do reflect on representations of race/ethnicity and gender in anime. They do not, however, necessarily see all of the diverse faces of the medium at once. Anime is able to weave together images from Japanese culture, from other cultures, of fantasy, and of concerns relevant to our globalizing world. In response, viewers sometimes focus on the fantasy face of anime and do not perceive content as Japanese. Other times, they ground what they see to real-world cultures. As a result, the potential for anime is great, but overarching claims regarding its ability to generate any particular kind of cultural influence are problematic.

Cultural Content

Within anime scholarship, we isolate two overarching and seemingly contradictory arguments regarding Japanese cultural content. One is that, much like Japanese products such as the Sony Walkman, anime lacks references to contemporary Japanese culture (Iwabuchi 2002). Some authors use the term *mukokuseki*, meaning "lacking clearly identifiable Japanese national, racial, or ethnic markers," to explain this (Brown 2006, 7). Iwabuchi discusses anime as "culturally odorless" (2002, 27), although this does not imply culture is absent; the consumer may realize the product is Japanese. Instead, cultural odor refers to how contemporary "cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" (Iwabuchi 2002, 27).

How does anime become odorless? Creators/producers sometimes minimize cultural references for marketing purposes (Iwabuchi 2002). Licensed versions sometimes change original elements (Price 2001). Of course, this is a simplification because historical context is necessary to understand these dynamics. Furthermore, anime's odorless quality may be due to the nature of the medium rather than cultural whitewashing. For instance, Allison (2008) and Saitō (2011) consider how anime represents fiction. Napier (2005) emphasizes that animation, unlike other media such as live action films, is nonreferential. "Animation stresses to the viewer that it is separate from reality," and maybe an "alternative reality" (XII); anime is in part a "fantasyscape" (Napier 2005, 293).

In contrast, the second argument we find in anime scholarship is that anime does contain Japanese cultural odor, at least before any cultural editing or mistranslation. Price indicates the content of anime is so tied to Japanese culture that "there is no way to disguise its very 'Japaneseness'" (2001, 156). Azuma claims anime draws from

Japanese culture (2009), and Napier explains almost all anime "contain some Japanese references" (2005, 26).

These contrasting arguments carry different implications. If anime contains Japanese cultural odor, anime may be a soft power resource for Japan (Iwabuchi 2002). Nye defines soft power as power that comes from "attraction" (2008a, X). Unlike soft power that ends at "military borders" (Nye 2008b, 96), the Japan External Trade Organization argues Japan spreads its culture to other nations through anime (2005). Newitz (1995) affirms this claim by arguing American viewers enjoy embedded critiques of the United States within anime. If anime is deodorized, the ability for it to generate soft power for Japan seems limited. Anime may still have cultural influence nonetheless. If anime includes representations of other cultures, it may propagate the appeal of those cultures (Iwabuchi 2002). If anime represents a unique type of fictional world, Japan may be a "signifier" for a particular type of "fantasy-ware" that companies from other countries emulate (Allison 2008, 107).

Understanding Race and Gender in Anime

These larger arguments about cultural odor apply to considerations of race and gender in anime. It is important to examine representations of race because the "cultural odor of a product is also closely associated with racial and bodily images of a country of origin" (Iwabuchi 2002, 28). Drawings of unrealistic, large-eyed, and sometimes blond-haired and light-skinned characters are contained within anime and manga (relevant because many anime are based on manga) (Iwabuchi 2002; Napier 2005, 2007). Interpretations that such characters look "Western" or "White" (Iwabuchi 2002; Knowles 1996; Napier 2005, 2007) reinforce theories of anime as not containing Japanese "cultural odor" but potentially the cultural odor of other groups. For instance, Ito writes the "majority of characters in Ladies' Comics have Miss America features" (2002, 71). The contention that anime characters are their own race, or do not have a race at all, also supports the culturally odorless argument. Napier argues since anime characters can have wildly colored hair and unrealistic body shapes "it is perhaps more correct to say that rather than a 'Western' style of figuration, the characters are drawn in what might be called 'anime' style'" (2005, 25). In contrast, Lu indicates it is possible to perceive some anime characters as Asian (Lu 2009), and therefore not deodorized. Schodt (1986) and Grigsby (1998) suggest this may be more true in the past, however. They note Japanese characters used to be drawn with more "Asian features" until "contact with the West" (Grigsby 1998, 69).

Concerning gender, we isolate the same core theories. Some scholars argue it is possible to see Japanese gender roles in anime.[1] For instance, Napier (2005) and Newitz (1995) claim certain subgenres reinforce traditional Japanese gender roles, although Napier also admits anime can reflect changing gender roles. More specifically, Newitz (1995) argues the "magical girl" subgenre reflects gender dynamics in Japan and reinforces men as dominant over women. Napier claims images of women cooking in this subgenre provide the "underlying message" that "even in a

frighteningly changeable world," some things remain the same (2005, 211). Newitz claims American fans consume these images and yearn for "social situations made possible by traditional gender roles" (1995, 5), implying anime may contain Japanese cultural odor. In contrast, some scholars argue that anime does not specifically represent Japanese gender roles, suggesting the form lacks cultural odor. Grigsby writes that the *Sailormoon* series includes "more idealized and stereotypical modern western . . . female gender characteristics than traditional Japanese female roles" (1998, 76). Kotani (2007) and Napier (2005) point out how the fantasyesque elements of anime/manga allow for the creation of a space for the transgression of traditional gender roles and the exploration of unique identities, even if Japanese society remains patriarchal.

The Many Faces of Anime

We isolate arguments about cultural odor from scholars' theories, but their theories are not necessarily unidimensional, especially as they consider the importance of globalization (Allison 2008; Napier 2007). For example, Napier (2005, 2007) recognizes that Japanese cultural elements attract some fans outside of Japan and considers anime a soft power resource for Japan. However, she also indicates anime characters do not belong to a particular race/ethnicity, suggests anime deals in problems of modern life affecting people of different nations, and argues "Fans . . . are not necessarily trying to 'become' Japanese. . . . They are participating in what may be a genuinely new and unique culture" (Napier 2007, 210). What Napier does not fully explain is how anime can be so many things at once, or why she tends to conclude the fantasyesque nature of anime is what appeals to fans despite evidence of a more diverse appeal. Hills makes a similar point by suggesting Napier ignores some of her empirical evidence in order to form a "generalisable conclusion" (2002b). He argues other anime scholars who claim "national identity and national difference don't seem to be activated in anime fans' readings" may be problematically homogenizing fans into one group (Hills 2002b).

We believe one explanation for these diverse and sometimes contradictory claims of scholars can be found in the nature of the animation medium, which allows for the inclusion of fantasy elements, but does not preclude use of realistic elements (as Napier notes). In this way, anime can and does have multiple faces. One program can be focused on Japanese culture, while another generates a fictional world unlike anything in reality, and another combines fantasy and realism. Furthermore, cross-fertilization between Japan and other nations has led to products that draw from multiple cultures. Writing about Japanese science fiction in general, Tatsumi agrees with the theory that "Japanese subjectivity" has always been "creolean" (2007, 256). This implies anime reflects the forces of globalization. In part for this reason, Allison (2008) argues the cultural influence of anime needs to be reevaluated and the concept of soft power should be revised. Pointing to expanding global communication ties, she concurs with Iwabuchi that "cultural products are becoming more difficult to trace and the origins of images and commodities become increasingly . . . irrelevant" (Iwabuchi

2002, 45). For her, the concept of soft power needs to additionally assess "the way globalism gets imagined as multi-odored and decentered from bounded places" (2008, 110). Allison (2008) claims anime can foster a reduction of ethnocentrism in viewers.[2] This brings attention to the role of the viewer.

Fandom

Studying viewers is important because cultural content matters little if viewers do not perceive it. Regarding race/ethnicity in anime, Thorn (2004) writes Westerners tend to see a circle with "two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth, free of racial signifiers, as 'white,' while Japanese see it as Japanese. A recent empirical study provides some support for his theory. In this study, participants categorized pictures of anime characters by race and "often projected their own race onto the characters" (Lu 2009, 181). Presumably, if anime presents multiple faces to viewers, different viewers can look at the same image, pick up on some cultural elements but not on others, leading to divergent interpretations. Azuma (2009) makes this argument: "Most of the characteristics of anime since the 1980s that are seen as . . . 'Japanese' were in fact produced through the mutation of techniques imported from the United States" (13), leading to "hybrid" images that combine Western and Japanese motifs (15). He hypothesizes this is why older Japanese viewers respond in contradictory ways: those who see "Japan" in the images accept them, but those who do not, reject them. However, more empirical research is needed to test these theories.

The historical divide between fans (not just of anime) and scholars is potentially one reason why research on fan interpretations has been limited (Jenkins 2006). In the past, researchers sometimes considered viewers as passive or stigmatized them as outsiders, a perspective still evident in some ways today (Hills 2002a; Jenkins 2006). Nonetheless, fans have been important historically in shaping the look and availability of anime/manga. For example, many fans involved in creating "amateur publications" have gone on to become professionals (Lam 2010, 233). While fans outside of Japan may not always exert much influence on creators (Levi 2006), they have affected the availability and look of products through fan-translated and fan-distributed products [3] (Hatcher 2005). Hills (2002a) urges analysts to pay attention to meanings provided by the text as well as how fans interact with it. In one of his analyses, he juxtaposes his own interpretation of a text with those of the text's viewers (Hills 2007). We make a similar move by contrasting scholars' theories with our own empirical analysis of two series and their fans' responses.

Methods

We used qualitative methods of media analysis; our focus was "not about coding and counting" but on understanding meaning and representations (Altheide 1996, 42). *Bleach* and *The Wallflower* are popular Japanese television shows based on manga and officially licensed in the United States. We used these texts and their images of

race and gender as the basis for fans' interpretations. *The Wallflower*, consisting of 25 episodes, is a *shōjo* (for young females) anime and belongs to the romantic comedy genre. The plot centers on four beautiful male teenagers who live in a mansion owned by a widow. Hijinks ensue as the boys attempt to change the widow's niece, Sunako—who is unkempt, likes gory movies, and talks to skeletons—into a "lady" upon the aunt's request (in exchange for free rent). *Bleach* is a *shōnen* (marketed to teenage boys) anime. It is about Kurosaki Ichigo, a human who takes on the powers of a *Shinigami* (official version translates as Soul Reaper). Besides the human world, *Bleach* contains a realm called Soul Society (SS), which is where humans' souls go after people die. Sometimes, before a soul makes it to SS, it turns into a Hollow and attacks ghosts and other people. *Shinigami* fight these Hollows. Hollows live in a realm called Hueco Mundo (HM). With *Bleach* currently in production, we primarily focused on the first 63 episodes in our analysis.

We analyzed the two programs for: the race, status, and gender of main characters; the use of racial and/or gender stereotypes; and the relevance of race and gender to overall plot progression. To address fans' perspectives, we analyzed threads on two public English-language Internet forums for each series: Cireus Anime (any threads focused on either anime), AnimeSuki (any threads focused on *The Wallflower*), and BleachAnime.org.[4] The data cover 2006-2009, and fans are located in various countries.[5] We read over threads to assess if fans discussed race and gender, and then analyzed those threads for fans' theories of such depictions. We primarily focused on whether fans explicitly perceived Japanese cultural elements in images. We coded the data for (1) if/how fans compared the fictionalized characters to any real-world racial/ethnic groups; (2) if/how fans saw characters as enacting gender roles similar to those in Japan or another nation; and (3) if/how fans saw these as fictional. We admit that while people posting on the sites appeared to be fans of anime generally, they sometimes expressed disappointment in *The Wallflower*. The study is limited by the programs and fora we selected.

Findings

Race and Ethnicity

Bleach provides more diverse images than *The Wallflower*. The main characters of *The Wallflower* are drawn with a light, relatively homogenous skin tone, except for two characters drawn in a relatively darker tone. They dance on opposite sides of a gong that flames up, wear Afro-styled hairdos, dress in ties and loincloths, and introduce a lesson in how to be a lady. These characters appear to be stereotyped "primitives," representing Suanko's transformation into a cultured lady; however, viewers indicate they represent a character the director created based on himself and who appears in other programs. The characters in *Bleach* exhibit a range of hair colors, facial features, body types (including the head of a canine), skin tones, and more. Characters who share a characteristic, such as skin tone, demonstrate diversity in

other ways, for example, through fighting skill and personality. That does not mean stereotypes are necessarily absent; at least one character (Kanoji), because of his buffoon-like behavior, appears reminiscent of the common racial stereotype of the "coon." Perhaps prompted by such diversity, fans on BleachAnime.org engaged in many discussions related to race/ethnicity/nationality,[6] while viewers of *The Wallflower* did not.

Fans not only analyzed the content of the anime in isolation but considered the context of the anime's production, distribution, and exhibition. Fans of both *Bleach* and *The Wallflower* were not oblivious to the shows' Japanese origins. For instance, they discussed the stories' creators, the pros and cons of different formats (e.g., RAW original untranslated format, "subbed" with subtitles, and dubbed), the quality of translation, and the abilities of American versus Japanese voice actors. For a variety of reasons, many *Bleach* fans professed to prefer watching subbed rather than dubbed versions, for example believing that subbed programs are more "original" (e.g., capture the maker's intent better, represent Japanese culture better) or encourage them to learn Japanese. Fans rarely made arguments that focused on the context of production while almost completely neglecting content. One example of this is the claim that characters are Japanese, regardless of whether characters look like real Japanese people, because the product is Japanese. This argument suggests characters are Japanese but does not necessarily indicate that *Bleach* contains Japanese cultural odor. As one fan noted, "It's not like all cartoons from a country have to look like the country they come from. I mean here in America, heck, look at Dilbert!" (BleachAnime.org 2008).[7]

Other fans claimed at least some characters are Japanese by examining the content of the anime—alone or in conjunction with contextual factors. They took a number of variables into account when interpreting the race/ethnicity/nationality of characters, including: skin color, facial features, hair (color and style), body type, language (e.g., character's name, character's spoken language, labels of objects/setting associated with character), clothing, theme music, associated objects (e.g., weaponry), and behaviors. They were not immune to relying on stereotypes, such as labeling a "well-endowed" character Latina (BleachAnime.org 2008). Other times, fans drew from their personal experiences and cultural knowledge (whether accurate or not) to draw conclusions. For example, they referred to their knowledge of various languages, countries' demographics, history, geography (e.g., character with an ice-type weapon must be from a country with a cold climate), and experiences with people of various races/ethnicities/nationalities. Fan analysis was sometimes facetious, such as when one fan claimed the character with the head of a canine must have been in a nuclear accident in Russia and is therefore Russian. Other times, fans' reasoning (whether correct or incorrect) went quite in-depth: "Anyone who has studied Anthropology will understand the importance of facial features. . . . Zommari is not forieng because he is black but because he has a very large flat nose with a pronounced ridge indicating he is from a country further west" (BleachAnime.org 2008).

The construction of the *Bleach* world encouraged fans to engage in such discussions. For instance, later episodes of *Bleach* use a variety of terms from languages

besides Japanese, including Spanish. As a result, fans discussed the translation of these words, where the creator might get his inspiration from (e.g., the Day of the Dead in Mexico), and other related topics. Furthermore, fans perceived how languages are loosely associated with different geographical areas of *Bleach* (i.e., human world, SS, and HM), and/or particular types of characters. Some considered the possibility that geographical areas of the fictional world *Bleach* relate to real-world geographical areas and races/ethnicities/nationalities: the human world with humans (potentially modeled after Tokyo), the *Shinigami* "race"[8] in SS (potentially modeled after feudal Japan with Japanese and/or Asian characters), and Arrancars and other "races" in HM (potentially modeled after a country where most people speak Spanish and/or are Latino). For example, fans discussed whether only Japanese people go to SS or if the afterlife is divided by race/ethnicity/nationality. One fan concluded, "hell is either in Spain or Central America as everything has a Spanish name," and "Heaven has not changed its buildings or clothes since Feudal Japan" (BleachAnime.org 2007).

Overall, the diversity in *Bleach* was hard to ignore, so fans often concluded characters represent multiple races/ethnicities/nationalities. In this way, fans perceived *Bleach* as drawing from Japanese culture as well as other cultures. Regarding deodorization, some fans were troubled by what they perceived as Westernized characters. They suggested these characters may be present for marketing purposes, or because Japanese and/or Asian people are unhappy with their looks. It was rare for fans to conclude none of the characters appear Japanese and/or Asian because of deodorization.

In short, some fans perceived "Japaneseness," but others did not. Even if fans always saw Japanese cultural elements when watching *Bleach*, this would not necessarily indicate the presence of Japanese cultural odor. This is because fans did not always view what is represented in *Bleach* as contemporary or as something attractive to yearn for within their own lives. For example, fans noticed how SS is stratified and contains "slum"-like areas (BleachAnime.org 2008). "I woudnt want to 'live' in SS's poorest area. Its even worse from what you might have experienced as living person" (BleachAnime.org 2008). Furthermore, fans sometimes directly critiqued the show for not representing certain groups positively, indicating the show may reinforce ideas that one race/ethnicity/nationality is superior to another. One thread began: "Why is it a common trend in japanese animes and mangas to make there black characters so weak i mean come on now its so obvious that Kubo Tite [the creator] is a little biased" (BleachAnime.org 2007). Another fan claimed the show "made it seem like the Spaniards (arrancar) are the bad guys and Japanese (shinigamis) are the good guys" (BleachAnime.org 2007). To be fair, there were fans who were impressed by and enjoyed *Bleach*'s diversity, seeing the show as somewhat progressive. "There just isn't a lot of ethnic diversity in Japan because of their traditional views on immigration and foreigners. We don't usually see many black, brown or red characters, unless they're minor or are villains. . . . I'd argue instead that Bleach does make some incremental progress towards racial diversity as compared to anime we've seen in the past" (BleachAnime.org 2007).

Occasionally, fans referenced the fantasy-nature of anime. At times, they attempted to use these references to limit discussion, for example, indicating that certain topics (e.g., racism or characters' representations of real-world races/ethnicities/nationalities) are irrelevant as the show is fictional. "The story doesn't exist so I don't think it should even matter [if some characters are racist]" (BleachAnime.org 2008). Sometimes they minimized the seriousness of such discussions rather than their occurrence. "They are fake characters. Just [because some characters are colored] in 5B pencil rather then 2B doesnt make then black or white or japanese. . . . Calm down" (BleachAnime.org 2007).

Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

In *Bleach*, there are a range of male and female characters with different body types (although women are generally thin and/or shapely), clothing styles, personalities, and skills, who are sexualized to varying degrees.[9] Although women sometimes demonstrate their love and bond with others through cooking, many of the women are skilled fighters and some have held among the highest-ranking positions in the program. Characters who share a status (e.g., *Shinigami* or human) are not all stereotyped as otherwise masculine or feminine, but exhibit varying degrees of independence, forcefulness, innocence, concern for others, and so on. Individual characters, such as Ichigo, can and do exhibit both masculine and feminine traits. Homoerotic elements appear occasionally, such as a human woman who effusively hugs another (in the manga, it is more obvious that she is grabbing the other woman's breasts). Fantasy elements at times challenge stereotypical constructions of gender and sex and make them comedic, for example, when a woman moonlights as a cat with a man's voice. However, in some ways *Bleach* still reinforces the idea of men as more dominant. The story is primarily about Ichigo. He gains his powers from Rukia after she fails to protect his family, and he goes on to surpass her fighting abilities; two of the primary story arcs center on Ichigo rescuing women, including Rukia.

Fans sometimes considered *The Wallflower* a *bishōnen*-styled story as it contains "beautiful boy" characters. Such stories often center on homosexual relationships between beautiful boys and are largely marketed to females (Napier 2005). However, the boys in *The Wallflower* are not homosexual, and numerous female characters are so attracted to them that they mob/stalk the boys. The boys exhibit some masculine characteristics as well as feminine ones, especially relative to Sunako, who in some scenes is the more independent, heroic, and violent character (although in other scenes a boy is more dominant and heroic). Furthermore, the boys at times get into situations where they feel obliged to disguise themselves as women by wearing dresses, and one boy is sometimes mistaken for a girl regardless of clothing. Playing with traditional gender roles, the plot involves these boys teaching a woman how to be a proper "lady." Sunako is multifaceted and enjoys the macabre, socially isolates herself, perceives herself as ugly, lacks regard for her appearance, is independent, and is physically strong. Characters refer to Sunako as scary and not fully human; the program's

inclusion of fantasy elements highlights this, for example, when she scurries up the side of a building. However, she is also smart, good at domestic tasks, and potentially quite beautiful. The latter is indicated through renderings of Sunako as pretty, because she is commonly represented through "super-deformed" or *chibi* drawings; these suggest that she, and others as a result, do not perceive her as beautiful. The revelation that Sunako began engaging in self-stigmatization after a boy rejected her complicates the plot, as the show does not make it clear if becoming a lady will restore Sunako's self-image or alienate her further.

Overall, *The Wallflower* opposes two potential lifestyles. As Sunako's aunt (whom the boys call *Oba-chan*) jet sets around the world, she comes to symbolize globalization, wealth, outward appearances, and women's liberation from traditional gender roles. Underneath Sunako's scary exterior, she represents more traditional Japanese culture and gender roles. For example, in one episode the boys get jobs at a fancy French restaurant through *Oba-chan*, and the program details what table manners a lady should have when eating at a French restaurant. This links "lady" and "manners" with "French food" and *Oba-chan*. However, although the restaurant provides the boys with French food, one of the boys demands that Sunako cook and they all eat a *nabe* dinner (a shared hot pot meal). Sunako agrees, in part, because a couple of the boys never got to share a meal like this with their biological families. The group bonds over the meal, which they eat with the material culture of Japan (e.g., chopsticks and *nabe*, which literally means pot), on a *kotatsu* (a heating device with wooden parts Sunako hammered together), in *doteras* (kimonos worn in cold weather). Tensions between *Oba-chan* and Sunako culminate in the last episode where their identities are compared. Sunako flips her aunt's goal of turning her into a lady around, and tries to turn her aunt into a housewife. In the end, the episode portrays *Oba-chan*'s life as somewhat frivolous and lacking in substance. She fails at basic household tasks and travels the world in a vain attempt to fill the void her husband left when he passed away. In contrast, Sunako's domestic abilities help create a family amongst unlikely characters. In this regard, the show affirms the relevance of traditional gender roles. However, by the end of the episode *Oba-chan* grudgingly respects Sunako's refusal to give up her independence, interests in the macabre, or lack of concern for outward beauty. *Oba-chan* recognizes that qualities such as inner strength are ladylike (although hopes Sunako will have the outward appearance of a lady in the future). Therefore, the show ultimately conceptualizes "lady" as someone possessing both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits.

Fans of neither series were passive consumers, but actively discussed issues of gender. They were willing to be critical. For instance, viewers of *The Wallflower* struggled over what it means to be a lady in today's society and what social message they hoped the series would convey. Some viewers hoped Sunako would become a lady; others appreciated Sunako as a nontraditional heroine. Furthermore, some viewers found the boys unappealing because of their feminine traits or physical characteristics (e.g., big lips coated in lipstick), which they felt made the boys seem female or

transgendered. *Bleach* fans questioned if male and female characters are represented equally in number and ability. One fan posted, "I just really hate the way most female characters in *Bleach* are shafted. . . . Orihime and Rukia could own if only Tite Kubo did something other than the helpless damsel in distress cliche" (BleachAnime.org 2007). Interestingly, *Bleach* fans valued some similar traits, including fighting skills and nurturing traits, in both male and female characters. However, they did not agree on what range of behaviors and/or physical characteristics was acceptable.[10] For instance, some fans criticized the well-endowed female character, Matsumoto, for her sexy appearance and laidback approach to life, yet other fans critiqued Soi Fon, a more serious female character with good fighting skills, for being too "flat chested" and serious (BleachAnime.org 2008). This suggests there are boundaries fans did not like characters to cross, or that fans were conflicted over which behaviors they found acceptable and/or preferable.

Fans considered the context of production/distribution/exhibition as well as content. For instance, they considered how the program's budget, the creator's gender, the director's vision, and gendered marketing affect the program's construction of gender. Some viewers attributed the use of *chibi mode* within *The Wallflower* to a lack of budget. One fan of *Bleach* wrote, "Nothing you'll find in Shonen Jump [a magazine containing *Bleach* and other *shōnen* manga] has an equal male to female ratio. . . . Be happy that Bleach has a lot of good girls who are more than eye candy" (BleachAnime.org 2009). Such considerations imply fans recognized the products' Japanese origins but did not necessarily consider them to contain Japanese cultural odor.

Indeed, fans generally discussed representations of gender in a culturally neutral manner. They almost never talked about representations as reflecting Japanese culture or any other real-world culture. One example where *The Wallflower* viewers did was in their discussions of the meaning/translation of the Japanese title of the program: *Yamato Nadeshiko Shichi Henge*. The literal translation has to do with the seven (or many) transformations of a woman from old Japan, so viewers wondered what these traits are, including if they are unique to Japan. As another example, they considered how characters represent subcultures in Japan, e.g. *gothic lolita* characters. However, fans did not always view Japanese culture positively. For instance, some *Bleach* fans claimed the show does not represent men and women equally, and argued this is a reflection of women's inferior status in Japan. At times, *The Wallflower* viewers judged *gothic lolita* characters and actual women who participate in this subculture as annoying and unattractive. Regarding the Japanese title of the program, one viewer wrote:

> Yamato Nadeshiko translates more into something like slave woman (figuratively). . . . It will be interesting to see where this show takes the "Yamato Nadeshiko" type, I hope they update it a bit. What is the perfect woman now a day? Surely not someone who is submissive to a man. Well maybe it still is in Japan, I don't know, would be sad though. (AnimeSuki 2006)

Following this viewer's comment, it is possible that fans residing outside of Japan do not make more connections between anime representations and real-world cultures because they are unsure of what gender roles and/or gender inequality are like for other groups or in other nations, or because they can identify with what they see in anime without recognizing it as culturally specific. Indeed, fans of *Bleach* who agreed the show does not represent men and women equally (a claim contested by other fans), were not in agreement on whether such inequality is a reflection of gender inequality in Japan's past, Japan today, the United States, other societies, the world, or if there is some other explanation (e.g., biological differences). "To make the show to be more believable he [the creator] had to make the male superior to . . . ladies. . . . Look at who runs most of the world (world leaders) males" (BleachAnime.org 2009). Another fan wrote, "What TK [the creator] has done with Bleach is amazing. . . . The fact that it is geared towards a male audience the amount of strong females is remarkable. Also the fact that very rarely is attention called to the fact that they are women in a male-dominated profession is interesting. . . . Now could it be more equal? Of course. But . . . real-life, especially working life in Japan, is not equal" (BleachAnime.org 2009).

Finally, some fans emphasized the fictional nature of these programs, and at times employed these references to limit discussion. For example, some viewers of *The Wallflower* said the show, including gendered representations, cannot be taken too seriously because the show is so ridiculous. Similarly, some fans of *Bleach* indicated that it is not important to analyze gender inequality since the program is fictional. One fan told another it is not "necessary for TK to make it more 'equal,'" and "just enjoy Bleach as it is" (BleachAnime.org 2009). However, such references can also be used to expand discussion. For example, one fan responded that, even if inequality exists in real life, *Bleach* is fictional. The implication is that critiques are justified as the creator could have made *Bleach* more equal. "I am entitled to voice my opinion about something I think could have been done differently" (BleachAnime.org 2009).

Conclusions

Within the scholarly literature, there are contrasting theories regarding how much Japanese culture is in anime, and if/how viewers come to recognize Japanese cultural elements. Our analysis of English-language online fan discussion boards demonstrated that fans of *Bleach* and *The Wallflower* actively reflected on anime's cultural content. Fans produced the same core arguments as scholars. For instance, some fans perceived characters to be Japanese and/or enacting traditional Japanese gender roles—and therefore saw Japanese cultural elements in the programs. However, other fans noticed characters do not always speak Japanese, saw characters as belonging to diverse races/ethnicities/nationalities, and perceived characters as enacting gender roles representative of multiple nations. These fans suggested that programs contain elements drawn from multiple cultures. (Rarely did viewers perceive the programs as containing exclusively non-Japanese elements.) Other fans asserted that rather than representing real-world cultures, the programs represent a fictional realm and culture

with characters belonging to a race/ethnicity that dwells only in fantasy, and who enact gender roles unlike those in reality. Finally, some fans perceived a combination of the above, e.g., fantasy blended with Japanese cultural elements.

We suggest this fan lack of agreement is due in part to the way anime can present multiple faces to viewers. Anime can be made more or less realistic, and can draw from different cultures. For instance, *Bleach* draws from Japanese culture as well as other cultures ("Talking with Tite" 2008), deals with issues relevant to people in multiple nations (e.g., war, friendship), and incorporates fantasy elements. When fans engage with anime, they can focus on one face of anime to the exclusion of others, or take multiple faces into account. This supports the theory that media provide "fragments of culture" and viewers do not all see the same thing when viewing the same product (Rafter 2006, 10).

A few factors appear to affect which face(s) fans see. Content matters, as anime vary in the degree to which they incorporate particular elements. The format in which fans choose to watch a show or film (raw, subbed, dubbed, and with or without editorial notes) matters. Fans indicated format affects their ability to see cultural elements; for example, some fans claimed Japanese cultural elements are lost in dubbed versions. Furthermore, fans drew from their existing cultural knowledge to interpret content. Therefore, fans' existing cultural knowledge (including knowledge of anime's context of production, distribution, and exhibition) affected their ability to see cultural elements. Our data support Saitō's claim that anime fans take "pleasure" in understanding and "straddling" the different contexts that come together to create the final anime product (2007, 227).

This does not mean fans never learn from anime. Fans described how anime helped them add to their cultural knowledge, including words from various languages. Although some fans researched information themselves, discussion boards created a space where fans could learn from each other. Fans helped other fans see cultural elements and/or interpret them. For example, some fans translated words. As another example, one fan started a thread asking why a Black character in *Bleach* is shown wearing a dress, and other fans explained the character is wearing a *hakama*. However, the structure of discussion boards limits their ability to serve this function. Boards have rules, such as BleachAnime.org's guidelines which prohibit topics of a political, racist, and adult nature. Indeed, moderators and participants sometimes expressed their disapproval of posts/threads where fans discussed discrimination and racial issues in controversial ways, with moderators at times shutting down entire threads.

Nonetheless, it is possible for fans to enjoy anime without explicitly thinking too much about Japanese culture or any real-world culture. This may be because fans make these linkages implicitly, because the themes present in anime resonate with people of various cultures (Levi 2006), or because people lack the cultural knowledge to recognize what they see as belonging to a culture other than their own. Finally, at least some of the time it is because fans perceive anime as fictional.

Overall, we conclude anime as a medium holds much potential but does not necessarily equate to soft power in the traditional sense. Regarding Nye's (2008a)

conception of soft power, fan discussions indicated there is at least some potential for anime to serve as a soft power resource for Japan. However, as anime has many faces and fans did not always perceive anime to contain Japanese cultural odor, this potential seems limited. Allison's (2008) expanded conception of soft power includes the suggestion that anime, in part because of its fantasyesque nature, can encourage viewers to see the world as multicultural and reduce ethnocentrism. *Bleach* fans' discussions certainly suggested this is a possibility. Various fans noticed elements in the series from diverse cultures (or read such into the program), and worked genuinely to understand them. However, this potential is limited by the way fans indicated Japanese culture and other cultures are not always represented positively, and alleged such representations can encourage viewers to see particular races/ethnicities/nationalities as dominant. Also, some fans did not make linkages between the fictional world of anime and any real-world culture. Furthermore, while it is possible for fans to reference the fictional nature of anime to enliven serious discussion, some fans used it as an excuse to prevent reflection on the content of anime and instead foster an acceptance of what other fans viewed as potentially racist and sexist imagery. This may foster a form of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) or gender-blind sexism. For these reasons, we argue anime is a neutral medium, with the potential to serve diverse purposes depending on its creation, distribution, exhibition, and fan interpretation.

Acknowledgments

Thanks go to Barbara Fennell, Erin Fennell, Alana Ledford, Jessica Manrriquez, Julie Reid, and the anime fans, for their comments on article drafts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Historical inequities still affect gender in Japan, with Japan demonstrating less gender equality than other industrialized nations by certain measures (North 2009; Sugihara and Katsurada 2002). Women's participation in the workforce and higher education has increased, and people are waiting longer to marry or remaining single (Raymo and Iwasawa 2005; Tamanoi 1990). Nonetheless, women in Japan have not always had the same opportunities or pay as men, perhaps because of traditional conceptions that women's place is in the home (Brinton 1989; Sugihara and Katsurada 2002; Tamanoi 1990). Gender stereotypes differ between the West and Japan; for instance, traits demonstrating individualism are not necessarily seen as socially desirable for either men or women (Sugihara and Katsurada 2002). Some evidence suggests gender role differences are diminishing; for

example, research indicates men and women sometimes hold masculine and feminine traits in more equal amounts (Sugihara and Katsurada 2002).

2. When Allison uses the term *anime*, she does not mean it has to be produced in Japan; she says it may be produced in another country and contain a "'Japanese' cultural air" (2008, 109).
3. We wonder if the rise of crunchyroll.com's legal streaming signals the decline of fansubs.
4. Here, we did targeted searches for posts using the keywords *racism*, *ethnicity*, *African*, *Spanish*, *Latina*, *sex*, *women and Japan*, *gender and Japan*, *women and Japanese*, and *food and Japan* (searching sections on the anime, characters, and *Bleach* in general).
5. This includes Japan, although fans are not necessarily from there. For example, BleachAnime.org has 132,908 members and 48 members specify they are located in Japan, 63 in Mexico, and 213 in Canada (numbers should be interpreted carefully as some fans list their location by city and some not at all).
6. Fans tended to conflate these concepts, so we discuss more than race.
7. When quoting fans, we give the year of their post, and quote them directly without editing grammatical mistakes.
8. Fans sometimes used the term *race* to discuss these character types (e.g., *Shinigami*, human) even when they were not relating them to nonfictional races.
9. Fans sometimes blurred issues of gender, sex, and sexuality, so although we focus on gender, we address relevant representations of sex and sexuality.
10. Here we looked at additional threads about characters in general.

References

Allison, A. 2008. The attractions of the J-Wave for American youth. In *Soft power superpowers: Cultural and national assets of Japan and the United States*, edited by W. Yasushi and D. L. McConnell, 99–110. Armonk: East Gate.

Altheide, D. L. 1996. *Qualitative media analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

AnimeSuki, forums. http://forums.animesuki.com/ (accessed January 15, 2010).

Azuma, H. 2009. *Otaku*. Translated by J. E. Abel and S. Kono. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bleach. First broadcast 5 October 2004 by TV Tokyo. Directed by N. Abe and based on a manga by T. Kubo.

BleachAnime.org, forums. http://www.bleachanime.org/forums (accessed January 15, 2010).

Bonilla-Silva, E. 2006. *Racism without racists*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Brinton, M. C. 1989. Gender stratification in contemporary urban Japan. *American Sociological Review* 54 (4): 549–64.

Brown, S. T. 2006. Screening anime. In *Cinema anime*, edited by S. T. Brown, 1–19. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cireus Anime, forums. http://forum.cireus-anime.com/index.php (accessed January 15, 2010).

Grigsby, M. 1998. *Sailormoon: Manga* (*comics*) and *anime* (*cartoon*) superheroine meets Barbie: Global entertainment commodity comes to the United States. *Journal of Popular Culture* 32: 59–80.

Hatcher, J. S. 2005. Of otakus and fansubs: A critical look at anime online in light of current issues in copyright law. *SCRIPT-ed* 2 (4): 514–42.

Hills, M. 2002a. *Fan cultures*. New York: Routledge.

Hills, M. 2002b. Transcultural *otaku*: Japanese representations of fandom and representations of Japan in anime/manga fan cultures. Paper presented at Media in Transition 2, Cambridge, MA, May. http://web.mit.edu/cms/Events/mit2/Abstracts/MattHillspaper.pdf.

Hills, M. 2007. Michael Jackson fans on trial? *Documenting* emotivism and fandom in *Wacko About Jacko*. *Social Semiotics* 17 (4): 459–77.

Ito, K. 2002. The world of Japanese ladies' comics: From romantic fantasy to lustful perversion. *Journal of Popular Culture* 36: 68–85.

Iwabuchi, K. 2002. *Recentering globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Japan External Trade Organization. 2005. *Cool* Japan's economy warms up. http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/reports/market/pdf/2005_27_r.pdf (accessed January 20, 2008).

Jenkins, H. 2006. *Fans, bloggers, and gamers*. New York: New York University Press.

Knowles, A. M. 1996. The cyborg-other: Japan's animated images of sex, gender, and race. MA thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Kotani, M. 2007. Alien spaces and alien bodies in Japanese women's science fiction. In *Robot ghosts and wired dreams*, edited by C. Bolton, I. Csicsery-Ronay Jr., and T. Tatsumi, 47–74. Translated by N. Miri. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lam, F. 2010. Comic market: How the world's biggest amateur comic fair shaped Japanese *dōjinshi* culture. In *Mechademia volume 5*, edited by F. Lunning, 232–48. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Levi, A. 2006. The Americanization of anime and manga: Negotiating popular culture. In *Cinema anime*, edited by S. T. Brown, 43–63. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lu, A. S. 2009. What race do they represent and does mine have anything to do with it? Perceived racial categories of anime characters. *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4 (2): 169–90.

Napier, S. J. 2005. *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Napier, S. J. 2007. *From Impressionism to anime: Japan as fantasy and fan cult in the mind of the West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Newitz, A. 1995. Magical girls and atomic bomb sperm: Japanese animation in America. *Film Quarterly* 49 (1): 2–15.

North, S. 2009. Negotiating what's *natural*: Persistent domestic gender role inequality in Japan. *Social Science Japan Journal* 12 (1): 23–44.

Nye, J. S. Jr. 2008a. Foreword. In *Soft power superpowers: Cultural and national assets of Japan and the United States*, edited by W. Yasushi and D. L. McConnell, ix–xiv. Armonk: East Gate.

Nye, J. S. Jr. 2008b. Public diplomacy and soft power. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 94–109.

Price, S. 2001. Cartoons from another planet: Japanese animation as cross-cultural communication. *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24: 153–69.

Rafter, N. 2006. *Shots in the mirror*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Raymo, J. M., and M. Iwasawa. 2005. Marriage market mismatches in Japan: An alternative view of the relationship between women's education and marriage. *American Sociological Review* 70 (5): 801–22.

Saitō, T. 2007. Otaku sexuality. In *Robot ghosts and wired dreams*, edited by C. Bolton, I. Csicsery-Ronay Jr., and T. Tatsumi, 222–59. Translated by C. Bolton. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Saitō, T. 2011. *Beautiful fighting girl*. Translated by K. Vincent and D. Lawson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Schodt, F. L. 1986. *Manga! Manga! The world of Japanese comics*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Sugihara, Y., and E. Katsurada. 2002. Gender role development in Japanese culture: Diminishing gender role differences in contemporary society. *Sex Roles* 47 (9/10): 443–52.

Talking with Tite: Bleach. 2008. *Shonen Jump* 6 (6).

Tamanoi, M. A. 1990. Women's voices: Their critique of the anthropology of Japan. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 17–37.

Tatsumi, T. 2007. Afterword. In *Robot ghosts and wired dreams*, edited by C. Bolton, I. Csicsery-Ronay Jr., and T. Tatsumi, 250–59. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The Wallflower. First broadcast 3 October 2006 by TV Tokyo and TV Aichi. Directed by S. Watanabe and based on a manga by T. Hayakawa.

Thorn, M. 2004. The face of the other. http://www.matt-thorn.com/mangagaku/faceoftheother.html (accessed 30 November 2008).

Author Biographies

Dana Fennell is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Ana S.Q. Liberato is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Kentucky.

Bridget Hayden is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Yuko Fujino has a degree from the University of Florida and currently resides in Japan.