Cross-Cultural Influences between Japanese and American Pop Cultures

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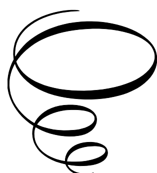
Powers of Pop

Edited by

Kendra N. Sheehan

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW OF POP CULTURE AND THE CYCLICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JAPAN AND THE US

KENDRA N. SHEEHAN

Various images come to mind when a person thinks of Japan and the US. Sometimes the images are very stereotypical, like samurai and cowboys. Other times they are a bit more specific and relatable, like images of bustling cities such as Tokyo and New York. When comparing the two countries, both among the world's top economies, many people might focus on the differences between the two. There have been many books written on how to understand the Japanese or books that propagate the idea of how "powerful" the US is by focusing on its history and military might. The idea that is often found in both types of books is that these countries are so fundamentally different that they cannot share many similarities. Many books also focus on the interactions between Japan and the US in relation to World War II and the Occupation of Japan. In general, most countries around the world want their culture and society to be viewed as unique rather than similar to one another. In the case of Japan, Harumi Befu notes that this is because the structural-functionalist theory influenced and supported the idea "that each society possesses a unique culture, and that society and culture are contained on the political boundaries of the state."[1] That does not mean that each country's culture and society is not worth studying or not significant. To keep pushing the ideas of how different countries' cultures and societies are becomes repetitive, focuses on essentialism, and ignores the ways diverse cultures interact and exchange information with one another. Relationships between countries shape and impact one another, negatively and positively, in a variety of ways. Shared histories especially highlight cyclical relationships between one another.

Popular culture cannot capture all the important aspects of a country and its varied cultures, but it gives snapshots of times, places, and

things significant to both the producers and the consumers. If the work endures past its shelf life, it produces new meanings for new consumers. One critique about studying any kind of media today is that critical thinking regarding the media itself is lost and people are often unaware of the contexts that shaped it or its significance regarding the time it was made. One goal for this book is to encourage people to look at those contexts and how they have shaped the relationship between the US and Japan. How have these two countries managed to influence one another?

Sharing Influences

All countries have their own forms of music, but consider how music changes when encountering other cultures and musicians from other cultures, along with new instruments and sounds. One only needs to see the influence of Elvis Presley on 1950s Japanese music to understand how it would go on to impact the formation of Japanese pop music. Film is so widespread and many of the greatest cinematic directors take influence not just from real life in their own countries, but from the political and social contexts of their countries, as well as from foreign directors and their films. Consider how Akira Kurosawa took influence for his films, such as *Yojimbo* (1961), from the Westerns of John Ford,[2] and how later directors like George Lucas would use Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) as inspiration for the characters, plot, and editing in *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977).[3]

When looking at Japan and the US, there is a tendency to assume that all interactions have their roots in World War II and the Occupation, as well as the idea that the US influenced most of Japan's popular culture, like rock music or comics. There is the tendency by some scholars, both Japanese and non-Japanese who research Japan, to fall into ideas of *Nihonjinron*¸ theories on the Japanese, or ideas that Japan is especially unique compared to other countries. Yoshio Sugimoto and Harumi Befu have discussed issues of *Nihonjinron*, noting it has "attracted a large audience captivated by portrayals of Japan and the Japanese as being exceptionally unique and fundamentally different from Western societies and Westerners."[4] In the period after WWII, many scholars viewed Japan as exotic and in need of restructuring, not unlike the view that the West generally had of Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912). While WWII and the Occupation influenced many authors, artists, and general creators who lived through the experience, it was not the first time Japan had contact with the US. Japan and the US had negotiated the opening of Japan to trade in the mid-nineteenth century during the latter part of the Edo period (1603-1868).

With this in mind, it can be argued that elements of manga, or Japanese comics, did exist long before the introduction of twentieth-century American comics and also that their current format did take influence from American and British comics. Yet, in the contemporary period, many comic artists are looking to Japan for aesthetic styles and ways to illustrate action or structuring story arcs. In general, most countries have historical antecedents of (pop) cultural artifacts that are often not unlike other countries, but which become shaped by interactions with other cultures or experiences by the creator of the artifact.

This book aims to consider how these cyclical relationships impact one another through the lens of popular culture. For the purposes of this book, Japan and the US are the main intended focus, yet some consideration is also given to the influence of Europe in the case of things like fairy tales and general literature. While this book wants to avoid an American-centric or Japanese-centric viewpoint, both countries' popular culture is relatively well known and consumed around the world thanks to globalization. The relationship between Japan and the US through the lens of popular culture can tell us about relationships between different cultures at a consumer level rather than an economic level, how consumers understand one another, what captures the attention of scholars, and how culture spreads, forms, and shifts through cross cultural communication.

Organization Structure and Summaries

Most edited collections categorize chapters into themed sections, but this was difficult due to the various subjects and topics contained within each chapter. For instance, placing all the chapters that discussed manga might take away from the more important topics contained within each chapter or cause undue comparison between the subjects covered. Putting those that focus on music together might remove the nuance from the inspirations or reasons for the musical influences. Placing sections that focus solely on the role of American influence or Japanese influence on the subject might oversimplify the focus of the subject. Thus, the chapters in this edited collection are not organized according to media or specific topics. Instead, the chapters are outlined to replicate certain flows of themes, subjects, and the relationship between Japan and the US. This organization structure allows for a natural progression through the collection. Topics in the collection cover manga and comics, music, literature, technology, film, and cosplay. While this does not cover the entirety of popular culture, the topics in the book provide a wide breath of common products of popular culture that are consumed and referenced between Japan and the US.

The first chapter in this collection is Nao Tomabechi's "Batman or *Battoman*?: Transnational and Self- Orientalist Depictions of Japan and America in Batman Manga." Tomabechi provides an overview of the superhero's development in the US and Japan, considering the role of globalization and the superhero as a transnational figure. Japan is no stranger to works featuring superheroes, and Tomabechi's chapter focuses on three transnational superhero comics by Japanese creators. The chapter examines the American superhero as a transnational superhero in the manga of Jiro Kuwata, Kia Asamiya, and Natsume Yoshinori's depictions of Batman. This analysis of Batman in Japanese manga illustrates the ways that superhero manga combines elements of American and Japanese culture, while considering the blurring of racial and cultural boundaries in Kuwata's *Batman*, self-Orientialism and the Othering of the self in Asamiya's *Child of Dreams* and Yoshinori's *Death Mask,* as well as providing a look at how Japanese works represent superheroes due to various influences and contexts.

Chapter two continues the examination of the relationship between American and Japanese media in Sutirtho Roy's "Reading the Animal Beyond Anthropocentric Paradigms of Power: A Post-Human Study of *Beastars* as 'Un-Disneyfied' *Zootopia.*" Roy analyzes Walt Disney Studios' *Zootopia* and Paru Itagaki's *Beastars.* His analysis considers how both works use animal stereotypes to examine responses to racism and speciesism. Roy's analysis of both works provides discussion of the considerable influence of Disneyfication often found in animation and explores the limitations of anthropocentric depictions of animality in *Zootopia* and *Beastars*. In addition, underlying his critical comparison between both works is the role Japanese and American culture play in dismantling stereotypical depictions and particularities within each culture that has influenced the representation of the animal protagonists and their relationships to other in both works.

In chapter three, Sarah Jessica Darley's "The Magical Girl Mirror: Reflections and Transcultural Transformations of Euro-American Fairy Tales in the *Mahō Shōjo* Genre" examines how the *mahō shōjo*, or magical girl genre, in Japan subverts fairy tale archetypes and tales. These works often intersect with romance and fantasy, overtly engaging with the Western fairy tale intertextual web. Darley examines the ways magical girls subvert archetypal passivity and how they are forced into necessary action, often being tasked with saving the world from an apocalyptic fate. She analyzes CLAMP's *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1996-2000), Aya Shouoto's *Kiss of The Rose Princess* (2008-14), considering how each uses the known narrative of an existent fairy tale in their narratives, drawing contrast between reader's

expectations and the actions of their heroines. Darley considers how the protagonists of these texts are located within mirrors of their reality in contemporary Japan, and that they can self-consciously engage, interact with, and critique the fairy tale plots and conventions that shape their lives as magical girls.

Chapter four provides an examination of influences from Japanese culture on American hip-hop music in James Richie's "Strategies of Cultural Mediation: A Reading of Japanese Influences on American Hip-Hop Audiovisual Production." Richie's chapter provides a comparative reading of the music video for "Stronger" (2007) and Donald Glover's short film *Clapping for the Wrong Reasons* (2013). Rather than reading these two works as portraying cultural appropriation or Orientalism, Richie argues that translation theory can provide a solution to the multi-cultural exchanges demonstrated in both works. He proposes that a reading of these works demonstrates that the sensibilities, goals, overall projects, and conditions of the creators endured them to the anime film *Akira* (1988) and concepts in Buddhism respectively as potential relationships for collaboration as a translator would seek in a source-language author, as well as the degree to which each of these cases achieves a dialogue with Japanese culture.

In chapter five, André Malhado's "Sounds Like Cowboys and Geisha: Representational Stereotypes and Music Styles as Cultural Signifiers in American and Japanese Mainstream Cyberpunk" examines the sonic and visual cross-references between American and Japanese mainstream cyberpunk media. He illustrates the musical and visual allusions in both forms of cyberpunk media, indicating how media practices capitalize the same stylistic techniques for similar tropes like cities and cyborgs. His analysis also discusses the stereotypes of technocultural representation, highlighting the audiovisual strategies that create perceptions of occidentalism and orientalism which vary according to the cultures of production. This chapter includes close readings of several forms of media that employ the use of stereotypical Japanese music, instruments, figures, and specific images such as samurai and geisha in media; as well as the stereotypical American images of country music and instruments, and other elements associated with the image of cowboys and outlaws.

Chapter six features Stephanie Hodge's "Obaachan's A.I.: How Japanese Technology Leads the West for Geriatric Care" which examines the how the rapidly aging human population, the rise of illnesses like cancer and dementia, and how living in an isolated society in a post Covid-19 world is in a greater need of geriatric services than ever before. She examines the ways in which the fast-growing aging population in Japan and its healthcare labor shortage has pressured the country to address geriatric care by turning

toward technology and A.I. This chapter provides a critical comparison of Japan and the United States, noting the impacts of technology and media. Hodge's analysis considers why A.I. is lacking in the West for geriatric care yet flourishing in Japan. Her comparative analysis includes consideration of technophobia, the digital divide, and how the Japanese elderly population has been impacted by A.I. care. These two countries share the same problem of a growing aging population, and this chapter explores if A.I. is benefiting Japan's elderly patients, their caregivers, and by extension, their country.

Chapter seven provides a consideration of how Japanese media depicts characters with disabilities in Kendra Sheehan's "Japanese Media Reflections of Characters with Disabilities: Considering Impacts and Influences." Considers how persons with disabilities are portrayed in Japanese media and whether the shifting changes in how they are portrayed has been influenced by diversity of media creators like directors and comic artists, as well as improved and nuanced understanding of how disabilities are defined within society through media. The chapter considers the role of globalization, global feminism, and Western policies and efforts for disability advocacy. This chapter provides a comparative analysis of how persons with disabilities were viewed and categorized in the US and Japan, media depictions of characters with disabilities, and a brief examination of three contemporary Japanese works that feature characters with disabilities. Sheehan also considers the ways in which realistic and normalized depictions of characters with disabilities in Japan and the US have the potential to impact discussion and improve the way that persons with disabilities are viewed in their respective countries due to the prevalence of Japanese popular culture.

In chapter eight, Kendall Belopavlovich's "The North American Indigenous Body in Motion in The Land of the Rising Sun: Lessons from *The Last of The Mohicans*" examines Shigeru Sugiura's manga adaptation of *The Last of the Mohicans* and how it examines the intermingled stories of indigenous history and Japanese American relations through Hollywood Western narratives and post-war Occupation period American comics. Specifically, Belopavlovich examines Sugiura's 1953 and 1973 adaptations, as well as the 2013 translation of the 1973 adaptation. This chapter considers the cross-cultural exchange of Japanese and American popular culture. Belopavlovich discusses how exposure to ideological, political, and cultural values at both sites builds across time and space in ways that blend localized forms and tend to reinforce the originary culture's values due to complimentary narratives of imperialist as well as colonialist nationhood. This chapter aims to be restorative and to dispel false mythologies of mass-mediated indigenous representations.

Chapter nine is Simon Stow's "Portrait of The Artist as A Grapefruit: Yoko Ono, Japanese Mourning, And American Pop" examines Yoko Ono and the biculturality of her work. Stow provides a close reading of Yoko Ono's *Season of Glass*, considering how Ono's work was received and understood in the West, as well as situating the album within certain aspects of Japanese mourning. Stow argues that Ono's work challenged the bifurcated tendencies of American grief's focus on either the Freudian relinquishing of the love object, or on the wrath-inducing "never forget" in a record on which the presence of the deceased is repeatedly invoked as part of an ongoing relationship. His analysis illustrates how her work merged a Japanese understanding of loss with an American idiom in ways that challenged not only the pop form itself, but also American conceptions of loss, life, and death.

In chapter ten, Elijah Pritchett's "Necropolitical Noise: Reassessing Naked City in The Twentieth Century" aims to (re)frame the avant-garde gesture of the band Naked City and the band's output with Yamantaka Eye. Pritchett's thesis argues that Naked City depends on a kind of nihilistic exhilaration imagined through the merger of the most abject aspects of American and Japanese cultures. He argues that the US and Japan are framed as debased post-atomic societies, and deformed reflections of each and that the signifiers of both cultures become detached and freely intermingled into a necropolitical worldview powered on obscene desire and unrestrained violence. Pritchett provides contextual framing of how Naked City forms a continuation of the cynical Cold War disposition that animated much Western punk/metal music from its inception, as well as comparing Japanese contemporaries who also incorporate nuclear age imagery into their musical projects, though to very different ends. His primary concerns are analyzing the cumulative aesthetic of Naked City as a whole, with considerations to aspects of both Zorn and Eye's artistic development.

In chapter eleven, Tiffany Nelson's "Cosplay and Genderplay: Gender Diversity as Emerging from Japanese and American Cosplay Scenes" explores how the elements of cosplay within the space of fandom conventions allows for acceptance of gender expression diversity. She provides a brief overview of the evolution of cosplay between the US and Japan. Her analysis examines how the phenomenon of cosplay has produced a community of thought which destabilizes traditional norms and creates spaces within which new forms of diversity are enabled. Nelson considers the many factors which contribute to instances of gender play and exploration within cosplay, while focusing on two themes: 1) the ritualization

of cosplay as an activity, and 2) the definition of fandom conventions as spaces of destabilized gender norms.

Chapter twelve features Katsuya Izumi's "The African American Character Under the Japanese Narrator's Eyes in Yamada Amy's Bedtime Eyes," which features a close reading of *Bedtime Eyes* (1985) by Amy Yamada. Izumi explores Yamada's depictions of relationships between Japanese women and African American men. In this debut novel, Izumi investigates the relationship between the protagonist and her love interest, who embodies a cultural "Other" and how the author's female characters resist conforming to Japanese patriarchal societal expectations. Notably, Izumi argues that the protagonist's narrative empowers her using typical and stereotypical images of African American men and refusing to give her love interest an individuality. He further elaborates how the protagonist's gaze highlights the link between the US and Japan as similar imperialistic countries.

Chapter thirteen is Justy Engle's "The Prototypical Cross-Cultural Female Hero: Western Inspiration, Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli." Within which Engle analyzes the roles of the heroine in several films from famed director Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli. She argues that Miyazaki's strong female protagonists' journey from self-perceived insignificance to discovering their own inner strength so that they might embrace their own value and heroic identity. Engle considers how American and Japanese culture lack strong representation for young women, and that Miyazaki's films provide an inspiration for a generation of young women to persist, embrace community, and discover their own heroic possibilities.

Chapter fourteen contains an exploration of the trans-pacific influences between Japan and the US by interviewing three comic artists who were inspired by Japanese manga. Liam Webb's "Trans-Pacific Influences in The Development of Early Twenty-First Century Manga" provides a brief historical overview of the interactions between the West and Japan when comics began taking form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He highlights the ways that American comics would go on to influence the form of comics in Japan, as well as early themes and subjects in early twentieth century manga. Webb also examines the influences of Japanese manga on American comic artists, especially the products of the newborn American online comic movement. The final part of his chapter contains interviews with Keung Lee, Timothy Lim, and Mark Pellegrini, creators of manga-influenced American comics. His interviews provide thoughtful consideration of their perspectives and reasons why they chose to make American comics in a manga style.

The final chapter in this collection is Tokikake Ii's "Consolidating Social Perceptions Above and Beyond the Local City: Japanese Receptions of The U.S. Atoms for Peace Promotion." Ii's chapter continues to consider the role of the influence that the US had on Japan through an analysis of the relationship between Atoms for Peace exhibition campaign held in Japan. He explores the US government's cultural propaganda on democracy through media and exhibition, as well as the Japanese public acceptance of nuclear power as the source of energy. Ii focuses on the cultural and public impacts that the exhibition had on developing and larger cities in Japan. He considers a binational approach between the US and Japan, through his discussion of the exportation of democratic value within material culture, such as the introduction of American products like refrigerators and cars, to Japan. His chapter provides a public perception of American ideology both within and beyond the context of nuclear culture.

Conclusion

The authors in this book come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. While chapters have been edited for coherency and cohesiveness, the authors' voices have been left largely intact. Some chapters may lean into ideas of essentialism and the stereotypes that often come from *Nihonjinron*, while others have a stronger American-centric perspective, yet others still provide objective critical examinations of Orientalism and Otherness that appears in many Japanese and American works. The diversity of the authors adds to the myriad of ways that one can study the relationship between Japan and the US through popular culture, media, and promotion of culture within each respective country. The goal is that these chapters can be read with a critical eye to further highlight and address the ways that the US and Japan have interacted and influenced one another. There is nothing new under the sun, and that is especially the case with the perspectives that people may hold about Japan as the Land of the Rising Sun.

Gratitude

The editor of this book wishes to express her sincerest gratitude to all the contributors of this collection. As this was the editor's first endeavor in editing a collection of such diverse interdisciplinary topics, the contributors' patience was appreciated more than they can ever know. The editor is also grateful to Rebecca Gladders and Adam Rummens of Cambridge

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Hutchinson, Rachael. "A Fistful of Yojimbo: Appropriation and Dialogue in Japanese cinema," in *World Cinema's 'Dialogues' with Hollywood*, ed. Paul Cooke (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 172-187.

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Notes

[1] Harumi Befu, "Concepts of Japan, Japanese culture and the Japanese," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*, ed. Yoshio Sugimoto (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

[2] Rachael Hutchinson, "A Fistful of Yojimbo: Appropriation and Dialogue in Japanese cinema," in *World Cinema's 'Dialogues' with Hollywood*, ed. Paul Cooke (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 172-187.

[3] Stuart Galbraith, *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune,* (London: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2002), 253-264.

[4] Yoshio Sugimoto, "'Japanese Culture': An Overview," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*, ed. Yoshio Sugimoto (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

CHAPTER ONE

BATMAN OR *BATTOMAN*?: TRANSNATIONAL AND SELF-ORIENTALIST DEPICTIONS OF JAPAN AND AMERICA IN BATMAN MANGA

NAO TOMABECHI

Introduction: Uniquely American?

"Uniquely American" seems to be a description favored by many scholars when speaking about superheroes.[1] Superheroes, they argue, "reflect what American culture considers the most estimable qualities in a person."[2] Correspondingly, much of the scholarship on the superhero genre regard it as an exclusively American phenomenon that impacts and is impacted by American society.

It is perhaps because the superhero genre was founded in America with many of its protagonists and narratives revolving around "patriotic American values and functions as personifications of abstract national ideas about American exceptionalism"[3] that some seem astonished to find the "extraordinarily global"[4] attention superheroes have been receiving lately, especially with the many successful films based on the works and characters of the two mainstream superhero comics publishers, Marvel and DC Comics. However, while it is not a mistake to take into consideration American cultural and societal contexts when examining the superheroes, they have barely ever stayed within American borders from the earliest days of their appearances. For example, during World War II, superheroes were already traveling across seas in the early forties, for many comics were sent to the soldiers fighting abroad.[5] Featured among the popular series sent was Captain America, "a character defined by and rooted in the 'good fight' of World War II," with his "individual freedom" displayed as "the cornerstone of American exceptionalism."[6] Though the readership may have been

primarily American during the war, soon enough, superheroes would find themselves not only acquiring overseas fans, but also overseas creators.

In such superhero narratives created by those outside of America, with the integration of different cultures and their distinct narrative traditions, what emerges is a superhero mythos that is not quite "uniquely American." Stuart Hall writes that globalization is "the process by which the relatively separate areas of the globe come to intersect in a single imaginary 'space.'"[7] Superhero comics by non-American creators can serve as such a globalized place where two cultures meet. It is thus as Daniel Stein writes:

> Superhero comics participate in the construction of such transnational imaginary landscapes, even though they are seldom studied in this context. [. . .] In this genre economy, images and stories do not originate in a single place from which they are then exported. Instead, they are produced in many different spaces, adapted across national borders, and redefined across various cultural contexts.[8]

Superheroes have been, for decades, transnational figures that travel across oceans, nations, cultures, and societies; while their current popularity is perhaps among the greatest in superhero history, their having a global audience is not exactly a recent phenomenon, nor an "extraordinary" one.

Japan is among the countries that participate in superhero storytelling, publishing alongside translated American comics works created by and for the Japanese. In these works, one finds representations of America and Japan that differ remarkably from American publications. This chapter focuses on three such transnational superhero works by Japanese creators, *Batman* (*Battoman/バットマン*) by Jiro Kuwata (1966-1967), *Batman: Child of Dreams* (2000-2001) by Kia Asamiya, and *Batman: Death Mask* (2008) by Yoshinori Natsume to explore the different means in which superhero manga brings together America and Japan. [9] In Kuwata's *Batman*, Japan and America come together to create a space that is not only transnational, but one that also blurs cultural boundaries, making the narratives racially, ethnically, and nationally ambiguous. Such a depiction differs greatly from those in the later *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask*, which participate in self-Orientalism, or the willing engagement in the Othering of the self. Unlike the fictional universe Kuwata creates where borders between nations and cultures are vague, the borders in the latter two publications are rather thick and conspicuous, for Japan and America are depicted as entirely separate entities, at times, even depicting Japan as different and exotic, or in other words, the Other.

This chapter begins by briefly providing the early history of superheroes in America and Japan to establish the historical context as to how superheroes entered Japan. It then analyzes Kuwata's *Batman* and the transnational aspects of the series in the next section. Though the original title of Kuwata's work is *Batman,* from here onwards, the series will be referred to as *Batmanga* to avoid confusion from the original American *Batman* comics that it is based on. This is taken from *The Jiro Kuwata Batmanga*, the title DC Comics gave the series when it was (re)released digitally in 2014, which most likely alludes to Chip Kidd's *Bat-Manga!: The Secret History of Batman in Japan*,[10] a book that collects some of the serial runs of *Batmanga* along with images of Batman merchandise released in Japan during the sixties. Analyses on *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask* that focuses on self-Orientalism follow.

It should also be noted that in this chapter, transnational refers to Aihwa Ong's definition which insists that the prefix "trans denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something [. . .] Transnational also alludes to the *trans*versal, the *trans*actional, the *trans*lational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism."[11] This notion works exceptionally well with the superhero, who, "as figures whose diegetic exploits are premised on an ability to transform from private identity to costumed identity and whose reception depends on a media-intrinsic demand for readerly produced closure [. . .] [they] are prone to all kinds of popular transformations, including transnational ones."[12] Accordingly, the Batmen that appear in the three Batman manga have, by entering (and then later leaving) Japan, *trans*formed from their "uniquely American" selves into figures appearing in cultural products that are simultaneously Japanese and American.

Japan, America, and the Superheroes

Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and debuting in *Action Comics* #1 (Jun. 1938) is widely recognized as the first American superhero to have emerged[13] The superhero is commonly marked by a combination of specific components: their mission to protect others, superpowers, and identity, which includes their superhero persona, civilian identity, as well as the costume they wear.[14] The immense popularity of Superman prompted the births of other characters, including Batman, who was introduced in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939) that follow the mission/powers/identity formula. When America entered World War II, the

superhero comics surged in popularity when they found their place as propaganda with heroes who grew increasingly patriotic, fighting the Axis Powers in the comics.

Though the acclaim of the superhero genre was cemented during the war, the prestige for these American superheroes understandably did not arise in Japan during these years. However, while American superheroes had not established themselves just yet, this does not necessarily mean Japan was devoid of a figure reminiscent of a superhero. One character that comes to mind is the Golden Bat (Ōgon Batto/黄金バット) created by Ichiro Suzuki and Takeo Nagamatsu, and first appearing in a *kamishibai* (紙芝居), or a paper theater, series *The Black Bat* (Kuro Batto/黒バット).

The Golden Bat, though debuting almost a decade before Superman in 1930,[15] and not belonging to the (American) superhero genre scholars define, already incorporates elements in which Peter Coogan identifies as a requisite in a superhero. His fight against evil, or the mission, is the basis of his narratives. In his battles, he is shown to have remarkable strength or releases beams from his weapon, the Silver Baton, confronting monsters and villains that can only be defeated by his superpowers. Speculations on his origins are made, but none know his true identity, nor what he is. As such, the Golden Bat fulfills the mission, power, and identity formula necessary in a superhero. Correspondingly, despite many superhero scholars' emphasis of superheroes' Americanness, Ichiro Sakamoto, writing on the Golden Bat, argues that such "magical saviors," which can be interpreted as a superheroic figure that protects society from evil is based on "traditional beliefs in Japan," such as folklore and mythology.[16] Noting additionally that "there are also many similar stories overseas,"[17] this, as well as the character of the Golden Bat, challenges the notion that superheroic beings are exclusive to America, and "show[s] how nonuniquely American [the superhero] figure really is."[18]

It was not until the 1950s that the American superheroes finally rose to popularity in Japan. This is primarily due to Japan strictly censoring media during the war, forbidding anything that depicted Japan negatively. Additionally, nationalism had heightened during those years, and many willingly avoided the consumption of American culture and using foreign words. Works such as superhero comics that tended to portray Japan and its people in an offensive manner, therefore, were naturally banned. When superheroes gained their fame in the fifties, it was neither the genre nor comics that caught Japanese audience's attention, but instead the television series *Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958) starring George Reeves. The series began airing November 1956 in Japan, and the series proved to be an

unprecedented hit, as it was "the highest rated show of any kind on Japanese television" marking 74.2%.[19] Superman's remarkable popularity and influence can be found, for example, in the fact that Mizuki Shigeru, who became a widely known cartoonist for *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (ゲゲゲの鬼太郎; 1960-1969), debuted with *Rocketman* (*Rokettoman*/ロケットマン) (1958), which featured a protagonist clearly inspired by Superman.[20] Furthermore, Superman's success in Japan drove producers to create their own live action superhero series, *Gekkō Kamen* (月光仮面), or *Moonlight Mask* (1958-1959). A mysterious hero of justice clad in a white turban and sunglasses with phenomenal fighting skills, Gekkō Kamen, like the Golden Bat, meets the requirements of a superhero.[21]

Batman was introduced to the general Japanese audience a couple of years later "in the midst of the Bat-Mania"[22] which was then being experienced by America, brought on by the live action television series (1966-1968). Following Superman's example, it was the television series that was imported into Japan. The series aired from 1966 to 1967 under the name *Kechō Ningen Battoman* (怪鳥人間バットマン), or *Mysterious Bird-Man Batman,* and it was alongside this that Kuwata's *Batmanga* appeared. *Batmanga*, which marks the first superhero manga to be officially drawn and written by a Japanese artist, was serialized in *Shōnen King* (少年キング) from June 1966 to April 1967, and *Shōnen Gahō* (少年画報) from volume 23 (1966) to volume 15 (1967). Both, published by Shōnen Gahōsha (少年画報社), are manga magazines that feature chapters from numerous manga titles in the form of an anthology that may later be compiled into books and volumes.[23]

American superheroes have been around for approximately eighty-five years, and they have been in Japan for at least sixty-five.[24] Japanese superheroic figures even predate Superman, who is commonly described as the first American superhero. This perhaps may have worked as a foundation to enable the acceptance of Superman and eventually Batman by a Japanese audience, as the concept of the superhero itself, while exotic in the characters' American roots, was not entirely foreign.

Batmanga: Japanese, but also American

Batmanga, released in the wake of the success of the *Batman* television series, is not exactly Kuwata's original work, but rather an adaptation. Kuwata was given the American *Batman* and *Detective Comics*

issues to reinterpret and adjust for a Japanese audience, as he explains in an interview with Kidd.[25] Though these comics did serve as the basis, Kuwata claims he "totally reconstructed [the Batman stories]," for he felt that some of the stories told in the original issues would not appeal to the intended Japanese readers. [26]

But reading through Kuwata's work, one finds that it is not only the stories that were modified, but the artwork and storytelling techniques, too. According to Kuwata, he had initially planned to "practice the realistic and dynamic drawing style of American comics, and then blend it into [his] original drawings," but due to the lack of time, he proceeded to rely on his own established style. [27] While Batman's body and mask-clad face are "closely modeled on his American source," as Stein notices and despite Kuwata's claim, other characters, especially those whose faces are visible such as Robin and even the unmasked Bruce Wayne appear manga-like with "the cartoonish reduction of facial features, including big eyes and toothless mouths, and the prominence of disproportional physiques." [28] Hence, though Batman may retain his foreign visuals, Kuwata's blending him into the general manga-styled pages, removes much of the "American" aesthetic from the artwork.

Alongside the art, the pacing of the narratives has been greatly adjusted in *Batmanga* as well. The *Batman* issues Kuwata based his work on are all self-contained stories, and so are the stories of *Batmanga*, too. However, as Timothy D. Peters and Stein agree,[29] *Batmanga* tells its story at a significantly slower pace. If it only takes one issue for the American Batman to defeat the supervillain, Kuwata's needs several. Though there are arcs that conclude in one issue such as "Clayface" that appeared in *Shōnen Gahō* #9 (1966),[30], the majority of comic arcs spends two to three issues with some even running for four or five issues, like the "Lord Death Man" arc which runs for three issues in *Shōnen King* #23 to #25 (1966).[31]

The difference in pacing can be identified not only by the entire narrative, but by individual panels too, as the time that passes within a single panel in *Batmanga* differs notably from that of the American comics. As Stein observes, Kuwata "devotes more space to individual moments of the narrative and extending fight scenes over several pages" in comparison to the American comics, which "does [the same] with substantially less space."[32] Peters dedicates this to the "more 'cinematic' tendencies of manga in comparison to American comics—focusing on both longer narratives and more detailed depictions of action and movement across multiple panels."[33] Take, for instance, "The Revenge of Clayface" that ran from *Shōnen King* #42-45 (1966), which is based on *Detective Comics* #304 (Jun. 1962). In one scene, Batman and Robin, suspecting Clayface to be impersonating a

man named John Royce in the original, and Colt in *Batmanga*, visit his home, only to find him tied and gagged. In *Detective Comics* #304, Batman and Robin arrive at his home, knock on the door, deem it suspicious that no one is answering despite the lights being on, and barge into the room to find the man on the floor in the space of merely three panels. In comparison, Kuwata uses nearly two pages, starting with Batman and Robin heading for the Batmobile, which is followed by driving to Colt's home (two panels), knocking, slowly entering inside (five panels), and finally discovering him. Whereas the American Batman and Robin are more dynamic in their actions, tackling the door open and bursting in, Kuwata's superheroes seem more careful, their caution creating tension in each panel. Such differences in the mode of storytelling exemplify how "the transformation from comic to manga obviously goes beyond the mere linguistic transfer of American words into Japanese. It is the whole visual grammar and narrative structure that is adapted from one intratextual economy of meaning to another."[34]

The adjustments Kuwata made in the stories may also include, in addition to narrative styles, meeting the social contexts of that time. Take, for instance, "The Revenge of Professor Gorilla," serialized in *Shōnen King* #32-34 (1966), based on *Detective Comics* #339 (May 1965). In the original issue, the supervillain is Karmak, the gorilla, who gained intelligence in an accident involving a malfunction of a machine and now wishes to take personal revenge on the humans who forced him to do tricks when he was in the circus. Here, the comics frame Karmak as an uncontrollable evil beast, and the issue concludes with his defeat and a heartwarming scene where Batman encourages the shy scientist who invented the machine that gave Karmak his intelligence to pursue his research.

In contrast, *Batmanga* is not as optimistic, nor does it present the gorilla as hopelessly evil, instead showing some sympathy towards him. Like the original Karmak, this version has been humiliated in the circus and desires vengeance against mankind as well. However, he also demands justice for nature and its animals that have been wronged, becoming more an eco-terrorist than merely seeking personal vengeance. Furthermore, in *Detective Comics*, Karmak is visually depicted simply as an angry gorilla whose beastliness marks him as inferior. Yet, Karmak in *Batmanga* hides his animal body, dressing even in a superhero manner with a full bodysuit and cape. Covered from head to toe, and even wearing gloves, none of his beastliness is in display. Finally, even as Karmak is finally defeated, the atmosphere remains somber unlike in the original. Batman laments that Karmak was "extraordinary," and Robin admits that Karmark's anger was reasonable and that he, too, would have wanted to "exact revenge on humans" were he in Karmak's shoes. The arc thus concludes with Robin's

condemnation of mankind's treatment of nature and Batman's message that humans have "a great responsibility" to animals.

While the superheroes' concerns for preserving nature in *Batmanga* may seem generic, it may, in fact, have a deep association to Japanese culture, or "relation to the Shinto tradition" as Se Young Kim, referring to studies such as by Ivan Vartanian, contends.[35] These scholars observe that the monster figures, or the *kaiju,* that have appeared widely in Japanese popular culture can be analyzed in correlation to "animism" and a grievance towards a disconnect from the natural world.[36] Correspondingly, Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle expand on the *kaiju* that Japanese mythological and religious roots, which draw connections between the Japanese people and nature, influence works that feature them.[37] Considering the flexibility of the definition of *kaiju*, which is "roughly translated to 'strange beast'" and can be described as "big, unknown, and often malevolent creatures attacking innocent people,"[38] Karmak, with his impressive intelligence, desire for vengeance, and mysteriousness provided by the full-body suit he wears that hides not only *who* but *what* he is, as well as his connections "with themes of monsters and Nature,"[39] can perhaps be read in association of Japanese popular culture's usage of the *kaiju.* This, then, makes it understandable that a discourse on nature possibly deriving from a Japanese cultural and societal context appears in *Batmanga*, and for Karmak to not simply be a creature in pointless rampage, but a monstrous creature that reflects "anxiet[ies]" of certain cultures.[40]

Furthermore, the fact that this issue was published in the mid-sixties may also provide additional context to the conclusion of Karmak's arc. Hirofumi Katsuno stresses that "throughout the 1960s, Japanese society grew increasingly skeptical of the United States because of the struggle over the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the Vietnam War, and environmental problems."[41] *Batmanga* surely celebrates the American superheroes and the ideology they represent. But in the final moments of the arc, just as Japan was becoming distrustful towards America's stance on various issues including environmental ones, doubt is cast on the original comics and correspondingly, the American superheroes and their culture that had failed to address why Karmak became a supervillain mad for revenge in the first place.

How *Batman* stories have easily been reconstructed to meet the needs of the Japanese audience without modifying the significant basis of the plot, characters, and the ideals they represent, may illustrate their narrative transparency. Narrative transparency, as defined by Scott Robert Olson, refers to "any textual apparatus that allows audiences to project indigenous values, beliefs, rites, and rituals into imported media or the use

of those devices. This transparency effect means that American cultural exports manifest narrative structures that easily blend into other cultures."[42] Olson argues narrative transparency is one of the reasons behind the success of American popular works, and this may certainly be applied to characters like Batman whose popularity is massive worldwide. Yet, though Kuwata had reinterpreted or indigenized Batman comics for Japanese readers, neither he nor the comics magazine *Batmanga* was serialized in, seem to intend for Batman to become "culturally odorless,"[43] or a wholly Japanese product, frequently advertising the fact that Batman is an American product. Such conscious maintenance of Batman's "Americanness" denies itself from completely "blend[ing] into" Japan.

This can be seen, for example, in the margins of *Shōnen King*, where they repeatedly mention in almost every issue the popularity of Batman in America as well as worldwide. Similarly, the cover for *Shōnen King* #23 advertises *Batmanga* by claiming that *Batman* is a comic that is incredibly popular in America (「アメリカで爆発的大人気のまんが」).[44] Additionally, though not from *Batmanga* specifically, a picture of a toy, which presumably shoots water given the name "Batman Pump," is featured in Chipp's *Bat-manga!* with artwork that includes the printed text, "Batman from America (アメリカからきたバットマン)." Therefore, Kuwata and Gahōsha, on the one hand, seem to be aware that the American Batman must be modified and made "Japanese" to sell. But on the other hand, they seem to deem that part of the appeal of Batman is that it derives from America, just like the American superhero Superman, who achieved an incomparable success in previous years.

Consequently, despite *Batmanga* "Japanizing" the narrative and visual styles of American *Batman* comics, the fictional world Kuwata creates is not entirely Japanese. And yet, neither is it entirely American. Instead, the stories of *Batmanga* are set in a space where America and Japan coexist, or in other words, a place where nationalities are extremely vague. Such ambiguity is first established by the characters of Batman and Robin. Unlike with some of the later manga adaptations of American superheroes such as Spider-Man,[45] Kuwata does not change Batman/Bruce Wayne and Robin/Dick Grayson into Japanese characters, but rather keeps them American. And yet, this maintaining of their American nationality is exactly what leads them to become racially and ethnically ambiguous characters. As Stein asserts and as I have quoted previously, Batman is visually "closely modeled on his American source."[46] Considering the "American source" is a white American man, Kuwata's depiction of Batman that closely resembles the original suggests that Bruce/Batman in *Batmanga*, too, is

white and American. However, as I have previously noted, the moment the Batman mask comes off, Bruce Wayne is drawn in Kuwata's own style, or a manga style, which renders the character Japanese.[47] The implication of his whiteness and Americanness, then, only occurs when Bruce Wayne is wearing the Batman mask. Whereas Batman is drawn as a Caucasian American, once he sheds his superhero costume, as Bruce Wayne, he becomes "Japanese." Nevertheless, whether Kuwata had intended for Batman (and Robin) to be Caucasian or otherwise is uncertain, for nowhere is this clarified, deepening the ambiguity and flexibility of the characters' race. Consequently, looking only at the art, Batman's and Robin's race or nationality cannot be determined, for they are simultaneously Caucasian American and Japanese, but also possibly neither.

If race and nationality of the characters are indefinite, the country in which their adventures are set is just as unclear. The events of *Batmanga,* like those of the original issues, take place in "Gotham City," but it is confusing as to where this city is located. In *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask,* Gotham City/America and Japan, whether it be Tokyo or a traditional neighborhood, are clearly distinguished in the art of the cityscapes.[48] Contrastingly, Gotham in *Batmanga* is, like the characters, a mixture of the American and the Japanese. Some panels of *Batmanga* are based exactly off the original *Batman* issue, such as the one found in the first installment of "Lord Death Man," where Batman and Robin work their way down a pole on the side of a building. Such panels are likely to include not only the characters, but also their surroundings, and hence, the architecture and the city of Gotham as drawn in the original issues, which indicates the setting as America. Not to mention, the cars the characters drive in this installment as well as throughout *Batmanga* are American, or at least not Japanese, considering the driver's seat placement on the left, further confirming the city as not Japanese. And yet, the signs on buildings, name plates on houses, and any other texts that appear throughout the city are all in Japanese with barely an English letter in sight. This, then, now situates Gotham City, which was presumed to have been an American city, not in America, but possibly in Japan. What is more, though the sound effects in *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask* are translated into or written in English, the translators of *Batmanga* leave the Japanese as it is.[49] Japanese letters are thus scattered across the pages of the comic, further visually creating a space filled with Japanese. As such, where the Gotham City of *Batmanga* exists is extremely unclear, thus obscuring cultural and national borders within the narratives. Consequently, *Batmanga* "blur[s] cultural origin[s] and loosen[s] the requirements of cultural representation"[50] of both America and Japan, resulting in a series that concurrently engages with histories, tropes, and

styles of popular cultures from different countries without invalidating either one.

The (self-)Othered Japan in *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask*

Approximately thirty-five years after *Batmanga,* two more Batman manga were released: *Batman: Child of Dreams* by Kia Asamiya and *Batman: Death Mask* by Yoshinori Natsume. The former, like *Batmanga,* was serialized in a Japanese manga magazine, *Gekkan Magajin Z* (月間マガジン Z), but with the supervision of DC Comics, who later translated the work and released it for American readers. *Child of Dreams* consists of two arcs: the first half taking place in Gotham City, America, and the second half in Tokyo, Japan. The series tells a story of a Japanese news reporter, Yuko Yagi, who visits Gotham City with her fellow news crew for an exclusive on Batman. There, she encounters not only Batman, but a strange array of fake Gotham supervillains terrorizing the city. In order to uncover the culprit behind the fake supervillains, Yuko returns to Japan, at the same time that Bruce Wayne/Batman visits Tokyo. In Tokyo, he learns that Kenji Tomioka, Yuko's uncle, and the head of the highly respected Tomioka Pharmaceutical Company, is a man obsessed with Batman and is the mastermind behind everything.

In contrast to *Child of Dreams* which was serialized by a Japanese publisher, the later *Death Mask* was released by DC Comics and intended for an American audience. This comic tells the tale of a cursed *oni* mask that Bruce had come across approximately twenty years ago when he was learning martial arts in a dojo in Japan. The mask arrives at Gotham City via Jiro Agurama of Agurama Corporation, who secretly wishes to take over Gotham's crime ring, but is killed by the mask (or the mysterious wearer of it), which seeks to spread hate and vengeance. The cursed mask itself remembers Bruce and being drawn to his darkness, and thus desires to take over his soul and body.

In both *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask*, Japanese and American cultures are depicted as belonging to separate spheres. More importantly, one finds similarities in the two works in that despite having been created by Japanese artists, the narratives display Orientalist discourse repeatedly. In fact, with Natsume admitting to having written the story with a "Japanese flavor [that] would likely please American readers,"[51] one finds in *Death Mask*, but also in *Child of Dreams,* too, a voluntary participation in portraying Orientalist images of Japan, or in other words, self-Orientalism.

Japan, its culture, society, and people have had the tendency to be represented in highly exoticized, fetishized, stereotyped, or Orientalist ways in superhero comics. Orientalism, coined by Edward Said in 1978, refers to the placing of non-Western cultures, or "the Orient," as the Other.[52] Much of this is achieved through a fetishization of the Other culture, deeming it as "synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the seminal,"[53] which transforms the "Orient [into] a living tableau of queerness"[54] that differs significantly from the West. Not only does this result in stereotypical representations, the beliefs in the non-Western culture's Otherness "maintains" the stereotypes, "control[ing], manipulat[ing], even […] incorporat[ing], what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world."[55] Consequently, the West is situated as the standardized norm, as well as the "superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures."[56]

In the superhero genre, depicting Japan as the Oriental Other can be traced back to the early comics of the forties. In fact, comics from the forties, especially those published during WWII are infamous for their not only stereotyped, but also racist depictions of the Japanese, who frequent the pages as the enemies superheroes must defeat.[57] They are drawn as barely human and are "extremely grotesque" with "fangs, large protruding bucked teeth or hunched backs," and colored in a sickly yellow that differs greatly from the white American superheroes.[58] Though these clearly racist and vilified images of the Japanese did eventually disappear, stereotyped images did not. Frank Miller's *Wolverine* (1982) published by Marvel, for example, features numerous Orientalist stereotypes including strange shrine-like architectures, sumo wrestler bodyguards, and a submissive kimono-clad damsel in distress. Even in recent years, one of the most famous Japanese superheroes, DC Comics' Katana, remains stereotyped, wielding (unsurprisingly) a katana and wearing a Japanese flag on her face. More notoriously, in 2017, it was revealed that the "Japanese" superhero comics writer Akira Yoshida who had written works such as *Wolverine: Soultaker* (2005), which also depicts countless stereotyped images, was actually the white American C.B. Cebulski.[59] The Othered Japan(ese) has thus been with the superhero genre for a considerably long time.

These depictions, however, are more likely to be written and drawn by Western creators for Western audiences. It is, therefore, intriguing that in *Child of Dreams* and *Death Mask*, the Japanese creators themselves differentiate Japanese culture as the Othered, "support[ing] the construction and maintenance of 'Japaneseness' […] utilis[ing] the difference from the 'West.'"[60] On the one hand, the Japan illustrated by Asamiya and Natsume can certainly be understood as "practices of self-representation" that "challeng[e] stereotypes with authenticity."[61] However, what is problematic