

**From:**

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**Embracing Differences**

Transnational Cultural Flows

between Japan and the United States

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The omnipresence and popularity of American consumer products in Japan have triggered an avalanche of writing shedding light on different aspects of this cross-cultural relationship. Cultural interactions are often accompanied by the term cultural imperialism, a concept that on close scrutiny turns out to be a hasty oversimplification given the contemporary cultural interaction between the U.S. and Japan. »Embracing Differences« shows that this assumption of a one-sided transfer is no longer valid. Closely investigating Disney theme parks, sushi, as well as movies, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt reveals a dialogical exchange between these two nations that has changed the image of Japan in the United States.

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## Exoticism, Imagination, and the Harajuku Girls

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Where mono – there’s me, there’s you  
(hoko-ten) / In a pedestrian paradise /  
Where the catwalk got its claws (meow) /  
A subculture in a kaleidoscope of fashion /  
Prowl the streets of Harajuku (irasshaimse)  
- GWEN STEFANI “HARAJUKU GIRLS”-

In her song “Harajuku Girls,” which was released on her 2004 album *Love, Angel, Music, Baby*, American pop singer and fashion icon Gwen Stefani not only sings about her fascination with a particular Japanese fashion style, the Harajuku style, but she also blends Japanese words and phrases in her lyrics: “Where *mono* – there’s me, there’s you (*hoko-ten*)” [...] “Prowl the streets of Harajuku (*irasshaimase*)” or “n’ cause it’s (super *kawaii*), that means (super cute in Japanese)” (“Harajuku Girls”). The conflation of Japanese and English in this text mirrors the common practice of many Japanese entertainers of using English loan words in their songs and exemplifies how an American artist borrows from the Japanese culture and language.<sup>1</sup> In Stefani’s song, the Japanese parts are sung by four Japanese background singers; “her” Harajuku Girls, who add an “exotic” and “authentic” flavor, while the translations explain and familiarize the foreign terms and phrases. Even though, or perhaps because, the song became very popular in the United States and Europe, Stefani was repeatedly criticized for employing the four background singers, who accompany her not only on tour but are also displayed on CD covers, posters, and in her music-videos. Since their

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1 Jackie Hogan elaborated in “The Social Significance of English Usage in Japan” on the use of the English language in Japan.

main task is to pose behind the American singer, thereby adding a foreign flair to her appearance and performance, Stefani was accused by Korean-American actress Margaret Cho of reinforcing stereotypes of Japanese women as silent and submissive. Cho even went so far as calling the Harajuku Girl performance a “minstrel show” (Cho) and as the four women make Stefani’s show more “exotic” it can be argued that the album indeed presents an “Orientalist” image of Japan for a Western audience.

The practice of exoticizing Japan and its people for Western consumers that helps to sell Stefani’s music has been characterized as “Orientalism” and it is not at all new. Edward Said famously described this practice in his groundbreaking study under this title, explaining how in Orientalist discourses Europeans have been constructing an Orient according to their imagination for centuries, thereby defining, naming, and gaining power over foreign lands and people, while at the same time denying “The Orientalist Other” agency to represent him- or herself. This uneven power relation can be seen in the performance of Gwen Stefani as well. In her case, she is an American singer who defines the Harajuku-style for a Western audience; whereas the four Japanese women remain in the background and have to repeat Japanese phrases that fit Stefani’s definition of Japan. The American singer creates a binary opposition between a mature Occidental self and an Oriental “Other” that is inferior and somehow childlike. Historically, this dichotomy of an enlightened West and uncivilized Orient became an “ultimately political vision of reality” (Said, *Orientalism* 43) which was used to justify colonialization.

Yet, at the same time, it has to be taken into consideration that Orientalism expresses a longing for the “Other.” Henry Yu explains in *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*, that when American merchants and missionaries sailed to Asia “the belief that the Orient was fundamentally different from America laid the foundation for Orientalism” (83) but the knowledge about the supposedly exotic “Other” was considered exciting and “something to be collected and objectified” (85). John MacKenzie has even argued that a relationship between the East and the West in the field of art was mainly grounded in admiration for the exotic (44). This notion is indicated as well in Stefani’s song that admires the “Other” style and culture of the Harajuku Girls. In a similar vein, she sings in “Rich Girls” about what she would do “if [she] was a rich girl.” One of her fantasies is that “I’d get me four Harajuku Girls / to inspire me

and they'd come to rescue / I'd dress them wicked, I'd give them names / Love, Angel, Music, Baby / Hurry up and come and save me" ("Rich Girls"). Yet again while she is, on the one hand, very excited about the Harajuku Girls, on the other hand she objectifies them as she wants to "get" them, "dress [...] and give them names," thereby treating four grown-up women as if they were dolls. According to Yu, collecting and mastering the knowledge of the Orient has always functioned as "a fetish for elite white men and women" since the Orient represented "the adventure of the exotic" and "was the opposite of everything uninteresting in their own lives" (85). This attitude clearly motivates even Stefani when she hopes to be saved by the Japanese girls from her boring life by inspiration and in turn usurps them of their distinct identity, thus indicating a cross-cultural relationship with a very uneven distribution of power.

The concept of Orientalism can indeed be applied to Gwen Stefani's presentation of the four Harajuku Girls, who always appear in a group and wear the same outfit, which makes them hardly distinguishable for a Western audience. They create a stark visual contrast to the blonde, Caucasian Gwen Stefani, who further distinguishes herself from them by wearing a different costume than the Harajuku Girls. Visually she stands out from the exotic group and serves as a familiar reference point. Stefani, who promotes herself as a modern, independent, and unique woman of the twenty-first century, reinforces this self-perception by surrounding herself with the group of smaller, Japanese women who remain mute in interviews, follow Stefani silently, and affirm the Western stereotype that all Japanese women look the same.

While Stefani's performance borrows profusely from Orientalist stereotyping, interestingly enough, the lyrics of "Harajuku Girls" do not necessarily support the same attitude. Stefani voices her appreciation of the Harajuku style, which is named after a fashionable district of Tokyo where teenagers and young adults dress in various extravagant ways. This style has no rules or conventions except, maybe, the idea that the combinations of clothes worn have to be creative and individual. The song does not only acknowledge the distinctiveness of this Japanese fashion style, but emphasizes that despite all the differences to American fashion, it is a "Ping-Pong match between Eastern and Western [styles]" ("Harajuku Girls"). Indeed, the Harajuku style does not only include Japanese influences such as kimono or anime-inspired fantasy costumes, but it is influenced by Western

styles as well, i.e. by the 1950s retro-, punk, glam rock, gothic, and hip hop styles. Japanese and Western elements are mixed and matched in new, creative ways, thereby generating a unique fashion style that transcends national borders.<sup>2</sup> The lyrics of the song pinpoint exactly what Tiffany Godoy and Ivana Vartanian explain in the “Introduction” to *Style Deficit Disorder: Harajuku Street Fashion Tokyo*: “while the Harajuku district has long been a spot for a domestic audience to come into contact with foreign culture and style, today the influence has reversed: foreign fashion leaders are taking notice and being influenced by what’s happening on Harajuku’s streets” (10).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Western styles were first exported to Japan, and then adapted to the local culture and the result exported to the West, where Western consumers are free to use and recontextualize the stylistic mix again.

In her song, Stefani further confesses that she does not only admire the fashion of the Harajuku Girls but that she was inspired by them when designing fashion for her own label L.A.M.B. (an acronym of Love Angel Music Baby – the names given to the Harajuku Girls by Gwen Stefani). The lyrics of her song read, “Did you see your inspiration in my latest collection? / Just wait ‘til you get your little hands on L.A.M.B.” (“Harajuku Girls”). Her Harajuku-inspired fashion line, however, is very different from the Harajuku fashion worn by Japanese subcultures. Stefani’s design no longer reflects the distinct and extravagant style worn in the Japanese suburb but appeals more to the American mainstream. The only markers of distinctiveness and Japaneseness are Japanese characters and images printed on T-shirts and sweaters. Gwen Stefani’s Harajuku style may be inspired by the Tokyo street-fashion style but it remains *her* interpretation and it is streamlined for an American target group.<sup>4</sup>

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2 As Takeji Hirakawa describes in “Harajuku’s Start: The Roots of Tokyo’s Street Fashion Scene,” the style developed during the Occupation Era after World War II, when American officers and their families settled in a district called Washington Heights in Harajuku, and U.S. and Japanese fashion styles started to be mixed (22).

3 Since the 1980s the international fashion scene has been increasingly interested in Japanese designs and fabrics and Japanese fashion designers such as Issey Miyake and Kenzo continue to be internationally acknowledged (Kondo).

4 The commodification of different styles by the media is closely investigated by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

Binary oppositions of the East (Japan) and the West (America) can neither account for the complex, border-crossing nature of the Harajuku fashion style/s, nor the particular cross-cultural exchanges in the performance and the lyrics of the song. While Orientalist notions are still widespread, fashion and popular music display a much wider spectrum of cultural exchanges between Japan and the United States today. Despite its problematic features, Stefani's song reveals much about the growing influence of Japanese popular culture in the United States as it discloses how cultural influences cross national boundaries and how contemporary cultural interactions create not only new ties but perpetuate and recreate old tensions.

But how does one account for the changing interrelations? How should one conceptualize the new configurations of power and longing? Such a reading of Gwen Stefani's "Harajuku Girls" suggests that new and more complex approaches are needed when discussing Japanese-American cross-cultural relationships. Before inspecting the intricate interrelations between Japan and the US in the fields of amusement parks, cuisine, and movies in the three chapters of this study, some traditional as well as newer theoretical approaches to intercultural links and dynamics will be sketched. First it will be argued that formerly popular theories of cultural imperialism are no longer sufficient to explain contemporary Japanese-American relationships. Then attention will be drawn to a number of studies which have already endeavored to discuss Japanese-American cultural exchanges outside of the discourse of cultural imperialism. Finally an outline of the theory of transnationalism, which will serve as the theoretical basis for this study, will be given.

## **CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND GLOBALIZATION**

The song "Harajuku Girls" reveals that cultural interactions between Japan and the United States are not unidirectional and consequently cannot be fully grasped in terms of simple binaries. Hence, the concept of cultural imperialism does not suffice when explaining Japanese-U.S. interrelations. Said, who wrote about the power of Western fiction as a tool to define and dominate other cultures, described cultural imperialism as practices, theories, and attitudes of a "dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (Culture and Imperialism 9) and John Tomlinson agrees with Said that the-



ories of cultural imperialism “constrain the negatively marked notions of power, domination, or control” (20). This binary model of West-East cultural interaction has been challenged by various theorists. Richard Pells, for instance, criticizes the fact that the consumer is denied any agency in these theories, as dominant cultures supposedly “turn the masses all over the globe into robotic consumers of superfluous products and vacuous entertainment, unable to decide what was in their best economic interest or how to satisfy on their own, their personal or cultural needs” (265). The term “cultural imperialism” implies the one-way imposition of cultural practices and commodities by a stronger on a weaker nation. Although questions of economic power relations play an important role, the processes of cultural exchanges are more complex and less consistent than the center-periphery model suggests – and the changing character of cultural interaction over time has to be considered.

Through processes of migration and colonization, people and cultural practices have been traveling across borders for centuries. However, in the past they traveled for weeks, sometimes months before encountering different cultures. While many of those who traveled to unknown and distant places were, merchants, explorers, and missionaries, sometimes including refugees and economic migrants; unlike today, there were only few tourists. Their journeys mainly focused on trade, the claim of new territory, and the mission of converting supposedly uncivilized people (Ashcroft *Post-Colonial Studies* 112). Encounters with an unknown culture then and even now challenge the familiar, one’s own culture. In order to cope with the unfamiliar, the unknown has always been evaluated in comparison to the known culture, which frequently resulted in the creation of binary oppositions that stress the differences and obliterate commonalities. In the past, the foreign “Other” was almost inevitably judged as exotic, backward, sometimes even dangerous and barbaric and the creation of such imaginary visions of the “Other” helped to justify Western interference in the East under the pretense of proselytizing campaigns. While intercultural processes of othering are still at work today, increased global and transnational interconnectivity, new technologies of transport, and new communication technologies such as the internet have made parts of apparently distant cultures a part of everyday life and it is becoming easier to get accustomed to them. Production and consumption of goods happens on a world-wide scale and instead of dangerous, inconvenient journeys on ships which took months to

reach their destination, nowadays people can travel, both literally and metaphorically, within a few hours to almost all places around the globe. The internet allows users to inform themselves about other cultures or to order commodities online from all over the world, thereby further decimating boundaries of time and space and creating an “intense and immediate contact with each other – with each ‘Other’ (an ‘Other’ that is no longer simply ‘out there’, but also within)” (Morley and Robins 115).

Nevertheless, the current massive extension of cultural interactions, international trade, and the flow of goods and images between different nations is often accompanied by fears of globalization in the form of cultural imperialism. These terms became synonymous with the Americanization and homogenization of other cultures, which were believed to lead to the decline of national identities and the erasure of cultural uniqueness throughout the world. While the American cultural impact is still very strong, in the meantime Japanese anime, video games, and food, Indian Bollywood productions, and Chinese martial arts movies as well as other Asian popular cultural artifacts increasingly penetrate the global market and have become serious competitors in the fight for cultural dominance around the globe. Japanese scholar Iwabuchi Koichi argues in *Recentering Globalization* that the United States is no longer the only global player but has to share their central position with other nations. He criticizes the cultural imperialism thesis and acknowledges new sources of cultural influences and new marketplaces and further scrutinizes the successful export of Japanese culture and media to the West in order to shed light on Japan’s decentralizing power in the globalization process (5).

Given this development of “recentering,” the concepts of hegemonic globalization and cultural imperialism turn out to be hasty oversimplifications if applied to the contemporary cultural interactions that exist between the United States and Japan. The assumption that cultural transfer is one-sided, forced upon a weaker Japan by a stronger USA, can no longer be used to grasp the complex phenomena of the cultural interactions and exchanges between these two nations. Not only do the Japanese modify imported U.S. products according to their needs and thereby change the original meaning of these goods to create new, hybrid, and transnational products, but the export of Japanese cultural commodities to America yields vast profits for Japan and enhances its prestige within North America. From a Japanese perspective, the export of Japanese popular culture products “ar-

ticulate[s] distinct ‘Japaneseness’” and reinforces the pride of Japanese superiority and uniqueness that rests on Japan’s own tradition of imperial supremacy in Asia (Iwabuchi, “Uses of Japanese Popular Culture” 202).

Manga and anime, for example, are among the most popular genres in contemporary U.S. popular culture (Goldberg 281) while domestic comic books are losing their appeal to the younger audience. Even in industrial sectors, Japan “threaten[s] to surpass the United States in the field of electronics and automobiles” (Pells 314).<sup>5</sup> With an increased interest and investment by large numbers of U.S. customers in Japanese (popular) culture, the image of Japan in the United States has shifted once again. While Japan was regarded by the first Americans to visit the island nation in the eighteenth century as an awkward, backward country, today it is primarily perceived as the bearer of technology and modernity. Hence, it is no longer possible for cultural theorists to deny Japan agency and apply concepts of simple center-periphery relations. It has to be acknowledged that within the worldwide flow of cultural practices, as well as commodities and images Japanese and U.S. cultural representations, experiences, and ways of life interact with and cross-pollinate each other in multiple ways.

## GAZING THE JAPANESE

A number of studies have been devoted to the images and stereotypes of Japan and the Japanese in the United States. While the common images of Japan and the Japanese mostly betray very one-sided notions of the other culture, they are far from being homogeneous. Sheila K. Johnson argues in her book *The Japanese Through American Eyes* that contradicting images of Japan as “cruel warriors,” “harmony-loving worker bees,” and “other-worldly aesthetes” have existed in the United States side by side or in succession since the first Americans set foot on Japanese soil (v). Similar observations are made by Ian Littlewood in *The Idea of Japan: Western Images, Western Myths*, who categorizes the images of the island-nation in

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5 In the automobile industry, Japan produced eleven million vehicles in 1980 while the U.S. only produced eight million cars in the same year. This trend continues and Toyota even exceeded General Motors as the world’s number one car producer in 2006 (W.Cohen and Kennedy 104).

terms of “Aliens, Aesthetes, Butterflies and Samurai” (xii). Both Johnson and Littlewood relate these conflicting stereotypes to Japanese-American history, which is marked by constant imaginings and re-imaginings of “the Japanese Other” either as enemy or as close ally.

In the nineteenth century, Japan was perceived as a backward but aesthetically appealing country with beautiful women whereas in the twentieth century Pearl Harbor and World War II atrocities resulted in a negative image of cruel, inhumane savages. This image was revised when Japanese people were elevated to the status of model minority in the late 1950s and 60s in the U.S. (Niiya 238-239). Yet, during the trade conflicts in the 1980s, when “Americans thought the Japanese economy more a threat than the Soviet military” (Wilkinson 140), negative war-time images reappeared and Japan once more became a nation of cruel, treacherous (business) warriors in the mindset of many Americans. Johnson explains that the radical changes in perception result from the very nature of popular stereotypes which are always greatly influenced by immediate historical events and cultural developments (ix-x). The constantly shifting image of Japan attests vividly to the fact that the idea of a nation or culture does not remain static through time, but is reconfigured and reshaped according to external influences. Nowadays, because of the multiple influences, especially in the realm of popular culture, Japan has a predominantly trendy, “cool,” and yet still exotic allure in the United States. Yet, Japanese popular culture also constantly evolves in the face of external influences from other Asian countries and “the West”.

Especially the American influence in Japan, visible in the omnipresence of American brands such as Starbucks, McDonald’s, GAP, or Disney and U.S. film and TV, has been critically discussed by several scholars such as Joseph J. Tobin, Aviad Raz, and James Watson. They all agree that although there is a wide-ranging contemporary American cultural impact in Japan, American consumer items are not simply imposed, but fulfill a distinct Japanese need. As Japanese consumers actively adapt foreign cultural practices, these scholars reject the idea of an American cultural imperialism subduing Japan. Ian Condry explains, for instance, in “Japanese Hip-Hop and the Globalization of Popular Culture” how hip hop is not just taken over and/or copied by Japanese artists but actively and creatively reinterpreted. Here, as in other cases, what seems to be at first sight an invasion of American culture in Japan turns out to be a distinct, Japanese version of an

American original, as “Japanese rappers perform for local audiences in the Japanese language and use Japanese subjects to build their base of fans” (381).

Similarly, the collection *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*, edited by Joseph J. Tobin, analyzes a number of cultural adaptations in Japan such as the specific usage of the English language, the creation of Japanese versions of Disneyland, and the ways in which tango is popularized in Japan. However, most analyses in the book are still occupied with positioning Eastern and Western cultures as binaries, thereby completely ignoring the possibility of cultural hybridization or exchange. Mary Yoko Brannen’s essay “‘Bwana Mickey’: Constructing Cultural Consumption at Tokyo Disneyland” that focuses on the adaptation of the American Disneyland theme park in Japan is a case in point. Her detailed analysis, in which she repeatedly explains how the dichotomy between “us” versus “them” is strictly preserved in the Japanese park, leads her to the conclusion that Tokyo Disneyland is a “Japanese form of cultural imperialism” (227). It will be argued in the second chapter of this study that although it is important to acknowledge the differentiation between Japan and the United States within the park in order to understand how Japanese consumers perceive Tokyo Disneyland, the adaption of Tokyo Disneyland to Japanese consumer demands resulted in a hybrid product that contains American *and* Japanese influences.

Aviad Raz also focuses on the adaptation of the park to Japanese consumer needs in his socio-anthropological studies of Tokyo Disneyland. Drawing on interviews with Japanese staff members of Tokyo Disneyland and his own visits to the park, Raz compares the structure of the place as well as the employment and management policies to those in Disney parks located in the United States. In doing so, Raz concentrates on the Japanese perspective on Tokyo Disneyland and the recontextualization of the park in Japan, arguing that the success of Tokyo Disneyland is based on the fact that by adapting the theme park to Japanese culture, it has been transformed into something Japanese. This insight will be further extended in order to show that the hybrid, transnational park indeed incorporates both Japanese and American influences and is sustained by this cross-cultural appeal. As a Japanese interpretation of the American park, it reflects the image of America in Japan.

Among the academic studies that understand cultural exchanges between the East and the West as bilateral and interactive is James Watson's *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, which explores the impact of McDonald's restaurants on the Asian market. The book challenges the widespread notion that McDonald's restaurants work only as a global homogenizing force, which destroys local eating cultures and illustrates the locations in which the American fast food restaurants of the McDonald's company are situated in Asia, as well as how they are adapted to local needs. The volume thereby challenges the explanatory value of the concept of cultural imperialism and at the same time suggests a transnational approach.

On the one hand, the growing influence of Japanese consumer products in South-East Asia has been closely analyzed as well, for instance, by Iwabuchi Koichi, Cherry Sze-Ling Lai, Wendy Siuyi Wong, Ogawa Masaki, Mitsui Toru, and Hosokawa Shūhei. On the other hand, and despite both an increasing interest in Japanese popular culture commodities in the United States and the growing world-wide Japanese permeation of the entertainment media, only recently have scholars such as Anne Allison, Christopher Hart, Ken John Belson and Brian Bremner, Steven L. Kent, Tatsumi Takayuki, Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, and Ron and Ronald Yates, started to investigate the influence of Japanese culture on the United States. Most scholars who examine the Japanese influence in the U.S. focus exclusively on one topic such as anime (Allison), manga (Hart), Hello Kitty (Belson and Bremner), video games (Kent), cyberpunk culture/literature (Tatsumi), baseball (Guthrie-Shimizu) or Kikkoman, a company most famous for its soy sauce and food seasoning (Yates). In this study, however, examples from different genres will be examined in order to reflect on the complex picture of cultural exchanges between Japan and the United States. Only by comparing the cultural exchanges in different cultural realms is it possible to explain how these exchanges currently work.

In *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.*, Roland Kelts has aspired to create such an overview of Japanese influences on America and the convergence of American and Japanese cultures. After naming different Japanese influences in the United States like sushi, poetry, scrolls, and literature, he focuses on manga and anime. Yet his book, which is more journalistic than theoretical, is based on some daring speculations like the one that Japanese popular culture, especially manga and anime,

have become extremely popular in the United States because they “emerged as underground expressions of trauma in Japan” (37) that were caused by the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to Kelts, the popularity of manga and anime in the United States nowadays “means that we are finally hearing another voice in our conversations about atomic bombs, Vietnam, the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, and the violence, uncertainties, and fears of the twenty-first century” (37). He additionally assumes that Japan “feels a lot closer to us than it used to” after 9/11 because the United States and Japan now share a form of cultural trauma (37). It seems questionable as to whether or not America really “feels closer” to Japan because of the events of 9/11, especially due to the fact that the *Americans* dropped atomic bombs on Japan is hard to ignore in this context.

In order to sort out the different and often contradictory background of Japanese-American interconnections, *Embracing Differences* aims at elucidating cultural exchanges between Japan and the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first century in the context of postcolonial as well as transnational cultural studies. Although the United States is often absent from imperial or postcolonial discussion, as Amy Kaplan examines in “Left Alone With America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” it may be highly enlightening to include the United States in the discussion of postcolonial discourses, since colonial patterns are indeed visible in the history of the United States.

The American-Japanese relationship is interesting to investigate through the lens of postcolonial studies since even though Japan was never formally a colony, its relation with the West in general and especially with the United States can be examined in colonial and neo-colonial terms starting with the unequal treaties forced on Japan in 1854 and the Occupation Era which reflect quasi-colonial or neocolonial relations of power and dependence between the two nations. Yet as already indicated above, a post-colonial approach, valuable and elucidating as it may be, is not enough to cover the intricate and contradictory patterns of the contemporary relations between the two nations. Therefore, the second theoretical strand running through this study is the theory of transnationalism.

In 2004 when the American Studies scholar Shelly Fisher Fishkin emphasized the necessity of American Studies as an academic discipline to take a “transnational turn” (17-58), she noted the urgent need for a more in-

clusive and multi-perspectival approach when discussing American culture and literature. Fisher Fishkin strongly advocated for a turn away from an exclusive focus on Caucasian American culture and perspectives and against ignoring the larger global context. She called for American Studies to locate the transnational rather than the national in its center (21). She urged scholars to acknowledge that the United States is no “static and stable territory and population” (24) and therefore to include perspectives of American Studies scholars from all around the world (38f.). Kaplan described the decentralization of the academic field and the critical interrogation of a unidirectional historicism as significant for American Studies. The influential literary critic Emory Elliott has also demanded of his colleagues that “those of us who study the United States from the inside and those who do so from the outside need to have more dialogue” (6). In the spirit of these critics and many others such as Richard King or Amirtjit Sing and Peter Schmidt, who have tried to shed light on their fixation on the exceptional U.S. position and the interrelations between the USA and the world, Japanese perceptions will be included in order to analyze Japanese-U.S. relationships and follow the theoretical path opened by Peter Hitchcock in his study *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism*.

## TRANSNATIONALISM

Transnationalism in the context of cultural studies has opened a new way of thinking, of imagining cultural relationships. Perceptions of the self are contested and re-examined by questioning traditional ideas of national identity. Aihwa Ong emphasizes the merits of transnationalism by arguing that the prefix “trans”

[d]enotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something [...] (it) also alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism. (4)

Ong’s definition suggests that transnationalism as a theory offers new perspectives and hints to a new “interconnectedness and mobility across



space,” a theory that allows to trace “cultural specificities of global processes, tracing the multiplicity of the uses and conceptions of ‘culture’” (4). Similarly, Peter Hitchcock describes cultural transnationalism not only as a methodology for cultural studies but as “a challenge of the imagination itself” (1). He emphasizes the importance of “rethink[ing] culture as an object of knowledge beyond its strict and restricting national base” (2-3), reasoning that the “recognition of disjuncture and difference” (3) between cultures is necessary and important and that these differences between cultures do not only need to be acknowledged, but encouraged (3). With this approach to different cultures, “new possibilities to analyze global differences” (5) open up new ways to “imagine difference globally” (1). As Myra Jehlen has argued, in transnational studies the term “difference” replaces the older term “Other” and thus grants the former “Other” identities of their own. The idea of a cultural dialogue is accentuated since “with the substitution of ‘difference’ for ‘otherness’, it is hoped that the imperial monologue becomes a two-sided exchange” (42). By imagining situations between different nations “otherwise,” transnational cultural studies focus on “representation and non-representation” (Hitchcock 5) and on their possible conditions.

Hitchcock’s ideas are based upon the ideas of a new role for the imagination in our time that the sociologist Arjun Appadurai developed in *Modernity at Large*. Appadurai argued that in a world highly dominated by visual materials, the media has to be positioned at the center of the discussion of the global present. According to him, “the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (3), indicating that the imagination can be further used as a positive force to imagine alternative modes of the world. Globalization theory has traditionally been more interested in powers “from above,” in huge corporations as well as economic elites and cultural hegemonies, and in the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world as the flow and spread of cultural practices, commodities, and people disconnected from nation states. The emphasis on the rising interconnectedness of nation states nourishes the fear of the homogenization of cultures and the decline of the nation state and thus the vision of the loss of distinctive national identities is connected to this theory. Instead of focusing on ideas of cultural homogenization, scholars including Appadurai, Hitchcock, and Jehlen welcome, the new media, mass migration, communication, and

cultural interactions as sites where local negotiations take place and create new cultural forms (*Modernity at Large* 6), making hybridization rather than homogenization a process of globalization, and thus focusing on powers from “below.”

Hybridity in this context has to be understood as a form of boundary crossing between familiar and exotic elements, which, however, are not completely absorbed, but remain distinguishable. According to Homi Bhabha, the concept stresses interconnectedness and, at the same time, challenges the authority of dominant agencies. Bhabha argues that this “empowering” hybridity leads to the recognition of “Third Spaces,” which are defined by him as liminal, ambivalent in-between spaces that can help to overcome notions of exoticism (Bhabha 38). Similarly, Robert J.C. Young refers to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of hybridity in languages to argue that the nature of hybridity itself is hybrid, “a doubleness that both brings together and fuses, but also maintains separation” (22), thus evaluating hybridity as “the form of cultural difference itself” (23). In a more recent reference to Bhabha, Iwabuchi also used the term and argued that hybridity articulates the dynamic of “cultural interconnection, transgression, reworking and cross-fertilization” (Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization* 51), as it is a synthesis of elements from two or more different cultures. All three theorists stress the dynamic nature of hybridity, a concept that also challenges the clearly demarcated boundaries of “us” and “them,” or the “West” and “the Rest” (Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization* 51).

Though hybridity is a core aspect of transnationalism, it is important to note that the individual cultures and nations are not understood as fusing and vanishing completely in this context. Transnationalism starts from a focus on different phenomena as rooted in nation states, and provides the insight that the nation state is not erased in the global context but imagined in a different way. As Benedict Anderson already described in *Imagined Communities*, nations are always in a state of change (4). Yet, part of their function is to supply all members of one nation with an imagined national affinity, based on shared myths, ideals, and values, nation states simply cannot be annihilated by globalizing processes, dissolved in hybridization.

Since transnationalism shifts away from the exclusively Eurocentric point of view that places the West at the center of cultural exchanges, it may be regarded as an extension of postcolonial studies, which imagined an “Other” as in a binary opposition to a “self” in order to define the self posi-

tively. Hence, as transnationalism seeks to reform and even transgress older approaches through which the East was exposed to and defined by a Western gaze, it strives to respect and include Eastern perspectives as well. Transnationalism embraces Appadurai's observation that a permanent tension between the local and the global influences both sides and that the ensuing interactions create "tensions between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (*Modernity at Large* 32). The theory of transnationalism therefore recognizes existing differences between national cultures and understands these differences as part of a network of power relations. This constitutes an ideal new basis for analyzing cultural exchanges and interactions, with an emphasis on "the in-between and conflictual" (Hitchcock 18) nature of cultural interactions.

## **RETHINKING JAPANESE-AMERICAN CULTURAL RELATIONS**

Using the insights of transnational and postcolonial studies, the following chapters will investigate Japanese-American interrelations in the fields of theme parks, food, and movies. By following Appadurai's theory and its further specification by Susan Napier and Sylvia Ferrero, seven dimensions of cultural flows across national borders are distinguished in a global context. The first five were named by Appadurai: ethnoscape (the flow of people), technoscape (the flow of technology), finanscape (the flow of money), mediascapes (the flow of images), and ideoscape (the flow of ideas) (*Modernity* 33-37). Two more "scapes" were added to elaborate upon the different spaces where cultural interactions take place: fantasyscape (the flow of play) by Napier and foodscape (the flow of food practices) by Ferrero. As contemporary transnational exchanges are based upon and contextualized by the changing history of Japanese-American cultural exchanges through the last two centuries, a short chapter devoted to this topic introduces the analyses.

The main part of this study is divided into three analytical chapters. The first, "*Yōkoso* Mickey Mouse! Disney in Japan" will focus on the fanta-

syscape of Disney theme parks in Japan.<sup>6</sup> It will first explain how Disneyland has established itself in Japan and show that Tokyo Disney Resort is an example of how an American ‘original’ traveled “across distinct cultural boundaries” (Van Maanen 5) and became successful in Japan because of its marked difference from Japanese cultural products. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that the Disney theme park in Japan signifies something different to the Japanese audience than the American Disney parks signify to American visitors. It will be argued that the park is not only popular because it is an American product, but because it was considerably adapted and now reflects an idealized Japanese perception of the United States – and other parts of the world, since the park has expanded to a full-fledged resort, which creates and imagines different European cultures as well. However, the park is neither a form of Japanese cultural imperialism (Brannen) nor an entirely Japanese theme park (Raz). Instead, the originally American theme park has been reimagined by the Japanese owners, who have turned it into a transnational space.

The second chapter “A Taste of Difference: Sushi in the United States,” focuses on the influence of Japanese food in general, specifically that of sushi, on American food culture and thereby concentrates on the foodscape in the United States.<sup>7</sup> It explains how Japan and the United States first used food as a cultural marker in order to set themselves off against each other in terms of the food they consumed, and in the process equated strange food with strange people and barbaric eating habits with uncivilized consumers. The conflation of uncivilized people with strange food happened on both sides of the Pacific, since the diets of people living in Japan and in the United States in the nineteenth century were significantly different from each other. However, the idea of what is considered strange or exotic has shifted over history. Today, what was once regarded to be a barbaric eating habit, such as eating raw fish, has become part of the American *haute cuisine*. Nowadays sushi can be found in almost every American supermarket and even Martha Stewart recommends “Japanese Twist Bridal Showers” with sandwiches made of salmon, *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish), and *shiso*

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6 Parts of this chapter were presented in 2009 at the 36th Annual Conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, University of Graz.

7 Parts of this chapter were used for a publication in *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*.

(a Japanese herb), or green tea shortbreads (Stewart). Taking sushi as an example and analyzing American Sushi cookbooks elucidates how an originally Japanese culinary product was adopted and adapted by the American foodscape, thereby creating a transnational version of the dish.

From Benedict Anderson's argument that nations are imagined, it follows that different nations are imagined differently. This difference is repeatedly constructed and reconstructed on screen. The final analytical chapter "Could We Have a Geisha in This Scene? Transnational Depictions of Japanese in Contemporary Hollywood Movies," examines the depiction of Japan and the Japanese in Hollywood movies and in doing so investigates the mediascape. With the massive influx of Japanese cultural goods and their rising popularity, American companies felt the need to react to obvious new consumer demands. For example, the enormous popularity of anime in the United States urged big animation corporations such as Disney and Nickelodeon to try to compete with Japanese anime by creating their own anime-style productions. It will be argued that with the increasing saturation of Japanese products and their popularity as well as their "cool" appeal in the United States, Hollywood has started to create new images of Japan and the Japanese. The shift from inscrutable and untrustworthy strangers to civilized allies, from highly stereotyped and often ultimately evil "Others" to individualized and human characters will be shown as importantly connected to the transnationality of the Hollywood film industry. The directors, producers, and actors that made *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) came from multiple national backgrounds and brought their cultural backgrounds and knowledge with them. These – in production, consumption, and film-text – truly transnational movies imagine Japan differently on screen.

All these developments in recent cultural exchanges between Japan and the United States reflect how both nations cross-influence each other and thereby create not only new, hybrid, transnational cultural practices and products but also new, hybrid, transnational (imagined) spaces which lead to an altered perception of Japan in the United States and vice versa. It will be demonstrated with regard to Disneyland in Japan, sushi in the United States, and Hollywood representations of Japan on screen that the attraction of these cultural influences lies in their very difference from the recipients' own culture. To Japanese visitors, Tokyo Disney Resort is interesting because it is an American "original," that is, it functions and feels "different"

than Japanese theme parks. Similarly, sushi fascinates American consumers because it differs from American food. Hence, although these cultural items need to be adapted to local consumer needs to a certain degree, it is of crucial importance to maintain a sense of “Otherness” in order to keep them interesting. At the same time, movies set in Japan are often considered alluring, as they depict a world often unknown and unfamiliar to the audience.

Since cultural products need to be contextualized within their new surroundings when they are exported, it becomes obvious that in this process, cultural items change their meaning. Cultural goods exported to foreign markets are always re-contextualized and need to be understood in their local context. In “Harajuku Girls,” Stefani alludes to this phenomenon by acknowledging that the Harajuku fashion style is a mix of Western and Japanese cross-influences. This challenges the idea that global interconnectedness automatically leads to cultural homogenization and exemplifies the contradictory nature of transnational interactions. While the lyrics signal a creative exchange that results in the creation of new, hybrid styles which incorporate American and Japanese elements, the performance of the song by the American singer with her stereotypically marginalized Japanese girls in the background indicates that this transnational exchange is not at all free from (earlier) cultural imperialist influences. Because national and ideological ideas and histories are attached to cultural commodities and practices, the idea of national stereotypes and supposed national inferiority versus superiority in a world of unequal power relations is exported and imported whenever consumer items penetrate foreign markets.

Yet, as Stefani’s expressed appreciation of the “super *kawaii*” Harajuku style makes abundantly clear, the “cultural imprint of the producing country” or “cultural odor” (Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization* 27) may further reflect positive associations with the country from which different ideas and goods are imported, even if they are related to its perceived exoticism. Commodities and cultural practices are not only inevitably linked to their countries of origin but are often interesting to consumers from different cultural backgrounds *because of* their distinct national imprints and are often adapted to the different consumer needs. Thus, while globalizing processes may lead to the availability of cultural products outside their original national spheres, a homogenization of cultures is not necessarily implied by these processes. Instead differences can be emphasized and/or goods can be

localized in their new surroundings and through these processes new versions of an original are developed. As Gayatri Spivak has phrased it, it is important “to *recognize* agency in others, not simply to comprehend Otherness” (12), in the context of this study that means that differences should not just be noted but also different cultures should be granted agency in the ways they deal with cultural imports.

Contemporary cultural exchanges between Japan and the United States take place within and between the different “scapes” defined by Appadurai, Napier, and Ferrero. The analyses of some of these “scapes” in *Embracing Differences* challenges the simplifying concept of a center-periphery relationship between the cultures involved and shows that they offer instead “building blocks for individuals and groups who create their ‘imagined multiple worlds,’ spread all over the globe. Thus, these [...] dimensions are powerful enough to subvert a dominant order dependent upon the notion of the nation-state” (Ferrero 196). This does not imply that an ideal equilibrium already exists or has ever existed. Yet today globalization and transnationalism have led to the closer approximation between the two nations and their cultures, especially when compared to earlier Japanese-American cultural exchanges that were marked by immensely unequal power relations, prejudices, anxieties, and suspicions. Nevertheless, *Embracing Differences* will show that the cultural interactions do not make both cultures the same. Instead, differences remain visible and are not only accepted but often appreciated and embraced on the other side of the Pacific. Today’s vital cultural exchange is based upon the constant flow of people, commodities, ideas, and images across borders, which leads to the creation of new cultural forms and practices, which then once more travel back to the country of “origin” where they have to be re-negotiated. Thus, transnational cultural products and meanings are created which can no longer be related to one particular country, and transnational consumers embrace these products, which are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. However, this does not mean that these transnational practices are entirely free of power relations. This is also evident in Gwen Stefani’s song “Harajuku Girls” when she sings, “You got the look that makes you stand out / Harajuku Girls, I’m looking at you girls.” The fact that the American singer, “an American girl, in the Tokyo streets” (“Harajuku Girls”) is observing and judging the Japanese women in the streets of Harajuku indicates that she is the person who decides, from a Western point of view, what is considered stylish and what

not. Although Stefani sings about “a ping-pong match between eastern and western” (“Harajuku Girls”) and acknowledges that her own fashion collection was inspired by this Japanese fashion style; she continues with the lines “Just wait 'til you get your little hands on L.A.M.B.” (“Harajuku Girls”). By including the adjective “little” to describe the hands of potential Japanese consumers, she belittles them and once more puts herself in a dominant position. It becomes axiomatic that, no matter how much consumers embrace them, transnational cultural practices are never free of power relations and the interactions between cultures have always been and will remain complex and multifaceted.