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Redefining Our Future: A Semiotic Approach to Understanding the  
Black Otaku

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Kyrie S. Blackman

December 2023

Thesis Committee:  
Dr. Jason Weems, Chairperson  
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The Thesis of Kyrie Blackman is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Redefining Our Future: A Semiotic Approach to Understanding the  
Black Otaku

by

Kyrie S. Blackman

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Art History  
University of California, Riverside, December 2023  
Dr. Jason Weems, Chairperson

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois believed that through the use of visual arts, Black Americans could cultivate a new collective social identity. It's through the intentional and collaborative utilization of the visual arts that gifts one the agency to shape their own individual future. While he urged us to direct our understanding of the collective history of Black Americans here in this country, which he distinguishes as the intersection of being both African (Black) and American, he also urged us to seek insight from other cultures. This master's thesis employs Du Bois's views of the role art has in society. It examines the commonalities between Black Artistic expression in relation to critiquing one's place in society and navigating the future, embodying themes within Afrofuturism, which is a theory that expresses notions of the individual Black identity, within the intersection of art and technology, to ultimately envision a liberated future. It can be argued that Black Americans, are having a semiotic experience with Japanese Anime and Manga when viewing them. Semiotics is a form of analysis focusing on how

meaning is created, understood, and communicated between people. After their semiotic experience, they then take action by using visual arts and media to subvert preexisting narratives rooted in fatalistic realities.

This thesis focuses on the prevalent and intentional use of signs and icons presented within Anime and Manga series, that are internalized by Black American Anime fans (Otaku), who then take an Afrofuturistic approach to how they perceive their place in the world, as well as envision possible futures. It is separated into three chapters, with the first being historical as it analyzes W.E.B Du Bois's work. The second chapter points to contemporary Black Artists whose work is influenced by Japanese culture, Iona Rozeal Brown and John Jennings. Lastly, the final chapter defines what are both Anime and Manga and their influence today on Black Americans. To conclude, if one embarks on this internal journey, one can contribute towards creating a new collectively acceptable social identity that is not synonymous with fatalistic realities, through their appreciation of Anime, Manga, and Japanese culture.

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## Chapter 1: Historical Paradigm

American sociologist, art historian, and in retrospect afrofuturist, W.E.B Du Bois, served as a civil rights leader, being a contributing founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in the early stages of the 20th century. It is in 1895, thirty years after the abolishment of slavery, when he defended his dissertation titled “ The Suppression of the American Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1683-1870”, becoming the first Black American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard and leading scholar in the field of history<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, he began teaching as a professor at institutions including Wilberforce University, The University of Pennsylvania, and most notably Atlanta University, now referred to as Clark Atlanta University. It is within these formative years at the turn of the century, which Du Bois expanded his repertoire, through his rich and thought-provoking writings alongside his fellowship as a political leader. Amidst the accolades and being the exemplar of an elite intellectual, he was constantly bombarded with the harsh realities of his limitations as a Black Man in America, feeling the wrath of institutionalized racism and bigotry in the country he served. In Amy Helene Kirschke’s “ Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory”, she states “ Du Bois understood

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<sup>1</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. *The suppression of the African slave trade in the United States of America, 1638-1871*. HU 90.330, Harvard University Archives.

that many white Americans did not consider African Americans to be part of the collective American identity. From the crafting of the U.S Constitution, African Americans had been considered property, and little had changed in the white perspective since that time, despite emancipation and the constitutional amendment giving black men the vote<sup>2</sup>". This quote presents a systemic boundary between Black Americans and the American identity, supported by Jim Crow Laws, that places fatalistic realities on Black Americans based on perception. Merriam-Webster defines "fatalism" as, " a doctrine that events are fixed in advance so that human beings are powerless to change them<sup>3</sup>". Du Bois recognized this boundary, which can be believed to be embodied within this term, that lead him to expand his perspective and knowledge by extensively traveling abroad and familiarizing himself with the visual arts.

At the turn of the century, there was a collective excitement that transcended demographics, as intellectuals, artists, and entrepreneurs of all nations, sought out ways to exhibit and appreciate the technological and visual advancements of the time. While at first thought, that moment in history can come across as one that should have brought forth unity. In actuality it was the opposite, as Black Americans were

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<sup>2</sup> Kirschke, Amy Helene. *Art in crisis W.E.B. Du Bois and the struggle for African American identity and memory*. Bloomington, (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> "Fatalism". *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2023



consistently excluded from exhibiting and presenting their contributions toward advancements in the arts and technology, being confined within the boundaries of the same country that enslaved them. In 1899, Educator and Lawyer Thomas J. Calloway wrote to the highly recognized educator Booker T. Washington in which he states “ We owe it to ourselves to go before the world as Negros. Everyone who knows about public opinion in Europe will tell you that the Europeans think us a mass of rapists, ready to attack every white woman exposed and a drug in civilized society<sup>4</sup>”. He transitions to ask a question, “How shall we answer these slanders?”. He presents the upcoming Paris Exposition, L'Exposition de Paris 1900, as he expresses that at that exposition, “thousands upon thousands of them will go and a well selected and prepared exhibit...will attract attention... and do great and lasting good in convincing thinking people of the possibilities of the Negro”. And thus we were gifted the Exposition de Nègres d'Amérique (Exhibit of American Negros), which was an attempt at progressive activism by the scholar, who also captured themes within Afrofuturism at the time.

Being a classmate of Calloway at Fisk University, he sought out Du Bois, intentionally, to curate this exhibition in collaboration with his students at Atlanta University. Scholars point to Du Bois utilizing the medium of photography as a unique form of representation that revokes the validity of racial propaganda surrounding the

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<sup>4</sup> “Deconstructing Power: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.” *Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian*

*Design Museum*, [www.cooperhewitt.org/channel/deconstructing-power/](http://www.cooperhewitt.org/channel/deconstructing-power/). Accessed 8 May 2023.

Black image and reimagine a new form, as the century changes. (Image 1: W. E. B. DuBois surrounded by his work. *The Colored American*, 03 Nov. 1900) The use of photographs was necessary as he aimed to present Black Americans through a contrasting lens to what was already presented, which he deemed “typical negro faces”. He, alongside his students, formulated a body of work consisting of photographs of the average Black American, coexisting in space with, data visualizations, graphs, charts, maps, as well as an extensive library of publications by Black scholars. The exhibition captivated an audience of over fifty million, that gathered at the Palace of Social Economy in France. Art Historian, and renowned biographer of Du Bois’s life, David Levering Lewis described the experience as “resolutely upbeat, racially triumphalist, and progressive<sup>5</sup>”. It is safe to say the success of the exposition reinforced the central themes envisioned by both Du Bois and Calloway. Art had finally become an adequate tool for progressive activism for Black Americans, as its functionality gifts the agency to dismantle negative stereotypes, replace them, to then cement more positive and reassuring views of the everyday Black American. Returning to America, Du Bois integrated studying the history of art into his scholarship. While becoming an apparatus of inspiration and imagination, it presented the harsh, fatalistic, and dualistic reality of

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<sup>5</sup> Kirschke, Amy Helene. *Art in crisis W.E.B. Du Bois and the struggle for African American identity and memory*. Bloomington, (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2007.

being a Black American, which Du Bois went on to describe in his 1903 book “ The Souls of Black Folk”.

Referencing back to Amy Helene Kirschke’s work in relation to Du Bois most recognized body of work she states, “ Du Bois hoped to show the importance of the Black experience, to put into context as a part of the national history. Du Bois implied that America’s collective memory awaited new voices, new scholars, and storytellers whose “strivings” might liberate it from the misconceptions and false constructions<sup>6</sup>”. Consisting of a detailed collection of essays, divided into fourteen chapters, W.E.B. Du Bois’s “ The Souls of Black Folk” characterizes the experience of being Black in America, and presents a theory, which is described as an individual way of seeing, called “ Double Consciousness”. This lens is forced upon the individual, which attempts to strip and separate their own individual identity from the one that is directly imposed onto them from birth. As one’s intellectual eyes are open to the constraints of the more dominant social structures of white hegemony, which was once unbeknownst to them, they then arrive at an impasse, surrounding them with new sensations. Du Bois states “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,- an American, a Negro;

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<sup>6</sup> Kirschke, Amy Helene. *Art in crisis W.E.B. Du Bois and the struggle for African American identity and memory*. Bloomington, (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2007.

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder<sup>7</sup>". What is described, is fatalism in personification. It can be understood that this theory of the Double Consciousness is essential for one to acknowledge and see the fatalistic restraints placed upon them, cause and effect. His theory and body of work was fundamental to understanding the Black American's place here in America, as it can still be applied today, over 123 years later. It is through that foundation that Du Bois expounded on his work through advocacy within the arts, as he spearheaded a movement of Black Contemporary artists within his publication titled "The Crisis Magazine".

With its name deriving from a poem titled "The Present Crisis" written by James Russell Lowell, "The Crisis Magazine" is a magazine publication, consisting of art, political cartoons, photographs, prints, and essays, that was created by both Du Bois and the NAACP. Du Bois formed the NAACP in 1909, alongside scholars including Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell. With that platform, alongside his work as an educator, Du Bois set the goal to have a publication that presents arguments and points that demonstrate the threats of racial prejudice, specifically to colored people. The magazine's structure, under Du Bois leadership as the editor, was separated into four sections beginning with

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<sup>7</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches*.

Chicago, A. G. McClurg, 1903. New York :Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968.

“ Along the Color Line”, which focused on aspects including politics, art, and the social sciences, as well as organizational meetings. The second section, titled “ The Burden”, centered around civil, racial, and economic injustices against Black Americans. “What to Read”, as the title suggests, offered a thoughtful collection of literature and scholarship for viewers to interpret. Lastly, the final section offers two interchangeable topics titled “ Talks about Women” and “Man of the Month”. This publication became an outlet of expression at a time when there were none, as Du Bois believed that this medium could exhilarate his people and present new possibilities in life. It is at the juncture between visuals and text information for one to fully grasp the totality of their positioning in America, as the arts and literature coexist with each other in unison to present in-depth conversations. Kirschke confirms this when she states “The written word was not sufficient- visual imagery was central to bringing the message to the homes of readers and emphasizing the importance of the cause<sup>8</sup>”. While artistic expression is vast and diverse in relation to its medium, Kirschke points to political cartoons and illustrations being the more prevalent artistic form at the time, for Black Artists contributing to this publication.

In an exhibition titled “ Art & Politics: 300 Years of Political Cartoons” at the First Amendment Museum, they begin with a thesis statement expressing “ Art has always

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<sup>8</sup> Kirschke, Amy Helene. *Art in crisis W.E.B. Du Bois and the struggle for African American identity and memory*. Bloomington, (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2007.

been intrinsically linked with politics. Nowhere, however, is that link more obvious than in the art of the political cartoon<sup>9</sup>. This distinction made by this institution and its staff can be confirmed as true as many scholars, including Du Bois, understood the power cartoons held in the development of America's political and social identity, coinciding with other forms of imagery. With the success and recognition of the magazine growing, W.E.B Du Bois sought out and employed some of the most esteemed and thought-provoking artists of the Harlem Renaissance including Romare Bearden, Cornelius Johnson, Albert Alex Smith, and most notably Aaron Douglas, cementing his impact towards the expansion of Black Art. In Kirschke's work, she expresses that illustrations have a distinct role in providing clues into how a group of people views themselves as well as how others view them. She expounds that in these illustrations, one can directly see society's values, interests, and beliefs, as the illustration can be examined as a "magnifying glass", magnifying the perplexities of today's society. She goes on to express that it is the radical, or "progressive" publications, that provide examples of this magnifying glass. The political cartoons, within *The Crisis*, serve as that magnifying glass, for Black Americans, and while there is not enough space within this thesis to expound

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<sup>9</sup> Art & Politics: 300 Years of Political Cartoons." *First Amendment Museum*, 6 Oct. 2021,

[firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/](https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/).

on more than one Artist featured in this magazine, it will discuss the work of Aaron Douglas and his contributions towards the publication itself as an artist.

While there is little to no documentation of interactions between Du Bois and the artist he included in this publication, many of them went on to become renowned artists in their own right, utilizing the collaboration as a springboard for other opportunities including fellowships, cash awards, and traveling exhibitions. The experience can be viewed somewhat as formal training, and a unique opportunity not afforded normally to Black Americans. Aaron Douglas, who is considered one of the more prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance, took advantage of this opportunity as he, and a group of other rising artists, aimed to reconceptualize the Black Image. Du Bois incorporated Douglas's artistic practice, in hopes he can utilize ocular messaging to depict Black Migration during the first world war. Through their mutual vision, Douglas aimed to create pieces with intrinsic meaning, a new, refreshing, positive, and affirming depiction of his people. His time with The Crisis was experimental, pushing him past his artistic boundaries as the work he produced there was some of his most impactful and thought-provoking. While contributing numerous pieces, this thesis will analyze one that graced the cover of a September 1927 publication titled, "The Burden of Black Womanhood".

**(Image 2** Cover of the September 1927 publication of The Crisis by Aaron Douglas)

A lone woman figure looks directly above her, squinting and pressing, toward the descending object that seeks to flatten her. Knees bent, chest out, back straight! Its

composition is somewhat of a façade as it is not clear if this figure is struggling with or embracing this pressure. It is as if it is already aware and has prepared itself for this reality. The falling object, with words depicted upon it transcribing the title of the magazine, presents itself in layers, like our earth's atmosphere, in which it protrudes past the figure's head, neck, and chest sectors. The image is flat, similar to that of which the object intends to do to the figure. The figure stands tall, towering over the ever-evolving society in which we are held captive. To the left of the figure, triangular pyramid-shaped objects peak over the horizon. To the right of the figure, rectangular objects, which depict modern buildings, are disproportionately placed alongside one another. The lone woman figure protects the surface from the impending danger. She bears the weight of the crisis at hand as she has all the power in her hands.

Merging African Iconography with his depiction of the Black American Identity, Aaron Douglas exemplifies modernist themes by refuting the fatalistic conditioning of Black Americans by honing into his African heritage. With the focal point of this image being the woman, she is depicted holding the weight of the world, which correlates to the position of Black Women here in America, bearing the raw weight of an entire marginalized group. In another body of work by Amy Kirschke titled "Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance", she gives her interpretation of the woman figure when she states "She looks up, with face in profile and slit eyes that resemble African Masks...the woman bears the burdens of the world; she carries them like a female



Hercules<sup>10</sup>". This interpretation reinforces the artistic prowess of Douglas, as he applies bolded lines with symbolic and allegorical imagery to illustrate harsh realities. The success of the magazine, through contributions by artists like Aaron Douglas and others within the Harlem Renaissance, allowed a new reimagining of Black people by envisioning a more liberated future.

Du Bois, as a progressive thinker, sought out ways to inspire his community, through careful critique of one's own perspective of themselves here in this country. In a October 1926 edition of *The Crisis*, he provided one of his most controversial essays titled "Criteria of Negro Art", in which he challenges the preconceived notion, that Black Art and culture are inherently classified as lesser juxtaposed to other artistic forms. In the essay, he analyzes how Black art and culture are interpreted by both Black Americans and White Americans and states "Colored people have said: "This work must be inferior because it comes from colored people." White people have said: "It is inferior because it is done by colored people." But today there is coming to both the realization that the work of the Black man is not always inferior. Interesting stories come to us<sup>11</sup>". What this statement conveys, is that Black creativity, through the use of distinct narratives, is portrayed within objective realities forced upon them. Whether it's a Black woman figure, like the one depicted in Aaron Douglas's cover illustration, portrayed in an art piece, or a well-thought-out written story, Imagination and

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<sup>10</sup> Kirschke, Amy Helene. *Aaron Douglas Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance*. Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> "The Crisis", Vol. 32, October 1926: pp. 290-297.

storytelling has been an adequate avenue of inspiration. While at the same time as him being the editor at “The Crisis”, Du Bois also tried his hand at exploring and expanding his skills as a writer, writing now in speculative fiction, to portray the Black American experience in ways he could not in his scholarly writing. Thus the story of “The Comet<sup>12</sup>”, is brought to us for the first time.

The tale introduces us to a Black Bank Messenger named Jim Davis in New York City. Frustrated by his work conditions and reality as a Black man, he curses and works, while the higher-ups chit chat about the impending comet passing by earth’s atmosphere. Suddenly, the Bank door slammed close, trapping him inside a vault. After discovering an escape route, and making it out to street level, Jim, unlike the rest of the population, realizes he just survived a catastrophic event, as a comet impacts the planet, releases toxic gasses, and wipes out all of human civilization in New York, outside of him. He was dumbfounded by this reality, as there are now no more racial barriers. He could go anywhere he wanted and create a new life for himself. Or so he thought! To his surprise, he then is startled by the sight of another being, a White Woman named Julia, who is wealthy and comes off as high-maintenance. Instinctively, the two were skeptical as they were both on the opposite side of the spectrum in regard to race and socio-economic status. However, that skepticism subsided as they grew to understand that

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<sup>12</sup> Ross, Tia. *Black Sci-Fi Short Stories: Anthology of New & Classic Tales*. Flame Tree Publishing, 2021.

they needed each other, as the only survivors. Together, they travel to Harlem, passing body after body along the way, in hopes they can find community. They don't, and as that reality becomes more and more set in stone, they understood that it might be up to them to repopulate. A Black man and a White woman, polar opposites that must be one. As they began to accept the seemingly fatalistic reality that transcends race, they are shocked as they are greeted by a group of men, one of them being her father. She immediately runs into his embrace, as he informs her that it was only the city of New York that was affected by the comet. Simultaneously, he looks towards Jim's way and asks if he was inappropriate and needed to be Lynched, bringing back forth racial roles.

This is a story that presents a reflective image of racial segregation in America. At the immediate sight of the dead bodies after leaving the vault, Jim began to panic, as if he would be criminalized for murder. That panic subsided as he gazed at more and more lifeless bodies surrounding him. Then a moment of epiphany struck him. Momentarily, Jim believed he was transported to a utopian world that has eradicated racial and class bias. Though it was just for a moment, throughout the duration of the story, Jim experienced actual liberation from racial restraints and with that being the case, began to imagine what his new future would entail. The Comet, overall serves as a metaphor, representing racial biases and its divisive and destructive attributes. Jim's character is the representation of the Black community, its history, and its positioning in America, and Julia's character represents the systems of White supremacy that upholds fatalistic realities. It takes the possibility of a comet destroying society for a Black person to be

human in the eyes of their oppressor and that is confirmed in the story when it states “ Below lay the dark shadows of the city and afar was the shining of the sea. She glanced at him timidly as he set food before her and took a shawl and wound her in it, touching her reverently, yet tenderly. She looked up at him with thankfulness in her eyes, eating what he served. He watched the city. She watched him. He seemed very human,-very near now”.<sup>13</sup>This story serves as a portal to this reality, idea, and way of questioning one's place in society. It can be argued that it is through storytelling within art as well as writing, that these ways of critiquing and perceiving can most effectively be presented. That is evident, as Du Bois’s work within the Harlem Renaissance, as a fiction writer as well as an advocate of the propagandistic nature of art, specifically cartoon illustrations, spearheaded a new, self-empowering, movement for Black Americans.

W.E.B Du Bois’s career as an editor, educator, and leader, afford him a vast and diverse experience, not often afforded to Black people. Assisting and advocating for artists, educating students at multiple institutions, and expounding his own intellectual perspectives as a civil rights activist, forced him to constantly seek more. In the later stages of the Harlem Renaissance, beginning in the 1930s as Du Bois began his second tenure as a professor of Sociology at Atlanta University, he remained invested in analyzing the social and economic conditions of Black people. Throughout his career, it can be noted that traveling and studying abroad helped mold his perspective,

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<sup>13</sup> Ross, Tia. *Black Sci-Fi Short Stories: Anthology of New & Classic Tales*. Flame Tree Publishing, 2021.

challenging him in different ways. He began by traveling to Germany in 1892, studying theorist Max Weber and his emphasis on the role of social structures forming human behavior at the University of Berlin, in which he then incorporated his work in developing the theory of the Double Consciousness. France, Russia, and China were also destinations visited by him during his travels, but for the sake of this thesis, it will point to his time spent in Japan in 1936, as he drew parallels between the Black American experience, to that of the Japanese.

Du Bois's fascination with Japan came in conjunction with his fascination with global politics, as his experiences abroad, like most artists and intellectuals, expanded his own perspectives in regard to racial and social identity. It is in 1936 that he visited the country, alongside the delegation of Black intellectuals, to meet Japanese scholars and artists. He was taken aback by their culture and the drastic differences from that of the west, specifically through the use of their own cultural aesthetic that is in direct association with everyday life there. Du Bois hypothesized, that if applied back in America, Black people can begin to embrace their own culture, to then create art, new scholarship, and sophisticated narratives, that truly embody what it means to be Black in America. The premise for his inference is based on his understanding of the "Color Line", as he understood prior to his trip, which refers to an intricate system that was in place during the early twentieth century that sustained forms of legal and societal boundaries used to segregate colored people from white people, and also preventing them for exercising the same rights as a human being. In another one of his publications

titled “ W.E.B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line<sup>14</sup>”, he specifies and dissects the intricacies within the themes of this theoretical “color line” and in doing so, he presents the attested reality that historically, the white races have held the hegemony over civilization and with that being the case, presented the idea of “whiteness” as being “Civilized”. This forcefully placed colored people, whether they are Black or Asian, to be deemed as “uncivilized”. Again, this is a fatalism in personification. Shortly after making this distinction, he expresses that this problem has been viewed as parochial, or small, in the eyes of an average American, constricting it to the confines of the southern borderlines here in this country. He states “ If such men would look carefully around them however they would see that the problem of the color line in America instead of being the closed chapter of past history, is the opening page of a new era. All over the world, the diversified races of the world are coming into close and closer contact as ever before”. Returning home back to America, and his students at Atlanta University, he presented his findings in an oral presentation titled “ The Meaning of Japan”.

On March 12th, 1937, in Atlanta Georgia, W.E.B Du Bois addresses students, scholars, and civil rights leaders, at Morehouse College. He begins by stating “ I have thought that it might be instructive to turn from our own race problem to one of the

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<sup>14</sup> Mullen, Bill V., and Cathryn Watson. *W. E. B. Du Bois on Asia Crossing the World Color Line*. University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

great problems of the world and to consider the meaning of Japan in modern civilization. I do this the more gladly because Japan is a colored nation and thus exemplifies one of the color problems of the world<sup>15</sup>. Du Bois pointed to Japan being the exemplar of a nation refuting the effects of European Colonialism and White Supremacy, as he urged students to look towards Japan, and its people, as they were mentally awakened regardless of the outcome of the pending world war. Intrinsically, he begins by acknowledging the island's founding being enveloped in mythology and beginning in conflict with Korea, as it was the geographic center of the extension of Japan from the mainland to the sea. Its people traveled from countries including Korea China, Malaysia, and India, integrated, to then birth a new demographic of colored people. The foundation of Japanese civilization expanded as the integration of Indian Buddhist religion, both Korean and Chinese scholarship, and other forms of expression, molded its collective identity. Du Bois orally articulated what he saw within the temporary but vast experience he had in Japan, emphasizing its potentiality as a model for modernization, its intransigence to the more dominant Western cultural hegemony, and ideologies surrounding respectability amongst cultures. There are unique parallels between the Black American experience to that of the Japanese, as Du Bois believed it was adequate to mimic certain aspects of Japan, the colored nation.

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<sup>15</sup> Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. "The Meaning of Japan (1937)." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2012, pp. 233–55. *JSTOR*,

Historically, Black Americans and the Japanese, while different, have often experienced similar realities, which bond the two groups in a unique way. In his speech, Du Bois states “The same impulse which after the war (American Civil War) sent teachers into the South to establish higher schools for Negroes, send teachers and missionaries into Japan. Japanese higher education, in its Western aspect, began then at the same time that Atlanta, Fisk, Talladega, and Howard, were established in the United States”. After that distinction, he points to Waseda and Doshida, both universities in Japan, being the Japanese equivalents to our Historically Black Colleges and Universities, of the US. With its singular mission of becoming the gateway to Western education and ideologies, its schools nurture its students to be global leaders in the industrial, educational, and political sectors. In relation to education and expression, Du Bois goes on to expound on the Japanese utilization of literature and art, which both have a long-lasting tradition, reinforcing his notion that those forms of expression can adequately inform, educate, and inspire. He points to their literature having an honorable and constant tradition, that has been influenced by modern European literature that has been translated into Japanese. While there have been large populations of consumers that seek more extensive literature, Du Bois points to both Newspapers and Magazines contributing towards the rise of the majority of literate readers, through daily publications reaching millions. He also expressed there was a native novel and a “New” native poetry, representing the increase in literature representing the proletariat at the time. In conjunction with the rise in literature at the time, the singularity, originality,



and beauty of Japan's fine art, pushed past certain artistic boundaries to entice conversations and depict their own unique themes. Du Bois states " Their painting has been in watercolors rather than oil and with India Ink. Instead of centralizing their attention on the human figure they have portrayed more in the abstract, depicted beautiful landscapes and flowers and mountains, and in human being's actions rather than form. I saw the last National Exhibition in Kyoto and the marvelous work in screens and figures. There is, of course, nothings beautiful as the Japanese color prints<sup>16</sup>".

His speech at Morehouse College in 1937, helped cement his career work of critiquing, educating, and inspiring Black Americans, in relation to their current status in America and how to navigate the future. His findings during his time in Japan, mimic, the fatalistic realities placed upon his people back in the US, as he acknowledged that there can be a lot learned and applied from the Japanese people. Within the 30's, Tohokai, which translates to "Society of the East", became active as a fascist political party, who drew influence from Adolf Hitler's beliefs in one sole leader and no democracy. At the time, the people of Japan lived in constant fear, similar to the realities of Black people in America, which forced the people to combat that in unique ways. Their capitalization of narration, artistic expression, and education, was actively demonstrated through their deliberate use of literature in scholarly writing and

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<sup>16</sup> Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. "The Meaning of Japan (1937)." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2012, pp. 233–55. *JSTOR*,

magazines, contemporary Art, including Anime, as well as investments into their institutions of higher learning. Similarly, Du Bois's career work circumscribed the broad unique experience of the Black American into an individual process of perceiving and expressing. It is within his theory of the Double consciousness, that one acknowledges their presented fatalistic reality, being Black and American. At that moment, mimicking what is practiced in Japan, one must capitalize off the use of storytelling, which is embodied in Du Bois's "The Comet", artistic expression to inform, as seen in the functionality of the Crisis Magazine, as well as access to an adequate education, which can be best received at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Subsequently, W.E.B Du Bois went on to be an influential figure in the fight for civil rights and the overall field of Sociology. In 1963, at the age of 93, he passed in the country of Ghana, one day prior to the March on Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech".

The irony of his passing coming one day prior to Dr. King's iconic speech serves as a metaphor and call to action, for Black Scholars, Artists, and Authors to continue and enhance his findings, through the lens of the Double Consciousness. His work reinforces this notion that Black Americans should hold agency over their own destiny and it should not be in the hand of those that once oppressed them. Furthermore, his interests in the intersection between, history, race, and the future, through technological advancements, continuously have been taught in hopes that his work can be expounded based upon the current times. Thirty years after his death, in 1993,

Writer and Cultural Critic Mark Dery coined the term “Afrofuturism<sup>17</sup>”, and defined it as “speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th-century techno culture and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future”. While that term is still understood within the boundaries of its infancy, thirty years after its coining, its thematic structure has been studied and expressed through a mixture of numerous mediums including literature and visual art. I argue that the theory itself is an extension of the theory of Double Consciousness, as a way of seeing and critiquing your place in the world, now in relation to one's future.

It can be argued that Du Bois’s work helped contribute towards the theorizing of Afrofuturism, as one of his collaborators, Aaron Douglas’s, work has often been considered early examples of art that embodies Afrofuturistic themes. Outside of the visual arts, music and sound has also been a unique form for Black liberation, as it exemplifies similar themes, and that is best understood through the work of composer Herman Poole Blount, also known as Sun Ra. Sun Ra’s ideologies were unique and his perspective toward liberation for Black people was rooted in two sectors, the land of Africa and Space itself. In the book *“Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come”*, the author distinguishes Sun Ra being the “Father of

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<sup>17</sup> Dery, Mark. “Black to the Future.” *Flame Wars*, 1994, pp. 179–222,

Afrofuturism”, and points out his practice in imagining possible futures using technology and its juxtaposition with Black people, who are an oppressed group. It further expounds on this position in relation to sound when it states “ Sun Ra’s system, however, in itself searched for different origins— in ancient Egypt, in Africa and outer space. These different origins also have sonic equivalents. As such the origins open up a space for fantastic sounds, or a sonic fantastic, as they reference unheard sounds as well as sounds that can only be constructed by proxy or imagination<sup>18</sup>”. It is this ideology that is captured in his created sound in unison his work as a Jazz musician. Sun Ra’s practice was unique as it stretched across music genres as well as tampered with a vast amount of instrumental sounds. His performances were somewhat of an interstellar experience as he dressed in space suits and props that mimicked astronauts. In Yatasha Womack’s book “ *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*”, she described his style, intentionally, and sound when she states “ “Hyperlinking his music to space travel created a prism of creativity for Sun Ra. He explored with healing tones, and new sounds, and pushed jazz beyond its bebop dimensions<sup>19</sup>” .

Safe to say a new day was coming for Black Americans in relation to the visual arts and music. As Du Bois urged, literature and narration, increasingly became

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<sup>18</sup> Steinskog, Erik. *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.

adequate forms of inspiration, as Black American speculative fiction authors began to thrive around the same time as the coining of the term “Afrofuturism”, providing new and refreshing stories, that do not present Black Americans in a stereotypical way. Science Fiction Author and Award winner Octavia Butler, most known for her Parables, rose in prominence through her exploration of race and gender identity in relation to Black Americans. Heralded as the first Black Woman to gain popularity in the genre of science fiction, she challenged the dominant social white-male hegemony, providing a breath of fresh air as not only a Black scholar but also a Black Woman. Her two-book series, titled “Parables of the Sower<sup>20</sup>” and “ Parable of the Talents<sup>21</sup>”, presents a sophisticated tale of a near-future dystopian country in the US, in which society has imploded due to drug abuse, environmental degradation, and racial and economic inequality. The protagonist of the story, Lauren Olamina, is forced to navigate her new reality, constructing a new religion, “Earthseed”, which she uses as a means of survival in her fatalistic reality. This series, which has been developed as a graphic novel by an artist referred to in the next chapter, is cited as a prime example of Afrofuturistic literature. The first book was written and published in 1993, however, the story takes place in the 21st century, between the early 2020’s to early 2030s. Her book's success was obvious, as many expressed it was a portal to the future at the time. Author Alex

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<sup>20</sup> Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. New York :Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Talents : a Novel*. New York :Seven Stories Press, 1998.

Zamalin, in a chapter titled “ Octavia Butler and the Politics of Utopian Transcendence<sup>22</sup>” states, “ The parable books were less work of magical realism and more prophetic critique of what American culture was and where it was headed”. What this demonstrates is that, again fiction and storytelling are adequate forms of education and inspiration, as her work served as a new artistic form of envisioning the future<sup>23</sup>”.

To conclude this chapter, reinforce Du Bois’s claims, and present the overall argument of this thesis, analyzing Japanese Anime and Manga, through the lens of Semiotics and Iconography, viewing signs and symbols and their symbolic meaning, can ultimately add to the current scholarship in relation to the theory of Afrofuturism. Through this scholarship, institutions of higher learning, including HBCUs and Japanese universities, can begin to understand the potentiality of the Black American’s fascination with Japan, their animation techniques, and unique forms of storytelling through the visual arts and literature. At the same time as the coining of the term “Afrofuturism”, Anime began to integrate into America during the 1990s and early 2000s which now, only twenty years later, confines its scholarship within its infancy. Through research, It is recognized that there is little scholarship surrounding Anime, from a Black cultural perspective. This thesis is the first step towards that! Now that a historical framework

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<sup>23</sup> Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

has been presented, the next chapter provides examples of Artists influenced not only by Japanese Culture but Anime as well, to then create. It concludes with the last chapter, which will define what is Anime, how it can be viewed from the lens of semiotics, as well as the artistic creativity of Black Americans who consume Anime, specifically Cosplayers. The time is now, as we can follow Du Bois's footsteps in creating a liberated future for Black Americans.

## Chapter 2: Contemporary Framework

### Introduction

In 2008, Curator, Author, and Professor of African American History and Culture at Doshisha University in Japan, Fanon Che Wilkins, brought together various contemporary Black Artists, to Japan. In doing so, he cultivated a diverse group of artists whose artistic practice blends Black American popular culture with Japanese culture, in order to produce new and enticing narratives. The artists all infuse Japanese iconography within their work, representing the vast experience each of them had studying in Japan. Three of the artist from the show, in collaboration with Wilkins, who is a graduate of Morehouse College, are presented in this thesis. In a chapter within the book “Keywords for African American Studies”, written by Wilkins titled “Empire”, he expresses the focus of the essay being ways Black Americans confronted and resisted empire at home and abroad within the mid-19th century up until the 20th century. He begins by pointing to a famous declaration made by W.E.B Du Bois in being “ The problem of the color line”, within the 20th century. He goes on to state “ Hard on the heels of the failures of Reconstruction, the persistence of white supremacy, and the legal codification of Jim Crow, “The color-line” has remained an opening salvo for grappling with the conundrum of race and racial oppression on U.S. soil<sup>24</sup>”. This statement reinforces Du Bois’s declaration in relation to understanding Black American’s

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<sup>24</sup> Edwards, Erica R. *Keywords for African American Studies*. NYU Press, 2018.



positioning in America and it is within his curated show at Doshida Univeristy, where he juxtaposed Japanese Culture and History with the fatalistic realities placed upon Black Americans.

This chapter focuses on the work of Iona Rozeal Brown, as well as John Jennings, who is in collaboration with Sanford Biggers. The time spent in Japan, influenced all three artists as they merge certain icons, symbols, signs, and artistic practices within Japanese culture, with their own individual style in relation to Black popular culture, to form new signifiers for the viewer to internalize. Analyzing their work, from the lens of semiotics, will reinforce Du Bois's claims of the visual arts, storytelling, and studying Japanese culture being adequate modes of inspiration for Black Americans. To conclude, Iona Rozeal Brown's intricate fables, as well as John Jennings's graphic novel depictions of other stories, mimic the functionality of Japanese Anime and Manga, which allow the viewer to take an Afrofuturistic approach to view the Black American Identity.

Iona Rozeal Brown

"It's so easy for someone to get off their path and follow something they believe they should be like, look like, act like, this affects all our children. This affects us all!".

<sup>25</sup>These words echoed during an exhibition at MOCA Cleveland, expressed the need for

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<sup>25</sup> Brielmaier, Isolde, et al. *Iona Rozeal Brown: ... In Conjunction with the Exhibition Iona Rozeal Brown: All Falls down Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland Jan. 29 - May 9, 2010*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010.

new representation in the Black American community. A thirst for an opportunity to shed a new skin from fatalistic realities, in hopes that through research, attention to detail, and empathy, one may be able to strive for a new level of self-competency that is the physical embodiment of one's true self. Born in Washington DC, Contemporary Artist Iona Rozeal Brown is acclaimed for her distinctive painting style, blending Black American Hip-Hop Culture with traditional Japanese Ukiyo-e woodcut prints. In doing so, she synthesizes two seemingly opposite cultures into a singular narrative as multicultural folklore. For this thesis, it focus specifically on her work during a 2010 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland titled, " Iona Rozeal Brown: All Falls Down". In doing so, it examines how she utilizes symbolism in Japanese Mythology, Iconography in Hip-Hop motifs, and Semiotics to reimagine one's self-identity.

To begin, we look at a 2004 exhibition at Spelman College showcasing the work of emerging Artist Iona Rozeal Brown titled, " A3: Black on Both Sides<sup>26</sup>". In an interview<sup>27</sup> conducted around the time of this exhibition, Iona Rozeal Brown expressed her earliest introduction to Japanese Culture was at the age of seven, being taken to the Banraku

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<sup>26</sup> Brown, Iona Rozeal. *Iona Rozeal Brown: A3.Black on Both Sides*. Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Lyneise E., and Iona Rozeal Brown. "Black on Both Sides: A Conversation with Iona Rozeal Brown." *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2006, pp. 826–834,

Puppet Theater, which is a traditional theatric performance analyzed by Semiotician Roland Barthes in the next chapter. As her fascination matriculated there was a moment of realization, which she described as an epiphany, as her time in Japan brought to her attention the study of the sub-culture of Ganguro ( a 1990s movement in Japan of young girls darkening their skin and dressing up as their favorite American Hip-Hop stars). From someone in Japan, the movement can be deemed as empowering, but for Brown, or any other socially conscious American, it can be misconstrued as wearing Blackface. From the darkened tanned skin, urban streetwear, and painted lips, it's fair to have the assumption of this culture being Blackface. Questions arise immediately including the intentionality of the person and if they realize that their artistic practice is offensive or their knowledge of Blackface in general. As she recognizes that the admiration of Black skin, in this instance, may be superficial, she also recognizes that critiquing that admiration can be an opportunity to unravel how other cultures perceive Black skin, or “Blackness” in general.

Brown's exhibition at Spelman was an ode to that moment of critique she felt in Japan, as she was able to embody that in her work that will now be analyzed. (**Image 3** Iona Rozeal Brown a<sup>3</sup>...blackface #52) A lone feminine figure gazes into the distance as she seemingly lays comfortably on a foundation that seems to not be there. Her posture is relaxed at a quick glance, however, her crouching positions her as if she is ready to leap. Is this figure a Black woman? Her luscious afro protrudes past the boundaries of the image while a single braid dangles on top of her shoulder. Her skin color is a hue of

brown that suggests her being of African descent, however, sections of her head and neck area, juxtapose the brown with a hue of eggshell white, similar to that of the background surrounding her. Her facial color looks similar to blackface. Is this figure an Asian woman? Her eyes are squinted and her lips are small, with red lipstick, which contrasts the known features of a Black woman. Her attire is unique, bearing what seems to be a kimono gown with an obi sash which is wrapped around her waist. The striped orange and dark blue kimono is in contrast with her red and gold diamond-shaped obi. Within the Japanese kimono, she wears a crop top and short combination that is similar to that of African American fashion. The dark blue, jean-like clothing presents her in a relaxed state not constricting her. She wears Highrise socks that have a light-blue hue that also has burgundy symbols. Around her neck is a dangling chain with a marijuana leaf crescent that can be seen in American popular culture. She also has another chain that she holds within her hand that hangs as well as what seems to be a diamond ring.

Brown's earlier works immediately force the viewer into a space of reflection and assessment and she does so intentionally. In doing this, she teases them through certain attitudes displayed alongside intricate mannerisms within the original Japanese Ukiyo-print, blanketed by striking contemporary Hip-Hop postures. Her time spent in Japan provided a moment of epiphany for her, as she then produced a body of work that articulates the then unbeknownst appropriation of Black American Hip-Hop culture. She does this by placing proximity between the two cultures, represented by the skin

color of the figure, presenting distance within the gap between the being's natural skin color and its depicted skin color, similar to Blackface. It is her understanding of Hip-Hop and its uniqueness in representing Black Popular Culture, alongside her personal response to the interchange between Black American and Japanese Cultures, that exemplifies her formative years as an Artist. Brown's early work represents a direct response to Japan's Ganguro Culture and their fascination with Hip-Hop, and while this thesis won't expound on any other pieces from this time in her career, this moment in her career can be used as the crux of the argument for the rest of this section because it presents the antithesis in asking " Well how do we as Black Americans represent Japanese Culture?", specifically through our fascination of Japanese Anime and Manga.

Iona Rozeal Brown's work is captivating as she utilizes imagery as a catalyst for uncomfortable conversations regarding race and appropriation. Before transitioning to her exhibition at MOCA Cleveland, we must first distinguish the cultural significance her prior exhibition holds as its success, afforded the opportunity to Spelman's Museum to showcase its capacity in focusing on contemporary artists. Since its opening in 1996, The Spelman College Museum of Fine Arts has been heralded for its innovative and intellectual exhibitions, focusing on and exemplifying Black woman artists, whose work directly inspires Black women. While the Exhibition at MOCA Cleveland in 2010 was the world's, and the contemporary American art scene at the time, introduction to her work, it was her early exhibition at Spelman where she first individually introduced

herself, using the platform of an HBCU to do so. That was her first step in infusing two different cultures, who long for new modes of inspiration and enlightenment.

Described as a multicultural folklore, infusing popular culture and art history into one singular fantasy for the viewer, Iona Rozeal Brown's exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland "All Falls Down"<sup>28</sup>, features fifteen of her thought-provoking and elaborate paintings from her series, which is also the name of the folklore, titled "You Can't Turn A Hustler Into a Husband (or lessons on how to get something for nothing)". Expressing the need for a heroine, these paintings were produced intentionally as she constructs a multi-layered mythology into a singular narrative, which is similar to that within contemporary Anime series, exploring societal and cultural pressures placed upon women. The flatness and linear contours of the Ukiyo-e print, adjacent to stylistic motifs, provides an ambivalent relationship with two seemingly different cultures. That symbiotic relationship embodies what is described as the "titillating, materialistic culture of 90's hip-hop" and the "opulent, rousing urban environment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Edo period in Japan". Shifting away from the reactive imagery of Blackface, she centered her new work towards affirmative visual messaging, through examining Japanese hip-hop culture. Through this, she provides a new sense of self-agency for the viewer by taking the two cultures and transforming them into one.

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<sup>28</sup> Brielmaier, Isolde, et al. *Iona Rozeal Brown: ... In Conjunction with the Exhibition Iona Rozeal Brown: All Falls down Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland Jan. 29 - May 9, 2010*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010.

Turning mythology into a medium by fusing Japanese Art History and mythology with her own artistic practice, Brown's work captivates its audience as it references bold figures ranging from Hip Hop music, West African Adinkra Symbols, Lord of the Rings, and Japanese Noh Theater. Dynamic characters, fictional realms, new languages, and engaging plots, represent her desire to focus on and battle cultural elements that negatively influence teenage girls. She pushes past the boundaries of her past work in sampling Japanese Art History and Hip Hop culture. In doing so she hones in on the allure of hip hop and the accessibility of figures to provide counseling for young women so they do not end up being, what she describes as the "Casualties of cultural chaos"<sup>29</sup>. An elaborate allegory which is described as proverbial and eccentric as well as universal and intimate. Brown's work reaffirms young girls, giving them agency as it is distinguished that, culturally they are forced to withhold their authentic selves and showcase small samples of their innate gifts.

The characters within her allegory, serve as icons of inspiration, which capture the essence of themes she aimed to portray from both Japanese and American culture. For this thesis, all of the characters within this fable will not be analyzed. However two characters from this body of work, which have been intentionally chosen, are more

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<sup>29</sup> Brielmaier, Isolde, et al. *Iona Rozeal Brown: ... In Conjunction with the Exhibition Iona Rozeal Brown: All Falls down Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland Jan. 29 - May 9, 2010*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010.

adequate examples of icons, serving as the protagonist and antagonist. It is then, that it can be argued that the functionality, through their depiction, can be compared the iconographic nature to that of characters within contemporary Anime and Manga. Their portrayal, alongside both verbal and linguistic signs, then narrates a thought provoking allegory, which Japanese Anime and Manga similarly does as Brown has expressed she drew inspiration from Anime in the early stages of her career. The Hero and The Villain are intrinsically the focal point of any fable, with that being the case it is most instructive to begin with them, as we start by analyzing the hero.

**(Image 4** Iona Rozeal Brown, "king kata #3: peel out)

Seemingly disgruntled, based upon the posture of their lips, this being's presence protrudes over the viewer in an intimidating factor. Their dark shades hide from us their true intentions and emotion, as the eyes are the direct windows to an individual's soul. Similar to that of an optical illusion, the subject outwardly leaps from the image itself, as if it will occupy the space alongside us. Is this a hero? Its cape flows effortlessly, brandishing an array of terms used within contemporary rap. Alongside that, its hair is free-flowing and in unison with that of the cape itself, placing the being in a free-flowing motion. Blast off! It pops a wheelie while drifting, gathering smoke, as it tightly grasps the handle and control of the child tricycle, also known as a Big Wheel. Its gloves portray an aesthetic similar to that of many comic book superheroes, as this a brand new hero of its own. Where is this being headed off to? It looks to its right as if



something has caught its attention, which forces a shift from what's in front of them to something else, as they have to make a halting change of direction.

We begin by introducing “Yoshi”. No not the loveable green travel companion in the iconic Super Mario Gaming series. This is a unique being, whose iconographic nature embodies themes surrounding the innate beauty and individual talent of young girls, especially Black girls. Brown distinguishes Yoshi's physical and metaphorical states as she expresses her having a “Fiery Personality’, suggested by the snarl lip posture but she is also playful yet powerful. Her intentionality for the character serves as a direct counterforce to themes surrounding materialism and consumerism, which is embodied in the portrayal of villains in her mythology. That intersection is where the name of this exhibition derived, and through mythology, she creates a parallel universe that mimics the experience of adolescent girls, critically critiquing the much-needed opportunities for understanding and growth. If one follows the matriculation of this Heroine, they then are forced into the abyss of their own existence. Similar to most fictional tales, and for the purpose of this research most contemporary Anime stories, Iona Rozeal Brown's work directly positions one in the Heroine's journey. Exuding traits synonymous to that of a super hero including discipline, empathy, good faith, and integrity, she uses mythology to place the viewer in unison with the protagonist within that journey as they travel down the heroic path, seeking coexistence of all beings, while also critiquing imperfections, to then reach a higher level of self-competency. This realm and

positioning is what she calls the “ Humanic Enterprize Zone” or (HEZ) and within this zone, she utilizes deities and spirits to guide the viewer.

For the second character being analyzed, we introduce E.I.N, pronounced as “ine”, which is an acronym for “ Everything I’m Not”. A thin body, pale skin, spiked horns, wart lumps, and lifeless eyes, all depict an evil entity who is described as a ghastly presence. Brown created this being to serve as an antagonist as its name references material consumer culture and its effects on girls’ self-confidence, specifically Black girls. She points to it being the personification of insecurity and emerges on the victim similar to that of A Nightmare on Elm Street’s Freddy Kruger. It is the cancer of material culture and enters the mind of girls and women in a dreamlike state. Its physical traits differentiate it from other characters as it is obsessed with fashion and material culture. Though not depicted in this specific image, as this was an outline for the character, it is usually portrayed having magazine cover lines tattooed over its body, alongside a device in which it receives orders from an unbeknownst evil entity. Distinguishing its thin body, long black weave, and provocative poses, Brown refers to those traits being synonyms to that of a fashion model, which alludes to the being’s past existence as a beautiful maiden. To conclude, Brown compares the beings longing for fashion commodities, which directly transformed her into a repulsive being, to Gollum from “ The Hobbit” and “ Lord of the Rings”, who transformed from a Sméagol the friend who is obsessed with a ring.

**(Image 5 Iona Rozeal Brown. All things fall down)**

A translucent figure is compacted within the borders of the paper as it seems to be confined for view. It's had is hunched down as its hair flows similar to that of a wave preparing to hit the shore of a beach. Its elongated neck stretches in a set space as it extends to the protruding finger-like claws of the being itself, down to its crossed legs. Its eyes are pitch black like a soulless entity, leveled under sharp horns, similar to that of its claws and ears. Its mouth melts, giving it motion as if it's attempting to speak. The apparent discomfort for the being is as if it is trying to escape but cannot. At the same time, there is a sense of patience as if the being is contemplating a detailed escape from its prison. The absence of color equates to no life which alludes to the figure being soulless or lifeless.

To present an adequate analysis of Iona Rozeal Brown's work in relationship to Japanese Anime, it is best to conduct a semiotic analysis, surrounding the theme of the protagonist and antagonist, comparing Yoshi and E.I.N., to protagonist and antagonist Tanjiro Kamado and Muzan Kibutsuji, from the Anime and Manga "Demon Slayer, Kimetsu No Yaiba". I utilize Semiotician Roland Barthes's<sup>30</sup> theory, in which he expounded on Saussure's signification theory, to formulate a system of two forms of signification, denotation, and connotation. Denotation represents the association between what is signified and the objective reality, or primary signification, while

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang, 2009.

connotation refers to what is signified and its connectedness to the viewer's emotions and individual perception of life. Connotation can be understood on a range, based on socio-cultural implications. The connotation is also unique, as its functionality rationalizes the idea of a myth as the deepest form of the connotation, which can be argued as a direct interaction with the viewer to historical Japanese mythology, through Anime and Manga being the driving medium.

**(Image 6 Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, Vol. 2)**

Two beings, confined in one intimate setting as they forcefully glance in each other's direction. A hazy background engulfs them together as the smoke circulates them. Above them, an icon with the words " Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba", protrudes over them, while engaging with them, through the being's sword. The being on the left tightly clutches that sword, as its wielder, with its intentions set on swinging. A sense of motion is evident, as his opposite arm is set in preparation to thrust. Is this blood-drenched on its arm and collar? The hue of that is similar to that of the sun in its Japanese-style earrings. Its hair is a dark hue of red infused with black, matching the scar that extends down its face and to its eye. It's one eye, presented with only one side of its face, is interlocked with that of the being below them. The being from below gazes directly back, also with intention as if he is prepared to defend but also attack at the same time. It's seemingly disgruntled as it is presented with its head down and a disappointed smirk.

This is the Demon Slayer Manga Volume 2 cover and is the first thing one sees when being introduced to this tale. The cover, similar to Brown's work, transports the viewer into an intricate tale, influenced directly by Japanese Mythology. The first being, the human boy, is its protagonist, named Tanjiro Kamado. The story takes place in the Taisho Era in Japan and follows him as he rises the ranks of the Demon Slayer Corps, after finding his family slaughtered by Demons, as well as his sister slowly turning into one. He is left with no choice but to search for a cure for the last member of his family, which can only come from the blood of the main antagonist, the other being in this image. This is Muzan Kibutsuji, the strongest and longest-existing demon in existence within this world. With the unique power to directly manipulate his cellular structure, he disguises himself as different human beings of various ages and gender, intending to overcome his ultimate weakness, sunlight. The journey of both these beings is interconnected, as they both need the blood of the other to accomplish their goals.

Here begins the semiotic analysis,<sup>31</sup> as the purpose served within the depiction of the characters in Demon Slayer serves a similar purpose in the work of Iona Rozeal Brown. As one can understand within semiotics, you begin by distinguishing anything that can be interpreted as a sign. According to Barthes, a sign is a correlation between its signifier (image) and what it signifies (concept), and signs can be distinguished

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<sup>31</sup> Andriani, Diah Iis, and Dewi Yuli Anti. "Semiotic Analysis on Kimetsu No Yaiba Movie Posters." *JURNAL BASIS*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2022, pp. 325–338,

between visual signs or verbal (linguistic) signs. In Brown's work, as well as the Manga Cover, there is an intentional use of both forms of signs, to convey meaning to the viewers. We shall begin with verbal signs, first in Brown's piece and next within the Manga Cover. An evident example of the usage of verbal signs is within the cape of the character Yoshi, which showcases a variety of different terms used in Hip-Hop Slang. Words like "Beef", "Big Ups", "Dope", and "Kick It", alongside numerous other terms, flow in unison with the crusader's cape. Transitioning back to the Manga Cover, an immediate example of the use of a verbal sign is the title logo for the series "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba". Presented in large white font, the words "Demon Slayer" embraces the viewer, suggesting it is the main title of the fable and is protruding over smaller words in white with a red outlining. Both phrases are presented in front of a yellow Japanese-styled background, similar to that of a Kimono. It is beneficial to note that, the sword of one character engages with the verbal sign, giving it significance.

Analyzing these two examples semiotically, one must understand the constructiveness of the verbal sign. The verbal sign is linked to linguistics and how one deciphers languages, specifically to decode messages. While not as immediate as the use of verbal signs on the Manga cover, Brown's use of verbal signs does draw the attention of the viewer, bringing them in and creating an intimate interaction with the subject portrayed. In the exhibition catalog it points to why Brown specifically did that when it states "These cards, which contain hip hop terms and phrases like "dope" and "keep it real", are stitched together like a quilt. In addition to reclaiming the

commodification of hip-hop language, the cape alludes to hidden languages like those woven into quilts for communication during the Underground Railroad<sup>32</sup>. Her comparison to a quilt demonstrates how they are bound together semiotically. In this example, for each word quoted, the denotative meaning is what each word specifically means from the English dictionary, with an example being the word “Beef” meaning the flesh of a cow. While that is its denotative, or literal, meaning, Brown referencing it as a Hip Hop term, as she alludes to its connotative, or cultural, meaning which is a conflict between two individuals. In doing this, she believes the depicted cape serves a similar function to that of quilts from the Underground Railroad, alluding to hidden languages.

Next, we transition to the Manga Cover to observe its use of verbal signs. We see the title of the series in bold font depicting the English words “ Demon Slayer”, and the Japanese words “ Kimetsu No Yaiba”, which translates to “ Demon Killing Blade”. They are considered verbal signs as they use textual symbols. The denotative meaning is the title of the series itself, which informs the viewer. The main title is in English, while the second is in Japanese translation, which creates a language barrier. By using both languages, the artists attempt to draw the attention of a large population of consumers. In regards to the connotative meaning, it may serve as a metaphor for battling internal

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<sup>32</sup> Brielmaier, Isolde, et al. *Iona Rozeal Brown: ... In Conjunction with the Exhibition Iona Rozeal Brown: All Falls down Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland Jan. 29 - May 9, 2010*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010.

struggles, which we deem as “ personal demons”, and the self-enlightening journey it takes to slay them. That, is reinforced by the interaction between the text symbols and the sword, held by the wielder. These two examples showcase the direct practice of using verbal signs, to direct attention and provoke intricate thoughts, through narration.

Next, for the second half of this formal analysis, it will point to examples of visual signs, used by both artists, to convey certain meanings. For Brown’s work, as well as the Manga Cover, one can identify the use of posture, specifically the subject head placement, gripping of an object, and subtle smirk, as well as smoke as visual signs. For both works, you can see that the posture of the character’s head, arms, and hands are all in motion. The denotative meaning of posture is the dynamic of how one holds themselves in motion. The connotative meaning in the use of posture varies by culture however numerous religions and belief systems, believe bodily posture has a unique connection with divine worship, allowing a sense of inspiration. Secondly, in both pieces, there is the usage of smoke, which denotative meaning that is correlated with the visual representation of something being burnt. Smokes' connotative meaning is somewhat universal to all cultures, representing communication, purification, and introspection. The use of posture juxtapose to smoke, confirms that the beings are in motion, and through the usage of signs, the viewer is unknowingly, semiotically interpreting signs, verbal and visual, that they then draw inspiration to take into their personal lives.



To conclude, the work of Iona Rozeal Brown serves a similar function to that of the covers of Japanese Mangas, which are graphic novels converted into Anime shows and films, but can be applied to other forms as well. It is noticeable that Brown's early introduction to Japanese culture, through Japanese theater, Anime, collaborating with Fanon Wilkins, as well as her formative years as an artist, presenting her work at institutions like Spelman College, directly influenced her as she formulated an intricate fable used to inspire girls and women, specifically Black American girls and women. It is under the lens of semiotics, where she uses verbal and visual signs, to blend opposite cultures into one multi-cultural folklore, filled with spirituality, fierce battles, and a strict hierarchy. In doing so, her work exemplifies W.E.B Du Bois's call to action in understanding ones place in the world, through the lens of the Double Consciousness, as well his emphasis in storytelling utilizing the visual arts. With that being the case, the viewer must forcefully critique their perception of contemporary popular culture and its relation to politics now. Through that critique, alongside viewing the rest of her work, one can reimagine how one perceives being Black in America and how one must navigate that reality, reinforcing themes captured in Afrofuturism.

John Jennings

This next artist presented, studied alongside Iona Rozeal Brown as well as contemporary artist Sanford Biggers, in Japan, the same time as Anime's penetration within American popular culture. John Jennings is a curator, graphic novelist, and educator, whose work examines the visual culture of race in an array of media forms

including film, illustrated fiction, and comics, similar to that of Japanese Manga. His focus area is the intersection between the visual culture of Hip-Hop, Visual Literacy, and most importantly Afrofuturism. To reinforce the overall claim in relation to Du Bois's work, in relation to the rise of Afrofuturism, this thesis analyzes two of his bodies of work beginning with his graphic essay for Sanford Biggers's Codeswitch Exhibition at the California African American Museum, where he showcases the detailed and layered symbolization of the art of quilting which is prevalent in Biggers work. Within this exhibition, to support this thesis, it can be argued that Jennings uses the graphic essay to depict the themes within Biggers work, including mythical thinking and codeswitching, to then make a liberating intervention into the prospects of Black American representation. Secondly, it analyzes images from his graphic novel depiction of Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower", which is referred to in the first chapter, a post-apocalyptic fiction novel heralded for being a catalyst of inspiration for Black Americans to re-imagine their own future. For this chapter, it argues that the time spent in Japan, and analyzing Japanese culture, directly influenced his practice in creating graphic novels and curating work by artists who entice larger conversations. It ends by conducting a semiotic analysis of two of his pieces and juxtaposing them to an actual Manga script. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that Japanese Manga, which is a Japanese graphic novel, as well as Anime, should be analyzed from the lens of Afrofuturism, which

is a genre that centers Black history and culture and incorporates science-fiction, technology, and futuristic elements into literature, music, and the visual arts.<sup>33</sup>

To begin, there are two examples of John Jennings's work that are the visual representations of aesthetics captured within the genre of Afrofuturism. One example is his collaboration at CAAM<sup>34</sup>, where he created *Mother Patchwork*. The second is from his graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower"<sup>35</sup>. Through these two examples, the question arises of how does one use graphic novels, whether they are comics or manga, to depict larger stories or themes depicted through other mediums. For the *Codeswitch* exhibition, the inspiration comes directly from Sanford Biggers's work, and the same with "Parable of the Sower", and its visual adaptation. The development comes in three phases with the first being written down (the use of verbal linguistics), next the visual (use of icons and visual signs), and lastly the use of cinema and film, which brings everything to life through motion and sound. Jennings's work, "*Mother Patchwork*" is mainly depicted through direct illustration and images,

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<sup>33</sup> Washington, Angela. "Afrofuturism in the Stacks." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 15 June 2022, [www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2022/6/library-](http://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2022/6/library-)

<sup>34</sup> Andersson, Andrea, et al. *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch*. The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Duffy, Damian, et al. *Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*. Abrams ComicArts, 2021.

however, it is also presented in video form alongside music and sounds. This allows the viewer and audience to engage in two different ways to receive information and inspiration. In relation to Octavia Butler's novel, Jennings advanced her work, similar to that of Japanese Manga Artists capturing themes within Japanese mythology, enhancing the storytelling experience through illustration and the use of color. In looking at Jennings's intersection with Japanese forms and ideas within his time there, it can be demonstrated that his work can and should be, presented and heralded similarly to Japanese Manga, as well as studied under the lens of Afrofuturism. Japanese Artists take similar information and inspirations from novels and tales, to create Manga books, which then get produced as Anime shows and films.

Before transitioning to formal analysis, it is beneficial to point to what a graphic novel actually is. A graphic novel is its own unique form and not necessarily a genre as it uses sequential art to narrate a story, similar to comic books and Manga books. Author Eddie Campbell defines what is a Graphic novel and its functionality when he states "The term graphic novel is currently used in at least four different and mutually exclusive ways. First it is used simply as a synonym for comic books. For instance, I recently read of an "eight-page graphic novel" that I myself once drew. Second, it is used to classify a format - for example, a bound book of comics either in soft- or hardcover - in contrast to the old-fashioned stapled comic magazine. Third, it means, more specifically, a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel. Finally, others employ it to indicate a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its

ambition - indeed, a new medium altogether. It may be added that most of the important "graphic novelists" refuse to use the term under any conditions<sup>36</sup>. What differentiates a graphic novel from a comic or manga, which is a comic or graphic novel produce exclusively in Japan, is that those mediums have long-lasting and diverse stories while a graphic novel has a distinctive storyline with more intricate forms of narration, most importantly the length and depth of each story. While they have their differences, they all serve the same function in how they illustrate and convey messages and themes. From the fantastic and whimsical world of fiction to the socially significant and historical reality of non-fiction, artists, and illustrators use this medium to capture semiotic signifiers from visual signs and text, through their denotative and connotative nature. While most examples of graphic novels are based on fictional stories and mythologies, there are examples of non-fiction, as even museum institutions utilized the medium to tell a story, and that museum is Colonial Williamsburg.

Serving as the catalyst towards the institution's efforts in adopting a narrative structure with how they present exhibitions, celebrating of their three-hundredth year anniversary, Artist Brian Stelfreez and Curator Cary Carson, utilized visual mnemonics to critique the conventional ways to view an exhibition. The results of their collaboration produced a graphic novel titled "When Virginia Was The Wild West"<sup>37</sup>. Exhibiting mostly archeological artifacts, the graphics, drawn by Stelfreeze, and the graphic text, written

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<sup>36</sup> Campbell, Eddie. "What Is a Graphic Novel?" *World Literature Today*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2007, pp. 13–15. *JSTOR*,

<sup>37</sup> Denenberg, Thomas Andrew. "1699: When Virginia Was the Wild West: An Exhibition Review." *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2000, pp. 291–300. *JSTOR*,

by Carson, this museum tested its creative boundaries in conventional exhibitions of American material culture, to replace it with a new narrative structure .The exhibition's success, serves as a precursor for other artists and institutions, including the California African American Museum, in using graphic novels as a medium to convey messages, exhibit art, and, tackle complex issues. In regards to John Jennings' work, the realm of fiction has become a director motivator for Black Americans to reimagine possible futures.

**( Image 7 John Jennings Mother patchwork. 2020)**

To begin, it is instructive to conduct a formal analysis of Jennings's work within his collaboration with Sanford Biggers, for Mother Patchwork. Two separate pages within a larger body of work, are combined into one large panel to capture an overall image that allures the viewers through the use of human figures encompassed around vibrant colors, specific text, and intentional imagery. Noticeably, there is the deliberate use of both text and human figures, to convey meaning, having four human figures and four text boxes. The left half of the image begins with multiple panels within a larger panel. Each individual panel depicts different portions of one human figure, an older woman, and is placed together like a collage to show the viewer a full image of the human's head and face. The being glances into the distance, with intent but also a sense of longing, as if their attention is called for. Above the figure's head, a lone panel portrays a set of hands that is engaged, as if it is weaving thread or fiddling with its fingers. We do not know if these are the hands of the woman figure but it is safe to

assume it is. Next to the panels, a row of clocks is lined up, one on top of the other, as if they are going to jump out the page. Lighter hues of colors including, orange, blue, pink, purple, and brown, animate the image in ways that darker colors may not. To conclude analyzing the first half of this image, there are two text boxes, that depict the phrases “ I am a story made of stories” and “ An index of tradition and family”.

For the second half of this larger panel, we are greeted by three human figures, one male and two females, that tower over the entire panel. Again the use of color seems very calculated as a hue of pink and purple mask the face of two of the figures. While two of the figures are engulfed with color, the viewer is still able to distinguish the beings being of African descent from their natural skin color juxtaposed to the color illuminating their faces. However, that is not the case for the third being on the furthest right. This woman figure’s entire skin color is a hue of light blue, so her race is only indicated based on certain features synonymous with that of a Black woman. The center focus of this image is the woman figure in the middle. The other two are placed alongside her, creating boundaries and borders, which is alluded to by the illustration of what seems to be a swift wind, depicted using line and the colors white and blue on the left, and what seems to be clouds or humps, depicted using the colors pink and brown on the right. Below the woman figure in the middle, is what seems to be a diagram that consists of square, diamond, and triangular shapes, with a variety of colors. Below the diagram, are two arms with hands that come together, as if they are sowing. To conclude, there is the usage of verbal signs through text, utilizing a text box, as there are

two of them that state the quotes “ Passed down from wise hands to young supple ones, then back ‘round again” and “ My name and practice are stitched in memory”.

John Jennings’s “ Mother Patchwork” from Sanford Biggers’s “ Codeswitch<sup>38</sup>” exhibition serves as a graphic essay and transitioned to a sophisticated animation. It’s function, in representing a process and way of thinking, portrays the themes and logic within Biggers’s quilt-making practice, to then transform and modify them as a moving image. Biggers’s describes his work as “ Material Storytelling”, with the usage of quilts, but how does that storytelling, or narrative change or alter when its materiality changes? Thankfully, there was a lot of room to explore due to Biggers’s artistic practice being interdisciplinary, including forms like sculpture, performance, as well as illustrations. In a panel discussion for this exhibition<sup>39</sup>, Jennings distinguished an important example when he expressed the functionality of Artist Jacob Lawrence’s “ Great Migration” series being placed in a calculated sequence similar to that of a comic. So with that distinction, it can be noted that historically, artists and illustrators have experimented, whether it be intentionally or unintentionally, with ways to present messages and stories through illustrated panels.

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<sup>38</sup> Andersson, Andrea, et al. *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch*. The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> “John Jennings and the Visual World of Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch.” *YouTube*, 19 Oct. 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDbgAX3sWe4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDbgAX3sWe4).



For the overall thesis, as well as understanding the materiality of the graphic novel, the study of semiotics is a central framework in examining specific cultural and symbolic meanings embedded in not only graphic novels, but also manga and Anime. In examining the use of signs, symbols, and icons, it allows the viewer to gain invaluable insight into intricate communicators, placed by the artist. Through that examination, one can dissect underlying significance of visual images, social norms, and gestures, within the story itself. The theoretical foundation within the study of semiotics can be traced through three theorists, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Roland Barthes. To start, Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>40</sup>, whose theory advocates the idea of language constructing reality and not actually reflecting reality, conceptualized a two layered form of interpretation “ The Signifier” and “ What is Signified”. Secondly, one can apply the semiotic approach of Charles Peirce<sup>41</sup>, with his ternary dynamic between representation, interpretation, and the object portrayed. Pierce believed that a sign, on its own, cannot fully represent something. Pierce's work co-exists with the work of Saussure, which allows us to understand all facets of semiotics and reinforces the notion that signs must have an interpretation for them to function as actual signs. Lastly, to wholistically conduct a semiotic analysis, one should apply Roland Barthes’s theory of “ Connotation and Denotation<sup>42”</sup>, as its direct function gives the sign a level of relevancy,

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<sup>40</sup> De Saussure, Ferdinand. (1966). *Course in General Linguistics* (Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, Translated by Wade Baskin). New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

<sup>41</sup> Short, T.L. (2007). *Peirce's Theory of Signs*. New York: Cambridge University Press

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. Hill and Wang, 2009.

also described as “levels of meaning”. Analyzing graphic novels through the lens of semiotics will allow us to decipher the complex ideologies and themes being presented to the viewer, from which they then draw inspiration, to then re-imagine their own future.

In conducting a semiotic analysis of **(Image 7)**, one can directly decipher themes captured in the work of Sanford Biggers. Analyzing “Mother Patchwork” through the process laid out prior, one can begin by distinguishing “The Signifier”, which is the physical form of signs, and “The Signified”, which is the mental meaning the sign represents. In this image the woman on the left page, whose image is broken into pieces presented in multiple panels, is the Signifier, and “Mother Patchwork” is what it signifies. The themes embodied in the practice of quilt making are placed within the portrayal of “Mother Patchwork” being the older woman. It is a visual sign, or signifier, that Saussure distinguished as being the representation of what society collectively agrees the signifier means. In this example, the agency is highly influenced by the collaboration between the original artist, Sanford Biggers, and the graphic artist, John Jennings, as they assign meaning and relevancy. Taking that same example, “Mother Patchwork”, and applying Pierce’s view on semiotics, it falls under the category of a symbolic sign, which is a sign that relies on cultural meaning, instead of an iconic or indexical sign, due to the reality that the woman portrayed is arbitrary and does not resemble the actual practice of quilt making. Lastly, it is instructive to apply the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes, as he provides an outlet for interpreting

meaning, through denotation and connotation. The differentiating factor between denotation and connotation is “ The order of significance”, and through this, the viewer begins with the denotation, the sign, and the signifier, and transitions to the connotation, which utilizes the denotative sign to convey more meaning. In this case, the old woman, her jewelry, and her hand positioning, all denote and represent sowing or being a Sower. Topics surrounding materiality, maturity, self-agency, and race are all the connotative messages interpreted by the viewer. With this being the case, when the viewer gazes at this image, they internalize themes, passed down, that center around Black liberation and navigating the future. The practice of quilt-making has become an adequate form of communication for Black Americans, through embodying themes including community building, humility, and creativity. Jennings’s work, portrays the themes in a way that the original medium may not be able to.

Before concluding the analysis surrounding the depiction of Mother Patchwork, one must distinguish two themes embodied within the work of Sanford Biggers, re-represented by John Jennings, that gives the viewer the ability to decipher codes and then imagine one’s own future through the use of codes and signifiers. While it may come off as scratching just the surface, on Sanford’s work specifically, it does illuminate the way Jennings's work conveys as an extension of Biggers’s work. For the first theme, one can reference an essay within the exhibition catalog, written by Curator Antonio Sergio Bessa titled “ The Craft and The Codes Traveling Through History With Sanford Biggers”, where he states “ The use of quilts in the context of the Underground Railroad,

and as appropriated by Biggers, suggests that “ metaphorical literacy” is not entirely predicated on written and spoken language but rather on things: objects that function as signs and together convey the semblance of syntax, like a rebus<sup>43</sup>”. It is within that juncture where the author discerns that metaphorical literacy can and should be viewed as what he calls a “ bricolage”, or for a more fluid understanding, “Mythical Thinking”. Lastly, the author ascertains the matriculation in Biggers’s ability to bricolage effectively when he states “ Biggers has mastered the bricolage by assembling a stock of cultural-historical references not as linear narratives but rather as dynamic combinations of clashing signs- a process he calls code-switching” . So what we now see here in Jennings's work is a very unique intersection as his motion film is the appropriated form of his own graphic essay, which is appropriated form of Biggers’s Quilts, which is appropriated from the use of quilts in the context of the Underground Railroad. Transcending time, physical space, and materiality, the viewer receives codes from their ancestors, rather they are aware or not.

The second theme distinguished comes as the same author expounds on Biggers’s intentional use of code-switching to forge a certain dynamic which he describes as “ the possibility of multiple time frames coexisting” . Codeswitching is a practice of alternating communication styles based upon where you are located. It is pivotal for Black Americans to codeswitch, as there are societal and cultural biases

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<sup>43</sup> Andersson, Andrea, et al. *Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch*. The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2020.

placed upon them. It is through placing metaphorical codes and combining them, that the author points to Biggers being within an emerging collective of avant-garde Artists whose work refutes traditional forms of art-making, juxtaposed to our obsessive contemporaneity as consumers. Biggers' vision has been described as targeting the "Blackest aspect of the Black tradition', coincided with today's cultural fluidity, to then provide feelings of liberation not synonymous with American slavery, colonialism, and capitalism. What this mimics, is themes embodied in Afrofuturism, or imagining futures from a Black cultural perspective, which again John Jennings is a contributing scholar. It is not Biggers practice of quilt making that is considered apart of Afrofuturism per say but more of his mindset and intentions when creating the quilt, and messages he aim to convey to get the viewer to imagine what their future might entail, now they are internalizing themes within the quilt. What reinforces this distinction is a reference made by Bessa, as he explores sci-fi analogies referred to in the work of scholar Mark Dery titled " In Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture<sup>44</sup>". Dery begins by recognizing that only a few Black Americans write within science fiction and while that is the case, he takes an Afrofuturistic approach to view African Americans, arguing that we are direct descendants of alien abductees, live in a sci-fi nightmare, and our Black bodies are altered by technology. To conclude, one can reinforce the two chosen theme's

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<sup>44</sup> DERY, MARK. "Flame Wars." *Flame Wars*, 1994, pp. 1–10.

relevancy, through the use of signs and codes, with a quote used in the essay by Dery “ Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search of legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”. Jennings, as an Afrofuturist, extends Biggers work and allows the messages to be understood in a lens that it may not have had, if only viewing the quilt by itself.

Transitioning to the second image to be analyzed (**Image 8**), we must begin by identifying the role narration and fiction plays in conveying messages. Du Bois, urged his people that both are adequate tools towards liberation. Fiction refers to literature, or writing, that are imagined or made up. Narration, while similar, is the act of recounting or telling a story, whether its real or made up. The similarities of both forms are that they both convey themes, they create empathy and provide a sense of connectivity towards the literature, provides critique and feedback, and is also entertaining and engages the reader. For Black Americans, it is the connector and driving medium needed to compartmentalize how one should navigate their understanding of the past in relation to their own future. Authors and scholars in varying disciplines have tried their hand at fiction writing and that includes Du Bois, with his five fiction novels, most notably, “ The Quest of the Silver Fleece” and “ The Comet”. For this example, it looks to the use of speculative fiction in the work of Black American Author Octavia Butler, specifically her novel “ Parable of the Sower”. With a reoccurring theme of Black women holding leading roles within her stories, Butler transports readers, from 1993 up until

now, directly into the year 2024. The story begins following a young Black woman named Lauren Olamina, as she navigates to live within a gated community, twenty miles from Los Angeles, in a dystopian world filled with drug abuse, joblessness and crime, and rising climate change. With it being one year prior to the time set in the story, what is most intriguing to me is the themes within this story's connection to temporality. How would a person in 1993 interpret the themes compared to a reader now in 2023? What one can say is, the depiction of this story through the intentional use of the Graphic novel, provides more signs and signifiers for the readers to interpret in ways that the regular novel itself cannot. That is what makes John Jennings's work that much more important.

In the crux of Donald Trump's presidency, John Jennings, as well as his collaborator on this project Damian Duffy, were assigned the task of depicting the specific prose of Butler's work surrounding topics including racism, white supremacy, classism, and gender-based stereotypes, in visual form. An immediate question that arises is how would they adequately depict themes with the release of the book being so far removed. It comes from attention to detail and the use of a script, or for the case within my thesis, verbal signifiers through linguistics. Jennings, with his partner, were obligated to dissect the story and rebuild it by prioritizing exactly which elements directly translate towards the protagonist's development as a character most effectively. It has been described as a unique cartooning design philosophy that intentionally uses visual abstraction to communicate. To reinforce the importance of

the graphic novel I refer to a quote by Jennings from an interview where he states, “ The language of comics is inherently symbolic and surreal, almost like a dream space of comics. This allows me to take readers places I wouldn’t be able to in other storytelling media. I can take readers to new, strange places. The way comics convey information through the pictorial, the symbolic, along with the text is powerful to me about this hybrid storytelling medium<sup>45</sup>”. What this means is that the graphic novel, comic, or in the case of this thesis manga, which is a Japanese comic, functions in ways that other mediums cannot, in providing messages. It is that hybridity between the pictorial, the symbolic, and the text, where meaning is born now as we conduct a formal analysis, we can pinpoint sections within the novel that validates the portrayal within the graphic novel.

**(Image 8 John Jennings Parable of the Sower)**

In conducting another formal analysis of one page within “ The Parable of the Sower” graphic novel, we can then conduct another semiotic analysis to match the themes portrayed in the graphic novel to the themes portrayed in the original novel. This graphic novel has almost 300 pages, which is similar to that of the original novel. It was published in the beginning of 2020 and is an illustrated extension of the original novel. Most graphic novels are in collaboration with an illustrator and writer, who then get the body of work printed published then sold. This image is a page taken from within the novel itself. Overall we are provided an array of content that fills up the page, while

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<sup>45</sup> “John Jennings and the Visual World of Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch.” *YouTube*, 19 Oct. 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDbgAX3sWe4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDbgAX3sWe4).



simultaneously it is being compacted. Drawn to the woman figure to the right of the page, whose face and head are separated from their body by the boundaries of the page, she directs the viewer to the written content of the page through the blank stare in her eyes. In front of her, a male figure is aligned in the exact same direction, but has his eyes closed and is missing an arm. Behind the male figure, a distant town illuminates as if it was a sunlit horizon. In front of him, a chest and torso, with a decapitated head leaning up for comfort underneath two text boxes that read “ Bigger, like Keith, for big city excitement” and “ That was before Dad’s parents were robbed and murdered before there was a neighborhood wall”. The top panel presents us with an image of a male figure with a distorted face whose gaze conveys a certain level of sorrow. To the right of him, more text boxes provide distinct context, providing a setting to the viewer. At the bottom, multiple figures, with one being more illuminated than the others sit around, in community, as they all gaze in their perspective directions. More textboxes protrude around them, giving them life through thoughtful messages from the original author. The messaging is place to provide more context towards the images, giving meaning to a broad portrayal, and direction for the viewer.

To shift from formal analysis to a semiotic analysis, it is instructive to identify three important signifiers within this image with two of them being visual and one being verbal. Starting with the visual, Saussure distinguished that the visual signs are what society collectively agrees it represents, one can point to the image of the woman as well as the notebook templates that the texts are upon. One can identify them because

they serve a very specific function of distinguishing the main character, as well as her internal thoughts, which is written on notebook template similar to that of a personal diary. Adding them could have been an intentional choice, and directly convey details from the storyline in the novel, intricately placed metaphors, as well as religion. An example of this is one text stating “Crazy to live without a wall to protect you”, as it is the main characters personal observation. Lastly, one can identify the verbal text on the template in the image representing verbal signs. What that represents is certain ideologies captured in the book itself. These signs placed together, created in collaboration between John Jennings and his partner, can expand Octavia Butler’s work, presenting themes and ideas that could be missed in reading the novel itself.

The woman in the image is Lauren Olamina, the main protagonist of the story. She is unique, in some cases unusual, intelligent, and curious about life outside of the walls she was placed behind as a child. Throughout the story she ages from fifteen to eighteen and ultimately she is called to lead a community of survivors that she randomly encountered after turmoil in her community. What is most interesting about her, and what the reader may interpret through her depiction, is that she was born with an uncommon condition of hyper-empathy, that was brought upon by drug abuse by her mother prior to her birth. Though the condition itself does affect people in the real life, in the context of this book, it is placed in a unique paradox through its symbolic and semiotic nature. Is this a rare-sensory ability, similar to that of a superhero, or is it a crippling condition? Octavia Butler places that differentiation responsibility on the

reader however, the posture and facial expression of her depiction of this image portrays her condition. The direction of her gaze, alongside her blank expression, reinforces that idea as she is portrayed in self-analyzation.

The next visual signifier distinguished is the notebook template in which the text is placed. Usually, when creating a graphic novel, the illustrator is tasked with how they will present text via a textbox. What can be noticed here is that Jennings portrayed the textbox to look as if the main character is writing in a journal notebook, so we the viewer are in actuality greeted with her own personal journal entries. Viewing it semiotically, Octavia Butler assigns Lauren a notebook which she uses as a notebook and a personal diary. What is unique about it, however, is that the chapters within the book are in actuality her personal entries so the themes captured in her entries, guide the viewer of the graphic novel depiction as if they read the entire book themselves. Jennings, helps the viewer understand that through the aesthetic of the textbox, similar to it being an essay or notes, which can lead the viewer back to the original novel. Lastly, her journal entries transcend just being a diary and an outlet of expression, and ultimately they become a religious form of self-spiritual enlightenment. Her entries progressed to be called the religion she cultivated called Earthseed, which blends her own personal ideologies with other religions practiced. It is these two visual signifiers that convey intricate messages from the author, that provide tools of inspiration in a post-apocalyptic setting.

The last signifier, being the verbal signifier, within this image is the text placed upon the notebook text boxes. While narrating and providing important context for the story itself, many of the text depicted are signifiers for larger themes and metaphors within the novel that Butler intentionally aimed to evoke. If one dissects all the text in order from the top of the image to the bottom, Lauren is the narrator and she is describing her father's childhood and the now importance of the wall and what it signifies as far as protection. It is through the text that it conveys the living conditions they lived within, and is through expressing those conditions that characters, specifically Lauren, can draw inspiration to create change. Her words convey the story, drawing the reader in to think about change and the text in the image embodies themes in the quotes used at the beginning of each chapter within the novel. There is one unique quote within the novel itself that embodies themes captured within this specific verbal signifier as it states " Intelligence is ongoing, individual adaptability. Adaptations that an intelligent species may make in a single generation, or other species makeover may generations of selective breeding and selective dying. Yet intelligence is demanding. If it is misdirected by accident or by intent, it can foster its own orgies of breeding and dying". It is evident in this quote's acknowledgment of generational decision making as well as its emphasis on adaptability, that intentional critique and adaptation are needed while facing danger. So to conclude, Jennings's choice of text is very intentional in their efforts to depict the beginning of the chapter Earthseed quotes.

So to conclude, what does all of this have to do with Japanese culture, Manga, and Anime specifically? Manga, which functions similarly to that of a graphic novel, serves the same purpose in depicting larger stories. John Jennings' work, specifically portrays a story from a novel, in the case of Manga, they depict stories from Japanese mythology and folklore passed down from generation to generation. Moving forward, there will be an emergence of new Black illustrators and artists, that depict larger known stories in the graphic novel form, and in doing so they will create a new path for others to follow.

### Chapter 3: Anime and the Black Otaku

Transitioning to understanding this phenomenon from not only an Art Historical perspective but also a media and popular culture perspective, it is most instructive in doing this by defining what Anime is, providing a summary of its history and how it was brought to America, and giving an example of a contemporary Artist who infuses Anime in his work in Takashi Murakami and explain how one can understand it through the lens of semiotics. Through this understanding, the foundation of thesis is re-presented in that, after having a semiotic experience viewing their favorite Anime, through the lens of Afrofuturism, Black Americans use Anime as an outlet to create and reimagine their own future, that is not rooted in fatalistic realities forced upon Black Americans, as defined in the first chapter. Through that understanding, this chapter then goes in depth towards Afrofuturism's connectivity to Anime, Manga, and Japanese culture. Lastly, it analyzes specific examples of Black Americans who are directly inspired by Anime to then create, within different sectors including the fine arts and graphic design or cinema and photography, with an example being the performative art of Cosplaying.

Anime, which is Japanese animation, transcended demographics during its penetration in America, as it was broadcasted on basic cable in most households. For Black Americans, it became a unique artistic form, as its suspenseful storylines and action pact fights allured its consumers. To define what is Japanese Anime, one can first look at the definition presented by Curators Jeff Fleming and Susan Talbot of Independent Curators International, in their 2001 Exhibition titled " My Reality:

Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation<sup>46</sup>”, at the Des Moines Art Center. Anime is the shortened term for Japanese Animation. They express it deriving from, and being an extension of, Japanese Manga, which was popular after World War II. Manga in its basic form is equivalent to a comic book or graphic novel, and both curators point to it having a serial format printed on newsprint in white and black. It is at that juncture, where Japanese Animators give them life, adding vibrant colors, to then flow and fuse each panel together, bringing forth fluid motion. The evolution of this process within the last century has captivated not only visual artists but also scholars and educators as its materiality grew as Japanese innovations grew. The 2021 exhibition at Williams College titled “Repro Japan: Technologies of Popular Visual Culture”, gives a more comprehensive and historical analysis of the creation of Anime when it states, “During the Edo period, color woodblock printing allowed the mass production of illustrated books and artwork for a broad audience, while fabric-printing technology using paper stencils fostered new popular fashions. Later, printing would evolve through photography, motion pictures, and animation or anime, where sequential images were painted on plastic cells and transferred to film to produce

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<sup>46</sup> Fleming, Jeff, et al. *My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation*. Des Moines Art Center, 2001.

moving images for the even larger audiences created by cinema and television<sup>47</sup>". What can be understood within the cultivation of Anime, is that it is more than flashy fights and captivating stories, its form is an intricate medium shared with the world, by Japan.

Transitioning into defining what Anime is, it is instructive to understand its history within the last century. Anime's origin date back to the early 1900s and refer to the specific and unique form of animation produced specifically in Japan. Tracing back, its original material makeup begins with charcoal on paper as the first known series was created in 1917 by an Artist named Shimokawa Oten<sup>48</sup>, who is heralded as the founding artist and pioneer of Anime. Lasting at most five minutes, having no sound, and consisting of hand-drawn images, Oten showcased the competency to place intricate images together so they can move and narrate a story. However, after most reels were dismantled, many were lost and destroyed due to the impending World Wars as well as natural disasters in the country of Japan. Prior to the rise of television in the early 1960s, one would have to see Anime specifically in theaters, however, the new innovation of the TV afforded individuals from all walks of life the opportunity to enjoy Anime. Most notably in 1963, the United States was introduced to Tezuka and Mushi Pro's "

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<sup>47</sup> *Repro Japan: Technologies of Popular Visual Culture.* Williams College Museum of Art,

[artmuseum.williams.edu/repro-japan-technologies-of-popular-visual-culture/](http://artmuseum.williams.edu/repro-japan-technologies-of-popular-visual-culture/).

<sup>48</sup> *Collections online: British museum.* Collections Online | British Museum. (n.d.).  
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/AUTH231948>



Tetsuwan Atom”, most notably known as “ Astro Boy”. The show's instant success attested to Anime’s potentiality in Western culture as it lured in the consumers of Manga books and became the more socially acceptable mainstream outlet. Today<sup>49</sup>, in 2023, the United States has become one of the largest consumers of Japanese Anime, only second to Japan itself. What is interesting about that is the fact that while the US has more individuals who watch anime regularly, 72%, Japan has a larger population who watch Anime overall, while being a drastically smaller country. What this means is that while we are a large consumer of the medium, Japan will always hold the power in how its produced, interpreted, and distributed.

There is an obvious obsession with this form of visual culture and media in both Japan and America. What can be differentiated though is that obsession is perceived differently within Japan compared to America. In Japan, it is viewed as paramount in popular culture, being held to a high standard, and has a strong economic and social presence to the people there, irrespective of gender, age, and class. That wasn’t the case in America until recently, as the broadcast of Anime in this country came in phases. In the research journal titled “ Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of

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<sup>49</sup> Precedence Research. (2021, October 22). *Anime market size to worth around US\$ 48.3 billion by 2030*. GlobeNewswire News Room. <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2021/10/22/2319206/0/en/Anime-Market-Size-to-Worth-Around-US-48-3-Billion-by-2030.html>

Globalized Culture<sup>50</sup>”, written by Nissim Otmazgin, they allocate the penetration and localization of Anime in the US into three phases. The first phase comes within the early 1960s as the broadcast of imported Anime, which the author describes as “ the mere broadcasting of children’s Anime, from Japan were translated into English, also known as Dubbed. They were demanded by small groups, usually consisting of just avid fans and college students”. The author explains the second phase in being the active localization of Anime to adhere to American needs. They indicate that this came within the late 80s with the rise of American production companies. Lastly, the third phase is embodied within the later years of the 90s, as there was an experimental stage in American and Japanese collaboration within the production of Anime, described as embryonic but unknowingly profitable. This chronologically makes sense as Japanese Contemporary Artist Takashi Murakami took the contemporary art scene by storm around the same time, and it is through his work that we can see Anime being brought into the fine art world.

Juxtaposing themes within Japanese Anime and Manga with traditional Ukiyo-e woodcuts, similar to the work of Iona Rozeal Brown around the same time, Contemporary Artist Takashi Murakami creates pieces consisting of sculptures, paintings, prints, and films within a two-dimensional style that is known as his “

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<sup>50</sup> Otmazgin, Nissim. “Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of Globalized Culture.” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2014, pp. 53–69,

Superflat” aesthetic. In developing this aesthetic, Murakami experiments with the use of dimension, which excludes depth in exchange for shapes and color on a flat plane, which forces the viewer to extend their point of view. In Japanese culture, there is no direct distinction between high and low art, which is culturally different from that of the West. With that being the case, Murakami believes that the comic writer is held on the highest level in the Japanese cultural scene. Heralded as the “ Andy Warhol of Japan”, Murakami's work has integrated Anime into the fine arts world. His “Superflat<sup>51</sup>” Aesthetic, has been the primary form, within postmodern art, in understanding how artists are influenced by both Anime and Manga. His success in the contemporary art world has gifted Black Americans the opportunity to interpret signs and themes from within Anime and Manga, through being a fan, to then cultivate a new art form and imagine new plausible futures.

To begin, referencing back to the exhibition referred to earlier in defining what Anime was, in “My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation<sup>52</sup>”, the viewer is greeted with this installation titled “ DOB In The Strange Forest (Blue DOB)” **(Image 9: Dob in the strange forest ( Blue Dob) Tekashi Murakami 1999 Instillation)**. Beginning with an array of chaotic mushrooms with multiple stylized eyes,

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<sup>51</sup> “Superflat: How Takashi Murakami Set the Stage for Post-War Japan.” *Cartellino*, [cartellino.com/features/2020/03/24/Murakami-SuperFlat-Movement-Postwar-Japan](https://cartellino.com/features/2020/03/24/Murakami-SuperFlat-Movement-Postwar-Japan).

<sup>52</sup> Fleming, Jeff, et al. *My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation*. Des Moines Art Center, 2001.

he places them alongside his own created character known as “Mr. DOB”, which is an icon created by fusing influential characters in popular culture including Doraemon from Japan, Sonic the Hedgehog, and Disney’s Mickey Mouse. Mr. DOB’s demeanor has been described as sweet and fun-loving, however, he is also menacing and intimidating due to the stress of external forces, with an example being capitalism. Murakami’s omnipresent mushrooms are associated with the toxic mushroom clouds, a distinction made by Murakami, during the bombing of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, embodying the trauma felt by the people of Japan. The piece itself depicts a scene inspired by the original story of “Alice in Wonderland”, as Alice abruptly runs into a caterpillar lying on a mushroom, within the “Strange Forest”. Mr. DOB is fully engaged with this setting. Is he scared or is he amazed? Is he pushing the mushrooms away from him to create space, or is he demonstrating certain movements for them to remember? That is up to the viewer’s interpretation however, Murakami’s work merges entertainment and art as a form of escapism from trauma.

This piece’s relevancy towards our understanding of Anime as an artistic form, is unique as it comes at the same time as Anime’s integration into American popular culture in the late 1990s and at the turn of the century. In the exhibition catalog, the curators provide a brief history of understanding Anime and Manga and their relation to post-war Japan. In its forward, it begins by stating “ Whenever a new cultural phenomenon arises, artists take notice. Anime, short for Japanese animation influenced a generation of artists who grew up during the 1960s and ‘70s in post-Hiroshima Japan.

As the country rebuilt itself in a frenzy of business and technology, many Japanese sought refuge from this work-oriented culture in the fantasy of anime cartoons and manga comics. This imagined world portrayed a future far different from day-to-day reality- a future of cyborgs and superheroes with mythic destinies in sharp contrast to their own lives". It concludes this forward by expressing that the popularity of Anime stretched further than Asia, with Pokemon games and Hello Kitty toys being an example, and its influence can be felt within European and American Contemporary Art. With this premise, it is confirmed that Japanese Anime is an adequate medium for not only inspiration but also for escaping mental and emotional trauma, as well as enticing conversation. While this idea was set by the curators themselves, the artist Murakami also reinforces this idea within the catalog in an essay titled " Impotence Culture- Anime".

The essay begins with a statement, " Whenever I try to explain what I think about Japanese animation (anime), I find myself at a loss. Anime has a complex cultural profile. Grasping exactly where it came from, and how it is developing today, is terribly hard". What this quote confirms is that even with a renowned Japanese Artist, understanding the functionality of Anime, and its cultural significance, is not easy. For starters, Murakami believes the term itself is vibrant and unique to the country itself, so much so that the term has become a proper noun. That term itself intertwines with the subculture of Manga as well as videogames, which are released targeting all age groups. In regards to the intersection between Anime and fine art, as of late, it has become so

vast that it opened the door to “Anime-inspired Art”. To capture the vastness of this medium, he provides an analogy and states “ This art responds to the complex milieu of its progenitor in varying degrees. Yet the desire to understand even a part of the deep cultural forest of Anime is to me, perhaps surprisingly, as pure and creative a motivation as the artistic drive to capture the beauty of a landscape or a nude with the rough tools of the art”. It is at that juncture where he believes we must strip the flesh, carve into the bones, and analyze the marrow of the medium. He describes the world of Anime as a world of impotence and helplessness, and believes behind every flashy titillation of Anime, lies the shadow of Japan’s trauma. To conclude, by investigating its creative marrow, one can adequately understand its essence and the development it undergoes.

Understanding Anime’s unique form is important towards understanding how it was introduced to American consumers. It is important to understand as this exhibition was a precursor towards understanding its potentiality, in relation to the fine arts. It is critical to remember that this exhibition and essay came over twenty years ago as Anime’s influence in American popular culture was in its infancy. Referencing the research journal earlier titled “Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of Globalized Culture”, it states “ From the mid-1900s, the golden age of Japanese animation (hereafter “anime”) in the United states generated considerable economic

revenues, reaching a formidable peak in 2003 with more than \$4.84 billion in sales<sup>53</sup>.

Now twenty years later, it has blossomed and matriculated to a high-grossing genre and medium that transcends age, race, and socio-economic status. Within that time its global sales grew from \$ 4.8 billion in 2003 to \$22.6 billion in 2020 and are projected to reach \$48.3 billion by 2030. This actively demonstrates that while it also is an adequate artistic medium for inspiration, it also is an adequate medium for entrepreneurs, and it can be argued that Black Americans have realized that and use it as a tool. From creating Anime inspired content and objects, selling Anime merchandise, or teaching Anime inspired content, there are numerous avenues that Black Americans can take to liberate themselves and gain capital. This can be attributed to collaborations, through fandom and global interests, within different industries including sports, with the NBA and NFL, Music, and Fine Art. Now, before transitioning towards explaining how one can understand the Black American's fascination with Anime and how it's utilized within Black popular culture, one must understand how to analyze the marrow, as Murakami urged, through the lens of semiotics. To do this one can look to Roland Barthes's "Empire of Signs", as Black Americans view Anime from the scope of an outsider, or a "tourist" as Barthes describes it.

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<sup>53</sup> Otmazgin, Nissim. "Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of Globalized Culture." *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2014, pp. 53–69,

Written during the last decade of his life, Roland Barthes's "Empire of Signs"<sup>54</sup>, expounds on his view of semiotics, through a philosophical exploration of Japan's relationship with signs and symbols. This body of work consists of twenty-six chapters, analyzing various aspects distinct to Japanese Culture, alongside eighteen black and white images, including Japanese wrestling, Haiku poetry, the arcade game Pachinko, as well as the Bunraku Puppet theater, which is what will be applied to the function of Japanese Anime. Barthes advocates that there is a unique pleasure in the unfamiliar, whether it be through language and the understanding of linguistics, sound, and rhythm, or Japan's specific use of signs. It is through the lens of a tourist, more specifically a "foreigner", where his "defamiliarization" allowed him to view aspects from an objective lens. He also emphasized the importance of viewing Japanese culture in what he calls "its own terms", to not impose Western ideologies and social norms on it. Ultimately, it is adequate to apply this body of work, from Barthes to the analysis of understanding the Black Anime fan, as its thematic form addresses the vastness of this ongoing phenomenon.

Imagine, you're sitting in a large theater that is dimly lit, eager to witness a spectacle with your loved ones. With origins dating back to the 17th century, Bunraku is a traditional puppet show that incorporates large puppets, which are the size of a child,

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<sup>54</sup> Barthes, Roland, and Richard Howard. *Empire of Signs*. Hill and Wang, 2009.



that are controlled by puppeteers, dressed in black costumes to blend into the black background. With detailed painted faces, the puppeteers manipulate facial expressions intricately, through movement, to convey an array of emotions. Within that process, coinciding alongside the puppeteers, are musicians and speakers, whose role is to express the text through partially speaking, singing, and stroking instruments. To conclude, Barthes places the performance practice in three separate categories, which he describes as “three sites of the spectacle”, being the puppet, the manipulator, and the vociferant. He then breaks that into three separate gestures the effected gesture, the effective gesture, and the vocal gesture. One can apply the same theory, formulated in Japan by Barthes, to Japanese Anime.

The stories within these performances with puppets tend to usually capture historical or mythological themes, through the relationship with all three spectacles, as they work in unison to bring the show to life. In a review of Barthes's writing, it states” Bunraku shows the gesture, lets the action be seen, exhibits simultaneously with the art and the labor. This form rids the actors of manifestation of any whiff of the sacred and abolishes the metaphysical link the West cannot help establishing between body and soul, cause and effect<sup>55</sup>”. What this actively demonstrates, is that different from Western norms, Japanese culture has a unique relationship with objects and spirituality.

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<sup>55</sup> Otmazgin, Nissim. “Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of Globalized Culture.” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2014, pp. 53–69,

Anime, serves a similar function, which brings two-dimensional drawings to life through words, facial expressions, movement, and gestures, to that of the functionality of Bunraku Puppet Theater. To reinforce this, animation techniques, which function the same as the puppeteers, and conventions, which function the same as a theater setting, allow the viewer to be immersed in the portrayed story. Anime, which again is short for Japanese animation, draws inspiration from traditional forms in Japan, with that being the case it is important to understand Barthes's distinction between the "animate" and "inanimate".

In another chapter, Roland Barthes addresses the distinction between the idea of the "animate" and the "inanimate", which is a blurred distinction within Japanese culture. That is due to their belief system, which expresses that inanimate objects can possess a spirit, and is directly connected to spirituality, which is different from our views in the West. He presents this notion that the basis of our theatrical art is much less the illusion of reality, rather than the illusion of totality. He expresses that the Western spectacle is anthropomorphic, relating human characteristics to non-human things, as gesture and speech form one conglomerated muscle that allows expression to function but never divides it. Using the example of puppet theater, our view is that the puppeteer manipulates the puppet and the puppet itself is not alive and has no agency of its own. In Japan, however, the puppet is viewed to have an essence of its own and is in collaboration with the puppeteer. To reinforce this idea, Barthes states " Bunraku does not aim at "animating" an inanimate object so as to make a piece of the body, a

scrap of a man, “alive”, while retaining its vocation as a “part”, it is not the simulation of the body that it seeks but, so to speak, it is its sensuous abstraction”. Through this understanding, the western perspective is not adequate in this case and it one must take an objective view towards grasping the complexities of ones relationship to objects, whether it be a puppet, sculpture, or a drawing.

How can one apply Barthes’s theory to contemporary Anime? Anime can be viewed as an extension of the animacy, or how alive an object is, that is described by him, and emphasizes that it is more than mere entertainment but a reflection of cultural norms and spirituality practiced in the country of Japan. Anthropomorphization in anime is multifaceted and takes different forms including inanimate objects like cars and buildings, animating them through the use of facial features, voices, and personality traits. This directly exists with traditional Japanese mythology and religious beliefs, reinforcing the overall notion that objects have their own spirits. Black American Anime fans internalize these themes as they learn them, which forces them to critique the views taught in Western society.

Shifting to the crux of main argument, relating this to the Black American Anime fan, because North America is a large consumer of Japanese Manga, Anime, and Videogames, fans are unknowingly having a semiotic experience as they are viewing the content in Anime and Manga series. Through this experience, they are internalizing, interpreting, to then re-interpret, similar themes and signs within Japanese culture, that are pointed to by both Takashi Murakami and Roland Barthes. It is at that juncture that

they then draw inspiration artistically to then recreate those same themes to cosplay, create art, and collaborate, embodying themes within “ Afrofuturism”. It is also the use of icons that is intricately placed within the content that the viewer aims to emulate. That is the case based on **(Image 10)**, which comes from a Perris High School Student. The student created this image while listening and viewing a specific lesson plan that was cultivated and presented to hundreds of students of various demographics around the greater Riverside County. It was presented to students in grades varying from 5th to 12th, and a common theme recognized is that there is an overlaying fascination with Japanese Culture that transcends demographics, including race, age, sex and socio-economic status.

This process consists of a fifty minuet lesson plan, presented to students at any given school. The content does not change based on school or grade level, as the goal is to receive natural feedback. It begins with introduction and informing students the purpose of this session. While instructing, intentionally, the are informed to draw or create while listening, using the materials brought to them or the ones provided by the school. They have the freedom to create in any form they would like, as freedom of expression cultivates enticing conversations. Next, they are presented opportunities surrounding Anime including being an artist, whether it is visual or graphic, voice actor, and entrepreneur, and given examples. After, they are shown two graphs of symbols and colors, which are signifiers and icons holding meaning within Anime and Manga

tales, for them to identify. This becomes a mental exercise for them as I prepare to introduce them to the term “Iconography”.

In the presentation, it defines “Iconography” on the basis of the German Art Historian Erwin Panofsky’s definition, which he also expounds on with “Iconology”. Panofsky’s study on iconography focuses on symbols and themes in different works of art, most notably Renaissance art. In his book “Studies of Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance<sup>56</sup>”, he breaks down the three stages of Iconographical analysis starting with “Primary or Natural Subject Matter”, with examples being factual and expressional. Next, he describes the second stage being “secondary or conventional subject matter”, with examples being images, stories, and allegories. Lastly, he defines the third stage as the “intrinsic meaning”, which conveys more symbolic meanings and values. To conclude Panofsky’s view, he describes Iconology being the act of interpretation of icons. While restricted by the boundaries of time or comprehension based on age, it’s important to understand that this is the foundation on what is present it to them.

Moving forward, in order to explain iconography to the students in simple terms, students are provided a relatable example in “Emoji”, that we all use to communicate. They were explained that emojis function as a communicator, utilizing line, color, and

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<sup>56</sup> PANOFSKY, ERWIN. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. ROUTLEDGE, 2019.

symbols, to communicate emotions ranging from irritated to furious, sad to distraught, and happy to ecstatic. Continuing on, emojis are compared to the iconographical nature captured in Anime characters displayed, varying from their eyes, mouth, and hair color, as well as their overall facial expressions. Remember, emphasis is placed on creating while listening, so the students are going back and forth between listening, looking, and creating. The lesson then shift towards more symbolic aspects captured within Anime, which connects to semiotics, including the role of the protagonist, antagonists, their own individual journeys throughout the series, as well as their powers. It concludes by showing a brief video that connects anime shows directly to Japanese mythology and then opens the floor for questions.

This experience supports some of the theories covered in this thesis, including Anime being an adequate form of inspiration, the utilization of narration, and drawing inspiration from Japanese culture. What was most interesting during the interaction with students is that even though all the students have a high level of interest in the content and creating, its evident that fifth graders, whose ages typically are ten or eleven, not only understood the material, but they also asked more detailed and thoughtful questions compared to the high schoolers. Why that was the case? Comparing their feedback, compared to the feedback of the students at Perris High, many students were shy to speak and express themselves. What can be hypothesized is that as a child matriculates, they lose their ability to imagine as they are constrained by society's fatalistic views, as defined in the first chapter. If you put that within a black

cultural perspective, one can understand how a child has to grow up fast, meaning they cannot navigate from the lens of a child but instead on par with an adult. This was confirmed based on **(Image 10)**, from a student at Perris High.

**(Image 10:**Perris High School, Gluck Student, March 2022)

A blank space with no background draws us into the woman figure as she is engaged with another being in intimate interaction. There is a subtle movement by the woman figure as her emotional state is expressed, through the relationship with the other figure. Texts surround her in free form, not text boxes, giving us detailed information for interpretation. There is an overall lack of color, which may be intentional, however, the color that is present, draws us back to the woman figure, as she is the only one illuminated in that fashion. Her skin was a shade of coco brown in contrast with her pitch-black bodysuit. Darker hues of brown, as well as brown present makeup and eyeliner. One blue eye is open, with the other closed in a wink, in a flirtatious style, that is confirmed with a star icon sparkling from its closed eye. A red headwrap ties her hair up, curly and protruding like a luscious afro. Atop her afro, is a raccoon, perched as if it wants to hide within the confines of her Afro.

The presented image portrays character icons created by the student, “ Eliza Davis: The Bandit”, and her companion “ Asra the Raccoon”. It gives us information about the character depicted as “Eliza”, being from a well-off family but an only child, and the struggles that come along with that. The student expounds by giving us details about the companion “ Asra”, and its functionality as a sidekick and a supporting character of

the protagonist Eliza. She concludes by informing us that the protagonist draws inspiration from the themes embodied in “ Robin Hood”, which she distinguishes being her motivation for helping people. She provides both verbal and visual signs, being the written story as well as the woman figure and her sidekick, which can be interpreted semiotically, narrating a story similar to that of an anime.

So to begin with the icons used, the identifiable icons are the eyes, most importantly the figures wink and sparkle, the eye color, and the lips. In this example, the student identified icons presented in the PowerPoint, interpreted their meaning, and then portrayed them through her own expression being the woman’s skin color, eye color, eye wink, and sparkle icon protruding from her face. Anime and Manga both have a unique form of visual communication and, just like the emoji example that was presented in class, most of the time we don’t think about how they communicate we just interpret them. In this case, the student utilized the more immediately understandable forms to communicate, with eye symbols being that. Within the rich history of Japan, and also referenced by both Murakami and Barthes, eyes have consistently been the tool to convey an array of emotions. With this example, eyes with a wink and sparkles, represent cuteness. Usually, characters that are portrayed with that form of an icon have intentionally portrayed that way to try to get their way. It is a persuasion tactic, which makes sense to the context given by the student. Another distinction is seen within the use of color, and in this case skin color and eye color. The student portrayed the woman figure as a black woman but gave it blue eyes, which is



not common. In Panofsky's process, one would utilize the third stage with the "intrinsic meaning", which involves analyzing formal elements of a given artwork, its subject matter, and its cultural context. This is the case because the blue eyes have a more symbolic meaning, representing hope and innocence. That juxtaposition to the brown skin, which can represent uniqueness, represents a being of a higher power that is unique and provides hope to others that they are around.

Utilizing Roland Barthes's theory, the connotation is unique however, its functionality rationalizes the idea of a myth as the deepest form of the connotation, which is then what creates a direct interaction with the viewer to historical Japanese mythology, with Manga and Anime being the medium. In this piece, one can identify two signifiers, being the raccoon "Azra", which is the sidekick, and the verbal text. In regards to the sidekick, semiotically, they embody a form of companionship for the main character. Applying the denotation, a sidekick usually tends to be, literally always around the main character. Connotatively, the sidekick represents loyalty and moral support, and most of the time, the character cannot reach their full potential without a lesson learned through their companion. In regards to the verbal text, in Manga, they provided a multi-layered story, with meanings hidden within the meanings.

Denotatively, it is a brief bio introducing the characters to the viewer, based on the literal meaning of the words, and an example of this is the names are written and the student's signature. Connotatively, there is meaning within meanings, as it suggest that the story written may be the student's own personal ideologies expressed on the paper.

In all, the use of iconography and semiotics is clear and intentional, and my hope is that through my research, I can inform artists like this student what they actually are doing.

What can now be argued, is that through the use of semiotics and iconography, this student is somewhat aware of their positioning in America as a young Black girl. It is through her fascination with anime and its symbolism, that she was able to express her views of the world and imagine how it might be in an imagined one. This first layer forces the individual into a mental space of epiphany. They now question their place in the world, based on their own unique interests, and that embodies scholar W.E.B Dubois's theory of "Double Consciousness". In his 1903 book titled "The Souls of Black Folk", Dubois formulated this idea of "Double Consciousness", which is a sensation described as a "two-ness", by Du Bois. It is a conflicting sensation as the individual is now aware of both their heritage as being Black and their heritage being American. This is the reality for Black Americans, and with that being the case, many individuals do not reach this moment of enlightenment. Black Anime enthusiasts, like this student, are presented with this notion, and Anime and manga have been an outlet for us to critique that. With that being said, for this student, the Gluck activity pushed her to that first step. It's from her own work, but this can also come from the Anime shows directly, Manga comics, or viewing established cosplayers on social media. Representation is the key, as now that they are aware, they can use other tactics in theories to progress forward.

The example of the student's work, and signs within contemporary Anime shows, allow Black fans to take the first step, the first phase. That first step embodies Dubois' double consciousness, which allows the individual to understand their position. A second step, a second phase, can be available for individuals most readily, through photography and cinema. Feminist Theorist Tina Campt's work titled "A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See"<sup>57</sup>, , reinforces this because it is through photographing Cosplayers, that Black American anime fans can then control how they are portrayed in visual culture, giving them agency to then re-imagine their future, which flows into the third step captured, in the themes within "Afrofuturism". In her work, Campt acknowledged Dubois's theory and claimed that as the basis of how Black Americans are represented in visual culture. She advocates that the double consciousness of Black Americans is often made invisible and becomes overlooked in favor of fatalistic realities. Campt provides a challenge in disrupting the standing framework, and with the photo image being the medium and the cosplayer being the subject, exhibitors, and collaborators can keep double consciousness on their minds when presenting Black Americans in an empowering light.

The performative art of "Cosplaying" is unique and it is through the use of photography and cinema, that one can adequately capture signs depicted within Anime

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<sup>57</sup> Campt, Tina. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*. The MIT Press, 2023.

and Manga to then cultivate new meaning. To start, it is instructive to explain what this performance piece actually is and its functionality. For this we refer to Art Historian Theresa Winge, and her analysis in “ Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay<sup>58</sup>”. She begins by establishing the premise that the term “ Cosplay” itself, combines the terms “costume” and “role play”. What this does next is animate the individual as they then participate in various activities including masquerades, singing, dancing, and posing for pictures with other cosplayers, known as “otaku” in Japan. “Otaku”, describes the individual and is a label placed upon them based on their level of obsession. The chapter identifies that cosplaying encompasses an array of genres within costumes roleplaying including fantasy, mythology, and horror however, the two dominant cultures are Japanese and North American anime, manga, and video games. Another important distinction is the fact that compartmentalizes cosplaying into four elements, “ The Cosplayer”, “ The Social Setting”, “The character being cosplayed”, and “ The dress”, or outfit. To conclude she layers cosplaying on a spectrum based upon the individual’s level of commitment being from casual to complex.

In 2020, with the world closed at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, and thesis research still within in its infancy, the Autry decided to discuss the intersection between Hip-Hop, Black Popular Culture, Cosplaying, and Anime. Their initiative was

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<sup>58</sup> Winge, Theresa. “Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay.” *Mechademia*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, pp. 65–76

called “ Imagined West”, which focuses on imagination and creativity, in relation to the American West. After conducting extensive research, interviewing a contemporary cosplayer, and curating a selection of images, the museum published a body of work titled “ Megan thee Stallion: Rap, Anime, and the Imagined West<sup>59</sup>”. Released in September 2020, as the country faced uncertainty, the Autry Museum was preparing for a new exhibition on the horizon. The premise of the publication is set with a question: What does that term Imagined West even mean? West of what? With there being no right or wrong answers, this was written to evoke thoughts and inform viewers that we are all connected in more ways than it actually seems. With that being the foundation bringing them in, they are exposed to whom the post decided to cover, rapper and entertainer “Megan Thee Stallion”, with her fascination with Japanese Culture and Anime. To conclude the thesis paragraph in that writing, it contrasts two opposing worlds, and the cultural significance of the rapper, stating “ From dropping multiple gold records to cosplaying your favorite My Hero Academia Character, she continues to inspire the next generation of female rappers and black cosplayers in ways that challenge societal norms and normalize women excelling in many realms”.

**(Image 11 Paper Magazine, 2019 Photography)**

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<sup>59</sup> “Autry Museum of the American West.” *Megan Thee Stallion: Rap, Anime, and the Imagined West* | *Autry Museum of the American West*, [theautry.org/explore/blog/megan-thee-stallion-rap-anime-and-imagined-west#lg=highlights&slide=5](https://theautry.org/explore/blog/megan-thee-stallion-rap-anime-and-imagined-west#lg=highlights&slide=5).

This digital cover, taken from Paper Magazine, which was released in 2019, depicts a Black Female figure, identified as the rapper Megan Thee Stallion, by the visual text below her. Above her, while interacting with her, is the title of the magazine, also expressed through visual text. She gazes at us, as we gaze back while also being drawn in. Her hair is separated into two different colors white and red. There are boundaries in general placed to give us certain direction, as she is split in half with one half being a light hue of red and the other being a light hue of blue. The blue side is encompassed with a whistling ice blast, while the opposing side is engulfed in flames. An item is held in the middle, a box of matches with the Texas state logo on the cover. The matchbox is open slightly and because her hand is in motion, on the left-right side of the image, it's safe to assume that she is attempting to grab one. This image of the rapper is the base of what I believe is a transitional multi-phased process that conveys messages through the use of icons and signs. The materiality and subject can change mediums through Anime and Manga style, photography, and cinema. Going back to the student, it can be hypothesized that the rapper, Megan Thee Stallion, can view that image and inspire Cosplay through signs and icons she internalizes. Inversely, the student, can view this image of the rapper, and inspire to Cosplay and collaborate with a photographer to capture them or create art using Anime and Manga style.

(Image 12 Shoto Todoroki)

Now we are presented another image of the Anime and Manga character Shoto Todoroki, from the series "My Hero Academia". Born with powers to emit fire and ice

from separate sections of his body, he is a protagonist in the story and attends a prestigious school for students who possess powerful “ Quirks”. In this world, there is a ranking system for heroes and he is the son of the second-ranked hero “ Endeavor”, who possesses the quirk of hell-fire. This character is very quiet, and intuitive, often represented with a stoic expression on his face if viewed from the lens of iconography. His main goal is to work alongside the main protagonist to prove himself as a hero, surpass his father, who is obsessed with him becoming stronger, and make the world a better place.

While we won't conduct a complete formal analysis, one can identify signifiers in the image of the rapper and identify them alongside similar signifiers in the image of the anime character. First one can identify that the use of fire and ice as icons, the subject's facial expressions, as well as their hair all convey meaning. Roland Barthes expressed that photographs have messages, and in this case, the photographer would be the source of emission, the camera, and social media would be the channel of transmission, and the viewer of the photograph would be the point of reception. What does this mean in relation to the cosplayer themselves? What this means is that they are a muse, and while they have some agency, including being the inventor of their self-image through poses, the responsibility falls more on the photographer setting them up and dressing them. Beginning with the setting, one can refer to Barthes' theory of connotation as the setting gives the image meaning. An example of this is that if the cosplayer is presented in a vibrant and colorful environment it will give a connotation. In contrast, if presented

in a dark setting, that can connote mystery and disarray. For the setting in both images, the background is a natural color, which typically is done to focus the attention on a specific point, which I believe is the case with the icons of fire and ice in both images.

In both images **(11 and 12)**, the use of fire and ice as icons create a connection between the subjects' own personal battles. They both function as visual signs, and semiotically they tend to represent contrasting realities being good and evil, life and death, and creation and destruction. For the rapper, going back to the publication from *The Autry*, she was intrigued by the character's personal struggle, and it is that personal struggle, that she identifies as the motivator towards her cosplaying. In an interview with the Anime streaming company "Crunchyroll", which I quote in the writing, she stated " "Being an adult and watching anime, I really like the storylines. You see a character who might not be the strongest. You grow with that character. You meet new people along the way as they try to be the hero and become the person they need to be". She, similar to the student, does not know they are viewing the anime from a semiotic lens, however, it is important to distinguish this fact to recognize the potentiality exhibiting images of cosplayers has in inspiring Black Americans.

The last signifier is the use of facial expressions, which is used as an iconographic visual sign, to convey emotion. For the subject Todoroki, as stated earlier, his expression is often described as stoic and emotionless, which can be recognized by his mouth being presented in a somewhat straight line and a blank stare in his eyes. In Roland Barthes's "



The Photographic Message ” he states “The face is the privileged site of a certain enigma, a certain inexpressiveness, an infinity of nuances that one can express without speaking”. With that premise, he believed that a subject's identity, character, and emotion can be captured in a facial expression. With that being the case, comparing both images, The rapper has a different facial expression, compared to that of the fictional character. While subtle, because her mouth position is different and she is actually looking forward instead of down like the character, she evokes different feelings, that convey emotions of inspiration and empowerment. That could be intentional and was captured to empower women, specifically Black women.

In Afrofuturist Ytasha Womack’s 2013 book titled “ Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture ”, she provides us with another definition of the performative art of cosplaying when she states “ Cosplay, or the act of donning costumes from your favorite comic book, video game, manga, or anime tale, is pretty popular, totally geeky, and truly fun<sup>60</sup>”. She then goes on to differentiate the functionality of Cosplaying, within the context of Black American popular culture, as there is an increasing, vast, and diverse population of cosplayers dressing up as their favorite heroes, heroines, villains, and sidekicks, gifting them with a temporary break from fatalistic realities with being Black in America. it is through the lens of “Afrofuturism”, which is defined in chapter one and what can be argued as the third and

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<sup>60</sup> Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.

final step or phase, proceeding Dubois's Double Consciousness and Tina Campt's Black Gaze, that Black American Otaku begin to imagine a liberated future through world they individually create. Going back to the work from the "Imagined West" exhibition, it also provides an interview from a contemporary Cosplayer Taylor Hobbs, also known as YourFavoriteSenpaii, who utilizes photography and social media, holding agency alongside the photographer, to reach a vast audience, recapture and reinterpret signs seen within Anime, and inspire other Black fans to create themselves.

Similar to the rapper and the student, Taylor also shares a love for Anime and Japanese culture overall, and three years ago she shared how she got into cosplaying, after an interview. She began by expressing of her introduction into the realm of Cosplaying when she was in high school, attending a convention called Persacon, which traveled and took place in varying cities within Alabama. It was a new world to her and as her fascination grew, anxiety and nervousness came alongside that fascination. It can be hypothesized that she experienced the first phase at that moment, the Double Consciousness, which caused those feelings. Amidst those conflicting emotions, she introduced her alternate identity, YourFavoriteSenpaii, by cosplaying her first character, Naoko Takeuchi's Sailormoon. Her decision to use photographic images as a medium at that moment progressed her to the second step. That alternate identity is whom we are greeted within this image and it is then shared with the world, through social media.

**(Image 13 Taylor Hobbs as Sailor Moon)**

Present yet unavailable, she stares into the distance in a trans-like state, similar to a gaze. The figure protrudes over us with her chest out and arms extended to the side of her as if she is ready to engage with another being. In her hand is a crescent-shaped staff that she grasps tightly in a high-rise glove that goes up to her elbows. She is dressed in an outfit similar to that of a school uniform or sailor suit, that has colors red, white, and blue. Her hair, which seems to be in locs, is tied up into two buns and extended down her back and shoulder. Notably, the background behind her is blurred, which places a direct emphasis on her and the immediate setting that she is in the middle of, giving a sensation of being placed in a separate world.

Taylor Hobbs's depiction of Naoko Takeuchi's Sailormoon, as YourFavoriteSenpaii, appropriates themes captured in the series itself, to then form a new character that serves as an icon for the next viewer. **(Image 14 Sailor Moon)** The fictional character herself was created in the 1990s and has been integrated into an array of Anime series, films, and merchandise for sale. The most notable features of this character are her appearance and sailor scout uniform. In relation to her appearance specifically, her aesthetic has been described as youthful and feminine, based on her large sparkling eyes, long flowing hair, and distinctive two buns. Her signature sailor outfit, galvanizes different generations of fans, all aiming to emulate her. This character spearheaded and rejuvenated a unique retro aesthetic in popular culture, that exemplifies multiple themes including love, feminism, and Astrology. Most notably, this anime series was one of the first to incorporate themes centering on LGBTQ+. It is the

Icon's pure and authentic essence, that cosplayers, like Taylor, identify, emulate, and reproduce. The finished product, the image itself, and its functionality allow one to view the world from an "Afrofuturistic" lens, to then gain control of how they will shape their own future.

The Student, MegantheeStallion, Taylor Hobbs, and Black fans across the country, all utilize their status as avid fans to create and imagine. Similar to being a fan of a sports team, Anime, and Manga has created a thriving industry for fans and enthusiasts to take their joy and fascination and use it as a mechanism for creativity and entrepreneurship. To reinforce this idea, one can refer back to the term "Otaku", that was introduced earlier. To do this, one can also refer back to the essay on Murakami as he provides a brief history of the term and its uniqueness to the advancement of Anime and Manga globally. The year is 1974 and the world is introduced to the Anime show Uchusenkan Yamato, which translates to "Spaceship Yamato". The essay begins by expressing that the introduction of this show changed the face of Japanese animation overnight, ultimately leading to cultivating theatrical versions of the show and most notably "Animage", short for Anime magazine. This birthed a sub-culture of fans from late teens to grown adults, which we classify as "Nerds", or in Japan "Otaku".

Prior to the coining of the term, there was consistently a connotation between Anime and science fiction. The release of "Spaceship Yamato", and its success motivated the producers to improve and expand the story, examining societies' relationship with technology, which is also a theme embodied in "Afrofuturism". The curators of the

exhibition point to the success coming within the depth of the setting, alongside science fiction jargon, like the term “warp drive”. That dedication by the producers directly motivated fans. The studio itself, “Studio Nue”, and its first generation of artists, are heralded for cradling Otaku culture. It is at that juncture that fans began to use the term itself to pay homage to the studio’s enhancements to the field of Anime. They then would congregate at markets, fan meetings, and host parties, whenever a new show or movie was being released. Amassing fans from all over, estimated over one million to twenty million people at the time, Otaku culture was born.

Around the same time as the release of “Spaceship Yamato”, the “Animage”, was the most prevalent outlet for all things Anime as it examined the industry in all aspects including the work that goes into animating, how one becomes a voice actor, drawing techniques from the creators, and new shows soon to be released. The essay points to the success of this outlet, leading fans to create their own animated shorts, providing critiques, creating parodies, as well as becoming Cosplayer. It was, and still is, momentous to witness drawn figures from the show inspiring mixed-media promotion as that subculture still thrives, in a different form with the rise of social media. If we view this from a contemporary lens, it demonstrates that the same inspiration, from signifiers and icons in Anime and Manga, continues to inspire fans and is through the use of social media, where they convene, create, curate, and present their work, for the entire world. For Black American Anime fans, or in this case we can now call them Black

Otaku, it is now possible to meet and collaborate with millions of other enthusiasts to convene, an example is an Afrocentric Anime convention, called Dream Con.

Dream Con<sup>61</sup>, which is an annual Anime and gaming convention started in 2018, gathers thousands of social media influencers, artists, and fans to Texas to collectively and openly share their love for Anime. Celebrating shared interests ranging from comics, music, fine art, and popular culture, this convention welcomes everyone as each guest has the rare opportunity to speak with their favorite voice actor, dress up as their favorite character, or just beat their friend in a game of “Smash Bros”. This is all cultivated and made possible by a group of friends, who are YouTube content creators, who formed the group RDCworld, short for “Real Dreamers Change the World”. Reaching an audience of up to almost 12 million people through social media platforms, their mission, as stated on their website, is to utilize their platform as a stepping stone to build an audience and ultimately create Manga and Anime. On their website, they also expressed that originally they aimed to visit established conventions to meet and interact with fans. However, they express that most conventions ignored them and turned them away, which motivated them to create their own.

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<sup>61</sup> “About Dream Con.” *Dream Convention*, [www.dreamconvention.com/about](http://www.dreamconvention.com/about). Accessed 9 May 2023.

## Conclusion

The Japanese Otaku of the past and the Black Otaku of America now, both demonstrate why Japanese Anime and Manga should be analyzed as essential artistic mediums to draw inspiration. Roland Barthes as well as Takashi Murakami recognized the benefits to Western society in internalizing themes and ideologies within Japanese culture. As an Otaku unknowingly conducts a semiotic analysis, through the analysis of signs and icons, they then harness what they interpret to create something new and inspirational. Understand, this can apply to all Anime fans, however, this thesis applies this directly to Black Americans' positionality in America and its history rooted in systemic racism and white supremacy. This application can be adequately placed in what was described as a three-stepped way of looking for Black Americans. The first step is embodied within W.E.B Dubois's Theory of Double Consciousness, recognizing that you are Black and American, which can be an adequate mode of seeing today. The second step is within Tina Campt's theory of the Black Gaze, which critiques the ways Black Americans are presented and represented, in relation to photographs, cinema, and social media. Lastly, and most importantly, after fans matriculate through the first two steps, they reach the third which is embodied in the theory coined by Mark Dery of "Afrofuturism", which gifts an individual the agency to shape their own path for the future. Thus far, Afrofuturism has covered multiple disciplines within the arts including film, music, and fine art. It also has incorporated numerous genres within fiction including horror, superhero fiction, and speculative fiction, most notably Octavia

Butler's Parables. It is through this contributing scholarship, that Japanese Anime and Manga, of all genres, should be examined through the lens of Afrofuturism. In doing so, we can, together, dismantle fatalistic realities forced by systemic barriers, for Black American Otaku, through the imagination.



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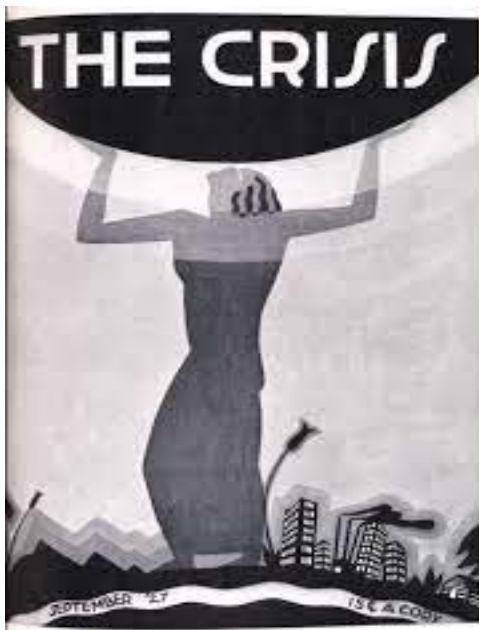
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Image 1



Z #HHE #G xEr lv#xurxqghg# #k lv#z runl#k#Frung#Dp hulfdq/#6#Q ry#4<331

Image 2



Cover of the September 1927 publication of The Crisis by Aaron Douglas

Image 3



Iona Rozeal Brown  
a<sup>3</sup>...blackface #52, 2003  
Acrylic on paper.

Image 4



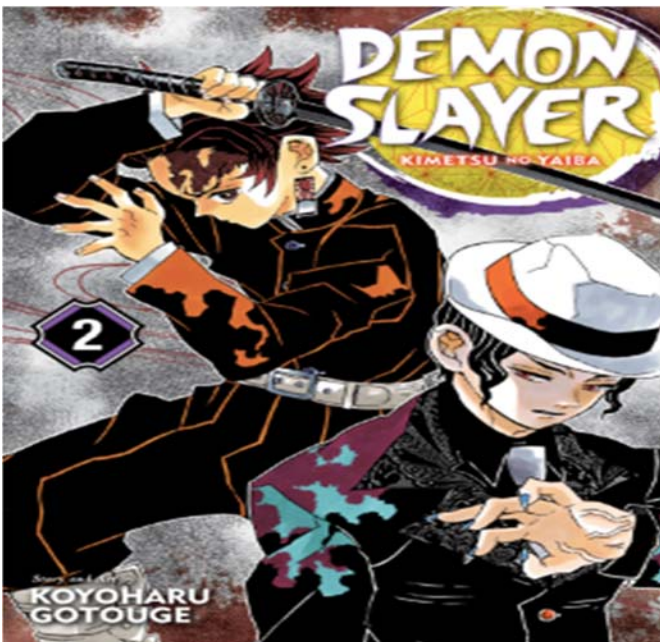
Iona Rozeal Brown, "king kata #3: peel out (after Yoshitoshi's "Incomparable Warriors: Woman Han Gaku")", 2007, Gouache and Acrylic on Paper, 62 x 50 inches. Collection of Tara Sandroni and Eric Hirshberg, Los Angeles.

Image 5



Iona rozeal brown. All things fall down

Image 6



Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, Vol. 2



Image 7



John Jennings Mother patchwork. 2020

Image 8



John Jennings Parable of the Sower

Image 9



Dob in the strange forest ( Blue Dob) Tekashi Murakami 1999 Instillation

Image 10



Perris High School, Gluck Student, March 2022

Image 11



Paper Magazine, 2019 Photography by Arturo Evaristo / Styling by Sarah Toshiko West  
Image 12



Shoto Todoroki-MyHeroAcademia

Image 13



Taylor Hobbs as Sailor Moon, Dave Yang photographer

Image 14



Sailor Moon