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“You Are Not Alone!”: Anime and the Globalizing of America

The two thousand people filling “every seat in the biggest room in Baltimore” on the final night of the 1983 World Science Fiction Convention were not waiting to see the summer’s biggest sci-fi blockbuster, *Return of the Jedi*. Instead, these devoted fans lingered until 1:00 a.m. to screen a film virtually unknown in the United States—the Japanese animation feature *Uchû senkan Yamato: kanketsuhen* (Space Battleship Yamato: The Final Chapter). Before the showing, though, the convention organizers forewarned the audience that the film’s Japanese sponsors had sent the wrong film, *Saraba uchû senkan Yamato: ai no senshitachi* (Farewell Space Battleship Yamato: Warriors of Love), a 1978 chapter of the long-running, *Star Wars*-like “space opera.” Yet, despite this blunder, the show went on, and the capacity crowd remained seated and enthralled by this uncommon spectacle.

To this audience, the wrong film was still new and different. No *Yamato* film was commercially available outside Japan, and virtually none of the convention attendees understood the film’s Japanese dialogue. Accounting for the lack of subtitles, two organizers “provided a running commentary in English,” though one later admitted that his fluency in Japanese was suspect at best. The language barrier, however, was insignificant. What was important was not the message of this particular film but the audience’s participation in the imaginative communal act of watching something different, something Japanese—something global. That night in 1983 the World Science Fiction Convention in Baltimore served as the frontline of cultural globalization by showcasing Japanese animation, better known today as anime.

1. These film titles are literal translations because in 1983 no official English-language adaptations yet existed. These would both see U.S. releases in the 1990s as *Final Yamato* and *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato: In the Name of Love*.

2. This story is recounted in R.F.’s response (November 15, 2005) to a questionnaire I distributed electronically to anime fans of the 1977–89 period. Hereafter these responses are cited as such: R.F. response, November 15, 2005. For respondents who are not published authors, I have chosen to use initials for anonymity. For readability I have created pseudonyms for names in the text. The questionnaire and all responses to it are in the possession of the author and are available upon request.

As it crossed the Pacific, anime provided the fans in Baltimore and thousands more across the United States with more than just entertainment; it presented an opportunity to participate in a global community that fostered local cultural difference. Anime looked unlike the children’s cartoons of U.S. television, and it told stories that challenged viewers’ emotions and worldviews more than the feel-good films of George Lucas’s and Steven Spielberg’s Hollywood. When anime aired at a science-fiction convention or a fan club meeting, it offered audiences spaces where they could experience mediated cultural exchange with anime’s Japanese creators and with fellow fans on the other side of the world. Across the United States, the Japanese medium inspired the creation of anime fan clubs: local, non-elite social communities that envisioned a world of cultural interconnectedness. The case of anime thus serves as one tangible illustration of the impact of cultural globalization on the United States in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In the last two decades, foreign relations historians have carefully explored the twentieth-century expansion of U.S. culture overseas. Only recently, though, have they begun to examine the impact of global economic and cultural exchange within U.S. borders through histories of consumption and globalization. Throughout the twentieth century, globalization took place in millions of domestic settings as Americans increasingly consumed foreign products and the ideas and images those products carried. In fact, during the postwar era, relations with a producing nation like Japan more often played out in the realms of consumption and cultural exchange than in traditional political and economic spheres, though the conventional narrative of U.S. foreign relations has yet to recognize this. In general, many more Americans have consumed foreign products than have made foreign policy. What impact might such a recognition have on histories of U.S. foreign relations?

Recent work by Kristin Hoganson and others marks new territory in the exploration of domestic consumption and its relevance to the field. Hoganson notes that “we know more about the outgoing tide than the incoming swells” of imports that have landed on U.S. shores and shaped domestic life. Her particular story of “how bourgeois American women . . . participated in international rel-
tions” through their consumption of foreign products provides a model for understanding how anime fans, as non-elite consumers unconnected from traditional globalizing institutions, also partook in foreign relations. The scholarly neglect of the “incoming swells” derives from a general disregard for the transformative power of outside influences on domestic life in the United States. In surveying the growing literature on the “globalization of American culture,” Petra Goedde observes that “the proliferation of American culture abroad affects the production of culture in the United States itself,” yet historians have largely ignored the “reciprocal effect” of “the impact of globalization on American culture.”

This article examines the role that the consumption of one Japanese product, anime, played in the reciprocity of global cultural exchange within the United States, a phenomenon I label the “globalizing of America.” Akira Iriye notably used this phrase to characterize the period in the early twentieth century when U.S. power became a global reality. I subvert this term, however, to describe how “the global” became a reality of U.S. social and cultural life in the second half of the twentieth century. By “the global” I mean the widespread material and ideological conditions resulting from the processes of contemporary globalization. Political scientist Jan Aart Scholte creatively defines contemporary globalization (beginning in the early 1970s) as a “reconfiguration of social geography marked by the growth of transplanetary and supraterritorial connections between people.” In other words, the experience of the local changes in response to global processes of unprecedented scale and kind; cultural globalization is thus the reconfiguring of local conditions in response to the “transplanetary and supraterritorial” flow of symbolic systems of meaningful ideas, images, and goods. Such a definition distinguishes contemporary globalization from earlier moments of economic and cultural expansion, like the sixteenth century or the three decades preceding World War I, which are often associated with older notions of colonialism or imperialism. To be sure, U.S. elites had established global connections and consciousnesses since at least the period Iriye describes, but only with the new inexpensive media and transportation technologies available circa 1970 were “transplanetary and supraterritorial connections” available to the non-elite majority. Also, I describe the “globalizing of America,” instead of “the United States,” to imply that the processes of material

and ideological interconnecting were broader and more multifaceted than traditional understandings of statehood and citizenship allow.

What the empirical example of Japanese animation’s border-crossing and popular proliferation demonstrates, then, is that as much as America has changed the world, the world has changed America. More specifically, the case of anime illustrates how non-elites have engaged the processes of globalization by using the consumption of a foreign cultural product to create new social communities reflecting cultural heterogeneity in local U.S. settings. Iriye and Thomas Bender, among others, have argued persuasively in the last two decades for the incorporation of a transnational or global perspective into U.S. history, recognition of the constructedness and limits of the idea of the nation-state, and more nuanced understandings of U.S. culture.¹¹ For foreign relations historians, such methodological leaps require approaching culture as cultural historians do, acknowledging that the notion of a single, mythic “American culture” obscures the diverse ways that local communities connect nationally and globally. The trend of studying nonstate actors, such as businesses and nongovernmental organizations, has opened significant new paths of inquiry, but it still links the stories historians tell to public or private institutions of elite power.¹² The next methodological turn is to explore how, throughout U.S. history, people without access to institutional power were able to ideologically construct the world and materially connect with it. Linking foreign relations with histories of domestic consumption, as Hoganson does, allows for such a turn. This article follows Hoganson’s example by detailing how anime fans’ cultural consumption enabled them to act as agents of globalization independent of the institutions commonly credited with the globalization of America.

The impact of anime consumption on local U.S. communities began in 1977 when enthusiasts in Los Angeles established the first anime fan club. Over the next dozen years, emerging social communities at the local and national level used this foreign cultural product to reconfigure their “social geography,” that is, to reorient individual and group identities according to new awareness of transnational or global interconnectedness. Until 1989, when entrepreneurs founded the first U.S. anime import company, thus turning the corner toward anime’s commercialization, fan communities existed solely because of grassroots, “do-it-yourself” initiatives. U.S. anime fandom in its first decade was a

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form of intercultural relations at the level of middle-class, non-elite private citizens; it was also an aspect of the U.S.-Japan relationship mediated almost exclusively through the exchange and consumption of anime texts. In this article I examine several representative anime before exploring a few central aspects of the fan experience that enabled non-elites to participate creatively in global cultural exchange. Exploring the activities of fan communities in the 1980s—the decade before “globalization” entered the popular lexicon—can illustrate for foreign relations historians how non-elite Americans at the local level engaged with the sweeping social and cultural transformations of the late twentieth century. I conclude with suggestions for rethinking the history of U.S. cultural relations in light of the case of anime.

Before exploring how fans created global cultural spaces in the late twentieth-century United States, an introduction to anime’s characteristics and a look at some exemplary texts from this era would be appropriate. Simply, the term anime (denoting both singular and plural) refers to any and all television or film animation produced in Japan. The genres of anime are as diverse as U.S. popular entertainment, if not more so. Mindlessly lighthearted and comical anime—a large segment of it, like the once-ubiquitous Pokémon, marketed to children—share the big and small screens with sophisticated philosophical treatises with large adult audiences, like Mamoru Oshii’s critically acclaimed Ghost in the Shell (1995) and Hayao Miyazaki’s Academy Award-winning Spirited Away (2002). In Japan, animation has never been pigeonholed as children’s entertainment as it has in the United States. Its popularity in Japan is linked to the omnipresent manga, which is often translated as “comics,” but which more closely resemble what Americans call “graphic novels.” American visitors to Tokyo frequently are struck by the number of adults passing time on a train with noses buried in the latest volumes of favorite manga. Many of the most popular anime series first appear as manga.

Anime’s first break on Japanese television, Osamu Tezuka’s Tetsuwan atomu, based on Tezuka’s 1950s manga of the same name, aired in early 1963. (Tezuka, the “godfather” of manga and anime, credited his trademark style to an earlier moment of cultural transfer: he adored Walt Disney cartoons like Bambi.) Testuwan atomu signaled the birth of a popular culture phenomenon in Japan.

13. In Japan, animation of any national origin, including the United States, is anime. In the United States, however, fans have worked hard to ensure that the word “anime” refers only to animation produced in Japan. Well into the 1990s, Americans used the words “anime” and “Japanimation” interchangeably, but the latter died off because of the authenticity of “anime” and the potential of offensively mispronouncing “Japanimation.”
14. Japanese names are rendered in Western format (i.e., surname last).
Anime’s popularity increased gradually in the country from the mid-1970s. Science-fiction (SF) series like *Uchû senkan Yamato*, *Kidô senshi Gundamu*, and *Makurosu* generated large and dedicated fan bases. So too did series like *Urusei Yatsura*, a comedy that mixed SF themes with commentary on daily life in contemporary Japan. By the early 1990s the anime *otaku*, or obsessed fan, had become enough of a Japanese cultural icon to be the target of a popular spoof, the film *Otaku no video* (1991).

Some of the earliest anime on Japanese television crossed the Pacific and became familiar to American children of the 1960s as *Astro Boy*, *Speed Racer*, *Gigantor*, and others. Few if any American viewers, however, were aware of these programs’ Japanese origins because U.S. editors stripped the animation of all visual and plot references to Japan. For producers like Fred Ladd, responsible for the U.S. adaptation of *Gigantor*, Japan in the 1960s was an inexpensive source of animation that could be Americanized, or “denationalized,” without great effort.18 Ladd took for granted that the original animation’s “Japaneseness” would not appeal to U.S. audiences. This assumption from the early sixties continued to guide the editors of commercial anime imports through the late eighties. It was not until after the rise of grassroots anime fandom in the eighties that U.S. producers recognized the commercial potential of anime’s cultural difference as expressed in its Japaneseness. While producers’ assumptions about mass audiences defined anime’s commercial presence until the late eighties, growing fan demands for cultural authenticity defined its underground existence. The commercial boom of the 1990s was the result of several U.S. companies rectifying this tension by giving the die-hard fan community what it wanted.

Aside from the run of children’s cartoons in the sixties, anime was relegated to marginal status in U.S. popular culture in the seventies and eighties. In the early eighties Japanese anime companies had half-heartedly tested the U.S. market but concurred with Ladd’s notion that animation produced for Japanese viewers would not have wide commercial appeal.19 The medium’s fortunes shifted in the early nineties with the founding of several U.S. companies dedicated to importing anime and manga not for Americanization but for their appeal as exotic foreign products. Films like *Ghost in the Shell* then regularly appeared on video-store rental shelves with little or no editorial denationalization; also, children’s series like *Sailor Moon* occupied coveted after-school broadcast slots. (It should be noted that anime imported for the U.S. children’s television market continues to undergo extensive editing to remove “mature” content like violence or bloodshed; Japanese signifiers, however, remain untouched.) By 2000, a children’s anime series, *Pokémon*, illustrated anime’s exceptional U.S. and worldwide growth. As one study of the *Pokémon* phenom-

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enon claims, it was “the most successful computer game ever made, the top globally selling trading-card game of all time, one of the most successful children’s television programs ever broadcast, the top-grossing movie ever released in Japan, and among the five top earners in the history of films worldwide.”

Some scholars have therefore suggested that anime, as a major source of Japan’s “gross national cool,” as an oft-cited *Foreign Policy* article called it, is a potential “soft power” tool of Japanese foreign relations. The United States is hardly the only country whose popular culture has recently experienced an infusion of “J-Pop.” Anime and manga have also found receptive audiences in Italy, Germany, France, and other European countries; East and Southeast Asia; and throughout Latin America, notably in Brazil. Yet, despite Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura’s recent appointment of an “anime ambassador”—the popular animated robot cat Doraemon—Joseph Nye’s political science concept is anachronistic in an era when cultural images and ideas flow independent of state power, not in support of it. Instead, by the turn of the twenty-first century anime served as a medium for transmitting more ambiguous images of Japaneseness to hundreds of millions around the globe.

What sort of cultural message was anime transmitting when it first arrived in the United States? Anthropologist Koichi Iwabuchi argues that anime, like much of Japanese popular culture, is “culturally odorless.” Iwabuchi defines “cultural odor” as “the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process.” Unlike American products, which travel abroad loaded with American ideology and symbolism, Japanese products like the “three Cs”—consumer electronics, cartoons and comics, and computer games—do not. Throughout the Cold War, for example, U.S. companies like Marlboro and Levi’s sold goods in Europe using the positive iconography of the American West. Japanese products like the video cassette recorder (VCR) and the Walkman, on the other hand, did not cross the Pacific in the eighties loaded with Japanese cultural values or ideology.
According to Iwabuchi, a product’s cultural odor is also associated with “racial and bodily images of a country of origin.” Thus, one could assume that a product like anime, which constantly reproduces images of bodies, Japanese or otherwise, would transmit Japanese racial images as well. This is not generally the case. Iwabuchi and other scholars cite the claims of anime directors who argue to the contrary that anime demonstrates the concept of mukokuseki, translated as “someone or something lacking nationality,” or simply, “denationalized.”

Indeed, the uninformed viewer often comments that the characters in anime do not “look Japanese.” Though anime today exhibits a wide range of diverse characters, a typical male protagonist drawn in the seventies or eighties might have cream-colored skin, brown hair, big and round blue eyes, and a nondescript face, while artists would typically add long eyelashes and a voluptuous figure for female protagonists. Anime’s most celebrated director, Hayao Miyazaki, once cryptically attributed these vaguely Western-looking characters to the fact that “the Japanese hate their own faces,” while another prominent director suggested that Japanese animators “unconsciously choose not to draw ‘realistic’ Japanese characters if they wish to draw attractive characters.”

Whatever the reason—a question better left to scholars of Japanese culture—anime characters lack features that non-Japanese audiences might link to ethnic Japoneseness.

This “nonculturally specific anime style,” as Japanese literature scholar Susan J. Napier calls it, appealed to American audiences in the seventies and eighties because it was aesthetically transnational—its apparent nonethnic style facilitated its diffusion across borders. Like Sony VCRs and Toyota Camrys, anime could cross borders without carrying a distinct national identity. The mukokuseki style may have been ambiguous, yet it also subtly adhered to Western racial and gender hierarchies in its representations of male and female bodies. The representation of characters like Yamato’s Nova, with her blonde hair and slim figure, or Shinji Ikari from the popular series Neon Genesis Evangelion (1995), with his brown hair and blue eyes, allowed these Japanese creations to be simultaneously Western and transnational. It is ironic, then, that so many fans tied their interest in anime to their fascination with its Japoneseness. The Japan that fans encountered on television or in club gatherings was a highly mediated one that crossed the Pacific after passing through the mukokuseki filter. Still, cultural odor is relative to the nose of the smeller, and what seemed denationalized to a prominent anime director could smell a lot like Japan to a young person in California. It was this complicated intersection of production and consumption, the
mingling of Japanese and Western aesthetics, genres, and racial and gender categories, that permitted anime to be a truly hybrid global product.

*Star Blazers*, a 1979 U.S. television series adapted from the early-seventies Japanese version of the aforementioned *Yamato* series, is a fitting example of anime as a globalized product. *Star Blazers* is an SF epic. The SF genre lends itself to themes of transnationalism because, as in *Star Blazers*, it often envisions a future in which the divisions between “races” of the Earth pale in comparison to the divisions between intergalactic races. (Of course, viewers can read interplanetary conflicts as representative of earthly international divisions too.) Centralized world governments are common SF tropes, accentuating planetary unity. *Star Blazers* also emphasizes moral values and narrative elements recognizable beyond Japanese borders—duty and sacrifice, war and peace, love and personal relationships, good and evil—which aided in its transition to non-Japanese locales.

*Star Blazers* tells the story of the *Space Battleship Yamato*, a resurrected World-War-II-era battleship reconstructed into a space weapon and charged with saving Earth. The *Yamato* launches to repel an invading alien force and then travels many light years away to acquire material essential to reviving the planet’s destroyed environment. The invading alien force, the Gamilon Empire, has used nuclear-like “planet bombs” to render Earth’s surface radioactive and uninhabitable. The Gamilon invasion represents two significant issues of transnational concern in the postwar era: the threat posed by nuclear proliferation and the human destruction of the natural environment.

In transforming the Japanese series *Uchū senkan Yamato* into *Star Blazers*, Westchester Films, the U.S. production company, purposefully obscured the *Yamato*’s history. To many Japanese living in the postwar era, the name *Yamato* was reminiscent of the sacrifices of World War II and a racial self-referent. The *Yamato*, the largest battleship ever built, sank near Okinawa in April 1945 in a suicide mission to prevent American forces from seizing the island. Its name derived from the mythical Yamato race from which the imperial state claimed the Japanese people descended. In the U.S. overdubbed version (or “dub,” that is, with English-language dialogue to replace the original Japanese voice acting), characters refer to the *Yamato* by name only in the first episode, and the fact that Japan built the battleship with the explicit intention of fighting Americans goes unmentioned. Editors also deleted scenes showing the *Yamato*’s final heroic moments fighting the U.S. Navy. (In a striking moment of lingering anti-American sentiment, the American fighter planes move in similar patterns to the

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enemy Gamilons, and the same ominous “bad guy” music accompanies the World War II flashback.) As the ship enters the plot, its captain tells the *Yamato*’s story: “This was a great battleship at a time when great fleets sailed the seas and there were wars among the nations of Earth. It sank in one of the last wars between countries. All wars ceased when Gamilon began bombing us.” American viewers saw that, whatever the *Yamato*’s checkered past, in *Star Blazers* it represented humankind’s unified military power against an invading alien force. To inaugurate a new era of international peace and cooperation, the *Yamato* is renamed the *Argo*, referencing the ship of Greek mythology’s Jason and the Argonauts; *Star Blazers*’ U.S. producers substituted this Western culturally specific reference for a Japanese one.

Editors did not have to rework racial and bodily representations in *Star Blazers* for consumption by U.S. audiences. The series’ nonethnic characters already privileged a Western racial hierarchy. Though the main protagonist received an Americanized name—Susumu Kodai became Derek Wildstar—his physical appearance remained unchanged from the Japanese original; he has long, flowing brown hair and blue eyes. In the first episode he and his partner stumble upon a woman they describe as “beautiful”—she is tall and thin with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale white skin. Though drawn in a “nonculturally specific anime style,” this character still reinforces the primacy of Western aesthetic categories as the embodiment of attractiveness in anime.

*Star Blazers* first aired in syndication in several large media markets in September 1979. It differed from its sixties anime predecessors in the United States, like *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer*, in that its producers aimed for an audience of teenagers and young adults instead of children. It was also serialized; like a soap opera, viewers had to watch episodes consecutively or they would miss crucial plot developments. These two elements helped create a small but dedicated U.S. fan base for *Star Blazers*. Fans enamored with the series found upon investigation that *Star Blazers* derived from the long-running Japanese *Yamato* series. *Star Blazers* was thus a watershed for anime in the United States, serving as the first series to entice fans to learn more about other Japanese animated shows. One fan, who later went on to a career in the nascent U.S. anime industry, said of *Star Blazers*, “it was my ‘poison’—the series that put me beyond any turning back.”

*Star Blazers* and the anime that followed it on U.S. television continued to undergo extensive editing to erase its Japaneseness, but the series retained enough difference from common broadcast fare to hint to captivated viewers that something non-American lay behind their favorite program. Another prominent example was the popular SF series *Robotech*, which first aired in

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Producer Carl Macek managed to amass enough episodes for U.S. syndication (which required a minimum of sixty-five) by combining the animation from three unrelated Japanese series, writing a new script for American voice actors, and following the editorial trend of downplaying national origin. The Frankensteinian result continues to enrage anime purists, but the show attracted a significant viewing audience that also eagerly consumed associated product tie-ins like books and character models. Enthusiastic fans, like their Star Blazers compatriots, discovered the show’s Japanese origins and used Robotech as something of a gateway drug to exploring other anime and connecting with fellow fans. The dean of U.S. anime fans, Fred Patten, writes that Robotech was “arguably the single anime title to have the greatest influence in bringing the existence of Japanese animation to the awareness of the public.”

Within a year of its initial release, Robotech aired in syndication in roughly 90 percent of television markets in North America, and commercials for product tie-ins were ubiquitous during after-school television hours. Ratings demographics revealed that among teenage viewers 70 percent were male, but among the coveted 18–49 age group, 53 percent of viewers were female. Likely teenage boys watched for the fast-paced action sequences, pitting giant human-piloted robots against each other, while adult women and men appreciated the mature “space opera” storylines about friendships, romance, and the tragic social consequences of war.

Growing public awareness led to demands from nascent fan communities for more accessible anime. Fans were particularly interested in what they considered “authentic” anime, untouched by the corrupting hands of American editors, which was difficult to acquire in the United States unless one was connected to one of the national fan clubs (discussed below). The demand for authenticity inspired Robotech producer Macek, assisted by animation expert Jerry Beck, to launch Streamline Pictures in 1988. Streamline was the first U.S. company created to import, translate, and subtitle or overdub anime for distribution in the U.S. theater and home-video markets. One of the company’s early projects, Akira, became the first anime released with limited distribution in theaters in December 1989. Akira also became, arguably, the most well-known anime feature-length film in the United States.

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34. Patten, Watching Anime, Reading Manga, 34.
36. Patten, Watching Anime, Reading Manga, 38, 40. Patten, ibid., 39, mentions that Miyazaki’s Laputa: Castle in the Sky was Streamline’s first theatrical release, though it was only shown on one screen, whereas Akira had (very limited) national distribution on college campuses and in arthouse theaters.
With Streamline’s adaptation of *Akira*, fan communities got a more “authentic” product. The only violation of authenticity was the English-language dubbing, which Streamline produced in lieu of the subtitling preferred by fans. Otherwise, the company curbed efforts to minimize the film’s Japaneseness. The main characters’ names, Tetsuo and Kaneda, remain unchanged. The plot unfolds in Neo-Tokyo, and Japanese-language characters appear in the background of many scenes. Promotional posters advertised the film as an English-language adaptation of a Japanese original, and they did not hide the director’s Japanese name, Katsuhiro Otomo. Streamline promoted *Akira’s* Japaneseness, linking images of futuristic Neo-Tokyo to popular images of Japan as a futuristic utopia/dystopia from U.S. films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Black Rain* (1989). The film only played to small audiences on college campuses and in independent theaters, yet it gained a cult following in the early nineties thanks to a commercial release on videocassette.

Streamline marketed *Akira* specifically as a Japanese product, but the film continued to display the same transnational themes that made anime like *Star Blazers* and *Robotech* appealing beyond Japanese borders. Through the SF genre *Akira* expressed, as well as any work of art, the terrible global nuclear anxieties of the eighties. Its opening scene, which flashes the date “1988.7.16” in front of contemporary Tokyo moments before an atomic explosion annihilates the city, hauntingly articulates the fear and immediacy of nuclear holocaust. Otomo’s dystopian vision of the future also reflects anxieties about the technological transformation of the natural environment. Tetsuo and Kaneda, members of a nihilistic motorcycle gang, ride through the crumbling streets of Neo-Tokyo, seemingly drowning in ubiquitous mass media, corporate advertising, and buildings that reach endlessly to the sky. Neo-Tokyo’s hyper-urbanism is reminiscent of director Ridley Scott’s vision of a postapocalyptic Los Angeles in *Blade Runner*. (As homage to Scott, director Otomo also set *Akira* in the year 2019.)

The film culminates in the grotesque transformation of one teenage protagonist, Tetsuo, from an adolescent outcast to a world-destroying monster. Through government experimentation, Tetsuo acquires the powers of the character Akira, who had earlier attained “the power of a god” through the same government research, yet he wields this power only to destructive ends because of adolescent immaturity and foolish pride. Tetsuo’s body swells to the size of an Olympic stadium, generating another citywide nuclear catastrophe. The film then ends with characteristic anime ambiguity; from within a divine white light a voice whispers, “I am Tetsuo,” suggesting the dialectical nature of destruction and creation. American viewers might have read these climactic scenes as an allegory of Japan’s newly acquired global economic power in the eighties. In a U.S. popular discourse that often framed Japan’s postwar political and economic development in the language of maturity, one possible reading of *Akira’s* apo-

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lyptic conclusion, once the film crossed the Pacific, was that Japan was emotionally unprepared for the consequences that accompanied extraordinary global power.  

_Akira_ set a new benchmark for artistic achievement in the Japanese medium. Yet, Otomo’s creative accomplishment was more significant as a commercial turning point in the United States. Streamline’s production marked the birth of an industry that would grow exponentially in the 1990s and profit greatly from properties like _Ghost in the Shell_, _Sailor Moon_, and _Pokémon_. _Akira_ was also a triumph for the U.S. fan community, which had been growing since the late 1970s. Streamline’s _Akira_ and the boom of the 1990s resulted from fan demands for anime that was not simplified and Americanized, anime that provided a more “authentic” Japanese cultural experience. The earlier persistence of U.S. producers to downplay anime’s Japanese origins had actually intensified the fan community’s insistence on the authenticity of a foreign product. Fans were able to achieve their goals because they had organized into visible cultural communities that flourished in a variety of local, national, and global spaces.

From its birth in 1977, early U.S. anime fandom’s most conspicuous characteristic was its emphasis on activism within the community. Activism manifested primarily in three forms: fan clubs, conventions (or “cons”), and in the creation of an underground, self-published, English-language literature on anime. The demand for activism contributed to a unifying sense of community and permitted participants to experiment with new cultural identities. Active commitment also required vigorous imagination in order to envision national and transnational communities of shared experiences. As fans organized clubs, attended national conventions, published underground literature, and eventually conversed over the Internet, they connected local communities to global cultural trends and contributed to the globalizing of America.

Benedict Anderson first directed historians to the ways that media create communal solidarities, or “imagined communities,” by connecting individuals with shared identities across vast spaces. In _Modernity at Large_, a provocative statement on cultural globalization, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai updates Anderson’s framework for a globalizing world. Since the 1970s, media have become deterritorialized and are no longer reined in by the boundaries of the nation-state—boundaries, both real and imagined, that print media had helped to define in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Anderson demonstrated. The transnational media of the late twentieth century, coupled with worldwide immigration and consequent diasporic communities, made the “work of the imagination” central to a new “global subjectivity”—a new way for non-elites to

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think about the world and their places in it.⁴¹ In other words, as a result of cultural globalization, people have been able to envision communities that shape group identities and claim individual loyalties while transcending national borders. Appadurai provides insight into the way anime fans’ global subjectivity manifested in the imagining of new cultural communities at the national and transnational levels. While there was nothing “imaginary” about local fan clubs that met in person, much cultural work went into the process of envisioning connections, material or not, to communities around the world.

Fan clubs, cons, and underground literature from this period illustrated fans’ conscious efforts to define anime as a distinct cultural category, to develop knowledge about the medium and its relationship to Japanese culture, and to construct boundaries to mark the territory in which legitimate fan behavior could take place. Like the “media fans” that Henry Jenkins describes in his seminal work, Textual Poachers (1992), anime fans were “spectators who transform[ed] the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture.”⁴² Fandom maintained the “function of an interpretive community” and the “status of an alternative community,” allowing participants a space in which to critically and communally engage anime texts.⁴³ This “work of the imagination” often took place with an oppositional attitude toward mainstream U.S. entertainment media, though it would be unwise to assume a simplistic, binary mainstream-vs.-underground tension—after all, without the unprecedented mainstream success of Star Wars, Star Blazers would have found neither a producer nor an audience when it did.

Early anime fandom matured in a political climate frequently hostile to Japanese economic growth, yet it also bloomed in a consumer culture more ambivalent toward Japanese products like automobiles, VCRs, and Walkmans. In this context, the promotion of anime as a Japanese object could be an act of resistance to mainstream political culture, though the construction of fan communities as nonpolitical spaces made such resistance largely implicit. Rather than being indicative of a political attitude, the consumption of anime was instead one small part of a nuanced U.S.-Japan relationship that took the form of a trade conflict at the international level but manifested in the acquisition and consumption of hundreds of millions of goods at the level of the individual consumer. The heated rhetoric of the “trade wars” obscured the fact that Americans desired Japanese products.

The construction of fan communities began in local settings with the organization of fan clubs. The first club dedicated exclusively to anime was the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (C/FO), founded in May 1977 by several Los

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⁴³. Ibid., 2.
Angeles-area fans who had all previously attended meetings of the popular Los Angeles Science Fiction Society (LASFS). The C/FO met monthly to watch episodes of English-language commercial anime from the sixties, like *Astro Boy* and *Gigantor*, and newer series like *Star Blazers* and *Battle of the Planets*. Occasionally they watched videotape copies of Japanese-language anime that aired on local cable access stations. (After 1975 relatively inexpensive VCR technologies, like Sony’s Betamax and Matsushita’s VHS, were available on the U.S. consumer market, facilitating the consumption of these rarely broadcast programs and thereafter serving as the primary technology responsible for the growth of fandom.44)

Around 1979 the LASFS began to receive requests from Japanese SF fans for videotaped copies of popular U.S. series like *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica*. The C/FO responded to the call by sending copies of those programs in exchange for tapes of untranslated, unsubtitled anime recorded from broadcast television in Japan. This transpacific exchange provided fans access to “pure,” unedited anime. None of the C/FO members understood Japanese; nevertheless, one fan says that interest in the videos was so high that club members “were willing to watch them and guess what the dialogue was about.”45 Far from discouraging screenings, the language barrier contributed to anime’s appeal because it accentuated anime’s difference from the popular U.S. media that fans were accustomed to consuming.

From humble origins the C/FO expanded by the late eighties to nearly three dozen chapters in major cities like New York and Chicago and unexpected locations across the rural Midwest and South.46 The locations of fans from the period demonstrated the varied places that Americanized commercial anime reached in syndication in the seventies and eighties. Of course, the California and New York markets had stations airing anime, particularly on local-access Japanese-community stations where Japanese immigrant populations thrived. More surprisingly, more than one station in rural Oklahoma aired *Star Blazers*.47 Local stations in rural areas were not motivated by a sense of cosmopolitanism to purchase syndication rights to these programs; they were, simply, cheap content. But where commercial anime like *Star Blazers* established a beachhead, fan communities began to take root, interested in more than just the anime available in syndication. Fans could then make contact with a C/FO chapter to join or to get information on forming a new local chapter.

Many fans also participated in large clubs independent of the C/FO, like Rhode Island’s Anime Hasshin club, which had over four hundred members on six continents at its peak and boasted that it was the “largest international anime

44. A useful history of the VCR is Frederick Wasserman, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin, TX, 2001).
47. T.B. response, November 6, 2005; B.M. response, November 15, 2005.
fan club of its time.” The independent Boston Japanimation Society, which still meets today, also had a sizable presence in fan networks and at conventions in the Northeast. It is important to keep in mind that the C/FO, Anime Hasshin, and other similar clubs were large, record-keeping organizations with officers who scheduled meetings and kept track of dues payments, membership rolls, budgets, and inventories. Countless less formal gatherings also occurred in domestic spaces across the country.

Fans labeled large but informal meetings outside the scope of clubs, “disorganized fandom.” Some fans were dismayed by what they saw as the petty politics of clubs like the C/FO, which controlled the distribution of underground noncommercial anime. In November 1985, a San Francisco Bay Area resident founded A.N.I.M.E. (Animation of Inter-Mediary Exchange) as an informal gathering space for fans. Within two years A.N.I.M.E. grew to a “monthly barbeque-and-video-watching party of sometimes 200 fans from all over Northern California.”

The parties were “a great departure from organized fandom,” said one fan, an alternative for “fans who were totally disgusted by organized fandom and its power-tripping Secret Masters.” (The national C/FO organization broke apart in the late eighties due to squabbles over control of and access to underground anime videocassettes.) Even though fans of the “disorganized” variety chose to avoid local club politics, they nevertheless participated in the imagined community of fandom. In fact, one proud participant in disorganized fandom started the first successful anime discussion network on the Internet, a mailing list dedicated to the series *Urusei Yatsura*, a “slice-of-life” comedy that fans could only acquire through underground videotape-copying networks.

The remarkable system of exchange and distribution that early anime fans utilized demonstrated the interconnectedness between local communities and the global flow of culture. One U.S.-Japan anime pipeline began with U.S. military personnel at C/FO Rising Sun, a club chapter at Misawa Air Force Base in northern Japan. The club videotaped anime broadcast on Japanese television and mailed these copies to fan acquaintances in San Francisco. A distribution network based in the Bay Area then made multiple copies and sent them to C/FO chapters throughout the United States. Many other similar pipelines existed. Marc Carlson acquired episodes of *Maison Ikkoku* and other anime from

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49. This group is mentioned in *The Rose: Newsletter of Hasshin RI* 1, no. 1 (January 1987): 2.
52. Ibid.
a friend in Japan and shared these at A.N.I.M.E. meetings.\textsuperscript{54} Canadian fan Tom Edwards was so enthusiastic about building the library of his fan club, J.A.C. Victoria, that he purchased a second VCR and a computer to connect to other anime fans at universities, and began copying and distributing videotapes throughout North America.\textsuperscript{55} Laura Whittier in Sacramento received videocassettes from an American military friend stationed in Okinawa; she then duplicated and dispensed these throughout the C/FO network.\textsuperscript{56} Tape exchange was by and large a nonprofit affair. Often only a blank videocassette and postage reimbursement were necessary, especially if a fan was a dues-paying club member. The goal was not to violate copyright or intellectual property laws but to distribute anime and expand the U.S. fan community. (In fact, an unwritten rule in the fan community today is that fans are expected to cease distributing Japan-only anime once a U.S. company purchases the North American distribution rights.)

The videocassettes traded via underground networks contrasted considerably with the commercial anime that had enticed fans on U.S. broadcast television. Dialogue was in the original Japanese, there were no subtitles, and underground anime were uncorrupted by American editors and censors. While SF anime like \textit{Mobile Suit Gundam} were among the favorites of fans hooked by programs like \textit{Star Blazers}, non-SF underground series like \textit{Urusei Yatsura} and \textit{Maison Ikkoku} were popular because they dealt with daily life in contemporary Japan from comical, romantic, or nostalgic perspectives. These series attracted fans interested in anime specifically for its Japaneseness (i.e., its representation of a particular national culture).

Despite the fact that so few of the fans understood Japanese, the appetite for these underground tapes was insatiable. Some fans were “annoyed” by the language barrier and decided that the next logical step was “to actually try to go out and learn the language—which I did.”\textsuperscript{57} (Some of those that did so early were fortunate to launch careers when the U.S. anime industry boomed in the nineties.) Some fans used anime as an excuse to learn Japanese, but most had neither the resources nor the time to dedicate to learning a new language. Even Fred Patten, who spent decades running fan clubs like the C/FO, amassing an enormous anime and manga collection, and speaking publicly on behalf of the fan community, never learned to speak or read Japanese fluently.\textsuperscript{58} On the other hand, while earning two engineering degrees from Johns Hopkins University, Sharon Stapleton taught herself Japanese for the noble purpose of translating anime for her fellow fans. She typed translations and distributed them through

\textsuperscript{54} M.C. response, November 1, 2005.
\textsuperscript{55} T.E. response, November 14, 2005.
\textsuperscript{56} L.W. response, November 4, 2005.
\textsuperscript{57} R.A.W. response, November 14, 2005.
\textsuperscript{58} Fred Patten response, October 28, 2005.
mail order, charging only enough to recover printing and shipping costs. Once again, the emphasis was on global community, not commerce.

Clubs adopted a variety of practices to deal with the language barrier. Often those familiar with a program’s plot or with some Japanese language skills would shout out summaries of what was happening on screen. “Other times,” recalled one fan, “the tension or comedy would cause viewers to start ‘filling in the dialog’ that was missing with their own version, out-loud,” which gave club gatherings a feeling of public ritual and aided the work of the imagination that enabled fans to “think up my own dialog for stories that had no translation available.”

Henry Jenkins, observing a U.S. fan club dedicated to the live-action program Beauty and the Beast, noted a similar phenomenon when the club attended a French-only screening of several episodes. According to Jenkins, “mutual assistance was required to decipher the narrative content since none of the members was fluent in French. The members were encouraged to ‘shout out’ if they could make sense of any of the words . . . ; there was ongoing speculation about what was happening on the screen.”

As with anime, the act of interpreting the foreign was a communal effort.

With linguistic obstacles placed in the way of understanding content, the medium of anime became the message. Club gatherings were as much about the communal activities of watching, interpreting, and participating as they were about anime’s content. Viewing occurred in a social environment of like-minded individuals, not in the privacy of one’s home, contributing to the social construction of a distinct community. As one fan insightfully commented, “It was . . . comfortable to view these shows with the same ‘characters’ in the audience constantly. There is a social aspect that can and had caused the club members to accept one another, without too much judgment. We were all being sort of ‘weird, together.’” More than just opportunities for entertainment, then, clubs became real communities, complete with norms and behaviors expected of members. The sense of local community embodied in clubs fostered the social cohesion necessary to envision larger national and transnational networks of shared interest, especially since connections with fans outside the United States were more imagined than real. Sharing one’s couch, then, turned a domestic space into a site a global engagement.

The work of the cultural imagination continued at the regional and national level at cons, where anime fans congregated for one or several days’ worth of interaction. One fan described cons as “a buffet/smorgasbord of ideas, philosophies and beliefs, but in a friendly environment of mutual respect.”

During the eighties, enthusiastic fans traveled to SF and comic-book conventions through-
out the county with VCRs and anime tapes in hand. Anime screenings, often staged in small rented hotel rooms with a VCR and a handful of con attendees, introduced the medium to new fans. In 1981, a group of fans based in the New York metropolitan area established the “Gamilon Embassy” (named for the “bad guys” of Star Blazers) with the mission of traveling to cons in the Northeast and publicizing anime to SF audiences. At bigger conventions, like BayCon ’86, which boasted an eighty-hour anime marathon, anime was shown twenty-four hours a day. (Today, large annual anime cons in the United States welcome attendees numbering in the tens of thousands.) The popular practice of cosplay, or attending a con costumed as a favorite anime character, also emphasized the participatory nature of the anime fan community. Participants could spend dozens of hours assembling elaborate homemade costumes. Cosplay was another debt to SF fandom—it was the “Trekkies” (or “Trekkers,” as some preferred) who dressed up like Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock that made cosplay a con institution in the seventies.

The final facet of anime fandom that emphasized community activism was the creation of an underground literature. When I asked fans from this period, somewhat naively, what underground anime literature they had read, I did not expect so many to respond instead with the titles of “fanzines,” club newsletters, and amateur press associations (APAs) to which they contributed. Fans provided artwork, news updates, gossip, reviews, and fan fiction, a style borrowed from SF fandom wherein authors wrote their own stories about anime (or fictional universes like that of Star Wars or Star Trek) that already existed. The successful APA Bird Scramble! for example, published fan-authored stories about characters from the late-seventies series Battle of the Planets, adapted from the Japanese Gatchaman. An APA, which functioned as a precursor to Internet message boards, required that every subscriber contribute something to the publication; hence, one could not receive Bird Scramble! if one did not participate. What Jenkins says of television fans of the period applies equally to underground anime publishing: “Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raided mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions.” Participation in the creation of an English-language anime literature provided an opportunity to actively engage in creative cultural work and reinforced the social commitment required to be a part of the fan community.

64. Patten, Watching Anime, Reading Manga, 29.
69. Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 18.
The Rose, the newsletter for the Hasshin RI (later Anime Hasshin) fan club, serves as an example of the underground literature produced in the first years of local underground publishing.70 The first issue of The Rose stated that the “purpose of Hasshin RI is to circulate information about Japanimation as it comes to us and to show Japanese animation.”71 In just three years the newsletter grew in size from ten pages to twenty-five, illustrating the concurrent growth in knowledge about anime in the United States and proving Hasshin RI successful in its original goals. The improvement in size, paper quality, artwork, and density of information from issue 1 (January 1987) to issue 19 (January 1990) was significant (see Figure 1).

The nineteenth issue celebrated The Rose’s third anniversary. It dedicated nearly a third of its pages to networking with the national and global anime fan community. It contained encouragement for contributions, merchandise for sale, news about other national clubs, and addresses for clubs, media, and club members.72 Features like short synopses of various anime series, a word puzzle, and a page with lessons on Japanese vocabulary typified the efforts of fans to expand the boundaries of the U.S. knowledge base. It also reflected fan interests in learning more about the culture that produced anime, as evidenced in the vocabulary lesson page from the nineteenth issue (see Figure 2).

The May 1989 issue demonstrated explicitly the way anime fans envisioned their community through underground literature. A map, prefaced by the comforting words, “You are not alone!” pinpointed the location of every known anime fan club, totaling forty-six, in the United States. The editors encouraged readers: “Don’t be shy, write to these clubs . . . and make new anime friends.”73 Through this map, an artifact of the global imagination, anime fans envisioned a national community that traversed vast open spaces to connect groups with shared cultural affinities.

The Rose also provides insight into fans’ demands for cultural authenticity. Most discussion space of particular anime was dedicated to underground, Japanese-language anime and, because of either the language barrier or the feeling of authenticity these anime provided, reviews were uncritical. Contributors reserved their venom for U.S. producers’ corruption of “pure” anime. Donald Morris, reviewing Carl Macek’s post-Robotech union of two popular anime, Captain Harlock and Queen Millennia, referred to the end result, Captain Harlock and the Queen of 1,000 Years, as an “ANIMATED ABORTION.”74 Karl Waters criticized the infamous English adaptation of Hayao Miyazaki’s classic Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, titled Warriors of the Wind, for reducing the

70. I am indebted to Lorraine Savage, editor of The Rose, for providing copies of issues of the newsletter from 1987 to 1990.
74. The Rose 2, no. 9 (May 1988): 5–6, pseudonym.
Welcome to the first issue of "The Rose", the Hasshin RI club newsletter. Japanimation clubs seem to be growing as fast as the American interest in Japanimation has. It seemed only natural that little Rhode Island would have its own Japanimation fan club.

How it all came together: We know you can't wait for this! At a local comic book store a few months ago, I met a few people who were interested in Robotech and Captain Harlock. I mentioned that I had a small anime collection and that we could get together and watch some movies. Some of them didn't know much about Japanimation but figured they could sit through an afternoon watching animated movies in Japanese just to find out what it was all about.

About four people came to my apartment. Without any bias on my part (I swear!), we watched mostly Matsumoto movies, such as Queen Millenia, Endless Road SSX episodes, My Youth in Arcadia subtitled and we saw the Lupin III Mystery of Mano movie in English.

Little did I know that that initial anime get together in November '86 would spawn a club interest. Everyone had a lot of fun and we thought we could pull it off. We decided that Rhode Island needed and wanted its own Japanimation club. Our first official meeting was December 13, 1986. We decided on concrete club issues like: club name, newsletter name, amount of dues, tape trading policy and a want list for more animation. And here we are.

Now you ask, why a name like "Hasshin RI"? We wanted a lively title, something more than just "Providence Japanimation Club" or "Rhode Island Anime Fan Club". Something active and positive. You can't get much more active than the popular ship war cry "Hasshin!" (or "ascend, onward, blast off!") often spoken by the captains of the Yamato and the Arcadia. So get ready, RI is moving on!

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Figure 1: Cover page of the first issue of The Rose, the underground fan publication.

two-hour original to ninety minutes and for obscuring the poignancy of the environmentalist message of the original. On the other hand, commercially

75. The Rose 2, no. 11 (September 1988): 4–5, pseudonym.
imported anime had potential to satisfy fans, much like the English adaptation of Miyazaki’s *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (a Streamline production), if it appeared that the importers strived to maintain the integrity of the original. Ted Peterson wrote, “The English version is uncut. None of the names were changed. The

Figure 2: A sample cultural education page from *The Rose*, with fan-drawn artwork and Japanese-language lessons.
translation, as nearly as I can tell, is quite faithful to the original.”76 (Exactly how he could tell was not clear.) By 1990, fans praised U.S. production companies that responded to their demands by leaving anime as unchanged as practically possible, as Streamline did with Akira.

By the nineties, underground newsletters like The Rose gave way to two trends in anime fan communication: professional magazines and, more importantly, the Internet. The Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.anime signaled an important moment in the transnationalizing of U.S. anime culture.77 As one fan stated, rec.arts.anime “was more or less a global forum,” though until the early nineties access was limited to Americans, Japanese, and Europeans at universities linked to the Internet.78 The newsgroup launched in January 1988 under the initiative of one of the founders of A.N.I.M.E.79 Message traffic was slow at first, but it exploded in late 1989 with, ironically, the release of Disney’s successful animated film, The Little Mermaid. The resulting high volume of messages about U.S. animation instigated debates about the definition of anime, why it should be restricted only to Japanese animation, and why it deserved its own newsgroup distinct from all other forms of animation.

A 1988 challenge to rec.art.anime’s subject matter witnessed a group of subscribers attempting to create a separate newsgroup to discuss only animation produced in the United States. They claimed that rec.arts.anime “was felt to be too biased towards Japanimation,” which one contributor derisively called “Jap Warrior Robot shows.”80 (One fan also admitted that the new newsgroup had “become necessary in order to prevent friction over nationalistic issues.”81) This discussion reflected the developing perception among fans that anime was a unique cultural category that deserved to be distinguished from dissimilar U.S. media. It also illustrated the establishment of an “other”—U.S. entertainment—that anime fans used to define their own identity. The more often fans discussed U.S. popular culture, the better they were able to articulate anime’s expression of cultural difference.

77. Usenet is a global bulletin board service—more commonly used before the popularization of Web browsers like Netscape and Internet Explorer—that uses the Internet to send messages to the e-mail addresses of subscribers to particular newsgroups. In 2001, the search engine company Google purchased the entire one-billion-message archive of Usenet and has organized it all online, providing historians with a remarkable archive of popular culture. See Google Groups, “Welcome to Google Groups,” http://groups.google.com/googlegroups/overview.html (accessed October 25, 2008) for more information on Usenet. The Web site for the rec.arts.anime archive is http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.anime/about (accessed October 25, 2008).
79. M.C., “A Brief History of rec.arts.anime.”
81. Ibid.
The attitudes that manifested in public debates about the rise of Japanese economic power were visible in these online arguments and ruminated within the larger anime subculture, illustrating that fans’ interests frequently ran counter not only to U.S. mainstream entertainment but also popular political attitudes. While fans from the period recall clubs as explicitly nonpolitical spaces, fan activism on behalf of a Japanese product was an implicit statement of cultural politics at a time when labor unions directed “Buy American” campaigns, and United Auto Workers smashed Toyotas with sledgehammers at union picnics. Such overt “Japan bashing” was inherently incompatible with the attitudes of the fans that enjoyed anime precisely for its Japaneseeness. “Buy American” campaigns were rooted in economic nationalism, while anime fandom required a more cosmopolitan, globalized worldview—one that embraced positive cultural representations of Japan at a time when such representations were more uncommon than not.

In fact, anime fandom encouraged enthusiasts to explore Japanese history and culture more intimately. Some of the early fans mentioned above used anime as a first step toward learning the Japanese language. (Many college students in Japanese language courses today say that anime and manga inspired them to register; tellingly, after several semesters of instruction those same students say that their interests in Japan and its culture have grown more varied and sophisticated.) In August 1986, a group of thirty California fans from several C/FO chapters organized a trip to Japan, dubbed “Japanimation ’86,” to meet animators, visit production studios, attend the Japanese National Science Fiction Convention, and shop for anime-themed merchandise in Tokyo and Osaka.

Japanimation ’86 was the first trip of its kind and a rare face-to-face encounter during this period between anime’s Japanese producers and American consumers, and also between Japanese and American fans. The intercultural anime relationship more often took place in the mediated realm of consumption and imagination. Anime tourism like Japanimation ’86 has grown significantly in the last two decades, however, with fans from across the globe flocking to the Akihabara district of Tokyo for total immersion in Japanese anime, manga, and video-game culture.

There are several precedents to anime’s U.S. expansion. It is possible to compare transpacific anime encounters to the European and American japonisant.

82. See Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston, 1999), 160–86.


artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the American Zen Buddhists of the 1950s. For example, Lafcadio Hearn, the Greek-born American writer who fell in love with Japan in the late nineteenth century, spent the last decade and a half of his life there. Also, beat poet Gary Snyder traveled widely across Japan in the 1950s, absorbed in the study of Zen Buddhism.\textsuperscript{85} Anime’s U.S. boom, though, has become more widespread than these two instances because it has benefited from the global proliferation of inexpensive media technologies, one aspect of Thomas Friedman’s provocative argument about the “flattening” of the world that has enabled more people than ever to participate in global cultural and economic activities.\textsuperscript{86} As such, the U.S. anime experience has also been a highly mediated phenomenon, and most early U.S. anime fans accepted a mediated Japan through the consumption of anime texts, unlike Hearn or Snyder, who embraced Japaneseness by actually visiting Japan. Indeed, it was possible to be an anime fan and have never met a Japanese person—not an unlikely scenario in the vast spaces between the U.S. coasts. Yet, contact with Japan or Japanese has not necessarily implied cultural authenticity; as Edward Said famously demonstrated, traveling to “the East” did not preclude a writer from reproducing the most malevolent strains of Orientalism.\textsuperscript{87}

Anime devotees were instead likely the cultural successors to the early twentieth-century middle-class white women whom Mari Yoshihara describes. Such women “embraced the East” by consuming Asian objects, making the women “agents of the culture of Orientalism without their having to physically travel to the Orient.”\textsuperscript{88} The consumption of underground anime enabled fans to adopt a representation of Japan at once unmediated by elite ideological structures of Western Orientalism yet mediated through a border-crossing technology of cultural representation. Still, if anime’s \textit{mukokuseki} style has been influenced by Western racial and gender representations, then Americans viewers were consuming texts already infused with Orientalist ideology. This complicated and indistinct “Möbius strip” of representation, transmission, and consumption defined how U.S. fans consumed anime’s Japaneseness.\textsuperscript{89}

Another precedent in the history of U.S.-Japan cultural exchange is baseball. Anime is to the United States what baseball is to Japan—a transplant that has established a foothold in the landscape of a foreign national popular culture. Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu and Thomas W. Zeiler have each chronicled baseball’s journey to Japan and around the rest of the globe as one early instance of U.S.

\textsuperscript{85} For this comparison, see Susan J. Napier, \textit{From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West} (New York, 2007), 84–90.
\textsuperscript{86} Thomas L. Friedman, \textit{The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century} (New York, 2005).
\textsuperscript{89} Kelts, \textit{Japanamerica}, 42, suggests the Möbius strip analogy as a way of describing the cross-cultural exchange of ideas and images in the production of animation.
After more than a century of cultural exchange and adaptation, according to Zeiler, “baseball (rather than sumo) can be considered Japan’s national pastime.” Japanese players have excelled so much in recent years that American sports fans regularly cite the names of all-stars like Ichiro Suzuki, Hideki Matsui, and Kosuke Fukudome. Perhaps in time, considering baseball’s one-century head start, anime fandom could become a pastime of similar popularity and meaning in the United States.

The anime phenomenon in the United States is also not unique in terms of the local effects of contemporary cultural globalization. Another example is the growing popularity of Bhangra, a colorful and energetic style of Indian music and dance with roots in the Punjab region. Indian popular cultural exports like Bollywood films have accumulated increasingly larger audiences in the United States in the last two decades, even among Americans not of South Asian descent. Bhangra dancing, though, is closer in nature to the anime phenomenon in the way that its popularity hinges on active participation in the creation of new transnational cultural identities and communities. As with anime fans, some of the earliest organizing occurred on college campuses. In 1995, the George Washington University in Washington, DC, hosted a local Bhangra dance competition for college teams. Today the competition has grown into the annual “Bhangra Blowout,” which brings together eight “elite” college teams chosen from more than forty applicants. Though most of the competitors are children or grandchildren of South Asian immigrants, white and African American students also participate.

Bhangra dance teams have dealt with some of the same questions of cultural globalization that anime fans have confronted. For example, what makes a global cultural product or practice “authentic”? When young people in the United States first discovered Bhangra in the early nineties, they incorporated it into cultural practices with which they were already familiar, like break dancing and hip hop. As college students started forming dance teams, however, they organized these new communities around the principle of cultural difference, highlighting the non-Americanness of Bhangra and promoting its “traditional” Indian characteristics. Dance teams in the last few years have made it their goal to “dance as authentically and traditionally as possible,” and such criteria factor into competition judging. Echoing the fears of early anime fans, one college


student lamented, “Bhangra has gotten so much exposure, but we kind of lose what’s authentic.”

Like anime, the popularity of Bhangra shows that not only has cultural globalization created heterogeneity—the proliferation of cultural difference—but it has been created by the efforts of countless non-elites acting at a local level to pull the global into the United States. Such developments illustrate Charles Bright and Michael Geyer’s point about the heterogeneity of cultural globalization and present an important counternarrative to the story of global cultural homogenization generated by hegemonic capitalist corporations. “Far from fostering a homogenization of the world,” Bright and Geyer write, “globalization has made the production of difference . . . a much more proximate and intimate affair.” Bhangra dancers and anime fans in the United States have made the “production of difference” a communal ambition within the domestic space of the very empire so often accused of practicing a homogenizing cultural imperialism abroad.

Historians can use the examples of anime, Bhangra, and other foreign products and practices to draw tentative conclusions about the ways in which cultural globalization has transformed the United States. The story of America’s globalization moment usually rests on the actions of government, corporate, or non-governmental organizations; in the cases of anime and Bhangra, however, cultural globalization would not have occurred without the ambitions and actions of local non-elites disconnected from all three conventional globalizing institutions. The important actors in anime’s story were postal clerks, computer technicians, college students, and anonymous middle-class women and men with no professional training in the arts of international relations and communication. Multinational corporations may play a central role in the history of globalization in the postwar era, but with anime’s global boom cultural globalization was a process driven from below.

Anime’s U.S. history also raises questions about the utility of the concept of Americanization. The growth of the anime subculture in the eighties occurred in the context of increasing U.S. consumption of all things Japanese—from cars to VCRs to cuisine. Critics dubbed the resulting massive trade deficit a “second Pearl Harbor” and accused American politicians of selling the country’s future to Japan. Japanese corporations purchased American icons like Rockefeller Center, Columbia Pictures, and Pebble Beach Golf Course, fueling fears of the “Japanization” of America. Less than a decade later, though, these fears proved unfounded. “Victory” in the Cold War, the woes of the Japanese economy after

94. Quoted in ibid.
the 1991 recession, and American-centered narratives of globalization eased the bitter tensions that had peaked in 1991–92. Yet, the products that changed American culture and society—Toyota Camrys, Panasonic VCRs, Sony Walkmans, sushi, and anime—remained embedded in middle-class patterns of consumption. The flood of Japanese manufactured goods beginning in the early seventies showed how the consumption of foreign products can transform U.S. culture and society, yet any crude model of Japanization as cultural imperialism would be awkward to support. Therefore the U.S. encounter with Japanese commerce and culture forces a rethinking of notions of the Americanization, or any simplistic model of national “-ization,” of foreign societies.

Instead of a model of Japanization, then, I suggest historians frame the U.S. encounter with Japanese products like anime in the context of contemporary cultural globalization. Historians such as Richard Kuisel have shown how European societies beginning the early twentieth century used the slur “Americanization” to attack processes like consumerism that were more indicative of general trends of modernization. Likewise Americans reacted against Japan in the eighties but discovered by the mid-nineties that the markers of Japanese success—corporations with ambiguous national identities, the global flow of finance capital, the proliferation of new media products, and even transnational popular culture like anime—were indicative of a new way of thinking about the world and behaving in it, that is, globalization. Clearly globalization as a process of increasing human interconnectedness is a centuries-old process, yet revolutionary developments in communications and transportation in the postwar era ushered in a qualitatively new phase of global encounters. Anime would have never found its way to the United States without the sophisticated technology required to produce it, the inexpensive televisions and VCRs necessary to reproduce it, and the quick and low-cost postal systems essential to distribute it across the Pacific. (By the late nineties, Internet technology would render the last of these obsolete in transpacific anime exchange.) These advancements were unique to the postwar era. The processes of contemporary globalization made them possible.

Likewise, the technological tools of contemporary globalization have facilitated Bhangra’s popularity as well as the attractiveness of other global products and practices. Without the Internet, many U.S. practitioners of Bhangra would have no access to videos of “authentic” Indian dancing. Without inexpensive media technologies like the VCR, progenitor of the DVD player and YouTube, much of the world would not know of the Hong Kong action cinema of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan or the vibrant worlds of Bollywood film. And without advancements in rapid and inexpensive air transportation, coupled with new

refrigeration technologies, cosmopolitans the world over would not feast on sushi, a truly global delicacy.98

Finally, anime’s border crossing and its popular consequences reveal a different side of life in “Reagan’s America.” The idea that Ronald Reagan defined both domestic society and foreign relations in the eighties is an unfortunately historiographic misconception.99 The simplistic narrative transition from Jimmy Carter’s “malaise” to Reagan’s “morning again in America” obscures the complexity of life in an era when Americans were engaging social and cultural developments independent of traditional institutions of state politics and power. Some people looked beyond the culture of the late Cold War, beyond Reagan, and even beyond the borders of the United States to the globalizing of America.

