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FLIRTING WITH THE FOREIGN:  
INTERRACIAL SEX IN JAPAN'S  
"INTERNATIONAL" AGE

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*Introduction*

Since the late 1980s, a small population of young Japanese women has become the subject of intense controversy within Japan and abroad for its allegedly aggressive sexual pursuit of white, black, Balinese and other non-Japanese (or *gaijin*) males.<sup>1</sup> The activities of these women—labeled “yellow cabs” (*ierō kyabu*) in a racist, sexist slur coined by their foreign male conquests and appropriated by the Japanese mass media—have inspired best-selling novels, television documentaries, films, and, in the early 1990s, a heated debate in the major popular magazines. Anthropologist John Russell has observed of the phenomenon (which has tended to particularly sensationalize the role of black males), “what was once a taboo subject—the relations between black [men] and Japanese women—[has] suddenly become a topic fit for open discussion, sensational serials in Japanese magazines, late-night television debate, and underground cinema.”<sup>2</sup> These women are interesting not only for the controversy that they have engendered in Japan, but also because they defy standard Western Orientalist understandings of the Asian-Western sexual encounter, typically based on the *Madame Butterfly* trope of Western male power over and victimization of the Oriental women. In the standard yellow cab narrative, it is wealthy and leisured young Japanese women who travel to exotic locales to pursue these sexual liaisons; it is the Japanese women who themselves pay for the expenses of initiating and maintaining the liaisons; and it is Japanese women who, along with Japanese men, have developed a thriving industry at home devoted to commentary upon and evaluation of the *gaijin* male as lover—a commentary entirely independent of the foreigner himself.

The term “yellow cab” is a slur that implies that Japanese women are “yellow,” and that, like a New York taxi, “they can be ridden any time.”<sup>3</sup> The persistent use of the term encapsulates the hysterical response of the male-dominated Japanese media (as well as of the foreign men who originally coined the term) to the specter of sexually aggressive and transgressive Japanese females. However, within the Japanese media there are competing voices, as the “yellow cabs” themselves, as well as female commentators and writers, proffer their own interpretations of the women’s behavior. In fact, the graphic, semi-pornographic novels on the topic of black male-Japanese female sex which have comprised perhaps the most important element in this sensational media discussion have been written by two young women writers, Yamada Eimi and Ieda Shōko,<sup>4</sup> who are notorious for flaunting their preference for black men and black culture. These novels are not only best-sellers, but Yamada’s work has been nominated for the Naoki and Akutagawa literary prizes—the most prestigious in the Japanese literary world.

In this essay I will examine the contradictions and negotiations which accompany the yellow cab phenomenon. I will show that critical Japanese male representations are countered and resisted by the women, who demonstrate their own active goals in choosing gaijin lovers. I argue that the goals and behavior of the so-called yellow cabs are in fact of considerable theoretical significance for a Western audience, for they constitute not only a coherent, although indirect, critique of Japanese patriarchy, but also an instance of the increasingly shifting and contested grounds of encounter between Japan and the West and, finally, the emerging local/global continuum along which both people and theories must now be tracked.

The intersections of race, gender, nationalism, and sexuality have come under increasing interrogation by Western scholars who are seeking to problematize the dark and obscure associations between “love of country,” imperial will, and erotic longing. Much of this work has been concerned to show the extent to which “Oriental” and other nonwhite women have suffered from a unique brand of sexual colonization at the hands of Western men, not shared by their male counterparts. This line of research is necessary and valuable, and the various planes of continuing Western male power over the non-Western woman—particularly in the still obscure areas of sexual encounters and sex tourism—must be further explored. However, just as Appadurai and Breckenridge have argued that “old images that we associate with neo-colonialism” do not exhaust all that is happening within “new forms of transnational, cosmopolitan cultural traffic,”<sup>5</sup> so, it must be kept in mind, old images of the

victimized native woman do not exhaust all the possibilities of contemporary Asian female-Western male sexual encounters. In the age of *M. Butterfly*, things are not so simple. Japan refuses to be contained by Western tropes and academic theories, and Japanese women (although this point seems scarcely recognized) in many ways defy the Western-set gender dichotomy between public powerlessness and private influence. For one thing, they refuse to be, echoing Appadurai, “incarcerated” in their native land. Japanese women—particularly young, single, “pink-collar” women—are perhaps the most enthusiastic and committed travelers of any demographic group in the world; they are also, arguably, one of the wealthiest, with an expendable income over twice that of the typical Japanese male and with an average expenditure in a vacation locale like Hawaii almost three times that of any other individual tourist. Thus Japanese women embody to a large degree what Clifford has called the new global “cosmopolitanism,” which is marked, more than anything else, by the post-modern idiom of “travel” and the crossing (and inhabiting) of borders. This essay begins with the notion of culture as travel (as well as its inverse, “travel as culture”) to interrogate the meanings of a population of young Japanese women who travel to post/neocolonial borderlands to pursue sexual encounters with non-Japanese men. By probing the competing Japanese female and male discourses on the yellow cab, I will show how the travel of this population of young Japanese women enacts and resists, defies and maintains, Japanese cultural norms of gender, race, and sexuality. My goal, however, is not thereby to draw conclusions about a timeless, bounded, and coherent entity called “the Japanese culture,” but rather to set these local discourses against a global backdrop of increasingly complicated and interconnected transnational flows of people and power in order to show the circumstances of flux, confrontation, resistance, and displacement that mediate the global/local nexus of Japan in the world.

Without question “yellow cabs” are a small, marginal group, and the term itself is highly contested. Even the women who engage in such behavior would certainly not apply the term to themselves, for it has become a rhetorical weapon used by Japanese men to discredit a form of female behavior that they find threatening and disturbing and by foreign men to maintain hierarchies of power over Asian women. There are many Japanese women, including a group founded in New York City by Japanese professional writers called the Association to Think About Yellow Cabs (*ierō kyabu wo kangaeru kai*), who reject the term outright, alleging that no such women exist, and that the whole media phenomenon is the invention of Japanese men to undermine the activities of all

Japanese women abroad.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as time has passed, the yellow cab controversy has begun to have a deleterious influence on the reputations of Japanese women living abroad for any reason, first in Japan, but later even in the United States, where the term and its meaning has slowly dispersed to parts of the American male population. The anguish and humiliation at being labeled “yellow cabs” experienced by serious professional women residing overseas to pursue careers is undoubtedly great, and their consternation is understandable; however, to censor and/or deny yellow cab reality is not an adequate solution. Any such efforts to negate their existence and experience run the risk of reinscribing patriarchal systems’ hostility toward and rejection of women as sexual actors.

#### *Connoisseurs of the West*

However few their numbers, the women come in large part from the ranks of “office ladies” (OLs): young, unmarried clerical officer workers who, through the strategy of living with their parents, enjoy a larger expendable income than any other group of people in Japan.<sup>7</sup> The OL has virtually no chance for upward mobility within the company, and for this reason has been almost universally branded, by Western observers, a victim of oppressive gender discrimination. What is too little recognized, however, is the degree to which the OLs have employed their considerable financial resources to construct a vital, vibrant subculture of their own in the interstices of the male-dominated Japanese business world. The very circumstances that are marks of the OLs’ inferior professional status—lack of serious responsibilities, shorter working hours, flexibility to quit uncongenial jobs—are the same circumstances which leave these women free to pursue a substantially independent lifestyle devoted to shopping, hobbies, gourmet dining, overseas travel, and the satisfaction of purely personal leisure desires.<sup>8</sup> Many observers have remarked that only the OL is truly enjoying the fruits of the Japanese economic miracle.

The OL lifestyle and subculture depend more than anything upon complicated and sophisticated patterns of consumption and demand a single-minded commitment to commodity ethics and aesthetics that goes beyond mere purchasing or appreciation, but instead enters the realm of connoisseurship. While this consumption has undoubtedly declined since the bursting of the 1980s “bubble economy” and extended recession, it still outpaces anything seen in Western countries in many years. In fact, OL connoisseurship has long since exhausted the resources of native or Japanese products and has in the last ten

years expanded to encompass the goods, services, experiences, and opportunities of the entire globe—in particular, the West. Many OLs have traveled so widely, and shopped so extensively, that they are satisfied with nothing less than the finest the West has to offer, including diamonds and gemstones, haute couture fashion, Club Med vacations, French perfumes, and designer goods of all types. Things Western are not merely coveted, however; that was the case for earlier generations for whom foreign goods were seductively exotic. Now, Western goods are contained as signifiers within a largely self-sufficient OL universe of style and status; the West has been “domesticated,” to the extent that it is Japan itself that is now, for this generation, exotic and alien.

As Tobin has noted, Japan “now has the desire, wealth and power to import and consume passion in many forms from the West.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the stage is set for a few of these cosmopolitan young women—these connoisseurs of the West and citizens of the (late capitalist) world—to cross Japan’s borders in search of the “gaijin lover,” the exotic sexual experience that represents the final frontier of the foreign left to consume.

#### *Postcards from the Edge*

The locations in which young women so inclined may seek out a gaijin male are many and varied, but are concentrated, within Japan, in the fashionable Roppongi district of Tokyo, Yokohama, Kōbe, and the U.S. military bases of Yokosuka, Yokota, Misawa, Iwakuni, Sasebo, and Okinawa. Outside of Japan, they include Hawaii, Bali, Saipan, New York, and the U.S. West Coast. Not coincidentally, each of these locations is a border region, inhabited by a highly transient, ethnically, racially, and culturally mixed population. Even the regions within Japan are not really of Japan. The American military bases are, of course, U.S. real estate; Yokohama and Kōbe are historically the centers of foreign presence in Japan; and the Roppongi district—commonly known as the “gaijin ghetto” of Tokyo—is a kind of dreamlike (or nightmarish) liminal region of bars and nightclubs in which Japanese and non-Japanese mingle freely. Each of these locations is geopolitically ambiguous, caught within the post/neocolonialist regimes of U.S. military presence abroad, Japanese investment, mass tourism, international labor flows, and commodification of the “native.” As such, they are obvious places to seek out the foreign erotic, for the foreign men in these locations are themselves often wanderers from Europe and the mainland United States, gravitating to the borderlands of Asia and the West in search of the “erotic Orient.”<sup>10</sup> In Hawaii these men are known locally as “playboys,” and

they form a bounded and mutually recognizable population which roams the streets of Waikiki daily, seeking out and accosting Japanese female tourists for money and sex. Likewise, every weekend night in Roppongi, the clubs are packed with foreign men hoping to encounter their "Roppongi girl" for the evening.

Once in these locations, the young women, extending the consumer patterns that dominate their lives elsewhere, pay for the company of foreign males. This is not an institutionalized prostitution, but rather falls within the rubric of *mitsugu*, an old Japanese word—defined in the dictionary to mean "to give financial aid to one's lover"—that has taken on new life in this transnational context. The practice of *mitsugu* of foreign males includes extension of loans (which may go unreturned), coverage of the foreign male's rent, upkeep, and outstanding debts, payment of all costs associated with the affair, and finally, material gifts including cars, designer goods, watches, and jewelry. It is understood by both parties that both inside and outside of Japan, Japanese women, as possessors of the strong yen, are likely to be in the financially superior position. As one "playboy" in Waikiki told me, "they know if they want us they have to pay for everything." Women have here usurped the traditionally male prerogative of purchasing sex in pleasure districts at home and abroad. Some women, in fact, assert that "it was Japanese men, with their sex tours, who taught us how to behave like this." As we shall see, however, Japanese men disclaim all responsibility for yellow cab behavior.

#### *Deviance, Deception, and Defense of the State*

The intensity of the public outcry surrounding this yellow cab behavior suggests that it has indeed struck a nerve, particularly among Japanese men. The response of Japanese male journalists to the specter of the yellow cab can be described very simply: it is reactionary, conservative, and prurient. Devoted to the reassertion and reinscription of all elements of Japanese national/racial/sexual identity, and of traditional power hierarchies between Japanese men and women, men's representations derive their primary rhetorical force from the use of derogatory labels: not just yellow cab, but also "*burasagarizoku*" (arm-hangers), referring to the sight of diminutive Japanese women hanging on the arms of tall foreign men; "*sebun-irebun*" (seven-eleven), meaning that the women, like the stores, are "open twenty-four hours"; and "*eseburakku*" (fake blacks), referring to those who imitate "black" hairstyles, fashion, and mannerisms. Each of these labels draws attention to the ways in which "proper" racial/

gender boundaries have been violated. Yellow cab and *sebun-irebun* imply that the women's sexuality has become abandoned, out of control; *burasagarizoku* and *eseburakku* suggest that critical racial distinctions—tall foreigner/short Japanese, blackness/Japaneseness—are threatened. The use of these terms thus reinscribes the racial and gender boundaries deemed vital to the proper maintenance of the Japanese nation-state. At the same time, these boundaries are also interchangeably transgressive—and therefore doubly threatening. That is, historically, Japanese women are always already deeply associated with the foreign, and foreign men are always already highly sexualized. Thus, the foreign men also imperil sexual boundaries, and Japanese women also jeopardize national/racial ones. These two themes, then, combine together into one hypersexualized, hostile, and prurient male discourse that depends upon master narratives of oversexed foreign men and duplicitous Japanese women. "It's the Japanese girls who can be found dancing on the tables at discos, with their underpants showing for all to see. . . . They live in Waikiki hi-rises. . . . that their daddies pay for."<sup>11</sup> "The temperature of Narita Airport goes up each time a planeload of girls returns from their trips overseas. . . . and on outbound flights, they all may pretend to be little ladies, but actually, in their hearts, each one wants to be the first to get a gaijin to bed."<sup>12</sup>

Even the prose of highly regarded novelist and columnist Tanaka Yasuō (author of the popular cult novel *Nantonaku Kurisutaru* [Somehow, Crystal]), degenerates into a hostile diatribe on the subject of yellow cabs: "Of course, they have no use for Japanese men, and this shows on their faces. . . . They try to pretend that they're intellectuals, [but] people who know laugh at them. . . . These girls may seem delicate, but they're actually tough as nails."<sup>13</sup> Tanaka is clearly as disturbed by the women's deceptiveness as by their sexual transgressions. This fear of the "traitor in disguise," reveals the male linking of female sexual duplicity and national honor. This linking is most explicitly achieved in popular writer Ishikawa Miyoshi's recent suggestion that "Japanese women spread their legs a little wider for the sake of U.S.-Japan relations."<sup>14</sup>

Within this male rhetoric, AIDS takes on a dire significance. Through the specter of AIDS, Japanese men may at once paint the foreign male as not just an oversexed animal, but a diseased oversexed animal; the Japanese woman as treacherous and dirty; and themselves as innocent victims whose lives and health are endangered because of female duplicity. Again and again in the Japanese media, yellow cabs are targeted as the most high-risk group in Japan for HIV infection, while the men's sex tours to Thailand, Korea, and the Philippines go unmentioned. In fact, only a fraction of Japanese female heterosexual

HIV-positive individuals contracted the disease overseas, compared to heterosexual Japanese males. However, statistics cannot compete against a self-righteous male hysteria which culminated in one man plastering the walls and sidewalks of Waikiki with small, xeroxed notes that read: "Aloha Japanese girls . . . all men in Hawaii have AIDS. If you go with them, they will give you liquor and drugged cigarettes, and while you are sleeping, you will be raped, and have everything taken."<sup>15</sup> Writers such as Yamada Eimi and Ieda Shōko cannily feed into this hypersexualized hysteria by dwelling ostentatiously and obsessively in their novels on themes of black male sexual appetites and genital size. The works themselves are nothing more than soft-core pornographic novels which capitalize on the very worst racist notions of black male sexuality and racial inferiority:

Nuzzling his chest hair with my lips, I inhaled his body odor. I recognized the smell as the sweetish stink of rotten cocoa butter. . . . His smell seemed to assault me, like some filthy thing. But it also made me feel, by comparison, clean and pure. His smell made me feel so superior. It was like the smell of musk that a dog in heat sends out to attract his bitch.<sup>16</sup>

Jean stood over me as I lay naked on the bed, holding his heavy dick in his left hand and swinging it back and forth. I'm not usually so eager, but all I could think about was being wrapped in Jean's powerful body. . . . I was crazy with lust. . . . While he toyed with it, his copper-colored "thing," which had been dangling in his left hand, swelled. It seemed as if it reached to his navel. I can only say, it was a wonderful sight.<sup>17</sup>

Yet by taking this line, Yamada and Ieda are guaranteed not just good sales, but even critical acclaim and literary accolades from Japanese male reviewers.

#### *Good Gaijins/Gaijin Goods*

Women other than Yamada and Ieda, however, offer an entirely independent interpretation of the foreign male as lover—one that is, compared to the monotonous rantings of male commentators, varied, subtle, and complex. On one level, women's accounts are concerned with issues not of identity and morality, but of commodity and value. For what distinguishes the rhetoric of women is its shrewd and insistent contrast between Japanese and gaijin men—a kind of "comparison shopping" that carefully weighs the advantages of individual men on the basis of race and nationality.

The comparative advantages of the foreign male range widely, but include foremost an alleged "kindness" (*yasashisa*). It is in fact a virtual stereotype that foreign men are kind (*yasashii*), with many women offering contrasts like this one: "American men have been trained by their mothers since childhood to respect women—in a 'ladies first' kind of atmosphere. . . . But in Japan, women are always below men" (graduate student, University of Hawaii). Other women dwell on the good looks of foreign men, as in "A Japanese man's got to be dressed up to look good, but a gaijin looks good even when he looks bad." Foreign males' native English ability is often mentioned as an attraction. As one source stated, succinctly, "It's faster, cheaper, and more fun than going to English classes." Finally, of course, there is the allegedly superior sexual skill of the foreign male:

Americans know how to enjoy sex! It's fun, natural, wonderful. Japanese men treat it like something dirty or bad.

The thing that black guys have in bed that other guys don't is strong thrusting motion and a sense of rhythm.<sup>18</sup>

This sexual dimension is deemphasized, however, by others who claim that in the sexual act itself foreign men are the same as or inferior to Japanese men in skill. Such women argue that it is *yasashisa*, both in and out bed, that sets gaijin males apart. The glibly racist novels of Yamada Eimi and Ieda Shōko have, of course, made foreign male sexuality—in particular black male sexuality—a cause célèbre in Japan today.

The praise that is heaped upon the foreign male, however, is in most respects the praise given to a serviceable commodity object. Ieda states, "Girls know what they want!" "Chanel, Louis Vuitton bags, Hermes scarves, and gaijin men!"<sup>19</sup> Another woman, a habitué of Roppongi, suggests, "Gaijins are fun . . . but not if you fall in love . . . so it's better to just keep him around for awhile, to show off . . . like a pet."<sup>20</sup> Once again turning to the works of Yamada Eimi, we can see that the gaijin male is, in many ways, merely a "stand-in" for his penis. "[Spoon's] dick was not at all similar to the reddish, disgusting cocks of white guys. It was also different from the sad and pathetic organs of Japanese men. . . . Spoon's dick shone before my eyes like a living thing. It reminded me of the sweet chocolate candy bars I love."<sup>21</sup> Here it is the male genitals that are made into marketable commodities, and rated, by race, according to their serviceability.

When it comes to the question of marriage, some women are blunt: "I'll

never marry a hairy barbarian [*ketō*]. I'll marry a Japanese even if he's terrible in bed and ugly. At least he's stable." A young woman interviewed on a television special entitled, "The Real Truth About 'Resort Lovers'" informed an aghast male interviewer that "In a few years I'll wash my hands of this whole gaijin business, and return to Japanese men." An English student I spoke with was even more direct: "For marriage we want a Japanese guy; for playing around we want gaijins." The gaijin male's serviceability, then, is only in the capacity of escort/lover, and the reason lies in his rarity—or "*mezurashisa*."

I have to admit we have a weakness for gaijins. The reason is, there aren't too many of them in Japan, so they're rare [*mezurashii*]. (English student, Hawaii)

Why do we like blacks? 'Cause there aren't any in Japan [*nihon ni nai desho*]. (Tourist in Hawaii)

Apparently racial preferences shifted toward black men in the late 1980s based on the relative rarity of different racial types: "Two years ago everybody was going out with whites . . . but then, white guys weren't rare [*mezurashii*] anymore, so, right now everyone's going out with black guys" (English student). The commodity cycle continues to evolve as tastes more recently move toward Asian immigrant laborers. In men, as in other things, rarity brings status. This status is coveted, and its effect calculated. As *Cosmopolitan Japan* gushed in 1988, "We'd all like to be seen walking down the street arm in arm with a gaijin boyfriend, wouldn't we, girls?" A tourist in Hawaii explained, "We can walk a little taller. We think 'you go out with men from the same country, but I go out with men from a different country.'" Complete objectification has been achieved: "Being with a gaijin feels good. . . . When another Japanese comes up and asks me 'what language is that?' I feel pretty proud, you know? So, he's an accessory. From that point of view, any gaijin will do, even Sankhon."<sup>22</sup>

#### *Race and Reflexivity*<sup>23</sup>

The primary characteristic of women's discourse on the foreign male is its insistent contrast between Japanese and gaijin men. The attractions of the foreigner are attractive precisely because those qualities—kindness, sexiness, English ability—are claimed to be lacking in the Japanese male. It is clear, then, that the Japanese male is the invisible but central point of reference in this

female discussion. Intricately interwoven into the discourse on the "attractions of the gaijin" is a parallel discourse of frustration against the Japanese male. This discourse, although indirect, amounts to a coherent gender critique of Japanese society and Japanese men. Nearly every female statement from the previous two sections depends for its rhetorical force upon a critical contrast with the Japanese male: "But in Japan, women are always below men." "A Japanese guy would never do that." "Japanese men treat sex like something dirty."

Perhaps nowhere so much as in the realm of kindness (*yasashisa*) is the Japanese male felt to be deficient. As one source writes, poignantly, "[My black boyfriend] treated me like a lady after I'd been treated like trash by Japanese men." Another offers, "When I go to visit a British or Italian guy, they always . . . serve food and drinks themselves. But when I go to a Japanese guy's place, . . . he tries to make me clean his room and cook his dinner!"<sup>24</sup> Some women disparage the appearance of Japanese men: a tourist in Hawaii told me, "Gaijins are more masculine than skinny, unhealthy-looking Japanese men." And with exceptional virulence women can be heard criticizing the sexual behavior of their male counterparts: "Even in sex, I mean, if a gaijin is really telling you 'I want you, I need you, I want you,' you get in the mood, right? Not like with some stone-faced Japanese guy who tries to push you into a hotel all of a sudden."<sup>25</sup> As mentioned above, however, other women contest this emphasis on sexuality, arguing in some cases that Japanese men are actually better at "technique," but lack "emotional availability" or "the ability to create a romantic atmosphere."

Perhaps the most explicit summarization comes from the pen of journalist Kudō Akiko in the women's magazine *Fujin Kōron*:

The reasons Japanese women reject Japanese men are *not just physical*. . . . Women evaluate them badly in all areas—"they are childish and disgusting," "they have a bad attitude toward women," "they are fake and dishonest," "they are narrow-minded," "they are bad-mannered," "they can't take care of themselves," "they can't do housework." . . . Japanese men are the opposite of the Japanese GNP—they are the lowest in the world!<sup>26</sup>

In this passage the writer confronts the sexualized focus of the yellow cab controversy in order to deny that the attractions of the foreign male are "just physical." To the contrary, I would argue that the attractions of the foreign male are whatever the female speakers and writers feel is lacking in the Japanese male. For Kudō and others clearly imply that the gaijin male is *not* childish and

disgusting, is *not* fake and dishonest, is *not* narrow-minded, and loves to do housework. Yet, do they truly believe this?<sup>27</sup> I argue that, rather, they attribute these traits to the *gaijin* for exclusively rhetorical purposes. The foreign male becomes a reflexive symbol in an indirect discourse of complaint; a mirror against which the Japanese women can reflect back the deficiencies of Japanese men as lovers, husbands, and friends. He enables a coherent, albeit indirect, gendered critique. We can interpret the yellow cab encounters, then, not, as the Association to Think About Yellow Cabs seeks to claim, as a conspiracy perpetrated by Japanese men, but rather as a locus of potent and influential negotiations between some Japanese women and men over present-day and future gender relations in Japan.

As we have seen, the foreign male in reality may not be remotely kind, good-looking, or sexy; these facts are irrelevant. What is important is merely that he is not-Japanese. He is seen as an inert and harmless object, inherently *yasashii*, infinitely separate, entirely Other, by virtue of Japanese racial ideologies, and therefore endlessly malleable to the pursuit of female aims and agendas. That the *gaijin* may have any agendas of his own, in the pursuit of which the Japanese (or other Asian woman) is merely a tool, is not recognized or perhaps even imagined. The consequences of this ignorance can, however, be serious. Time and again young Japanese women in Waikiki are raped, impregnated, or, at the very least, taken advantage of financially and physically by the local population of "playboys." My playboy informants were blissfully convinced of their power over Japanese women, bragging about the sums of money they had extracted from them, and the abusive, humiliating, and degrading sexual acts they had compelled the women to perform. The Western men, then, are hardly passive and inert.<sup>28</sup>

However, circumstances conspire against women's recognition of the real nature of the Western male partner. The fantasy of *yasashisa*, Japanese racial ideologies of separateness and "alien"ation, commodity aesthetics and commodity ethics, Japanese consumer power over the West—all these lead to the *gaijin* male being objectified and commodified, seen and treated in a manner that fails to recognize his agency and power.<sup>29</sup> Women have appropriated the *gaijin* males as reflexive symbols by which they construct an image of Japanese men as they are, and as they wish them to be. Yet for all his deficiencies, it is the Japanese man who, in the end, retains the status of legitimate marital partner. These "flirtatious commodities" (in a stunning illustration of Haug's argument) are, and must be, described in terms that communicate to Japanese women peers, and to Japanese men, that they are no more than discursive

symbols through which genuine matters of power and status are discussed and negotiated.

#### *Conclusion—Gender and (Trans)National Sexualities*

Yellow cabs challenge prevailing stereotypes of many things: of the passive and victimized Japanese woman, of the Madame Butterfly trope, of the "proper" relations between Japan and the West. In conclusion I will trace the meanings of their challenge to understandings of Japan and the transnational moment.

The yellow cabs challenge us to consider the new meanings that cultural marginality takes on in a transnational world. Ivy writes that in the cultural imaginary of Japan, men are associated with the native/authentic and women with the foreign: "images of fictionality and authenticity waver between the poles of the feminine and the masculine—the non-native and the native."<sup>30</sup> Women's impurity, derived from menstruation, childbirth, and household "dirty work," puts them forever at odds with the purity of blood and body required by Japanese racial ideologies. In the past, this marginality put Japanese women at a grave disadvantage, rendering them "inauthentic," unreliable, and unqualified to participate in many ritual and institutional practices. In the transnational world, however, such hierarchies are increasingly destabilized, even reversed. It is precisely because young Japanese women are marginalized professionally and culturally that they have both the leisure and the inclination to travel or reside abroad, to intensively study foreign languages, and consequently to enjoy ever more intimate relations with the foreign(er). And it is precisely because they enjoy an intimate association with the foreign/global that women gain discursive leverage in their domestic gender struggles and in their local dialogues with Japanese men.<sup>31</sup>

Thus Japanese women, through their very marginality, possess knowledge of gender alternatives and options, without which they could not criticize and challenge Japanese male norms and values so consistently and effectively. The benefits for women of foreign associations are clearly parallel to the changing status of the *kikokushijo* (returnee children) in Japan. Once viewed as contaminated from "too much" foreign experience, the *kikokushijo* are now often seen as possessors of an "elite 'cultural' or 'symbolic' capital" which guarantees them entry into some of the finest universities and most prestigious jobs.<sup>32</sup>

We can find then, in these and other examples in Japan, ways that the transnational "refracts and shapes 'the local.'"<sup>33</sup> The yellow cabs demonstrate the necessity of taking a transnational perspective in ethnographic analysis;

their behavior is simply not comprehensible within the confines of a bounded and essentialistic notion of "Japanese culture." The yellow cabs are who and what they are precisely because they negotiate the borders between cultures, races, nations, browsing among the wares of the (masculine) world. The yellow cabs act and speak in the places of "betweenness," of "hybridity and struggle, policing and transgression,"<sup>34</sup> in which flows of people and power meet and interact, creating new forms of encounter and behavior. The degree of policing and struggle that characterize such locations (both spatial and cultural) is revealed in the insulting labels with which this group of women has been branded by Japanese and foreign men. The price of transgression is condemnation. Eluding the "border police," however, women continue to flirt with the foreign in their desire to disturb and recreate the Japanese.

But what is recreated? Are the discursive strategies employed by the yellow cabs effective in changing Japanese male nativist behavior? Japanese men's response has not been to embrace women's demands but to exaggerate the threat they represent: to precipitate a crisis. An example of male inability to cope constructively with the challenge of the yellow cabs and of women's demands can be found in a "Public Debate" on the subject of kissing in public, staged by a popular magazine between female novelist Kajiwara Hazuki and male columnist Ikushima Jirō. Kajiwara begins by arguing passionately that Japanese males' ability to express affection is "the worst in the world." She continues, "Because of that, recently the women whose desires for physical warmth and affection are not being satisfied find what they're looking for overseas, and end up being called 'yellow cabs.'" <sup>35</sup> Ikushima, however, responds in this way: "Japanese people are fundamentally poor at [public displays of affection]. They are a shy race. As proof, Japanese males may say 'I like you,' or 'I'm crazy about you,' but they find it difficult to say 'I love you.' . . . Women may say that easily, and demand that men say it too, but Japanese men will not say it if they can avoid it."<sup>36</sup> Kajiwara concludes her side of the debate by asserting, "I think the time has come for busy Japanese men to start changing. . . . [A]ny country that will go as far as 'exporting' women's frustration is just not right."<sup>37</sup> But Ikushima, it is clear, cares only to avoid confronting Japanese women's call for change; to reiterate essentialistic, nativist, and male-centered representations of "Japanese culture"; and to compel Japanese women to conform to such representations. It is as though Japanese men, confronted with an unflattering reflection in the mirror held out by women, have responded by turning away their eyes, to gaze instead upon women themselves as examples of female treachery, unbound sexuality, and cultural inauthenticity.

The men co-opt the women's voices, and in their highly influential media accounts, twist this discourse on gender into a discourse on sex and nation.

The dialogue between Kajiwara and Ikushima represents in microcosm the growing tensions in Japan between the much-touted boom in internationalization (*kokusaika*) and the equally conspicuous rise of neonationalist sentiments. Some believe that the two sides do in fact represent opposing opinions and desires, that there is a faction in Japan that seeks genuine internationalization. Others are not so sanguine. Yoshimoto argues instead that neo-nationalism and internationalization in Japan are merely two sides of the same coin and that "both are necessary to construct a model of the world at the center of which Japan is situated."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, I suggest that what is "recreated" within the yellow cab phenomenon is not a brave new world of female empowerment and international intimacy, but rather old racism in a new guise. Women transform the foreigner into a signifier whose primary purpose is to further their domestic agendas. Japanese men respond to the challenge by reinscribing inalienable boundaries of race and nation. And foreign males permit themselves to be "bought" only to recreate, indeed relive, ancient Western male fantasies of sexual access to and manipulation of the Oriental woman.

For these reasons, the example of the yellow cabs finally challenges us to be unfailingly alert to the shifting, cross-cutting, and mutually contradictory—indeed incommensurate—claims of race, gender, desire, and sexual fetish in the transcultural border regions.<sup>39</sup> Too eager an embrace of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, too gleeful a celebration of titillating possibilities of sexual "inversions," will result in our overlooking the local negotiations made of and through these sexual encounters and the way in which these encounters may obscure persistent inequalities, exploitations, and separations on a number of different planes simultaneously. Torgovnick has observed that "the essence of carnivalesque is that one cannot tell male from female, rich from poor, black from white . . . everything is possible."<sup>40</sup> But as we have seen everything is not possible, and the contact with the Other can just as easily depend on maintaining those differences between male and female, rich and poor, Japanese and black and white. Furthermore, an irresponsible fetishization of, for example, a highly marginal case of Japanese women's sexual objectification of the white male runs the risks of furthering the historical eroticization of the Oriental female ("she can never get enough") and inadvertently serving as "justification" for continued Western male sexual exploitation of Asian women.<sup>41</sup>

This failure of the carnivalesque should be kept in mind when evaluating other interracial sexual encounters, such as those increasingly glorified within

the Bennetton-esque multicultural carnival of the contemporary United States. White America's eagerness to appropriate "lovers of color" simultaneously enacts and masks efforts to employ them as signifiers within a self-serving agenda of white liberalism and/or postmodern chic. Regarding this trend, bell hooks has written, "Getting a bit of the Other, in this case engaging in sexual encounters with non-white females, [is now] considered a ritual of transcendence. . . . White males claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier. . . . They see their willingness to openly name their sexual desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality."<sup>42</sup> The increasingly common construction of the Asian woman as appropriate, even ideal, partner for white men must always be considered in light of a sexual economy which still permits (encourages?) the publication of essays such as: "Oriental Girls: The Ultimate Accessory."<sup>43</sup> We have entered a new era of race relations, in which sexual contact is often constructed as "a progressive change in white attitudes toward non-whites."<sup>44</sup> But in the age of *M. Butterfly*, things are not so simple. All too often the white men and women who see their foreign/non-white lovers as evidence that they are nonracist, liberal, sensitive, and culturally aware are "not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination."<sup>45</sup> It behooves us to remember that on all points of the global sex map, capital and the forces of commodification can dominate even as they liberate desire. We must recognize this domination, and acknowledge the overdetermined agendas that underlie the exhilarating encounters (sexual and otherwise) of the transnational borderlands.

#### Notes

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- 1 In the interests of economy, throughout this paper the term *gaijin* will be used to refer to all non-Japanese men, although in actual Japanese usage the term (literally meaning "outsider") is sometimes restricted to Caucasian foreigners.
- 2 John Russell, "Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Mass Culture," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (February 1991): 21.

- 3 The etymology of the term yellow cab is itself a remarkable example of the ebb and flow of transnational cultural tides. Ieda claims that the term originated in the United States, among certain black and white men in New York City and Hawaii who coined it to refer to Japanese women who were, from their perspective, "easy." Ieda made the term the focus of controversy by claiming that it is well-known in the United States as a slur on "loose Japanese women." When her work grew popular in Japan, the male-dominated Japanese media took it up as a catchall insult for "disreputable" Japanese women abroad. Women (including the New York-based Association to Think About Yellow Cabs) objected, claiming, rightly, that for the vast majority of Americans the term "yellow cab" has no meaning other than the name of a New York taxi company. Eventually, however, foreigners living in Japan and American journalists got involved in the fray, and as the controversy grew, the term and the debate around it did indeed flow back to the United States, where more men have now begun to use it. Since 1993, however, a new trend has emerged in which some young Japanese women have reappropriated the term in a gesture of pride and defiance against Japanese men. In 1993 a young female writer Iizuka Makiko published a book entitled *The Guys Who Can't Even Ride Yellow Cabs*, in which she argues that as low as some women's standards may be, they are still too high for "selfish, ugly, sexist" Japanese men to reach.
- 4 All Japanese names are written surname first, given name last.
- 5 Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Editors' Comments," *Public Culture: Bulletin of the Project for Transnational Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 2.
- 6 This association has pursued a vigorous media campaign against the work of Ieda Shōko, so fierce that it has earned the name "Ieda Bashing" and has left Ieda's reputation seriously damaged. While Ieda's work is certainly of questionable reliability, it appears that she was also used as a scapegoat to bear women's rage over the yellow cab controversy.
- 7 This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over an eighteen-month period (January 1991–July 1992) in Honolulu, Hawaii. For an ethnographic account of the data, please see Karen Kelsky, "Sex and the Gaijin Male: Contending Discourses of Race and Gender in Contemporary Japan," ASPAC Occasional Papers No. 5 (1993). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
- 8 There is no question that many OLS experience real victimization in the form of thwarted career goals, demeaning work, sexual harassment, and corporate paternalism. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to respect the voices of those OLS who assert that equality with men is not a particularly appealing prospect and that they have no desire to compete with or emulate "male corporate drones."
- 9 Joseph Tobin, "Introduction: Domesticating the West," in *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*, ed. Joseph Tobin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 11. The most recent form this imported passion takes is J-Club, a wildly popular male strip club in Tokyo, in which eight muscular foreign male dancers, dressed variously as American hillbillies, fifties rockers, cowboys, and trench-coated film noir P.I.s, gyrate and disrobe to a background of American rock music.

- before a screaming female audience. As the climax of the performance women may tuck fake U.S. dollar bills (¥1000 for three bills) into the fluorescent G-strings of the foreigner of their choice in exchange for a kiss.
- 10 An exception are the "beachboys" of Bali, Indonesian men, often from poverty-stricken regions of Java, who look upon Japanese women less as "exotic Oriental women" than as economic benefactors.
  - 11 Anonymous, "Hawaii Nihon ryūgakusei no gōka naru benkyōburi" (Japanese overseas students extravagant 'pretend study' abroad), *Shūkan Gendai* (August 1989): 151.
  - 12 Anonymous, "OL, Joshidaisei kaigairyōkō no seika hōkoku" (OL, girl college students overseas travel sex report), *Shūkan Hōseki* (August 1988): 218.
  - 13 Tanaka Yasuo, "Otoko ni sukareru kao, kenkyū repōto" (Research report on the kind of face men like), *An An* (September 1988): 81.
  - 14 John Russell, personal communication.
  - 15 Japan is of course not the only country in which AIDS stands in as a metaphor for a host of other social ills. See Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989). Also, drugging and raping as described in the note is, according to the local police, actually one consistent pattern of Japanese female abuse in Waikiki.
  - 16 Yamada Eimi, *Beddotaimu Aizu* (Bedtime eyes) (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1985), p. 13.
  - 17 Ieda Shōko, *Ore no hada ni muragatta onnatachi* (The women who flocked to my skin) (Tokyo: Shōdensha, 1991), p. 14.
  - 18 Both quotes from Kudo Akiko, "Gaijin no otoko denakereba sekkusu dekinai onna" (The women who can only have sex with foreigners), *Fujin Kōron* (June 20, 1990): 409, 410.
  - 19 Ieda, *Ore no hada ni muragatta onnatachi*, p. 5.
  - 20 Quoted in Katsuhira Ruika, "Roppongi gyaru" (Roppongi gals), in *Sekkusu to iu oshigoto* (The job of sex), ed. Ito Shinji (Tokyo: JICC, 1990), p. 215.
  - 21 Yamada, *Beddotaimu Aizu*, p. 15.
  - 22 Quoted in Katsuhira, "Roppongi gyaru," p. 215. Ousemann Sankhon is a Senegalese businessman turned Japanese TV personality; he is noted in the Japanese media for his "peculiar" and "amusing" African looks.
  - 23 This phrase is borrowed from Russell, "Race and Reflexivity," p. 3.
  - 24 Quoted in Kudo, "Gaijin no otoko denakereba sekkusu dekinai onna," p. 408.
  - 25 Quoted in Murota Yasuko, "Kanaami ni karamitsuita kanashii yokubō" (Sad desires entangled by wire fences), *Asahi Journal*, November 13, 1987, p. 7.
  - 26 Kudo, "Gaijin no otoko denakereba sekkusu dekinai onna," p. 411.
  - 27 Subsequent research has shown that many Japanese women do hold a markedly idealized image of Western (white) men. The white male is often described as a "knight in shining armor" or "prince charming" (lit. prince on a white horse, *hakuba ni notta ōjisama*) who is unfailingly chivalrous yet treats women with perfect equality. John Russell has called this image of the white male the "Messianic Mystic," and it is in some ways parallel to the Western male image of "Madame Butterfly," in that both serve as

- indirect efforts at sexual control by acting as cautionary reminders to the opposite sex within the race/nation of the existence of competition.
- 28 See the works of Boye De Mente, especially the 1964 and 1991 editions of his classic guidebook *Bachelor's Japan* for a blunt exposition of this Western male power fantasy.
  - 29 For a discussion of these racial ideologies and the "alien"ation of the foreigner, see Karen Kelsky, "Intimate Ideologies: Transnational Theory and Japan's 'Yellow Cabs'" *Public Culture* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 465–478.
  - 30 Marilyn Ivy, "Discourses of the Vanishing" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1988), p. 49.
  - 31 See Karen Kelsky, "Postcards from the Edge: The 'Office Ladies' of Tokyo," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal (English Supplement)* 6 (March 1994): 3–26.
  - 32 See Roger Goodman, "Deconstructing an Anthropological Text: A 'Moving' Account of Returnee Schoolchildren in Contemporary Japan," in *Unwrapping Japan: Society and Culture in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Eyal Ben-Ari et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).
  - 33 Akhil Gupta, "The Song of the Nonaligned World: Transnational Identities and the Reinscription of Space in Late Capitalism," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (February 1992): 63.
  - 34 James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 109.
  - 35 Kajiwara Hazuki, "Kōron shuron—Hitomae de no kisu" (Debate—kissing in public), *AERA*, August 6, 1991, p. 58.
  - 36 Ikushima Jirō, "Kōron shuron—Hitomae de no kisu" (Debate—kissing in public), *AERA*, August 6, 1991, p. 59.
  - 37 Kajiwara, "Kōron shuron," p. 58.
  - 38 Yoshimoto Mitsuhiko, "The Postmodern and Mass Images in Japan," *Public Culture* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 22.
  - 39 See also Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 213–229 for a nuanced discussion of this complexity and its implications for the ethnographic encounter.
  - 40 Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 40.
  - 41 One entirely unforeseen consequence of this research has been the large number of white Western male scholars and academics who have personally approached or contacted the author with the apparently self-therapeutic goal of explaining, justifying, rationalizing, or otherwise attempting to absolve themselves for a variety of unhappy personal relationships with Japanese women. I have been quite disturbed to find my research used to promote an identity as abused and misunderstood victim among white male academics; I have the odd, unpleasant sense of, in Lisa Yoneyama's words, "entertaining those I do not wish to entertain." At the same time, however, this latest, somewhat surreal, twist in the yellow cab saga has been instrumental in alerting me both to the ongoing issues of politics and agenda in academic work (whose purposes is it

serving? Is it serving purposes that I do not intend?) and to my own culpabilities and responsibilities as ethnographer of such global sex “trades.”

42 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 23–24.

43 Tony Rivers, “Oriental Girls: The Ultimate Accessory,” *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* (*British Edition*) (October 1990): 39–44.

44 hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 24.

45 Ibid.