

Global Media Streams:
Cosmopolitan Streaming Platforms and the Contemporary Ecosystem of Anime Distribution

By

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
<i>The Stakes of Global Streaming</i>	
Chapter One	45
<i>Netflix and the Japanese Anime Industry: Issues of Production and Representation</i>	
Chapter Two	100
<i>Crunchyroll and the Conundrum of Niche Streaming</i>	
Chapter Three	158
<i>Global Anime, Hybridity and Transperipheral Networks</i>	
Chapter Four	218
<i>The Contemporary Landscape of English-language Anime Fansubbing</i>	
Conclusion	275
<i>The Changing Anime Distribution Ecosystem</i>	
Works Cited	290

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the current state of global anime distribution following the mainstream rise of streaming services. As the presence of streaming portals like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, and more continue to grow, the way that global media is now circulated has transformed from previous distribution paradigms. I look at the effects of global streaming services from four vantage points within the global anime production/distribution ecosystem: the first chapter looks at how Netflix is representing and affecting the local Japanese anime industry with its presence and funding practices. The second chapter focuses on how niche streaming portals like Crunchyroll engage in producing brand communities around the existing global fandom in order to survive in the streaming market and the opportunities that may arise for creators of color within Crunchyroll Original productions. The third chapter takes the vantage point of minority and “peripheral” creators of color who are taking advantage of the global status of Netflix in order to get their productions and voices circulating around the world. While the second chapter emphasized the utility of leveraging minority voices for the niche streaming service, in the third chapter, I look at how creators are using Netflix to advance in their own objectives. The final chapter revolves around the contemporary state of anime fansubbing and how the informal economy continues to fill in the gaps that formal streaming services leave behind. Anime fansubbing and piracy have played a significant role in the global circulation of anime content prior to the rise of formal streaming services; however, their practices have changed in response to the transforming ecosystem of anime distribution. One such change happens at the intersection of piracy practices and the mainstream success of streaming services,

as I look at how digital “rippers” emerged in order to circulate formal anime content within the informal spaces of fandom.

Each chapter is concerned with themes of asymmetrical power differences and the way each player negotiates influence for themselves within the contemporary production and distribution ecosystem. Whether it is the local industries abroad that create the work that is being distributed by global American-based streaming services, the creators that strive to have a presence within the catalogs, or the laborers of the informal economy, each vantage point provides another crucial perspective on how streaming is affecting the way we engage with international productions. As I argue, global media is a significant feature that determines the success of internationally renowned streaming services. My project seeks to observe the transformations of the anime medium as it circulates around the globe via formal streaming services and how streaming services are leveraging global media for their own company’s success.

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Introduction

The Stakes of Global Streaming

On July 31, 2021, I interviewed Shinnosuke Nomura, an employee of Bandai Namco Entertainment and an individual who helped with the programming of the now defunct anime streaming service, Daisuki. Daisuki was a global anime streaming service which was in operation in the United States from May 16, 2013 to Oct. 31, 2017. It was supported through the investment of several anime studios, publishers, and production companies, including Bandai Namco Holdings, Asatsu-DK Inc., Aniplex, Toei Animation, TMS Entertainment, Nihon Ad Systems, Dentsu, Kadokawa, Kodansha, Shueisha, Shogakukan, and more (Daisuki 2015). Bandai Namco, Asatsu-DK and Aniplex established Anime Consortium Japan in October 2014 in order to develop a global digital streaming platform, and through funding from the Japanese government via the Cool Japan Fund, Daisuki merged with Anime Consortium Japan (Hodgkins 2015). Daisuki was a service that was intended to offer free and subscription-based models for the distribution of Japanese anime, specializing in content that was created by the studios and groups managing the service. The service aimed to “aggregate popular titles from multiple platforms in one place” (Loo 2013). This would include huge franchises, widely known by both casual fans and expert anime aficionados alike, such as *Dragonball*, *Idolmaster*, *Sword Art Online*, *Lupin III*, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, *Mobile Suit Gundam*, and more. Beyond their content-oriented offerings, Daisuki also partnered with an anime news site called *Anime Now* in order to expand global interest in the media form, and engaged in social media practices that enhanced not only the site’s anime offerings, but also its broader cultural knowledge bases, such as Japanese cuisine, cultural landmarks, symbols and more. Despite the sense of legitimacy that was afforded to the streaming service, as an entity that was primarily owned and influenced by

the very companies that produced the content that global audiences loved, Daisuki could not win out in the highly competitive English-speaking market, where the likes of Crunchyroll, Funimation, Netflix, and Amazon Prime were already in full operation, providing the kinds of content that anime fans wanted to see.

While Nomura provided several reasons for Daisuki's ultimate inability to find sustainable success as a global streaming service, a central issue that continued to plague the development of the platform was that many anime titles were already sold to streaming distributors abroad. Trying to retain those rights would mean that Daisuki would have to outbid major global distributors. However, the capital that the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime were working with far outshaded the bidding capacity of Daisuki. The result of this was that even though many companies were supporting Daisuki and its vision of Japan retaining control over the distribution of these highly successful IPs abroad, ultimately, these companies refused to offer exclusive distribution to Daisuki. At the end of the day, who was able to pay the most for the rights of a production at the moment of its release remained the most pressing issue for each respective company. Further, issues of technological capacity for the streaming service also became pressing, as

“the biggest problem by far is that the interface simply paled in comparison to virtually every other streaming platform. Fans that tried the service were constantly complaining about it: its overall layout, its less than solid video performance, its initial lack of HD video, and its seemingly random errors” (Sevakis 2017).

Coupled together with an uncertain vision regarding how to ultimately monetize from their subscribers, Daisuki found themselves ill-suited for remaining competitive in the global market where other entities were already leveraging the brand power and influence of anime to support the success of their own respective ventures.

In 2017, Nomura recounted that there was a sense of crisis within the anime industry regarding its relationship to global streaming services. He had expected that Japanese companies would have a bigger influence on the distribution trends of animation, given anime's central presence within global animation culture. Yet, the fact that their endeavors were so easily ousted destabilized his understanding of Japan's dominant positionality within the streaming wars even within the context of anime, a media form that is widely recognized as being culturally connected to and dominant in part due to Japan's global soft power influence. He stated that there were industry players in Japan who were concerned about what would happen if Japanese anime fell out of vogue in the eyes of services like Netflix. How would that affect the investment that these companies have within the anime industries and what would happen when the fickle interests of these companies stray away from the benefit of Japan's creative industries? Further, even if global streaming services' attention were not to stray from Japan's creative output, would Japan simply become a content factory for these centralized streaming services? How much agency would local creators and producers be able to retain within such a lopsided relationship? My interest in this Japanese-based global service stems from the manner in which one can read the concerns of media imperialism scholars through the lens of distribution and digital streaming platforms via Daisuki's ultimate rise and downfall. The persistence of global hierarchies from an economic standpoint, issues of brain drain, data colonialism, and the resulting lopsided technological finesse were stumbling blocks for well-established Japanese industry players. How can we understand the inability of Daisuki, as a collaborative effort among well-established Japanese companies, to have ultimately been unsuccessful when in competition with American-based global streaming services and what does this mean in the context of media imperialism and globalization scholarship?

Streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Crunchyroll, and more have dramatically altered the media landscape in relation to distribution, production, consumption, and reception. Scholars such as Ramon Lobato, Catherine Johnson, Amanda Lotz, Mareike Jenner, and more have applied broader level analyses to the general changes that are happening to the production and distribution of global media with the advent of digital streaming platforms. However, what is often missing in these more generalized analyses are the details of how exactly global media forms and industries are changing in response to the presence of these global services. How are streaming services based in other countries making their stand against powerful American-based ones like Netflix and Amazon Prime? Are the narrative constitutions of global media forms changing in order to serve the globalizing audiences that these services provide convenient access to? How have production structures and industrial practices changed in response to global streaming? How has the rise of formal streaming services affected pre-existing digital distribution networks? Do industries around the world perceive Netflix, Amazon Prime, Crunchyroll and more as allies or competitors and when do these positions change? What do these transformations say about the negotiative approaches that industries around the world must take with these American-based streaming services? These are only a few of the urgent questions that I explore in this project. Given the relative lack of specific case studies that take a deep dive into particular global media forms from the lens of disruption stemming from American-based global streaming services, this dissertation seeks to answer these questions using anime as my primary subject, a medium that is widely represented on most services.

For the most well-established contemporary streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, attracting a global subscriber base is central to their operation model, particularly as the growth rate of American subscribers continues to stagnate (Urbain 2022,

Nicolaou 2021). This incentivizes American-based services to invest heavily in proven-popular global media forms, in order to gain an edge of what has been called the “streaming wars.” The past few years have seen an intensification of the streaming wars, as an influx of new film and television streaming services enter the market and vie for subscribers on a global scale. The impact of these services on the distribution of global media and thereby, the flow of capital, has become a concern for cultural imperialism scholars, who allude to the outsized impact of American streaming services on local markets abroad, issues of representation, content regulation, surveillance, and changes in the textual medium as evidence of continued political and economic inequality (Jin 2015, Boyd-Barrett 2014). Despite the cosmopolitan branding that Netflix leverages in order to “soothe anxieties about the platform-imperialist dominance of a small handful of automated, algorithmic digital platforms,” there are often differing accounts as to whether American-based streaming services make good on their commitment to cultural diversity (Elkins 2019, 377). While it is certainly true that large generalist services like Netflix and Amazon Prime boast far more diverse catalogs than what could have been possible through linear broadcast paradigms, scholars and subscribers alike remain wary about what kinds of diversity is allowed on the service, the limitations of this diversity, and what paradigm of globalism these services ultimately support. While this inquiry will likely yield differing results depending on what global media form one focuses on, I will highlight the extent to which services like Netflix and Crunchyroll reflect upon the concept of diversity within the scope of their respective anime catalogs.

Ultimately, what is at stake in these concerns around streaming services’ focus on global media and their overwhelming presence in international distribution networks is in line with concerns that cultural imperialism scholars have been expressing since the 1960s. While the

cultural imperialism thesis, which outlines the lopsided domination of one culture over another has largely fallen out of fashion in academia, the advent of these services has rearticulated concerns over what it means to be a cultural hegemon in the current moment. As primary intermediaries between international content producers and global audiences, the influence of these streaming services is palpable as gatekeepers, tastemakers, innovators, and disruptors of media industries abroad. As Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens and Paul McDonald state, “In the business landscape of the media industries, distribution always represents a locus of corporate power. Control of distribution not only differentiates which companies will hold the most influence, but also, more fundamentally, creates barriers to who gets to participate in an industry” (2021, 5). This observation is significant because while many understand distribution to be the central business of streaming services, such framings do not accurately represent the enormous impact that American streaming services are having on the structures and production practices of international media industries, processes of media deterritorialization, and consequently, the media texts themselves. While distribution and circulation of content is a starting point for thinking about these multivalent influences, the scope of the effects of who holds this locus of power affects industries on a much wider scale, retaining rippling effects on not only who gets to tell stories, but how these stories get told, and the benefits and detriments of collaborating with these powerful intermediaries.

In my dissertation, I argue that it is within the realm of international media where we see American streaming services staking their claim to sustained success in the streaming wars by capitalizing on perceived taste cultures, and in turn, where we can see the full extent of the impact that such entities have on local industries and markets abroad. While attracting global audiences and maintaining a cosmopolitan outlook have been framed as major strengths and

talking points for PR specialists, what this investment means for the people who are collaborating and creating this international content for global distribution, and in what ways creators are approaching the specter of globalism that these media streaming services represent through their work has yet to be explored in detail. Without these perspectives, discourse around the transformative nature of streaming services remains predictably lopsided. Turning the analytical lens towards international media texts and their relationships with American streaming services, I focus on the Japanese and global anime industry, which have found remarkable success internationally, to analyze how changes in distribution practices impact both global creative processes and what negotiations local production companies abroad are making to accommodate these new players.

Critical Intervention

The study of media streaming services has only recently come in vogue within the field of media studies, with works that look at the shift from legacy to online television and the subscriber model of cultural production (Lotz 2017, Robinson 2017, Johnson 2019), changing technological infrastructures for distribution practices and its effects on consumption (Castro et al. 2019, Jenner 2016, Matrix 2014), and the influence of streaming services' global strategies on the geography of television (Lobato 2020, Wayne 2020, Dwyer et al. 2018). My project poses two critical interventions into this developing field. First, I aim to fill in some pivotal gaps in the literature, in particular, by centering the international, non-English media content that has been only marginally considered in English language scholarship, yet which plays a central role in the successful development of American streaming services as disruptive hegemonic entities around the world. Further, scholars who have started to analyze the global impact of these streaming

services have focused on generalized frameworks, which do not address the changing business models and production practices of media capitals like Japan.

Given that most existing scholarship on the subject uses examples focusing singularly on one company, like Netflix or Hulu, my second intervention will be to emphasize the streaming service market as an interconnected ecosystem, where the strategies of one node in the international market widely affect the practices of other nodes across national and cultural boundaries. For example, mainstream services, like Netflix, leverage strategies of original content production and big data for algorithmic personalization, which in turn, affects how niche services like Crunchyroll leverage their own branding initiatives. Crunchyroll retaliates through emphasizing different features on their service that speak predominantly to their fans-first branding strategy, such as simulcasting, community building, and more. Similarly, Crunchyroll makes choices in their own branding strategy that affects the informal economy of global anime distribution that was once largely predicated on the fansubbers' cultural practices, as simulcasting largely removes the primary need for fan subtitlers.

Throughout all of these interactions, local industry players abroad and creators of color negotiate their own representational spaces and economic growth among these emerging trends and figures. Taking inspiration from François Lionnet and Shiu-mei Shih's work on "minor transnationalisms," which can be defined as the kinds of dynamism that can be found in cultural exchanges between "minor" or "peripheral" nations, I analyze how various Netflix Original productions may be seen as evidence of a kind of transperipheral collaborative relationship emerging in different capacities. This can be through calling upon a diasporic network to help produce and support an anime adaptation, as is the case with the Filipino anime, *Trese*. It can be through forming and taking advantage of Afro-Asian collaborative networks in order to create

speculative fiction that prioritizes a novel interpretation of Blackness, like LeSean Thomas exhibits in his production, *Yasuke*. Through these examples, I examine the productive relationships that support “minor” creators and “peripheral” industries and how these entities continue to work through the global presence of American-based streaming services. Ultimately, the interplay between international streaming services and local media industries - sometimes as symbiotic partners and other times, as antagonistic competitors - reveals much about the current state of cultural imperialism and trends in media globalization.

Cultural Imperialism vs Globalization

Before analyzing the manner in which streaming services may act as an imperialist or globalizing intermediary, it is critical to outline the manner in which these two theoretical frameworks differ from one another. The roots of the cultural imperialism thesis, within the Western academic framework, were developed by scholars who worked in critical media studies and the traditions of the political-economic modes of analysis. According to Tanner Mirrlees, this framework of study was inspired by the postcolonial nations in the “global South,” who offered their work as “ideological support to national liberation struggles in postcolonial states and challenged modernization theory’s views that poor countries would “develop” automatically by embracing US and Western capitalist models” (2013, 21-22). From there, several key frameworks for understanding cultural imperialism emerged: namely, the world systems theory, dependency theory, the hypodermic needle model, and digital colonialism. The world systems theory is largely attributed to Immanuel Wallerstein, who categorized nation-states into three categories: cores, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, in order to explain the uneven nature of capitalist development around the world. Within this framework, core nation-states and their corporations and intermediaries generally exploit semi-peripheral and peripheral states for raw

material and human resources in an asymmetrical relationship. As Wallerstein elaborates on a core-peripheral capitalist relationship, “core-like” production processes are controlled by quasi-monopolies, while peripheral producers are those that are made “truly competitive” in the context of the global free market (2004, 28). While monopolization does not accurately represent the current state of the digital streaming market, we can see a similar kind of dynamic emerging, where those that retain a dominant position within peripheral markets as content producers (e.g. anime, Korean dramas, Bollywood) are siphoned towards these streaming services. In this relationship, one can observe a “constant flow of surplus value from the producers of the peripheral products to the producers of core-like products,” manifesting as an unequal exchange (28). Though the “peripheral products” are a constitutive part of the quasi-monopolistic streaming service as a unit within the catalog, the streaming service itself retains the most influence and clout as curators of excellent content, while the creators and local media industries abroad vie for the attention of these global services. Within the contemporary modern world-system, while the nations that constitute the core, semi-periphery, and periphery may shift according to the historical time period, these fundamental divisions do not.

The dynamic outlined between more “peripheral” markets creating engaging content in order to serve the competitiveness of American-based streaming may also resonate with those concerned with how this relationship may foster dependency within developing media markets. Dependency theory outlines the ways that core nations continue to have an overwhelming influence on developing regions, through modes of political interference, corporate intermediating, and asymmetrical economic exploitation. While this is not to say that there are no benefits in being in these relationships for the more disadvantaged nation, as it can often result in infrastructural development, skill transfer, and more, it is often the case that in the long-run,

these spaces see the profit generated from these ventures flow outward towards core nations, instead of being reinvested back into the local economy (Mirrlees 23). This observation continues to be in line with what Theotonio De Santo states as,

“a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected. The relation of interdependence between two or more economies...assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant ones) can expand and can be self-sustaining, while other countries (the dependent ones) can do this only as a reflection of that expansion” (1970, 231).

Further, while a small handful of citizens may benefit from acting as hybridized comprador elites, it is often at the expense of the exploited working class, further reproducing the structures that foster asymmetrical dependency on a global scale within the local context (Kraidy 2006, Sunkel 1972, Furtado 1976).

Among communications and critical media studies fields, dependency theory is also analyzed through the lens of industrial studies of global media production. Herbert Schiller remains a critical and central figure to the cultural imperialism thesis, as someone who emphasized a systems-centric analysis which would look at the totality of socio-economic processes on a global scale, focusing on the way nations and classes of people within those nations interact with one another (Schiller 1978, 271). According to Schiller, the media complex is essential for the American neo-imperial project, as a means of driving ideological and economic influence in a manner that is appealing and palatable. This is ultimately in order for a wider global network of labor and consumption to open up for the benefit of multinational American corporations. As he concisely notes, the burgeoning ICT sector only serves to “constitute a continuously growing and central area of operations,” namely, the United States (Schiller 273). Such structures give way to the broad dispersion of ideological factors that continue to allow for the growth of American media monopolizations, such as the “free flow of

information,” “freedom of the press” and “free” political institutions, and those who reject these ideals are immediately posed as more restrictive, as well as politically and morally suspect.

Oliver Boyd-Barrett echoes this sentiment in his more recent text, *Media Imperialism*, where he notes that “the ‘freedom’ in question is the freedom for a more powerful economy to do what it wants in the confines of external markets, with the minimum of accountability and for the primary benefit of the aggressor” (2014, 16).

From a media industrial perspective, the dynamic of ideological influence and its inexplicable ties to economic exploitation can be observed through Toby Miller’s concept of the New International Division of Cultural Labor, where certain kinds of labor are organized along the lines of how much power and influence a nation may hold respective to the global hierarchy. In this way, the “people with the ideas,” IP owners, and “creatives,” often hold much more influence than those who labor on behalf of these “visionaries.” It is no surprise that many world-renowned media creatives tend to come out of Hollywood and the “Global North,” while other countries offer exotic backdrops, the generic labor necessary for creating media (e.g. production logistics coordinators), and more menial work (e.g. catering, on-site translators) that will not yield the kind of exposure and financial compensation that the “creatives” receive. How Miller et. al. organize their global cultural labor schema is, like Wallerstein’s world systems theory, divided into three subsections: the world center (Hollywood), the intermediate zones of secondary importance, and nations that are subordinate to the needs of the world center (2005, 127). Runaway production often subjects non-unionized labor groups around the world to toil endlessly for American creatives. How the labor of cultural creativity is divided along these boundaries says much about the current status of media imperialism through the lens of media industries, as those with cultural and economic might are able to hold premium positions on the

labor hierarchy that further reinforce the influential nature of their respective institutions. In turn, cultural imperialism scholars would recognize the relationships between cultural institutions, like Hollywood, and the nations and ideologies they ultimately serve, all of which siphon funds, cultural capital, human capital, and more back to the “center.”

Returning briefly to the example of Daisuki, one way to perceive the initiative to create a global distribution network rooted within Japan by those that actually create and produce the popular works, is as an attempt to recenter flows of various forms of capital. While distribution rights for anime are purchased at a premium by global services, the fact that producers and studios were still devoted to trying to own a global distribution channel based in Japan reveals how much one’s agency is predicated on distribution. In particular, industry players were concerned about the fickle nature of business operations abroad, where mergers and acquisitions, as well as market failures, may disrupt and change the direction of business for these Japanese companies (Iyadomi 2021). This feeling of a lack of agency at the whims of the American market stems from the asymmetrical power differentials between Japanese content-oriented companies and globally established distributors. By attempting to center the flows of capital back to Japanese industries and take advantage of the passions of the global fandom that these companies were already aware of, they could retain the locus of power that distribution holds, lessening their dependence on other global services like Netflix and Crunchyroll. The hopes and anxieties of those who labor in the anime industry continue to map onto the observations of cultural imperialism scholars regarding the negotiated survival of industries that are smaller than the dominant and hegemonic presence of American ones. While it remains far too early to accurately respond as to whether the anxieties that the anime industry have are warranted, the new developments that are happening on the ground due to the weighty effects of Netflix,

Amazon Prime, Hulu, and other American-based streaming services are critical to examine within the lens of globalization studies for the precise reasons that they continue to exacerbate decades-long concerns that media and postcolonial studies scholars have had.

Beyond cultural imperialism however, we must address the other half of the imperialism/globalization binary, which is that it is also undeniable that digital streaming services, with their economic and cultural might, are able to circulate global content far more extensively than before. Because of this, there may be potential benefits for developing industries who collaborate with these platforms. In spite of the bleak forecasts of media imperialism scholarship, scholars have been working to further nuance and revisit Schiller's conception of media imperialism and Wallerstein's world-systems oriented dependency theories in order to enhance the applicability of cultural imperialism scholarship to the contemporary moment. For example, Joseph Straubhaar complicates both the world systems framework and unilateral understandings of dependency theory through his concept of asymmetrical interdependence. Asymmetrical interdependency acknowledges the structural significance of imperial histories and the uneven geography of development; however, it simultaneously outlines the diverse ways in which nation-states may develop beyond a dependent relationship with another nation and transition towards a more multidirectional framework. This framework may be applied more flexibly across nations that exist within and between the core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral categorizations of nationhood, as such relationships may exist across these variant categories and in unique paradigms that speak to the ways that nations may leverage different forms of cultural strengths and developments when negotiating their collaborative potential with another nation.

Beyond Straubhaar's asymmetrical interdependence, Oliver Boyd-Barrett has since revisited his initial conception of media imperialism, noting that while the United States is most often the prime example of an aggressor of media imperialism and remains the most dominant player, in the contemporary moment, it must vie with other nations and regions who have begun to exhibit their own forms imperialism. Like Straubhaar, Boyd-Barrett also notes that there is a gradation of power and nations may lie anywhere along a continuum of larger or smaller concentrations of influence (139). Ultimately, while cultural imperialism scholars have revisited their central theories and have continued to make them more sophisticated in order to respond to the contemporary moment, the characteristic of lopsided cultural flows and asymmetrical balances in power continue to be a foundational feature of understanding the relationship between imperial nations and those that must grapple with their presence.

In response to the theories that mainly focused on these one-sided media flows in the 1960s and 70s, a new theoretical framework of cultural globalization was born from the 1980s onwards, which resisted the claims that global cultural flows were necessarily one-sided. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai critiqued the simplicity of cultural imperialism theories by noting that the actual dynamics of global exchange are often far more complex and messier, and at times, uniquely singular than simply a one-way flow towards domination in which a stronger nation overpowers a weaker one. He gestures towards the manner in which a number of countries may be more wary of domination from other nations outside of the United States, given their unique cultural and national history, already posing a more complex set of circumstances than that of "West to the rest." Given the relative ease in which national and cultural boundaries could now be crossed and the necessity of more interconnected global networks in order to sustainably maintain enormous corporations, Appadurai observes that this affords different nations a means

of cultural dialogue, as opposed to domination. His five “-scapes” provide an alternative method of understanding global cultural flows, along the lines of ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, finanscaples, and ideoscaples, all of which interact with one another in disjunctive ways.

In line with complicating a “West to the Rest” understanding of cultural imperialism, Daya Thussu introduced his concept of “contra-flows,” in order to recognize the diverse range of cultural products that were being circulated beyond American fare, pointing out popular examples like Japanese anime, Bollywood, Korean films, and more. Certainly, “cultural proximity,” or the feeling of sharing a common identity or sense of cultural affinity between two or more nations complicates the notion of unilateral flows, as viewers may gravitate towards content that reflects their values more strongly than simply whatever American content happens to be popular at the moment. Certain conventional features that may imply feelings of cultural proximity are through shared language, raciality, genetic traits, ideological alignments, and more (Felbermayr and Toubal 2010). Cultural proximity can give rise to regional markets that allow for local industries to perform strongly and encourage the formation of transnational production networks that can mutually benefit all of the parties involved. However, Koichi Iwabuchi warns against leaning too heavily on a reductionist idea of “cultural proximity,” as this can lead to essentialist and ahistorical assumptions of culture being primordially drawn to others that display certain characteristics. Instead of thinking of cultural proximity as a mode of being, Iwabuchi encourages scholars to think of the process of intraregional collaboration and resonances that are fostered by industry professionals and hybridized consumers alike as a “dynamic process of ‘becoming’” (2008, 156). Through this form of collaborative “becoming,” one can find ways of indigenizing outside influence and media in ways that deny unilateral American dominance.

Ultimately, Thussu observes that indeed, “one-way vertical flow has given way to multiple and horizontal flows, as subaltern media content providers have emerged in order to serve an ever-growing geo-cultural market” (Thussu 18). Yet as he aptly underscores, what constitutes “global,” is often predicated on the reach of American content, and it remains the case that the corporations that are centered in the United States continue to extend their influence through global subsidiaries and finance, perpetuating and exacerbating extant power asymmetries. In other words, media contra-flows may complicate this reality of American-based media imperialism, but it does not necessarily debunk it.

Beyond distribution and its relationship to imperialistic pursuits, other scholars have further challenged the idea of one-way flows by focusing on the process of indigenization. For example, Roland Robertson questions what it means to be culturally “dominated” by an imperial power, when he coined the term “glocalization,” a process in which global influences are localized to suit the needs of the community (1995). In this framework, these communities abroad are not passive recipients of global cultures, but active agents who continuously indigenize and reframe global imports to reflect their own needs and desires. Imperialist “domination” does not necessarily characterize these complex processes, nor do they give enough credence to the agency of local communities. However, processes of glocalization are often divorced from the nation, as glocalization is enacted not necessarily as a national imperative, but a commercial one. In this way, the qualities of the exporting nation may not be emphasized as much as what is thought to be attractive to a specific community of consumers (Thussu 19). There are interesting resonances to this observation with Netflix’s rhetorical framing of “taste clusters” where viewers are often divorced from their identity-related features (national and cultural heritage, gender, race, sexuality, etc.) in favor of their affiliation to certain

tastes and consumption habits (Gomez-Uribe 2016). In spite of this turn towards consumption as primary mode of identification, I would like to reinforce the centrality of one's national and cultural background in becoming socialized as a consumer, and what this may potentially mean for glocalizing processes and their interwoven significance to the nation. As I will continue to reiterate throughout my project, identity features and national/cultural boundaries remain significant in how one can take advantage of or become exploited by global streaming services.

Along the lines of glocalization, hybridization has also become a topic that challenges two-dimensional understandings of cultural domination, yet still operates under the notion that uneven relationships of power must be included in frameworks for understanding the process of becoming hybrid. In his book, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, Marwan Kraidy outlines the ways that "hybridity" has become a heated arena for challenging the assumptions of imperialism and globalization alike. Hybridity has often been touted as a signifier of the weakening nation-state and a rise of a global cultural polyglot that exchanges influences dialogically, but the level of consensus regarding how power is situated in these relationships remain more tenuous. Renowned postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Ella Shohat, and Edouard Glissant, have used hybridity as a means of subverting and undermining cultural dominance from colonial powers by which, "the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal, but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration" (Bhabha 2013, 58). However, other postcolonial scholars such as Nestor Garcia-Canclini have expressed a more wary positionality on hybridity, noting that the process of "decollecting" and "deterritorializing" spaces and cultures which lead to hybridization is one of intense gatekeeping, categorization, and hierarchization. What is to remain in indigenous and folkloric cultures, and what must be set aside is often structurally

informed by those who hold more power in any cross-cultural or global relationship and the purposeful dehistoricization and rewriting of crucial contextual elements serve to make further inroads of influence into local communities. However, as Garcia-Canclini observes, “the unequal appropriation of knowledge and art do not disappear. The conflicts are not erased, as neoconservative postmodernism claims. They are placed in a different register, one that is multifocal and more tolerant, and the autonomy of each culture is rethought-sometimes-with smaller fundamentalist risks. Nevertheless, the chauvinist critiques of “those from the center” sometimes engender violent conflicts” (Garcia-Canclini 2006, 240-241).

In thinking about how hybridity’s multi-faced nature leads to cross-cultural relationships that defy easy designations of exploitation or empowerment, Kraidy defines his concept of “corporate transculturalism” against other forms of hybridity, where “hybridity is thus placed in the service of a neoliberal economic order that respects no borders and harbors no prejudice toward cultural and ethnic difference that can be harnessed for growth” (Kraidy 2006, 90). Such rhetoric often revolves around the neoliberal ideals of individual choice, free markets, and free trade. Yet they simultaneously remain curiously divorced from any consciousness of power or retaining a sense of empowerment, as proponents of corporate transculturalism use hybridity to “strategically highlight certain aspects of the global order...while discarding other elements that does not fit its strategic vision” (Kraidy 95-96). Hybridity thus has the ability to disrupt certain power structures that implicate a culture, but that former hierarchy is almost always reinforced or replaced by another hierarchical structure. There is never quite a clean break away from the hegemonic gaze, and this is particularly true in the case of streaming services and the way more minoritized creators and media cultures engage with these American-based distributors.

If cultural imperialism was critiqued for its emphasis on one-way cultural flows, reductionist understandings of local cultures, and a lack of agency generally attributed to communities who exist outside of “the center,” then the cultural globalization thesis has been critiqued for its ahistorical manner of viewing global dynamics of power. This may be a side-effect of trying to frame global relationships as “fundamentally new or different than before,” to which the waning power of nation-states give way to a freer flow of people, ideas, content, and more (Mirrlees 43). Some of the central tenets that are emphasized within this framework include the agency of active audiences, the resistance of local communities, and the benefits of deterritorialization. Yet, those who critique these claims often gesture towards the lack of consideration towards structural elements that continue to exacerbate unequal power relations, noting how resistance may exist, but that this does not negate the ways that the structural inequalities influence how cultures and content is perceived and decoded. Further, work on cultural globalization suffers under the same critiques that cultural imperialism had, namely, the muddy nature of the terms and concepts themselves, as well as lack of sustained empirical evidence for many of its claims.

In order to further divide and outline the nuance of cultural globalization scholars, Colin Sparks distinguished between “strong” and “weak” theories of cultural globalization, in which “weak” theories are

“concerned with structures of domination, with the centrality of the economic in social explanation, with the destruction of less profitable forms of cultural production by large capitalist corporations, and the articulation between these capitalist corporations and the political and military power of the state” (2007, 135).

In comparison, “strong” globalization theories are “radically non-reductive,” and focus primarily on “symbolic exchanges.” There is a profound decentering of global dynamics and an erosion of power from the West (Sparks 136-137) and often what is prioritized by “strong” globalization

theorists are the potential of multicultural audiences to pull disparate meanings and agency from the media texts and reappropriate “dominant” signifiers, brands, and franchises for their own individualized needs. For example, in Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes’ study on the reception of the American program, “Dallas,” within different cultural communities in Israel, they recognized that different features of the narrative were considered significant across the varied groups. There was also a recognition of the influence that American narratives may have on an ideological level, which can be seen as forms of “conspiracy or manipulation” (Katz and Liebes 1990, 57), defying the idea that these consumers are somehow “duped” into consuming propagandistic material. Because of this, one can recognize that there is agency to be found within interpretive communities and it is not a one-to-one mode of communication where intended messages are decoded in a singular fashion according to what American creators may be hoping to communicate. In this way, strong globalization theorists may warn cultural imperialism scholars that within the framework of global streaming services, their ability to curate their respective catalogs can only influence the subscribers’ perceptions of disparate cultures abroad so much, due to the differences in reception that can be found across cultural boundaries for even one television program. “Weak” globalization theorists would argue that the structural influences of streaming services, as well as the ways that their disruptive presence can be felt far beyond a body of texts must be taken into account in relation to how we understand ideological influence and power on a global scale. For example, even within the scope of audience interpretation of texts, weak globalization scholars would likely question how the emphasis of certain characteristics of a culture may reinforce a viewer’s understanding of that respective culture, regardless of the viewer’s agency.

One element that further complicates the imperialism/globalization divide is the advent of the digital, where individuals with an Internet connection have the ability to actively engage in distributing their own content, as well as shape discourse more broadly within various social media platforms. It is tempting to say that with the advent of the Internet and the new affordances that this platform has given to users, that we may be in a radically novel moment in media history. Yet, as the critiques against strong cultural globalization theories argue, it is a dangerous proposition to think that such historical and cultural breaks exist, as is believing in a radical newness apart from the historical milieu that preceded it. The fact that the concerns of the cultural imperialism thesis continue to appear again and again with different vocabularies but a foundation of persistent concerns into the digital age is evidence that such breaks have not occurred. While a shift towards multivocality may be happening, it is critically important to keep track of who remain as the most powerful influences. Equally important are those players that are persistently left in a defensive position, all of which result in perpetually uneven global exchanges.

In thinking about digital streaming services then, as both potentially imperialistic and globalizing agents, there are several concepts one can use to understand cultural imperialism as it applies to the likes of Netflix, Amazon Prime, Crunchyroll, and more. One concept is that of digital platforms. The term, “digital platform,” has retained different meanings, such as “a computing system of any sort upon which further computing development can be done” (Bogost and Montfort 2009, 3), a conduit (Gillespie 2010, 357), as facilitators of transactions between different groups of users (Stallkamp and Schotter 2018, 59), and more. Within digital streaming services in particular, Amanda Lotz has made the case for the term “portals” to describe the affordances and business models of digital streaming, including subscription-based models, the

nonlinearity of viewing schedules, the production of libraries over schedules, and more (2017). For the context of this project, I think of platforms from two particular frameworks: as a digital conduit where content, services, funds, and data are exchanged between users and the corporate intermediary, and metaphorically, as a place where various national and hybrid media forms are able to make an appearance and stake a claim to the globality that the streaming services provide. The latter conceptual framework of platforms emphasizes the importance of appearance and the ability to appear. Appearances are crucial in Roger Silverstone's concept of "mediapolis," which he defines as a "mediated public space where contemporary political life increasingly finds its place" (2013, 30). To appear is to state that one exists and is worthy of having a voice and of having the eyes of the world upon them. Naturally, the manner of the appearance holds great stakes for those whose appearances are being consumed. To be refused entry into these spaces is to make the claim that one is neither worthy of worldliness, nor suited for the particular kind of cosmopolitanism that these services seek to implement in their brand. While Silverstone is mainly concerned with news media, I would offer that even in the realms of fictional global media, there are truth claims that are made about far off communities (Shohat and Stam 2014, 179). In this way, we can think of services as "platforms" of representation, where the performances shown within the collective catalog can speak towards certain ideological ends, whether that is progressive or regressive. In this way, at the intersection of these two ways of perceiving "platforms" in relation to streaming services, I see a kind of battleground for competing ideological utterances, business practices, cultural framings and more. It is through this framing that we can see the concerns of cultural imperialism come into sharp relief.

For example, Dal Yong Jin uses the term "platform imperialism," to look at the ways that the dominance of American-based services like Google, YouTube, Twitter, and more are

affecting the cultural and economic terrain of media development on a global scale (2015). Using this concept as a starting point, Stuart Davis outlines some features of platform imperialism that seemingly applies to Netflix's streaming model, including a trend towards vertical integration of production and distribution, transnational upscaling of production, Netflix's avoidance of accountability regarding tax avoidance and transparency of their platform's technical functions, as well as their exploitation of user data in order to cement their dominant market positionality (2021). While some of Davis's exploration of Netflix's attempt to claim an imperialistic positionality overlooks the finer details regarding their global expansion, particularly with the manner in which the service attempts to implement vertical integration with their relationship with global media studios and systems, it is true that data exploitation becomes more centralized within American-based companies. Further, this information is not widely available to local industries who are attempting to challenge these global platforms within their own local grounds.

Siva Vaidhyathan's concept of "infrastructural imperialism" is useful in translating the concept of cultural imperialism in an applicable manner towards the digital turn and platformization more broadly. Using Google as a case study, Vaidhyathan states that a nation's imperialist endeavors can be found in "the pipelines and protocols of culture, not its products - the formats of distribution of information and the terms of access and use" (2012, 109), as those who control *if* and *how* something is distributed retain much more influence than those who craft *what* is distributed. Simultaneously, using ideologies such as the free flow of information and freedom of expression allows these platform systems to flourish abroad; however, this does not guarantee that global users can necessarily express themselves or access this information equally. Indeed, as Sara Bannerman observes, "the free flow of information strengthened dominant voices" (2022, 3), noting how the more one updates digital systems, the more power relations

between communities seem to remain the same. The intersection between control over informational pipelines and infrastructures, as well as the ideological messaging that allows the most powerful nations to have their presences rooted within relatively weaker nations allows for the cards to be stacked against local competition.

For example, Michael Kwet outlines the way digital colonialism is enacted on the “Global South” by reinforcing centralized ownership and control “of the three core pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware, and network connectivity, which vests the United States with immense political, economic, and social power” (2019, 4). Taking the South African region as his case study, Kwet looks at the ways in which companies like Google, Uber, Netflix, YouTube, and more continue to create technological dependencies within the region, engage in perpetual resource extraction, and dampens the ability for regional players to attempt to make their own networks and platforms that may tailor more specifically to the needs of their respective communities. Resource extraction, particularly in the form of user data which then relates to economic growth is reflected in Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias’ concept of “data colonialism,” which he defines as the combined dynamics of “the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing” (2019, 337). Drawing upon the extensive ideological and political work that must be done in order to frame social data as a “natural resource,” it becomes deeply concerning what the directionality of the data flow is like, who is privy to that data, the uneven nature of surveillance and exploitation necessary for procuring the data, and the assumptions that massive corporations can make of their users, both locally and internationally. While the data is taken under the assumption that such information can be used to further customize recommendation algorithms, platform

interfaces, and more for the convenience of the consumer, the largely opaque nature to which all of these processes and decisions occur cast doubt upon such benevolent assertions.

Further, the inability for local platforms to extract the same level of data within their own regions, let alone data from all around the world, challenges their ability to go toe to toe with these global, largely American-based platforms. Within the case study of Brazil, a significant market within the Americas, local competitors of Netflix and Amazon Prime, like Globoplay, must often react by creating new management models in response to the data collection habits of Netflix and Amazon (Meimardis et. al 2020, 73). Grupo Globo created the “UmaSóGlobo” project, which unites different companies within the group into one company, named Globo in order to support Globoplay’s robust performance in the market (73). We can see similar trends happening within South Korea, where Netflix continues to dominate the market in terms of subscriber numbers (8.16 million as of Dec. 2020), with local services trailing far behind (Lim 2021). In order to combat Netflix and YouTube’s steep rise in market performance, SK telecom and three of the largest terrestrial broadcasters, KBS, MBC, and SBS, launched Wavve, which provided drama and entertainment from the terrestrial broadcasters, as well as livestreams from their various channels. Similarly, TVing, which is a joint venture between CJ E&M (CJ Group), Naver, and JTBC, began to invest more heavily in original content production in order to combat their perceived weakness against Netflix and other global services like YouTube, who have the ability to fund original content in exchange for exclusive distribution. These developments occurred following Netflix’s entrance into the local market and its consequent rise in success, revealing the disruptive presence of these global services mainly motivated by the anxiety being displaced. One telling discursive trend that can be found in marketing in streaming start-up companies in South Korea, like Watcha, is the centrality of Netflix as a brand that continues to

come up in their marketing material as a mode of comparison (EO 2019). For Watcha, it is clear that success is defined in large part by Netflix's economic success and technical affordances and being able to emulate those features. For example, in a 2019 marketing video around Watcha, Alex Won, the COO and the co-founder of Watcha states as the very first sentence of this video that,

“we didn't see it as a negative when Netflix announced its expansion to Korea. Netflix would spend a lot of money and disrupt the Korean market...Since July 2018, our revenue surpassed that of Netflix on Google Play...Our competitive edge is that we effectively source content based on data and deliver it to the right people” (EO 2019).

The fact that even within Watcha's own marketing materials, Netflix remains a constant presence, whether stated outright or implied, reveals the concerns of South Korean media players who wish to remain competitive with the global services entering their markets. The anxiety of being overtaken by a global platform remains a strong motivator for industrial transformations and start-ups, revealing the significant influence that American-based companies continue to play on industries abroad.

We can also think of disruption that occurs both on the level of content production within the local industries and the content itself as a measure of how to observe imperialistic influences. As Ramon Lobato has outlined, the constitution of content catalogs reflects a wealth of information and data regarding Netflix's priorities to media representation (2018). Lobato also outlines the ways in which national sovereignty may come into conflict with issues of content regulation, noting how the European Union has implemented quotas and policies in order to curb Netflix's unchecked entry into the local markets (2020, 145), while other nations like Canada have foregone such restrictions, once again revealing the merging of ideology and media law. Recently, South Korea has felt Netflix's disruption by becoming a test case for whether the global company can use an argument of net neutrality in order to refuse paying Internet service

providers (SK Telecom) for service, while domestic corporations have had to for the entire period of Netflix's market development in South Korea. While the court hearings are ongoing, this reflects yet another instance in which Netflix's disruptive status is felt beyond simply questions of content distribution and links directly to issues of a nation's digital infrastructure.

It is critical to note these concepts: data colonialism, infrastructural imperialism, platform imperialism, and more, are not radically new or detached from the concerns of cultural imperialism and globalization scholars of the past. They are simply a translation of conversations that cultural imperialism and globalization scholars have already been having for decades into a digital instantiation. It is now merely a question of the extent to which multinational streaming platforms exacerbate or undermine the issues at hand and in what ways a digital framework may impact the way these same issues are articulated. Streaming services are important because through them, it has become easier than ever to access global media work. With the younger generations no longer engaging with broadcast television, this is the arena in which global media forms reveal themselves. However, with concerns revolving around symbolic and ideological hegemony, the persistent role of platforms becomes fraught, particularly as global platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime become centralized intermediaries. Who and what manages to make it onto these platforms often says much about the kind of cultural image that the platform is aiming to project into the world, as do the choices in content that platforms like Netflix decide to actively invest in. The content that is promoted ultimately speaks to assumptions of what is profitable globally. As I will explore in Chapter Three, this may open up opportunities for "peripheral" industries to make their way onto these globalized platforms and retain more control over their representation due to Netflix's desire for hybridized and globally legible media productions. However, there are limitations that are borne from the necessity of having to speak

transparently across multiple cultural boundaries. Simultaneously, in Chapter One, I focus on trends within catalogs on services like Netflix which reveal the kinds of narratives that are privileged, which when intersected with globalized mediums, often imply certain values towards that media culture.

While the active audience framework for understanding media reception remains a valid critique against the hypodermic needle model and ascertains the agency of viewers, the structural influences of the platform itself and what happens to be made available on it inevitably affects what is seen. As Nick Couldry states, “the difference between what is ‘in’ and not ‘in’ the media is not natural, but through continual usage is constructed as natural” (2005, 68). In viewing what is made readily available on these streaming portals, we are able to naturalize the significance of what is on screen and engage socially and culturally with what is framed as important, and simultaneously justify why something is not on the screen or not worthy of collective attention. While audiences continue to negotiate and engage with the works that these platforms present in complex ways, simply brushing away the concerns of platform imperialism scholars through the justification of active audience theory and polysemy would be short-sighted. As such, my project will take the considerations of platform imperialism scholars into account, even as we see moments when active audiences speak back to the service when they feel as if the service has transgressed in some manner (Chapter 2 and Chapter 4).

Yet another implication of Netflix’s global reach, is the inevitable frictions that occur due to the availability of certain kinds of content, in relation to regional cultures and politics (Roxborough and Ritman 2018, Conklin 2020). Whether it is the whitewashing of violence, the availability of certain titles, or the portrayals of certain forms of sexuality (Pak and Danubrata 2016, Roxborough 2019, Marshall 2019), what is made available can potentially become a

source of cultural friction and ideological entanglement. As Anna Tsing has conceptualized, the flow of goods, capital, ideologies, and people cannot occur without a large degree of friction, which, “reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (2011, 5). She continues further by noting that friction does not equate to resistance, as friction can simultaneously make and unmake modes of hegemony (6). It is within this mode of friction that I would like to frame the disruptions that have occurred due to Netflix’s entrance into the Japanese anime industry.

While Netflix must negotiate with policy and the unique cultural and political circumstances of a nation, the disruptions that this dissertation will grapple with is how the platform impacts content production and how this connects to the kinds of material that is being released worldwide. The particularity of the Japanese anime industry as a case study, and its turbulent contemporary state, amplifies the potential effects that global streaming platforms may have on the industry. Netflix’s impact on the global anime industry and Japan’s positionality within these negotiations have been destabilizing certain assumptions that the anime industry and Japan have been fostering regarding their own privileged position as a primary provider of animation. By observing the multilayered ways that Netflix has affected the anime industry, there may be further nuance added to the ways we understand how platform imperialism and globalization look in the contemporary moment.

Defining Anime

Given that anime will be my object of research throughout this project, it is worth speaking about how this media form is defined. What constitutes anime is a challenging question that has left scholars leveraging different definitional frameworks that emphasize its aesthetic uniqueness (Lamarre 2002, 2006, Suan 2021, Kelts 2006), its historical, national and cultural

backgrounds (Clement 2017, Napier 2016), its various forms as both genre and medium (Denison 2015, Hu 2010), and the economic strategies that anime production industries leverage (Steinberg 2012). Ian Condry frames his own anthropological studies of anime around important questions regarding who is creating and manifesting anime cultures, and how this should influence our definitional understandings of anime beyond national resonance (2013). Because of these multiple competing definitions, throughout this project, I take the lead of Rayna Denison, who responds to the question of “what is anime?” with the desire to “seek out the range of meanings that have become associated with anime,” including how the phrase works as a cultural category “perhaps most notable for its mutability” (Denison, 2015, 2). It is this mutability that affords streaming services the ability to test the boundaries of “anime,” as both a medium, genre, product, and instigator of flourishing global subcultures.

For streaming services like Netflix and Crunchyroll, the term “anime” can be leveraged to gesture towards a broader range of interests that global anime fans may have, such as webtoons, games, and more. On Netflix, “anime” is a genre on the service, which can retain any number of their “altgenres.” Genre may be useful for thinking about anime in line with Jason Mittel’s approach of going beyond the text to “external elements, such as industrial and audience practices” (2001, 7). Included in these external elements are discursive practices which help to create various “generic definitions and meanings” behind the cultural categorization function of genres (8). It is within this framework that we can interpret one mode of nation-centrism that is often included in conceptions of anime, namely, that it is a media property inherently connected to Japan. As I argue through my case studies, Netflix and Crunchyroll reject this narrow vision of anime; however, this rejection comes at the expense of smooth dealings with the global fandom

that these services often want to appeal to, who may have different understandings of the role that Japan plays in their conceptualization of their cult object.

One approach that somewhat separates “anime” from the nation is Stevie Suan’s framework of thinking about the “performativity” of anime, where “anime” is recognized as such when they are able to perform “anime-esque” acts, which he defines as “expansive and fluid, the anime-esque encompasses the many conventionalized elements one could expect from anime, elements that make anime recognizable” (2021, 17). This can include certain cultural literacies, aesthetic patterns, narrative conventions, and more. Suan recognizes that anime consumers, like all media consumers, are deeply aware of patterns and repetitive actions found across various content labeled as anime, and this wide variety of features become naturalized through exposure. This builds up a kind of database of sorts regarding anime-esque elements that creators can draw from, and this allows for the anime form to retain flexibility and transform gradually over time, as repetitive acts can also introduce slight variations across each iteration. As Suan defines, “anime, seen as an interrelated web of anime-esque elements, is not about defining what is or is not anime but a matter of degrees of engagement with recognizable conventions” (18). The greatest affordance of defining anime in this manner, within the context of this project, is that it challenges and disrupts the medium’s supposed inherent relationship to Japan, while still being recognizable as anime to a global viewership.

This is a critical development for understanding how anime can be defined, particularly for global streaming services who can be more agnostic towards where they source their content, as long as the content performs well across multiple regions. While Jonathan Clements has defined anime as referring to “animation from Japan,” additionally noting that to “quibble about the nature of ‘animation’ and to what extent it can come to Japan,” may lead to analyses that

“collapse under their own weight if subjected to such a degree of deconstruction and hypercriticality,” I would argue to the contrary (Clements 2017). If one is to agree that anime is a product of and subject to forces of globalization and the various asymmetries of power that govern these processes, then thinking about the extent to which we can imagine a media product as retaining imagined points of national origin is significant because other nationalities may or may not have access to the medium. This is perhaps even more so when we relate anime to global streaming services who are keen to invest in successful anime-inspired products that can speak multivocally to a global audience. In Chapter Two and Chapter Three, I look at how non-Japanese anime creators leverage Suan’s definition of anime in order to create work that may speak more closely to their own respective cultural experiences, while drawing from the extensive database of anime signifiers. However, as anime can also be interpreted as a genre, as mentioned above, the discursive trends regarding the role of nation within considerations of a production’s authenticity continue to challenge the global fandom and non-Japanese anime creators alike.

Beyond a generic and performative interpretation of anime, Tze-Yue Hu uses the framework of anime as a “medium-genre,” where anime can be seen at once as a communicative medium that is “not just the sounds and words which the Japanese use for communication, but also denote a larger communicative system of signs” (2010, 2). Thomas Lamarre further elaborates on some of the textualist features that distinguish anime from animation more broadly, including limited animation, which came about as a necessity due to the “technical limitations placed on *anime* production during the global economic crisis of animation in the 1960s” (2002, 335). Full animation was not an option for Japan due to financial restrictions, so animators often had to make do with conveying movement with a limited number of frames, often focusing on

“visually and emotionally important poses, which could last over many, many frames” (335).

This would lead to a further emphasis on engaging narrative and animation in the form of machinic movement in which life must be inferred from the automaton. Lamarre argues that the various aesthetics that emerged from these animators would come to define the “look and feel of anime” (336). By connecting the nature of the medium to the sociohistorical conditions in which it was produced, Lamarre is able to reference the importance of the Japanese context without reducing anime as a symptom of the relationship between Japan and the West or that of “Japaneseness.”

Given the diverse frameworks in which one can understand anime, what becomes clear is that anime is a transforming and dynamic medium-genre, which continues to respond to the changing tides of production and distribution, as well as economic, historical, and cultural dynamics. As I will elaborate in different ways throughout my project, the definition of anime is fraught and deeply contested by different factions across those who create, distribute, and consume it. Because I am committed to looking at how anime is transforming in response to the changing context of distribution, it is critical that I allow for a flexible framework for understanding the media form and avoid reductive understandings that may lead to perceptions that the anime media form is stagnant or already fully defined. Due to this consideration, on a foundational level, I adhere to Suan’s conception of anime, as a database of performative signifiers that can be leveraged and cited by those who retain the necessary literacies. This, consequently, affords global creators the possibility of contributing to and even shifting the constitution of these signifiers. As Suan observes, this understanding allows anime to transform and remain flexible as a communicative media form, while still allowing consumers to not lose sight of that form as being anime. However, recognizing that identity and nation continue to play

a significant role in the marketing strategies that creative teams leverage and its effects on a production's broader reception, I also see anime as a kind of genre as Mittel conceives: a discursive battleground between industry and consumers, both of whom leverage practices of definition, interpretation, and evaluation in order to frame anime in ways that better suit their individualized needs (2001, 8). In this manner, I recognize the lopsided nature of agency that global creators may have in negotiating their place within the hierarchies that constitute anime as a global media culture.

Methodologies

Avoiding reductive analyses of the moving parts that make up a streaming services' operations requires a multi-methodological approach that can speak to the diversity of engagement strategies and responses that are occurring simultaneously on a platform. Given the scope and subject of this project, and the opaque nature of operations for global services like Netflix and Crunchyroll, access was clearly a hurdle that I needed to consider. Further, given the drawbacks of doing a globalization project during the Covid-19 pandemic, this necessitated an approach that could take advantage of multiple methodologies that targeted the question of influence and lopsided power dynamics from afar. Due to these contextual features, one can consider this study as an experimental work for how to study the global elements of a streaming service in spite of significant challenges around access.

This project engages in a wide variety of strategies for accessing data, including personal interviews with industry insiders, discursive analysis, interface analysis, analysis of the constitution of content catalogs, textual analyses, and online surveys. My first chapter uses catalog analysis, discursive analysis, interviews, and textual analysis in order to better understand the tensions and concerns between Netflix and the Japanese anime industry. The

American-based branches in Netflix were largely reticent to speak with me, as were many Japanese anime studios that collaborated with them; however, there were a few studios who did wish to speak about their experience, which helped me to understand the dynamics between the streaming service and the production studios, and how they were approaching the global audience in their productions. Understanding the drawbacks of using interviews where studios are largely financially benefiting from their collaboration with large streaming services and the NDAs that normally accompany such relationships, I supplemented these interviews with a comparative look at how the Japanese press speaks about Netflix's relationship with the anime industry. In doing so, I observe the anxieties and potential drawbacks that these relationships spark. Finally, in comparing Netflix's industrial relationship with Japan to their symbolic one within the content catalogs, I perform an analysis of what kinds of genres are most represented within Netflix's North American anime catalog, in conjunction with a fetishistic paratextual documentary about anime that was created by Alex Burunova in conjunction with Netflix. As these myriad methodologies will reveal, Netflix does not have one grand vision about how to engage with anime neither in their distribution, production, nor marketing. At times, they will leverage orientalist discourses in order to attract global subscribers, but also complicate the industry's layout by encouraging more active global anime productions. They will provide ample funds to the production companies that collaborate with them, but continue to peddle a deeply lopsided catalog that may shape the way casual and generalist anime viewers may perceive the media culture. While Netflix's engagement with the industry and its outputs may not be cohesive, the fractured nature of these conflicting modes of engagement speaks to the messy dynamics of collaborating with global media industries.

The second chapter focuses on niche streaming portals, with Crunchyroll being my case study, and I use interface analysis and discursive analysis to see how a “fans first” platform markets itself and the challenges of transforming a fandom into a brand community. Much like the case with Netflix, Crunchyroll official employees were reticent to speak with me regarding the practices of their service. Because of this, I had to find workarounds through press releases, the disjunctures between fan perceptions and the platform’s perceptions of their brand identity, and follow the reception patterns of Crunchyroll’s first slate of Original programming. This content, perhaps much to the chagrin of the streaming portal, is publicized as vocal fans do not have any qualms about sharing their thoughts on what they believe to be Crunchyroll’s blunders. Further, the ability to speak with Crunchyroll employees and fans in person at Crunchyroll Expo was clearly disrupted by the pandemic; however, the convention was moved online with public digital chat spaces where one can see some of the broader trends in engagement from the fans to the formal employees. This also yielded a mode of access and a space where contextual data could be gleaned. Finally, returning back to the broader ecosystem level of analysis for global anime streaming, it is productive to compare Crunchyroll’s branding strategies with more generalist platforms like Netflix, looking at where these strategic engagements overlap and where they break away from one another, in order to observe how one node on the distribution network affects another.

The third chapter focuses on the possibility of transperipheral and hybrid collaborative relationships through dominant streaming services like Netflix. With a combination of discursive analysis and textual analysis, I look at the different ways that the “peripheral” and “hybrid” can be conceived within a global streaming service and where minority creators can find camaraderie in their creative practices. Unlike the Crunchyroll chapter, where I view the production of global

anime texts as a kind of branding strategy, I look at three Netflix Original productions (*Yasuke*, *Treese*, and *Seis Manos*) from the stance of the creators and how they are empowering themselves to create global anime work, as well as the limitations of these transperipheral collaborations.

The final chapter looks at the current context of anime fansubbing and uses personal interviews with nineteen fansubbers, digital ethnography of Discord channels where these fansubbers engage with their respective communities, and an online survey that scans the broader landscape of where and how anime fans are accessing their content. My initial plan was to go to anime conventions and survey this information in person; however, following the Covid-19 pandemic, this was no longer an option. Instead, I recognized that most postsecondary anime clubs and broader anime interest groups were meeting on Discord to socialize and this proved to be an important development, as I could circulate my survey in these places where a concentrated number of anime fans could be found. Further, the leaders of these anime clubs would spread my survey for me in order to gain further trust between their club members and myself as a researcher. This led to more engagement for my online survey and I ultimately came away with 738 responses. My interviews with fansubbers also happened on Discord, where the anonymity of these exchanges would benefit both the fansubber and myself due to the legal gray area that fansubbing exists in. Due to the pandemic, the Discord channels were more active than ever, and it allowed me to work around the obstacle of doing this kind of research while being effectively cloistered away from in-person fannish gatherings, such as conventions and meet-ups.

While each methodology has its inherent limitations, yet in combination, a more holistic image emerges regarding a streaming services' engagement with the global. Fissures, in and of themselves, were crucial in excavating data around the tensions across cultural and national

boundaries and became rich areas of comparative analysis. For example, while American news media and trade journals provided one interpretation on the influence of global streaming services and their potential dominance, the Japanese media provided yet another distinct image, and it was only when these two narratives were brought in close proximity to one another, that I could outline both the nuanced benefits and detriments towards global collaboration with powerful streaming services. By engaging with a wide variety of texts in order to gather data, including press releases, interviews, formal media content, the discourse of online users, tertiary industrial members, and more, these fissures become more varied in their inability to neatly conform to images of dominance or subjugation, imperialist motives or equalizing actants of globalization.

Chapter Outlines

My dissertation consists of four chapters, each which centralizes a different aspect of the anime streaming ecosystem. The first chapter focuses on mainstream media streaming services and their effects on the local anime production practices within Japan, using Netflix as my primary case study. Starting with an analysis of a discursive thread that was found within both the Japanese and American news media regarding Netflix's presence potentially "saving" the industry, I look at the ways that Netflix has invested in anime media production and how we can perceive their mode of engagement as potentially dominating. I look at Netflix's multipronged influence from several angles: the first being the economic support that Netflix has been offering established studios within Japan, such as Production IG, Bones, Mappa, Science Saru, and more in exchange for exclusive distribution rights of various IP on the Netflix service. I also look at how Netflix's cosmopolitan branding has affected the way Japanese creators have become conscious of serving a global audience, a turn that is surprisingly recent due to the industry's

focus on domestic audiences. The third vantage point that I view Netflix's influence within the anime industry is through their paratexts, focusing primarily on a documentary that Netflix commissioned Director Alex Burunova to produce, which skews towards an orientaling view of Japan, which is reinforced within the constitution of a catalog that heavily emphasizes action and science fiction productions. I conclude with an examination of Netflix's often contradictory strategy of engaging with global media forms like Japanese anime, which must be observed holistically, as opposed to focusing on one feature of Netflix's engagement strategy. This will offer scholars a more complex and comprehensive understanding of how local media industries are collaborating with Netflix in ways that defy a simplified binary of empowerment and exploitation, which is often absent from critiques of infrastructural and platform imperialism as blanket statements.

The second chapter centers on the engagement strategies of American-based niche streaming services that focus primarily on anime and narrowcast their content offerings to a fannish subscriber base. Using Crunchyroll as my example, I compare the differences in engagement models between a generalized mainstream service like Netflix and their niche counterparts, focusing on the affordances and challenges of targeting fans as a primary audience. On the one hand, taking advantage of established fan groups that have proven their devotion to their media object can provide many benefits for start-up streaming services who wish to survive in the streaming wars by positioning themselves as specialists within a particular global medium. However, while the subscriber groups may perform their fannish affect in ways that corporate entities can depend on to reinforce their market position, fans often have higher expectations of these niche services regarding literacy, tastemaking, and more, compared to more generalist services. Crunchyroll's need to continue sustaining market growth pushes the boundaries of the

service outwards in ways that may come into conflict with the fandom's ontological stability. However, it is this very expansion that may allow for global anime creators to be able to stand side by side with their Japanese counterparts in ways that perhaps engage in the creation of transperipheral networks.

The third chapter delves further into the topic of trans-peripheral alliances and hybrid global anime productions, looking at productions of anime that were created by the imaginations of those living outside of Japan. How creators of color are taking advantage of these alliances to create anime-inspired work for their own representational needs is the primary focus on this chapter. Using Netflix's Original productions, I look at three series that exemplify different modes of hybridity and trans-peripheral collaboration. *Yasuke*, directed by LeSean Thomas and animated by Studio Mappa draws upon the historical figure of Yasuke, the first Black samurai to have been recognized in Japan. In doing so, I argue that Thomas pushes against the expectations of the Afrodiasporic experience and expands upon what the Black experience can look like through speculative fiction and a rewriting of the past in anime form. *Trese* is the first Filipino anime to be distributed by Netflix and is inspired by the award winning *komik* by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo. The production team behind *Trese* draw from a trans-peripheral diasporic network in order to bring the work to life, as well as ensure the success of the work by calling upon the Filipino diasporic audience in their marketing material. In doing so, we see another anime work that decentralizes Japan and draws upon yet another iteration of hybridity. Finally, I conclude this chapter with an analysis of hybridized genres through the lens of *Seis Manos*, a series that draws upon various racialized genres (Blaxploitation, Mexploitation, Kung fu, grindhouse, etc.) in order to create a content-oriented trans-peripheral referential network. In each case study, I analyze the different modes of empowerment that come with fostering

“peripheral” alliances and the limitations of each strategy. Because of Netflix’s global reach, there are openings for global anime productions in spite of the fact that “anime-inspired” and globally hybridized work has fallen out of vogue in broadcasting networks prior to the mainstream rise of streaming services.

Finally, the last chapter looks at the way fansubbing groups have responded to the advent of simulcasting streaming services and the manner in which the shadow economy has transformed the motives of fansubbing groups who continue their cultural practice. I engage in a series of nineteen personal interviews with fansubbers regarding their relationship with formal streaming services and what motivates them to continue practicing fansubbing. In this chapter, I refer to the current stage of fansubbing as the “twilight stage,” where the cultural practice has seen a steep decline from the time period before simulcast streaming yet holds steady at the moment. A new figure that has emerged within the shadow economy that is directly related to the success of streaming services is the “fan ripper,” who uses automated scripts in order to download content from various services and upload them for consumption on piracy sites. This figure has challenged both formal services and fansub groups alike given the speed at which these “ripping” groups are able to make subtitled content available for fans. This figure, which could not have emerged without the existence of simulcasting services and previous pirating cultures of the global anime fandom remains a clearly disruptive entity for both content providers, both legal and illicit. Along with the series of interviews conducted with fansubbers, I also engage in an online survey of predominantly American postsecondary students regarding where they currently get their anime content and what role, if any, fansubbed content continues to play within their consumption practices. This is to see whether fansubbing is truly in a kind of

“twilight stage” in relation to how much fans are engaging with their work, and to observe the reasons why fans pick the distribution options they do from a consumer perspective.

By focusing on four distinct, but interconnected examples of the influences of digital streaming on the distribution landscape of global media (and specifically, anime), I aim to recognize the multidirectional effects of American-based streaming services on an ecosystem-wide level. In other words, the mainstream success of Netflix affects the manner in which niche streaming services brand themselves to their targeted audience and the qualities of the service that are emphasized in relation to the fandom’s values. This in turn affects how fansubbing groups operate and how they continue to justify their practices in relation to the contemporary distribution network, given that timely access is no longer as much of an issue for the English-speaking fandom. Simultaneously, while we can analyze whether global streaming services are imperialistic agents within Japan’s local industries due to the concerns outlined by Shinnosuke Nomura, Ken Iyadomi, and other industry insiders, the affordances of global digital streaming can also yield an increase in space for global anime creators of color outside of Japan who are normally doubly marginalized within the realms of anime production, global hierarchies and in relation to the racialized politics of the United States. These hybridized works then affect the constitution of Netflix’s catalogs and the particular resonances that the brand retains for communities around the world. Due to the multivalent effects of global streaming, a more holistic perspective regarding how multiple players are taking advantage of these new distribution channels allows for a more nuanced and complex understanding of the negotiation process among creative communities that work through and around relationships of asymmetrical interdependence (Straubhaar 2007).

Conclusion

I hope this project benefits those who are currently studying global media through the lens of digital streaming and as such, this project should not be understood as an area studies text focusing on Japan and their media output, but as an analysis of the global circuits in which anime is but one of a myriad of other globalized texts that may be facing similar trends. This project may also serve as an example for how one can go about studying a globalized media form within various American-based streaming services and the complex relationships that are navigated when confronted with a multicultural audience. The global media distribution ecosystem has been radically changing, and it is critical that we continue to observe these trends in a more detailed manner in order to understand how global power and influence work through these various networks. By observing these dynamics from the particularities of one globalized medium, we can ground questions of agency for industries abroad in their relationship with global services through a more focused lens beyond general inquiries of media imperialism and globalization.

Chapter One
**Netflix and the Japanese Anime Industry:
Issues of Production and Representation**

Introduction

On June 25, 2019, an article on Nikkei Asia titled, “How Netflix could give new life to anime,” by Hideki Shinohara was published, stating that, “Netflix, the world’s top video streaming service provider, could become a savior of sorts of Japan’s anime industry” (Shinohara 2019). Given the relative popularity of the media export as a global product, this felt like a fairly radical statement as it had not occurred to me that the anime industry was in need of saving, let alone, specifically by the foreign media streaming distribution service. The article goes on to outline the issues that have plagued the industry for decades, noting old fashioned production practices, the ubiquitous pirating cultures of its global fandom, the widespread implications of exploitative labor conditions for animators, and finally, in what ways Netflix may aid in alleviating the negative effects of some of these features.

About a month prior to reading Shinohara’s article, I came across yet another article within Yahoo Finance titled, “Can anime save Netflix?” by John Engle. According to Engle, the advent of new media streaming services by American media giants like Disney + was putting pressure on the once dominant distribution service. Supposedly, Netflix’s strategy towards focusing on proven-popular global media content, such as Japanese anime, may be the key to surviving the streaming wars, pointing to examples of successful niche services like Crunchyroll as evidence that wooing niche audiences could be the way to finding sustainable development in the face of increased competition. Engle also gestured towards the long working hours of animators and the slim margins that anime production studios are working with, noting how

these issues may find some relief with more exclusive business alliances with international players like Netflix.

Clearly, the desire to save and be saved by international industries on both ends gesture towards the growing anxiety for survival in the age of the “streaming wars.” Indeed, competition has remained steep in recent years for Netflix, as the platform has started to turn towards original content production to make up for networks withdrawing their properties in order to fill their own content catalogs for their respective services. However, the story between Netflix and its relationship to the contemporary anime industry remains more complex than a narrative of one industry saving the other or vice versa. For one, anime, while relatively established as a form of international media around the world, remains a clear minority in terms of number of fans and viewers compared to Hollywood works, and fan reactions towards many of Netflix’s original anime content, whether licensed or commissioned, have remained rather ambivalent (D’Anastasio 2020, Liu 2020). While anime fans may help to keep Netflix’s subscriber numbers steady, their presence alone will not be sufficient for “saving” the global platform from the steep competition that will likely only become more intense from here on out. Likewise, while Netflix has introduced new frameworks for funding and producing anime and has acted as a source of disruption for the local industry, its reach remains limited to the number of works that the platform is willing to invest in and the kinds of genres that they are willing to privilege. However, despite the lack of “saving” that may be happening from either party, the influence that Netflix yields within local industries abroad, and the positioning of international content as a necessary feature for continual subscriber growth, particularly as viewer growth within the United States stagnate, remain interesting and critically important points to consider in the field of global media studies.

When powerful media intermediaries descend upon nations abroad, there is the necessity of understanding in what manner these players may exert their influence upon extant local media cultures, practices, industries, and more. Netflix's global reach has already had rippling effects in international media policy, content regulation, infrastructure, production practices abroad, and viewing practices (Lobato 2019, Lotz 2021, Turner 2018). Such discourses revolving around the anxieties that nations have as American-based streaming services descend upon respective media landscapes inevitably stir up older discourses around the possibility of continued influences of cultural imperialism and the asymmetrical flows of information, media, and content that inevitably impact and shape global perceptions of a culture. As Dal Yong Jin notes, we can observe these asymmetries of power including "forms of technological disparities, [and] also the forms of intellectual property, symbolic hegemony, and user commodity [which] concentrate capital into the hands of few US-based platform owners, resulting in the expansion of the global divide" (2015, 12). Further, Jin emphasizes the possibility of Western ideological dominance stemming primarily from global American companies and the work of developers within these transnational corporations. Within the framework of platform imperialism, the reinforcement of asymmetrical information flows, regimes of intellectual property, and various forms of discrimination that are contingent upon transparent intermediating features within the platform all gesture towards the growing strength of American global influence. Though it is undeniable that certain nations have developed popular local platforms, the possibilities for those platforms to succeed in a global marketplace has remained rather limited when having to go head-to-head with the likes of Google, Apple, Amazon, and Netflix. As exemplified in the introduction, endeavors from various countries that try to compete with these behemoths often yield unsuccessful results, even from companies who create the very content that Netflix later

distributes. As will become increasingly apparent, matters of scale regarding distribution become critically important in relation to what can be produced locally by whom.

While it is certainly true that platformization has disrupted many aspects of our social, economic, and cultural lives, scholars have already complicated the notion that the lopsided flow of information and content necessarily connotes Western domination. When speaking about the hegemonic positionality of American-based services or enterprises, it is important to define exactly what constitutes domination in what feature of global development, and even more specifically, how such domination is connoted in relation to the service. For example, when it comes to the flow of cultural commodities across national boundaries, these engagements continue to necessitate cultural translators, forms of hybridity, and strategic modification on the part of these platforms and local creators alike in order to effectively engage different cultural communities abroad. As has been observed by previous scholars, American content is not so simply “American,” neither in the content’s production, translation, nor its eventual consumption (Donoghue 2017). If the concern is the lopsided flow of global capital and data, in what ways does hegemonic dominance manifest? Such questions and observations do not disprove the potential dominance of Western institutions in the global production and flow of cultural commodities; however, it does reveal that such ideological, symbolic, and economic hegemony may not be such a straightforward endeavor and requires more detailed case studies to grasp the complex negotiations made between entities that facilitate the production and distribution of cultural commodities.

In looking at how platforms may potentially act as imperialistic or globalizing agents, this chapter will outline the ways in which the global streaming portal, Netflix, has disrupted the production processes of one of the most widely touted success stories of media globalization:

Japanese anime. What has become increasingly apparent is that the platform has been very active in establishing anime as one of the major draws for new subscribers to their service in the age of the streaming wars. Netflix has been taking proactive steps to recruit renowned directors and create strategic business alliances between a number of established studios (Production I.G., Polygon Pictures, Studio Bones, Mappa, etc.). They have helped fund animation projects, which would, in turn, yield exclusive distribution rights worldwide within their platform. Collaborating with animation studios and academic institutions around the world, they have established animator education programs and scholarships in order to foster new talent in the anime industry. Netflix has also gone as far as to support the production of paratexts around anime culture in the form of a documentary called *Enter the Anime*, which serves as a kind of extended exploratory advertisement for its own Netflix exclusive original works. Beyond these productions and industrial alliances, Netflix has also offered a different model of anime production funding separate from what is largely considered the norm within the Japanese television anime model, which has aided in bringing a slew of labor issues surrounding the anime industry further into the light. While indeed, the audience reception to these Netflix productions themselves tend to be fairly mixed, what is undeniable is that Netflix is invested in anime production as a potent form of global media that may help provide a competitive edge in the cut-throat media streaming market.

While this dissertation is largely focused on the transforming ecosystem of global media distribution following the advent of American based streaming platforms, no study of the circulation of global media content would be complete without a look into the ways these platforms are disrupting the way these products are created in their respective countries. To this end, I will be providing an overview of how Netflix has been disrupting the anime production

industry, the issues that have arisen with the advent of this new global streaming platform within the processes that have sustained the circulation of anime texts previously, and finally, analyze whether Netflix can be accurately framed as an imperialistic platform intermediary within this context. With these factors in mind, anime becomes an important case study for yet another reason: while dynamics of asymmetrical interdependence between transnational and global production processes are relative depending on the nations involved and the size of their respective markets, it is difficult to state with any degree of accuracy that Japanese anime is a weak or marginal global brand. Already an agent of its own forms of asymmetrical interdependency, the process of creating Japanese anime involves other regional players, such as South Korea, Vietnam, and China, often along divisions of labor, which, until very recently, ensured that cerebral labor remained in the hands of the Japanese industry (Kim 2014, Noh 2020). Because of the relative strength of Japanese anime as a medium and national brand, the manner in which a Western-centered global player like Netflix can disrupt industrial status quos, and the anime industry's subsequent retaliations to maintain them, reveal a more complex narrative than one of domination or subjugation.

Often, the results of these engagements retain ambivalent tensions that simultaneously reinforce and subvert expectations and trends of Western dominance within the flows of global media. While it is undeniable that these streaming platforms act as gatekeepers regarding the content that is allowed to be shown on the platform, they also offer avenues in which content can be distributed legally around the world that may not have otherwise had as much reach without intermediating support. The ability to distribute content around the world does not necessarily equate to its ability to be received favorably, but it may help in reducing the frictions that exist when trying to access international media through often less legal or more roundabout means,

ultimately retaining a wider and more diverse viewership. This gestures to the broader conclusion that this chapter seeks to make, which is that in the case of American global streaming giants like Netflix, they rarely maintain one unifying strategy towards a hegemonic ideology that is shaped through its content catalog, its algorithms, or its interventions within the industry. As I will examine in this chapter, some elements of Netflix's strategy in engaging subscribers through international media fall deeply into expected orientalist caricatures and cultural stereotypes, lining up neatly with what Bourdieu may refer to as symbolic violence, while in other ways, Netflix has become a kind of ally in bringing anime narratives and productions that may have not been easily created under the current anime production system within Japan. Simultaneously, one can observe the service courting renowned creators into strategic collaborations and presenting a breadth of content within their holistic library that exemplifies the diversity of the medium, albeit in a lopsided manner. These disparate trends: both that revel in orientalizing and subvert those very visions by emphasizing proximity and humanization are presented simultaneously within the same space. Such contradictory visions defy easy designations of imperialist or globalist agendas. For Netflix, the desired outcome is always a steadily growing number of engaged subscribers and the strategies employed in trying to achieve this result varies as it relates to anime. It is in this ambiguous space where this chapter seeks to understand the nature of asymmetrical interdependency between global streaming platforms and the local production industry.

Literature Review

In thinking about the particularities of international, non-English media on streaming services, Jean Chalaby's "cosmopolitanization" may be a useful starting point to understand the role of the global in the American-based service. Chalaby defines the concept as the

phenomenon where “international communication is restructuring media flows at up to four levels (local, national, regional, and global)” (2005, 32). He goes further to observe that “this new period is not so much characterized by the creation of a new layer of communication flow but by the enmeshing of these four levels” (32). In many ways, Netflix’s increased attention towards international content in order to encourage simultaneous growth both for global audiences abroad and within the company’s stronghold countries, such as the United States, exemplifies this embroilment of the four layers. The global becomes a means for reinforcing the size of their audience within the local national context, and vice versa. The result of this enmeshing gestures towards Daya Thussu’s concept of contra-flows, where content from marginalized countries travel alongside and at times, against, the dominant currents of more mainstream work in a manner that implies multidirectionality. However, Thussu is cautious in labeling all contra-flows and the resulting heightened visibility of marginalized creators as necessarily positive, as “glocalisation strategies exemplify how the global can encompass both the transnational and geo-cultural by co-opting the local in order to maintain the dominant flow” (2006, 19). Part of the maintenance of the dominant flow is the discursive function of globalization that streaming services like Netflix reinforce. Evan Elkins has utilized the term “algorithmic cosmopolitanism” in order to frame the way streaming services like Netflix promote its particular brand of globalism as a kind of moral and political imperative, as opposed to an economic strategy that will yield more subscribers and profit from around the world (2019). While optimistically, one can hope that engagement with these cosmopolitan companies can act as a catalyst for more well-informed and empathetic global audiences, the reality of the representation and role of international works within Netflix’s content catalogs are much more complex.

Thinking about the history of distribution for Japanese anime more specifically, it is clear that, at least initially, the introduction of anime into American television would align with Thussu's skepticism regarding contra-flow as necessarily positive. As Michal Daliot-Bul outlines, when anime first aired in the United States in the 1960s, starting with Osamu Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atomu*, and later, science fiction texts like *Battle of the Planets* and *Star Blazers*, works that managed to air in the United States were "heavily edited to conform to the more strict standards of US television by removing violence and other storytelling elements deemed inappropriate; story plots were altered and the overall look and feel of the series were Americanized with the use of American names and the like" (2014, 80). In the 1980s, this Americanization went a step further, as popular co-produced IP were established, such as *The Transformers* franchise which was produced by Hasbro, who would collaborate with Toei Animation and Takara to establish their transmedial brand, as well as works like *Voltron*, which was created between American World Events Production and Toei Animation (Daliot-Bul 2014, Johnson 2013). What should be emphasized during this period was that both co-produced and exported anime were primarily targeting children, and more specifically, young boys, as their primary audience, a feature that continues into the contemporary moment of transnational co-productions with global streaming services.

Concurrently during this time, early anime fans were exploring other genres in the diverse medium through their science-fiction clubs throughout the late seventies, onward. In Sean Leonard's detailed account of the budding anime fandom during these early years, Japanese companies like TMS were noticing that cosmopolitan fans were engaging with anime that had not yet been touched by American corporate intermediaries. They began engaging with these American fans in order to see how some of their IP, such as *Lupin the Third: Castle of*

Cagliostro, would perform with a more adult audience (2005, 287). Unfortunately, despite the fervor of these cosmopolitan fans, these initial forays with content that targeted more diverse audiences would not yield the results that these Japanese companies were looking for, and they would leave the market. Despite this, throughout the 80s and 90s, there was a growing fervor for Japanese anime, both from children and adult fans alike within the United States. The children's anime that made its way into American television were rife with localization of the texts to fit American standards and lessen any characteristics that were deemed too foreign. In contrast, there was a simultaneous movement by organized fans that would develop a distinct disdain for the revisionist localization practices that were exercised by American intermediaries, who were often too liberal in their tampering of the original text for the fans' respective tastes (Cubbison 2005, Leonard 2005). Backlash against these revisions would allow for updated versions of anime like Studio Ghibli's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* to be released years later, iterations that would be much truer to the original texts and the creator's visions. These simultaneous and contradicting threads of globalization that were happening both on the corporate and audience level decades ago would continue characterize the flow of anime and localization practices within the United States into the contemporary moment. The platformization of viewing environments and the ecology of anime streaming continues to invite ambivalent tensions, praise, and critique from audiences and anime production companies alike regarding how they handle the process of culturally translating global work across national boundaries. Indeed, while the initial treatment of anime on American television, with intermediaries fostering a heavily revisionist tendency towards the foreign text supports Thussu's skepticism regarding whether contra-flows really is a sign of subversion of dominant ideological paradigms, there were clearly forces that were simultaneously resisting these tendencies and

challenging what forms of localization would be acceptable for the respective tastes of global audiences.

In continuing to think about whether Netflix is utilizing international media in a manner that reinforces dominant media flows, one aspect that scholars have focused on is the constitution of content catalogs. Often, juxtaposing the make-up of the catalogs with the company's claims around their commitment to globalism and supporting industries abroad reveals fissures in the company's progressive and cosmopolitan image. Almost unanimously across scholarly inquiry regarding the representation of global media forms within catalogs, there has been the critique that despite the presence of international media, Hollywood content tends to dominate in relation to the numbers. In Tomaz Affonso Penner and Joseph Straubhaar's analysis of Netflix's Brazilian catalog, not only was the overall size of the total library much smaller than that of the American catalog, but the Spanish-speaking original productions within the catalog only amounted to 3.92% across six countries in Latin America, including Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, Argentina, Chile and Ecuador (2020, 138). Further, they noted that the Spanish language original productions were more well-received for audience groups outside of Latin America than within. This reveals how despite the appearance of diversity and the multidirectional nature of the media flow predicated by Netflix's global presence, who this content ultimately seems to be serving may be detached from the originary countries.

This is not to say that Netflix is interested in dampening down "foreignness" in the same manner that American broadcasting companies were interested in doing for anime in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. In Stuart Cunningham and Alexa Scarlata's analysis of Australian Netflix Originals within the Australian catalog, they state that despite the low number of Australian original content, a mere 1.7 percent according to Lobato and Scarlata's analysis, "Netflix's

internationalism is not concerned with downplaying Australianness; indeed, it can double down on it when it suits the marketability of the content” (Cunningham and Scarlata 2020, 154).

Instead, the service’s internationalism revolves around investing in and distributing content that audiences in multiple territories may find appealing. In short, the texts must speak across boundaries, and if amplifying extant global discourses surrounding certain cultures aid in achieving that, they will likely lean into certain forms of cultural essentialisms or nation branding. Other scholars are less sure of this willingness to portray diverse cultures however, as noted in Luis Albornoz and Trinidad Garcia Leiva’s work on the diversity of Netflix originals, particularly in Spain. They go as far as to state that “Netflix originals in Spain are characterized as a transnationalized American offering with an international-flavoured seasoning” (2021, 2). Whose palate this content is seasoned for reveals much about what kind of work Netflix, and the creators that collaborate with them, expects international content to do within their service.

The approach that Netflix takes also differs depending on the region in question, and is often unequal regarding the number of commissions and co-commissions across national borders. For example, South Korea, Japan, and the United Kingdom lead in Netflix’s investment in international content. Their aggressive strategy in these regions may be informed by the fact that “US titles dominate the most-viewed titles in most countries, but not in India, Japan, and South Korea” (Lotz 2021, 209), spurring the need for the company to invest more in original content in order to foster continual growth within these nations. Similarly, given the established history of anime’s ability to travel, and more recently, Korean films and dramas performing well on an international scale, investing in these nations’ media industries would likely have a reasonable payoff. The discrepancy between the presence of international content within catalogs, from the relative abundance of Japanese and Korean titles, compared to that of Spanish-

language or Australian content, reinforces the obvious fact that the streaming service's commitment to internationalization is deeply uneven and subject to the economic and cultural hierarchies that characterize world media systems. Because of this truth, it is all the more necessary for scholars to analyze how Netflix influences individual nations and their respective media industries, infrastructures, and audiences, as well as the histories of how content from those respective nations have traveled previously, before establishing broader theories regarding how we can understand Netflix's influence on a global scale.

Given the scholarship outlined above regarding catalogs, cosmopolitanism, and the localization trends of international media forms, I will contribute to this body of work by analyzing the influence that Netflix has been having on Japanese anime in particular on three levels: text, catalog, and industry. In providing this multilayered analysis, it will become clear that far from having a unified strategy for how to engage in the distribution of anime and leveraging its surrounding cultures, the resulting collage of tactics utilized to appeal to the global audience on the part of Netflix often come into conflict with one another. Through this friction, one can observe the agency of creators in both submitting to and resisting modes of symbolic violence and leveraging the benefits that come with collaborating with an international juggernaut like Netflix for their own gain. Simultaneously, however, we can trace the boundaries of where this agency ends and where Netflix's considerable economic power continues to exert significant pressures on both the local industries and the distribution ecology within Japan.

Methodology

The methodologies that will be employed in this chapter are diverse, in part due to its aims. As noted previously, while deeply interconnected, the way that imperialistic and globalizing influences manifest themselves vastly differ depending on what form of hegemony

one is trying to observe on what element of the portal. I begin with a textual analysis of a paratext produced by Alex Burunova in conjunction with Netflix, which is a 2019 documentary focused on promoting several Netflix Original anime. As such, this text serves as a useful vehicle for understanding one framework of how Netflix would like to be perceived as an anime content provider.

Next, I will analyze the constitution of the content catalog, in order to understand Netflix's role as gatekeeper and to see how the orientalizing features of the *Enter the Anime* documentary reverberates across the holistic content catalog. As such, an analysis of the catalog in relation to the documentary will allow for broader thematic patterns to rise to the surface, including genres and tropes that are privileged, as well as what appears to be broader cultural trends. While the Netflix catalog differs across regions, I will be focusing on the North American catalog due to its ease of access to the researcher and the fact that the North American region still makes up for the bulk of Netflix's revenue, proving that it remains a centrally valuable consumer base. However, in order to lessen the disparities in analysis that can arise from differing catalog constitutions around the world, I will be focusing on the Netflix Original anime that Netflix has aided in producing, as they are generally available across all 190 countries.

By analyzing the content that is made available on the platform on several levels: the slates of Netflix Originals, the licensed content, and finally, the paratextual elements that frame these works, I will outline the multitudinous and often contradictory motivations of the platform, which seeks to shape the subscriber's understanding of "anime" as a media form. A multilayered analysis in this regard seeks to defy easy designations of the platform as a uniquely imperializing or globalizing force, but instead, outlines the polymorphous interpretations of a global medium

that exist simultaneously on the singular platform and what the effects of these multiple framings may be as the platform continues to invest attention and funds into the global anime industry.

Following this multi-level textual analysis, I will shift my attention towards how Netflix has proven to be a disruptive force within the Japanese anime industry. I will be using critical discursive analysis to look into the global platform's promise to industries abroad, the presumptions made by professionals within those industries, and the anxieties and concerns that come to the fore. Given the opacity of the inner workings of global streaming platforms, like Netflix, it is quite difficult to get beyond the tightly controlled nature of public data disclosure and the meticulously edited responses of public interviews with the CEOs and publicists of those companies. While this project does not quite manage to escape this opacity, it is nevertheless the case that the more perspectives that one is presented regarding a platform's relationship to an industry abroad, the more complex the resulting image being developed becomes, and fissures begin to appear in an otherwise impassive facade. Incongruities between accounts become rich moments for analysis regarding the friction and disparity that is inevitable in these transnational collaborations, revealing more complex truths that reach beyond the sheen of PR speech. In order to complement the press releases that have been made available in primarily English-speaking countries, I have interviewed media professionals in Japan as well as drawn heavily from Japanese media coverage on the role and influence of Netflix. Along with a higher availability of interviews from anime industry professionals who have collaborated with Netflix, there are texts written by industry insiders that deal with the issues of the contemporary anime industry, and a range of commentators that express their concerns regarding the future of the Japanese anime industry. By drawing from these sources, one can glean a more nuanced understanding of Netflix's impact on the industry, its benefits and potential drawbacks, the limitations of their

influence, and the extent to which the industries that provide content for the platform maneuver within these relationships. Certainly, the resulting narrative turns out to be a disparate tableau of anime culture retaining a range of ambivalent and often contradictory voices that co-exist in the discursive frameworks for understanding Netflix abroad. While this chapter will be limited in its focus on anime, the global nature of the Netflix platform itself provides many case studies in which further narratives can be teased out regarding how the platform engages with international content. Focusing on how players in both local and global markets speak about this content can reveal tensions in the interpretations of the platform's role from multiple different vantage points, which may ultimately yield useful data for other scholars.

Orientalism and Imaginary Originations: *Enter the Anime*

Within anime studies and Japanese studies more broadly, there has been a contemporary strain of scholarship that has questioned the relationship between Japan as a nation-state and the media products that they produce. Ian Condry has argued that to try to frame the development of anime as a result of "Japanese culture," or more broadly, "overarching national or ethnic assertions of cultural resonance," often disserves the multidirectional social practices and forms of value creation that cross national and cultural borders, all of which fundamentally characterize anime's global success (2013, 22). Anne Allison also expresses her skepticism regarding the "Japan" that supposedly effaces their pop cultural exports, noting that "whether the attraction is coded as global culture or as culturally Japanese, it involves not only a perceived difference from American pop but also a constructed world premised on the very notion of difference itself" (Allison 2006, 2). Further, in her case study of the success of *Pokemon* within the United States, she gestures towards the inherently self-indulgent and narcissistic framing of "Japan," when she states, "American kids can love Pokemon and know, even fetishize its origins (as in the U.S. fad

for the Japanese-made trading cards), but associate Japan in all this less with a national power or cultural lifestyle (“the American dream”) than with a consumer brand that can be collected and customized as one’s own” (2006, 262). Similarly, Koichi Iwabuchi has also gestured towards the slippery “odorlessness” of Japanese cultural products, noting the paradoxical tensions of the growing universal popularity of Japanese products with a simultaneous “disappearance of any perceptible ‘Japaneseness’...The cultural influence of Japanese animation and computer games in many parts of the world might be tremendous, but it tends to be an ‘invisible colonization’”(Iwabuchi 2002, 33). Casey Brienza, in her study of the domestication of *manga* within the United States, also notes how the transnational collaborative processes that make content legible across national and cultural borders take great intentionality and effort from a multitude of laboring parties from a diverse set of cultural backgrounds, making it difficult once again to singularly connect Japan with its pop cultural exports.

What these scholars are ultimately emphasizing is the tenuous relationship between the nation-state and the cultural products that purports some kind of imaginary origin. Further, each author, with their respective case studies, cautions readers against the assumption that a wider global viewership necessarily will lead to “Western sympathies toward Japan as a nation or reorient global cultural hierarchies” (Brienza 2016, 21). In short, scholars remain deeply skeptical regarding the discourse that revolves around “soft power” or the presumption that media consumption or cosmopolitan fandoms necessarily guarantees meaningful cross-cultural engagement as opposed to further fetishization of imaginary originations. In fact, in later works, Iwabuchi has demonstrated how the superficial appeal of Japanese popular culture products may actually hinder the ability to communicate meaningfully between Japan and its other regional neighbors which continue to share painful and unresolved histories (2015). As such, it is critical

that scholars do not conflate consumption with communication necessarily, largely when linguistic, historical, and cultural barriers continue to create frictions in cross-cultural engagement.

Despite these concerns, it is difficult to state conclusively that Japan is fundamentally disconnected or otherwise culturally invisible from the media products that they export. While criticizing the narcissistic fetishization and othering on the part of consumers are completely valid, the inquiry nevertheless begs the question of what constitutes meaningful engagements, and what is the agency of creators and consumers in their construction of “Japan” as it relates to media exports. Whether an act of fetishization or cultural engagement, it is difficult to separate Japan from Japanese anime in the global cultural imagination. One only needs to dabble in online fandom or visit an anime convention to recognize that there are linguistic fannish practices, ideologies, and performances at play that are at least predicated on some covetous and vague perception of “Japan.” The formal characteristics or ideologies that make up authentic “Japaneseness” is not the subject of this chapter; however, how global platforms like Netflix frame anime and its relationship to presumptions of Japaneseness within their content catalogs remains my primary concern. Whether “Japaneseness” actually exists within the anime text is less concerning to me, as how such works are effaced with these arbitrary presumptions and modes of orientalizing that are then made to be perceived and understood as a globally-constructed “Japaneseness.”

In order to explore the potential consequences of distinguishing which content is made available in the catalog within this framework, the work of Stuart Hall and his discussion of encoding and decoding is useful in understanding the extant agencies of creator, consumer, and global distribution platform, while nevertheless gesturing towards structural inequalities. When

creators and broadcasters “encode” messages within their work to produce “meaningful discourse” (2004, 165), there must also be a process in which the receiver “decodes” this message in order to receive that discourse. As Hall notes, there are certain codes that are “of course, so widely distributed...that they appear not to be constructed - the effect of an articulation between sign and referent - but to be ‘naturally’ given” (167). For any particular sign, its inherent polysemy offers many ways to decode the message; however, Hall cautions that “polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism...Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested” (169). This has widespread consequences when the “preferred reading” of a sign is taken as truth, often without even the consciousness on the part of the decoder.

In thinking about such preferred readings, I would like to focus on how Netflix capitalizes on certain pre-established forms of orientalism in order to explain the global legibility of anime as an accepted medium. Orientalism, established by Edward Said’s seminal text, refers to tactics of cultural “othering” and fetishizing, often in service of reinforcing one’s own cultural identity, or within the specific context of Said’s text, the project of the West. Orientalism, as it relates to Japan, has seen many iterations, from a framework of traditional, exotic culture (*chado*, geisha, shintoism, kimono, *Japonisme* aesthetics), to brutal and inscrutable soldiers (*kamikaze* pilots, *harakiri*, samurai, ninja), to the “weird” and “wacky” pop culture phenomena (anime, *otaku* culture, fashion/lifestyle subcultures, idols). According to David Morley and Kevin Robins, techno-orientalism rose in tandem with Japan’s growing economic power in the 80s and 90s, when the export of Japanese vehicles and electronics grew exponentially, stirring fears of “yellow peril” and the penetration of U.S. society by a perceived outsider. Anxieties over

Japanese corporate capital seeping into the United States culminated further when Sony and Matsushita purchased Columbia Pictures and MCA-Universal respectively, raising racially-fueled tensions in the American public with regards to how the Japanese would come to symbolically and ideologically dominate Hollywood. Of course, as Morley accurately notes, these anxieties were primarily spurred by the “increasing sense of insecurity about European and American modernity” (Morley and Robins 2002, 153). The West no longer had a monopoly over the future and Japan was no longer a passive postwar nation that would be singularly made to accept Western influence and modernity, as influence now flowed multi-directionally. In order to domesticate such anxieties, techno-orientalism acted as a means of fostering an “association of technology and Japaneseness [which] now serves to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal, and machine-like, an authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world” (169). In short, Japanese success was now characterized as the Japanese having gone too far in technologizing, and the foundations of rationality and innovation that would normally characterize scientific and technological development and progress had now reverted back to a kind of affliction, evidence of the “Other’s” inhumanity.

In line with such sentiments and ideologies, images of bleak, hyper-futuristic, vaguely Asian cityscapes serve as convenient backdrops to much of Western media’s cyberpunk science fiction, as is the case with Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, Rian Johnson’s *Looper*, and Laeta Kalogridis’s *Altered Carbon*, just to name a few. As Toshiya Ueno notes, Asia, and more specifically, Japan, “is not only located geographically, but also projected chronologically...the landscape and atmosphere of Japan, as typical model of over-adjusting to the high -tech built environment, are constantly referred to as signs of the near future” (1999, 98). Yet, despite this persistent fetishization, as David Roh et. al. observe, there are ways in

which people can use the tropes, aesthetics, and expectations of techno-orientalism to “provide vital, sharp counter-discourses via ironic, self-referential, and recuperative narrative strategies” (2015, 17). Kumiko Sato ambivalently notes how techno-orientalist discourses are indigenized to make the assumption that “Japanese cyborg identity is Japan’s very original, which owes nothing, or very little, to America: the West found Japan as its future model” (2004, 346). In internalizing such discourses, Sato goes further, stating that “ironically, American cyberpunk’s impact caused a sudden revival of celebrating Japanese particularity in the West’s universal terminology” (347). More positively, Kathryn Allan has looked at the way feminist post-cyberpunk has given Asian women a space for their voices, though, as always, these voices come through only with a series of negotiations with dominant, hegemonic ideologies that are reinforced onto “othered” bodies (2015).

The question then is in what ways can these Orientalist discourses be applied to Netflix’s anime catalog and what negotiations must be made on the part of the creators in order to foster a perceived global presence. One analytical thread that can be explored is examining the kinds of paratexts that Netflix is willing to produce and distribute around anime. In this section, I will be focusing on the ways that Enter *the Anime*, a Netflix-produced documentary which primarily stars the creators of Netflix’s own Original series, collapses into certain forms of ethnocentrism to introduce newcomers and fans to anime culture. The existence of this documentary is critical because it is a convenient framing device for how to understand the company’s approach to anime and the kind of messaging that the platform would like to present to their viewers. It is important to note that this chapter is fundamentally not about the reception of this documentary. Indeed, much of the backlash towards this documentary reveals the ways in which fans and viewers continue to decode texts in resistant ways; however, the documentary text itself serves as

evidence towards how the company may understand anime's global legibility as being foundationally constituted towards certain pre-existing orientalist assumptions. As I will elaborate, the orientalist assumptions provided in this text can be seen reverberating throughout Netflix's industrial strategy towards anime on the broader level of their catalog.

Enter the Anime begins with the narrator, Alex Burunova, posing the question, "what is anime?" Within the first few minutes of the documentary, Burunova contends that one must simply ride the Japanese subway to understand the "stoic surface of Japanese culture...quiet, polite, restrained." The documentary then poses the question how such a restrained and suppressed culture could create something like the "dark, twisted crazy world of anime." Already within the first minute of the documentary, the rhetoric that is employed utilizes multiple layers of orientalism in order to draw upon the perceived frenetic, multidimensional, ever-shifting nature of Japanese culture. If, as noted previously, anime is not inherently connected to "Japaneseness" or, if so, only very dubiously, as scholars have outlined, then the reinforcement of the connection is presented in the way that the majority of the documentary is shot in Japan, interspersed with many cutscenes of Japanese culture that are not largely associated directly with the process of creating Japanese anime, but nevertheless impose a sense of imagined cultural origination. While two of the creators interviewed are not Japanese: Adi Shankar (*Castlevania*) and LeSean Thomas (*Cannon Busters*, *Yasuke*), much of the documentary focuses heavily on the perceived connection between the Japanese and their unique culture, and the development of anime as an edgy, unhinged medium as a result of such a culture. Much like in techno-orientalist imagery, where the vaguely Asian cityscape signals to the viewer the setting of a vague future-oriented skewed temporality in which the West must bring to heel, the cutscenes of harajuku fashion subcultures, themed restaurants, robots, shrines, flashing neon lights, and manga-

dominated bookstores connote both traditionalist and “wacky orientalism,” serving as a convenient backdrop for introducing the “deranged” minds of anime creators.

Among the Japanese creators who are interviewed, the viewer is introduced to several of the anime industry greats, including Kenji Kamiyama (co-director of *Ultraman* and *Ghost in the Shell: SAC_2045*), Shinji Aramaki (co-director of *Ultraman* and *Ghost in the Shell: SAC_2045*), Toshiki Hirano (director of *Baki*), Rarecho (director of *Aggretsuko*), Yeti (character designer for *Aggretsuko*), Seiji Kishi (Director of *Kengan Ashura*), Yuji Higa (Producer of *Kengan Ashura*), Kozo Morishita (Chairman of Toei Animation), and more. An extensive list of works that have been labeled as Netflix Originals make appearances within the documentary; however, what is critical to note is the manner in which these works are framed. The most potent example that belies the manner in which the documentary serves as a motivated framing lens to these works is when Burunova talks about *Aggretsuko*. *Aggretsuko* is a slice-of-life anime that explores the exploitative conditions of a professional environment from the perspective of a female protagonist, as well as the pressures in her life as a woman complete with anxieties regarding marriage and lost aspirations. Despite the culturally proximate premise, the framing device that the documentary uses is primarily cemented in the gimmick of the show, the fact that the protagonist bursts into heavy metal karaoke in times of heavy duress. In one particularly insightful moment, director Rarecho marvels at the fact that a global audience has found some of the culturally specific humor revolving around Japanese sexism to be appealing and relatable, providing further commentary on his reflection of the global #MeToo movement in relation to the series and his sentiments regarding perhaps the lack of development for women’s rights around the world. Such introspection is sandwiched between interludes of heavy metal and the protagonist in fits of rage, drawing attention away from a moment of cross-cultural connection,

to the spectacle of difference. Indeed, Rarecho's observation feels brushed away altogether, as Burunova forgoes those moments of humanization and reflection, both on the level of the text of *Aggretsuko* and the director's words, in order to emphasize how *Aggretsuko* is "loud, aggressive, and gritty." In reality, the content of the show and the industry interviews with the creators reflect a far different story, neither of which is particularly loud, aggressive nor gritty, but more reflective of the broader global context in which their work has been received and what that may ultimately say about the audiences that receive it so positively. The emphasis towards the supposed unpredictable and frenetic nature of the character, Retsuko, then becomes projected onto Japanese culture writ large, when Burunova states immediately following the interview with Rarecho, that she was "getting caught in Japan's contradictions," not without failing to sandwich a mundane scene of a demure kimono-clad woman beforehand.

While *Enter the Anime* ironically pokes fun at the tone-deaf orientalist discourses that once characterized documentaries about Japan in the past, Burunova's work falls into many of the same trappings. In between interviews with industry professionals, easily recognizable imagery and backdrops that signal "Japan" are heavily peppered throughout the documentary. Akihabara maids, a *shinzen shiki* wedding, Harajuku fashions, and shinto temples all gesture towards a familiarly foreign rendition of Japan. Similar to the ways in which the documentary frames Japan, it is difficult to separate this documentary as a framing device for the Netflix Originals library when a conspicuous majority of interviews are with industry professionals who have collaborated with Netflix. As I will elaborate later in this chapter, this leads to most of the work being spotlighted in the documentary to focus on combat-oriented, edgy, and techno-orientalist productions, which inevitably draw further attention to these kinds of narratives within the catalog. Because of the genre that these productions fall under, despite the professional and

often mundane nature of the interviews themselves, the documentary sandwiches the creators quite literally between violent and flashy cutscenes of their respective productions. Such visual cues reveal a desire to project the fantasy narratives onto the bodies of the real-life creators. The product itself begins to replace the actual bodies and voices of the people who are behind the scenes, further merging the fantasy of Japan with the much more ordinary Japan that the creators present. This skewing then echoes throughout Burunova's own perspective, which prioritizes and interfaces with principles of difference and forms of orientalism that have already been outlined above.

As I will later elaborate, there has been an easing of content restrictions around the anime industry through Netflix distributing work that would not be acceptable on television, particularly in regard to portrayals of sex and violence. While such developments can be seen as liberatory for creators, given the particular framing that *Enter the Anime* provides, it is difficult not to view these affordances with a degree of suspicion of what the relaxing of these content guidelines do for Netflix. President Ishikawa of Production IG and President Minami of Studio Bones have both actively commented that while there has been an ease of expression restrictions through Netflix, simply trying to appease customers with sex and violence is not recommended, noting how it takes experienced creators to not make explicit depictions of sex and violence feel gratuitous (Hirano 2018, Ikuta 2018). While such flexibility is certainly a welcome change from the restrictions of working with the traditional production committee method of anime creation, the creator's ability to draw "cruel" or "grotesque" images have been conspicuous within Netflix's lineup. One can see that with additional paratextual frameworks, like Burunova's documentary, which actively manipulates how one can understand the textual qualities of the work with a supposed inherent connection with the cultures that make them, such liberations can

be actively used to promote “othering” dynamics, revealing such affordances to be double-edged.

Another aspect that *Enter the Anime* skitters uneasily around is the issue of labor exploitation within the anime industry. As noted at the introduction of this chapter, the issue of labor has been a contentious one and an ugly feature of the industry that has drawn global attention, to the extent where there have been inquiries regarding whether the advent of wealthy global distribution portals, like Netflix, can intervene and aid the ailing creators with their funding models (Sevakis 2018). While the issue of labor is never addressed directly as such within the documentary, when the industry creators were confronted with the question of, “What would you do if you weren’t in the animation business?,” Director Shinji Aramaki explains that as a production student, he would work “20 hours straight every day, making movies while running myself into the ground.” Chairman Kozo Morishita of Toei animation notes issues of incessant stress when making films, while both Director Rarecho stated how if he had the time, he would “sleep six hours a day,” with Character Designer Yeti echoing him, stating that she would just like to sleep. Producer Rui Kuroki responds mournfully, “to live an easy life.” After reflecting upon these answers, Burunova reflects, “How do they keep going - running on no sleep, and having to come up with creative innovation?”

While no answer is provided in the documentary, vague gestures made previously towards how the Japanese have “pride... especially pride in one’s work,” attempt to gloss over issues of labor exploitation, and instead, frame the discipline of these creators as an inherent cultural characteristic. Of course, the ability to be exploited for one’s labor and tolerate such treatment is not characteristically unique to the Japanese, nor is the tendency to minimize such issues by large corporations and creators alike as being individualized matters of “passion,”

“culture,” or “creative work.” However, what is curious is that the platform allowed for such commentary regarding the labor of anime to be presented at all, even if it is not the central premise of the documentary. Indeed, even gesturing towards the exploitative nature of the work can be a risky move for the platform that is investing directly into the anime industry. However, in further analyzing the effects of Netflix’s investment into the industry and the promise of global distribution for ailing creators abroad, it has come to light that Netflix’s presence has had some profound disruptions to how anime has traditionally been produced, and in thinking through the implications of such disruptions, one can begin to understand why introducing the fatigue of the creators may spur a positive understanding to Netflix’s foray into the industry.

Content Catalogs and Contestations of Symbolic Hegemony

While the previous section looked at how theories around preferential readings can be applied to singular texts within the streaming platform, structurally, the reinforcement of the ideologies expressed by the documentary can happen on the level of the distribution streaming service’s content catalog. The availability of certain texts becomes critically important in shaping the perceptions that are fostered regarding the relationship between the texts in question and the cultures that have created it or are perceived as originary centers. Netflix’s content catalog for North America’s anime genre consists of 153 television series and 60 anime films as of June 2021. Fifty-nine of the television series and twelve films are considered Netflix originals. The term “original” has been used, often confusingly, to connote both when Netflix is the exclusive distributor of a work within a region, global distribution, and also when Netflix has claimed ownership of a particular production. Netflix may commission or co-commission work and qualify these works as “originals,” but also may simply purchase the exclusive distribution rights. Because of the need to build extensive content libraries, the bulk of Netflix original works

are actually only licensed from companies after the production. This somewhat tempers the amount of influence that one can Netflix supposedly has on the constitution of individual texts.

For this analysis, even within this limited list of originals, I will be focusing on what industry professionals and anime fans have deemed as “ONA” or “original net animation.” The reasons for focusing on these particular works are threefold: the first is that ONA are unique from traditional broadcast anime, as they are created initially, for the express purpose of being distributed digitally, normally through a streaming service. In other words, original net animation are works that expressly came into existence because of the advent of digital streaming, serving as a unique media product from anime that has come before. Because of the environment in which they are created, there are certain affordances to ONA, particularly those that are created for global platforms. This includes more flexibility regarding the expectations of how long a work is supposed to be, a feature whose importance will be discussed further later in this chapter. Moreover, by nature of being ONA, the burden of responsibility is placed on the subscriber to be aware of the ratings of the work, therefore, work that may feature more mature content, can potentially be placed within the streaming portal without the censorship that may normally be required for broadcasting. This allows for further research into how the digital origins of these texts transform storytelling from previously established norms. Among these ONA titles, thirty-two works are considered Netflix originals, in which the company has supported a significant amount of the funding through licensing or commissioning costs.

Given the extensive amount of content that is hosted on the service in total, a diverse range of narratives that may provide multidimensional and nuanced depictions of anime culture is certainly present, and reflects Lobato’s observation that, despite concerns regarding the global distribution platform’s potentially imperialistic effects, it nevertheless boasts a widely diverse,

cosmopolitan, yet perhaps Hollywood-centric “spread of multilingual content” (2020, 69). Among the available titles, there are plenty of shows that dabble in genres that have become characteristic of anime culture, such as *mahou shojo* (magical girl) anime, combat-centric *shonen* (literally translated as “boys”) anime, and *mecha* (robot) shows. Beyond these genres however, there is also a wide selection of work that provide nuanced examples of the potential of animation and storytelling, which challenge one-dimensional depictions of anime or the cultures that inspire its development. For example, the availability of *Koe no Katachi* (A Silent Voice), an anime film by Director Naoko Yamada, explores what it is like to be deaf in Japan, the consequences of “othering,” and the dangers of fetishizing another’s pain and disability, all of which actively challenges presumptions of violence and orientalizations that sometimes shape viewers’ assumptions of what anime is like. Other shows, like *March Comes in like a Lion*, *Forest of Piano*, *Your Lie in April*, and *Anohana: The Flower We Saw that Day*, do similar work of showing the diverse range of what the medium can represent, beyond its bombastic spectacles, giant robots, and hyper-stylized violence.

However, it bears mentioning that there are certain genres that Netflix, as a platform, seems to emphasize within their content catalog, particularly within their ONA. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact characteristics of the content catalog, as works are added and taken away on a regular basis. However, there are still patterns that can be traced within Netflix’s library. For example, many series that are currently made available on the platform skew towards being action-oriented, with heavy-hitting *shonen* work, like *HunterxHunter*, *Naruto*, *One Piece*, *Bleach*, *Parasyte*, *Attack on Titan*, and more. Science fiction is also another genre that has significant representation in the catalog, with groundbreaking works like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a work whose acquisition by Netflix stirred somewhat negative reactions from both

industry and the global fandom alike due to localization decisions (Vilas-Boas 2019). In total, out of the 153 series and 60 anime films that are presented on the platform, 90 series and 34 films fall into those two genres. While productions that do not fall into the action and sci-fi genre also make appearances within the catalog, the pickings are notably slimmer. Given the brief history that was outlined regarding the kinds of anime that were exported to the United States in the 70s and 80s, this preferential treatment towards action and science fiction is unsurprising. This pattern continues among the Netflix Originals that the platform has actively helped in funding, as almost all of the works fall within the lines of action, combat-oriented narratives. Among Netflix's thirty-two ONA, twenty-five of the productions are action, though two are aimed at children (*Knights of the Zodiac: Saint Seiya* and *Transformers: War on Cybertron*) and thirteen works fall also into the genre of science fiction. Those that do not fall in line with these particular genres, have contexts prior to the creation of the show as being successful mascots (*Aggretsuko* and *Rilakkuma and Kaoru*), that would encourage the further success of the show. It is only very recently, in 2021, that Netflix released originals like *Way of the House Husband* and announced works like *Thermae Romae*, which do not fit within action or science fiction. As one can observe, while Netflix does support a limited range of genres, there is heavy preferential treatment for action/science-fiction works that often operationalize expectations of violence and grit to support the success of the production.

This trend in the catalog then gets picked up by paratextual productions like *Enter the Anime*, who leverage this focus to make broader claims about anime, Japanese culture, and the “deranged” creators that originate from this nation's media culture. The comments made in this documentary will appear to be less suspect when there is a convenient content catalog that supports these claims of anime being something inherently unhinged and edgy. In this way, one

can observe that a discursive thread that begins with a documentary regarding the nature of anime culture and the people who create it can then be reflected structurally by the constitution of the catalog, without ever communicating the fact that Netflix acts as a gatekeeper for this catalog. Simultaneously, Netflix subscribers may watch the anime that is made available on Netflix and then discover the documentary, where their exposure to Netflix's anime catalog will continue to support the claims made in the documentary. Ultimately, with control over both catalog and paratext, it becomes easier to naturalize certain discourses as truth claims. In conjunction with Netflix's global presence and the level of influence the service holds on what media it circulates, the concerns of cultural imperialism scholars who express their anxieties over an American-based platform shaping perceptions around global cultures become well-realized. The symbols that are circulated by the service can become overly determined when Netflix blocks various ways that alternative meanings can be wrought, particularly for generalist viewers who may not go out of their way to find more information beyond what is made easily available about the media culture on their own volition. Thus, there is a risk that the resulting symbol's orientalist interpretation becomes the "preferred reading." While the anime industry may not desire this to be the case, when the creators of action/sci-fi whose works retain certain orientalist thematic trends are the ones receiving the financial support from global services, companies who wish to survive and thrive in this age of digital streaming must comply. Yet, despite these disparities in influence and ability to affect the overall constitution of the catalog, creators still recognize the benefits of working with Netflix due to the affordances of the digital portal and its funding structures, which allow for creators to see Netflix as a lucrative experimental space where different kinds of storytelling techniques can be used. In the next section, I will elaborate

upon some of the changes that can be observed in the formal anime text due to Netflix's intermediation.

Digital Affordances and Textual Transitions

Despite the conservative nature of Netflix's genre exploration in anime, the service's emphasis on action-oriented works has led to other more experimental developments regarding the characteristics of the medium. For example, industry professionals, such as Production I.G.'s CEO, Ishikawa Mitsuhiisa, has commented that Netflix has allowed for anime works to present more explicit forms of violence and sex, which would otherwise not be allowed to air on major broadcast television (Hirano 2018). Because Netflix's mode of operation works under the assumption that shows are chosen directly by their subscribers, instead of having viewers be exposed involuntarily to content, this has allowed for the expression of more intense or "realistic" scenarios. It should be noted that while explicit works are not necessarily uncommon within anime, such works are often relegated behind premium subscription channels or to "late night" time slots in order to ensure that underaged children cannot access them. This naturally limits the audience numbers to people, namely those who are willing to engage with this content in spite of other professional and social obligations that may demand their time. In many ways, Netflix's global reach and the ability to create flexible viewing schedules address these issues, both in providing audience scale and the affordances necessary for working adults to access these works. Combined with Netflix's willingness to distribute productions like Director Masaaki Yuasa's *Devilman Crybaby*, a work often cited as evidence of this shift towards possibly more explicit work, this trend has caught the eye of industry professionals who may be looking to expand their repertoire of animated works, and also the attention of viewers worldwide, who may also notice a contrast with anime works that have been widely made available previously.

In line with the disruptions towards pre-existing industry criteria, Netflix's entrance as a distributor has also challenged the traditional norms of production such as the emphasis on roughly 12-13 episode cours, introduced primarily within one of the Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter slots. Originally, the pacing of the narrative for broadcast anime must generally fit within the span of around 12-13 episodes, and if a production is greenlit for an additional season, then the second season would also be in the form of another 12-13-episode cour. Regardless of the pacing of the original source material, anime narratives must fit within these temporal limitations. However, collaborating with Netflix removes these stylistic restrictions for studios, as broadcasting schedules no longer dictate the length of a work. For example, the anime adaptation of *Dragon's Dogma* and the original series, *Eden*, consisted of seven and four episodes respectively, certainly a detraction from expected norms. The space allotted in which a story must be presented has changed, providing more flexibility to the anime form. In addition, the mode of delivery has been changed as well. While normally, anime is viewed on an one episode per week basis, in order to extend the duration of influence and hype that a traditional anime series can generate throughout its broadcasting, Netflix often opts for uploading full seasons at a time, aligning closely to their preferred binge-model of consumption, and instead of building an extended temporal hype, there is a reaffirming of the need for there to be a hook into the next episode in order to keep the viewer engaged for yet another episode, a narrative strategy that is commonly utilized in only a few genres of anime.

Because of this change in delivery mode, which often requires entire seasons to be finished before releasing it at once on the portal, production schedules also become responsive to this new mode of operation. While scheduling agreements will inevitably differ depending on the project, it has been noted that anime studios are often allotted more time to create their work for

the streaming service. For example, President Ishikawa noted how when working with Netflix on *B: the Beginning*, he had time to work on a project for three years, which he considered to be a “luxury” in comparison to normal anime production schedules (Grainger 2018). This is significant because anime production schedules are often known for their grueling pace, with episodes being completed as the series continues to air in real time. The occasional incomplete episode that is unable to be aired is a testament towards the brutal conditions of anime production schedules, a factor that is exacerbated by issues of human resource shortages.

Beyond the flexibility of content scheduling and length of production, Netflix has proven to be quite willing to experiment with the anime medium in relation to the craft’s technicality by introducing a variety of fully 3DCG (3D computer graphics) works, as is shown by productions like *Knights of the Zodiac: Saint Seiya*, *Altered Carbon: Resleeved*, *Dragon’s Dogma*, *Sword Gai*, *Cagaster of an Insect Cage*, *Ghost in the Shell: SAC_2045*, *Hero Mask*, and more, along with their business partnership with Polygon Pictures, one of the leading 3DCG studios in Japan. Unlike animation within the United States, full 3DCG works have yet to be fully accepted by most anime studios and viewerships alike, with the bulk of anime works continuing to be a mix of digital 2D and 3D animation. With anime’s somewhat rocky transition into full 3DCG works, there are a host of issues that the animation industry must face, including the standardization of formats across companies, so that collaborations become possible, the necessity of procuring expensive new equipment for an industry that is notorious for razor thin profit margins, the continual development of more high-definition animation, the education and development of animator skill sets, and more. However, as industry professional, Terumi Nishi comments, it is becoming a necessity for the Japanese anime industry to iron out these crucial details and move forward in the industry’s development of sophisticated 3D digital work, lest global media

corporations refuse to work with Japanese studios due to their standard operating mode being too low-definition (Nishi 2020, 180).

In contrast, the studios that work with Netflix have seemed willing to follow the service's code of high definition image quality. In a personal interview with Director Masahito Kobayashi and Producer Yuriko Okada of Studio Dwarf, the creators of *Rilakkuma and Kaoru*, they noted that the studio followed the policy set by Netflix in shooting in 4K HDR, which was the "highest possible image quality at the moment" (Kobayashi 2020). Such tremors within the anime industry, as influenced by the funding of global distribution platforms, is seen in works like Director Akira Saitou's *Sol Levante*, which was created in collaboration with Production I.G. *Sol Levante* made history being titled as the very first hand-drawn 4K HDR anime, allowing for artists to illustrate with even more detail, giving companies the ability to "push the boundaries and limitations of Japanese anime" (Robinson 2020). In another personal interview with a producer at Polygon Pictures, Jack Liang, when asked whether without the presence of global streaming platforms, would there still be such developments made to the anime production scene, he noted that eventually studios would have, but that with the advent of platforms like Netflix and Amazon, it really sped up the development and acceptance of these technical standards, acting as a "wake up call" for the anime industry (Liang 2020). Such comments gesture towards the way that technological development in hardware and software, in conjunction with the increased centralization of global platforms, like Netflix, are shaking up local industry norms, with these production studios being perpetually subject to- and negotiating with asymmetrical power relations and flows of capital. While these developments allow for images to become more detailed than ever, along with such advancements come issues of labor exploitation and who will be privy to such technologies and the education needed to use them.

These are issues that, as I will discuss later, are dominating and persistent problems for the Japanese anime industry. Despite this, one thing that is certain is that such productions show that Netflix is willing to experiment and innovate alongside these production companies, and impact what kind of output is possible with their intermediation.

While this potential expressive liberation, both in the themes that are allowed in anime productions and the technological advances that are employed, gestures towards the way that Netflix may be challenging some of the more restrictive norms of the anime industry, in many other ways, the platform's move into retaining and developing original anime can be seen as very conservative. As noted previously, many of the works already have a legacy in popular manga or hugely popular franchises, such as Sanrio's mascot, Aggretsuko, and San-X's Rilakkuma. This pattern of using popular manga or character franchises as a gauge for how successful an anime work may be has been a common tactic within the Japanese anime industry to ensure a certain degree of success for the secondary and tertiary industry work that follows the success of an original creation. Original animation that does not draw from a previous network of other media forms, such as manga, light novels, or games, are quite rare within the industry. However, Netflix has also helped fund ONA that do not have narrative predecessors, like Production I.G.'s *B: the Beginning*, Studio Bones' *A.I.C.O. Incarnation*, and Studio Pierrot's *Hero Mask*. As noted previously, Netflix shows a distinctive preference for genres that relate to action and science fiction, particularly when it comes to their ONA. For example, *B: the Beginning* is a violent crime thriller narrative that focuses on capturing a serial killer that displays high quality combat scenes between its characters. *A.I.C.O. Incarnation* is a science-fiction genre action thriller that revolves around our female protagonist who learns that she is an android with a human consciousness embedded within her and must go find her original body. *Hero Mask* is yet

another crime thriller anime that capitalizes on the idea of biological masks that feels similar in tone perhaps to shows like *Black Mirror*. While the support of animated originals that do not have precursors can be taken as a sign that Netflix may be willing to take risks and continue to disrupt certain industry norms, when one thematically characterizes these works, there are certain features, such as depending on proven-popular franchises and an emphasis on what has worked for anime (e.g. sci-fi), that can be seen as quite conservative strategies.

For the works that have not fit so neatly into Netflix's edgy anime line-up, such as *Aggretsuko* and *Rilakkuma & Kaoru*, there are usually other points of attraction that ensure that there will be a solid viewership. Both *Aggretsuko* and *Rilakkuma & Kaoru*, focus on slice-of-life and drama narratives that generally are aimed to appeal to women (*josei* genre), a far departure from works the action-oriented, *shonen* fare. However, as noted previously, *Aggretsuko* is an incredibly popular *Sanrio* mascot, which already had a successful broadcast television anime that had aired in Japan before creating ONA successors for the streaming platform. The gimmick of the show, which focuses on interludes in which the red panda office lady mascot breaks out into heavy metal serves as a convenient hook for curious viewers. Similarly, *Rilakkuma* is one of the most popular mascots in Japan and worldwide for fans of *kawaii* culture, and easily the most popular San-X mascot. Their popularity and success was already ensured to a certain extent, which allows for more experimentation that may not be in Netflix's wheelhouse of expected action-driven anime Originals. Such trends have lead anime news analyst, Tadashi Sudo, to comment that despite Netflix's clear interest in the anime medium, their originals catalog remains rather conservative in nature due to the fact that works that don't fall into the action and sci-fi genre are still guaranteed to be successes due to the fact that they focus on very successful IP.

In short, these works fit neatly into pre-established genres, conventions, and assumptions of anime culture that have already proven to be widely-successful. With a focus on tropes and genres, such as science fiction, action-oriented battles, graphic forms of violence, or *kawaii* culture, it is difficult to say that the content catalog does not draw upon certain conventions of techno-orientalism and globally legible “othering” in order to attract Netflix’s international audience. This can also be seen clearly in Netflix Original live-action series that have received the anime treatment, such as *Altered Carbon: Resleeved*, where the cyberpunk aesthetics blend in with the starkly more “Japanese-coded” elements of the film, such as the inclusion of *yakuza*, *samurai*, *oni* masks, and “ninja sleeves,” drawing obvious inspiration from works like *Blade Runner*, *Kill Bill*, and *Ghost in the Shell*.

While in this section, I have focused on how Japanese anime has been evolving in response to Netflix’s presence, it is worth noting that Netflix has been experimenting with globally hybrid anime works as well. In examining the constitution of Netflix’s anime catalog, it becomes clear that “anime” has a distinct meaning for the streaming service as work that *may* draw inspirations from Japan’s established style; however, perhaps more importantly, it is primarily characterized by a focus on a more loosely connected network of other overlapping subcultures (e.g. video games, comics, music). This opens the door to allow productions that are inspired by anime to also make their way into this catalog. Indeed, while an anime fan may ponder whether works like *Seis Manos*, *Trese*, *Blood of Zeus*, and *Castlevania* really are “anime,” the categorization of these works as such is transforming the constitutions of production companies into more global enterprises. While in this section, I have analyzed the various framings provided by the platform that might seek to narrow the complexity and diversity of anime as a medium in ways that may have orientalist implications, in other aspects,

Netflix is continuing to challenge what anime can be in ways that departs from Japan as an originary center. This is a topic that will be explored further in Chapter 3, which looks closely at these hybrid anime productions.

The Production Committee Method of Creating Anime

In order to understand the changes that Netflix has wrought within the industry through their investment, it is first necessary to outline the way that anime is traditionally created. A significant characteristic that distinguishes the Japanese mode of anime production is what Marc Steinberg has noted as the “anime media mix” system. Anime media mix is a transmedial approach to narrative creation, where a decentralized network of television shows, films, dramas, light novels, *manga*, toys, tourism, and other commodities are used to envelop viewers and consumers into an expanding web of content. Often, characters become worlds unto themselves, as they exist within various media and are branded upon all kinds of goods. Steinberg theorizes that while normal media mix modes of marketing are used to ensure the eventual purchase of a kind of prioritized good, anime media mix truly is decentered, as all acts of consumption can be perceived as a support of the fragmented, yet holistic narrative world system of the franchise. This idea can be observed in the production committee structure of anime creation.

When an anime work, usually inspired by an original *manga* or light novel, is created, a production committee for that work is formed. The constitution of production committees varies wildly depending on the individual work; however, those who are willing to be part of a production committee always have something to gain from the production of that work. For example, a production committee can consist of the publishers of the original *manga* or the light novel, as the creation of an anime may boost sales for the original work. Toy makers would want the rights to be able to create merchandise of the characters to boost their own revenues. Film

distribution companies may be on the committee in order to gain revenue from the theatrical release to the public, and likewise, television stations may be on the committee in order to gain exclusive distribution rights to broadcast the work on their particular channels. Advertising agencies would help to promote the work to the public. These are but a few examples of some players that can be on a production committee. Each player within the committee provides some funds in order for the anime to be created. Because the production committee consists of many players, the risk, in case an anime fails to become a market hit, can be distributed among each player, so that a failed production wouldn't immediately put any one company out of business. Likewise, if the production becomes a big success, the benefits are also distributed. However, in the majority of cases, the risk and reward are not evenly distributed among each player. For example, certain productions may be more beneficial to the broadcaster, and less likely to be able to sell toys due to the nature of the narrative, which means that the broadcaster may pay more than the toy manufacturer (Funimation 2020).

Given this structure, the anime studio itself and the artists who actually animate and produce the work, is only one player among many. The production committee provides the funds to the anime studio, and it is up to the studio to either try to complete the production in-house or reach out to other anime studios to aid in certain parts of the production process. While the distribution of risk is a big benefit for the production committees, and allows for more anime to be released per season, there are also inherent weaknesses to the system. One of the most significant weaknesses is that the budget that is normally provided by production committees is often not enough to cover the price of producing the work, leaving the studios often with severe budget deficits (Nishi 2020, Suguwara 2020, Blaire 2017). Though the revenue that has been generated by the anime market has exponentially risen, with 2017 being marked at 2 trillion yen

(about 19 billion U.S. dollars), animation studios largely saw very little of this money (Schley 2017). Instead, this money was used to create more shows, as evidenced by the fact that the number of hours animated, both for film anime and television anime, have risen exponentially since 2000. Due to the fundamental lack of funds, animators are usually paid very poorly for their labor, with beginning animator salaries starting at around 200 to 500 yen per image. Further, despite the reduced budgets that production committees provide for anime studios, as noted before, the number of total anime creations have actually increased exponentially since 2000 leading to more labor (Nishi 2020, 64). Long hours and paltry pay are rampant within the industry, often leading to mass exoduses of animators within their first few years. This leads to a persistent lack of human resources, so trainees and novice animators are often promoted early compared to their level of experience, leading to more stress on the part of the animator, the system, and a lesser quality of animation ultimately for the production.

Beyond the issues that are spurred by low funding provided by the production committee, given the number of players that are in the committee, it is necessary for anime studios to negotiate with many players in their creative process, due to the required consensus from the committee, and also a willingness to cooperate with demands on the part of the studio. This leads to several limitations. For example, if a production has to be broadcast on television, there is a limit to how violent, grotesque, or sexual a work can be due to both censorship laws as well as concerns about marketability. While having to appease and negotiate with the many disparate players ensures that a production is of a certain level of quality, the persistent back-and-forth negotiations often leave studios with more work rather than less, and the process is often less streamlined.

Finally, in the recent past, the main source of revenue for the anime industry was through DVD and Blu-ray sales (Sudo 2017; Kojima 2018). However, as physical media has become less and less common, and with the average age of viewers growing (leading to less purchase of certain kinds of toys and merchandise), the industry needed to find new and innovative sources of profit and expand their markets beyond the local consumer base that they have depended on for so long. With an ailing market and a need for anime to go global through more legitimate channels, the industry was primed for the advent of global distribution companies like Netflix to contribute new ways of making anime, which would forego the need for physical media and allow the global company to retain exclusive distribution rights in order to try to gain an edge in the streaming wars.

Netflix's Method of Anime Production

Netflix's mode of anime production essentially cuts out much of the production committee, with the streaming platform aiding in funding a significant portion of the production through licensing or commission costs. According to several articles and interviews from anime creators who have collaborated with Netflix, while exact figures are never provided, it has been disclosed that the budget that is provided is often much more ample than what can be expected from a standard production committee budget (Ito 2020, Yamazaki 2020, Watanabe 2019, Nishio 2018). Further, as stated before, Netflix has been incredibly proactive in establishing business alliances with renowned production companies. The benefit of this for the studios is that they can expect a steady stream of work that allows them to foster their anime talent across projects, thereby encouraging the development of human resources and team synergy beyond a single production. This is significant because it is commonly known in the industry that the vast majority of animators are freelancers, often having to jump from job to job without necessarily

the benefit of a stable, extended stay within a company. Novice animators can more effectively establish mentorship relationships with more experienced employees in a company, which helps to develop a more sustainable model of human resource management.

Despite the increase in funding however, industry insiders, including Terumi Nishi, Minami Masahiko, Mitsuhisa Ishikawa, and Sakurai, have commented that this will not likely help the dire situation that the anime industry is currently facing in regard to animator wages. Part of this is due to the fact that in return for the high budget, there is a requirement for a higher quality of work than what would normally be produced for average television anime. As noted previously, while Netflix's presence in the anime industry may lead to the increased pace of technical development, this development does not come without the additional effort on behalf of those doing this creative labor. Further, the way Netflix pays for their originals, though this may be subject to some variance, is that the work is paid for in full following the completion of the project. Licensing costs are agreed upon beforehand, and while it has been said that these funds cover a significant portion of production, in exchange, if the production performs very well for the platform, this does not mean that the production studio gets additional profit from the service. In this way, industry insiders have noted that "if a series does poorly, the studio wins, if the series does well, Netflix wins" (Inoue 2020).

Another significant disruption that occurs from Netflix's intervention into the production committee method is the challenge that it may pose to standards of anime media mix. As people like Ishikawa and Sudo have commented, because Netflix is focused primarily on distribution, the rights for secondary development, such as merchandising, can belong to the production company themselves. This is not the case when works are funded by the production committee model. However, because of the nature of Netflix's exclusive subscription model, there are fewer

avenues in which consumers may access the original anime work, which may curtail the ability for these production companies to properly expand on ancillary product development. As Cecilia D'Anastasio purports, "in theory, [Netflix's] creators are liberated from the production committee system that deeply entwined anime the art form with anime the commercial enterprise" (D'Anastasio 2020). However, given Netflix's limited forays into merchandising, something that Sakurai notes is on the horizon for their anime as well in D'Anastasio's article, it becomes clear that the necessity for finding ways to extend and sustain hype for franchises beyond airing remains of critical importance and a challenge to both studios and the streaming service. While more generous funding models for production may be an obvious benefit to anime studios in collaborating with global streaming services, when exchanged for the exclusive distribution rights, it begs the question of how sustainable ancillary media development can be when the viewership that may be using the service in any particular country may be smaller than traditional broadcasting.

In return for helping to significantly fund the work, Netflix normally asks for exclusive distribution rights for a set period of time. For anime films, there are two ways in which it is brought to Netflix. First, following about six months after the public theatrical release in Japan, Netflix gains exclusive distribution rights allowing for windowing. In other agreements, Netflix may gain exclusive streaming rights while the film is in public theaters for simultaneous viewing (Liang 2020). For television anime, Netflix may purchase the exclusive distribution rights for a set amount of time before airing the work for broadcast television in Japan, but on average, their ONA are normally aired exclusively on the platform before being aired on Japanese broadcast television at a later date.

Netflix's global reach is one of the most significant benefits for the anime industry. Despite being touted as a media globalization success story, until recently, the anime industry considered their local market to be their priority, and the desires and consumption practices of the global audience to be largely peripheral. As Ryotaro Mihara points out, using a report from 2016 by the Association of Japanese Animation (AJA), from 2002-2015, the total revenue earned overseas had been growing slightly, but has, on the whole, remained rather stagnant. As Mihara notes, while the overseas revenue for Japanese anime never reached 40% of the total market, for other forms of media from Japan, such as the games industry, "46-90% of its revenue [is] from oversea markets over the same period" (Mihara 2020, 103-104). This dynamic has changed as of late, as in 2019, overseas revenue extended to 1.0092 trillion yen, making up 46% of the total revenue earned for the anime industry (Baseel 2019).

Because the price of creating quality anime has been growing, the national consumer base within Japan has been shrinking, and the rapidly declining sales of physical media, the industry was primed for the advent of Netflix and the portal's promise of monetary plenty and global distribution. Through global distribution, the industry can attract a far wider base of consumers and make up for stagnant national sales. Suddenly, the industry could no longer ignore the necessity of playing to the global public and Netflix proved to be a convenient vehicle to woo these fans through legitimized channels.

This turn to the global signals several changes within the industry. In particular, to collaborate with Netflix often means having to collaborate with industry professionals from different national industries. As noted previously, works like the *Enter the Anime* documentary seek to cement Japan's originary position within the anime industry; however, in practice, Netflix by no means intends to only work with Japanese creators to make anime or "anime-

inspired” content. Even within the documentary, interviews with Adi Shankar (Executive producer of *Castlevania*) and LeSean Thomas (Director of *Cannon Busters*) reveal an international approach to anime, or at the very least, anime-styled creations. In a blog post recounting the experience of attending the 2017 Netflix’s Anime Slate event, Tadashi Sudo reflected on being impressed by works like *Castlevania*, which was exclusively animated by American studios, but reflected a sophisticated anime-like style nevertheless. He goes on to note that while Japan’s anime culture has been quite recognized globally because of the rarity of adult-oriented animation, he believed that global competition may become steeper for Japan’s anime industries in the near future (2017).

Similarly, in an interview with Netflix’s Chief Producer of Anime, Taiki Sakurai, regarding the challenges of creating *Eden*, a Netflix anime original, Sakurai notes the rarity of a singular anime work that consists of a globally oriented team which includes American, Taiwanese, Australian, and Japanese talent. Because the individuals who worked on this team came from different cultural contexts, the particularity of the imaginations of each creator proved to be challenging at points, as did differences in work styles and workflows (Watanabe 2019). However, Sakurai goes on to hypothesize that despite perceptions of cultural origination as it relates to Japan, anime itself doesn’t have a particular national orientation as a genre or medium, as the work is not inherently Japanese or American. Instead, he notes that there is a kind of anime style, and that because of this style, viewers can project themselves onto the characters regardless of cultural or national background. It may be all the more so when narratives take place within spaces of cultural statelessness, much like the futuristic *Eden* does. Such affordances of the medium are critical for the anime industry’s survival and is seen as its great potential. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not is not within the scope of this chapter;

however, what is critical to note that the Sakurai's observation goes directly against some of the presumptions that are presented in the *Enter the Anime* documentary, proving that an inherent connection between anime work and Japan need not necessarily exist.

Whether the global constitution of production arrangements actively impacts the nature of the anime work itself remains up for debate. Indeed, while works like *Castlevania*, *Eden*, and *Indhun Chronicles* challenge the need to utilize specifically Japanese studios to create productions, it is nevertheless the case that Japanese companies continue to make up the bulk of Netflix's anime productions. It is Netflix's business and production alliances with Japanese studios that get the most attention and marketing online, once again reinforcing the uneven nature of global development. It begs the question then whether the international reach of the Netflix platform actively encourages anime creators to try to tailor work to a "global" audience. While Director Ishikawa notes that Japanese creators should not be bogged down by the idea of their work being distributed to 190 countries, as being paralyzed by such thoughts makes it impossible to create, it's difficult to imagine that such considerations are not part and parcel of the creation process. Returning back to Sakurai's remarks about *Eden*, he notes how the production staff was very careful in not adding Christian elements to the story by mistake, in order to ensure that the show would "not be unappealing to a global audience" (Watanabe 2019). Similarly, Hiroyasu Aoki (director of *Hero Mask*) states in an interview that while Netflix was lenient in allowing them to "make what they want," it was the Japanese studios themselves that became conscious of the global audience, and in turn, wanted to make something that may be palatable for their conception of that audience (Cho-Animedia 2019). Of course, not every studio approaches their global audience in the same way. When asked about the unique cultural customs and tastes that are presented in *Rilakkuma and Kaoru*, Studio Dwarf producer Okada

Yuriko noted that rather than privileging a global audience, they decided to present a unique Japanese perspective that would nevertheless be understood by niche audiences throughout the world, a negotiated approach that echoes Netflix's beliefs on taste communities that transcend national borders. Throughout these interviews, it becomes clear that despite Netflix's hands-off approach to production, the specter of the global continues to impact the creation of these Netflix Original texts in various ways. Netflix's global is one that demands transparency, legibility, and easy consumption across national and cultural borders, and how anime creators decide to interpret and tackle this demand is varied.

While an increase in budget, potentially more luxurious production schedules, and the opportunity for global distribution may seem initially very promising, as has been noted, such benefits do not come without a price. Indeed, as Tadashi Sudo noted in a personal interview with the author, only certain works may desire this form of Netflix collaboration. Those who aim to make "high-quality" works that would require exorbitant funding or those that want to create more violent, grotesque, or sexualized work that would not otherwise be accepted for widespread broadcast would find a home in Netflix's content catalogs. However, this does not necessarily mean that the advent of Netflix has upended the production committee method. For example, studios that create children's anime would not find a collaboration with Netflix to be attractive or even necessary, due to the potentially more limited reach of material commodities and perhaps the studio's own limits of producing highly detailed work (Sudo 2020). Further, other Western distribution platforms, particularly those that specialize in anime, such as Funimation and Crunchyroll, have engaged in the production committee method in order to fund anime productions for distribution rights, gesturing towards the fact that not all global streaming platforms operate in the same way in their interfacing with the anime industry. Because of this,

it seems very unlikely that Netflix's intervention into the anime industry would upend standard modes of operation. However, it has acted as, at the very least, a disruption that has made creators reflect upon what an anime culture that caters to a more globalist audience may look like and alternative avenues of funding and creation.

Media Imperialism or Globalization?

Reflecting upon the disruptions that have followed Netflix's entrance into the Japanese anime industry and the growth of Internet streaming television on a global scale, it becomes clear that the narrative that is presented between platform and industry is not one of easy subjugation or empowerment, nor belies any uniform and cohesive ideology on the part of Netflix in its approach to introducing viewers to anime culture. Its extensive library reflects the diversity and complexity of the anime medium, and provides international viewers a legitimate manner of accessing content that may further complicate any simplified understanding of anime as a cultural medium or a fetishistic mirror of some imaginary origination. Yet, Netflix's Original content, which privileges certain genres over others, and openly distributes a paratext that indulges in orientalist discourses through the presentation of anime culture, and Japan more broadly, contradicts this supposed openness towards nuance and cultural complexity. Netflix demands legibility and transparency from disparate media cultures above all, and that requires a degree of fetishization, reduction, and simplification. How the content attains this transparency seems to matter much less, whether it is through peddling racially-charged rhetoric or focusing on more culturally stateless genres like action and sci-fi. This is what leads to the contradicting discourses found on the service, as the ends are more significant than the means. In this way, Netflix's cosmopolitan outlook is "internationalism," yet only in so much as it aids in the further spread of global capital and the capturing of international producers and audiences alike. Much

like Schiller's concerns around how media seeks to put a pleasant face on what are forms of cultural and economic imperialism, cosmopolitanism is also leveraged in order to ensure the further cementing of Netflix's positionality in markets abroad, putting a familiar face to a global service. In short, the way that internationalism is depicted through the rhetoric of Netflix is a "double negation of (1a) the existence of cultural homogeneity and of (1b) Western cultural dominance" (Kraidy 2006, 75). Ultimately, Netflix's approach towards internationalism fits rather neatly into Marwan Kraidy's concept of "corporate transculturalism," which he defines as "a discourse in which fluid identities and porous cultural borders are depicted as growth engines in the service of cosmopolitan capitalism...a profit-driven strategy that actively and systematically seeks to capitalize on cultural fusion and fluid identities" (90). Such frameworks for internationalism and cultural fusion can be seen, on the one hand, in the way works like *Enter the Anime* encourage perceptions of Japan as an origin and home for anime culture, while the platform simultaneously pulls from talent pools of other countries to collaborate and make anime, somewhat decentering Japan in the process altogether, or at the very least, having labor structures that may be more horizontally integrated. It is not simply the viewerships that are globalizing, but the production teams themselves, who work across national and cultural borders incentivized by the promise of generous funding of global streaming services.

Indeed, who is able to fund what in this new production landscape is critically important in thinking about the profound impact of these global streaming services on local industries. As the journalist Sudo commented in a personal interview, local streaming services in Japan do not seem to have the necessary resources to fund anime productions extensively, nor become truly global to the same extent that the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime have. At best, one can dream of accruing a robust regional presence. Given this reality, local services instead have

preferred to stick to helping fund cheaper fare, like variety shows and live-action works. While Sudo notes the possibility for local services to fund their own anime originals in the future, he ultimately states that it would be rather unlikely without some integration among Japanese services (2020). As it becomes increasingly clear, who is able to distribute to the broadest “where” becomes key in the process of capital accumulation, and in turn, speaks to who is able to fund and produce what within the local stage. With a strategy that continues to focus on works that can perform both locally and globally, producing and exclusively licensing original Japanese content seems to be working for the service in the local Japanese SVOD market. In a report by GEMS Standard in 2020, Netflix’s Japanese market share grew from 8.4% in 2018 to 13.8% in 2019, making it currently the biggest market player for video on demand services. Its success continues to gesture towards the significance of capitalist hegemony within local markets, understandably rekindling concerns once again over cultural imperialism.

With such funds gathered from international and local markets, Netflix can encourage studios to develop new modes of creating, as seen in the case of *Sol Levant*, *Rilakkuma & Kaoru*, and more, hastening the process of technical development, providing benefits for the local industry, as well as for their own brand. Yet, these generous funds come with a cost, as Netflix continues to act as both benefactor and gatekeeper, selecting the works that may be deemed worthy of being shown around the world. Further, it has been commented on by several industry insiders that Netflix does not disclose viewership or performance data even to the creators of the works themselves, leaving the studios somewhat in the dark regarding the broader international trends that their work may be experiencing (Morrissy 2020). This gestures towards the continued forms of asymmetrical interdependence of local industries on these services, particularly as

international forms of funding become more and more necessary for the continued survival of local industries.

Given the labor and funding issues that have plagued Japanese anime industry for decades, it is clear that there was a need for some form of intervention, and while the local labor reform laws that have been introduced in 2019 have been slowly implemented in order to address some of these ailments, in the meantime, Netflix has offered a different option for funding. While the streaming service has not effectively alleviated the issues that plague the labor environment, it does show that as the market changes, new options for sustaining the business of anime production arise. The weight of capitalist forms of hegemony remains significant in the way that global streaming services can choose who is able to receive these benefits and who is able to represent themselves on the global stage. Netflix continues to mediate global industries as the company moves funds around the world at their discretion, and it is their own measures of success that ultimately dictate the local industries and franchises that they decide to bestow their attention. Ultimately, however, how these variant studios decide to negotiate with the particular specter of globalism that Netflix represents in their work continues to vary. While certain studios seem to default to more culturally stateless genres in order to find global appeal, other studios do not shy away from representing the specificities that mark a culture in deeply humanizing ways. If *Altered Carbon: Resleeved* focuses singularly on the violent, exotic, and techno-orientalist frameworks of global “Japaneseness,” then *Rilakkuma and Kaoru* reveal the more mundane, humanizing, and heartwarming aspects that do not shy away from signifying aspects of a kind of cultural particularity. If the tone-deaf rhetoric of *Enter the Anime* frames anime and the cultures that make it as radically strange, hoping to woo anime beginners with something “edgy” and “deranged,” then the voices of its creators reach across to try to find similarities of cultural

experience, whether that is through the unequal treatment of women in the professional space or presenting the exploitative politics of immigration in a New York-inspired martian city.

Obviously, these variances in strategy and focus remain critically important in thinking about agency and the multitude of often contradicting narratives that are presented simultaneously on the portal.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one of the primary strengths that Netflix holds in comparison to other global streaming portals is the fact that many employees of Netflix's Japanese anime division are former employees of the Japanese anime industry. For example, Taiki Sakurai formerly worked at Production I.G. before working as Netflix's executive producer, which likely aided in shaping the collaborative relationship between Production I.G. and Netflix. As noted in D'Anastasio's interview, Sakurai initially was skeptical of Netflix's interest in anime, but soon became convinced that the service was serious about expanding into the market, and in turn, Netflix would help him with his own goal of internationalizing the anime industry (2020). While one can critique the manner of influence that motivates skilled employees to transition over towards working for the international streaming service as a form a brain drain, it also becomes clear that as much as Netflix may be exerting its various forms of hegemony, symbolic, economic, and otherwise to impact the landscape of anime production, there are also ways in which the local industry players have utilized these very features for their own benefit and future development. To erase or undermine these complex negotiations in exchange for simplified notions of two-dimensional empowerment or subjugation would be shortsighted.

Conclusion

What becomes increasingly apparent is that the portal is predictably made up of a wide and dizzying amalgamation of motivations, perceptions, and viewpoints from all around the

world, and while the influence of capitalist orientations of imperialistic hegemony should not be underestimated, to say that Netflix is simply one massive American entity with a unified goal of portraying certain media cultures in particular frameworks or that they exercise overwhelming symbolic hegemony in a unilateral manner would be erroneous. While the smooth and seemingly guileless interface of Netflix may belie nothing at first glance, the act of bringing so many works into a singular space, even within one genre of the portal leaves slight, perceptible marks all across the platform, evidence of the contradicting and ambivalent voices and motivations that simultaneously manifest themselves under the umbrella brand of Netflix. Reading across and between national boundaries brings these complexities further to the surface, as the streaming service and the differing opinions of what impact Netflix has on industries abroad continue to develop in real time.

Further, as critical as we must be to the politically and economically-driven influences of the gatekeeping and tastemaking potential of the service, it is also undeniable that Netflix's presence within the anime industry has been shown to open up spaces where works that may not be so easily broadcast on Japanese television can find a broad audience around the world. How that work is ultimately framed by the portal is critical and will be analyzed more at length in a different chapter, the creation of alternative options and spaces for broadcast nevertheless has the potential to remain a net positive for creators around the world. As insiders have implied, the presence of Netflix has also hastened the development of the medium into further uncharted territory, whether that is through making it possible to take on the risk of creating with more multinational production teams, introducing more technologically advanced methods of creating animation, or offering alternative modes of funding. While it is ultimately uncertain how

Netflix's presence will continue to shape the industry, it is clear that disruptions are continuing to happen in local industries throughout the world by the advent of these global services.

Chapter Two
Crunchyroll and the Conundrum of Niche Streaming

Introduction

Following the success of more general audience-oriented media streaming services, niche streaming portals began to test the market waters, following the hope that smaller, but more engaged and passionate viewerships may emerge around their respective offerings. Starting as early as 2004, more minor streaming services began cropping up in the distribution ecosystem, many of which focused on narrower content genres, including horror (Shudder), British television (Britbox), cinephilic content (FilmStruck), East Asian Dramas (Kocowa, Dramafever), and more. While some niche platforms, such as Crunchyroll, became breakout successes, recently surpassing the five million paying subscriber mark, many others have since gone under, along with the ideals and promises around being able to effectively monetize around passionate fan bases. Indeed, it is worth questioning, as Julia Alexander does in her Verge article, “To All of the Streaming Platforms You’ve Never Heard Before,” what role niche streaming services play in the current media distribution landscape (2021). As Alexander aptly observes, while the performance of niche streaming services has been hit or miss within the past decade or so, media conglomerates are still willing to pay at a premium price for ownership, a testament to the perceived potential of narrowcast networks.

While niche streaming is a relatively new phenomenon, the idea of narrowcast channels where media corporations tailor their content offerings around certain interest groups is not. Whether it is cooking, home improvement, live sports, or cartoons, the broadcast media landscape has been using forms of narrowcasting in earnest since the mid to late 60s, though never to the democratic ideals that initially characterized discourse around cable television in the

60s and 70s (Mullen 2002). When considering the survival of narrowcasting channels, it was imperative for program creators to think about the ways in which they could continue to serve the widest possible audience within the scope of their respective field. This dynamic could be seen for narrowcast networks that involved targeting minority communities, as channels like BET (Black Entertainment Television) recognized the value of serving distinct marginalized audiences, but only insofar as it could cater to “essentialized notions of blackness” (Smith-Shomade 2004, 76). Such narratives around race and culture continue to make minority experiences legible to the broader public, but in doing so, fails to account for the inherent diversity within the communities that these channels supposedly target. Who is being positioned as the privileged audience then is arguably not Black viewers, but those who understand and willingly consume these narratives of essentialism for their own viewing pleasures. As Mullen goes on to theorize, successful narrowcasting ventures were actually quite broad in their target audience, and intentionally so, as that was necessary to generate the funds that would sustain robust channels. Similarly, the irony of maintaining “niche” streaming platforms is that it hinges upon growth potential and the ability to cast a limited net as wide as possible, a persistent concern of many of these services.

This is certainly the case for Crunchyroll, a niche service that has been widely covered as a successful venture, which caters to the global anime fandom. However, despite its success, there is a necessity for the company to continue broadening its consumer base in order to compete with more generalized platforms. As mainstream platforms, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu also focus their attentions on anime, licensing costs become steeper and this has necessitated niche services to not only present a deep level of experience with the fandom, but also a broad one. However, the need to expand the boundaries of the service continues to bring

tension. Niche services operate on a different register than mainstream services within the global media distribution network. If, as stated in the previous chapter, one of the limitations of Netflix's approach to anime was through its lopsided genre exploration, then it is with niche services like Crunchyroll that help to fill in those gaps and prove that productions that fall outside of the interests of the mainstream services remain marketable. Niche services play a crucial role in rounding out the kinds of anime productions that come to foreign shores, but in order to stay financially viable, the niche service must cater to the fandom and this comes with its own share of challenges. As I will reveal in the case study of Crunchyroll, their strategies of teasing the boundaries of the anime community outwards through mutual collaborations with anime adjacent industries and narrowcasting to certain niche communities within the already niche fandom are some of the ways in which they are trying to sustain a more robust growth potential, though the reception of these efforts are largely mixed among their subscribers.

There are obvious advantages to creating niche portals, particularly for those that already have proven cohesive and developed fan bases. Indeed, anime has proved to be one of those lucrative fandoms, as is evidenced by the multitude of niche portals surrounding the global medium within the United States alone, as well as the myriad of paratextual sites that have risen around the output of the industry, such as news and culture sites, databases, forums and more. Anime fandom has already established cultural practices, large-scale social events, coordinated groups and clubs across the country, and spaces where communities could be engaged prior to the advent of these centralized anime streaming sites. Because of the robust nature of the fandom, a close observer interested in capitalizing off of these spaces could utilize these trends within the community as blueprints for creating an intermediating platform that continues to facilitate and expand upon these pre-existing practices in order to amplify one's own brand

presence. In theory, the synthesis and symbiosis between a developed and content-hungry fandom and a corporate entity that can facilitate and support these consumers' desires could yield that elusive growth potential for smaller platforms. For Crunchyroll who recently passed their five million paid subscriber marker, it has. However, attempting to cater to developed fandoms also comes with significant challenges, and these tensions can be largely located within the platform's desire to try to tease the boundaries of the fandom outward for maximum growth for the brand and the resulting divergent multivalent positions that the streaming service must simultaneously reside in. Despite the fact that the anime fandom is often referred to in its totality, there are many subgroups that exist within the umbrella term of "anime fan." Some of these subgroups form around genre preferences and taste, but others are shaped by race, gender, and sexuality. These micro-niches are convenient target audiences for the fan-oriented streaming service who wishes to retain subscribers and Crunchyroll has been actively using these enclaves to their advantage. For example, Crunchyroll reveals a vested interest in catering to these micro-niches through marketing initiatives like *Crunchyroll All-Stars*, an interview series that focused on professional athletes' and celebrities' relationships to anime, many of whom happen to be people of color and international figures. By catering to these subsections, they can increase brand commitment within these micro-niches and potentially draw more subscribers to these spaces, thereby maximizing their growth potential. This simultaneously opens up crucial spaces of representation for creators of color that are often left at the margins of both mainstream American animation and anime as well. While niche services open up these spaces to ultimately serve their bottom line, it is undeniable that creators are taking advantage of the opportunities that niche streaming services like Crunchyroll are providing for them to take part in anime culture in a way that speaks to underserved fans. But this opening up of the catalog for different

kinds of anime work causes friction with the subscriber base. When the niche streaming platform takes on the challenge of addressing these various segmentations as one of its strategies towards maximization, the niche within the niche, rising tensions may also result from the segmented audience regarding who is perceived to be the privileged subscriber and how this fits with the pre-existing beliefs and tensions that the fandom has held. As Susan Napier states in her study of American anime fans, that

“most anime fans when questioned about why they liked anime answered in terms of what they perceived as Japanese superiority (in terms of narrative, range of subject matter, character development, and quality of animation) versus American inferiority (stale plots, one-dimensional characters, limited intellectual interest, unimaginative and unaesthetic visuals)” (2007, 176).

It is no surprise then that when Crunchyroll begins to expand outwards beyond Japanese-produced anime, that one will begin to see friction between the fandom and the corporate intermediary. After all, the belief in Japanese anime as a superior medium provides both a sense of subcultural clout for the fan, as well as an ideological stance that fans can find camaraderie in. Despite this, Crunchyroll continues to target micro-niche communities who may be more accepting of diverse works on the basis of representation, due to their more marginalized status within the fandom.

In conceptualizing the challenges faced by the niche platform as it relates to the tensions associated with developing a brand that targets a particular pre-existing viewing community, I argue that one of the main points of contention between “fan-first” distributors like Crunchyroll and the fandom writ large which they seek to profit from stems from the identity of anime viewers as a “consumption tribe.” First coined in 1995 by Michel Maffesoli, “tribalism” was a response against the grain of the idea that the postmodernist turn was characterized necessarily by extreme individualism due to the dissolution of traditional collective ideals like religion, education, nation, and family and the institutions that sought to reinforce these collectives. In

turn, the individual becomes the primary social unit and autonomous center in the contemporary age, and community is instead replaced with a kind of collective individualism, composed of loose associations with multiple groups, as opposed to deep relationships bound by blood and geography. It is no surprise that along with the idea of reinforced community through postmodern neotribes, the rise and continued development of digital technologies have lead scholars to also coin the term, “networked individualism,” in order to implicate the technologies that facilitate this kind of looser social organization that is not necessarily predicated on a central, singular pole. Simply being on a social media platform does not automatically connote that an individual is part of a community, nor can the entirety of the social media platform itself be considered a community (Baym 2015). However, communities can be fostered within this networked ecosystem that are fluid and retain permeable boundaries (Rainie and Wellman 2012, 38). Similarly, simply because one may consume anime does not necessarily mean that they are deeply engaged with the broader fandom community, but Crunchyroll must be able to speak to both the deeply engaged fan and the casual viewer through their service’s features in order to become an important node in the networked individual’s social collective.

In many ways, postmodern tribalism has acted as a conceptual precursor to the networked individual. Tribalism is a form of sociality and community that is characterized by “fluidity, occasional gatherings, and dispersal” (Maffesoli 1995, 76). As Maffesoli differentiates, these neo-tribes differ fundamentally from counter-cultural movements or communes as “it is less a question of belonging to a gang, a family or a community than of switching from one group to another.” These groups are fundamentally drawn together by affective dimensions which power “a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism” (Cova and Cova 2001, 67). Despite the ephemerality and looseness of these “diffuse unions,” it is critical to not

underestimate the sense of gravitas that these associations can have on the engaged individual (Maffesoli 1995, 73). Indeed, these tribes can “exhibit such strong ties not despite the fact that they are temporary, but precisely because they are temporary” (Cova and Cova 2002, 598).

Anime fandom, in many ways, exists as a kind of consumptive tribe that is held together by the members’ mutual passions and affect around their fan object and adjacent hobbies. In order for commercial entities to profit off of the intense, but ephemeral communities, as niche streaming platforms often aim to do, they must focus on not only providing the cult-objects, but also spaces and affordances in which the links between members of the fandom and their various rituals can be reinforced. Because of the fact that these fandoms exist on the basis of maintaining their passion, it behooves these services to continue to utilize the digital networks (of networked individualism) and virtual features to encourage these variant passions to flourish. However, it must never be forgotten that the fan is rarely devoted to the intermediary that provides the cult object, but the cult object itself. As stated before, there have been quite a number of distribution portals and services that have focused on the delivery of anime in just the United States alone, and this does not account for the many illicit online sources where one can continue to engage with the cult object without a commercial intermediary. Fans of anime do not necessarily need to stick with one niche platform for content, nor community due to the paratextual and anime adjacent networks that are available outside of streaming services. In short, the positioning of the streaming intermediary is precarious, as subscribers can always leave the service for another. In order to combat this, it is necessary for corporate intermediaries to not only play to the desires and subcultural tendencies of the fandom, but also foster a kind of brand community that differentiates itself from other competitors. While brand communities share certain characteristics with fandoms at times, such as the maintenance of rituals, a conscious

construction of a distinct “we” versus a “them” through the maintenance of certain ideals, and a unique system of ethics, the primary difference is that the focus is on the particularity of the brand over the necessary affective object. In other words, while Crunchyroll seeks to create a brand community through exploiting the cultural dimensions of the fandom, the fandom is not necessarily invested, nor interested in, serving the interests of the brand community. Ideally, through the synthesis between targeted fandom and brand community, the area of intersection would symbiotically reinforce not only the subscriber’s love for the content and the community that surrounds it, but also their love for the brand itself which would be framed as a benevolent facilitator.

The struggle for niche platforms to achieve this and maximize their target audience base, without disrupting or going against the sensibilities and ideologies of the pre-existing fandom is where much friction can be seen on the level of the interface and discourse surrounding the service. As noted previously, part of this tension stems from the fact that while the fandom is referred to in its totality, there are many sub-factions within both the subscriber base and fandom that the service seeks to cater to. This is exacerbated even further when we take into consideration the global nature of some of these niche platforms. Serving one faction for the development of maximizing subscriber numbers is often misinterpreted as spurning another’s sensibilities. In order to analyze the role of the niche portal in the broader distribution economy of anime streaming, I will use the case study of Crunchyroll and outline the ways that the platform seeks to create a brand community through the fandom in spite of these challenges. They do this by providing interface features and leveraging discursive strategies to communicate and shape what their ideal subscriber paradigm is. Simultaneously, there are ways that the extant fandom goes along with or resists these characterizations with their own strategies. Through

interface analysis, I outline the various ways in which the service influences modes of subscriber engagement, as well as the forms of control that are inherent within the interface. In addition, I will simultaneously provide examples of the ways in which subscribers resist these various forms of influence on the level of the interface by undermining the engagement logics of certain features found on the platform.

Following this feature of the analysis, I focus on Crunchyroll's first foray into their Crunchyroll Originals branding, which reveals the company's active hand in the anime industry more explicitly than before, while simultaneously beckoning to different audience segments by engaging in global "anime-inspired" content. In particular, I emphasize the creative decisions surrounding the Original, *Onyx Equinox*, which primarily dealt with the specificities of MesoAmerican culture and was animated by the South Korean studio, Tiger Animation. Through these Originals, Crunchyroll was able to target racially marginalized subsections of their subscriber base in order to optimize the affective connection that these groups will feel towards the brand through rhetorical strategies of representation. Engaging in discursive analysis, I will examine the reception of this show, which conveys the liberatory potential for minority creators who get their work circulated by these niche portals that aim for more narrow audiences. However, the mixed reception from the subscribers also articulates the challenges that these creators still face when cultural hierarchies continue to characterize who is accepted within the spaces of fandom.

By doing this multilayered analysis, I elaborate on what role niche platforms continue to play in the current media ecosystem as exemplary nodes for the circulation of and more intensive engagement with anime texts that would likely not find purchase elsewhere. Yet simultaneously, despite the optimistic rhetoric around the potential for niche streaming and passionate fandoms,

there still remains significant challenges and limitations towards manufacturing brand communities, which articulate the fundamental differences and tensions between identification between the brand that wishes to instigate affective loyalty and the fluid dynamics that constitute the networked individual with their associated fandom.

History

In order to understand Crunchyroll's own fan-oriented strategies and the limitations therein, it is critical to first outline the history of the streaming service and how the unique context that Crunchyroll began in contributed to its branding as the fan's platform. Crunchyroll was initially founded in 2006 by four UC Berkeley alumni, who wanted to create a centralized space where users could upload their own anime and Asian entertainment related content. Because of the service's initial user-oriented uploading structure, which was inspired by the rising popularity of YouTube at the time, much of the content that could be seen on the site within its first years was pirated content, a feature that would draw much criticism from both the extant anime distribution companies at the time, such as Funimation and Bandai Namco Entertainment, as well as anime production companies. However, in 2008, as the group of alumni both left their former jobs to focus more seriously on the start-up, they procured venture funding from Venrock Investment of 4.05 million dollars with the goal of becoming a major distribution site for Japanese anime. A feature in particular that Crunchyroll focused on, which would later become a significant differentiating characteristic between the niche service and its more mainstream competitors was the act of simulcasting, where content would be made available just an hour following the show's release in Japan. It is at this point that the illegal nature of the website became a major hurdle for the company, as simulcasting necessitated procuring licensing agreements with Japanese companies who were skeptical of doing business

with a scrappy start-up that seemed to have no qualms with distributing their content illegally. However, despite reservations on the part of the Japanese licensors, several players decided to back Crunchyroll with exclusive licensing agreements, including Gonzo, TV Tokyo, and more. Through these agreements, Crunchyroll was able to simulcast several hit shows, including *Naruto Shippuden*, which put the company on the map for many American fans at the time.

During this period, the service also seemed to be interested in investing in other forms of media that are considered anime-adjacent, such as manga, merchandise, and DVD releases. In 2010, they retained the DVD rights for cult popular works, such as Shinkai Makoto's *5 Centimeters per Second*, which gestured towards the company's willingness to continue to invest in physical media and target even more niche audiences: fans dedicated enough to purchase DVDs, despite their move towards digital streaming. Later, in 2018, the streaming service would also create a new division in their company called Crunchyroll Games, which would focus on mobile games that have roots in anime, such as *Danmachi: Memoria Freese*, *Naruto X Boruto Ninja Tribes*, and *Princess Connect: Re Dive* (Orsini 2018). In 2018, Crunchyroll and Sumitomo Team would collaborate with GREE, a gaming development company, to release anime-related games to their North American and overseas markets. Similarly, in 2019, Bandai Namco Entertainment and Crunchyroll games announced a strategic partnership to distribute their games with Crunchyroll, granting them access to a growing population of global anime fans. Like simulcasting, this mixed media method of content distribution would become one of the major factors that would differentiate Crunchyroll from its more mainstream competitors, such as Netflix and Hulu, around the world.

Throughout this period, as Crunchyroll was developing into a multimedia fan-centric service, there were several changes in the company's ownership. In 2013, the Chernin Group

announced that it had acquired a majority stake in Crunchyroll, alongside Crunchyroll Management and TV Tokyo. In 2014, as a joint venture between AT&T and Chernin Group, Otter Media, became the majority owner of the streaming service, and Otter Media would later yield a new brand, Ellation, which would focus on the development of subscription-based online video services, including Crunchyroll, Soomptv, and VRV, all services that focused on smaller niche audiences. Following this development, Crunchyroll became a more active player on the side of anime production investment, as they teamed up with Sumitomo Corp. to facilitate further co-productions and have ready access to licenses for overseas distribution. Analysts have surmised that Crunchyroll's strategic partnership with Sumitomo Corp, a major domestic trading company, was in part, due to the steeply rising licensing costs for anime content (Sudo 2015). Indeed, as noted in the introduction, the high costs of licensing were clearly a significant factor in edging lesser competitive players, such as Daisuki, out of the distribution market. Because of the recent shift from major platforms like Netflix and Amazon in focusing on globally legible content, like anime, it is highly likely that Crunchyroll decided to gain the initiative by actively being part of production committees to secure exclusive rights ahead of the curve. Similarly, in 2016, Crunchyroll collaborated with Kadokawa, in order to "strengthen their relationship through a marketing campaign with the book publishing and anime distribution businesses, as well as joint efforts to expand relevant merchandising businesses" (Crunchyroll 2016). Whereas Netflix made waves within the industry and press by challenging a number of production norms, it is clear that Crunchyroll opted for a more non-disruptive route in which they would engage with pre-existing practices. While there were press releases that announced Crunchyroll's various partnerships, unlike Netflix, Crunchyroll did not differentiate the content that they

actively aided in funding under a different branding name until 2018, where they would announce their first “Original” project: *High Guardian Spice*.

In 2016, Crunchyroll also collaborated with Funimation, their only viable niche-audience oriented competitor for Japanese anime within the United States, in which a number of works from each platform was made available for respective subscriber groups. This was an interesting development given Funimation’s initial disapproval with Crunchyroll’s pirating origin story, yet with a proven list of partnerships from trusted companies, the service’s pirating past seemed to be truly behind them. This agreement concluded after the purchase of Funimation by Sony and Crunchyroll by Otter Media who purchased TV Tokyo’s remaining shares of Crunchyroll in 2018 respectively; however, in 2020, Sony announced that it would be acquiring Crunchyroll for 1.2 billion dollars, to which Funimation triumphantly announced that this was a win for the fans, though what exactly was meant by this was largely unknown, seemingly even to the fans.

As noted previously, 2018 proved to be an eventful year for Crunchyroll, as following Otter Media’s acquisition of TV Tokyo’s shares, Crunchyroll began to announce that they too would start creating their own “Crunchyroll Originals” revealing a slate of content, starting with *High Guardian Spice*, an “anime-inspired” work that was scheduled to be released in 2019. Despite the fanfare, the series was released on a major delay with the first episode airing on Oct. 26, 2021, due to the significant backlash that the work garnered from anime fans who were concerned about the implications of Crunchyroll investing in hybrid anime content, as opposed to original anime from Japan. Though what constitutes anime continues to spark heated discussions within the community, for many die-hard anime fans, the catchphrase “anime inspired” often signals subpar work and a form of hybridity that almost never succeeds in delivering to these fans’ lofty expectations. Though there were certainly a number of fans who

vocalized their support for *High Guardian Spice* and the creative team who had marketed the fact that their lead creator was a transgendered man and that they would be working with an all-female writing staff, the clear ambivalence of the subscriber base contributed to a significant delay in the show's release and consequent wave of hate that it garnered from Crunchyroll subscribers and the broader fandom. Alongside *High Guardian Spice* was another anime inspired work that was also headed by the queer Hispanic creator, Sofia Alexander, called *Onyx Equinox* which drew heavy inspiration from MesoAmerican mythologies. Despite the backlash against *High Guardian Spice* and its continuously stalled release, *Onyx Equinox* was able to make a timely release, to a somewhat polarized reception on Nov. 21, 2020. Beyond these two works, Crunchyroll's initial slate of originals would also include the company's collaboration with Webtoons, which would yield anime adaptations of *Tower of God*, *Noblesse*, and *God of High School*. The remainder of the slate consisted of *In/Spectre*, *Meiji Gekken: Sword & Gun*, and an animated rendition of *Freak Angels*, based on a comic book by Warren Ellis and Paul Duffield. As noted before, while Crunchyroll has taken part in production committees before, it was only in 2018 that the term "Crunchyroll Original" was used to refer to such works. As Callum May explains, "the term doesn't necessarily mean Crunchyroll owns the anime, but rather that they had some involvement in its initial funding" (2021).

It is with these Originals that rifts between audience segments come into sharp relief, as Crunchyroll's collaborations with Webtoons, as well as their explorations with hybrid "anime-inspired" content such as *Onyx Equinox* and *High Guardian Spice* signal their desire to push the boundaries of their anime-focused programming outwards. While anime continues to be a globally popular medium with an industry that generates enormous amounts of content each year, Crunchyroll is clearly invested in looking for additional areas of community overlap where

they can tease out the synergistic relationships between other globally popular content like Webtoons and the fandoms that are harbored in those spaces. Beyond this, they also are deeply aware of the persisting audience segmentations that do fall along the lines of race and sexuality, given the manner in which they programmed and marketed *High Guardian Spice* and *Onyx Equinox* in order to emphasize its diversification of talent behind the scenes, as well as a tentative push towards getting “anime-inspired” to be accepted by the fandom through discourses around representation. Their second slate of Crunchyroll Originals however would exemplify a retreat back into the safer waters of anime that originate from Japan, with works like *Tonikawa: Over the Moon for You*, *So I’m a Spider, so what?*, *Gibiate*, *Dr. Ramune*, and the notoriously maligned *Ex-Arm*. To understand why fans may bristle at the idea of Crunchyroll’s expansion strategy, it is first necessary to outline the way that Crunchyroll initially branded itself as a “fans first” kind of platform and the benefits and challenges of utilizing this strategy.

“Built by Fans, For Fans:” Crunchyroll’s Branding Strategy

In many ways, Crunchyroll’s fan-oriented strategy draws heavily from the narrowcasting practices of cable television, where certain networks fostered channels that would target defined interest groups or communities that were being underserved by extant programming. It does so, in part, by drawing from and sharing the “life-world” where “implied in its presentation and mode of address - that it is both aware of and shares in, the everyday life of its intended audience” (Wilson 1995, 131). This life-world is an inherent part of the narrowcast “brand experience,” which is crafted to increase the affective range of the brand through discreet products, in order to establish a deeper relationship with the consumer than the average broadcast (Grainge 2007, 29). While initially touted as a movement towards the democratization of television, scholars have critiqued the trend towards narrowcasting along the lines of subpar

televisual representation, which tend to prioritize marketability and essentialism over diversity and multiplicity (Smith-Shomade 2004, Parks 2004). Lisa Parks echoes this sentiment when she establishes the term, “flexible microcasting” where television and digital technologies combine in order to give users the sense that media streaming is tailored to their personal tastes. However, she continues to state that such microcasting is not separate from personal identity characteristics, and indeed, the growing number of narrower identification categories reveals the commodification of personal identity that exists to maximize the profits of media networks and executives. Further, scholars have also been concerned that the atomization and subsequent seclusion of audience segments may actually hinder diversity initiatives, as it can create echo chambers due to the lack of exposure to diverse content across enclaves.

While narrowcasting has taken on different meanings in the context of streaming services, the assumption of a kind of mutual life-world remains extant, as well as the continued limitations of the diversity that these services tout. In the mid 2000s, the heightening of content diversification gave rise to the conception of the long tail model of content distribution, where shelf space and constraints in capacity were no longer relevant within the digital space. Combined with the growing sophistication of algorithmic systems, one could simultaneously personalize recommendation systems in response to individual search histories, potentially pushing up content that would have normally been obscured. Chris Anderson referred to the long tail as a model that is predicated on the economy of abundance, as opposed to scarcity, where diversity of content is what will drive engagement, as opposed to the select number of hits within an industry. However, whether the promises of the long tail model of content aggregation has been fulfilled is open to interpretation, as scholars like Philip Napoli have noted that in spite of such diversity, the kind of content that is constantly encouraged on the level of the interface on

services like Netflix continue to be many of its Originals. This can be seen in other industries as well, such as the music industry, where the supposed rapid diversification of music offerings in content aggregation sites such as iTunes and Spotify actually exacerbated the earning inequality between the top one percent of artists, despite the ability for a small number of independent artists to break into this coveted position (Coelho and Mendes 2019). In short, while the digital turn has diversified content offerings within aggregate platforms, it is far from the utopic vision that Chris Anderson once predicted.

Despite these critiques however, in many ways, the niche platform combines both the strategies of the narrowcast and the long tail into one expansive package. Unlike Netflix and Amazon Prime, which hosts a wide variety of content targeting more generalized users, niche platforms like Crunchyroll focus exclusively on fans who are willing to pay for a multifaceted and deeper engagement with their specified form of media. Often, the success of these ventures are predicated on the ability to facilitate and encourage pre-existing fannish practices that have already fostered a robust fandom. Done successfully, Crunchyroll can help to mediate even more fervent engagement with anime works further down the long tail that would not get such attention on a service like Netflix. While analyses of the long tail model often center around large aggregate platforms like Netflix, iTunes, Amazon, and more, there has been less of a focus on how the long tail may operate differently in niche platforms. Indeed, with the fan's penchant for sharing information with other fans and the provision of spaces where fans are encouraged to discuss and engage their various passions, niche works may fare better in these spaces than being part of a more expansive, generalized catalog.

Crunchyroll's founders have often capitalized on the narrative of the service's history being a passion project by a group of anime fans that sought to address the failings of the anime

distribution ecosystem at the time. Initially inspired by the potential of aggregate user-generated content sites like YouTube, they circulated their initial service to their friends and acquaintances, to which, as co-founder Kun Gao notes, “instead of uploading cats on shower curtains, they uploaded a lot of Asian content that they couldn’t watch in the United States” (Otaquest 2017). While originally, the site peddled in all kinds of Asian content, including dramas and films, the passion and cohesion around the anime fandom would be what stood out to the co-founders and what would ultimately remain of their original vision for the platform. The founders and the employees of the company would later go on to capitalize off of this “for the fans” narrative and ethos on multiple levels, as it spoke to an origin story that was more humanizing and proximate to the experience of fans than the cosmopolitan behemoths that now dominate the streaming ecosystem like Netflix. Crunchyroll’s brand not only focuses on anime content itself, but also behind-the-scenes videos that introduce the studios that make the content, videos introducing the Crunchyroll work environment, as well as the yearly Crunchyroll Expo, which happens in San Jose every summer, where fans can interact with employees and industry insiders. Employees who moderate fan forums and engage with fans regularly, such as Tiffany Chen, who goes by the handle of “Tiffako,” and the enigmatic “Shinji” often perform fannishness both in their rhetoric and engagement with subscribers, effectively attempting to become bridges and links between the brand community and the broader fandom.

“Community features” were already a part of the vision that the original creators had for the service from its conception, and these would persist into the contemporary moment and prove to be a unique feature for niche portals that capitalize on fan passion. In conceptualizing Crunchyroll’s brand strategy, it may be useful to outline the concept of online brand communities. In Muniz Jr. and O’Guinn’s influential article, “Brand Community,” they defined

the term as “a specialized non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (2001, 412). According to these authors, they outlined three observable markers in which one could understand the social fibers that kept a brand community together: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility to the community as a whole (413). “Consciousness of kind” was the formulation of an “us,” which can facilitate a feeling of belonging within the context of brand consumption. Rituals can be understood as “a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that members of the community experience through its repetition, is acted out over time in a systematic function” (Larouche et. al 2012, 1758). Finally, moral responsibility towards the brand may manifest through a sense of duty towards the community or the ideals that the brand upholds. Ultimately, all of these moving pieces, which operate both through corporate design and consumer agency, function with the primary purpose of encouraging further support for the brand. However, as Muniz Jr. and O’Guinn note, despite the commercial nature of this form of sociality, this does not necessarily mean that meaningful encounters and relationships are not gleaned from one’s membership in these communities, nor has the historic formation of communities more broadly rarely been entirely separate from commerce and economic drives.

Following the development of web 2.0, brand communities were taken into the virtual space to see how the unique affordances of social media enhanced the sense of communality (Laroche et. al 2012). For example, rituals can now be designed into the interface of the platform, in order to help new users navigate themselves into various forms of accepted sociality. For example, in 2017, Netflix got rid of their five-star rating system relatively early in exchange for the thumbs up/down system due to a fundamental misunderstanding between the platform and its subscribers. While many subscribers mistook the five-star system to be a culmination of

reviews from other subscribers who may have viewed the content, in reality, the five-star system was based on how Netflix's algorithms believed that the individual subscriber, based on their viewing habit, would rate the work thusly (McAlone 2017). According to Netflix's Cameron Johnson who oversaw the transition from five-star rating system to a thumbs up/down one, when they simplified the system to a more binary model, subscriber engagement with the rating system increased by 200%. Further, they retained the original vision of predicting subscriber reactions to a particular work through their percentage match system. Through ritualizing how feedback is given in a digital environment, this influences the kind of sociality that users can engage in. The existence of a binary thumbs up/down and lack of commenting section shows that the form of sociality that Netflix encourages is predicated on the individual, not necessarily the links that are created via common fandom. Though this is not to say that fandom cannot be created or fostered through the content on Netflix, it is not the streaming service itself that encourages this kind of ritual. As reflected in this brief example, a shift in interface can have significant ramifications to the engagement of a platform's users and their understanding regarding what kind of sociality is considered appropriate within the bounds of the service.

This example reveals the importance of the portal's interface and the way it impacts the "imagined affordances" that are available to subscribers. Affordances was initially coined by James Gibson, who used it in the context of ecological psychology to "designate all kinds of action possibilities latent in the physical environment" (Butcher and Helmond 2017). Donald Norman would later take this concept and apply it to the field of Human-Computer Interaction, calling it "perceived affordance" to analyze the way product designers can "help people figure out what actions are possible without the need for labels or instructions" (2013, 13). Similarly, William Gaver notes how affordances can also be "hidden," with no information that suggests a

particular user can interact, yet they are still affordances by nature of giving the possibility of action (1996). The intuitive design of a product can guide users into certain pathways of engagement, though those pathways are never completely defined or closed off. This potential is reflected in Peter Nagy and Gina Nen's concept of "imagined affordances," which was a term leveraged against the widely appropriative uses of the term "affordance." They contend that "the term, with some recent exceptions, has been used to point to what technology makes possible for users - ignoring the black boxes, the algorithms, and the automatic. In other words, the complex sociotechnical systems that act with and sometimes without or despite us are not covered" (2015, 2). As a corrective, they offer their interpretation of the concept as something that "evokes the imagination of both user and designer-expectations for technology that are not fully realized in conscious, rational knowledge but are nonetheless concretized or materialized in socio-technical systems" (1). Similarly, Mel Stanfill has written that while social media scholars have often written about interface affordances in restrictive terms, it may be productive to see the push and pull of power between user and platform in the Foucauldian sense, where such power is seen as productive. With this in mind, she utilizes the term "discursive interface," where "the features, but also what is foregrounded, how it is explained, and how technically *possible* uses become more or less *normative* through productive restraint" (2015, 1062).

One manner of thinking of this productive restraint is looking at how small changes to the interface have dramatically transformed how users present themselves to the virtual public. Jose van Djick has analyzed the way small changes in the interface can introduce new models of understanding the digital architecture of the platform. She notes that there has been a shifting "center of gravity from connectedness to *connectivity*" (2013, 202). To illustrate this, she presents how the introduction of Facebook's timeline feature introduced a new paradigmatic

information order which prioritizes narratives, instead of databases, as the fundamental flow of information, and therefore, how users receive it, has changed. Users were no longer occupying a cell in the meta database that was Facebook, but now protagonists of their own interconnected narrative that they were telling about themselves. On the other hand, Butcher and Helmond had analyzed how in early 2016, Twitter adopted an organizational paradigm around the popularity and predicted affinity of tweets in relation to the user. Such developments show how the platform fundamentally shifted from a linear temporal mode of presentation to non-linearity, which dramatically transforms how one engages with and understands the content of the platform (2017). In line with Barker and Helmond's encouragement for an "environmental approach" to studying platforms, where agencial relationships between users, interface features, discourses, and the industry all interact with one another in ways that have rippling effects across the totality of the environment, I will be focusing on framing the Crunchyroll platform as an environment for engagement. Such environmental approaches retain the flexibility to look at how the specific "low level" features contribute to the high-level conditions in which content, platform, and brand interactions are made. In doing so, I will analyze the ways in which Crunchyroll uses the interface to reinforce a sense of brand community and simultaneously signal what their ideal subscriber is like and the ways in which users adopt and resist these various characterizations.

The features of Crunchyroll's brand community engagement model a fundamentally different paradigm than that of Netflix and Amazon Prime. Crunchyroll opts for a hybrid approach between user generated content models like YouTube and more formal services like Netflix. In particular, what remains fundamentally different about Crunchyroll from its streaming competitors is that it attempts to provide a 365-degree holistic fan experience for the narrower

category of anime aficionados. In this manner, we can think of Crunchyroll as a brand identity that seeks to embody “a new gestalt of ‘total entertainment.’” (Grainge 2007, 14). Grainger defines this ‘total entertainment’ as a form of “proto-synergy...associated with the consumption of movies, their products, and associated leisure attractions” (43). One can see how Crunchyroll continues to take advantage of the totality of transmedial and iterative nature of popular anime franchises in its many forms, through manga, anime, games, and merchandise, in ways that have not been done with other streaming services. Beyond the anime franchises themselves, Crunchyroll also expands its own brand through the transmedial use of their own anthropomorphic mascots, the creation of podcasts, yearly conventions, and other paratextual content that bridges the fan experience with the content proper. In this way, Crunchyroll, as a platform brand, is exemplary of “branding [which is] taken up...as a means of expanding, systemizing, and managing the function of contemporary marketing” (Grainge 28). However, this process of systemization and management of fracturing audiences is not without its frictions. While the category of “anime” may already be considered niche, it is important to remember that within this niche category, many sub-fandoms and audience segmentations continue to thrive and because of Crunchyroll’s narrower audience and “expert” positionality, it is critical for them to serve these narrower sub-audiences with demonstrable degree of cultural literacy.

There are many features of the service’s interface that communicate this focus on fandom and the knowledge bases of the consumptive neotribe, as opposed to generalization. When one initially enters the landing page before logging in, compared to more mainstream platforms, there is much more information that is provided at the start¹. While the likes of Netflix immediately leap into their content offerings, when one goes to “Crunchyroll.com,” the user is

¹ This analysis refers to Crunchyroll’s classic layout and not its new beta layout, which was transitioned in April 2021, which was prior to the research period of this chapter.

led to a landing page filled with recent news and other forms of data. Above the fold of the homepage, there is a carousel that delivers information on what new episodes are out, new merchandise that is being sold in the Crunchyroll store, a few slides advertising popular anime franchises, as well as new features in the Crunchyroll Games section. Below the carousel is a “Latest News” section, where news regarding anime, manga, games, VTubers, fandom, and reviews are presented to both subscribers and casual site visitors alike, cementing Crunchyroll’s position as the platform expert for Japanese anime. This news section focuses on the trends of anime, game, and Japanese pop culture more broadly. Below this section, one can find “site news” where Crunchyroll-specific content can be shown. This separation is necessary due to how subscribers and fans may find the manipulation of anime news content in order to redirect funds back to Crunchyroll to be objectionable (e.g. only covering news about titles that Crunchyroll distributes). As Michael Beverland has stated in his analysis of niche brands, revealing overtly commercial motivations downplays the feeling of “authenticity” that the niche brand has to maintain in order to seem more proximate with the sensibilities of the fan and their ideas of commercial integrity as it relates to their cult object (2005). Of course, this does not mean that the redirection and shaping of news in ways that ultimately benefit Crunchyroll does not exist, as even the act of broadcasting various trends and collecting the data of user comments that are also allowed in these spaces provide much feedback towards what Crunchyroll should be investing in, which ultimately strengthens Crunchyroll’s predictive analytics.

It is only below the “Site News” section that visitors finally get to see a chart of the season’s “simulcasts,” the content that is released almost simultaneously with Japan’s airing times, a feature that is arguably one of the most powerful draws of the niche platform. This ability to air content simultaneously across the globe has been a relatively new innovation for

global media products. The reason for this is that it often takes a considerable amount of time to get the work either subtitled or re-dubbed in order to distribute effectively for countries abroad. As I will outline in more detail in the final chapter, this labor was initially conducted by a large group of productive fans who collaborated with one another in order to fan-subtitle (fansub) the production and release it either through torrent or on illicit streaming sites. While depending on the fansub group in question, they may prioritize rapid-speed releases or slower “quality” releases, neither group could accurately say that they were able to “simulcast” due to the time that it would take to go through the fansubbing process. However, with Crunchyroll’s direct collaborations with anime companies in Japan, this allowed for the company to receive the episode or work in question earlier than its formal release time, so that Crunchyroll can employ their own team of translators or outsource the labor in time for a near simultaneous release with Japan. Through “simulcasting,” Crunchyroll could boast to their subscribers that their experience would be as close as possible with that of a native Japanese viewer, adding to the “authenticity” of the viewing environment, a currency that is often circulated within niche platforms.

The final section following the display of “Simulcasts” is “All-New” anime, which introduces all of the individual episodes that have been recently released on the portal. To the right of the main body, there is also a column on the right side, which once again advertises merchandise in the Crunchyroll Store, Featured Shows, “Coming Soon” content, and strangely enough, a list of *Naruto Shippuden* episodes. The entire body and margins of the website is surrounded by a page-sized ad, which for the researcher, happened to be an ad of the new Crunchyroll game, *Mitra Sphere*. The overall presentation of the website is one of maximization and sensory overload, as opposed to the more slick and minimal interface of Netflix’s own landing page. The value of this kind of landing page is measured in the way it can multicast to

different subsections of its user-base. While in many ways, premium subscribers seem to be the valued end-user that the company would like to prioritize, the reality is that of Crunchyroll's 100 million registered users, only 5 million are actual paying subscribers². This is due to the fact that one can access Crunchyroll's anime for free, as long as the user is willing to sit through the long reels of ads that are dispersed throughout the content. Because the paying subscriber base is in the minority, and registered users continue to have an abundance of convenient pirating options at their disposal, Crunchyroll utilizes different modes of engagement to entice registered users to stay within the confines of their website by proving to be a valuable resource for news, games, sociality, and other forms of entertainment outside the strict viewing of anime. The fact that the service prioritizes "latest news" and ads for their merchandise over the representation of their own catalogs by being "above the fold" of the site speaks volumes about the manner in which the company is trying to become more than simply a streaming service, but a node of broader engagement for the fandom. The abundance of content within the landing page, while it may be off-putting or overwhelming to the non-anime fan, is rife with valuable information that act as snags to keep users from venturing outwards.

These snags and points of engagement are also extended towards the viewing environment of the service. For example, returning briefly back to the importance of rating systems, despite the broad turn to thumbs up/down (e.g. Netflix), like/dislike (e.g. YouTube), and more binary approaches to signaling to the platform one's affective response to the content, Crunchyroll retained the five star system. This is mostly likely because if their primary subscriber base is invested fans, those who are willing to review a work would likely appreciate the more nuanced range that a five-star scale provides. Further, Crunchyroll also allows for users

² As of the Spring 2022 season, the content that is made available for free through ad-support has been made limited to a select group of seasonal offerings (Brett 2022).

to write comments on each video and series, which encourages users to share their opinions, justify their ratings, provide advice on how to approach a work, and banter with one another. Much like Facebook, each comment is given the ability to reply directly to a user, and has an upward arrow icon, connoting a “like.” The only other two interactive features within a subscriber’s comment post are the “report comment” button and the “flag as spoiler.” The latter of these two options become an interesting point of contention, because while the intended purpose of the feature is clear, subscribers have utilized the feature, at times, inconsistently, showing how user agency against the grain of the interface’s affordance continues to disrupt and undermine the structuring forces of the affordance itself.

When a comment is flagged as a spoiler, it becomes unreadable by being shaded out. If one wants to still engage with the comment, there is an option to “show spoiler” at the end of the comment. Sometimes, mundane or unhelpful comments seem to be flagged as a spoiler, seemingly as a joke or by passing judgment that such a comment is not worthy of engagement from other users. At other times, the feature is used as a means of getting other subscribers to not see certain sentiments, often that of negativity or disapproval. For example, one comment from the original series, *God of High School*, states “okay I was sensing that this was getting a little cringe, so I read ahead of the webtoon and it was pretty bad. Hoped the anime would be better written but yikes, this episode man,” was shaded out as a spoiler, so that other viewers would not engage in the perceived negativity. While this practice is not consistent, there are comments throughout the portal that reflect the unintended use of the feature, as subscribers actively engage in censorship and discouraging comment readers from engaging with these sentiments. Despite the potential to abuse this feature, it should be noted that its use is inconsistent, and often, comments that display the exact same sentiments as that of shaded out comments are allowed to

circulate without being interceded. Through these various features, direct and public engagement between subscribers become more normative within the interface, and the platform can see the general wave of sentiment across its viewers and take these factors into consideration in their decision-making processes. Beyond this, Crunchyroll also has a forum section where fans can go and discuss anime, fandom, adjacent content, and socialize more broadly; however, this feature of the service has been made much more difficult to discover for subscribers, a development in the interface that I will return to later.

The ability to comment helps to reinforce the core constitution of the brand community as delineated by Muniz and O'Guinn. First, there is a fostering of a sense of moral responsibility that is outwardly displayed in multiple ways. The first is when fans take it upon themselves to share information with one another that will troubleshoot issues with the use of the portal and also with ideal ways to view a particular series. For example, in the Crunchyroll/Webtoon Original series, *Noblesse*, fans were simultaneously observed sharing advice with one another, such as Blinkergolem and Toshisan23, who stated that viewers should watch the much less marketed original video animation (OVA) first within the service, before watching the original series, as critical information for the viewer's comprehension of the series is established in the prequel (2020). These acts demonstrate the ideals of a productive user within the service, which is not only concerned about their own optimal viewing experience, but that of other fan subscribers as well. The labor that these subscribers engage in addresses a failing on the part of the platform itself in not properly marketing an ideal viewing scenario for their fans.

Moral responsibility within the anime fandom is also shaped on a more macro-scale, as Crunchyroll also yields spaces where one can talk about the moral implications of gaining access to media content illicitly, a feature of the service that will be at odds with the ideologies upheld

by fansubbers outlined in the final chapter. For example, within the forums of Crunchyroll, subscribers have gone head-to-head regarding what the dominant framing of fansubs versus official subs should be, and the negotiations users must make along the lines of quality and access. Unsurprisingly, the range of responses and justifications one can find on these forum discussions for both sides are diverse, and the influence that the streaming service itself seems to have on the viewing habits of the fandom, even those who are invested enough to contribute to the service's forums, are uneven. While Crunchyroll clearly indicates that supporting official releases would be ideal within their paratextual networks, fans within these spaces seem to care little about how the platform thinks that they should behave, often implying a different set of standards that nevertheless gesture towards a distinct moral compass (Miller 2017). Further, in times of crisis, such as the 3/11 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami disaster, Crunchyroll was one of the amplifying institutions that helped mobilize fans to provide support for the Japanese citizens affected by the disaster, effectively reinforcing models of fan citizenship that go beyond the limits of simple engagement with anime (Miller 2020).

Similar mobilization dynamics could be observed from the service following the March 2021 Atlanta Shootings, when eight victims, six of whom were of East Asian descent, were murdered. Denouncing the rising antagonism that the AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) community faced following the Covid-19 pandemic, which culminated in the tragedy, Crunchyroll leveraged their company's relationship to its Asian roots as a motivator for encouraging users to not participate in the rising tide of violence against individuals whose cultures fostered the creation and distribution of their fan objects. Similarly, Funimation emphasized anime's Asian roots in their own messaging (Funimation 2021). Putting aside the rather tortured and awkwardly framed justification of not harming a group of people because of

their ability to create and distribute enjoyable media, Crunchyroll and Funimation were not alone in this call to action, as the American anime fandom and industry players continued to devote funds and energy towards raising awareness for non-profit organizations that were devoted to the welfare of AAPI communities, reflecting how the ideals of the fandom can be put in parallel with those of the brand communities that seek to profit off of them.

Interface features also encourage the reinforcement of rituals and traditions through habitual actions and through those actions, users are able to replicate and fortify various relationships and hierarchies that cement the centrality of the media institution (Couldry 2005). One feature where this becomes apparent is the “CR [Crunchyroll] Premium Members” forum channel, an exclusive area where only paying customers can have access. The landing page of the forum channel contains a message from some of the moderating employees of Crunchyroll, stating that,

“Without our Premium Members like you Crunchyroll would not be possible! A large share of your Premium Subscription goes directly overseas to the content creators in Japan, both those making Anime and Drama. By directly supporting them, it makes it possible for Crunchyroll to expand our growing catalog of shows as well as acquire the rights for more Simulcasts! That means that your favorite shows are here thanks to your own contributions!”

The message goes on to note how providing feedback on the site and requesting content contributes to the service’s success, encouraging various forms of productive labor on the part of the user as both troubleshooter and convenient signal for the trends within viewerships. The affective resonance of this message, ensuring that the funds from one’s subscription contributes directly to the industries themselves, and also directly assists with the streaming service’s catalogs, encourages feelings of belonging to an exclusive “us” that is adjacent and proximate to the industries that create the content that the fans love. This is exemplary of the use of “affective economics,” which emphasizes the emotional dimensions of consumption and seeks to

encourage loyalty to the brand through appealing to the consumer's own sense of identification (Jenkins 2006). While this aids in reinforcing the sense of a "consciousness of kind," it should be noted that this feeling is reinforced across brands, as Funimation similarly has encouraged this close association between legal viewing and its affiliation to the industry; however, the practice of making suggestions for the Crunchyroll platform is one area in which ritual can reinforce the needs of the brand community. There is a moral injunctive within the position of the premium member that stands against those who leech or pirate. Because of this, the ritual of utilizing Crunchyroll both for viewing content and for public communication signals the values of the "good consumer." Simultaneously, even within Crunchyroll's user base, being a premium member foster a more exclusive sense of an "us," the paying "us," which is separate from the rest of the registered users, once again gesturing towards the multitude of segmentations and communities within the subscriber-base. Through positive affirmations, Crunchyroll is encouraging the formation of the idealized subscriber, who is engaged with the service in very particular ways: paying, respectful, and oriented towards productive positivity for both the brand and fan community. It is unsurprising then that subscribers who are asked why they choose to engage with a particular streaming service for Japanese anime instead of engaging with piracy sites often cite support for the industry as one of their primary motivations for utilizing these intermediaries. By establishing a vocal group of fans that stand against piracy, this may assist the brand in moving the needle within the broader fandom in relation to normative and accepted practices.

The availability of these affordances however does not necessarily mean that subscribers will react positively to the work or the platform that hosts it. In fact, subscribers are often cagey with praise for the portal, while critiquing abundantly on the drawbacks of various features of the

service and its production decisions. For example, while the aforementioned “premium member” forum channel encouraged closer communication with other invested subscribers to help reinforce the communal links of the brand community, in reality, the bulk of this channel consisted of troubleshooting complaints, griping about new site layouts or affordances, and discussions regarding whether or not to quit the subscription. While there were also several threads that exhibited positive sentiments about the service and its offerings, those were somewhat less common in comparison to negative complaints. Ironically, hiding these user-oriented threads behind a paywall may be aiding the service in doing damage control, as complaints from users who are not paying often seem to have less weight than complaints from those who do. Further, the unfortunate placing of the “forum” link, which is at the very bottom of the site below the “Store” subheading, an organizational decision that lacks intuitive design, is often a source of confusion. As such, the continued engagement with the forum itself has been spotty, much to the chagrin of devoted forum users. It is uncertain whether newer subscribers are even aware that the forum function exists at all. While the motivations for effectively hiding the forum link remains unknown, it is likely due to the multiple areas in which fan engagement of this kind exists within the service. As noted before, like YouTube, all of Crunchyroll’s videos have the affordance of commenting and rating the work in question, and if there is more of an emphasis on the content itself through the proximity between content video and commenting section, then it is likely that Crunchyroll can more closely control what is being discussed in these spaces, namely, discourse regarding the content. Comparatively, the forum remains much more open and diverse in the kinds of discussions that members engage in, which yields less control by virtue of the construction of the interface. User rituals can be reoriented from that of regular forum engagement which could span all kinds of topics, including many that do not

directly relate to Crunchyroll, to a more focused interaction in the comments section which encourages engagement of the brand community as opposed to the more nebulous fandom, particularly when it comes to the work of Crunchyroll Originals.

However, in spite of this desire to try to exert control through the interface and shape visions of the ideal subscriber, it is often a friction-laden and troubled process, as users and subscribers alike do not fall in line with these implied directives from the corporation. One place where we can see these frictions emerge is the subscriber reception to Crunchyroll Originals, which caught heavy and public crossfire from ambivalent subscriber sentiments towards these productions. The risk regarding the public nature of these fan-to-fan engagement features lies in the ways in which a viewer can be swayed into certain affective ranges from the very publicness of these exchanges. While publicness can work as free and “authentic” marketing for the niche service, the very strength of the fans’ communicative network can also backfire. For example, *Ex-Arm*, a Crunchyroll Original that has been considered to be one of the worst executed series for the service, and was critiqued harshly and widely across the fandom not only for the series itself, but the platform’s extensive marketing around the work and its willingness to host the series at all as an Original. Various paratextual networks have engaged in heavily critiquing the production, with the comment section in particular manifesting as a concentrated affective space for the negative reactions that stemmed from the platform’s subscribers. While the almost universally negative reaction to the poorly executed *Ex-arm* exemplified a misstep for the brand, the much more ambiguous and conflict-ridden reception of *Onyx Equinox* and the platform’s Webtoons collaborations, *God of High School*, *Noblesse*, and *Tower of God* reveal a much more nuanced dynamic regarding the reception and politics of cross-cultural remakes and narrowcasting to specific subsections of the brand community. A large part of the incentive for

these cross-industrial collaborations speak to the desire of the niche platform to stretch the boundaries of their subscriber base in order to sustain a robust growing consumer base. However, the performances of these collaborations often articulate the tensions and competing ideals of the diverse communities within the fandom, which continue to reveal the challenges of trying to establish a cohesive brand community through fan collectives. Though Crunchyroll's entry as the "for fans, by fans" service in the distribution landscape has aided in rounding out the more limited catalogs of Netflix and conveniently provides an avenue for fandom to access work without piracy. These are ultimately positive developments for anime fans and industry workers alike. While in Chapter One, I outlined my concerns regarding the level of control streaming services may have over determining how global media cultures may be perceived, through the example of Crunchyroll, it is clear that fans continue to resist being pulled unidirectionally by the streaming service. They are vocal in their discontent when they believe a production challenges their beliefs and continues to provide input towards the services' performance as a formal global distributor.

Crunchyroll Originals and the Labor of Synergizing Fandoms

Within fandom, different features of one's identity may become conflicted, particularly when one is not considered to be part of the target demographic for a media text or brand community. One's identity as an anime fan may chafe against other features, such as one's race, sexuality, or gender. Scholars such as Rukmini Pande have explored fandom through the lens of gender and raciality, stating that, "which fans are considered the most valued remains enmeshed in a complex matrix of identity markers, most notably those of race, gender, and sexuality" (2018, 2). Often, the lived experience of fans whose identities intersect with marginalized and underrepresented communities must negotiate their place within fannish spaces on a regular basis

in order to feel a sense of belonging that fandom supposedly affords. A sense of discordance between the self and fannish identity may come in the form of seeing a racist depiction within one's fan object, to which the fan of color may now have to consider whether to continue supporting a text in spite of these drawbacks. Similar dynamics of negotiation are often found in sexist and homophobic depictions within anime as well. This discordance may continue to be exacerbated when the supposed fandom that one identifies with vocalizes support for these depictions or actively exacerbates feelings of unwelcome by belittling one's identity, leaving these fans to find alternative ways of experiencing community in which the different features of their identity are not in such friction with one another.

Yet simultaneously, there are also moments of synergy between fannish identities, where one's fandoms merge and collaborate with one another. In this section, I would like to explore the ways in which Crunchyroll Originals take advantage of both feelings of synergy and discordance within fan identities in the hopes of bolstering their own brand identity through acts of microcasting. Such endeavors can be found in Crunchyroll's decision to collaborate with Webtoon, in order to leverage the visible popularity of some of Webtoon's action and fantasy series by creating anime adaptations, so that there can be productive crossover between these two distinct media types and platforms. Other forms of potential synergy, albeit one that is much more negotiated, is the leveraging of racial and sexual identities, in order to call out to distinct subsections of the fandom with the hopes that this will guarantee some level of positive acceptance and support of the Original series in the name of "authentic" representation. Of course, these strategies may also potentially backfire, as all of these productions detract from the norms of Japanese-originated anime to a certain extent. However, through the analyses of these case studies, I argue that even as Crunchyroll brands itself as a niche service that serves anime

fans first and foremost, they continue to also navigate across the subsections within this audience along the lines of different identity factors.

Among Crunchyroll's slate of Originals, *God of High School* and *Tower of God* were two productions that began as well-performing *Webtoons* series, by Yongje Park and S.I.U. respectively. The format of Webtoons is long, vertically scrolling digitally-native comic strips, whose forms and content are tailored towards consumption on smartphones and other smart mobile technologies, easily consumed on one's commute or during breaks throughout the day. While release schedules vary depending on the work and creator in question, new content is normally released on a weekly basis which encourages readers to check in to the platform regularly. The born-digital element of Webtoons provides several affordances to the creators that were not available for other adjacent types of comics, such as Japanese *manga* and American comic strips. For one, creators could animate certain panels of the toon, use an extensive range of colors without considering printing costs, add music, as well as sound effects that would trigger once the reader reached a certain spatial point of the comic webpage. Much like Japanese *manga*, webtoons cover a wide range of genres and topics, which make it an applicable form of entertainment for all ages. Webtoons, as a media form, originated from South Korea, and were aggregated by media platforms like Daum in 2003 and its rival, Naver, in 2004, which allowed for the Webtoons creators to monetize their work, as well as have these companies more easily facilitate audience engagement with the creators.

Similar to Japanese *manga* and anime culture, prior to the formal global distribution of webtoon content, international fans take it upon themselves to translate and circulate series, often in the same spaces where *manga* are being illicitly distributed. This proximity, both in terms of distribution spaces, as well as similar cultural resonances between manga and webtoons provides

a kind of symbiotic relationship between the two art forms. Unlike manga however, many webtoons could largely be accessed for free, and this remained true when Webtoon was launched globally through Naver. The ingenuity of the global release of the Webtoon platform was that on each nation's respective platform, there were creators represented from that nation, as well as popular works from Korea which would formally be translated into English, as well as a host of other languages done by fans and users where quality is screened following the fan submission. Because of this, content that is more tailored to the tastes of the local readership can be represented alongside what was popular in Korea.

The multimedia potential of webtoons plays into the broader dynamics of media convergence as Henry Jenkins defines it, as, "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2006, 2). The result of this converging culture is an extensive industrial practice of creating remixes, adaptations, and remakes. Further, as Clare Parody states, "adaptation is fundamentally sympathetic to the aims and protocols of franchise storytelling...a useful strategy for ensuring a consumer base will follow a franchise as it moves across platforms" (2011, 211). Given the cultural proximity of the two media forms as well as the overarching logics of franchising and convergent technologies, it is likely that the collaboration between Crunchyroll and Webtoon was leveraged with the hopes of creating a kind of synergy that would ideally bolster the viewership of both platforms. Indeed, in the official announcement of the collaboration, the senior vice president of IP at Webtoons, Taylor Grant, stated, "There is tremendous crossover appeal with our audiences ... and exceptional creative synergy on the types of stories we want to tell" (Crunchyroll 2019). However, as will be later observed, whether

this synergy has come into fruition through multimedia franchising remains up for debate as the mere shifting of media forms often does not necessarily correlate with fan acceptance of the work. When taking into consideration the transnational and cross-cultural nature of these franchises, finding synergy may prove to be even more challenging. As Jenkins notes on the nature of media convergence, “collaborations, even within the same companies, are harder to achieve than we might imagine looking at top-down charts mapping media ownership. The closer you get, the more media companies look like dysfunctional families” (2004, 37).

Regarding the anime adaptations of *Tower of God*, *Noblesse*, and *The God of High School*, such dysfunctions come at the level of medium transference, lack of effective communication to subscribers, and the cultural politics of transnational adaptations. It is clear that on their own, all of the franchises mentioned above have been enormous hits on the Webtoon platform, and when it comes to the cultural proximity of both media forms, *Tower of God* and *The God of High School* webtoons have clearly been influenced by manga and the narrative stylings of the *shonen* boys-oriented genre, while *Noblesse* remains similarly action oriented, but also retains elements of fantasy and school life. *Tower of God* and *The God of High School* properties use battle royale thematic elements that are common in the *shonen* genre and are focused on action and combat, which would translate well to the anime medium, while *Noblesse* had similar action motifs combined with depictions of school life, similar to that of popular manga work like *Vampire Knight*. Given the familiarity of thematic tropes that can be found across the cultural mediums, these franchises would have been apt choices for Crunchyroll to facilitate the creation of anime adaptations. In order to ensure that the process of transmediating Korean webtoons into a well-executed adaptation would go smoothly, top anime studios with proven track records for successful work were chosen to work on these franchises,

including Studio Mappa, Production I.G., and Telecom Animation Film. With an established global presence from the franchises, Crunchyroll's own global branding power, and a slew of talented studios to execute the adaptations, the potential for these new Originals to become unambiguous hits should have been secured. Further, these convergences of fan communities, where many anime fans also happen to be Webtoon fans and vice versa, yield a powerful kind of synergy that can be exploited in order to reinforce the respective brand communities of Crunchyroll and Webtoon. Yet, the reception of these works remained rather ambivalent, and the synergy that was supposed to manifest between the collaboration between Webtoon and Crunchyroll remains questionable.

One significant aspect that hindered the performance of these adaptations was the inherent differences between the webtoon format and that of anime. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter One, television anime series generally consist of 12-13 episode "cours," and unlike Netflix, Crunchyroll has been much more conservative with their experimentation with the length of a season. Compared to the rather strict temporal standards of anime, Webtoons can go on for hundreds of chapters, and indeed, all of the franchises that have been adapted by Crunchyroll have written over 500 chapters each. While *Tower of God* and *Noblesse* have created "seasons" within the Webtoon, the amount of content within a season still proved to be challenging for the anime studios to tailor, particularly when there was no guarantee that a second season would follow these initial releases. Ideally, the anime adaptations to these series would retain a synergistic relationship with the original content, and the anime would be multicast to pre-existing fans on Crunchyroll who wish to see their beloved franchises in a novel form, to Webtoon fans who may be encouraged to subscribe to Crunchyroll, as well as incentivize Crunchyroll subscribers who may not be as familiar with Webtoons to engage with

the Webtoon platform. However, given the challenges of adapting extensive material into a coherent plot with severe temporal restrictions resulted in a more jumbled narrative that left some subscribers who were unfamiliar with these franchises with more confusion than a desire to necessarily engage further with the original content.

For example, one of the key critiques that was leveraged on *The God of High School* was that while the animation, courtesy of Studio Mappa, was stunning, the story was lacking due to its rushed pacing. Because of the character history and information regarding fighting techniques were left out for the sake of time, subscribers who have only exclusively watched the anime version of the work found the characters to be unengaging and the pacing to be off throughout. As one reviewer for the series concisely notes, “It is fine to have unanswered questions, but this anime’s plot is moving so quickly that it is raising the question multiple times in a single episode. This distracts the viewer and becomes a detriment to the show because people will be more confused than entertained.” Due to the *shonen* resonances that the original Webtoon content retained, anime fans familiar with the genre were curious as to why the Webtoon did not get a similar treatment as long-running *shonen* work that were native to Japan. What becomes clear is that despite the fact that each feature of the franchise performed the unique strengths that are afforded to the medium, such as detailed and convoluted storylines for the long-running Webtoon, and the dynamism of animation for the anime adaptation, without the intermediating labor to properly bridge the two adaptations together, there is no guarantee that the fannish synergy that brings together a commonality of interests will necessarily develop. Further, despite the potential cultural proximity that resonates between the art forms, without the mediating factor of bringing the knowledge of norms and expectations of each media form to the respective viewer, it remains possible that subscribers may be discouraged from further engagement.

When thinking about the proper forms of mediation that platforms can provide for their viewers, carefully shaping the expectations of their respective fandom seems to be a critical role that these services can provide; however, in many ways, Crunchyroll's desire to do so seemed to be rather lackluster. This is reflected in the fact that the only explanation of what a Webtoon was for newcomers to the media on the Crunchyroll site was an article published in their news section, titled, "The Wild and Wonderful World of Webtoon Series," by Nicole Mejias, where she outlined the various aesthetics between manga, *manhwa* and the digitally-native webtoon. If a subscriber was not engaging with the news section of the service, such information would have easily been missed. Perhaps the streaming service was counting on their fan networks and members of the brand community to bring other fans into the fold of the collective knowledge base; however, in hindsight, it has become clear that the discourse around Webtoons and their subsequent adaptations did not necessarily play a positive role for the service, particularly when subscribers were less than pleased with the execution of the adaptations.

The very notion of cultural proximity is also one that contributes to the supposed manifestation of synergy; however, as Anna Tsing states, the universal desire for capital "make possible global-crossing capital and commodity chains. Yet these chains are made up of uneven and awkward links" (2011, 4). Far from synergy, these commodity chains yield a productive friction, which "refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine" (6). The manner in which these frictions materialize within the fissures of cultural difference reveals how despite the supposed proximity and cross-cultural exchange that happens in the creative process of franchise expansion, they often highlight the disjunctures within the convergent media landscape. For example, fans of the original franchise of *Noblesse* and *Tower of God* were quick to notice the cultural disjunctures between the original Korean Webtoon and Japanese anime

adaptations along the lines of representation. One feature that drew criticism from the viewership of *Tower of God* was the changing of the protagonist's name from "Bam," which is a homophonous play on words which means both "night" and "chestnut" in Korean was changed to the name "Yoru" in Japanese. Despite this change, the English subtitles that were provided still used the name "Bam," leading to confusion on the part of the viewer. Crunchyroll distributed a press release regarding the distinction in names between "Bam" and "Yoru," as Kyle Cardine explained that these discrepancies in naming stemmed from "collaborative decisions from the production committee, the stakeholders of the animation production," and was a common industrial practice, assuring that it was never the intention of the companies involved to confuse the viewer (Cardine 2020). Regardless of these vague explanations, critiques continued to heap against this creative decision as viewers questioned why the platform did not commit to either the Japanese localization of the name or the original source material. It is clear that the negotiative approach, where the Japanese creators could do as they wish to the protagonist's name and have Crunchyroll still cater to English-speaking viewers who have already been exposed to the original source material on the level of the subtitles reflected a lackluster strategy for many viewers. As one commenter observing the tensions between these divergent strategies that seek to please all has expressed,

"If you wanna "stay true" to the source material you wouldn't change any character names in general. The fact is that the Japanese translated the names so that it's more familiar with Japanese people. Just because Japanese people aren't familiar with the names doesn't mean they get to change it to random names no one but Japanese people would understand. Majority of the people reading or watching won't be Japanese anyway. Tower of God is a Korean webtoon with fans from around the world. So by your logic, just because the Japanese aren't familiar with the names doesn't mean they get to change it entirely to names no other race in the world is used to seeing."

This prioritization of Japanese originated content, both by the platform and the fandom more broadly continues to challenge the performance of the niche service's original content

productions and Crunchyroll's ambitions towards expanding the outer limits of their service to include culturally proximate, yet distinctive media. Even as production teams and the entities that fund the creation of anime work continue to globalize, there remain steadfast interpretations of what constitutes legitimacy for the fandom and an uphill battle for those work that do not fit neatly within these paradigms of legitimacy, such as Webtoon adaptations and "anime-inspired" content. While these media productions want to take advantage of these global consumption networks that have been established by the fandom, the ease in which these works can piggyback onto these previous networks depend on their ability to prove themselves as legitimate and comparative to the slew of Japanese anime work that fans have already been exposed to. Indeed, similar strategies have been enacted by Chinese mobile game companies, such as MiHoYo and NetEase, who utilize Japanese talent, familiar backgrounds, tropes, mythologies, and established anime aesthetics to help facilitate the global movement of Chinese mobile games through meeting the international anime fandom's expectations of what should be part of their sphere of consumption (Noh 2020). Of course, the political implications of privileging a certain set of aesthetics that have become associated with a nation brand over perhaps one's own reflects the troubled geopolitics of media co-production as streaming services like Crunchyroll attempt to facilitate the development of transnational franchises. Given this tension that arises across understandings of legitimacy and the continued hegemonic position of Japanese studios and anime aesthetics, part of the strategy for allowing the Japanese production team to change the name of the protagonist to a Japanese one for *Tower of God* may have been to smooth out the process of consumption for fans who are not familiar with the original source material.

Despite these ambivalent strategies however, there remains a vocal minority of fans who have been critiquing this established sense of legitimacy within the fandom, which reinforces the

inherent diversity of ideology within any fandom. For example, there were a number of fans who questioned why the background for the story of *Noblesse* was changed from South Korea to Japan, with one viewer bitterly commenting, “Oh boy, strap in folks, it is that time for CR [Crunchyroll] to ruin another perfectly good webtoon! Not even 2 minutes in and they have changed the location from Korea to Japan! Whoops, can’t let weeps know that a country outside of Japan exists!” While the specificities of the history and geopolitics between Japan and South Korea do not enter the comment section, such comments gesture towards the fan’s awareness of the political implications of cultural erasure from these narratives when the relationship between anime and Japan continues to be privileged by the service. Similar to the changing of names for *Tower of God*, for viewers who were already familiar with the original material, faithfulness to the established narrative or a commitment to the changes in the adaptation continued to be a priority over maintaining a hegemonic sense of legitimacy within the anime fandom. Part of the issue for struggling to necessarily manifest a strong cross-platform synergy may precisely be because legitimacy is measured differently between the fans of Webtoons and those of the anime fandom that Crunchyroll was trying to target. Because both *Noblesse* and *Tower of God* were labeled as Crunchyroll’s Originals, it is largely the service itself that has caught the blowback of these production decisions. Whether the service itself had any significant say on how these productions would be created remains uncertain.

Given these ambivalent emotional registers that have been expressed within the comment sections of these productions, it remains unclear whether the synergy that both platforms have been attempting to establish through transmedial adaptation has come into fruition. While there is clear overlap between members of each respective fandom, it remains apparent that the members of each respective group are fully cognizant of when the brand prioritizes one system

of values over another, and without proper intermediation on the part of the platform, fans may feel discouraged or let down by the brand's maneuver towards synergizing their fannish interests.

“Anime-Inspired” Originals and the Labor of Racial Microcasting

Beyond Crunchyroll's collaboration with Webtoon, the other Original projects conspicuously seem to target the potential expansion of the niche portal through bringing together different elements of fan identity through anime-inspired productions. As stated previously, Crunchyroll announced two such projects in their first slate, which consisted of *High Guardian Spice* and *Onyx Equinox*. Because *High Guardian Spice* was released following the research period for this chapter, despite being the first announced original, the analysis of Crunchyroll's anime-inspired Originals and the particular labor that these works perform for the streaming service will primarily center on *Onyx Equinox*. Anime-inspired work has long held a contentious position in the fandom, in part due to concerns regarding “authenticity,” which makes Crunchyroll's decision to dedicate a sizable percentage of their first slate of Originals to be anime-inspired productions a risky one. Such programming risks contradicting elements of the service's established brand identity, particularly the claims to expertise in Japanese anime culture that often draws fans to the service in the first place. However, cultural authenticity can be constructed in many forms, and Crunchyroll leverages their own mode of strategic authenticity in order to cater to a broader audience. I will focus on the marketing strategies surrounding the Crunchyroll Original work, *Onyx Equinox*, which relies heavily on discourses of authenticity to legitimize its position as an anime directed by a queer Hispanic-American director and animated by a Korean studio.

If the perceived origination of anime is one feature that heavily influences ideas of “legitimacy” and “authenticity” for the fandom, then *Onyx Equinox* challenged the perception of what kind of content should be considered “legitimate” on the Crunchyroll platform and how one can go about microcasting within an already narrowcast service. Given the context of the backlash against *High Guardian Spice*, *Onyx Equinox* had an uphill battle in finding acceptance within the subscriber base; however, its strategy of targeting subscribers and fans of Hispanic heritage would prove to be one critical element of the show’s success, compared to the more broadly marketed *High Guardian Spice*. From the beginning, Alexander was very vocal about the MesoAmerican influences that would heavily characterize the project, as well as her thoughts regarding the lack of representation of Indigenous Mexican cultures. As she states in an interview, “for so long, Mexicans have been portrayed as either drug dealers or these bloodthirsty warriors that only care about sacrifices and I wanted to change that. *Onyx* is an invitation to other Mexicans and to other indigenous people to tell their stories” (Pullam-Moore 2020).

While Crunchyroll may seem like a strange fit for *Onyx Equinox* and its goals of expanding the visibility of Hispanic creators, in reality, the development of this franchise helped bolster the already flourishing Latin American viewership for the streaming service. Latin America remains Crunchyroll’s “second largest market,” behind the United States and Latin American audiences have been widely exposed to Japanese anime, as the licensing rights for anime tended to be much cheaper than their American counterparts (Kim 2020). Indeed, not only has anime been seen as a source of entertainment for spectators, but has even been utilized in political movements as a form of performative solidarity (Diaz Pino 2019). Crunchyroll launched their Latin American branch in 2012, and was described as “a tipping point for anime in Latin

America, as anime fans in those countries would previously have had to depend on either cable/broadcast TV with no guarantee of seeing the latest anime or relying completely on fansubs due to the lack of legal options for streaming” (Saabedra 2012). It is significant that Crunchyroll has been visibly balancing their engagement with fans from different parts of the world, which can be seen by the fact that events like Crunchyroll Expo had a solid amount of coverage that focused on their Spanish-speaking markets, often with cultural intermediaries who predominantly speak Spanish moderating in order to ease the engagement process. This reflects yet another practice the service engages in in order to expand the boundaries of their niche narrowcast service. Given the potential for in-depth engagement with this group of fans, the development and distribution of *Onyx Equinox* positioned Crunchyroll as not only an anime distributor, but a global intermediary that is clearly aware of the international dimensions of anime beyond the more limiting Japanese context, and can speak to those unique dimensions. Further, because the production team took such care with representation, both on-screen and behind it, despite the potential backlash against pre-established ideas of “legitimacy,” Crunchyroll would have likely been able to depend on a vocal sub-group within the global fandom that would support the production despite its boundary-pushing dimensions due to its commitment towards “authenticity” of a different kind. Indeed, if “authenticity” and textual faithfulness hindered the transmedial performance of Crunchyroll and Webtoon collaborations, then the dedication to authenticity within *Onyx Equinox* to the extant Aztec, Maya, and Zapotec mythologies would prove to be a powerful defense against those who would question the production’s place within Crunchyroll’s content catalog. Authenticity, as an interpretive category, is weaponized by both fans and the formal streaming service alike to contest the position of anime-inspired work in a predominantly native Japanese anime catalog. As Sarah

Banet-Weiser expresses, authenticity is “a symbolic construct, that even in our cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives” (2012, 5). Because of this, the battle over authenticity between corporate intermediary, the broader fandom, and the micro-niche of Mexican and Spanish-speaking fans becomes one that has ontological significance. Authenticity and the branding of authenticity is significant to the performance of international media, and doubly so for an anime-inspired production that is considered an outlier in broader anime culture. Because of this, it is no surprise that the creative team behind *Onyx Equinox* was deeply committed to shaping perceptions of authenticity.

Unlike in the case of *Tower of God*, *Noblesse*, and *The God of High School*, where the only intermediating factor between the two platforms and media forms were fan discourse and an article on the Crunchyroll platform, Sofia Alexander made sure that there was a myriad of paratexts that would aid the unfamiliar viewer to the intentions behind the work and the mythologies and cultures that motivated *Onyx Equinox*'s development on behalf of shaping authenticity discourse among the fandom. For example, following the airing of the production, Alexander also produced a companion podcast, titled appropriately, *Onyx Equinox: A Companion Podcast*, where she would expand upon her thoughts on the happenings of each episode, bring in guests who were part of the production staff in order to give viewers a peek behind the curtain of how the production came to be, and explain the significance of the cultures that are seen within the formal text. While it is unclear how many subscribers and viewers engaged with the podcast, the reality of its existence reveals how the marketing behind the Original series was already aware of the necessity for intermediating forces between industry and viewer that seemed lacking in the Crunchyroll/Webtoon productions.

Beyond the podcast, Alexander gave a wide number of interviews across a diversity of English-language news sites that focus on anime, cartoons, and other fan subcultures to circulate her message and intentions about the television series, as well as at anime conventions around the United States. She also spoke at more formal venues such as Annecy Film Festival about the cross-cultural flows between anime culture and her Latin American roots. As she states in her intentions for her series during the festival roundtable, “The Influence of Japanese Animation on International Animated Creation,” “I wanted to see characters that were truly Mexican and Latin American that had a touch of the anime that Mexico loved so much” (Alexander et. al, 2021). As she continues to frame her production through extensive networking efforts and public interviews, Alexander focuses on making legible these cultures that are not often represented on the screen. This labor served the creator well, as one of the primary affirmations and perceived strengths of the work would be this dedication towards presenting this rich mythological history in ways that are not explored in neither American nor Japanese television. Simultaneously, Alexander bolstered support from the Latinidad fan community within these spaces, which could be seen reflected in the textual spaces both on the interface of the streaming service, as well as in various modes of engagement that can be seen in spaces like Crunchyroll Expo. For example, in the 2020 virtual Crunchyroll Expo panel, titled “Crunchyroll Originals Presents: Mesoamerica Animated: *Onyx Equinox* with Sofia E. Alexander,” which was presented in Spanish with English subtitles, Alexander recounted a moment in the production of the work where the English voice actors complained about the difficulty of pronouncing the names of the Aztec gods, and wondering whether they could shorten the names. Alexander stated how she retorted that if she could learn the English language for the comfort of those around her, then the least the English dub voice actors could do was to learn to pronounce the names of these characters. As

she recounted this, enthusiastic support both in the real-time messaging space from Spanish and English speakers alike, as well as from the Spanish native-speaking intermediaries that presented alongside Alexander erupted, revealing the finesse in which Alexander simultaneously incorporated the politics of the immigrant experience with the presentation of her work. To enjoy *Onyx Equinox* was framed not only as a media experience, but one in which the consumption of the text could be seen as having a kind of moral and political imperative.

These moments of engaging with the political implications of the work on the level of its production continue to be a resilient thread within the marketing of the work, yet whether this was enough for subscribers who would be more critical of the production precisely because of its distinct differences from the majority of Crunchyroll's Japanese anime catalog remains somewhat ambivalent. Alexander seems to be aware of this tension within the fandom, as she purposefully frames *Onyx Equinox* as a "cartoon inspired by anime," as opposed to simply calling it an anime production (Halls 2020). Despite this framing, there were still a notable number of naysayers within the comment section. A common thread in the review section for the series was that while reviewers were impressed by the extent to which Aztec mythologies were represented, a refreshing change from the standard depictions of the Greek pantheon that are more common in the English-language mediascape, the complexity of the narrative and the performance of the voice actors seemed to be lackluster, precisely because of the work's proximity with other anime productions that are more common fare for the fandom. As Susan Napier recounts in her study of American anime fans, a primary draw for many viewers is the enhanced level of narrative complexity and more nuanced depictions of individual characters that can be seen in the medium, which is often not available in the American cartoon counterparts (Napier 2007). Viewers who remained critical of *Onyx Equinox* noted the awkward pacing of the

series, the differences in animation aesthetics, as well as the perceived lower quality of voice acting for the English dub, with some subscribers going as far as to demand a Japanese dub. Unsurprisingly, when speaking about the strengths of the series, given the focus on authenticity of MesoAmerican culture that was represented in the extensive marketing materials, people commended the attention to detail regarding the cultural practices of diverse indigenous communities. Within this strain of commentary, Hispanic fans brought their own cultural heritage into the review sections, with one subscriber noting that, “As a Mexican-American and a huge anime fan, this show speaks to me. It has deep-rooted cultural references that I admire seeing in an anime format. Yes, it's a bit rough around the edges and if you are a hard-core Anime fan, then yeah, maybe this show isn't for you.”

This simultaneous awareness of the heterogeneity of the community’s ideologies within this comment, as well as the strategic balance that it strikes between the importance of representational politics and the production as a flawed work of art reveals the wide range of nuance that invested subscribers are willing to present to the broader public in order to manage expectations while simultaneously incur further support. Given the positionality of this work, as representative of a Crunchyroll Original that has decentered Japan from the process of creating anime remains significant not because of its unique relationship with Japan per say, but because it speaks to the broader cultural and racial politics within the United States. When Alexander speaks of the paltry representation of Hispanic and Latin American characters and productions, she is directing her critique to the United States, and as such, the weight of her contribution to Crunchyroll is as an intermediary between the peripheries of both the niche brand community and the Hispanic anime fandom, not necessarily either party’s relationship with Japan. Interestingly, while the Crunchyroll and Webtoon collaborative adaptations are characterized by

certain creative decisions that may position the influence of Japanese studios as a hegemonic center within the broader transnational and global creation of anime-influenced franchise work, the affordances of the medium itself in relation to its aesthetic and cultural norms may be liberatory in the context of *Onyx Equinox*. This may be due to the fact that for many Latin American communities, anime culture itself remains at the periphery of their cultural experience, and therefore, represents an alternative to and means of undermining American dominance within their mediascape. This is a similar dynamic as can be seen in France's engagement with anime culture, as "French media consumers' attitude toward Japanese cultural texts is shaped in part by France's complex relationship to U.S. popular culture whose highly popular nature raises the specter of cultural imperialism" (Darling-Wolf 2015).

Within this framework of seeing anime as a resistant category against the norms of American media cultures, Crunchyroll complicates these simple binary modes of consumption, as an American-based streaming service which interfaces regularly with what fans would consider more traditional anime work, as well as facilitating work that lingers around the transnational and transperipheral which blurs the cultural boundaries and speaks across them. On the one hand, it is the simultaneous mainstream, yet still liminal positionality of Japanese anime within the American mediascape that may allow for "anime-inspired" work to push against certain boundaries of animation cultures within the United States and for cultures that exist in the periphery to communicate through these mediums. It is clear that at least with works like *Onyx Equinox*, there was a clear focus on speaking directly to Latinidad fans, both within the United States and Latin America. While there were clear economic incentives to fund and support the production of *Onyx Equinox* in order to reinforce the robust performance of Crunchyroll as a streaming service, as a means of pushing the boundaries of their niche audiences outwards, and

to reinforce loyalties for niche groups within the consumption tribe, this does not necessarily discount the production's activist-oriented bend for Latinidad viewers. As one reviewer comments, "I'd love to see more American (North, Central, and South) indigenous stories done with this level of care."

The neoliberal leveraging of identity-related communities within the fandom through microcasting is clearly a strategy that Crunchyroll continues to invest in, in the hopes that they can reinforce the links between the brand community. While *Onyx Equinox* is perhaps the most involved work as of late which exemplifies this trend, Crunchyroll has also previously made *Children of the Ether*, a short fourteen-minute ONA (original net anime) directed by LeSean Thomas, which focused on a Black protagonist and also had Hispanic representation, albeit as antagonistic characters. The series was a co-production between Crunchyroll and the French studio, Yapiko Animation. Since the release of the ONA, there has been no additional news regarding the production, and Yapiko Animation's Japanese branch has since gone under. However, in 2021, Crunchyroll announced that they would be working on an original anime, titled, *Dantai* with Idris and Sabrina Elba, which may play into similar dynamics of leveraging racial representation as a means of bolstering brand commitment.

Crunchyroll's strategies demonstrate that while it is necessary for the streaming service to continue to push the boundaries of their niche audience outwards, their efficacy for achieving this varies. One strategy they employ is attempting to facilitate synergy between perceived adjacent media fandoms, as well as with the corporations that govern those spaces. While the Crunchyroll and Webtoons collaborations remain conspicuous as two distinct, somewhat peripheral media forms whose borders are attempting to overlap to a certain degree in order to encourage further cross-over of their respective fan communities, such initiatives prove to be

challenging, particularly when each respective fandom has deeply entrenched ideals revolving around their beloved franchises and what constitutes proper treatment of the material. Beyond these crossover industrial co-productions, Crunchyroll has been active in additional initiatives with media entities that may be more familiar to American anime consumers. For example, Crunchyroll and Adult Swim, the adult-oriented programming block of Cartoon Network collaborated in order to bring the production, *Fena: Pirate Princess*, which streamed on Crunchyroll and aired on Adult Swim's Toonami block. Another project between Crunchyroll and Adult Swim is *Blade Runner: Black Lotus*, an offshoot animated work of the franchise, *Blade Runner*, which will likely continue to push the bounds of Crunchyroll's niche programming towards other communities, such as sci-fi fandoms. These collaborations also reflect a desire to foster synergistic relationships between viewing platforms, as many American anime fans would recognize the branding of Adult Swim and Toonami as earlier anime distributing precursors. While the reactions to these productions from both the brand community and fandom respectively have yet to be determined during the time of research for this chapter, it may prove to be a more successful collaborative endeavor than the somewhat conflictual Webtoon co-productions.

Beyond cross-fandom synergy, Crunchyroll's strategy of microcasting to specific racial demographics with their productions reveals the manner in which marginalized fans navigate multiple competing ideologies and demands as both fan/brand enthusiast and member of their racial community. The streaming service's challenge is negotiating the balance between microcasting to a particular enclave within the niche fandom at the intersection of race and fandom, while still maintaining a sense of cohesion within the community. Such tensions reflect Ahmad Jamal conceptualization of retailing, which he defines as "a system that comprises

activities that facilitate co-presence and aggregation of individuals having a multiple sense of being” (2003). While this play towards appealing to a subscriber’s multiple sense of being, particularly for fans of color, can result in a more powerful engagement with the content and service, it must also be facilitated skillfully, playing at the liminal boundaries between identity categories. This is particularly challenging when the exact elements that may constitute the microcast may go against various established beliefs of the broader fandom, such as the position and role that anime-inspired cartoons, like *Onyx Equinox*, should have within the catalog. These are the moments of friction where the brand identity of Crunchyroll, as the “fans-first” platform for anime becomes counterproductive to the growth of the service itself, due to its discursive formation as exacting experts of *Japanese* anime. Indeed, it may be easier for a generalized portal like Netflix to release such hybridized work without having to navigate the fan’s wrath. Yet, as outlined above, leaning into the process of creating a narrowly-tailored “authentic” experience for the micro-niche yields various defenses against the vitriol that purist fans may have to the work, and allows for spaces of trans-peripheral contact. While discursively, Alexander has clearly contributed her work for the primary consumption of Latin American viewers, the production’s heavy reliance on established narrative tropes, such as the hero’s journey allows for the work to be easily multicast to different audiences as well. But balancing universal tropes with “authentic” cultural narratives is crucial for Alexander’s work to reflect upon Crunchyroll as well, at least enough for the fan of color to feel satisfied with the production’s representational capacity and Crunchyroll’s commitment to their racial community. Fans are willing to work for authenticity, as authenticity is always a “relationship between individuals and commodity culture that is constructed as “authentic”” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 14). But the production and the broader brand that houses the work (Crunchyroll) must reveal their

dedication towards building this collaborative sense of authenticity. To betray this project is to betray a fan's ideological positioning and destabilize their ontological security, a dangerous proposition for a brand that is heavily dependent on the fandom. In this way, being able to multicast cultural narratives to different micro-niches becomes critical as Crunchyroll becomes situated as more than simply an intermediary between Japan and the rest of the world, but an active contact point for hybrid anime cultures that have been developing in the peripheries unbeknownst to Japan's local industries. Expanding and being responsive to the needs of these hybrid cultures may prove to be one element that can reinforce the brand community by intersecting the politics of race and representation, though one must be wary to toe the line with the broader fandom. Cultural consumption continues to become a means of articulating identity and proliferates the various meanings, both symbolic and economic, that are associated with consumptive acts. As such, we must consider how streaming services become structuring models of normative behaviors, and how users both resist and negotiate with the service on variant aspects that seek to redefine community.

Conclusion

On August 9, 2021, both Funimation and Crunchyroll announced that they would merge under the umbrella company of Sony, along with the niche streaming service, VRV. This will likely usher in a new chapter in the history of niche streaming services, as it is now becoming clear that niche services are consolidating, perhaps in order to gain their own respective edge in the streaming wars. It is uncertain as of yet whether this consolidation is a commentary on the unsustainable nature of niche portals in the current distribution ecosystem, or if these various acquisitions actually speak to the strength of niche streaming reflected in the desire of larger industry players to retain these services. Regardless of these uncertainties, Funimation described

the acquisitions as, “a big win for creators, and especially, for fans! Yay for anime!” (Funimation 2021), promising to establish the most comprehensive lineup of content through these synergistic mergings. Unsurprisingly, subscribers were ambivalent regarding this development, wondering whether the centralized ownership of these established brands may create a monopoly that will edge all other smaller players out, how subscription prices may change, and how the culture of these respective brand communities may also transform.

What remains clear however is that fandom will continue to objectify and manifest their values through acts of consumption, but that these acts are subject to sustained scrutiny and ambivalence on the part of the subscriber base of these services. In this chapter, I explored the frictions that are associated with the niche streaming service when the corporate entity attempts to profit off of pre-established fandoms and the strategies that are employed in order to reinforce the loyalties of subscribers for the brand community, at times, at the behest of the broader fan community. Far from the discursive formation of the niche streaming service as natural fixtures within the contemporary media distribution landscape, which tout that they are “by fans, for fans,” the reality remains that an enormous amount of effort is necessary in order to court these fandoms, and often, the shaping of a brand community in relation to these groups proves to yield tensions that do not connote an easy one to one translation between being a fan and a consumer subject. Whether it is through collaborative enterprises or the leveraging of identity features that are interwoven in all levels of one’s consumptive identity, each strategy derives various advantages and disadvantages towards the streaming service’s endeavor to stretch the boundaries of their own target community. Crunchyroll may yield remarkable influence through the shaping of their interface, implying who and what kind of engagement characterizes their “ideal” subscriber, consequently influencing how fans must present themselves, but fans also find ways

to retaliate against the service using these various features against them. Creators who distribute through Crunchyroll may use the branding associated with the service in order to attempt to bolster their engagement with their content, though this too comes with a fair share of friction between the viewers and the production groups. The resulting tableau that is manifested among the motivations between fan, subscriber, creator, and corporate intermediary paints a vivid picture of user and creator agency, as well as various forms of retaliation on the part of the platform on the level of interface and production practice.

Chapter Three
Global Anime, Hybridity and Transperipheral Networks

Introduction

The mainstream success of Netflix and other streaming distribution services have opened the door to a new stage of globally hybrid anime productions, in part due to the necessity of content that can speak across multiple cultural and national borders. This is significant as animation studios around the world have the opportunity to craft narratives that speak more closely to their cultural experience and national background, fostering their representational capacity on a global scale. While anime has historically been a culturally hybridized medium, the contemporary distribution landscape has allowed for more visible representations of narratives outside of Japan, particularly from creators who have been considered marginalized or “peripheral” in some capacity. While the previous chapter touched upon *Onyx Equinox*, which was distributed from a niche streaming service, this chapter focuses on how transperipheral collaborative relationships are fostered in order to create hybridized anime productions that expand upon the representational desires of multicultural audiences for a mainstream service, in this case, Netflix. While Netflix continues to have an outsized influence on the kinds of stories that are being distributed around the world, it is clear that minority creators are also exercising their agency and taking advantage of the affordances of global streaming in order to make advances on their own desired development on behalf of their industry and for their own global recognition.

Within the scope of this chapter, I explore hybridity in anime and the potential for transperipheral networks to be created through the lens of major streaming services by looking at three case studies, all of which can be found within Netflix’s anime catalog. The first is *Yasuke*, a

Netflix Original production headed by LeSean Thomas and animated by Studio Mappa that expands upon visions of the Afrodiasporic experience through speculative fiction around a real historical figure. Through collaborating with a Japanese studio, Thomas is able to bring about a novel vision of the Black experience through the medium of anime, one that is predicated on tropes that are distinct from Western animation, which is what Thomas's production history is most known for. The second case study is *Trese*, a Filipino *komik* that was adapted into an anime-inspired production that takes advantage of the diasporic network in order to provide a globalized and cosmopolitan narrative around folkloric traditions of the Philippines. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of *Seis Manos*, a genre-bending production that takes place in the fictional town of San Simon, Mexico, and draws inspiration from Mexploitation, Blaxploitation, Kung Fu, Narcos, and grindhouse genres. I observe the extent to which empowerment can be found within a hybrid narrative that takes advantage of racialized genres that often essentialize certain identities through established tropes. Yet, because of the cross-racialized support that one can find within these genres, it may allow for the capacity to create transperipheral networks through the lens of genre formation. Given the different kinds of hybridity that can be found within a singular genre within a singular catalog, I reflect upon how transperipheral networks can be established through the "major," in this case, Netflix, and the affordances and limitations of these various modes of hybridity as forms of empowerment. While hybridity can in some ways be referred to as a subversive force that can be used to recuperate power from the colonizer's gaze, the necessity of hybridity and the ability to speak across cultural boundaries through the particular lens of Netflix, can also be seen as a disadvantage for those who do not wish to "universalize" their narratives for global consumption.

Before going further, I will clarify the status of certain established forms of hybridity that are already widely known within the global anime fandom, namely that of “anime-inspired” work. As stated in the previous chapter, “anime-inspired” content has often received mixed responses from the broader anime fandom. That being said, there have been success stories in the past, such as *Avatar: the Last Airbender* and its sequel, *The Legend of Korra*. In defining “anime-inspired,” I draw upon the scholarship of Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Ozmatgin, who states that it is “an effort by non-Japanese studios to produce an animated show that refers to, reproduces, and even emulates that particular (rather elusive) something found in anime that attracted so many fans around the world” (2020, 112). As these two scholars argue, the term was used primarily as a marketing tactic in order to signal to producers and global fans alike that there would be an awareness of the cultural background and common literacies that are necessary for decoding anime texts in order to enhance the appeal of the production for niche audiences. This literacy stems from the knowledge of a series of repetitive performative aspects of Japanese anime, which Stevie Suan terms as “anime-esque” acts. Such anime-esque acts can include common facial expressions, gestures, aesthetics, generic conventions, narrative developments, character archetypes, and more that provides anime its unique recognizable identity and which often do not necessarily have equivalents within American animated cultures.

For example, the *Avatar* series not only took the aesthetic conventions of Japanese anime to portray its characters, but they also took the narrative flexibilities that anime has provided in the broader culture of animation in order to create an epic narrative that revolves heavily around continuous character development and explores themes of oppression, grief, and intergenerational trauma in ways that resonated with viewers, even as they continued to age up. The understanding that cartoons and animation have the capacity to speak meaningfully to adult

audiences and explore complex themes beyond standard children's fare is also a kind of literacy that stems from Japanese anime, where adult-oriented animation is commonplace. The ability for anime-inspired work to speak to audiences even as they mature was reflected in *Avatar's* incredibly positive reception in the Netflix catalog. Despite the fact that *Avatar: the Last Airbender* was a series that was initially broadcast in 2005 and that there was "little fanfare" about its release on Netflix, its rerun on the streaming portal placed it consistently in the top ten most watched shows following its drop date (Tassi 2020). This may be partly due to nostalgia, the show's accessibility to a diverse age-range, and the fact that the millennial generation seems more open to mature explorations of cartoon content than their predecessors, all of which would have helped to reignite interest in the series and adult-oriented anime inspired content more broadly (Evershed 2021).

Despite the fact that anime-inspired productions largely fell out of vogue following the aughts, becoming a "category [that] is practically obsolete in the United States," the mainstream success of streaming services and their capacity to distribute and produce more diverse forms of content has reignited a new stage for anime-inspired work, particularly productions that actively target older audiences (Daliot-Bul and Ozmatgin 2020, 113). For example, Netflix began their anime-inspired slate with Powerhouse Animation's *Castlevania* in 2017, and soon added *Blood of Zeus* (2020), *Seis Manos* (2019), *Trese* (2021), *Dota: Dragon's Blood* (2021), and *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021) to their adult-oriented anime-inspired lineup. Netflix is not the only streaming service who has turned its sights on anime-inspired work, as Crunchyroll also introduced productions like *Onyx Equinox* (2020), *High Guardian Spice* (2021), and *FreakAngels* (2022) among their first slate of Crunchyroll Originals. Through the support of streaming services, anime-inspired works have once again emerged as a viable media form, and

further, has encouraged creators' abilities to target a primarily (young) adult audience, which allows for more lenient expressions of violence, sexuality, and cultural narratives that don't often appear in animated form, invigorating a new stage of development for hybrid anime-inspired media.

Because digital streaming portals are liberated from the constraints of linear broadcasting schedules, services like Netflix, Crunchyroll, and Amazon Prime are able to more flexibly experiment with different types of content than previous distributors. Further, because of the global reach of many of these services, they are able to target niche audiences that exist across national boundaries, which may give producers more leeway in finding a sizable audience for their work. Finally, because there is an agreement between subscribers and services that they should be aware of what kind of content they are getting into when they engage with a production, more visceral depictions of violence, sexuality, and heavier topics are able to exist in anime-inspired cartoon form alongside Japanese originated content, which pushes against the expectations of the previous stage of anime-inspired work, which mainly consisted of children's or all-ages fare.

At the intersection between the digital affordances of streaming services and the transition to a novel industrial stage for global anime-inspired cartoons are diverse creators of color who are leveraging these new potentials to tell stories that expand representation for their respective cultures. Given that global streaming services must now cater to multicultural audiences, spaces for more international works have opened up within these services, particularly for those that can engage in a kind of cultural hybridity that can speak multivocally across international audience segments. In the previous chapter, I elaborated upon the challenges of engaging in hybridized work, to which anime-inspired content is a quintessential example,

including the backlash and ambivalence that marks audience and fan reception of these productions. Further, the dynamics of culturally hybrid productions that are most often circulated by these international services fall into modes of corporate transculturalism, where hybridity is leveraged as a tool to centralize the flow of global funds and ensure the economic success of established industries, thus reinforcing hierarchized international divisions of cultural labor (Miller et. al 2005). However, it is also undeniable that diverse creators have taken advantage of these very notions of hybridity in order to further carve out spaces of representation for their own respective communities and industrial needs. Certainly, exploiting the global success of Japanese anime and its recognizable database of tropes and aesthetics can help in the work's economic performance, particularly for industries that may not be globally renowned for their animation cultures. By being able to rely upon an established and vocal fandom, animation creators around the world can begin to cement their own respective presences on these digital platforms.

Part of the negotiation process of engaging with economically viable modes of hybridity includes grappling with the pressures of performing well across a diverse, multicultural audience. American-based streaming services continue to engage with different forms of benevolent cosmopolitanism in order to secure international subscribers. While this helps with the overall diversity of cultures that are represented in the anime-inspired medium, creators must continue to struggle with limitations on what kinds of content are privileged. While in Chapter Two, I spoke about the challenges of leveraging hybridity for services like Crunchyroll that aim to position themselves as experts of anime culture to their subscribers, in this chapter, I will focus on anime-inspired and globally hybrid work that can be found on more generalized platforms, like Netflix. Despite the limitations of leveraging hybridity, creators of color use hybrid media in order to

represent their respective cultures and build transperipheral networks that allow them to make their work more competitive on the global stage.

Hybridity

The concept of hybridity through the lens of postcolonial and globalization studies has been used to destabilize and problematize identity, particularly through the lens of multiculturalism and third spaces. Multiple concepts have been used to explain the phenomenon of cultural mixture. As John Szwed states,

“words like nomadism, deterritorialization, transnationalism, modernism, and postmodernism, all...attempt to characterize some of the conditions under which people come into contact and produce new cultural form; or *marronage*, *border culture*, *heterogeneity*, *cosmopolitanism*, *multiculturalism*, and *pluralism* ” (2011, 20).

Historically, hybridity, or the mixture of race, culture, class, and society more broadly was considered to be a negative development that tainted an otherwise “prelapsarian purity” (Pieterse 2006, 667). However, in the contemporary moment, hybridity has a more positive connotation that can destabilize hierarchical relationships between the center and margin, the major and minor. For example, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat use the concept of polycentric multiculturalism in the context of challenging Eurocentric interpretations of history through emphasizing a rejection of

“a unified, fixed and essentialist concept of identities (or communities) as consolidated sets of practices, meanings, and experiences. Rather, it sees identities as multiple, unstable, historically situated, the products of ongoing differentiation and polymorphous identifications and pluralizations” (2014, 300).

In other words, identities and the formation of cultures are always in flux and defy simplified ways of knowing that are often forced upon by the colonialist’s hegemonic gaze. Because of this multiplicity and cross-border mixing, this may render hierarchies which organize these cultures vertically unstable as one can identify the dominant culture within manifestations of the hybrid,

and through often violent contact, the colonized culture can also affect the dominant culture through multidirectional influence.

Similar to Stam and Shohat's observations, Homi Bhabha theorizes the concept of "third space" by stating that "it is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable" (Bhabha 1994). It is only when we understand identity and culture as inherently a product of a "third space" that the "discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (1994). This space is not one of overdetermination, but "one loaded with ambiguity; it represents an act of unleashing that post-dialectical moment when people reject structures and hegemonies and occupy any one of the heterogeneous spaces where they negotiate narratives of their existences...within the postcolonial condition" (Kalua, 2009, 25). As Adela Licona elaborates, the third space can be seen as an "in-between spaces that are created at virtual and material intersections" (2012, 4). Third spaces defy borders and the binaries that generally accompany them. They have often been used in order to colonize and to impose, separate and organize; yet, the work of third space allows for the possibility to articulate "a deconstructive process that consciously challenges and ultimately dismantles the identity binary" (2012, 6). Conceptions of hybridity and third spaces by these scholars are generally perceived as positive and as having the potential to subvert the hierarchies imposed upon communities by colonization and phallogocentrism; however, scholars do not unilaterally share this view. While the emergence of this "post-dialectical moment" may possibly liberate one from hierarchy, it is often accompanied with a sense of disorientation, as

symbols, words, and other articulative forms lose their initial meanings. Within that sense of initial loss, there emerges a site of intense struggle in order to retain control over meaning, whether that control is vested to the dominant group or the colonized remains uncertain, and the possibility of multitudes of meaning that can co-exist may emerge, but that is determined by whether each respective side can hold their own against the flows of culture.

As Marwan Kraidy argues, the rhetoric that revolves around hybridity, particularly from global corporate entities, is often staged as a means of using disparate cultures to recenter power within established economic hubs. For example, such rhetoric can be seen in Netflix's branding of its catalog as "benevolently cosmopolitan" due to the diversity of the content that the company distributes, though its presence is often disruptive to the media distribution environments that it plants itself in on a global scale. Kraidy defines this form of hybridity as corporate transculturalism. This distinction is important to consider in relation to the way scholars are thinking about hybridity above, as Kraidy admits that real power can remain in the hands of the dominant cultures, while they allow for benign forms of cultural mixing that does little to actually vest colonized and marginalized communities with any sense of significant influence. As Lipsitz observes, the advent of hybrid identities, languages, and aesthetic styles may "confirm(s) in the sphere of culture the failure of nationalist anti-colonialist movements around the globe to translate national independence into something more than neo-colonial economic, cultural, and even political dependency" (1994 28). As he elaborates, one manner of viewing postcoloniality and the hybridity that emerges from these temporal and spatial ruptures is as evidence of failure of the nation-state. If previously, the struggle of disenfranchised communities was within the realm of the nation, the growing prevalence of cross-cultural economic, cultural, and political global flows of influence may very well nullify the struggles for

autonomy and empowerment by these communities, as the struggle may no longer be rooted within the nation. This is certainly the case for Netflix, as to take on the influence and significance of this streaming service within one's local media ecosystem is not merely a battle that is limited to the boundaries of the nation, but that of Netflix's global presence. Yet, as Lipsitz ultimately concludes, there is also the possibility for new forms of resistance being made available through these transnational, global and hybrid spaces.

Similar to Kraidy, Nestor Garcia Canclini takes a much more ambivalent perspective to hybridity and the consequent deterritorialization of culture and content across national borders. On the one hand, the growing intensity of cross-cultural flows encourage the breaking down of certain hierarchies, so that the once established markers of high and low culture, such as the content that is deemed to be high-brow being institutionalized into museums and folkloric art being relegated to street markets and peripheral spaces, are now thoroughly disrupted. Street art, folkloric art, and high art, all circulate within the same spaces, which break down former hierarchies that reinforced the idea of "stable wholes" (Canclini 2006, 429). Instead, we are in the age of decoupling and decollecting, of divorcing from original contexts and recreating new ties and in "this multiple appropriation of cultural patrimonies opens up the possibilities of experimentation and communication with democratizing uses" (432). Such observations echo Roland Robertson's conception of "glocalization," where foreign and global concepts, products, and entities are indigenized in certain ways to suit the local context, inevitably creating a product of "in-betweenness." While Robertson initially explored this concept in order to critique the assumption of cultural homogenization in globalization studies at the time, Canclini is more interested in how cultural hybridity is often a result of the deep inequities of power, which does not "subvert" hierarchies *persay*, but rather works at times to reinforce these structures, as well

as work around them. For example, noting the Mexico and United States borderlands and the hybridity that one can observe within these spaces, he states that “from both sides of that border, intercultural movements show their painful face: the underemployment and uprooting of peasants and indigenous people who had to leave their lands in order to survive” (434). While the development of hybridity and third space defy straightforward designations of victimization and empowerment, Canclini acknowledges that these processes are often motivated by necessity borne from inequity, suffering, and exploitation. It is in the resilience of these marginalized communities in the face of profound ruptures within the realm of the political, economic, and cultural that hybrid cultures are able to emerge. Similarly, as Shohat notes, a “celebration of hybridity or syncretism per se, if not articulated in conjunction with hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the *fait accompli* of colonial violence” (1992, 109).

Given these divergent views of hybridity and the potentials of third-space cultures, scholars have analyzed the methodologies that have been used by disparate communities to hybridize cultures and products in the first place. In thinking about how communities may negotiate control over the configuration of ICTs and appropriate its various affordances to suit their own respective needs, Francois Bar, Matthew Weber, and Francis Pisani use the concepts of baroquization, creolization, and cannibalism in order classify modes of hybridized localization. While their case study revolves around communities using various technologies, this framework of thinking about appropriation in relation to hybridization methods is applicable more broadly to other cultural communities as well, and I would like to leverage this organization through the lens of anime history.

Beginning with Bar. et. al's "cannibalism" paradigm, this refers to the appropriation via "dismembering, absorption, and chemical transformation" of the phenomenon in question. Within the scope of anime history, one can think of the development of Osamu Tezuka's artistry, which was heavily influenced by Disney, Paul Terry's *Mighty Mouse*, and other Japanese animation predecessors at the time as a model of appropriative "cannibalism." Osamu Tezuka is widely known as the "the Father of Manga," particularly contemporary manga. His most internationally well-known work, *Tetsuwan Atomu*, or *Astro Boy* as it is known in the United States, was the first anime to be imported into the United States. *Tetsuwan Atomu* was able to become its own original anime production following its *manga* release, and is simultaneously considered as the instigator that hailed the modern age of Japanese anime. Tezuka has stated in relation to *Tetsuwan Atomu*, that "Atom's father was in effect, *Mighty Mouse*, whose father was *Super Man*. And that's the reason I used the [English] subtitle of "Mighty Atom" on the opening page when I first serialized the story" (Tezuka qtd Schodt 2007). While one can trace the various influences throughout the series' aesthetic and narrative conventions to American animators like Disney and Paul Terry, Tezuka ultimately consumes and deconstructs these myriad elements of animation from around the world, in order to reconstruct something original. This originality of Tezuka's vision would eventually birth a medium that would be considered a unique part of the Japanese media landscape, anime, and will be considered as inherently distinct from its various original influences essentially mirroring the process of Bar et. al's "cannibalism."

Creolization refers to the process of mixing and remixing that yields unexpected hybridized cultures (Bar. et. al 2016, 623). As Robert Baron and Ana Cara eloquently state, "Creole forms are expressions of culture in transition and transformation. Even as these emergent forms persist and become institutionalized after initial culture contact, they continue to embody multiplicity, render multivocality, and negotiate contension while also serving as a means of national identity and creative expression" (2011, 3)

Creolization has traditionally been applied to Latin American and Caribbean societies; however, the concept has since expanded to describe the phenomenon of cultural contact and mixture more broadly. Scholars remain divided as to whether creolization can be applied more broadly to globalization. For those who disagree, they argue that creolization should be a culturally specific phenomenon, and to apply it to all forms of cultural contact and mixture diminishes the concept and its uniquely destabilizing effects of hierarchy and cultural dominance. Yet, I argue that there are benefits in using the term in characterizing the “multiplicity” and “multivocality” of a culture in transition more broadly. As Edouard Glissant emphasizes, “Creolization, one of the ways of forming a complex mix and not merely a linguistic result - is only exemplified by its processes and certainly not by the “contents” on which these operate” (1997, 90). Glissant’s emphasis on the process of creolization and not the end results or the “contents” in which mixture is happening can potentially liberate the concept from a distinctly bounded cultural center. Within the realm of global anime, we can see creolization happening through the development of “anime-inspired” productions, particularly from creators that may hail from communities and cultures more commonly thought to be marginalized. The analysis of Sofia Alexander’s *Onyx Equinox* in the previous chapter reflects this. The use of the anime aesthetic form to illustrate a narrative deeply inspired by MesoAmerican indigenous mythologies serves as a means to simultaneously destabilize the more “dominant” global form of anime and the characteristics that define it, as well as shaping these mythologies in order to become comprehensible in anime form. The exploration of “anime-inspired” by these creators is often developed in reference to the process of cultural contact and the destabilizing of what those contacts bring, such as aesthetic forms, narrative norms, cross-cultural knowledge, and more. In other words, despite the asymmetrical nature of this collaborative creative relationship, the

process of blending the global culture of anime and the folkloric Maya and Aztec mythologies simultaneously influences both cultural forms, as opposed to a unidirectional flow of influence where the more marginalized culture is exploited by the more dominant.

Finally, “baroquization” refers to the process of infiltrating previously dominant forms and “the artistic appropriation of spaces through filling and layering” (Key et al. 621). It is “docile, where users follow an appropriation script laid out for them by the provider” (629). Instead of a process of direct consumption and confrontation that is implied in the hybridity borne from “cannibalism” or creolization, the baroque refers to the existence of a cultural presence within the dominant that is able to fill in the gaps of culture, contributing to the disjunctive and discontinuous collage of the culture, and yet not fully assimilate to the dominant form. It is in the inharmonious image that one can see baroquization operating within the broader schema of hybridity, a refusal to meld neatly, but allowing the fissures within the image to simultaneously be evidence of violent confrontation and resilience of colonized cultures that is often the impetus for such hybridity to emerge in the first place. Yet, this inharmony is not necessarily poised as a confrontation. Like creolization, baroquization has been associated with Latin American hybrid cultures, but the observable dynamics between the meeting of two cultures and the ways in which each side adapts to the other can be helpful in thinking about how marginalized cultures continue to negotiate and operate in spite of (neo)colonial contact. In thinking about baroquization in the context of anime culture, we may think about the anime media mix form of marketing and creation. For example, there are ways in which racial representation can be extended more broadly through the transmediation of franchises. Taking a basic example, while *Pokémon* the anime series is not necessarily known for the diversity of its main cast, through the games, players can customize their skin tone, hair styles, and more.

Further, they are always the protagonist of their own adventure. While this diversification does not necessarily pose a confrontation to the main series, nor its accepted narrative, the affordance of changing race within the video game quietly expands the possibility of representation for the franchise. It is a kind of diversity that follows an “appropriation script” laid out by the creators of the game, and ultimately remains “docile” to the franchise as a whole, because it never quite confronts the lack of diversity in the franchise’s other mediated iterations.

For many scholars of hybridity, this phenomenon often develops between moments of cultural conflict, such as colonial contact, forced migration, and more. It is a relationship that is characterized by its verticality and through stark asymmetries of power. But there are also ways in which hybridity may develop between cultures that are considered to be “peripheral” in the broader global hierarchy, fostering what Francois Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih has conceptualized as “minor transnationalisms,” which serves as an alternative to “major discussions of transnationalism and globalization [which] assume that ethnic particularity and minoritized perspectives are contained within and easily assimilated into the dominant form of transnationalism” (2005, 7). Instead, we can also consider how globalization also encourages minor-to-minor contact and collaboration in ways that sometimes circumvent the major altogether. Such explorations of hybridity take deep inspiration for Edouard Glissant’s conception of “relations,” where cultures are not discrete bounded units which hybridize only through violent moments of infiltration, but have always already been hybrid. Such conceptions of hybridity also allow for intersectional identities that revolve around the loci of alterity to find relations across national, cultural, and spatial boundaries in order to influence the boundaries of community. For example, in Joel Windle and Luiz Paulo Moita-Lopes’s scholarship on queer musical artists from “peripheral” cultures, such as Jaloo, a *tecnobrega* artist from the Amazon

region, reveal that they use their intersectional identity in order to forge relationships between peripheral spaces, including different forms of other marginalized music. Further, through leveraging the objectifying gaze of the major, Jaloo is able to create an “invocation of others who recognize and accept him [which] points to the effort to establish a new collectivity, through the alignment of shared sensibility and values that are indexed by the unusual and the exotic” (2021, 8). Thinking about the potential of transperipheral networks, where the major can be circumvented and the desires and multivocality of the subaltern can become articulated and visible beyond its comparison to the major yields potential spaces of subversion of corporeal semiotic markers and significations that have largely been shaped by the (neo)colonial and hegemonic gaze.

When applying a trans-peripheral framework to the global production networks that now characterize the creation of anime, the need to expand these global collaborations have been enhanced by the necessity for global streaming services to appeal to multiple audience subsections. The recent trend of culturally hybridized productions, such as “anime-inspired” work that are headed by diasporic creators of color, such as *Yasuke* and *Cannon Busters*, yield opportunities to foster transperipheral alliances between cultures that are often sidelined within the broader network of media distribution. While certainly, the major is not completely circumvented, as the presence of American-based distributors such as Netflix, Crunchyroll, and Amazon Prime are necessary in order for these works to be economically viable and experienced by audiences on a wider scale, wholly discounting these alliances and the affordances they provide on a representational scale, both in front and behind the scenes would be a disservice to the labor that continues to happen in order to increase opportunities for diverse communities within the animation industry.

In looking at how transperipheral alliances may emerge from the production of global anime, I begin with an exploration of LeSean Thomas's *Yasuke*. Thomas is a Black anime creator who began his career in the United States as an TV animator for works like *Lizzie McGuire*, *Batman: The Brave and the Bold*, *Green Lantern: First Flight*, *The Boondocks*, *Black Dynamite*, and more (Wachter 2021). In 2009, Thomas was hired at JM Animation in South Korea, which was seen in some ways as a step back in terms of his career. However, Thomas was frustrated by his own lack of knowledge regarding the animation process, which was most often outsourced to different countries outside of the United States, with the United States handling only the pre-production and post-production. In order to get a better idea of each step of the animation process, as well as the skills and labor that went into the art form, Thomas decided to take a hands-on approach to learning the animation cycle in South Korea (Thomas 2012). This collaborative effort between Thomas and the Korean animation staff that he forged relationships with would jumpstart his original project, *Cannon Busters*, which feature a full cast of characters of color and is a production that provides a kind of speculative Afrofuturist exploration for Black characters beyond an experience mired by racial tension and historical trauma. This exploratory thread continues into Thomas's Netflix Original production, *Yasuke*, as he teams up with one of the most renowned Japanese anime studios, Studio Mappa, in order to create a fictional fantasy narrative surrounding the historical figure, Yasuke, who is known to be the first African samurai in Japan who served the *daimyo*, Oda Nobunaga in the sixteenth century. In leveraging cultural hybridity on all levels of narrative and production for both *Cannon Busters* and *Yasuke*, Thomas is able to expand upon the representational capacity of his productions by broadening the boundaries of what can be considered a "Black experience" through the support of Korean and Japanese animation studios respectively.

Following this analysis of LeSean Thomas's *Yasuke*, I will shift my attention to the Filipino anime, *Trese*, which provides another vision of hybridity apart from the one that is presented in *Yasuke*. *Trese* is a Netflix Original that started as an award-winning *komik* series by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldsimo, and revolves around Alexandra Trese, a detective and *mandirigmang-babaylan* (warrior shaman) based in the Philippines. In its animated adaptation, *Trese* is a production headed by Base Entertainment, which is quartered in Jakarta, Indonesia, and uses talent across the Filipino diaspora. As such, *Trese* faced different challenges than *Yasuke* regarding its positioning as an anime work within Netflix's catalog, due to the creative team circumventing the comparative "major" of renowned Japanese animation studios. Within *Trese*, we see a different transperipheral network emerging than the one that forms around Thomas's productions, one that primarily focuses on the Filipino diaspora and reaffirms a myriad of experiences within the community through resonances in the media text and the series' marketing material. Using textual analysis around the formal and paratextual media that has emerged from this franchise, I look at how the creators of *Trese* take advantage of the "major," which in this case, is Netflix in order to reinforce the transperipheral network that made the production possible in the first place and glean support from Filipino audiences around the world.

Finally, I end with an analysis of *Seis Manos*, an anime-inspired Netflix Original production created by Brad Graeber and Alvaro Rodriguez, and animated by Powerhouse Animation Studios. *Seis Manos* is a genre-bending series which draws inspiration from Kung-fu films, Blaxploitation and Mexploitation flicks, grindhouse, drug cartel movies, and Mexican folklore, and takes place in the small fictional bordertown of San Simon, Mexico. The series serves as a kind of love letter to the pre-existing tropes and stylisms of these various genres, and

much like in *Yasuke*, it is the juxtaposition of unexpected tropes and racially-charged elements that allow for hybridity to disrupt the limited expectations of a community's boundary of experience and expression. Yet, as all these global anime and anime-inspired productions reveal, hybridity continues to be limited in its ability to fully challenge pre-existing hierarchies of power, as often, "hegemony is not merely reproduced but refigured in the process of hybridization" (Pieterse 669). Even looking at the case of racialized genres, the blending of which offers another perspective on creating a trans-peripheral mode of reference through the lens of genre and classification, the production cannot quite shed essentialist notions of identity, in which the Westernized, "major," predominantly white gaze is inexplicably a part of.

Through genre hybridity, I argue that there are moments when marginalized characters are able to find camaraderie with other characters that are considered to be at the social periphery, such as shamans, orphans, and women in male-dominated careers. While these characters, particularly Brister and El Balde, play into certain racialized stereotypes, they are also able to challenge the dominance of the "major" by finding ways to survive through these transperipheral relations. In this manner, while the hegemonic gaze is not completely dispelled, and potentially harmful genre norms are still used to attract audiences, the message that individuals in the periphery can find productive and supportive relations with one another may help to expand the representational capacity of this production beyond stereotypes that are supported by genre structures.

Genre, Raciality, and its Limitations

During the 1970s, Blaxploitation films rose to prominence for their ability to speak against the asexual, benign, and unthreatening depictions of Black masculinity that was touted by Hollywood previously. The rise of Blaxploitation films coincided with the rising anger of the

Black community towards the failures of a political system that allowed them to technically participate in the sociopolitical body, but that resulted in their persistent marginalization and subordination in arenas of economics, politics, and culture, leading to an increase of protests and uprisings across 298 cities within 1967 and 1968 (Guerrero 1993). The Black Power movement was in the cultural conscience of the United States and due to the 1948 Paramount Consent Decrees, new theaters could not be built without the express consent of the courts, which forced studios to use the theaters that already existed, which were primarily centered in urban areas (Bausch 2013, 260). Coupled with the shifting racial demographics of neighborhoods, with middle-class white families moving to the suburbs, and urban hubs generally populated by Black communities, the Blaxploitation genre, with its tropes of masculine hypersexuality, drug peddling, violence, and “winning out” against White systems of exploitation was ripe for consumption for urban Black audiences.

While Blaxploitation’s reception was divisive in the Black community, it was clear that at the time, there was some sense of revolutionary spirit to the emerging genre. However, as the developments of the genre became more concretized, the influx of cheaply made films served to contribute to the “destructive shift in the black community away from collective political struggle of the 1960s and toward such individualist, self-indulgent activities such as drug consumption and the single-minded pursuit of material gain” (Guerrero 1993, 97). As one can observe, racialized genres, like Blaxploitation, simultaneously allow for the desires for empowerment to be expressed over racial and cultural inequality, yet often, only in a negotiated manner in which certain expectations must be upheld. While the racialized character may emerge victorious over their respective oppressors within Blaxploitation, they concurrently play into certain ingrained stereotypes that have largely been shaped by hegemonic Western-centric and

predominantly white perspectives in order for this victory to occur at all. While in the 70s, the advent of a swaggering, hypersexual and vengeful Black protagonist was seen as revolutionary from the more “inoffensive” depictions of docile and asexual Blackness, it begs the question as to how these genre conventions perform in the contemporary moment, where a different historical and cultural context must be taken into consideration. Even when Blaxploitation was in vogue in Hollywood, the reception of this content from the Black community was deeply divided, with some accusing these productions of glorifying the actual suffering that occurs in the “ghetto” in fantastical ways, without ever actually engaging or inspiring any sense of political consciousness within its viewership. Others have critiqued the misogynistic depictions of Black women, who were maligned in various ways in order for the protagonist to confirm his Black masculinity (Bausch 270). Given this divided reception, we can think of the current context of Black Lives Matter and the persistent over-surveillance of the Black community due in part to the deeply ingrained cultural imagery of Black masculinity being overly-violent, irresponsible, and sexually-threatening, and whether creators can draw upon the tropes of racialized genres like Blaxploitation, as the producers of *Seis Manos* do, without considering how these representations may be perceived in the contemporary moment.

Similarly, we can think of *Seis Manos*' depiction of Mexican “borderlands” like the fictional San Simon as a space of drug-trafficking violence and Mexploitation supernatural horror doing similar ambivalent work. On the one hand, we can see *Seis Manos* being pitched as a production that would be “really important to the Hispanic community” (Viz Media 2019). Jonny Cruz, the voice actor for one of the main characters of the show, Jesus, explains the significance of the show further gesturing to his skin at one point in an interview and commenting that “this shade of brown is represented to show kids that they matter. That they are

part of culture. That they are included” (Viz Media 2019). While not discounting the fact that it is significant that Latinidad talent can get jobs where they can perform parts of their cultural identity on a global platform, we must also think of the ways in which this kind of media is part of a larger cultural narrative surrounding issues of immigration and national security. As Camilla Fojas observes, *borderland* shows “turn the metaphoric strangeness of the outskirts into the actually marginal space of the borderlands where living on and traversing the fringe is associated with all manner of criminality” (2013, 42). While there are examples of strong female leads in the show, as well as transperipheral alliances between minority characters, we must consider: during a time when xenophobia and heightened rhetoric around border policing is the norm, do we need more shows that depict Mexican narcos and an excess of violence, even if it is through the lens of genre play and hybridity? Delving into this inquiry continues to reveal that minority representation remains a negotiation between the structuring forces of sociopolitical discourse and the way media either feeds into or subverts these cultural tropes. Whether the creators are able to rewire these tropes through the hybrid intersections of other racialized genres will be analyzed later in this chapter.

It is worth noting that genre itself has been subject to much scholarly attention for its ability to articulate cultural conventions; when race and other identity features become intersected with genre’s organizational capacity, one can often understand genre as having a negotiative relationship with marginalized groups. Genre, as Jason Mittell notes, is not simply a quality of the text, but a discursive battleground for meaning both within and outside of the formal text (2001). They organize more than collections of tropes. For example, Ana Alacovska and Dave O’Brien observe how genres have the capacity to gender, racialize and classify power, stating that “as much as genres constrain careers, they can also enable careers” (2021, 650),

referring to the ways in which women are often more visible in children's television than more "masculinized" genres. While this carves out enclaves of media production where women can find a productive and non-toxic work environment, it is also at the cost of having to work in genres that are seen as more infantilizing. Similarly, we can apply this organizational feature to racialized genres and the visibility and support that creators of color receive, insofar as they are able to stay within the bounds of their expected genres. As Andre Carrington notes, "genre functions as an organizing principle in the field of cultural production," and it is through these reproducible genre conventions that permeate popular culture that we can find salient racialized thinking, both for the purposes of reinforcing and subverting a marginalized positionality (2016, 2). Here, we can observe the fate of talented actresses such as Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson when Blaxploitation films fell out of vogue in Hollywood, who "all but disappeared from the commercial screen by the end of the decade [70s]" (Guerrero 1993, 100). Genre, in conjunction with their racial background, kept these actresses out of commercial filmmaking due to the perceived inability to translate across genres and be accepted. Genre, then, is organizational, not only of tropes and narrative expectations, but of people and the communities that they represent as well.

Rick Altman's foundational work on genres has given multiple frameworks to conceive of the concept, such as a contract between audience, creator, and broader institution, as a kind of blueprint, as a label, and as a kind of structural framework. He concludes by noting that "it is of course [the] ability to serve multiple functions that gives genre the power to secure privileged relations among cinema's various components" (1999, 4). None of these concepts fully entail the racialization of certain generic categories, and an exploration of genre which is "attentive to filmic texts as well as cultural, social, and ideological contexts" become all the more necessary

(Ritzer and Schulze 2015, 13). Altman recognizes the ways in which we must think of genre studies from both the perspective of its ideological and ritual functions. The former draws from the work of Althusser, observing that genres and established narratives serve as a vehicle for governing bodies to create “narrative situations and structural relations as offering *imaginative* solutions to society’s real problems” (27). In this manner, audiences may be lured into a sense of complacency and apathy towards the nation’s pressing issues, such as immigration, racism, and more. The latter argues that “audiences are the ultimate creators of genres...narrative patterns of generic texts grow out of existing social practices, imaginatively overcoming contradictions within those very practices” (27). When thinking about racialized genres and their possible hybrids, recognizing whether genres serve a ritual or ideological function is crucial. The possibility for cross-cultural contact and formation of transperipheral alliances in spite of divisions in culture and experience may speak to a genre’s ritual functions, where we can smooth over a sense of conflictual difference in order to divert attention to the broader problems that are faced by marginalized communities more broadly. However, viewers must simultaneously be wary of the ideological functions that racialized genres and its hybrids may support, as seeing diverse communities of color represented in animated form on screen may potentially exacerbate post-racial and colorblind ideologies, as well as ignore concerns of racism within and across various marginalized communities towards one another. As Altman diplomatically concludes, it is likely that genres serve both ritual and ideological functions simultaneously, though as I would add, it may be more critical to see how audiences take or do not take certain actions in relation to their exposure to a production before we can accurately analyze how these ritual and ideological functions ultimately manifest themselves. Different modes of leveraging genre will yield different instantiations of where a production ultimately lands on the ritual/ideological

continuum. Because of this, I adhere to conceptualizing genre within the scope of this chapter in relation to its racializing capacity and opportunities for hybrid contact to be much like all principles of division, meaning, and definition-making, a struggle for “power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore their mobilization and demobilization” (Bourdieu 2010, 481).

Hybridity within genre perhaps has the potential of enhancing the space in which racialized genres can overlap with one another, creating transperipheral networks, and broadening the areas where marginalized creators may see their creative vision find purchase. The contact point of two or more genres that draw upon distinct cultural backgrounds along the lines of race may address some of the concerns that critics of hybridity have brought up in the past. On the one hand, hybridity in relation to genre has been critiqued by scholars like Janet Staiger and Martina Allen as being too loosely applied to many works which draw from multiple genres, but do not actually do the labor of establishing cross-cultural encounters which is where the possibility of political and cultural subversion comes into play. As Staiger observes, the more common genre remixes remain “in the same language family of Western culture. The breeding occurring is not cross-cultural, but perhaps, and with a full sense of the derogatory implications involved, even a case of inbreeding” (Staiger 214). Allen brings into question how one can even conceive of genre in ways that can be comparable to one another, given the manner in which generic attribution is often defined by “vastly disparate and incommensurable criteria” (Allen 2013, 5), whether that be style, sociality, functionality, politically, or more. Given the myriad trajectories in which genre expectations are shaped, whose boundaries are often porous borders require redefinition, which narrative is not “hybrid” in the sense that it has taken influence from multiple sources? Finally, both authors critiqued the political dimensions of the word “hybrid,”

which has always been used to disrupt essentialist notions of culture and identity, but historically, has been framed negatively as the “polluting” effects of racial miscegenation. If “hybridity” is co-opted by colonizer cultures in the name of aesthetics and the pretense of progressivism, while not engaging in the laborious work of critiquing the “major” and cross-pollinating various cultures meaningfully, the subversive potential of hybridity is ultimately defused. Yet, whether *Seis Manos* in its exploration of racialized genres are able to enact cross-cultural engagement, in spite of the limitations of the genres that they draw from, may allow for a kind of critique of the “major” to emerge. As I will ultimately outline, the ways in which my three case studies utilize different modes of transperipheral collaboration in order to expand upon the representational capacity of their respective targeted communities; however, the necessity of this hybridity which emerges in order to speak to the widest possible audience segmentation continues to delimit creators of color due to the necessity of having productions that are easily digestible regardless of cultural background.

Yasuke and Speculative Blackness in Anime

While Black characters are relatively uncommon within Japanese anime, there is a history of representation within the medium, particularly as secondary and tertiary characters. Often, these characters remain less than stellar representations that peddle stereotypical visions of Blackness inspired by American media cultures, such as minstrelsy and Blaxploitation. For example, characters like Sister Krone from *The Promised Neverland* are characterized by their minstrel appearance and relatively inferior positionalities to their paler and more clever counterparts, perpetuating stereotypes of inferior maternal instincts and femininity, while characters like Coffee from *Cowboy Bebop* take direct inspiration from the work of Pam Grier. Japanese anime is an inherently hybridized and cosmopolitan medium, taking inspiration from

all kinds of global filmic traditions, and it is clear that the media cultures of the United States which capitalized on various forms of exploitation of Blackness also reached anime creators who draw inspiration from this imagery. While this hybridization may enhance anime's cosmopolitan positionality, which can be instrumental in defining a kind of sophistication and worldliness that may benefit global reception of the media form, the same cannot necessarily be said for the Black community as certain harmful tropes continue to be reified on a global level. Black anime fandom clearly recognizes the differences in Japan's racial and cultural constitution. However, given anime's global success, the demands of the global fandom and their concerns must now come into consideration. As one fan notes, "people say 'well it's from Japan, it's not here, it's [racial politics] not the same thing.' But what they don't realize is that on a global scale, it is the same thing" (anime fan qtd. Toussaint-Strauss 2020). In other words, becoming a global and cosmopolitan phenomenon that draws economic and cultural support from a wide diversity of cultures comes with the heavy responsibility of recognizing the ways in which certain cultural politics begin to apply more widely to that international medium, and with renowned celebrities and athletes of color being so vocal about their love for anime (e.g. Crunchyroll All-Stars Interview series), the excuse of cultural difference can only go so far in the contemporary moment, especially because of the central role that global audiences and international streaming services now play in the anime production and distribution landscape.

Simultaneously, Black anime fans take advantage of the abstract flexibility of the animated form in order to read raciality onto characters that are otherwise made to be racially ambiguous. As Scott McCloud has infamously said, "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it" (McCloud 1993, 36). Given this

trend, it is unsurprising that animation, and more specifically, anime, becomes the arena in which representation is made fluid and is fought over. For example, fans of color use this fluidity to reach a consensus around characters regarding them as being Black despite the fact that visually, these characters do not necessarily connote a direct connection to Blackness. *Dragonball Z*'s Piccolo and *Cowboy Bebop*'s Jet fall into this category of the fandom reading raciality into characters that are not canonically confirmed as a particular race, nor do they necessarily physically emulate the features that are normally associated with Blackness. Amy Shirong Lu's study regarding how global viewers perceive raciality in various anime works ultimately concludes that viewers tended to engage in "Own Race Projection (ORP)," where Caucasian viewers were more likely to interpret the characters as Caucasian, while Asian viewers were more likely to perceive the characters as Asian. Drawing from Sato's work, Lu brings up the concept of "*nihonjin-banare*" or "de-Japanizing" cultural works in order to encourage the global reception of Japanese products. In doing so, she brings up the inquiry that perhaps this may be a trend in anime, where the racially ambiguous nature of anime character designs may be a commercial tactic in order to encourage the feeling of cultural proximity across multiple cultural boundaries. However, there are some drawbacks to Lu's study, not least of which, the vast majority of her participants were Caucasian. Further, Lu does not explore the fact that certain physical features in animation, like in other cultural art forms, are not received so neutrally by fans, viewers, and consumers. One such feature is dark skin, which is a much heavier and loaded signifier than the "default" of pale skin. An animated character with dark skin cannot uphold the same kind of strategic ambiguity that is provided to animated characters more broadly, and as such, a heightened consciousness regarding the features and characteristics of dark-skinned characters are taken into account by fans of color. A persistent failure of dark-skinned anime

characters in achieving the same quality of screen time and character depth weighs heavier on fans of color, than the more neutral and naturalized positionality of their paler counterparts, for whom they may be able to transfer undesirable characteristics away from the self and retain the more desirable due to animation's ambiguity.

Despite a dicey track record of representation of dark-skinned characters within Japanese anime, there has been a more recent push towards leveraging hybridity in order to provide a more diverse range of characterizations. Japanese creators such as Shinichiro Watanabe, Takashi Okazaki, and Sayo Yamamoto have crafted narratives that draw inspiration from contemporary Black culture, with more well-rounded dark-skinned characters that rival their more pallid peers. Shinichiro Watanabe has directly collaborated with Black artists (Nai Br.XX, Denzel Curry, Thundercat) for his production, *Carole and Tuesday*, in order to bring a more grounded representation of Black artistry, allowing them to vocalize on behalf of these characters through music, while Japanese voice talent vocalize the characters' speech when they are not singing. In doing so, these racialized characters are able to reveal the diversity of Black experience, one that can hold a multitude of voices and cultures within the singular polyvalent Black body beyond the limitations of historical trauma, victimization, exclusion, and suffering that permeates the Black American experience. To this point, it is necessary to bring up the necessity of problematizing border logics in imagining futurity, in which Afrofuturism is but one of a larger network of racialized imaginings of the futurism, which includes indigenous futures, Sinofuturism, Chicanafuturism, and more, all "signaling both resistance and radical dreaming through a creative refusal of the hegemonic imposition of a utopia for some, neoliberal dystopia for the other(s)" (Van Veen and Anderson 2018, 9). In *Carole and Tuesday*, we see the collaboration between Afrofuturism and Asiatic futurism. Watanabe leverages hybridity in order to avoid an

essentialist notion of Blackness and instead, reflects upon an “emergence of a black identity framework within emerging technocultural assemblages” (12).

We can see similar trends happening in LeSean Thomas’s Netflix Original series, *Yasuke*, which is a narrative that emerges at the intersection of the historical past and a speculative future in which robots, *Onmyodo* mystics, werebears, psychics, spider witches, and samurai all co-exist within one temporal and spatial dimension. In the midst of these wildly varying magical beings, a Black samurai is not so unusual at all, though much of Yasuke’s backstory revolves around finding a place for himself within Nobunaga’s entourage of warriors and retainers, with many of those around him doubting his capabilities of serving the *daimyo* due to his outsider status. Following Nobunaga’s defeat at the hands of spider witch, *Yami no Daimyo*, Yasuke witnesses the ritual suicide of Nobunaga and lives with the failure of being unable to protect his leader, eventually turning into a reclusive *ronin* in a remote village where he is tasked with protecting the young psychic girl, Saki from the *Yami no Daimyo*’s machinations.

While the animation was largely done by Studio Mappa, Thomas was careful in bringing Black talent into his production, with Nick Jones Jr. helping with story creation, Flying Lotus composing the music for the production and LaKeith Stanfield voicing Yasuke in the English dub. In creating this work, Thomas has stated that he hopes that *Yasuke* will act as a “gateway” anime to get a broader and more diverse global fanbase interested in the medium. This is one of the reasons why he included renowned artists like Flying Lotus into his production, as those interested in Flying Lotus’s music may be drawn to *Yasuke*, which peddles in many tropes unique to anime, such as magical girls and mecha, thereby increasing the possibility of laypeople who may not be familiar with anime to become interested in the medium. Simultaneously, anime fans who are not familiar with the work of Flying Lotus and LaKeith

Stanfield may go on to become fans of their work, allowing for *Yasuke* to become a kind of cross-cultural conduit for Afro-Asian media cultures. As Thomas notes, “I am not a Japanese person, I am not an expert on Japanese culture, but I do know the craft of television animation and am able to navigate the waters between the West and Japan, and understand what makes both of those exciting” (Thomas qtd. Romano 2021). In a similar vein, Thomas has been vocal in his claim that *Yasuke* was a joint project between Flying Lotus, Stanfield, and his own extensive experiences of being a Black person within South Korea and Japan. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, he states that Stanfield encouraged a centralization of themes of trauma and mental health, while both he and Flying Lotus also spurred the inclusion of a “supernatural take on the material, which involves a Japan populated by mechs and magic” (2021). Much like in *Carole and Tuesday*, this hybridity aids to push the boundaries of what is considered to be a “Black experience,” which includes the potential to be an honorable and cosmopolitan samurai, by simultaneously challenging essentialist and monocultural notions of both Japanese and diasporic Black cultures and leveraging experiences of violating borders in order to find camaraderie through multiplicity and commonality. It is unsurprising then that *Yasuke* finds connection between another outcast within Nobunaga’s entourage, an *onna bugeisha* (female samurai) named Natsumaru who herself, represents radical border-crossing both in her femininity and also when she reveals that she is a spy for both sides of the Iga clan and Hattori Hanzo within Nobunaga’s own faction. Marginality becomes the space in which multivalent, even contradictory, senses of belonging are found. Multidirectional border-crossing simultaneously becomes the liberatory representational force behind the Black samurai, as well as the supposed success of Netflix’s global content strategy.

Ironically, it is this inclusion of widely-accepted and familiar anime tropes which attempt to vocalize hybridity that led to a backlash against the series, with critics stating that this fantasy-oriented fictional approach to Yasuke's narrative is far less interesting than the actual biographical narrative of the historical figure (Berlatsky 2021, Baron 2021, Daniels Jr. 2021, Robinson 2021). The protagonist has been criticized as being "soulless, with no personality," in spite of Stanfield's contribution of centralizing the destabilizing nature of trauma, and instead, it seems as "worldbuilding took precedence over the main character" (Complex 2021). Thomas has gone on record noting that one of the reasons why this mystical worldbuilding took a prioritized role within the production was because "I don't think true historical biopics in Japanese anime are popular...Historians will like it, but it's kind of boring for the average viewer" (Limbong 2021). While it is uncertain where Thomas draws upon this data, as historical anime works have been known to succeed both within the global anime fandom and outside of it without the inclusion of robots, magical girls, demons, and orientalized mystics (e.g. *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Hyouge Mono*, *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju*, etc.), the expectation of a Black creator to produce work that may be seen as more "authentic" to the outsider narrative also delimits the expansive affordance of hybrid narratives. This thread of criticism reveals the ways in which cultural hierarchies continue to persist in spite of the destabilizing forces of hybridity. On the one hand, Thomas's leveraging of the Japanese anime aesthetic form and the established tropes that come with it in order to tell a narrative about the mythical and elusive past of the African diaspora allows for a remixing of past, present, and future that refuses the notion of "real time" which may singularly offer up a likely traumatic history of exploitation. Instead, radical speculative reimaginings at the nexus of past, present, and future allows for Yasuke's exploration of outsider status to feel as timely as ever, while projecting counter-pasts, and therefore, the

possibility of counter-futures outwards. As Kodwo Eshun has stated in his own research on Afrofuturism, “to establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble counter-memories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (2003, 288). Speculative historical fiction is certainly one area in which such counter-memories can manifest themselves in the consciousness of racialized communities through engaging in what Tobias C. Van Veen calls chronopolitics. Chronopolitics recognizes the fabricated nature of historical narratives, and within history’s synthetic nature, one can find ways of rewriting the past in ways that can “intervene in the production of collective memory” (2015, 80). It is through this rewriting that we can think about the possibilities of the future in ways that may seem unforeseeable in the colonized and dystopic now. However, the manner in which these “counter-futures” are ultimately imagined in *Yasuke* seem inevitably entangled in the hegemonic positionality of Japan’s orientation of anime culture. Indeed, while Thomas’s imagining of a “gateway” anime that can include Black influence and presence more directly than ever in the series’ production is certainly present in *Yasuke* and a step forward for a more inclusive global anime culture for the contemporary fandom, the speculative nature of the *Yasuke* narrative is limited by its necessary adherence towards accepted medium conventions and expectations of that global audience. In this manner, the hybridity that is represented in *Yasuke* may be seen as a form of baroquization, where representation and hybridity can happen, but largely through its ability to stay on the tracks provided by anime culture more broadly. To veer too far away from these tracks would be to lose the advantages that come with the anime form, hence motivating Thomas to stick closer to these established conventions.

As I have analyzed in previous chapters, there are tangible benefits towards co-opting the anime genre within the organizational classifications on media streaming services, as well as the established aesthetics, due to anime's proven popularity on a global scale. The fact that there are established fandoms and consumers around the world to target lessens the risk of creating animated work that may not find a substantial audience to serve. If, as Stevie Suan argues, anime's ability to present itself as anime is linked towards catering towards certain expectations and databases of signifiers, then *Yasuke*'s acceptance into the body of work that are accepted as "anime" is predicated its ability to emulate these various features. Thomas's extensive experience within the East Asian animation industry and his collaboration with Studio Mappa, a production company that is known for creating globally renowned anime, such as *Attack on Titan* and *Jujutsu Kaisen*, gives Thomas a significant edge in appealing to both the Black anime fan community who are hungry for better representation within anime, as well as other subsections of the anime fandom that would be familiar with Mappa's reputation for high quality fare. As such, no critic can say that *Yasuke* looks "inauthentic," a common assessment for other anime-inspired and hybrid cultural productions that often weighs heavily on the market performance of the production, as was outlined in my previous analysis of Crunchyroll Originals.

In some ways, one can hear echoes of Director Sofia Alexander's approach to alternative cultural "authenticity" in relation to anime in Thomas's interviews, particularly when global fans compare *Yasuke* to another Black-inspired hybrid work, *Afro Samurai*. However, as Thomas notes, *Afro Samurai* was created by Takashi Okazaki and the kinds of Blackness that is represented in that production stemmed from Okazaki's love for "Black culture; discos, afros, music, and all that stuff" (Egan 2021). Okazaki himself has stated that it was not only his love

for Black culture that inspired *Afro Samurai*, but also his curiosity regarding the ways in which Hollywood perceived Japanese culture, mentioning films like *Kill Bill* (cinema factory 2007). In other words, it was an experimental work of “double consciousness,” reflecting on what it means to look upon the Other (Hollywood’s interpretation of Japanese culture), from the perspective of the dominant media culture, while simultaneously fostering yet another gaze within the self, which engages with the fascination for yet another “Other” (a Japanese individual’s interpretation of Black culture). These fractured perspectives serve as a kind of feedback mechanism referencing one another in border-crossing ways, all the while reveling within the “inauthenticity” and incompleteness of a trope-laden understanding of disparate cultures, seeing whether such an experimentation can lead to a radical re-envisioning of these essentialized notions. As Thomas mentions, he believes that *Afro Samurai* is much like *Kill Bill* in that regard, that both works are “a surface love letter to a culture that is not his own, but nonetheless loves” (Egan 2021). However, it is implied in this statement that *Yasuke* can be perceived differently from *Afro Samurai*, precisely because of the Black creatives that are taking an active role in the creation of this narrative, which invites perspectives that may go beyond an outside fascination for Black culture towards questions of how Black culture may already be woven into the fabric of anime culture through the lens of Black creators. Thomas has expressed some frustration regarding the inevitable comparisons between *Afro Samurai* and *Yasuke*, noting the challenges of simply “exist[ing] at the same time” (Egan 2021); however, it would also be disingenuous to state that there aren’t similarities between the two works, especially in the ways that both works incorporate *mecha* aesthetics, the long-term influences of trauma, visceral depictions of violence, and hybridized temporalities to create a disorienting genre-crossing production.

As *Afro Samurai* drew a substantial global cult fandom following its release, both within the Black community and beyond it, it would have been a safe bet for the creators of *Yasuke* to take note of how *Afro Samurai* told its speculative fictional narrative. In this way, we can observe the creation of certain tropes and “blue prints” for not only how to tell a Japanese-originated anime narrative replete with familiar tropes, but also works that purposely draw from divergent forms of cultural hybridity. Indeed, the shackles of retaining a veneer of “authenticity,” of having to cling to the benefits that are yielded when one decides to call their work anime, remains a limiting factor that plays safely within the guidelines of audience expectations. Such patterns bring to question to what extent one can consider the production of *Yasuke* as taking full advantage of the affordances of speculative historical fiction in disrupting the contemporary colonial mentality through “emerging global technocultural assemblages” given this close adherence to global expectations (Anderson and Jones, 2016, VII).

Despite the limitations imposed upon the anime cultural medium that collectively attempts to define the boundaries of what is or is not anime and the limitations of the cosmopolitan reimaginings of *Yasuke*, it is impossible to deny that Black creators are continuing to gain representational ground both in front of the screen and within the industry. For example, the first Black-led studio, D’Art Shtajio, opened up in Japan powered by the vision of its founder, Arthell Isom. D’Art Shtajio have used their artistic talent to collaborate with Black celebrities like Jay-Z and Pharrell, while also doing collaborative work with Japanese studios on globally renowned productions like *Gintama*, *Tokyo Ghoul: Re*, and more. D’Art Shtajio constantly acts as a mediator between Black creators who would like to see their narratives be told in anime form and the industrial practices and expectations within Japan, ultimately embodying a hybridized spirit of creativity that resonates across cultural boundaries. Similarly,

Noir Caesar is a Black-led independent media company that focuses on the intersection of anime and Black culture and provides news, original content by creators of color (manga, documentaries, etc.), merchandise, and support for various media projects. However, unlike D'art Shtajio, Noir Caesar is based in South Carolina, emphasizing the potential for Black-created anime and manga-inspired work to be viable outside of Japan, as well as the possibility of combating anime's representational issues without necessarily having to relocate to foreign grounds. Fans within the United States have also organized conventions devoted towards emphasizing inclusive spaces for people and talent of color, such as BlerDCon and Dreamcon, which seek to increase the visibility of diverse racialized fans and talent of color, while addressing issues that are unique to these respective communities.

Concurrently, global streaming services are recognizing the desires from various audience subsections who wish to see content that represent racialized communities and hybrid works within global media forms. With a proven history of being able to retain different cultural influences and flexibly meld them into a cohesive narrative without being flung out of orbit from the gravitational pull of anime's signifier database, anime is clearly a prioritized experimental battleground for testing out what forms of hybridity are viable in the eyes of streaming platforms. While in the last chapter, I focused on the ways in which niche streaming services like Crunchyroll have been engaging in culturally hybrid original anime work in order to expand their capacity to target micro-niche segments of their subscriber base, major platforms like Netflix have also been clearly interested in expanding the boundaries of what constitutes anime content and the polyvocal potential of its inherent hybridity. Yet, the need to prove legitimacy within the medium, perhaps especially because of Thomas's own doubly liminal and marginalized status as a Black anime director from the United States and a foreigner within Japan, reveals the ways in

which hybridity continues to delimit forms of diversity in both media content and the voices that exist within these global forms. The trans-peripheral production network that is shaped by Thomas's collaboration with Japanese production studios in order to present a Black vision of the diasporic mythic past clearly expands the possibilities for Black storytelling in a media form that is commonly thought of as associated with East Asia; however, the need for more diverse voices persists within. As Thomas aptly notes, the global animation media industry is not yet in a position where the question of whether diverse racialized content or Black-led anime media is sellable or not can even be accurately analyzed, as there are so few examples to draw from. The burden of representation cannot fall on the shoulders of a singularly exceptional individual, nor their limited output. However, as global media distributors who rise to the position of being able to fund more creators of color who can push the boundaries of hybridity emerge, we can see transformations in the transperipheral production networks. While the major is never quite circumvented in these developments, it nevertheless shows different paradigms of how minor cultures collaborate with one another and the strategies for audience acceptance that emerge at the nexus of diverse global cultures.

***Trese*, Third Space, and Diasporic Hybridity**

While *Yasuke* and LeSean Thomas's body of work reflects a collaborative transperipheral network that takes advantage of the cultural "source" of anime in order to tell an Afrodiasporic narrative that can retain a sense of "legitimacy" in the eyes of the global fandom, the creators of *Trese* foster a different transperipheral network that takes advantage of the Filipino diaspora in order to tell a story that focuses on rites of passage and the liminality of identity. *Trese* has been referred to as a kind of Filipino iteration of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with a strong focus on Filipino folklore and mythologies, all the while pulling from a global network of diasporic talent

to bring the characters to life (Conley 2021, Bricken 2021). Throughout the series, the viewer is introduced to a diverse collection of Filipino mythological creatures, such as *aswang*, *tikbalang*, and more, as well as cultural customs and superstitions that mark everyday life in the Philippines. *Trese* uncovers a series of corruptions within the Filipino government, as she recognizes the failures of the police units that administer justice, as well as the fact that the person behind the series of murders is Mayor Santamaria who uses his political position to cover up his various supernatural crimes. Through the assistance of her spiritual servants, *Trese* is able to bring the mayor to justice and save Manila from imminent destruction from the advent of the god of war. Hybridity between the folkloric “local” traditions and its intersection within the cosmopolitan center of Manila reflect the modes of transformative cultural production that Canclini observes that continues to guarantee the presence of the hybrid popular traditions, even as these media productions are aimed for the consumption of a broader global audience. As Canclini articulates, “Folk, or traditional cultural facts are today the multidetermined product of actors that are popular and hegemonic, peasant and urban, local, national, and transnational” (2005, 157). Certainly, the framing of *Trese* in relation to the more globally known franchise of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, reveals one small strategy in translating the folkloric elements of the show into something culturally proximate to a broader audience subsection, as well as another way of siphoning and piggybacking on the influence and success of a hegemonically positioned Western fantasy narrative.

Trese was directed by Filipino-American Jay Oliva, written by native Filipinos Tanya Yuson, Zig Marasigan, and Mihk Vergara, and produced by Base Entertainment, which is headquartered in Jakarta. Vocal talent consisted of the Filipino diaspora, such as Shay Mitchell and Eric Bauza for the English dub and a full cast of Filipino voice actors in the Tagalog dub.

While *Trese* is an incredibly popular and award-winning comic book series within the Philippines by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldesimo, Tanya Yuson comments in an interview on *Trese After Dark*, a program that features an inside look at the people who created the production, that it was very difficult to convince other broadcasters that they approached to accept an animated version of *Trese*. Yuson goes on to note that during this difficult period, it came to her attention that Netflix had been actively looking for anime that was created outside of Japan. After pitching *Trese* to the anime branch of the streaming service, it was approved for global distribution. The fact that Netflix was willing to engage with the series and to anime work outside of Japan more broadly reflects their commitments to exploring new international avenues for content that speaks to more peripheral experiences. Netflix is not only interested in pursuing successful Japanese-based productions, but also works that speak to the global hybrid cultures that have emerged around the international anime fandom that Japanese production industries may have ignored. In the case of *Trese*, Netflix's strategy proved to be successful for the portal, as the production sat on the "Top 10" charts for nineteen countries, including Austria, Germany, the USA, Jamaica, Lithuania, and the Philippines (Ichimura 2021).

Within the marketing material of *Trese*, there was a heavy focus on identity representation and the possibilities of underserved communities, in this case the Filipino diaspora, to be the privileged audience. For example, in *Trese After Dark*, all of the interviewees noted the pride they felt as Filipinos in relation to this production. *Trese*'s English voice actress, Shay Mitchell, a member of the Filipino diaspora, would recount how working on the series made her feel closer to her heritage and that the largely Filipino creative talent reflected the production's commitment to representation and diversity (Asilo 2021). Similarly, Director Jay Oliva recounts how excited the voice actors and actresses who auditioned for parts were "to not

have to hide their accent and also hide that they're Filipino," reflecting a cultural experience that is rooted in a particularly global instantiation the Filipino identity (Oliva 2021). In other words, given these accounts of reclaiming heritage and being able to outwardly perform as Filipino speaks primarily to a global, diasporic experience, which would bolster the support from an international audience who seeks this kind of cultural familiarity that is not often represented in mainstream animation fare within English-speaking countries. This is significant because the diaspora often seeks to use media and the repetition of certain performances (e.g. cooking, ways of speaking, ways of behaving, code-switching) in order to engage in "diasporic reassertion" within their respective spaces (Karim 2003).

One manner of recreation is to "reterritorialise the diaspora through the resonance of electromagnetic frequencies," in other words, through engagement with media (Karim, 2003, 10). One common function of diasporic media is a representation of a desire for homecoming, which is derived from what Vijay Mishra refers to as the "diasporic imaginary." This sense of "imaginary" manifests when mourning transforms to melancholia where, "we are struck by the match between a diaspora's memory of homeland (which defies representation) and the nature of the lost object that forms the basis of melancholia. In melancholia, the object lost is of 'a more ideal kind'" (9). Leveraging the diasporic imaginary, diasporic media often draws from desires manifested in a kind of "homeland myth," where the fetishization of "cultural memory and (trans)national desires, are represented as mythical landscapes, invented traditions, stories and ceremonies" (Cunningham and Sinclair 10, 2001, Safran 1991). As Safran notes, these mythologies of return can be leveraged by diasporic communities in order to "solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity" and develop a sense of internal unity, particularly when religion, space and place, family, and a sense of local community is "threatened with disintegration"

(Safran 1991). At times, this desire to develop an internal unity can lead to ironically racist and exclusionary “fictions of purity as a kind of jouissance, a joy, a pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homelands are constructed against the multicultural, miscegenation-prone reality of the nation states in which diaspora are located” (Vishra 16). At once, the existence of these mythologies of both homeland and return are often conveniently developed by the diaspora themselves, these affective longings and established cultural narratives can be taken advantage of by media companies and creators who are seeking to benefit from this global ethnic network. Yet, we must always be wary of the ways in which media narratives around diasporic homelands may perpetuate purist and exclusionary ideas of what it means to belong within the diaspora, thereby reinforcing harmful hierarchies within the diasporic transperipheral network.

Trese manages to simultaneously exploit the homelands myth, while avoiding an exclusionary depiction of who is invited to be part of these feelings of belonging by showing a range of diasporic experience within their marketing material and paratexts. For example, Shay Mitchell recounts in *Trese After Dark*, “I am half Filipino and grew up hearing about the amazing folklore...anything that I wasn’t sure about in terms of Filipino folklore, I had my own little personal lesson that also helped me to understand the broader picture of what we were working on” (*Trese After Dark* 2021). Similarly, Mitchell recounts the laborious process of helping her to get the diction right in the Filipino sayings that are sprinkled liberally throughout even the English dub. Recounting her experience, it is clear that the process of working on *Trese* for the English dub team, was a process of reconnecting and rerooting one’s self in the performance of the mythic “homeland,” through the disciplining of one’s way of speaking, and therefore one’s way of expression, as well as a broader cultivation of folk knowledge. Similarly, diasporic talent, such as Jay Oliva received a “crash course” of living in Manila when he was

introduced to the transportation systems and the colors and textures of the city, which was a first for him, showing how a sense of “return” for a diasporic creator can be framed as rich marketing material for a global anime that is leveraging “cultural authenticity” as a means of reaching out to a cosmopolitan audience. Finally, in reinforcing the veracity of the “mythic homeland” and its relationship to the production material, Budjette Tan completed this line of questioning by recounting his experience of growing up in Manila, stating:

“As a kid growing up in Manila, it just felt so real *to encounter something magical*. I would be walking down the street and then my auntie would say, ‘Oh, you have to say *‘tabi tabi po’* because we just passed by, you know, an anthill.’ Or my dad opens the newspaper and the headline says there’s a *manananggal* attacking people in Sampoloc. So it’s not really a big difference from the Manila I grew up in. It just got translated into the comic book page” (*Trese After Dark* 2021, emphasis added by author).

In drawing upon both the mythic quality of the homeland and its relationship to the fictional text of *Trese*, the global diaspora can play into feelings of cosmopolitan knowing and belonging, through the engagement of this production, a clever marketing turn that once again reinforced the connective network of the globally-oriented transperipheral.

In amplifying diasporic voices, the creators of *Trese* attempt to frame their production as a kind of third space media, where the manifestation of the Filipino anime is predicated on the support of a wide variety of global Filipino identities and a mythic sense of connection to the homeland. There is a fostering of transperipheral networks that are built upon the connections of the global diaspora, whether that is manifested in the wide network of *Trese* fans who have vocalized their pride and passion for the media product in public venues or the transnational nature of *Trese*’s production, which had Filipino talent at all levels of the project. A range of experiences of what it means to be connected to Filipino culture through the intermediation of *Trese*, whether that is through a diasporic reconnection to language and folklore as expressed by the creative vocal talent of the series or the labor of creating a globally recognized Filipino

franchise through the support of Netflix aids in reinforcing a coalitional consciousness that is rooted in the in-between spaces of national and cultural borders.

In many ways, the production of *Trese* exemplifies the cannibalistic mode of hybridity, where the production team takes inspiration from many different cultural sources and creates something that speaks distinctly to the Filipino diaspora. By using the categorization of anime, the production team is able to depict some more graphically violent scenes that would likely not be as widely accepted in other animation cultures. It also signals that this production can target older audiences, which is a pattern that is seen throughout Netflix's anime catalog. However, *Trese* also takes inspiration from the animation stylings of D.C. animation, an aesthetic trend that fans and reviewers will pick up on, as well as its own native *komik* beginnings. By taking disparate inspirations and digesting them to create something novel, this form of hybridity aims to speak directly to a global Filipino audience, while not losing the ability to multicast to other audience subsections.

While the transperipheral nature of *Trese*'s production yielded support from a vocal subsection of the global audience and reinforces a sense of connection between largely marginalized viewerships, the same issues regarding its liminal placement within the anime genre in streaming services potentially yields friction regarding audience expectations. Given the ways in which LeSean Thomas leveraged a direct relationship to one of the most renowned anime studios in Japan in order to retain legitimacy and clout within the production of both *Yasuke*, the unique development environment of *Trese* provides a means of posing questions of gleaning legitimacy from yet another strategic angle: given the nature of genre categorizations within global streaming services like Netflix, Crunchyroll, and Amazon Prime, is it possible for the advent of a new stage of anime-inspired productions to push the definition of anime

outwards? In other words, can anime made by marginalized “outsiders,” both in the context of the Japanese production system, as well as the broader media landscape which is asymmetrically influenced by Hollywood, influence the constitution of the anime features database that is collectively manifested within the totality of the medium? While Stevie Suan’s conception of “anime-esque” acts to liberate anime from being rooted in some kind of fundamental notion of national and cultural origination, it only speaks of the collective clout that the Japanese anime industry has gathered through its rich media history in passing. This clout makes it more challenging for non-Japanese creators of anime to engage and contribute meaningfully to the evolving features of global anime. As Suan observes, while transnationalism has always been part of the long media history of anime development, the “Japaneseness” of anime has always been discursively formulated so that even as multicultural hands shape the development of the products, the branding is always associated as having some kind of inherent relationship to Japan. This trend ultimately relates to issues of perceiving “quality” and “authenticity” in anime media texts with Japanese-originated content almost always being perceived as being of a higher caliber than that which is produced from nations that have historically helped to develop anime for Japanese companies. This has ramifications for how global anime creators must frame their work obliquely in relation to these “Japanese” aesthetic and narrative ideals. We can see evidence of this in the ways in which *Yasuke* adheres to these conventions that are common in Japanese-originated anime, in spite of rhetoric regarding the liberatory potential of global hybrid anime in the quest for better representation for various marginalized groups.

As *Trese* largely circumvented Japanese production companies and talent, the conception of a Filipino “anime” genre and its inclusion in Netflix’s categorization can potentially speak to the influence that Netflix has on the global medium. Much like in the reception of *Onyx Equinox*,

viewers were appreciative of the fact that *Trese* existed in animated form at all for its representational capacity for Filipino culture on a global mainstream platform. Yet some viewers were quick to draw into question *Trese*'s ability to adhere to the expectations of the anime medium, commenting that the aesthetics seemed more Western-oriented than anime proper. Even further, some people commented upon the D.C. stylings of the animation itself, perhaps purposely avoiding the term, "anime" (star_hazard 2021, magnusdetmig 2021, snapbounceprint 2021, aylinpatacsil 2021, etc.). While viewers received the animation generally positively, as is evidenced by the positive commentary left in review aggregate sites like IMDB and forums like Reddit, audience members still remained uncertain of how to perceive *Trese* in relation to the larger catalog of Japanese anime that these services distribute, nor a consensus on how one should categorize this production. Some viewers seemed to not mind the anime categorization, and used the term freely to describe *Trese*'s positionality (francoischristana 2021, jameslouie-36425 2021, yd-17723 2021, thejassivakumar 2021, garycofield 2021, richarddillomes 2021, kegebler 2021, dharmashantilove 2021, etc.), while others resisted the terminology (paul_haakonsen 2021, trexmalabanan 2021, LavistaAtsival 2021), with one reviewer stating, "Trese is based on a komik of the same name from the Philippines (for crying out loud stop calling it anime, it's not from Japan)" (BoxwoodExpress 2021). Often, viewers defaulted to the more neutral term of "animation" in order to refer to the artistry of the medium, while not necessarily using a word that connotes a cultural center.

Compared to the backlash that anime-inspired productions like *High Guardian Spice* received on the Crunchyroll platform, where the relationship between "quality" and Japanese originations of anime was much more clearly articulated, viewers' acceptance of "anime" as a term that can apply to *Trese* was much more present within IMDB reviews. This may be in part

due to Netflix's more generalized approach to branding, where anime is but one genre and global medium of many that the service distributes. Beyond Netflix's branding strategy, this acceptance of the term "anime" for shows that are detached from the "major" of Japanese production circuits may also reflect the growing regionalized presence of anime aesthetics within Asia more broadly, through adjacent and hybrid media like webtoons, *donghua*, mobile games, and more, all of which draw heavily from anime aesthetics. Just as Netflix may conceive of "anime" as a loose network of interconnected interests within the fandom, the global fandom itself is responding to these developments where the space of "anime" also include media objects that are distinctly not anime.

While this flexibility of the part of the global fandom may be a positive development for global anime production in decentering Japan from discourses around anime, quality, and legitimacy, it is critical to note that industrially, the challenges of influencing global anime culture continue to persist. Part of understanding the dispersed agency that creators around the world can enact upon the medium is reorienting the transnational and global as having a multilateral directionality of influence in which global anime creators do not simply take inspiration from common tropes established largely by Japanese creators. Instead, these creators from the "minor" must also be able to influence the medium in ways that affect the output of Japanese creators as well as to further equalize and hybridize the global nature of anime production. An equalizing perspective on medium hybridity does not demand *Yasuke* or *Trese* to adhere to fantastical anime tropes in order to gain acceptance into the body of anime, but also allows these works to influence the nature of Japanese works. It is too soon to be able to accurately observe whether *Trese* and anime productions that originate from "minor" cultures will influence the visible citationality of anime's aesthetics for Japanese production companies.

Yet, what must be emphasized is the continued persistence of hierarchical modes of influence, even within hybrid productions and the trans-peripheral networks that allow these media forms to emerge.

***Seis Manos* and Racialized Genre Hybridity**

If *Yasuke* leverages the hybrid nature of anime in order to tell a distinctly Black, Afrodiasporic narrative with the talents of a renowned Japanese production company and *Trese* reinforces the diasporic trans-peripheral network in order to push the boundaries of what anime can be, then *Seis Manos* operates on a different logic of hybridity, one that draws inspiration from racialized genres in order to enhance the possibility of representation. The narrative of *Seis Manos* revolves around the lives of three orphans (Isabela, Jesus, and Silencio) living in San Simon, Mexico, where they hone their skills at Kung Fu with their father figure and *sifu*, Chiu. After a violent and supernatural altercation that leaves San Simon decimated and their father figure deceased, the three siblings seek to uncover the mystery around Chiu's past and his untimely death. An alternative narrative thread that unravels simultaneously revolves around Brister, a Black special agent operative for the Drug Enforcement Administration, who goes down to San Simon and collaborates with Garcia, the first female Mexican Federale that is based in San Simon, in order to track down a drug trafficking operation that is connected to the supernatural happenings around Mexico. Brister epitomizes certain features of the Blaxploitation cinematic genre, such as the hypersexual, gun-slinging, jaded Black hero, while the three siblings embody the Kung Fu and Mexploitation filmic tropes. The connective tissue between these two narrative threads is a third one that focuses on El Balde, the main antagonist of the show and a drug kingpin who uses black magic in order to keep his subjects docile and his mother, who is a witch, forcefully contained in a statue of Santa Nucifera, where he can use her flesh to transform

himself into a stronger iteration of himself. Such disparate narrative threads often allow for the comparative cultural exploration of features that both Daoist and Mexican cultures find significant such as the passage from life to death, the role of mysticism in the everyday lives of each respective culture, and more. Given the extensive genre mixing and remixing occurring in the text, the kind of hybridity that *Seis Manos* engages in fits most neatly with creolization. The process of this mixture yields unexpected moments of cohesion between these disparate cultures that enables for minor representation to be expanded due to the collaborative intersections of marginalized characters.

These multi-pronged narratives are often instrumental in targeting different audience subsections and fandoms of certain genres, theoretically enhancing the amount of viewers that these productions can speak to. As noted previously, genre, as an organizing force, tends to be a double-edged tool for racial representation, as more creative talent of color may occupy the limelight, but in ways that must follow the conventions of the genre. While subversion is certainly possible in the form of satire and challenging audience expectations, straying too far from these conventions and literacies that audiences have developed will divorce the creators from the benefits of working within genre constructs in the first place, such as established market audiences, marketing strategies, and more. While genre has been formative in getting talent of color on-screen through racialized categorizations, people have also used genre's organizational structures to both exclude racialized individuals and perpetuate inequality within the creative industries. "Hybrid" genres have drawn both critique and celebration for the ways in which scholars can understand the structuralist ways that creators can introduce multicultural and cosmopolitan works into the mainstream. On the one hand, genres are constantly reinventing themselves and are in a state of flux, with new features that potentially push the flexibility of the

blueprint outwards. However, on the other hand, scholars have been quick to recognize the ways in which “genre boundaries become a microcosm or metaphor for the constraining boundaries of societal forces and a personification of the oppressiveness of culture” (Beer, 2013, 146).

Similar to the manner in which *Yasuke* challenges the expectations of what constitutes the Afrodiasporic experience in an easily digestible manner for a mainstream audience, the blending of Mexploitation and Kung fu media content, both which tend to revolve around racialized communities reflect the complex histories of immigration that challenge any conception of global cultures as discrete and separate units, or provincially local. For example, Chinese immigration to Mexico increased sharply in the 19th century following the United States Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and numbered over 60,000 immigrants (Chao Romero 2010). Due to their economic success in Mexico, Chinese immigrants faced similar anti-miscegenation laws and racialized violence within Mexico. Further, as Robert Chao Romero outlines, many Chinese would also flee back into the United States, ironically making them the first “undocumented immigrants” from Mexico, and would later develop complex and sophisticated circuits for smuggling immigrants across the border back into the United States (3). Of course, such histories become conveniently buried under anti-immigrant sentiment targeting the Mexican diaspora in the contemporary moment, and yet, the existence of hybrid genre works like *Seis Manos* reminds viewers of the ways in which minor cultures have always interacted with one another in response to the broader influence of the “major.” In this way, it isn’t so unbelievable that in the world of *Seis Manos*, Kung Fu masters raise Mexican orphans and a Black DEA officer that is accustomed to the exclusionary practices of the American administration finds more agency and camaraderie with the first female Mexican Federale and the shamans of Mexican folklore, establishing transperipheral allies.

Simultaneously, through these transperipheral connections that are made between the characters, we can see forms of editing regarding genre in order to confront some of the original shortcomings of the Blaxploitation genre. For example, if misogyny was one element that was critiqued of the genre, the creators of *Seis Manos* made sure to include powerful female figures who are seen as valuable allies, as opposed to love interests or “sexploited” background characters. While this does not discount the limitations of representation that come with taking advantage of the essentializing elements of each respective genre (ie. Mexican narcos, hypersexual Black men, wise and riddling *sifus*), what is integral is the ability to come together and build survival networks that discount the “major,” whether that is the United States government, El Balde’s goons, or the cosmopolitan that refuses the folkloric popular. These marginalized characters persist in spite of all of these various factors revealing a kind of resilience in the transperipheral, even when the transperipheral emerges as a relational network of reductive genres.

The conceptualization of genres and their consequent ability to cross into one another that is most metaphorically applicable to *Seis Manos* is that of a porous border that interconnects different racialized genres to one another. A similar metaphor that Altman leverages is viewing genres as nations, in which features can, and indeed must, “immigrate” across borders in order to form constellated communities and systems of relation. As Altman states, much like the national, cultural hyphenation becomes a vehicle for change, pointing to the ways in which a nation that continues to grow more complex in its constitution due to immigration and cultural mixing reflects ways in which genre must perhaps follow in order to recognize and respect these changing cultural dynamics (203). However, I would go a step further from Altman and note that while these genres may operate on their own as discrete units, the case for genre boundary-

crossing in itself does not necessarily mean that they are “hybrid” or even “hyphenated.” As genre scholars previously have already noted, just because a film constitutes two genre traditions, such as fantasy and romance, does not mean that they are “hybrid” in the postcolonial sense nor do they inherently attain a destabilizing potential that subverts hierarchies and speaks to the desires of the “hyphenated” racial and cultural communities that these genres operate within. As I have noted with all of my case studies, hierarchies continue to persist in some form in spite of these productions’ transperipheral and hybrid capacities. These hierarchies may manifest in creators of color having to attain legitimacy in the eyes of the global audience through following common tropes within the anime medium. It may be in the comparisons that are drawn from a renowned Japanese anime studio to a Indonesian-based one and the kinds of anime artistry that is produced from either. It can be from the marginalization that stems from being a Filipino anime work that operates in the same spaces as Japanese anime. Perhaps most importantly, we continue to see hierarchies in the negotiations made by creative talent working in racialized genres and media that simultaneously enhance the possibility for more nuanced representation and fetishization. These characters and the creators of color that brought them to life are not liberated from essentialized representations though they may push against them to a certain extent, and a studio’s excuse of a production being a pastiche of what has come before does not lessen the responsibility of a work exacerbating issues of inequality without the production having some element of critique around the power asymmetries that made these genres emerge in the first place, which *Seis Manos* ultimately fails to do. Yet, in the case of *Seis Manos*’ exploration of genre hybridization, we see the possibility of cross-cultural contact within “bordertowns” that allow for peripheral alliances to emerge, which ultimately allows for the

possibility of these marginalized characters to survive in a brutal cultural and narrative landscape.

Implicating the Major

The bulk of my analysis of the three case studies above have focused on different ways to conceptualize transperipheral relationships on the level of production and text. Yet, given the boundaries of my project, it is impossible to avoid the “major” altogether, particularly the position of American-based streaming services. Clearly, the “major” continues to deeply influence the ways in which these minor networks are established and how these productions are conceptualized for a global audience. The distribution capacity of Netflix and their global reach serves as an economic and cultural influence on these creators and their output. The limitations that have been outlined regarding the kinds of work that Netflix seems most interested in distributing and the manner in which they frame these respective narratives through various marketing strategies continue to persist. This does not discount the polyvalent ways in which a narrative may be received by their broad subscriber-base; however, to not draw attention to certain similarities between my three case studies would be discounting the invisible forms of influence that global intermediaries like Netflix continue to have on these transperipheral networks.

Simultaneously, Netflix’s practice of organizing content along the lines of “altgenres,” which Emily Lawrence defines as, “composite, non-canonical genres constructed from Netflix’s controlled vocabulary,” may potentially groups productions in ways that may or may not encourage the fostering of trans-peripheral alliances along audiences (2015, 358). In 2014, Alexis Madrigal traced as many as 76,897 genres, with increasing degrees of specificity, such as “Mind-bending Cult Horror Movies from the 1980s” and “Cult Evil Kid Horror Movies”

(Madrigal 2014). Within the framework of genre that I have explored throughout this chapter, Netflix's influence through altgenres may be significant for two reasons. The first is that racialized genres may slip into broader genre categorizations, such as *Yasuke* being defined as "action anime," as much as it can be considered a Black-led television show, or samurai anime. This may simultaneously aid the production in blending in with the expectations that have generally been formed around a genre or medium in particular, which may help in a work's reception. On the other end of the spectrum, the increasingly specific genre categorizations may ironically bury these productions within the catalog, depending on the user's viewing history and perceived preferences. How Netflix's altgenres may initially color the potential interpretations of these variant productions may be significant. As Lawrence observes, how we categorize art often determines what we glean from it and how we should evaluate such art. For example, drawing from my own Netflix page, the category "critically acclaimed witty tv shows" appears: the evaluative claims of "critically acclaimed" and "witty" may automatically calibrate my sense of how to engage with the work that show up within this subgenre. Simultaneously, drawing from Madrigal's interview with Todd Yellin, the VP of product innovation at Netflix, Yellin states, "It's not just that Netflix can show you things you might like, but that it can tell you what kinds of things those are. It is, in its own weird way, a tool for introspection" (Madrigal 2014). In this way, having "critically acclaimed witty tv shows" show up on my landing page may be narcissistically building a particular framework for interpreting the self, further aiding Netflix in "nudging" their viewership towards certain forms of engagement. However, in avoiding an overly deterministic perspective on this subject, it is clear that while corporations maintain strategies of determining and "reading" their users, as I have already explored in other chapters, users rarely behave in ways that are entirely predictable to the platform. For example, I haven't

engaged with the bulk of the productions in the “critically acclaimed witty tv shows” altgenre, and rarely engage with the recommendations shown on the landing page. Instead, I tend to either directly search for content recommended by trusted friends and tastemakers or engage with Netflix’s broader genres menu to search for content. While I am not stating that Netflix’s altgenres do not have influence on consumption habits, it is crucial to not overly determine user behavior without data to support such claims.

Although I do not have access to data on how Netflix’s altgenres affect a user’s on the ground engagement with the service, it is clear that certain thematic threads continue to persist across all three of the case studies mentioned above. Narrative trends include a focus on the mythical folkloric traditions within the minor, sometimes excessive displays of violence and “exploitation” themes, and the sudden loss of parental figures which leads to a displacement of “belonging” for the primary characters. While the last feature is a common narrative trope that can also be found in Western animation traditions, the presentation of the “minor” through the lens of action, violence and the inherently mythical continues to delimit the kinds of representation that is common on these global platforms. For example, the disruptive presence of the folkloric within cosmopolitan centers in anime-inspired narratives creates a space where hybridity becomes the primary mode of operation that subverts the inherent dominance of the “cosmopolitan.” However, another way of interpreting this persistent thematic thread is through the lens of orientalization. Certainly, the mythological and the folkloric can exist in ways that disrupt the dominant and retain the ritual functions of establishing a sense of rootedness to a particular culture; however, within the context of a globalized Netflix Original series, it begs the question of how much the particular depictions shown in *Trese*, *Yasuke*, and *Seis Manos* actually operates on behalf of the “minor” and how much of it allows for the hegemonic perspective of

the global to take precedence. Edouard Glissant's exploration of the right to cultural opacity is central in considering to whom these narrative visions ultimately serve. For Glissant, it was not sufficient to simply ask for "the right to difference, but, carrying this further, agree also to the right of opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity" (1997, 190). In asking for the right to opacity, Glissant observes that the demand for transparency from the dominant culture towards the minor and the colonized, is to be subjected towards the impossibility for equality or empowerment, as to be transparent to the dominant is to recreate the minor in the dominant's own image.

Similarly, we can apply the right to opacity towards a lateral understanding of transnationalism, a transperipheral network as he states that, "I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him" (193). In demanding comprehensibility, we leverage neocolonial appropriative acts. In Netflix's desire to cultivate multicultural and global audiences for their various original content, these narratives and the cultures that they purport to represent, must be transparent and consumable. It is the response to this desire for transparency that drives much of the persistence of hierarchical structures within the three case studies mentioned above. As Lionnet and Shih analyze regarding the growing centrality of global capitalism, "As nationalisms decline on the transnational front, the hardening of minority identity becomes more visible and out of step with economic globalization and is soon ready material for global multicultural consumption" (2005, 10).

It is this need for fundamental legibility that brings LeSean Thomas to include a wide variety of globally established anime tropes, as well as the persistence of the spectacle of violence as it intersects with folkloric entities within *Trese* and *Seis Manos*. The violence that we

see being enacted upon the characters are not products that critique the hegemonic expectations that depict the folkloric as savage and self-destructive to the communities around them, but instead, become the catalysts of violence themselves. For *Seis Manos*, it is the potential for folkloric witchcraft in the hands of a sadistic Mexican drug kingpin that destroys San Simon. The violence that is enacted by El Balde and his supernatural dabbling is confined safely “south of the border,” not to disrupt the hegemony of the United States. Instead, the one individual who becomes entangled within this case is Brister, a minority member, and his displacement to Mexico safely confines him away from the White, normalized society across the border. *Trese* has strains of social critique within its narrative, as the one pulling the strings of a series of gruesome murders in Manila happens to be the Mayor Sancho Santamaria, a corrupt political official. Yet, even the localized critique of the “major” becomes sidelined in place of the supernatural and the mythological, when it is determined that it wasn’t Mayor Santamaria at all, but the “god of war,” *Talagbusao*, who wishes to violently disrupt the cosmopolitan and thrive within the wreckage. In the case of *Trese’s Talagbusao*, the mythological figure was heavily fetishized from the indigenous communities of Mindanao, communities that continue to face “various threats to their ancestral lands and rights to self-determination, including pressures of internal displacement, sustained military operations in their mountain domain against insurgents, and unwelcome development projects” (Ragragio and Paluga 2021). In reality, according to anthropologists, Andrea Malaya M. Ragragio and Myfel D. Paluga, the *busaw*, which is derived from *Talagbusao*, was more akin to a kind of potency and power that is passed between humans and nonhumans that does not have a moral bearing. Yet, as they accurately conclude, Netflix needed a story with a universal sense of good and evil in order to create a globally transparent and palatable narrative, a sense of good and evil that is not applicable to these indigenous

cultures, whose storytelling traditions often do not have such stable binary moral bearings (2021). In both *Seis Manos* and *Trese*, we see a simplifying of complex popular and folkloric practices, in order to sustain a universal kind of narrative, while simultaneously excluding the communities to whom these practices originate. In this way, we continue to observe how hybridity and the fostering of transperipheral network enact hierarchies in which the gaze and desires of the major is ultimately implicated in both visible and nonvisible ways.

Ultimately, the attention given by Netflix to these various communities prove to be a complex and double-edged negotiation, one that cannot easily be summed up as a matter of pure exploitation or empowerment. While having content that is directly marketed towards one's own racial and cultural community serves to legitimize them as a market segment that is worthy of being hailed to by powerful corporate intermediaries, once the corporate gaze fixes upon a community and uses visibility politics as a primary marketing tool to expand the reach of a production, what often results is a reductive vision of who or what is considered valuable on both a local and international scale. To be framed as valuable by the streaming service, which would result in a product's distribution, is to engage in the process of assimilation to a broader cosmopolitan ethos that aligns with these services' brand image. It is the commodification of difference which "blur the sharp edges of the very difference that the corporation produces and profits from" through "reproducible denominators [such] as color and costume" (Du Cille 1994, 264-265). In other words, there may be differences to be found, but those differences are transparent, and ultimately, easily consumable by a cosmopolitan-oriented audience.

That being said, the public facing representation of anime-inspired work continues to negotiate with the boundaries of what is considered marketable on an international scale and it would be short-sighted to discount work that is currently being done in the background to

enhance the voices of underrepresented communities in its entirety. It is not so much that minority identifying individuals are becoming “out of step with economic globalization,” but that the work that they do must speak with a sense of multivocality in order for different audience subsections to find what they ultimately desire within the text. After all, “the persistence of colonial power relations and the power of global capital, attend to the inherent complexity of minor expressive cultures on multiple registers” (Lionnet and Shih 11), and simply attending to these texts as matters of commodification and fetishization would be doubly shortchanging the resilience of minority communities, who excavate different meanings and forms of empowerment from even transparent global media texts. The ways in which a colonizing outsider perceives the media text does not necessarily discount the transperipheral networks and modes of operation that these creators are working with. However, there is a recognition that the stakes and ways in which a signifier can be decoded in a meaningful way changes across cultural experience, and these various decodings must co-exist in order for these cultures to be represented by the likes of Netflix at all. In this way, conceptions of hybridity as they apply to these productions must also operate on different registers, whether that is through the more jaded perspective of Kraidy’s “corporate transculturalism” or the more subversive models that are present in Bhabha’s “third space,” or the hybridization capacity of genres.

Further, at the most foundational level, the fact that Filipino, Hispanic, and Black talent is seen on diverse levels of these productions, from its leaderships to its artists, and remains at the forefront of these animations continues to have meaningful implications for the diversification of the workforce behind these productions. As Brad Graeber, the co-founder of Powerhouse Animation (*Seis Manos*, *Castlevania*, *Blood of Zeus*) stated in a personal interview with me, he recognized the white male dominated nature of the cartoon industry within the United States, and

how this likely contributed to American animation feeling like the “same old same old.” However, he also elaborated that there is work being done on the forefront of diversity, highlighting his company as being a “50/50 studio,” that employs as many women as men, and that they are excited to hear what new voices have to say in the field of animation production. Because so much of the activist-oriented work occurs behind the scenes, in the everyday negotiations that occur between industry workers from underrepresented communities and the broader media production environment, to simply look at the diversity of production narratives as the sole indicator of the diversification initiatives that are being undertaken by creators would be delimiting.

While the various transperipheral networks that are fostered by these productions yield forms of hybridity that potentially disrupt hierarchical expectations from the global audience regarding the nature of diasporic and racialized experiences, it is challenging to discount the enormous influence that the “major” continues to have in the production, consumption and distribution cycle. Creators that are included in various “minor” networks take advantage of the affordances of the “major,” but simultaneously, there are certain expectations regarding legibility and transparency that limit the full expressive potential of these creators representing the nuances of their respective cultures. While SVOD portals are continuing to expand the kinds of content that are accessible globally, there are sizable challenges in fully realizing the ideals around nuanced cultural representation within content catalogs.

Chapter Four
The Contemporary Landscape of English-language Anime Fansubbing

Introduction

On Aug. 14, 2020, two of the largest illicit anime streaming and manga sites, KissAnime and KissManga respectively, were shut down due to mass copyright violation notices, likely coinciding with the tightening of online anti-piracy laws that were enacted by the Japanese government in June 2020. While once, “anime producers tended to be lukewarm in their reaction towards fansubbing, seeing it as something taking place in a remote market which is much smaller than the domestic one,” this is now no longer the case as shifts in domestic viewer demographics, declining DVD sales, the necessity of legitimate international distribution networks and their economic support are key to sustaining consistent market growth (Lee 2011, 1140). The revision of copyright laws by the Japanese government was in response to the rise in global and local piracy sites, of which KissAnime was only one of many. Accordingly, those who proved to be repeat offenders of illegal downloading would be subject to “two years in jail or a maximum fine of 2 million yen, or both,” while operators of such sites could “face penalties of up to five years in jail, a maximum fine of 5 million yen, or both” (Japan Times 2020). Such recent developments reveal how illicit shadow economies continue to thrive alongside the growth of “legitimate” streaming services around the world and the moments of crisis and tension that arise, as global media industries continue to struggle with the fallout of retaining an increasingly cosmopolitan viewership.

While Japanese anime has a fairly robust presence in many American streaming services, which has had a profound influence on how anime is circulated, widespread exposure to this content is largely due to fansubbing communities that have existed since the 1980s. However,

despite this history, fansubbing and peer to peer distribution remain deeply ambivalent practices, exemplified by the ways in which fans, scholars, industry, and practitioners grapple with the motivations and effects of these cultural practices. While much has been written about the motivations and practices of fansubbers, this chapter seeks to focus on the impact that the rising popularity of official streaming services has had on the anime fansubbing community, and where different forms of illicit distribution have challenged the once-dominant presence of anime fansubbing, such as automated fan-ripping from official streaming services. Whereas previously, the practice of fansubtitling had largely been justified as a means for proliferating awareness and access to anime in a media landscape that seemed disinterested and incapable of licensing productions in a timely fashion, that is no longer the case, as simulcasting services like Crunchyroll, HiDive, and Funimation release content often within an hour after the official broadcasting in Japan (Leonard 2005, Lee 2011). Given the ease of access that these services provide, if the global anime fandom yielded a fansubbing culture that was borne purely out of necessity, the practice should have been eradicated with the mainstream rise of niche streaming. However, fansubbing practice and communities continue to persist, though not with the same presence or influence that these groups once held.

Given how fansubbing has been made expendable as a cultural practice within the English-speaking fandom, it is clear that the ontological security of fansubbers has been threatened by streaming services. This yields shifting justifications as to why fansubbers continue to do this work, which reflect the changing relational dynamics between formal streaming services and the laborers of the informal economy. For example, fannish justifications for continuing fansubtitling have gestured towards the desire for better translations, encoding, and typesetting than what is provided by official services, which operates more closely with the

interpretive nature of fan creations where proactive consumers can negotiate meaning in various texts and reinforce certain knowledge bases amongst themselves. In many ways, these motivations have remained constant to this day, as region blocking and fractured libraries across a myriad of streaming services have driven viewers back towards torrenting and alternative streaming methods. While simulcasting has eased linguistic and temporal barriers of access, albeit perhaps reinforcing economic and spatial ones, fansubbers remain divided regarding whether the quality of the releases is on par with that of fansubbers, often gesturing towards moments where they feel like official platforms have shortchanged their audience by denying them a potentially more immersive viewing experience.

As fansubbing practices have been so central to the formation of the global anime fandom, it is necessary to continue to trace the relationship between the shadow cultural economies that fansubbers and rippers reside in and the official streaming services that have now risen to mainstream prominence. The shadow economy has existed in order to make up for the failings of the formal economy, and the relationship between the fansubbers/rippers and formal streaming services continue to exemplify this. To study fansubbers/rippers is to know where we can see different perceived weaknesses within the ecosystem of formal distribution, but also different moral paradigms of how people frame their engagement with global media. Finally, studying fansubbers/rippers and their practices is significant because according to my own research, a significant number of global anime fans continue to use illicit sources to sustain their anime consumption habits. We must understand the reasoning for this trend, despite the increase in official sources for content and the motivations behind fostering a strong illicit economy, powered primarily by fans. In order to gain access to the reasoning behind why fansubbing practices still exist, I engage in a series of interviews with nineteen fansubbers. I have also

circulated an online survey to primarily postsecondary American-based students in order to get a better sense of how, where, and why fans choose the sources they do to access their anime content.

While the illicit economy continues to serve a significant point of access for global anime, official sources and cultural intermediaries have revealed a keen desire to distance themselves from the fansubbing community in the contemporary moment. However, in spite of this, there continues to be moments of intersection, collaboration, and borrowing that challenges the concept of strictly binary modes of consumption that corporate platforms would like to reinforce. For example, there are platforms like Viki and Webtoons, which bring fansubbing culture into the fold of the official. These companies strategize towards the convergence and collapse between the two cultural spheres. This chapter approaches three elements of contemporary fansubbing practice that reveals the importance of why media scholars should continue to engage with this community following the advent of simulcasting streaming services. The first part of my analysis will reveal in broad strokes, how a subsection of anime fans access their anime and to what extent they may engage with fansubbed content currently. With easy access to all kinds of anime content, both in the formal and informal economy, I trace some of the motivations of viewers as to why they continue to engage with the broader shadow economy, which may gesture towards some of the pitfalls regarding the current distribution strategies of official services. The second section traces the motivations of fansubbers that continue to engage in the practice in spite of the tectonic shifts that have occurred due to the rising popularity of official streaming platforms and the consequences of these centralized nodes of distribution, such as the emergent figure of the anime fan ripper and their role in the media ecosystem surrounding anime. While there has been an increase in the notoriety of piracy sites, as implied by the shifts

in governmental policy mentioned previously, this move coincides with a steep decline in fansubbing groups in recent years that gestures toward a changing paradigmatic shift in their once central role within the fandom's consumption model and this transition has yet to be subject to scholarly analysis. The final part of my analysis looks at how contemporary fansubbing communities operate within the digital sphere through focusing on their community building practices on Discord, which continues to persist in spite of the existence of niche streaming services like Crunchyroll and Funimation. By engaging in this three-part analysis, I provide an updated look at the current state of anime piracy and how the formal and informal economy continue to intersect in spite of the rising prominence of anime on global streaming services.

Literature Review

While the practice of fansubbing is most commonly associated with digisubbing, a portmanteau of digital fansubbing, the history of the cultural practice began in the 1970s, with the trading of anime VHS tapes among anime clubs and conventions across the country. The rise of fansubs coincided with the rejection of American media companies denying fan requests to bring the content to their shores legitimately, which allowed for fansubbing to become one of the primary ways in which fans could access these works (Leonard 2005, 289). As Sean Leonard notes in his detailed work on the early days of the American fansubbing scene, "fan distribution between 1976 and 1993 functioned economically as a prerequisite good to licensed materials and that fan distribution constituted the demand formation phase necessary, but ancillary to capitalist activity" (283). This legacy of fansubs filling in the gaps that official media companies could not fill and acting as a prerequisite for media legitimacy within the corporate sphere continues to this day. While the early attempts to fansub VHS tapes were often hindered by both the cost of the equipment required and geographical boundaries, the advent of the internet and consequently,

digital subtitling, eased many of those boundaries, and fansubbing became more accessible to industrious fans.

From then on, the practice of fansubbing became more refined as different forms of freeware and more standardized codes of operation became widely available. As Hye Kyung Lee notes in her own research, the early days of digisubbing was dominated by hardsubs, a practice of subtitling where the text is imprinted directly onto the video, but was quickly exchanged for the much more flexible process of softsubbing, where the subtitles were provided as separate files, allowing for multiple languages and versions of subtitles be provided without a direct manipulation of the video image (Lee 2011). Fansubtitlers continue to play at the forefront of new technological adoptions, seeking more effective ways to encode (x264 and x265), filter, and distribute (bittorrent) anime texts. The release of Aegisub software also allowed for further flexibility regarding the visual and temporal elements of the subtitles themselves with much more ease. It is no surprise then that in terms of software, there are moments where standards converge for both official and fan subtitlers, as official platforms like Crunchyroll also use Aegisub to subtitle their own official releases (builtinSF 2021).

Fansubbing groups operate within an organized structure consisting of around eight roles, though certain jobs may be expanded or collapsed depending on the size of the group. These eight roles include the RAW provider, who finds the source material, the translator, the timer, editor, encoder, typesetter, quality checker, and the distributor. Often “unpaid, self-organized, and decentralized” (Lee 2011, 1137), the entire subtitling process takes place across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. While there remain a small number of recognized and established fansub groups, which operate as a kind of brand, fansub collectives may also materialize around certain projects, only to disintegrate after the completion of the fansub

process. While the time required to finish each task is highly dependent on the position and the text in question, the process can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks, often requiring great discipline and time from each fan subtitler respectively. Scholars have theorized as to the motivations of fansubbers to do this extensive labor, often listing social gratification and self-education as the primary reasons. Mizuko Ito notes that “the practice is framed by fans as an act of evangelism in the service of expansion of commercial markets for anime” (2012, 182). While this isn’t entirely erroneous, the reality of the fansubber’s ambivalent relationship with the industry can be further refined as not only the need to expand the commercial market, but to expand it in the manner that fansubtitlers see fit. Fansubbers continue to be critical of the ways in which official intermediaries go about handling the text and what they perceive as the broader systems of exploitation that use the labor of official subtitlers and fansubtitlers alike in less than ideal ways. In an AMA regarding the once enormously popular fanripping group, HorribleSubs, when asked as to why they did the work that they did, the leader of the group answered, “we mainly do it to piss off CrunchyRoll, as stated in our mission statement. Philosophically, however, we started off disliking how CR [Crunchyroll] fucked fansubbers up in the ass ” (Maxwell 2020). There are several ways to interpret the hostility that is being clearly communicated by the leader of HorribleSubs. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Crunchyroll began as a pirating website, but soon had to clean up their catalog of all fansubbed content after going corporate, straining the relationship between laborers of the informal economy. Even for fansubbers who may consider becoming professional anime translators, Crunchyroll has been known for not amply compensating individuals for this labor, a point that I will elaborate on later in this chapter. What becomes clear in this show of antagonism is what exactly constitutes the

ideal handling of the text and the treatment of the industry's translators remains contentious across these varied groups.

Fundamentally, fansubbers are laborers of the informal economy, which Ramon Lobato defines as, "a space of *unmeasured, untaxed, and unregulated* economic activity...informality is characterized by handshake deals, reciprocity, gift economies, theft, barter, and other modes of exchange and redistribution which bypass institutions" (2012, 40). The informality of exchanges reflects the social gratification of fansubbing, the dynamics of pleasure and reward which falls closely in line with John Fiske's "shadow cultural economy," where the currency is popular cultural capital, yielding distinction and status to those who properly contribute to its marketplace (1992). This helps in bypassing formal institutions, though as I will continue to elaborate in my analysis, there are also moments of crossover between the formal and informal that are often productive in various capacities. Ito outlines how at the height of fansubbing culture, there was a distinction to be made between the industrious fansubber and the "leecher" who only consumes the work. While leechers are often framed derogatorily, it is critical to note that the declining number of viewers who engage with properly fansubbed work in the contemporary moment is a significant reason for the decline of fansubbing groups in general, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter. Nevertheless, even in the current day, fansubbing groups who are able to produce high quality content in a timely fashion will inevitably receive more views, downloads, and positive responses to their work, compared to those with spottier records. This applies to ripping groups as well, as those who cannot upload quality work in a timely fashion are often quickly maligned. Further, in relation to the cultural economy, even amongst fansub groups, there are skills that are more highly coveted because they contribute directly to the cultural knowledge base, such as linguistic competence in Japanese, which often

dictate the kind of influence one may have within the group. By continuing to labor on behalf of the enrichment of the community, fansubbers may enhance their own sense of social belonging and reinforce various forms of hierarchy dependent on one's accrued cultural capital.

In thinking about the gray area of legality that fansubbing resides in, there are several concepts that scholars have previously used to understand the influence of fansubbing practices as it relates to viewership and industry impacts. Ito conceptualizes the fansubbing community as a kind of hybridized public that perceives intellectual property as somewhere in between proprietary and open regimes, where “if we consider today's public culture as a space that includes the circulation of both commercial and noncommercial forms of culture, otaku cultures inhabit the zone of translation and integration of the two” (Ito 2012, 183). Sean Leonard conceptualizes the fan distribution of anime work, particularly from 1976 to 1993 as a “proselytization commons,” or “spaces where media and ideas can be freely exchanged to advance a directed cause” (282). The directed cause in this case, would be the widespread expansion of anime culture, filling in the gaps that official platforms cannot or refuse to fill, and increasing the availability of the content to audiences around the world. Through the formation of such commons, fans were able to “pull” the text to their country of origins, both through informal networks and eventually, the official sources. Ian Condry uses the term, “dark energy” in order to frame the productive relationship between “content and desire, which in turn helps drive the circulation of media products” (2013, 163). The productive capacity of dark energy brings to attention the forms of flow, of content, knowledge production and exchange, and more, which often precedes official commodification. He exemplifies the expansive quality of dark energy by pointing to moments where fansubbers meticulously trace the historical connections between anime texts and Japanese history or linguistic play, in order to encourage various forms

of knowledge circulation and root a viewer's interest in the media text to broader networks of appeal.

Among these attempts to metaphorically understand the impact of fansubbing as practice and as community-builder, a common throughline is the emphasis on the liminal status of fansubs as neither being fully commercial, nor anti-commercial (Hills 2017, 85). Indeed, fansubbing continues to teeter ever so precariously at the edge of legality, as fansubbing processes often borrow heavily from official sources, in order to engage in different acts of typesetting, font aesthetics, or the occasional translation error. If fannish justifications for the transformative nature of the work is used to legally legitimate the bulk of fan creations, then fansubs continue to inch ever forward towards an unequivocally illegal status. It remains uncertain what the exact impacts of this widespread pirating practice has on the anime industry itself. Despite the grandiose numbers often published regarding the monetary losses over piracy, the anime and manga industry has continued to see consistent economic growth (Schley 2018, AJA 2019). As many observers, both in fandom and official sources have commented, the circulation of texts, even illicitly, can be beneficial as “popular culture forms depend on access, buzz and circulation to succeed” and taking away illegal sources does not necessarily equate to consumers buying the official releases (Condry 2013, 167). However, as many of the scholars mentioned above have already outlined, fansubbers are not without their scruples when it comes to their practice. Instead, they often operate on a fundamentally different ethical system where legality does not play into what may be considered acceptable or unacceptable behavior within the fandom. While highly dependent on the fansubbing group in question, there are certain observable patterns that dictate the fansubbing community's ethical system. For example, taking monetary donations for one's labor is largely considered unacceptable, and a good number of

fansubbing groups tend to focus on work that are obscure, have significant perceivable issues with the official release, or are not yet readily available in the regional market. Interestingly, official players continue to try to influence these largely self-imposed guidelines through various modes of address to the community.

For example, on June 8, 2003, Anime News Network provided “A New Ethical Code for Digital Fansubbing.” This was likely in response to what has been deemed the “dark ages” of fansubbing when the group, Anime Junkies, exemplified an antagonistic response to the request of the official licensors, Urban Vision, to remove the fansubbed version of the work. The code outlines a series of six major points, which confines the role of fansubbing in the community to be about exposure of work that has yet to be licensed, minimize the commercial impact of their presence, never be a substitute for the official release, and never receive monetary compensation for this work. The article implored that fansubbers should intentionally release lower quality content in order to not be competitive with the official source, and reminded the intended audience that the work of fansubbing was to promote anime, and not one’s self. This move towards policing the activities of fansubbers gestures towards the ways in which the label of “dangerous” or “immoral” fansubbing and piracy more generally

“allows powerful institutions to decide which actors are allowed to compete in, and which are to be excluded from, mainstream economic practice. This provides these institutions with a moral scheme by which those able to protect their IP are allowed to benefit from their economic activity, while those unable to do so are not: an ethics of accumulation” (Dent 2012, 31)

Of course, given what has already been observed of the fansub community, the interjection of an official source, let alone one that has attempted to define the boundaries of fansubbing culture, was not effectively taken up by the fansubbing community. Instead of the desired reinforcement of hierarchy between fansub and official content, as Hills observes, there was an intensification of fostering neoliberal brand identities across fansubbing groups, where “cult fan activities

voluntarily come to resemble commercial enterprises” (2017, 88). A much more recent example of an official platform’s imploring fansubbers to ethically self-manage was in the Crunchyroll sponsored podcast, *Anime in America*, where in the flagship episode released on July 28, 2020, Justin Sevakis, the founder of Anime News Network, formal fansubber, and CEO of MEdiaOCD, implores fansubbers to stick to obscure works that will likely never be licensed.

If fansubtitling practices exist within the darkest greys of grey legal areas, then it could be argued that beyond the realm of anime fansubtitling, fanripping may be considered unilaterally crossing the line. Yet, it is important to note that while digital ripping is a relatively new phenomenon in global anime viewing, which rose to prominence alongside the expansion of official anime streaming platforms, it is quite common in other forms of media. This demands further attention on not only the context of anime fansubbing, but the scholarship around piracy more generally. Lobato has organized six frameworks for understanding piracy: as theft, as free enterprise, as acts of free speech, as authorship, as resistance and as a means of access (2012). It is clear that different frameworks can be best applied to the stages of anime distribution history. The early days of anime fansubbing history would have seen fansubbing and piracy as a means of access, due to the lack of interest formal players had in the global medium. Currently, we can still think of fansubbing and ripping as a means of access due to the fracturing of the seasonal catalog across digital streaming services, though it is clearly less of an issue today than it was a few decades ago. Concurrently, we can also see the contemporary iteration of fansubbing as resistance, as is clearly vocalized by the leader of Horriblesubs above and their qualms with Crunchyroll. Of course, from the perspective of formal streaming services and anime production companies, piracy can be nothing more than theft of their IP. One mode that Lobato does not

touch on in his six frameworks is that piracy can also be framed as an instigator for sociality and community-building, as I will elaborate further in my interviews with fansubbers.

In conceptualizing piracy more broadly beyond simply streaming media, Freriksson and Arvanitakis use the metaphor of a leak, where within, “the globalized capitalist economy, profit, control, and the monopoly on distribution is dispersed beyond the existing property regimes” (2014, 5). Despite the positively subversive undercurrent of this definition, as a kind of relinquishing of profit, control, and monopolies, James Meese encourages a more neutral conception of the pirate figure that defies the ultimately unproductive criminal/hero dichotomy (2014, 20). Such dichotomies are often positioned either as a “global scourge” on intellectual property or as subversive Robin Hood figures who are bent on liberating the information economy from the hands of dastardly mega corporations (Castells and Cardoso 2012, 8). Indeed, during the Fandom and Piracy: Piracy and Capitalism panel headed by the Berkeley Center for New Media, Jennifer Holt made the provocative statement, that the pirates are not the audiences that seek to access media illicitly, but the enormous corporations like Google, Amazon, and Microsoft that invest billions of dollars in data centers and plunder user data around the world in order to advance market goals (Holt 2021). This ethos of challenging the dominance of multinational corporations echoes Jennifer Ashley’s concept of “honorable piracy,” where “copying the work of others...was considered “honorable” because it was done not for individual economic benefit, but rather for the collective political good” (2015, 10). It reasserts the agency of the individual against the control manifested by market figures far more powerful than any one digital user, and “democratizes” the processes of expression and consumption from certain economic and geographical limits. My quotes around “democratizes” recognizes that, in the case of anime fansubbing, there continue to be ways that fansubbers and pirating figures within the

global fandom police and discipline their users and consumers, as is already apparent in Ito's observations of separating "leechers" from "proper" contributors to anime fandom. Yet, it is unclear whether anime fansubbing falls under Ashley's category of "honorable piracy," given the surface level affect that can be inferred from HorribleSub's response to why they engage in the practice at all - that it is retaliation towards a niche streaming company on their perceived slights against a relatively well-connected, digitally-savvy, and privileged subsection of the fandom (fansubbers). Democratization of the content seems like a secondary effect, though as Patrick Burkart notes in his study of pirate politics, "its emphasis on reforming copyright to promote cyberliberties more broadly is not a call to eliminate private property rights entirely, but to modify them" (2014, 31). In a similar vein, some fansubbers I have interviewed have vocalized the desire to eradicate the need for their practice, if that means that formal distributors have met their desires. This is not a disapproval wholesale of formal distributors, but a tweaking of practice and positionality in relation to the distribution of anime. It is clear as I will outline in the responses of fansubbers below that motivations for engaging in the practice varies, from its democratization potential to its socialization capacity to the pleasures that come from the artistry inherent to the practice itself. Given the swath of motivations that bring fans into the fold of the informal economy, it may be reductive to simply categorize this practice as honorable.

Given the history of fansubbing, the reality in practice is much more complex, and while fansubbing and piracy is clearly not insignificant in establishing an audience presence within the United States, it is also equally significant to understand that despite the glorified language that is sometimes used to describe pirating practices, the act of pirating itself is mundane and everyday. Francesca da Rimini and Jonathan Marshall notes how often, "the drama of landmark legal cases eclipses 'daily life'" in which the scandal of piracy obfuscates a reality that "piracy is

just a humdrum taken for granted affair, as even if the corporations squash one distribution channel, people can expect that others will spring up, and that they can continue to download” (2014, 323-324). In other words, piracy is often enacted less with the grand intentions of subverting capitalist society as we know it or some fundamental ideology predicated on freeware, data protection, and benevolent knowledge-sharing, but more of a response to issues of region locking, economic barriers, linguistic barriers, assurance of future purchases, and the desire to engage in fandom and community in a timely fashion.

While fanripping may not comfortably fit into the usual cadre of fan-related activities that often focus on some aspect of the transformative, it is nevertheless the case that ripping practices across media continue to inspire intense productivity. If Condry’s “dark energy” expands content and knowledge from within the fandom and potential viewerships that then ripples outward to influence the official, then, Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas argue that even if the IP holders and the mainstream media sector may lose the cost of an official viewing, ancillary businesses, services, and technologies that both seek to support and stop piracy reveals the incredibly generative force behind the illicit practice. Whether it is the rising anti-piracy industry, which develops software like increasingly sophisticated modes of data encryption or YouTube’s Content ID system, or the pro-piracy industries that help to circumvent these developments at each turn with their own clever workarounds, the explosive economic and technical productivity that is spurned from piracy is undeniable.

Beyond its productive capacity, there have also been observations and analyses regarding the manner in which piracy may have the potential to engage with media preservation more effectively in the face of official and legal players who simply are not invested in such endeavors. In a 2020 lawsuit against the nonprofit Internet Archive, publishers challenged that

the Internet Archive's attempt to open an "Emergency Library" in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was violating copyright law, because the institution circulated images of the 1.5 million books that remained outside of the public domain and did not purchase the licenses to the work, thereby shortchanging authors and publishers alike. Such altercations reveal persistent fissures and competing interests between copyright regimes, the affordances of the Internet, and the necessity for documentation. Abigail de Kosnik has written extensively on the pirate's ability to foster archives through their own personal collections, allowing "pirate individuals to preserve and circulate films and television shows that official institutions might ignore, allow to be lost, or keep out of circulation for a prolonged period of time or indefinitely" (2012, 529). This is ever more so, as international forms of media come to the fore and circulate with more ease around the world. Thinking back on the case of KissAnime and KissManga, the decline of these illicit services gestures towards not only a loss in accessibility for many fans, but a loss of a living archival history of fansubbing itself. Similarly, returning to Sevakis's imploration for fansubbers to focus their attention on more obscure works in Crunchyroll's *Anime in America* podcast, it seems that at least a few individuals within the official industries recognize the pirate's capacity to preserve in the way that De Kosnik has outlined. Yet, even beyond the older and more obscure content, the continuous fragmentation of anime content across multiple platforms and the variations therein fosters an imperative for pirates to continue to consolidate these disparate collections, ironically centralizing nodes of consumption in response to this perpetual fragmentation spurred by official industry.

In thinking about the productive quality of piracy, I would like to continue to emphasize the moments in which "informal and formal economies intersect," often in ways that are quite apparent, such as the ways in which pirate fan rippers directly take from established platforms,

thereby further proliferating the official platform's rendition of the text (Hills 2017, 88). While fansubbers seek validation from the labor-intensive processes of fansubbing, which may include starting from scratch, and fully engaging with the process of translating, typesetting, and more, rippers gain clout from their timely uploading of content that can be found on formal streaming services. Because the majority of fans tend to engage with whatever is made most conveniently available and whatever happens to come out first, rippers have an advantage in this field. Ironically, it is the dominance of these fanripping players within the current informal economy that have largely put English-language fansubbers on the decline, a feat that official players have long been attempting. While a select group of fansubbers continue to do their work, many consider their cultural practice to be in its twilight. It is perhaps a steady twilight, to which select groups remain invested in continuing the legacy of the craft, but one in which the apex of the practice seems to be well within the past. For those who are invested in documenting the development of fansubbing history, an oft-agreed upon critical stage in anime's development as a global product from fan and official sources alike, then it may be all the more imperative that pirates, if they can indeed exist as the archivists that de Kosnik has outlined, do their work of archiving the many divergent versions of texts and the fansubbing groups that were once involved in the circulation of anime.

Methodology

In order to analyze the impacts that official streaming services have had on fansubtitling as a practice, I have engaged in a multi-methodological approach to target different aspects of anime fansubbing and ripping culture. First, in order to gain an understanding of contemporary fansubbers, I interviewed seventeen active fansubbers, one fansubber who engaged with the practice within the past decade, but has since stopped doing so, and one ancillary member who

has worked on creating programming scripts to aid in the process of fansubbing through automation. The majority of the fansubbers that I interviewed worked in English-language subtitles, with the exception of one individual who currently works primarily with German. Because of this limitation, these studies are only applicable to English language fansub scholarship, and it should be recognized that there may be equally or more robust fansubbing networks that work with different languages, particularly for those countries who are not served effectively by global platforms and services. All of the following interviews were conducted on Discord and averaged to be one to two hours long in total. In order to protect the privacy and safety of all of my interviewees, the interviewees will be mentioned only through the use of pseudonyms that have been chosen by each individual. The interview subjects were chosen through snowball sampling and represent several prominent and active fansub groups that are currently involved in English language fansubtitling.

In order to trace the continued significance of fansubbing and ripping practices within the American fandom, I created a survey through Google Forms requesting information on fan viewing practices, including how often the respondents viewed anime, where viewers normally accessed their anime, whether they engaged with fansubtitled work, and their justifications for doing so or not doing so. The survey received a final number of 738 responses, which provides a detailed look at the methods and justifications for how people engage with this global media form on the ground and in their everyday lives. The survey was dispersed on social forum based websites, such as Reddit and MyAnimeList. However, the bulk of the respondents were recruited from American university anime club discord channels, which has become the primary means to which many club members across the country have congregated following the Covid-19 pandemic. Given this strategy of recruiting respondents, there are several limitations that must be

noted in the results regarding issues of diversity. The vast majority of my respondents are based somewhere in the United States. While my results are geographically diverse across the United States, given the manner in which I could target the locations of the universities, because the vast majority of my respondents are university-level students, the results are heavily skewed towards reflecting the viewing habits of early to mid twenty-somethings. There is also the issue regarding levels of education, as due to the limited scope of my subject pool, it is likely that the respondents involved have or will retain at least an undergraduate level education. There may also be limits regarding socioeconomic class, though given the diversity of public and private institutions that I have reached out to, there is a fairly diverse range of students regarding this characteristic.

My final methodological approach is utilizing digital ethnography to understand the manner in which fansubbers and rippers addressed their engaged viewership and the spaces and relationships that these viewers fostered for themselves. Beyond the use of IRC and fansub group websites, fansubbing and ripping groups have both turned to Discord in order to update and engage with their viewerships in real time. As Discord is a relatively new platform that initially emerged in 2015, there is very little research done to date on fansubbing and ripping community practices, modes of engagement, maintenance, and the cultures that arise from these digital spaces. The Discord servers that I focused my attention on were the servers dedicated to the fansub groups for DameDesuYo, Good Job! Media, Moyaisubs, Asenshi, and Saizen Fansubs, while the fanripping group servers that I followed were Erai-raws and SubsPlease. While those that consume the content and participate in the works' distributions come from all over the world, my focus continues to be in English-language subbing and ripping practices, and consequently, the dominant language used in all of these servers is English.

I observed these groups respectively for the equivalent of one month, checking in 3-4 hours daily, in addition to whenever there were announcements and messages made across the servers. While this is a limited time frame, a particularly useful affordance of Discord is that one can see a comprehensive record of the written messages from before one enters the server, which let me to continue to access data from the past, effectively allowing me to expand the range of time that I can engage with the group's content. One crucial aspect of Discord that I do not cover in my research is the voice-chat channels that exist sporadically across these servers. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, it stems from a desire to retain as much of my own anonymity as possible while doing this research, as my primary mode of engagement was as a passive observer, and not as an active participant in these spaces. The second is that in order to properly engage with voice chat as data for analysis, it would have been necessary for me to record these conversations, which is invasive and unethical if I had done so without letting the participants know ahead of time. If I were to let them know of my intentions and that I was recording these conversations, this would inevitably influence the manner in which discussions would be conducted. Given these drawbacks, I have decided against using the voice chat channels as part of my body of data.

In utilizing these three methodologies, I aim to outline the contemporary state of the fansubbing communities that continue to act as nodes for fostering engagement with Japanese anime across the world and the perspectives from a diverse range of actors within this fan-driven system. The way fansubbers' practices have changed reveals the drawbacks and potential weaknesses of the current formal platformized network of distribution. In these transformations, we can also continue to observe the strength of influence that streaming services have on the current state of distribution for global media texts. While fansubbers have recently found their

position within the community shifting due to the advent and rising popularity of simulcasting streaming platforms and fanripping groups as a natural consequence, the anime viewing and fan ecosystem, where official and shadow economies ceaselessly merge, collaborate, and diverge continues to foster incredibly productive frictions that push against linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. In particular, I focus on how different metrics for quality emerge from these frictions, as well as the more micro-scale frictions that happen between groups and between viewers and fansubbers, much of which are publicized within digital commons, like Discord.

Anime Viewing Habits: Survey Results

While emphasizing the voices of fansubbers following the rising prominence of streaming simulcast services is the central goal of this chapter, in order to get a fuller picture of the anime viewing ecology and the role that fansubbing and ripping continues to play within this space, it is also necessary to hear the voices of the viewership. Among the 738 responses received from the survey, the majority were, unsurprisingly, voracious anime viewers (443 respondents), noting that they watched anime anywhere between a few times a week to almost daily. One hundred respondents marked that they watched anime about once a week, with the remaining respondents marking that they watched anime fewer times than once a week. When polled for which official platforms they utilized to access their anime, Netflix took the lead, with over half of the respondents (379) marking that they at least engaged somewhat with Netflix's content catalog, surprisingly surpassing Crunchyroll (307), the second most engaged official platform. However, the platforms that were most extensively utilized by this subsection of the anime fandom were illicit sources, which include streaming websites (492) and torrenting (204). Further, when asked whether the viewers had engaged with fansubtitling as part of their consumptive behavior, an overwhelming majority of 499 respondents marked affirmatively,

while 239 respondents stated that they did not. It should be clarified here that it is quite possible that a significant portion of respondents were not able to separate their understanding of fansubbing to ripping practices more broadly, as I will outline below, as very few elaborations noted the distinction between these practices in their responses. Further, when it comes to illicit streaming websites, depending on the site in question, the series uploads that are ripped and the series that are fansubbed are often presented without distinction. Because of this, if fans were to be invested enough in knowing the source of this content, they would not only have to actively look into the fansub or rip group itself, but also be marginally familiar with the methods that these groups employ. However, despite the lack of distinction, what becomes increasingly clear in these results is that regardless of the increasing popularity of official simulcasting sources, anime's shadow economy continues to underlie much of the robust viewing practices of the fandom and foster the effective circulation of this content.

When teasing out the common motivations for engaging with fansubbing and ripped content across the responses provided, there were four significant threads that could be teased out of the data. The first was, quite simply, an issue of access, as respondents often humorously disclosed that they did not have the monetary means to legitimately access their desired content across the many platforms that were made available to them. As many respondents bluntly and concisely answered, "because it's free." This is not surprising, as the majority of the survey respondents are university students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The second reason was also a matter of access, but one in which the respondents disclosed that some of the desired content was simply not available on any of the extant official platforms, particularly if they wanted to experience older or more niche works. As official platforms are always concerned with the market value of the content that they retain within their catalogs, it is reasonable to

assume that older works that have not already proven themselves to be an enormous market success would likely not find themselves a place within catalogs of legitimate services. However, it should be known that while these works are certainly not considered prime viewing, the popularity of anime within the United States has also led to official streaming platforms like Retro Crush, which focus specifically on older anime. However, it is unclear whether this service was ever utilized by the respondents. Beyond older or niche works, one respondent also mentioned that there seemed to be a “lack of official translation for many *shojo/josei* (girls’/women’s) shows,” referring to the lopsided nature of many streaming catalogs.

The third discursive threads focused on the ubiquitous issue of “quality” as it pertains to the translation and subtitling of the content. Interestingly, as fansub supporters were listing the benefits of fan labor regarding the subtitling process, those who opposed the personal consumption of fansubs also listed quality as a primary motivation not to support this practice. As will be made clear in the interviews with fansubbers, very few viewers and members of fansubbing groups alike are fluent in Japanese, and certainly not at a level of proficiency where accuracy may be evaluated. Instead of prioritizing accuracy per se, what seems to be critical for non-Japanese speaking anime fans is the balance between organic dialogue and varying levels of localization. There are several reasons behind the simultaneous leveraging of “quality” on both sides of the table. The first is that while fansub groups have dwindled in numbers, there still remains a diverse manner of approaching fansubs as a practice. For example, Commie Subs takes the ludic qualities of fansubbing to the extreme, foregoing accuracy and readability of the subtitles for a more playful approach where they take ownership of the text and let their presence be known within the mediating process by, for example, changing fansub fonts throughout their work, moving the subtitles in response to a character’s situation, or “trolling” their viewers.

While these ludic qualities have undeniably had a productive influence on the fandom, fostering memes, inside jokes, limited language acquisition for viewers and more, fans remain divided on engaging with these kinds of subtitles as a viewing experience, as the barrage of jokes, explicit presence of the fansub group within the text, and lack of accuracy may soon grate at the fan who simply wishes to conveniently access the content and not necessarily engage with the fandom in the ways that groups like Commie Subs seem to encourage. In this way, a viewer's perception of a fansub group's dedication to accuracy or quality may heavily be dependent on which group's work they decide to engage with.

The second reason for this discrepancy in the concept of "quality" is that viewers often differ in their preferences of where the ideal point on the spectrum of localizing to non-localizing influences is. Viewers who may prefer less localized forms of subtitling, with Japanese honorifics, titles, and names intact, may prefer fansubs, along with the fansubber's general practice of translation notes which often elaborate on cultural differences and word play. For those who want a more localized experience, official translations may be better suited for this preference, as translator notes tend to be a rarer phenomenon for official releases. However, as a couple of my respondents pointed out, consistency regarding localizations seemed to be an issue with official translations, stating that,

"I feel that sticking closely to the original line for subtitles and maybe expanding to add quick context is preferable to rewriting dialogue to remove these aspects. One specific example is honorifics: these don't exist in English, and don't always translate directly to English in context. CR[Crunchyroll]/Funi [Funimation] will *sometimes* leave these in, since it's generally accepted that people watching subtitled anime can get a grasp of these concepts quickly enough. However these same sources will sometimes leave them out and remove other cultural references that viewers could understand easily enough if they were left in the script."

In this individual's experience, they stated that with fansubbers, "you know exactly what you are getting with each group," implying, rather ironically, the kind of consistent methods and

practices that are used to develop a fansub group's brand that may trump the more uneven practices of the range of official translators employed by these streaming services, who often have their own preferences and styles that are scrutinized by engaged viewers. Compared to the often singular individual who translates all of the projects for a group, consistency may indeed be higher among fansub groups.

However, consistency was also an issue that continued to arise for those who were against fansubs, albeit in a slightly different framework. As a couple of the fansubbers that I have interviewed predicted, releasing work in a centralized, easy-to-access platform, just an hour following the formal broadcast in Japan, cannot be beat in terms of speed and regular scheduling. Further, despite the majority of viewers' lack of proficiency in Japanese, the fact that official translators get paid for their labor was often a source a reassurance that while subtitles may indeed not be "perfect," they would likely always reach a degree of accuracy due to the translator's involvement in the professional sphere. In short, there would be real stakes for those translators who are laboring on behalf of a company's catalog, thereby discouraging any egregious mistakes or over-the-top stylings.

The final reason for the competing definitions of quality is the prioritization of characteristics that are emphasized by fansubbing groups, namely technical prowess and stylistic freedom. Neither of these features necessarily translates to the quality of the subtitles, but they nevertheless impact the viewing experience. For those who prioritize the music in an anime, karaoke subtitles may be a necessity in order to fully engage with a work, a feature that is primarily provided by fansubbers. For those who desire the highest visual quality, fansub groups who prioritize the most sophisticated encoding processes may be a viewer's preference. In short, because official platforms have to prioritize a uniform set of standards for a large quantity of

content, they may not be able to necessarily experiment or utilize the latest technical developments in both typesetting and encoding.

But what of the industry?: Competing Ethical Models of Viewing

For those who were motivated not to view fansubs, there were two primary reasons for their decisions beyond their preferential choice of “quality:” ease of access and harm to the anime industry. For ease of access, viewers did not have to download additional software for torrenting, nor did they have to face the potential barrage of ads that often accompany illicit anime streaming sites. Given the efficacy of official streaming services, which tend to serve “good enough” experiences for a majority of tastes, there hasn’t been much need for viewers to look for illicit fansubbed sources at all. Indeed, a number of respondents elaborated that they have actually never engaged with or even heard of fansubs before, supporting Begnal12’s observation that, “Most fans will interact with Crunchyroll long before they even hear about fansubs. And then they only will if official sources don't come through for them.” For concerns of harm done to the industry, respondents wondered whether by engaging in piracy, they were taking away precious resources from the anime industry. As one respondent noted, “I like to give back to the media in ways that I can... I enjoy seeing these particular shows in their catalog and hopefully it leads to that show's success.”

Beyond what constitutes quality regarding the viewing experience and issues of easy access, it is the idea of “giving back” that seems to be primarily at stake among the divide between those who engage with fansubbing and those who ultimately reject the practice altogether. While the fansubber interviewees all seemed to recognize the gray legal area that their practices existed in, given their labor and love for the craft, often on behalf of content that they were passionate about, there was the sense that this work was a form of recompense to the

creators. In addition, the nature of the work also included patching up perceived weaknesses of the official industry's output, a service in and of itself that does not necessarily nullify official intermediaries, but helps to build upon their work. However, the viewers who disavowed fansubs generally make the fair point that creators cannot sustainably create if they aren't getting monetary funds for their work. As piracy and anime fandom scholars have already outlined extensively, it often seems to be the case that these constitute two fundamentally different models of ethical viewing, that nevertheless coexist within the mutual spaces of anime fandom (Lee 2011, Wu 2020, Denison 2011, Condry 2010).

Despite the discourse surrounding ethics and quality within the elaborations provided by the respondents, what became increasingly clear was that the majority of viewers in this sample size did not particularly care about where they got the content, nor even necessarily the quality, but that they could find ease of access in a manner that suited their current socioeconomic or national context. The fact that fansubs were free, by far, seemed to be a stronger motivator than quality, making many of these responses neutral in stance despite the two seemingly opposing parties of fansubs and official streaming. These results echo Midnight-sama's observation that cease-and-desist letters (legal dimensions) and combative measures against resourceful fans were not what was going to impact the creation and distribution of fansubs, but the ease in which one can access simulcasting certainly would. I would like to expand upon Midnight-sama's perspective then, and note that the stance that official platforms often take against fansubbing, exemplified by industry professionals disavowing the practice may not as effectively sway viewer opinions regarding issues of piracy. Oftentimes, the average viewer may not be so invested in the legality of their modes of viewing, the ongoing tensions between fan and official modes of distribution, or even the sustainability of these practices in relation to the industry, but

that in their day-to-day, they are able to ultimately view at all. This echoes the mundaneness of piracy that was outlined in Da Ramini and Marshall’s work, where it is much less a grand revolutionary gesture than merely a means to an end (2014). To best combat piracy and continue to be effective intermediaries between viewers and the anime industries, streaming companies must continue to smooth out and equalize the regional discrepancies of content catalogs, the economic factors regarding sustainable viewership retention, and the technical issues that seem to persistently arise from their interface. In the next section, I approach the other half of the consumptive informal economy, the providers of the translated content: fansubbers, and their incentives of continuing to do this labor despite the concerns of the broader viewership and fandom.

“I’m mostly just interested in getting our hobby documented before we’re all gone”: Contemporary Fansubber motivations in the Twilight of Anime Fansubbing

Fansubbers	Roles
Areki	Translator
Basil	Typesetter
Begna112	Everything except translator and editor
Midnight-Sama	Retired fansubber
Bucket	Everything but encoder
Desch	programmer
Fansubber A	QA, typesetter, editor
FD	Editor, misc.
Flower	distributor
Olynn	Editor, QA, typesetter, timer
Gebbi	Translator, Encoder, Typesetter

Gonbechyan	Editor, QA
Joletb	Encoder, QA, Typesetter, Timer
K3	Encoder
LightArrows	Encoding, editing
Luceo	Encoder, editor, timer, typesetter
M	Translator, typesetter, timer, encoder, scripting/automation
S	Typesetter
0x5	Typesetter, editor

Table 1. List of interviewees

On paper, it is undeniable that fansubbing groups and models of illicit distribution, which once served as being the most robust mode of accessing anime within the English-speaking fandom, seems to be on the decline at least in numbers. Comparing active fansub groups on fansubdb, a database of the season's anime releases and the groups who are fansubbing or simulcasting the content, it is clear that in 2010, the earliest year within the database records, multiple groups were seen working on the same shows, often competing for both speed and quality, while in 2021, only a few fansubbing groups remain, with many seasonal shows never receiving any fansubbing treatment at all. Despite the conspicuous increase in shows that have been delivered conveniently to American shores, with rarely any new seasonal work escaping the licensing net of Crunchyroll, Funimation, Sentai, Netflix, and more, English fansubbing as a practice has been dwindling. As one fansubber who has since ceased engaging in the practice accurately noted, “what actually killed fansubs was the simulcasting, not the Cease & Desist letters” (Midnight-sama 2021). If fame and clout was once the rewards of fansubbing labor, it seems clear that those are now reserved for fanripping groups, who almost always deliver material faster than almost any fansub group can viably operate. However, despite these

developments, in interviewing a group of eighteen fansubbers, what remained clear was that though there are dwindling numbers and consolidation of talent across established groups, there was still a range of diversity regarding motivations for why individuals continued to fansub, in spite of the rising prominence of simulcasting services. There were reflections regarding the weaknesses of the current paradigm of platform distribution, such as “Netflix jail,” fractured catalogs, and more; however, what seemed to ultimately draw contemporary fansubbers continued to be rooted in the social.

Given that access is no longer an issue within the English language anime fandom, many fansubbers have turned to focusing their attention to the quality of the subtitles and the immersive effects of their intermediation. Ten out of the eighteen fansubbers that were interviewed expressed their distaste for the quality of official subtitles across the myriad of streaming platforms (Gonbechyan, Olynn, Bucket, Areki, Begna112, 0x5, LightArrows, K3, joletb, M). It should be noted that “quality,” particularly in comparison to official releases, is often boiled down to a certain set of technical capabilities. For example, a factor that contributes to “quality” for fansubbers that may not be as pressing of an issue to the casual viewer is the presence of karaoke romaji/English subtitles for the opening and endings of anime work, a practice that is largely not executed by official sources. Fansub encoders were often critical of the “heavy artifacting in just about every [official release] video” (LightsArrows 2021), and worked to increase the qualities of encodes by “promoting sane filtering and new technologies like 10-bit” (Gebbi 2021). Fansubbers elaborated upon what displeased them about official subtitles, including flaws in translation, the lack of translation of background text that are common in anime, lack of typesetting, visual anomalies, lack of contextual information, and more, often reflecting a perceived lack within the respective fansubbers’ area of specialization.

Part of the criticisms against official practices have to do with the combining the amount of data that can be conveyed from the material in relation to the experience of viewing the original work. For example, many of the fansubbers commented on the lack of proper typesetting that often characterized official subtitles, particularly for signboards and backdrops, with joletb noting that part of what made fansubs superior was their dedication to making “the experience as immersive as possible...typesetting would have to be done to look like it was essentially done by the [production] studio (in recent times, we see a *lot* more people try to mask every sign and try to recreate complex effects)” (2021). Basil echoed this sentiment stating that “it’s pretty much a given that fansubbers generally do a far better job with typesetting and general presentation” (2021). Indeed, it is likely the typesetters who most often mentioned in the interview that part of their enjoyment of the labor, beyond trying to provide their viewers with a more immersive experience, was the artistry required to replicate the aesthetics of type within the frame would be the member who also quoted self-education and expression as key benefits of continuously engaging with fansubbing. As S stated when asked about what inspired them to start fansubbing, they note that, “there was a fansub of Kill la Kill my friend was watching a few years ago, and he showed me a sign that was entirely re-created from scratch, almost completely matching the style of the show” (2021). They go further to outline their experience of typesetting their first episode of the anime, *Mewkledreamy*, when they revealed, “I spent 6 hours trying to do one sign, it was a few thousand lines [of edits/code] long because of the motion tracking, the backgrounds, and the masking” (2021). These responses reveal that there is a level of artistry involved with typesetting, and manipulating the original image in order to convey information through translation and melding this data into the background for the least disruptive transmission of that information to the viewer. Extensive labor is involved with the process and

the additive value of this work defies the framing of fansubbers as “parasitically appropriat[ing] value they did not create” as both on the level of artistry and data that they transmit to the viewer, work that is often not done by official streaming services is clearly being engaged by these self-organized groups (Dent 29). Official subtitlers rarely take the amount of time and care to typeset the contextual features of the media form, as such attention to detail is rarely awarded in the official subtitling industries. As one interviewee elaborated, “they get paid for doing a good job, but nothing extra for doing a perfect job. While most fansubbers are doing it out of passion in the first place, so they’ll be more motivated to aim for perfection” (Midnight-sama 2021).

The quality of translations also continues to be a contentious issue between fansubtitlers, official translators, and viewers alike. Sharp-eyed viewers continue to seek out and publicize mistakes in official translations, such as the Twitter account, *shit_simulcasts*, which keeps a running record of the transgressions made by official translators. Despite this running tally, fansubbers have acknowledged that “recently, the quality of official subs has definitely improved” (Areki 2021), though in the past there were more pressing issues of accuracy as was pointed out by Areki about the official release of the anime, *Nana*. It should be noted that the vast majority of the fansubbers that were involved as interviewees did not have fluency in Japanese, thereby making it difficult to perceive issues of translation accuracy. With the exception of fluent translators like Areki, when fansubbers and viewers alike criticize translation, they are more accurately critiquing the style of translation, which is normally the labor of editors. Among translation styles, there is a divide between literal translations and interpretive and liberal translation, where the former prioritizes accuracy and one-to-one interpretations across the two languages, whereas liberal translations often prioritize how organic the subtitle will sound in the

viewer's own language. Often, this is a balancing act of localization, as literal translations can easily sound too stilted or "dry and awkward," which would impact the immersion of viewers, whereas liberal translations risk losing the original meaning of the speech altogether (0x5 2021). The fansubbers that were interviewed leaned more heavily on the side of liberal translations that are able to imitate organic dialogue in English, so when they critique an official translation, it is normally because the translation draws further attention to the foreignness of the text itself, not necessarily because of inaccuracy in meaning. Again, this draws further attention to the very particular characteristics that define what "quality" consists of within fansubbing groups and the anime viewership more broadly, which is defined across differences in tastes and ideologies in cross-cultural media engagement, rather than an objective standard.

However, the discursive trend of fansubbers trying to distance themselves from official translations and rebrand their own labor as higher quality does not mean that collaboration and intersections with official industries do not exist. It is when one observes fansubbers attempting to raise the quality of translations, that one can see how fansubbing and official platforms continue to be ever more intertwined together. For example, Begnal19 revealed how their fansubbing group, DameDesuYo "came into existence right as Crunchyroll was really gaining traction" (2021). This transformed some of the practices of fansubbing itself, as simulcast subtitles could now be used as "base translations," to which the fansubber can add their own edits. As fansubber A notes, a good editor can really "punch up" an existing script, and fansubbers may sometimes take on that role of editor when they feel like the official editor has failed in some capacity. However, Begnal19 added that fansub groups may still default to translating the work completely from scratch, as it can be surprisingly difficult "to break away

from a base script from a mental standpoint [as] the way the line is structured and translated influences the editor's choices" (Begna 19).

Similar to the ways that fansubbers draw from the cultures of official industry, one mode of collaboration can also be seen through the information networks that are fostered by translators across the boundaries of the formal/informal economy. While the quality of the official subtitling work is under close scrutiny by the fansubbing community, many interviewees also mentioned that another reason for their critical discontent with the industry's official releases was due to what they perceived to be mistreatment of the official translators. While there are no formal sources that have released this information to the public, the impression that the interviewees expressed was that the tight turnaround times for simulcasting, in addition to general low wages for translators made for an exploitative work environment for those that toiled within that system. While official translators are often put between a rock and hard place in trying to express these discontents, it is fansubbers and those who exist in the paratextual margins who spread this information further outwards to the general public. In an interview with Desch, the webmaster of *Fansubbing*, they mentioned that, "it isn't that official subs will always be inherently worse, but that they're not put in an environment to thrive," revealing a nuanced understanding of separating blaming the employees of the formal economy with the cultures that are being fostered by corporations within it. While it is difficult to parse the validity of these statements as much of this information travels through whisper networks between close-knit translator communities, what it does reveal is that it is not only the quality of the subtitling work itself that remains a concern for the contemporary fansubbing community, but the conditions in which anime has been able to spread into the mainstream through modes of potential labor exploitation. This once again gestures towards a kind of ethical code that diverges from law, but

nevertheless has its own internal logic that informally governs these subcultural communities. Being paid nothing and working on providing top quality viewing experiences as a passion project between a network of friends is more just than being paid a small wage by an official corporate entity who may be exploiting that very passion. As Bucket concisely summed up, viewers chose illicit modes of viewing because sometimes, “they don’t agree with the service’s working conditions and would rather not fund such a workplace.”

In extending this ethical code further, it is worth thinking about the role that ripping has played in proliferating the official textual renditions and quite often, overwhelming the presence of fansubbers. Despite the amount of work that often may go into raising the quality of the viewing experience and immersion through fansubbing, many fansubbers were not so optimistic regarding having their work seen by viewers. Viewers were sometimes framed as complicit to the perceived mediocrity of the viewing experience on official platforms, and when pressed on why platforms may not be taking a page from the fansubber’s guidebook, 0x5 morosely noted that the mentality within streaming services may very well be, “‘people pay for this garbage, so why should we bother improving?’ as far as I can tell” (2021).

The rise of “ripping” culture must be contextualized within the broader historical trajectory of fansubbing, which, as noted previously, existed before digital streaming. Following fansubbing’s digital turn, fansubbing groups scrambled in order to both make anime content accessible to the fandom, as well as gain clout within the global fandom. Fansubbing groups were formed and branded along the lines of speed-subbers, quality-subbers, and comedy subbers. “Speed-subbing” groups capitalized on how fast they could release a subtitled product following the release of the original material. These groups would promise quick access to their viewers, though the subtitles may have inaccuracies. Quality-subbing groups would often take a longer

time in order to release content, but the end product would often be more accurate in their translations and more immersive in their typesetting capacities. Finally, comedy subbing groups would often forgo accuracy in order to make jokes around the original content in ways that often spoke to the fandom's tastes. If speed-subbing and quality subbing were once diametrically opposed methods of wooing viewers to engage with a fansub group's content, then the general practice of speed-subbing has been replaced with ripping, as uploading simulcast content would always be faster than trying to translate from scratch and the quality of the subtitle would be at least be at the level of official translations, where egregious errors tend to be a much rarer occurrence. While some groups that engage in ripping may do light typesetting and encode editing, consequently raising the general quality of these rapid-fire uploads, often these works are just uploaded as-is. Because of this, even within the informal economy, we see the circulation of the work of official translators, not necessarily the industrious fans.

The mention of ripping practices had a polarizing effect on the interviewees, ranging from acceptance to apathy, grim tolerance to anger. Those who generally expressed disapproval for the practice gestured towards the immoral nature of profiting off of piracy and the outsized impact that ripping had on both official streaming and fansubbing cultures alike. Despite the general illegality of both fansubbing and ripping practices, fansubbers were keen on separating their cultural practices away from rippers. Echoing Ito, Olynn notes the importance of doing actual labor on behalf of the community when they stated, "I wouldn't call rippers fansubbers. They're just outright thieves. They do nothing for themselves. Fansubbers at least use some elbow grease." When pressed to elaborate further on the details of his discontent, Olynn noted that it was also the donations from ripping websites that they couldn't support, particularly when they "aren't going to shut [their] donations off once [they] hit your quota." Begna 19 echoed

similar concerns regarding the issue of funds, mentioning that, “generally, I’m against profiting on piracy. So in that respect, I dislike many simulcast rippers or streaming sites.” Gonbechyan expressed some anxiety regarding the spaces in which fansubs and rips seemed to cross over, when they noted that through rips, “it feels like official subs are infiltrating the area of fansubs too.” Such statements echo the ethical code that fansubbers outlined over a decade ago, which encouraged working on content that had not been picked up yet by official licensors, though in many ways, that code was not followed by the respective fansub groups either. However, the potential transgressions of fansubbers for their ethical code seemed to be justified by their current limited impact on the industry and fandom, as K3 notes that “I think stuff like Erai-raws and Subsplease harm the industry way more than us.”

For those who were more neutral to the rise of ripping services, they offered a measured response to the role of ripped content within the global anime fan community. Bucket offered a balanced account of his ambivalence regarding this topic, stating,

“rippers are an interesting case. Their primary goal as I see it is to make accessible content from an inaccessible platforms (whether it’s because it’s paid or locked or what have you), and I think they’re always going to exist...I don’t necessarily agree with that from an ethical standpoint, but most fansubbers these days, including me, make use of their work, and I think you’d see a significant decline in fansubs if rippers were to disappear. I can’t say fansubbers are any better than rippers in terms of ethics because we’re also equally guilty of pirating content.”

It should be noted that Bucket was the only interviewee who put themselves on the same ethical stage as rippers, whereas the majority of fansubbers who extended a more neutral stance on rippers were still keen on separating themselves from the former group. As Areki reinforced, “rippers are rippers, they rip the official subs, nothing more, nothing less...But what they do doesn’t really...concern us, fansubbers, much, outside the fact that we watch their rips if there’s no other release available.” Discourses on quality were once again utilized to create a sense of separation, noting that “I recognize that they [rippers] fulfill a purpose, but I still prefer fansubs

due to the quality difference. There are some shows that I want the absolute best versions of to archive for watching on my own” (Midnight-sama 2021). LightArrows also mentioned off-handedly that, “I don’t really have any issues with them [rippers]. I just wonder why there’s so many when most of them do a suboptimal job.”

For those who took a more generous stance to rippers, it was often because of the recognition that they were the natural response to asymmetrical influence that streaming services seem to hold over their viewers. As Joletb elaborated,

“it’s usually a consequence of poor service for Crunchyroll and especially Funimation. Region locking can just straight up prevent you from watching the show legally, [and] also prices are not really adjusted for certain countries that aren’t as developed, so throwing \$10 monthly may not [be] fuck-all money for some.”

This statement reveals that in the anime viewing ecology, ripping plays a beneficial role, similar to that of fansubbing a decade ago, as matters of access continue to persist despite the rise in simulcasting services. While ten dollars may indeed be a reasonable price to pay for access to limitless anime, the reality of the situation is more complex. Given that anime has become a desired commodity for many services, it is not only Crunchyroll or Funimation that is in the market for the anime fan’s attention, but also Amazon Prime, Netflix, HBO Max, HiDive, and more, which leads to an exorbitant amount of monthly fees if one were to attempt to gain access legitimately. Even then, availability tends to rotate among platforms or are dropped altogether after a set amount of time, which continues to limit the viewer’s access. If one is a fan of a particular franchise that has multiple seasons, remakes, and paratextual media content, one may find that the access to these various individual texts can be spread across multiple streaming services. For example, in the case of the enormously popular franchise, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, in the American market, Netflix has the original 1995 series, as well as the 1997 film, *The End of Evangelion* and *Evangelion Death (True)*², but Amazon Prime Video retained

the series of remake films, *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone*, *Evangelion: 2.0 You Can (Not) Advance*, *Evangelion: 3.0 You Can (Not) Redo*, and *Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time*. Amazon Prime also circulated the documentary around the *Evangelion* director, Hideaki Anno. One would need to be a subscriber on both platforms in order to fully access the range of media associated with *Evangelion*, as many fans desire to do. The lack of centralization may exacerbate issues of access for fans who may not have the funds to retain both services. As I have already elaborated in my survey, the more common pattern in contemporary anime consumption is membership with perhaps one or two commercial streaming services, with torrenting and illicit streaming sites supplying the rest of the fan viewer's desires for full access. If this is the situation for prized markets like in the United States, then access is often even more limited for markets that may not be as prioritized by the official streaming service in question. Indeed, even if legitimate streaming services foster a presence within markets abroad, there are situations that may be well out of the hands of the fans that impact their access, such as the recent blocking of much of Crunchyroll's catalog in Russia due to censorship laws (Koyomi 2021). Given these challenges, it remains clear that ripping, despite the potentially negative impacts on fansub visibility, continues to offer a node of access for global anime viewers.

Given the manner in which fansubbers have distanced themselves from rippers through discourses on quality and ethics mirroring in some ways to their disavowal of the official industry, it is important to recognize that the ethical code that was once implemented over a decade ago, regarding dropping licensed projects and prioritizing the health of the official industry, is no longer strictly applicable. In some ways, there remains an echo of this ethical code that still travels along fansub groups to this day. For example, Bucket stated that his team prioritized "shorts that were previously unsubbed," while Luceo echoed similar sentiments

saying that he focused generally on “un- or quite poorly translated shorts.” Similarly, there are fansub groups, such as Saizen, who focus on older content that will likely not be picked up by licensors due to their predicted lack of market potential. Moyaisubs, which at the time of writing this chapter, has focused their attention on series like *Mewkledreamy* and *Kiratto Pri-chan*, franchises that once did not hold the interest of licensors. While *Kiratto Pri-chan* recently got licensed by Crunchyroll at time of the interview, members of Moyaisubs contemplated continuing their work on the series defying the ethical guideline of “drop when licensed.”

Similarly, both Post Apocalyptic Subs (PAS) and Moyaisubs have focused their attention on providing fansubs for work that have been in “Netflix jail,” a term referring to Netflix’s practice of holding off on releasing weekly anime content in order to upload them in a large batch reflecting their preferred binge model of consumption. PAS has recently finished their work on the second season of *Beastars* and Moyaisubs has been working on *Godzilla SP*, two works that have already been slated to be released on Netflix at a later date. There are incentives to working on this kind of content. By focusing on works that are in Netflix jail, fansub groups are able to reach download numbers that are quite equivalent to that of rippers. This is because in order to engage with this body of work, a translator is necessary. Given the rippers’ operational mode, there are often no translators readily available on their teams. While fansubbers often recognize that their work should ideally support content that is unlicensed and inaccessible, a few have noted that passion is what is necessary, perhaps even more crucial than following the former ethical code, to continue the labor of fansubbing in the contemporary moment (Begna19, joletb, Olynn, S). As Olynn concisely summarized, “when you’re unpaid and doing it on your own time, you should be doing what you enjoy.”

Beyond motivations of persistently one-upping the official releases through technical prowess, the fansubbers continued to express many personal incentives. While maintaining a sense of community with their viewers remained critical, perhaps more importantly, it remained a way to continuously engage with friends within the fansubbing community that often spanned national boundaries. For example, as K3 expressed,

“I can’t speak for anyone else but myself. But for me, the only and entire reason I continue to do this mostly thankless job that very few people see a reason to exist is to have fun with my buddies...We’re all friends. This is what we do for fun. We talk to the same people every single day for years on end...It’s actually shaped our lives. We’ve traveled to the other side of the world to meet up and see each other” (2021).

In short, for those who have continued to fansub despite recent industrial developments, camaraderie continues to trump the desire for fame or subcultural capital. Further, these relationships are reinforced through various forms of just-in-time learning and mentorship across the community. For example, S gave an honorable mention to their friend Combo, who helped them “get faster at subbing by making me think about the time constraints,” while Basil recounted a moment when a viewer “extracted all the files in our release and very harshly pointed out all of the technical areas we did poorly in. It didn’t feel good to us at the time, but he was genuinely trying to help in his own way and we’re grateful for it, because we learned an absolute ton from him.” The critical viewer would later become the individual who would obtain the RAW (untranslated) content for the group. Beyond acquiring new technical skills, fansubbing provided members like Areki, Olynn, and Gebbi opportunities for professionalization, as the latter two interviewees now work within professional anime-related industries, while the former is considering going into professional Japanese to English interpretation as a career.

What initially spurred my interest in the impact of streaming services on the fansubbing community was the line of discourse regarding how fansubbing had, or was well in the process

of, dying. K3 had explained that a primary motivation for speaking to me was “getting our hobby documented before we're all gone and the hobby's completely dead.” In their own interview, Midnight-sama likened the declining practice of fansubbing as “similar to how brick-and-mortar stores are going out of business because they failed to adapt to the changing times.” Yet, what becomes clear is that despite the somewhat fatalistic stance that a number of my interviewees have adopted as the inevitable decline of the English-language anime fansubbing scene, this perspective was not shared uniformly among the fansubbers. As S admitted, “I hear that [discourse] too and it pains me. It honestly feels like these big actors like Funi and Crunchyroll are purposely trying to kill fansubbing by calling it dead, even though it's alive and well.” For fansubbers who began their foray into the cultural practice following the rise of simulcasting, like Bucket and S, it is the continued arc towards learning how to hone the craft of typesetting and fansubbing more broadly that have encouraged them to stay committed to this hobby. Further, as Bucket noted, “fansubbers are always striving to improve, and that’s even the nature of the work we’re doing.”

To support Bucket's claim, we can look to a long list of technological advancements and tools made by members of the community that have smoothed the process of fansubbing, including moving the subtitling process from FTP to Git, and the creation of SubKt, which was developed by the fansubber, M, and automates many of the tasks required to build a release. Desch, the webmaster of Fansubbing, created Deschtimes, developed by Desch, which automates Discord and IRC bots that notify viewers regarding status updates on episodes. As Desch observed, “half of the activity in Discord (and IRC back in the day) was people trying to find status updates,” so he created a way of getting that information to viewers “in a way that fits how people interact with IRC and Discord.” Further, S notes that “fansubs aren’t dead until every

single anime is licensed. And even then it probably won't die, since everyone has fun doing this on their own," listing open source software like MPV, Libass subtitle renderers, and SubStation Alpha (.ASS) format as tools that can be used for voracious hobbyists. M contributed to this sentiment noting that part of what makes fansubbing so appealing compared to official releases was the ability to experiment with new and innovative models of doing this kind of work. Such boundary pushing was less inclined to be accepted in legitimate streaming services. These developments exemplify that despite the dwindling number of English language anime fansubbers, there remains a continuous explosion of productivity and innovation as Lobato and Thomas outline within the subcultural community (2018). Given how much crossover there is regarding software use and skill transference between official and fansubbing sources, it is likely that the development of fansub software will likely inspire the professional realm of subtitling as well. Indeed, as Gebbi notes, his investment in new encoding technologies within his respective fansub community, sparked an interest from his professional sphere to increase the video quality of official services. Despite the largely antagonistic facade that official corporations have fostered against fansubbing and piracy more generally, it is undeniable that both sides have benefited from the development and unspoken cooperation between the two spheres.

Beyond the pedagogical and technical developments that continue to advance within the fansubbing community, several interviewees have stated that so long as official releases continue to be subpar or there is content that has not been licensed, fansubbers will likely continue to pick up the slack. Those who shared this view were a bit more reserved comparatively however to those who seemed more motivated at the moment by pedagogical incentives. For example, Gonbechyan stated that, "I think as long as there are shows that aren't licensed, there will always be a need for fansubs, but the fansub scene will definitely become smaller and smaller as more

and more shows are picked up.” Basil echoed this sentiment that “it’s no secret that there are fewer and fewer fansubs these days...but fansubs will always be around so long as there are great shows out there that people really love.” While the rate of new talent coming into the fansub scene may be dwindling, as 0x5 observed, “I do still see new faces every now and then.”

Collaborative Creativity and Dispersed Digital Networks

Given the advent of the pandemic in 2019, the widespread move towards transitioning what would normally be offline sociality into the online space and reinforcing modes of effective digital communication ironically, in some ways, centralized certain spaces in which conversations regarding anime, fansubbing, and fandom were happening. Anime conventions/clubs, which often pose as convenient yearly meeting spaces for fans all over the country, quickly transitioned their services online. While the pandemic may have certainly encouraged individuals to maintain a more robust presence in online spaces, Discord has been a primary hub for fansubbers and their viewers to interact with one another within the past couple of years in collaborative ways. Discord servers are divided amongst fansub groups, rip groups, and illicit streaming sites and each server has a set of channels based on topics of interest. Fansub groups and rip groups are quite similar in the constitution of their server channels. Common channels that were found across the board were a kind of general channel (though names can differ, such as “lobby”), a progress channel, a quality checking and feedback channel, and channels to post content related to the series that the fansubbing group may be working on. Progress channels are normally automated by bots like Deschtimes, which notify the participant of what stage the fansubbing group is at for a particular episode. The last of these channels regarding content posting and discussion depend heavily on the fansubbing group in question. For example, for more focused groups such as Moyai Subs, who have been working extensively

on a few franchises, their channels are carefully tailored to those works. Comparatively, the server for DameDesuYo has a much more broad-ranging set of channels, including spaces where one can talk about video games, vtubers (virtual YouTubers), SFW and NSFW content, and DIY crafts, engaging in anime adjacent forms of community and fandom within this space.

Clearly, the organizational and community-building affordances of Discord provide a convenient lens into observing how fansubbing groups act as both brand and community simultaneously, mirroring some of the dynamics of official streaming services like Crunchyroll and Funimation, and foregoing others in order to differentiate themselves from formal players. Fansub groups change the tone and constitution of engagement with their own viewers regarding times of perceived crisis, but generally, fansubbing groups emphasize a more pedagogical mode of communication with their broader viewership than that of the likes of niche services that predicate their economic performance on the fandom. Tracing these differences continues to reveal how members of the formal and informal economy differentiate themselves from one another and when they can be seen as mirroring one another in the neoliberal economy, reflecting both branding dynamics and free market ideals that are reflected in the scholarship of Denison (2011) and Hills (2017). Further, we can see how novel digital platforms also contribute to the ways that fans and subbing groups alike communicate with one another.

In emphasizing the communicative modes of the fans and fansubbers, I would first like to draw attention to the collaborative dimensions of the checking and feedback channels that can be found on most fansubbing Discords. Depending on the fansub group in question, how viewers go about notifying the fansubbers of mistakes in the media text or airing their more general grievances vary widely. For example, DameDesuYo creates a strict format that viewers must follow in order to get a response from the fansubbers, including show name, episode number,

timestamp, description, and screenshot if necessary. Even if a viewer follows this format, the fansubbers only respond to certain requests. Other groups, such as Asenshi's QC channel, opt for a much more flexible approach, allowing for viewers to message as they see fit and respond accordingly. Spelling and grammatical errors, awkward phrasing, issues regarding filtering, missing fonts, and more are brought to the attention of the fansubbers where they may or may not aim to remedy the issue in a subsequent revised release. Despite the flexibility of Asenshi and Good Job! Media, the members deploy methods of disciplining unruly viewers or those who the fansubbers believe have stepped out of line in the manner in which a viewer brings up a grievance. While each server has a certain set of rules that are provided within the landing channel, when a member initially enters the server, what seems to be more effective than these explicit guidelines are the public disciplining of certain unruly participants. For example, when a viewer in Good Job! Media's blame-spam channel quipped, "if we manage to get S2 (Season 2) done somehow before S3 (Season 3) Does that mean when S3 comes around, we will have a wait this long for each episode?" To this query, gsk_, a staff member of Good Job! Media responded, "Sometimes ppl ask as if we...owe them something. We don't get paid, there is literally nothing to gain for us by doing this. It's easy to ask while you are sitting in your chair and criticizing. Just try doing TS (typesetting) and you will know how much effort and time it requires. An average of 2-5 hours needs to be spend per ep. And a monster like Kaguya I wouldn't be surprised if the working time required is 20+ hours. He has real life issues that he is dealing with and can't work in the current circumstances."

Much like Ito's prior research on how knowledge and labor can be used as a kind of capital among fan economies, one can see how outlining the amount of time it takes to do this labor can be used as a strategy to discipline an antagonistic user. Given this response, the initial viewer issued an apology regarding their behavior affirming that they were a fan of what the fansub group did and that they did not mean to "sound like a jerk."

Because these exchanges are completely public to the participants of these Discord servers, they serve as an example of how not to engage with the fansub group in question, and the general stance that the staff members take with their own work without having to explicitly state their intent. Similarly with the use of react emojis and tone of responses, one can subtly show what kinds of errors and quality issues are privileged by the fansub groups, and which they would choose to ultimately ignore, which shift the attention and standards of viewers accordingly to the kind of issues that they should be looking for. It is unsurprising then, returning to the previous analysis of how the contentious nature of “quality” seems to be defined and constituted by the viewers, that those who engage with these servers may have a very particular definition that is shaped by these implicit discursive strategies on the part of the fansubbers to promote certain interpretations. The creation of quality fansubs then, is at least partially predicated on the engaged responses of at least a segment of the group’s viewership, revealing the collaborative nature of doing this kind of fan-oriented work.

Beyond engaging in more general quality-checking labor, the collaborative nature of these spaces are exemplified as viewers engage with fansubbers and one another through pedagogical and discussion-based channels. The exact formation and nature of these channels depend on the server in question. For example, DameDesuYo hosts a slew of discussion-based channels for fansubbing, information and systems technology, Japanese, programming, and DIY arts and crafts, while MoyaiSubs’ “Nihongo Jouzu” channel provides a space where one can find conversation partners for Japanese. While there are no channels dedicated to pedagogy per say in Good Job! Media’s server, one can find examples of how group members collaboratively and publicly troubleshoot programming issues in their games-and-tech channel. Similar dynamics can be seen in ripping servers, such as Subsplesae and Erai Community as well, with more

experienced users helping to troubleshoot issues regarding torrenting and encoding. These spaces can prove to be very beneficial for novice fansubbers and viewers alike, who often have to utilize their peer network in order to advance their own knowledge bases in various forms of cultural engagement, including media literacy, linguistic competence, and more that may compensate for gaps in more formal modes of education.

The tone of these channels tend to vary widely depending on the active users in question and the topic that is being discussed. For example, technical questions that are more formal in tone and asked in earnest will generally receive a more productive response than one in which a viewer suggests changes to the working model that the fansub or rip group is engaging with in a less deferential or uppity tone. For example, when one member of the DameDesuYo server requested, “if anyone knows an easy way for a noob to extract the subs from one release and put it on some raws that are in better quality could they explain to me how to do that pls and thx,” to which several members responded by giving them a list of recommended software and suggestions for basic extractions and muxing. Comparing this more supportive atmosphere to when a member asked, “Can Erai release the new HEVC releases with OPUS sound?,” prompting a discussion about encoding formats that would lead to better audio quality. A community manager responded sharply to the member’s responses with, “it does not. It cannot. Please read up on basic encoding.” Similar to the methods of shaping discourses around quality, the transferring of knowledge between users tends to be governed by strategies of showing what is considered a valuable contribution to the discussion and what may not be, predicated on various forms of rhetorical strategies where knowledge is often leveraged as a means of gaining subcultural capital to be used for various forms of disciplining and hierarchization. The public nature of these exchanges only amplifies the efficacy of these strategies.

Given the fluid nature in which fansub group members can collaborate with one another and between groups, there are generally no strict boundaries between the various subbing and ripping servers. Indeed, there are members who traverse server boundaries in order to interact with various communities and groups, as many of the fansubber interviewees that I engaged with shared more than one common server with me. However, there are moments when knowledge and branding can be weaponized to draw and reinforce boundaries. For example, for the ripping group Subsplease, speaking about Erai-raws dismissively was often a way to reinforce their own brand identity, particularly during the hierarchical shuffle that seemed to happen following the dissolution of HorribleSubs as one of the most infamous ripping groups. For example, comments like “if you think erai has really good ts [typesetting], then you haven’t seen good ts yet,” offhanded comments regarding the appearance of respective websites, how a group asks for donations, and delays in upload times, were often used as a mode of comparison to comment on how one’s own group was unlike the targeted ripping group. While this dynamic seemed strongest between ripping groups as opposed to the fansub groups, there were still offhanded comments by fansubbers. For example, Areki noted that “It’s annoying if they do the job badly (like Erai used to have issues where they broke italics and whatnot), it’s great if they do it correctly (SubsPlease has been very good).” Such dynamics echo Hills’ observation that there are “fan-cultural brands, [which] worked competitively and moved across formal and informal economies” (87). Though Denison focuses exclusively on fansubbing, her observations regarding how “groups fulfill a branding function not unlike corporate brands” (2011, 456), seems to remain true in the contemporary moment, as fan-brands not only compare themselves to official releases now, but also official releases that have been further enhanced by fan labor. Such permeability between the official and the fan-oriented economy and the resulting forms of

productivity continues to blur together; however, the construction of these channels within the Discord servers reveals that anime fandom is not simply “communities of consumers” or “communities of imagination,” but retains a fluid constitution that is highly subject to transform during certain moments of “crisis,” such as when HorribleSubs went down, and celebration (Annett 2014).

For example, it is not surprising that the fandom would operate more as a community of consumers among these fan-brands when a perceived instability spurred by the take-down of a major illicit streaming site or ripping group happens, as fans seek to choose sides on who should take the position of “quality” distributors and share information on where next to find their beloved content. Yet, simultaneously, different channels depicting more fannish affect surrounding their favorite vtubers, sharing art, memes, music, discussing episodes, and even sharing momentous milestones in a member’s personal life continue to persist and create modes of community beyond consumption and branding. They hold contests for fanwork, such as DameDesuYo’s banner contests where viewers provided digitally altered headers with some of their beloved anime characters. The content was then posted on the DameDesuYo blog and website. It is not so much that one paradigm of fandom or community necessarily dominates the other, but that fandoms organically tend to take certain shapes in response to the conditions of the surrounding distribution ecology. When the community feels a sense of impending crisis or models of commodification are interjected within the fannish sphere, such as how rips have become increasingly dominant in the fan-powered distribution cycle, there may be more allegiances towards certain groups or methods of consumption as opposed to others, as well as the necessity of safeguarding certain boundaries. However, instead of one group or sphere overwhelming the other, as sometimes characterized by the more skeptical anime fansubbers

regarding the decline of their practice, there tends to be a more productive friction that is fostered by this desire to reinforce the official and the fannish as a dialectic. This includes the production of competing definitions of quality, forms of sociality, and pedagogical networks, all of which gesture towards the way that the tensions within the official economy and the extensive piracy networks that work in the shadows of fandom feed into one another in a myriad of ways that address the layered needs of the community.

Moments of Intersection: Situating Official and Fan Subbing Within One Another

Official sources like Crunchyroll and Funimation have been laboring to separate themselves from the fansubbing history of the global anime fandom as well as closing down possible modes of competition via fansubbing. For example, in September 2021, Funimation released a wave of DMCA/cease-and-desist notices for their company towards three piracy apps and services, Taiyaki, AnimeGlare, and Shiro, while Project Kamyroll and Yukino have since gone “private” (Maxwell 2021). Crunchyroll sent a DMCA complaint towards “Crunchyroll Downloader,” a popular free-to-use application that was created by Tim Schneeberger, a German student that “focuses on building open-source desktop and mobile application,” and allowed users to download content from the official platform. As Schneeberger states in an interview with TorrentFreak, “I wanted to create an app that was able to ‘simulate’ the official client as good as possible, in order to provide a safe method to download content directly from Crunchyroll at high speeds, rather than relying on reuploads on piracy sites or torrents” (Schneeberger qtd. Maxwell 2020), revealing once again, the ways in which the gray area between the formal and informal economy attempts to try to address one another’s drawbacks and weaknesses for their broader viewership. Github, where the application was once housed, deleted the project and is no longer available. In spite of a history of pirating themselves,

Crunchyroll has also threatened lawsuits for thirteen YouTube anime uploaders in 2011, claiming reparation for “great and irreparable injury that cannot fully be compensated or measured in money” (Sherman 2011). Interestingly, the official statement from the CEO of Crunchyroll, Kun Gao reflects a kind of balance of trying not to antagonize the anime fandom due to the service’s dependence on this group, using YouTube’s terms of service as the primary reason for why they are trying to shut down these YouTube channels. He states, “Categorically, we don’t endorse legal action against anime fans and viewers...In compliance with YouTube’s TOS, filing a formal legal complaint was a necessary step in order to keep these illegal streams off of YouTube” (Gao qtd. Sherman 2011). Beyond anime-specific sites, in 2022, Google has also updated their DMCA policy, where they have

“developed a ‘demotion signal’ for Google Search that causes sites for which we have received a large number of valid removal notices to appear much lower in search results. We have also made it much harder for infringing sites to evade demotion by redirecting people to a new domain. Finally, we have added a “still-in-theaters/prerelease” flag for DMCA notices involving this category of content to enhance the Search demotion signal. When a site is demoted, the traffic Google Search sends it drops, on average, by 89% on average” (Statement of Interest and Comment United States copyright Office’s Consultation on technical Manners 2022).

This movement reveals how corporate entities are devoted to cutting viewers from the source regarding fansubbing and pirating anime content more broadly.

Yet, despite the very conscious efforts on both sides of the coin (fansubbing groups and corporations) to separate themselves from the other, there continues to be a decreasing distance between official translation and release practices with fansubbing work. Contrasting this observation to the “Japanophile anime model of fansubbing [which] has proven resilient to global homogenization processes” (Dwyer quoting Gottlieb 2012, 238), it seems that fansubbing is adapting around the affordances of the official releases, which may not necessarily yield resilience, but a kind of co-opting of these processes. This co-option does not fit neatly into the

standard conceptions of homogenization or heterogeneity. Beyond the common knowledge that fansubbers sometimes find work within the official industries, the occasional controversies that crop up, such as when it was discovered that the streaming service, Retro Crush, had taken the fansub for *Magical Idol Pastel Yumi*, without contacting the fansubber previously. This reveals how influence within these two spheres continues to be bilateral. As another anecdotal point of reference, joletb stated in his interview that their fansub group's work on *Little Witch Academia* was so popular that Studio Trigger, the studio behind creating *Little Witch Academia* "used our spell names for the official JPBD [Japanese blu-ray] english subs." Similarly, as the focus for fansub groups turned from an emphasis on translations-from-scratch, to a focus on typesetting and encoding, similar intersecting dynamics can be seen as official translations are often used as a kind of base script to which an editor can expand upon. Clearly, the influence of the official base script permeates into the edited fansub version of the work, a condition that has already been expressed by fansubbers. Ripping groups continue to proliferate official releases of a work in both illicit streaming and torrenting sites, effectively continuing to spread the official translators' interpretations of the text. The expectations involved with what constitutes quality subtitles, both for official releases and fansubs alike continue to contribute to one another's conceptions, whether it is the professionalization of the aesthetics of the subtitles for fansubbers, or the very basic typesetting and explanatory notes that are official sources occasionally use.

The boundary between the official and the fan-created seems to be discursively formulated between the entities involved. This dynamic continues to speak to the explosive productivity that is motivated by the frictions between the official and the pirated that Lobato and Thomas speak of in their own work (2012). Whether it is fan-made programming scripts that have automated and smoothed over the process of fansubbing, the production of different

interpretations of quality, or the labor that is required from fans for works to be emancipated from “Netflix jail,” the end result is always a proliferation of “more,” both within fan and official spaces. As a point of comparison, one fansubber noted in his observations of the German fansubbing scene, that what may have “killed” the German fansub scene more than even the English one, is that fansubbers were co-opted into these more legitimate services, which ultimately fostered platforms that seem to be respected by both fansubbers and more casual viewers alike (Gebbi). Gebbi elaborated on how, unlike the English context, there were more “neutral or positive vibes between the official publishers and German fansub groups.” This was due to the collaborative relationship that was fostered from the beginning, as fansubbers were allowed to head some of the official subtitling projects, such as the 2012 “Bakuman Project” being among the most significant. With free reign over the subtitling style, the German fansubbers were able to cooperate willingly with the official platforms, which led to employment opportunities for some members in the future (Gebbi). The effect of this is that German streaming services, like Anime on Demand, are regarded quite highly by several of my interviewees. Comparatively, it seems like there is yet to be an English-speaking platform that plays to the desires of fansubbers as effectively. While the existence of an official platform that serves the quality of fansubs seems to be the desire of several interviewees, it may likely be the case that with the disappearance of this friction between official and fan-oriented sources, the productivity that one can currently observe may take a dramatically different shape.

While at the beginning of this chapter, I sought to outline the practices of anime fansubbing in its twilight years, what has become apparent from speaking to the fans who do the labor is that despite the rising prominence of simulcasting platforms, they still have been able to remain rather steady recently in their numbers. Though they certainly may not be as prolific as in

the past, they continue to exist to fill in gaps that are created by the official services. Though fansubbers may be serving “a very very small minority” (fansubber A), there is still a minority to serve, one that seems deeply engaged with the technical and interpretive capacity of anime as a media form and the current distribution ecosystem’s failings. This is in conjunction with the artistic, social, and technical motivations for continuing with their craft. What seems most likely is that anime fansubbing, perhaps to the chagrin of industry players, will likely continue to exist in some capacity for the foreseeable future. Both ripping and fansubbing groups alike have been filling in the gaps that are created by the official industry through the fracturing of anime’s seasonal offerings across multiple services. Digitally-savvy programmers will continue to create applications that aid both viewers in navigating their anime consumption and inspire industry employees to better the features of their own labor practices and interface. Even in spite of the formal DMCA notices that attempt to control distribution nodes, re-emphasizing that it is distribution that is a fundamental locus of power (Brannon-Donoghue et. al 2022), new illicit streaming sites continue to pop up and information networks that are fostered by fansubbers and fans alike continue to guide avid anime consumers towards these illicit sources. While this chapter has been focused largely on the English-language fandom, it is probable that anime fansubbing may be even more robust in other languages, as streaming services continue to be subject to global politics, as well as cultural, national, and ideological boundaries, and the hierarchies of power that come with it. Indeed, while engaging with the discord servers, there would occasionally be requests for how to add different language fan-subtitles to one’s own work, showing how this network continues to engage transnationally in knowledge-building networks.

One aspect between the relationship of fansubbing and official industries that I have not touched on in this chapter is the potential for fansubbing to be co-opted into the official industry as part of the platform's inherent operating model, such as that of Viki and Webtoons. Tessa Dwyer has written on the multilingual fansubbers who have labored on behalf of these official industries in "a 'legal playground' for pirate-style practices" (2012, 222). While the fansubbers who do this labor are compensated with various forms of access and subcultural capital, rather than monetarily, one can see how Viki is trying to utilize the more chaotic and responsive nature of fansubbing and apply that to an official platform. Given the persistence of the rather antagonistic stance that the anime distribution and streaming industry have taken against fansubbers and their activities, this hybrid structure seems unlikely to happen in the case of Japanese anime, at least within the American context.

The impact that streaming services have had on fansubbers continues to exemplify how the shifting ecosystem of media distribution has had profound effects, not only on traditional broadcasting and distribution systems, but on the shadow economy that has continued to adapt and reinforce its presence in spite of these new players. Because of these transformations, it is important to see fansubbers as a continued source of productive energy for the fandom, both in their discourses around quality, their ability to provide alternative readings and versions of formal media texts, the manner in which they push the technical boundaries of digital subtitling as a practice, and how they incubate both community and branding initiatives within their respective social media presences. While the tensions between official and informal players may not change, the way that these tensions continue to manifest themselves do in response to the transforming social media network and retaliative practices of official players. Given the aggressive DMCA waves that have been engaged by official services in the background, it is

clear that the presence of the fansubber is not necessarily guaranteed. However, the labor that they do may continue to expand outwards towards other areas of the fandom. As fansubbers continue to explore new and innovative ways of engaging with their craft, it is likely that these advancements will trickle into anime-adjacent fandoms such as vtubers and paratextual seiyuu content, perhaps having rippling influence around the official industries regarding this media as well. Similarly, the changes in the official industries will continue to have a deep impact on the fannish shadow economies that persistently work to expand the reach of the global community, compensating for the perceived and actualized failings of the legitimate and promoting certain taste communities of their own.

*Conclusion***The Changing Anime Distribution Ecosystem**

Among the four chapters of this dissertation, I have examined the features that now characterize the global circulation of anime from different vantage points, from mainstream generalist streaming services like Netflix to smaller niche portals like Crunchyroll, and the industrious laborers of the informal economy who act as the glue between the gaps that these services leave. As a member of the global anime fandom that grew up with the changing tides of distribution, from broadcast to digital piracy to formal digital streaming, I initially began this project on how digital streaming was changing anime consumption habits on the level of a concerned fan. Being an aca-fan meant recognizing the stakes of these globally spanning battles, between the formal and informal economy, between the struggling local industry and the global distributor, between the American creators of color and the expectations of the global fandom. The trends that emerged from these frictions would certainly affect both the production output and consumer/fan practices, and in turn, would deeply influence the way I engage with anime and global media more broadly. I recognized the precarity of the fan practices and industries that I have mentioned throughout this dissertation, which served to exacerbate concerns regarding the asymmetrical relationships that characterize the exchanges between American-based streaming services and those they interface with. While the journalism circuits seemed to be catching on to these larger trends, thus far, there have been far fewer scholars who have actively engaged with what the rise of global streaming services means for the future of anime and those who produced and consumed it. Yet, as the scope of this project expanded, what fascinated me most was the resilience of marginalized fans, creators, and industry laborers that continued to persist and stake a claim within these “streaming wars,” in spite of the power differentials that could be found between the global streaming corporation and their own agency within these systems. If the

analyses that I provide within this dissertation seem persistently negotiated, never a clear victory or a sure loss for those who labor and consume under these systems, that is precisely because that remains the reality for those involved in the contemporary broader distribution ecosystem.

On a parallel and perhaps relatable thread, as I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, this project was experimental in observing what kind of research could be done regarding these global streaming services, as they are often black boxes in and of themselves, unwilling to engage with academics, and a nosy graduate student, even less so. This was compounded by the fact that I was doing research around far-off industries during the pandemic adding an extra layer of challenge to a project where I felt like the cards were already stacked against me. Yet, the existence of this project at all is proof positive that international media research around global streaming services like Netflix remains possible, if one pays attention to the frictions and fractures in the holistic image that streaming services desire to convey to their broader consumer base. Whether those fractures exist in what Evan Elkins refers to as Netflix's "algorithmically cosmopolitan" image or the narrative provided around the benefits and drawbacks of working with powerful streaming services that don't quite make it across linguistic and national barriers, fractures often signal where there is more data to be found and a more complex negotiative narrative than what the streaming service would like us to believe.

Engaging in methodologies to unearth what these fractures had to yield led me towards a winding path of interviews with journalists, industry professionals, and fansubbers from different regions. Given the dearth of data around how anime fans actually access their content and the disparate and fractured interpretations of piracy and fansubbers that are leveraged by both consumers and industry officials alike, I engaged in online surveys to see how people currently get their content and how they perceive the work done by laborers of the formal and informal

economy. Discursive analysis, digital ethnography, textual analysis, analyses of streaming catalogs, and interface analysis continue to yield more data from these variant fractures, and in turn, provides a much more complex narrative than binaries, whether that is dominance and subjugation, imperialism and globalization, empowerment and exploitation. In turn, just as my experimental journey across this dissertation project forced me to make negotiations when certain paths led to dead ends, it is often the case that those who are in relatively weaker positions of power negotiate to carve out their presences within the broader context of digital streaming in spite of the limitations that they may face during the process. The resulting image is one that complicates both understandings of dominance and subjugation by the more “central” or “major” media corporation, but one of interdependent compromises, where change may seem to come abruptly from the influence of the dominant, but incrementally for those who work within the “minor.” While not discounting the importance of these incremental changes, clearly, there are structural challenges that restrict the agency of global creators, fans, and users. In line with this mode of thinking, I emphasize three significant threads that thematically tie my chapters together.

American-based Global Streaming Services are Disruptive

In each chapter, I have emphasized the ways in which American-based streaming services like Netflix and Crunchyroll have been disruptive presences for global media industries, media distributors, as well as fans and consumers. At times, this disruption may come at the expense of particular cultural practices, such as the case with fansubbing and the advent of rippers who take directly from streaming services, replacing a central distribution node in which fansubbers once resided. It may also come as a disruption in common production practices of creating anime, such as Netflix’s exchange of exclusive distribution rights for copious funding

for Japanese production companies, as well as the renewal of a new stage of hybrid anime-inspired creations. The ability to handle these disruptions and the anxieties that arise from their existence gestures towards the significant influence that American-based global streaming services enact upon global industries and audiences. Looking at cases where streaming services like Daisuki and Korean start-ups like Watcha, who are unable to find their footing within the competitive American market, it is clear that the flow of capital and labor often dictates who is able to remain standing in these environments. On this most basic level, scholars who label the advancement of American-based platform and streaming industries towards the imperialist agendas are accurate.

While there are outlier case studies where other nations compete with platforms of their own (e.g. Tik Tok and Alibaba) or targeting particular enclaves within the "global north" (e.g. Kakao), this does not disrupt the overall trend of American dominance within these respective fields on a global scale. A version of globalization that touts an equalizing effect must see multidirectional influences being exhibited, including from the "periphery" to the "center," and on an infrastructural level, that has yet to manifest itself within digital platforms and streaming services. For local distribution services abroad who are facing off against the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime, they may hold national and even regional specializations, but their respective presences are not yet felt within the United States on a broad scale. At best, it seems that one can aspire to be a successful niche service (e.g. Kocowa) that is unlikely to provide any significant competition to established services. Given this environment, one can assume that the ability to respond to the presence of these services within their own local market and the disruptions that they may be having on various global industries remain critical areas of study in relation to globalization studies. This project has been one response to the pressing need for more in-depth

knowledge on how these disruptions play out across multiple nodes of distribution for a singular global medium.

Another way scholars can approach the concept of disruption through streaming services is by looking at how these companies leverage their industrial practices for survival in the streaming wars against one another and how the choices of one node on the distribution network may influence another. For example, the branding around Netflix Originals likely spurred niche distributors like Crunchyroll to also label a slate of anime texts that they have financially backed as Crunchyroll Originals, despite the fact that they have been supporting various productions within the industry for years. The branding around Crunchyroll, as a “by fans, for fans” service is also likely a result of being niche in a battleground that is occupied largely by behemoths, who also siphon funds into the global anime industry. The actions of one node tends to ripple outward and affect the way other nodes do business, produce, and present themselves. In some instances, new nodes of distribution may emerge from the disruptions created by streaming services, such as the “rippers” and their pirating practices. Given the interconnected nature of the global distribution ecosystem, following one disruptive trend’s effect across the ecosystem may yield useful data regarding how streaming services are influencing media production and consumption processes, without necessarily having to gain elusive insider access to these streaming services.

Cosmopolitanism for whom?

Another thematic thread that I have been exploring throughout this dissertation is what kind of cosmopolitanism American-based streaming services tout and present within their respective services and how such framings can be leveraged for a stronger market presence around the world. While it is undeniable that the likes of Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Crunchyroll retain diverse catalogs that signal a commitment to the cosmopolitan, subscribers

must continue to be wary of exactly what iteration of cosmopolitanism these services stand for. On the most basic level, cosmopolitanism stands for the ability to engage with other cultures beyond one's own, yet whether this concept has a positive or negative implication ultimately depends on the kind of cosmopolitanism one decides to engage in. Scholars have developed many definitional iterations of cosmopolitanism in relation to media: one can think of cosmopolitanism "as a search for contrasts and the assumption that the media is a flow of new imaginaries and possibilities that lift us out from our particular positionings" to which a healthy media diet may be "enabling for cosmopolitanism" (Corpus Ong 2009, 455). Or as Roger Silverstone summarizes,

"The cosmopolitan individual embodies...a doubling of identity and identification; the cosmopolitan, as an ethic, embodies a commitment, indeed an obligation, to recognize not just the stranger as other, but the other in oneself. Cosmopolitanism implies and requires, therefore, both reflexivity and toleration. In political terms, it demands justice and liberty. In social terms, hospitality. And in media terms...an obligation to listen" (2013, 14).

Silverstone outlines a kind of benevolent cosmopolitanism, where a radical openness to others may aid in becoming a global citizen, a fundamental caring for the Other in a perpetually globalizing world. However, cosmopolitanism is not so positively framed in other frameworks. Cosmopolitanism can take on classist implications as a well-rounded cosmopolitan media diet can both take on a narcissistic edge of building oneself up as seemingly worldly and educated, a connoisseur unhindered by the limitations of locality. As Ulf Hannerz observes, to be cosmopolitan is to seem competent in maneuvering across a diverse range of cultural scenarios, a kind of intellectual and aesthetic stance. Because of these benefits and the way cosmopolitans often frame the Other inevitably in relation to the self, Hannerz states, "Cosmopolitanism often has a narcissistic streak; the self is constructed in the space where cultures mirror one another" (1990, 239). Cosmopolitanism can also invite national communities to engage in the "spectacle

of suffering” for Others from the safety of one’s living room, and thereby fetishize and instrumentalize suffering for its “role of forging the togetherness and sociality of Western audiences” (Chouliaraki 2006, 5). In other words, one can pity and glean a kind of narcissistic moral positionality for affectively engaging with those “less fortunate Others,” but one cannot empathize with them nor ultimately meaningfully alleviate that suffering.

While this iteration of cosmopolitanism is largely articulated in the news, documentaries, and other forms of non-fictional media, we can also think about how the various global media and genres that streaming services foster are also be doing similar work by emphasizing certain qualities around a cultural community through an over-emphasis of certain themes. Whether those are the violence implied by folkloric cultures which tout universal values of good and evil or the prominence of gritty action and science fiction works within one of Netflix’s global genres, there are claims that are being made of the “Other.” They play into long histories of orientalization and being subject to the colonizer’s gaze. It continues to imply and reinforce a simple message: that communities over there are not like us, they are backwards, “deranged,” and less than across various registers. The process of inclusion and exclusion creates interpretive image worlds around these global cultures and engages in doing the “boundary work” that Silverstone outlines as “the work of boundary and community construction at national but also subnational, regional, and local, levels” (2013, 19). The boundaries and limitations of these catalogs outline a kind of knowledge circulation, a way of knowing a community from afar, and perhaps unintentionally, creates an understanding between an “us” and a “them.” As these different renditions of cosmopolitanism reflect, the concept can be simultaneously leveraged towards creating meaningful connection, encouraging humanization, and genuine empathy that

extends beyond cultural and national boundaries, as much as it can be used to fetishize, reduce, and exploit.

One may question the significance of these thematic trends that the likes of Netflix, Amazon Prime, and others are creating within their catalogs. The advent of global streaming services that are interested in engaging with a wide variety of global media work makes it easier than ever for subscribers to access international work. The meteoric global rise in fame of productions like *Squid Game* can provide wide exposure to media forms that global users may not have consumed previously and can support the further development of regional/local media industries (e.g. K-drama in the case of *Squid Game*). Yet, in the easing of media boundaries and borders, distributors must be careful of what iteration of a culture they are presenting. It may very well be that it is through these global streaming services that users get their first taste of certain forms of global media. Netflix's interface and paratextual marketing campaigns may frame and color one's understanding of a global media culture. Unsurprisingly, global works may continue to fall under forms of orientalism, reduction, and racially-charged imagery. While streaming services may have eased the blockades to global media access, what is shown does not break so radically from what has come before. It is the intersection of these two trends: ease of access and continued fetishization that the stakes of this project become clear. How we access global cultures remains largely rooted in media cultures. While the wealthy cosmopolitan may have the means to go globe-trotting and find alternative methods of engaging with international cultures, for most of us, media is the primary way that we access and understand others. Within the United States, these experiences come at the affordable cost of \$9.99 a month for a Netflix account, allowing us to globe trot, if not physically, then at least through our media consumption habits. What kinds of characterization are we seeing from these catalog offerings? How can we

understand international media cultures through them? While this project focused on anime offerings, the same inquiries can be posed for all global media forms that are offered on these global streaming platforms.

Whether the kind of cosmopolitanism these services engage in encourages radical acceptance and empathy of Others or a kind of fetishistic border reinforcement ultimately depends on both the global media and industries they collaborate with, as well as the diverse range of representation and difference that is provided within their catalogs. As I have already extensively analyzed, generalist streaming services tend to carry a wide range of global media products and distribute them on an international scale, which aids in circulating content created by many smaller and developing international industries. Simultaneously, Netflix and Amazon Prime's presence is truly global in that they both have market presences in over 190 countries. In this way, one can observe that both services are truly cosmopolitan, both in their offerings and in their reach around the world. With streaming services' unique affordances of supposedly infinite shelf space, personalized algorithms, and lack of linear schedules, this allows for more content to be shown to potential audiences all over the world, making even smaller viewerships, such as adult-oriented anime-inspired work, have a higher chance of finding a critical audience mass. However, as I have elaborated, the kind of cosmopolitanism that Netflix engages in is one that ultimately aims to serve their bottom line. While there are a range of media products from many countries represented to varying degrees, the content must be legible to a global audience, limiting the kinds of cultural narratives that can be represented. Whether this is seen in the unbalanced genre representation within Netflix's North American anime catalog, the need to reinforce "universal" narratives from their creators who are working to further hybridize the global anime industry, or by peddling racially-charged orientalist tropes for marketing, the

specter of the cosmopolitan and the global is one that is heavily mediated towards transparency and easy consumption. One way to interpret these trends is that the global streaming service is exploiting the desires for financial support, representation, and recognition that marginalized creators and smaller global industries crave. In doing so, the streaming service can retain a benevolent cosmopolitan image, while manipulating the kinds of content these creators are encouraged to make. However, that is not the only way one can perceive this exchange, and while Netflix's cosmopolitan image aligns with corporate transcultural ideals, it remains clear that creators from more marginal and peripheral national industries are taking advantage of Netflix's global presence.

The Resilience of “Minor” and “Peripheral” Creators/Industries

In spite of the dominant and disruptive nature of American-based streaming services on local industries abroad, it is clear that creators continue to take advantage of these services for their own benefits as well. Whether that is reinforcing trans-peripheral relationships in order to produce hybrid anime content, calling upon the global diaspora to increase chances of a production's success, taking advantage of the educational and experimental initiatives that these companies head, or seeking new ways of financing the creation of anime from an ailing system, creators recognize the concrete advantages of collaborating with a global powerhouse like Netflix. This goes beyond simply getting a production funded, and also includes articulating why the representation of certain communities in anime form is significant for these groups. While voices of minority community and creators may be softer than the comparative exclamations of the likes of Netflix, they are still there, still speaking back and speaking for. To be able to listen to these voices and to read between the lines and the cracks of discourse between these creators, industries, and streaming services is to know that they are still negotiating their presence, neither

completely empowered by these services, nor entirely overwhelmed. To acknowledge their labor and their efforts is to know that while Netflix's presence may be significant on a global scale and the balance of their power is asymmetrical, minority communities and peripheral industries continue to speak.

There are many ways one can observe the presence of these collectives. As I have noted, there is a large number of Black and Latinidad anime fans who continue to be avid supporters for the possibility of anime content that speaks more closely to their cultural experiences, beyond what Japanese creators may be able to provide. While the global hierarchy of legitimation still exists within the international anime fandom, enclaves of underrepresented fans continue to push for the possibility of broader representation through anime and streaming services and take advantage of these desires. While the budget for anime director Sofia Alexander's collaboration with Crunchyroll was low, Alexander notes that what happened behind the scenes wasn't "black and white. I wouldn't have been able to represent LGBTQ+ characters or a story about trauma and grief anywhere else" (Alexander qtd. Morrissy 2022). Japanese anime industry officials are considering what the transforming landscape may mean for their own trajectories of influence and representation and where they may be able to gain an edge. At all levels, negotiations are made between the creators' respective agencies and the structural influences that are embedded in the branding and market strategies of global streaming services.

I am not stating that the negotiations that these minority creators are making somehow rectify the imbalances of influence and power that global streaming services hold over both media industries and distribution systems across national boundaries. However, as Alexander recounts, this exchange isn't "black and white," but a more complex kind of engagement where working with these services clearly brings benefits that can then contribute to the broader

development of one's industry. Of course, this leads to hierarchization relating to who is able to work with these companies and who continues to be excluded, which can potentially exacerbate the issue of who is even invited under the value-laden category of "cosmopolitan" or "global." However, those who do collaborate with Netflix and Crunchyroll clearly have their own objectives. Given the myriad ways in which this progression manifests, whether it is in the form of enhancing the representational capacity of anime, fostering trans-peripheral networks, or taking advantage of exclusive partnerships with Netflix which guarantees support across multiple projects, the resilience of creators and the industries that they represent remain clear. To uniformly categorize these negotiations as "exploitation" without analyzing to what ends these creators may be taking advantage of Netflix and Crunchyroll would be doing a disservice both to the creators and the different ways international media industries are interpreting their relationship to these streaming services. However, in order to be able to make this claim at all requires extensive research on multiple sites of the production and distribution network, and it is in the specificities of each global media form, the industries that create them, and the consumers who support them, that a more complex and nuanced relational image can emerge. While it is clear that streaming services' are structurally influencing media industries, to uniformly claim that platform or digital imperialism is being enacted may ironically contribute to the erasure of creators of color and peripheral industries that continue to carve out spaces for themselves within the global sphere through these services. As I have noted above, it is critical work to be able to listen to these softer voices, as scholars, to amplify them and encourage the fight, and not contribute to drowning them out by simply claiming that digital imperialism is upon us. These are the stakes of this project: to amplify the voices from those of the various peripheries without denying the challenging media landscape that they labor in.

Future Trajectories

As I have mentioned previously, this project was focused on one global media industry that American-based streaming services have been keen on collaborating with. Japanese anime was a convenient starting point, as it is widely touted as a successful global media product with a robust presence on many streaming services. Further, because of this wide success, anime and the industries that create it are in a relatively strong position in negotiating with a powerful global intermediary. Yet, even so, as I have illustrated throughout the various chapters, how they take advantage of American-based streaming services remains clearly negotiated on multiple levels. Given this pattern, it seems likely that other global media products that may have a more peripheral presence than anime on these services may have even more challenges to deal with in relation to working with the services. This may require an even more detailed dive into the cultures that create this work and the dynamics between the local industries and the global distribution network. Because of this, I would like to see further advancements in the study of streaming services and their current effect on global media industries not from a generalist framework, but one that can take into account the specificities of each respective media form. As we glean more data from specific contexts, we can create better generalizations regarding how American based streaming services are affecting industry, distribution networks, and consumption practices.

As such, I would like to continue to engage with different global media forms with the same level of detail that I have engaged with the anime medium. Given the rise in success of the K-drama industries on a global scale and my own cultural literacies, I will work on seeing how we can understand the disruptive presence of Netflix on the production and distribution practices of this industry. Like with the Japanese anime industry, Netflix has been siphoning enormous

amounts of money into the K-drama industry in order to encourage the production of global hits for their platform. Media industry players within South Korea have been equally vocal about their concerns regarding Netflix's disruptive presence and what this may mean for the future of K-drama. Like the anime industry, Korean dramas have a long history of global distribution before the advent of digital streaming, and it is likely that streaming services have challenged those previous networks as well. Given the parallels that one can find between the movement of the anime industry and the K-drama industry, looking at the development of these two media from a comparative perspective may also yield interesting insights between how Netflix is affecting globally successful and hard-hitting international products.

Yet another trajectory that I would like to continue is exploring how marginalized communities are taking up global media products in order to amplify their own voices. As I have mentioned in Chapter 3, minority communities within the United States have long been exposed to and have used anime as a means of community building and recently, there has been a push towards increasing the amount of anime production that engages with minority communities. I would like to do ethnographic work regarding spaces where fans of color in particular are hailed to and how their own unique production networks emerge. I would also like to focus on the growing globalization of the anime industry more generally through the lens of minority creators and distributors through case studies like D'art Shtajio, Saturday AM, Hoshino René, and more. Ethnographic work within the digital and physical spaces that fans of color congregate and their fight against the racially-charged atmosphere of the global anime fandom will be a rich area of study, particularly when intersected with the voices of these minority creators around the world. How transnational and global relationships are fostered within the peripheries will continue to be

a foundational building block to my contribution to anime and global media scholarship more broadly.

Finally, I would like to expand upon my study of global streaming services and Netflix in particular to see how they are creating a presence for themselves in other countries on the ground. While the Covid-19 pandemic effectively cloistered me from having any on-the-ground engagement, how Netflix advertises itself in other countries, how the productions that are exclusively distributed on Netflix are marketed, and how this may or may not be effective in retaining global subscribers is a topic of interest to me, as there are very few detailed, ethnographic accounts of how Netflix's presence is being articulated within these international spaces. For example, inquiries like whether exclusive Netflix Original anime products are marketed differently within Japan due to their focus on media mix is of continued interest to me.

My interest and scholarly contribution to this field revolves around observing the peripheries and in working to surmount some of the cultural and linguistic barriers that exist in understanding the details of how American-based global streaming services are affecting media industries and consumption practices abroad. I hope this dissertation provides a productive methodological and theoretical framework for how one can study global media and streaming services from afar and how one can continue to do the work of amplifying minority voices within a globalizing media sphere.

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