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Reaching the Otaku's Mecca: The Cultural Growth of Geeks Journeying in Japan

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REACHING THE OTAKU’S MECCA: 
THE CULTURAL GROWTH OF GEEKS JOURNEYING IN JAPAN

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Bachelor of Arts with
Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
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*****

Western Kentucky University
2014

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ABSTRACT

There is a population of people that refer to themselves as *otaku*, which has come
to mean someone who is a fan—to the point of adoration, in most cases—of Japanese
media. For *otaku*, going to Japan is a journey of zealous force—almost a pilgrimage—to
the Mecca of the *otaku* experience. I have undertaken an autoethnographic study that
observed a few American *otaku* traveling in Japan. I recorded the events of each day and
the behaviors that I and the *otaku* with me exhibited during these events, attempting to
pay special attention to the tensions between *otaku* subjects and specific aspects of
Japanese culture we recognized from referential encounters in America. What I came to
recognize is that our journey resembles a story of growth and cultural maturation. It is
my hope that my analysis of our experiences can tell cultural studies about the nature of
the *otaku* subculture and international relationships between culture groups.

Keywords: Otaku, Autoethnography, Anthropology, Japan, Culture
Dedicated to Dr. Lindsey Powell.

You cared a lot about this project, and I cared a lot about you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like most to thank my advisor, Dr. Kate Hudepohl, who has been an extraordinary guide for having come onto this project so late. She handled the scope of the project and my personal idiosyncrasies with grace and crucial advice. Without her structure and encouragement, I may have fallen into disarray after losing Dr. Powell. I would also like to thank Dr. Sandra Hughes, who not only gave me the opportunity to pursue my love of Japan through KIIS but also pushed me to take my experience further and apply to JET. Both this project and the person I am today would not exist without her.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword—The Otaku And Ethnography</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Day 1, Airports—Expectance (or Prior Knowledge and Anticipation)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Week 1, Nara—Childhood (or Innocence and Discovery)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Week 2, Yamato-Koriyama—Adolescence (or Isolation and Dependence)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Week 3, 1/2, Tokyo—Puberty (or Comfort and Boldness)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Week 3, 1/2, Free day, Manazuru—Connection</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(or Determination and Resourcefulness)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Week 3, 2/2, Hiroshima—Adulthood (or Sobriety and Catharsis)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Week 4, Kyoto—Maturity (or Longing and Serenity)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Day 30 and on, Coming Home—Culture Shock (or Exhaustion and Readjustment)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Journey—Reflection and Analysis</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary of Terms</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vi
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mochi</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusual Vending Machine</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Toilet Panel</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiyaki</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takoyaki</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shika</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello Kitty Shika</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digimon’s Raidramon</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raidramon Toy</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yatadera</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese KFC</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk Tea</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JR Railway Tokyo Map</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maid Café Employee</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maid Café Food</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon Ranger</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manazuru</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Manazuru</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghibli Bus</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima Peace Memorial</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroshima Castle</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyajima</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyoto International Manga Museum</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungle Emperor Leo</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inari Taisha upon Ascension</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inari Taisha upon Looking Back</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FOREWORD

THE OTAKU AND THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

Although the terms anime and manga are simply the Japanese loanword for “animation” and the term used for Japanese comic books that are read right to left, in America they have become words that can instantly separate people into groups. My generation spent our formative years buried in Japanese media names such as Nintendo, Power Rangers, Pokémon, Digimon, Sailor Moon, Dragon Ball Z, Cardcaptor Sakura, Final Fantasy, Metal Gear Solid, and a host of other amazing titles that changed us. Though most in my generation have not made a strong distinction in the origins of their childhood media, quite a few of these young people have come to view the Japanese media they experienced as something fundamentally separated from American media—and therefore, extraordinary. There is a growing population of people that refer to themselves as “otaku”, but what does being an otaku fully entail?

For the authors of Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World, “otaku culture references a constellation of ‘fannish’ cultural logics, platforms, and practices that cluster around anime, manga, and Japanese games and are in turn associated with a more generalized set of dispositions toward passionate and participatory engagement with popular culture and technology in a networked world” (Ito, Okabe, & Tsuji, 2012, xi). I would even say further that, for international otaku, the love for
Japanese media leads to an intensified curiosity about everything Japanese. The language, the food, the ancient traditions and modern developments, and even the geography and the people of Japan become intriguing due to the already established appreciation of the bits of culture these otaku have experienced through their media. For some otaku, going to Japan can be a journey of zealous force—almost a pilgrimage—to the Mecca of the otaku experience.

I identify as one of that particular set of otaku. When Dr. Sandra Hughes advertised the month-long, summer 2013 KIIS Japan study abroad program, I became intensely dedicated to the idea of traveling to Japan. I later met with the other KIIS participants from universities across Kentucky and discovered that almost all of them were going to Japan for similar reasons—that most of them, too, were otaku.

I have undertaken an autoethnographic study that observed myself and a few other American otaku traveling in Japan. I used an ethnographic journal and recorded the events of each day and the behaviors that I and the otaku with me exhibited during these events, attempting to pay special attention to the tensions between otaku subjects and specific aspects of Japanese culture they recognized from referential encounters in America.

What I find to be most interesting about my group’s journey to and through Japan is that, although our experiences slightly fit the religious pilgrimage narrative I had expected when I began this autoethnography, upon some reflection, a different narrative began to take shape. Our journey exemplified through my own internalized experience resembles a maturation story. We began the experience in Japan as children, unaware of social mores different from our own. And, as we continued to experience Japan and
travel to different locations within Japan, we developed, not only in the larger human maturation timeline but also as increasingly aware students of Japanese culture. This is a summary of that journey read through the lens of a maturation narrative, and I hope this structure can inform culture studies about the nature of the otaku subculture from one otaku’s perspective.

**Involved Literature**

I relied on three groups of literature to aid me in different facets of my interpretation process. I structured my narrative in relation to two texts, *Autoethnography as Method* and *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, in context with autoethnographic structure and performance. I also utilized texts such as *Millennial Monsters, Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, and *A Geek in Japan* to qualify my experience within the larger otaku group and the otaku experience in the larger scope of fandom. Lastly, and most importantly for this narrative, I relied on the texts *Understanding Japanese Society* and *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture* for the terms used in Japanese society that we came to live by due to our simultaneous discovery of these terms and recognition of them in the behavior we witnessed and attempted to replicate.

**The Otaku and Her Idea**

Every text I could find on otaku spent time discussing how the term “otaku” has had a troubled past of mixed connotations. Otaku exist in both Japan and America, and before the term moved overseas, referring to someone as an otaku was an insult, “implying that the person didn’t have a real life beyond the Internet or his favorite comic books” (Garcia, 2010, p. 86). Otaku were considered to be shut-ins who were unusually
reserved and antisocial by Japanese standards. Otakuism was like a sickness. However, when the term came overseas, it came to mean “‘a fan of Japanese culture’ and especially ‘a fan of anime and manga,’ [and t]he meaning it acquired overseas gave the word a slightly more positive connotation in Japan.” (Garcia, 2010, p. 86). However, the term was used pejoratively in America for a time as well, the only difference being that, when Americans were otaku, they weren’t sickly introverts; instead, they were obnoxious and loud. Either way, in both countries, the term came for a long time with images of an otaku being “socially deficient, unhealthily obsessive, concerned with childish things, and unconcerned about hygiene” (Ito, Okabe, & Tsuji, 2012, p. 92).

Much like the words “fanatic” and “geek” in Western culture, “otaku” was often originally used to refer to someone on the outskirts of a culture due to behavioral inadequacies. Only recently has the term been claimed by otaku and appropriated to be a title of inclusion and knowledge of Japanese culture. Interestingly, once otaku became a more positively connotated word free from its old stereotypical demarcations, new words took its place; hikikomori has come to mean a syndrome in which a Japanese person shuts themselves in at home and stops going to school or work in order to spend more time on the internet (Garcia, 2010, p. 87), and weeabo was a term used for a short period in the U.S. to single out a loud, rude, elitist otaku who used select Japanese words in everyday speech and claimed that Japanese culture was the best culture in the world. No matter what the word is, the stereotypes still persist in both cultures.

Something that I do think is interesting to take away from the stereotype, however, is the idea that the unhealthy otaku is “concerned with childish things.” This characterization of otaku is odd, because it’s slightly true. Many otaku become otaku in
America when they are young, and they love those first childhood pleasures with nostalgia; and, even when that situation is not the case, anime and manga—which are a crucial part of otaku culture—are hand-drawn, and for many non-otaku (more-so on the American front), that fact means that anime and manga must be cartoons, which are always, for better or worse, classified as media for children. Though I ultimately disagree with the idea that otaku are in some way less mature for what they like to watch or read, I will admit that the journey to Japan initially made almost all of the otaku in my group excitable and childlike, which allowed me to use the maturation narrative for this piece. Was that simply the experience of something as excitingly and terrifyingly new as international travel, or did it go deeper in our cultural subconscious?

My Place in the Group

When discussing the boom of Japanese media and merchandise in the youth culture of America in the late 90s and early 2000s, Anne Allison, in her book *Millennial Monsters* (2006), plays with the idea that part of the appeal of Japanese products is that they are distinctly not American, and being privy to cultural icons and facets outside the domestic realm are markers of worldliness. She states that “worldliness is both an asset and a marker of coolness [when] the foreign becomes familiar” (p. 2). I would be willing to argue that the idea of foreign familiarity is why many Americans become otaku, because many of the people I have met who are otaku seemed predisposed to feel out of place in the context of mainstream American culture.

I personally became interested in Japanese media during the time period Allison discusses, which was crucial in that, for a time, Japanese media was mainstream for American youth. During the early age of *Pokémon*, almost all American children loved
the media, even if they didn’t recognize it as Japanese. I first became otaku, then, when it was essentially impossible for a child my age to be otaku because most American children were enamored with Japan. Seemingly only when my peers “grew out” of Pokémon did I become an otaku, because I did not grow out of it. By the stereotype’s standards, I am one of those immature otaku who escape into anime and manga because I never “grew out of it.”

I define my own otakuism, then, in the terms of my otaku origins. I still watch new anime and read manga, but I am otaku because I still love the products of my childhood, and revisit them with the nostalgia and appreciation of an adult who has loved before. When I thought about traveling to Japan to address an otaku fantasy, I thought in terms of addressing a longing from my childhood, which may lend itself to the early stages of my tale of maturation.

The Otaku Lexicon: Before and After

When my group took classes in Japan, some of us took “Japanese Culture in Context,” and we learned Japanese terms that significantly shaped our perception of what we experienced while in Japan; those terms will set the framework for our narrative as maturing children in the Japanese cultural landscape. As otaku, we knew many words already, most often words that designated objects or physical entities; many of the terms we learned while in Japan, however, described crucial concepts. I have a full list of the Japanese terms below:
Previously Known Terms:

- Anime
- Manga
- Sensei
- Kawaii
- Ramen
- Sushi
- Kaitensushi
- Shinkansen
- Hentai
- Udon
- Karaoke

New Terms:

- Uchi
- Soto
- Gaijin
- Mochi
- Katsudon
- Okonomiyaki
- Taiyaki
- Takoyaki
- Shika
- Shika Senbei
- Amae
- Zoto
- Giri
- Wagamama
- Nihon no kokoro
- Honne
- Tatema

There will be a glossary of these terms at the end of the piece that will be organized in alphabetical order. The terms are listed here as they appear in order in the piece because they paint an interesting picture for the frame by which we lived our lives in Japan.

**The Autoethnographer and Her Methods**

As an English student, I tend to scour the world’s human productions in search of allegories and deep revelations into the nature of what makes human experience so torturous, so wonderful, and so fascinating. And, as an Anthropology student, I have come to believe that, within each human being’s incredibly unique and complex personal story, there are shared themes that tie us to a larger human narrative. My particular mix of disciplines and concentrations has led me to attempt to take a very personal approach to studying other human beings: always keeping in mind that my own preexisting list of complexities, beliefs, and biases will affect my perception of my experiences and will
therefore affect my results and presentation of those experiences to others.

Autoethnography has always been one of my preferred ethnographic methods because it does its best to promise self-awareness. Autoethnography admits that an ethnographer's reactions within the culture he or she is studying can be just as informative to the culture as the studies from the culture itself. It is a profoundly internal way of looking at the world outside oneself, and it can come with both benefits and disadvantages. The most glaring disadvantage of the practice is, of course, that it can never claim to be objective; it does not refer to empirical data and evidence but instead relies on inferences based on the ethnographer’s subjective experiences. Educational anthropologist Heewon Chang writes, when introducing her book *Autoethnography as Method*, “Every piece of writing reflects the disposition of the author. This book is not an exception; it subtly and explicitly reveals who I am and what I value” (Chang, 2009, p. 10).

Autoethnography also risks the danger of falling into a pattern of what academics in the humanities love to refer to as navel-gazing; intensive self-contemplation can become masturbatory if not approached with the proper humility and ability to recognize the separation of self and other members of a culture. Autoethnography can be the least scientific of the ethnographic methods because of its approach; interestingly, it is also endeared much more closely to the English side of my nature due to its grounding in story. The autoethnography focuses not only on the narrative but also on the narrator; it is my goal, then, to tell this tale recognizing that I am one kind of otaku with a particular kind of story, and my experience and subsequent analysis are biased because of that.
Methodology

Chang’s *Autoethnography as Method* and Carolyn Ellis’ *The Ethnographic I* were the works I followed in attempting to structure this piece. When Chang introduces the classification of autoethnography, she evokes a list of autoethnographic subgenres as well as a prescriptive list of issues to avoid in writing autoethnography, of which she discusses excessive introversion on the self and an over-reliance on personal memory. The idea is that too much self-centered introspection does not lend itself well to observing a cultural group as a whole, and personal memory can only go so far as a reliable tool for factual representation. Chang’s idea of what makes proper autoethnography is much more traditionally based in social science and the inclusion of the other in one’s representation of self than on a self-narrative. Ellis’ work, on the other hand, is a bit more experimental; the extended title of the piece is *A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Ellis uses the structure of a novel to weave together factual human experiences and testimonies in the frame of a fictitious classroom and uses a limited first-person perspective to narrate the piece. Ellis maintains that “stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds. Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography” (p. 32).

My piece is structured much more under Ellis’ school of thought than Chang’s, though I do employ a somewhat manipulated version of Chang’s concept of the other. I utilize the self-narrative in order to attempt to reflect my specific group of fellow students who traveled with me in Japan. These otaku students are Chang’s “others of similarity,” who are members of my own community who share my values. Though my personal journey is the story I narrate here, I almost always held close proximity with my peers,
who, through my own observation, seemed to be having experiences and transformations that paralleled my own. I will also evoke the other in referring to the Japanese culture we came to emulate, because the direct relationship between us as otaku and the Japanese culture we faced is crucial. Our insatiable curiosity for and immersive education in this culture led us to view our own cultural experience in the other culture’s terms, thereby blurring the lines of otherness. However, I also utilize my background in emotive writing in every stage of this piece. My research is based on my own memory-based recordings in an ethnographic journal, and I rely on emotional personal narrative in order to convey what I perceive as happening in the group. My type of autoethnography is some of the more controversial, and fringes between literary autobiography and ethnographic analysis. Still, I believe that the interestingly unifying characteristics of our group journey pose interesting questions for otaku in the scope of the Japanese experience.
CHAPTER 1

DAY 1, AIRPORTS—
EXPECTANCE (OR PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND ANTICIPATION)

Though we had met in person before the trip began, my group’s true KIIS experience began with airports and planes. This was a period of waiting, scrambling, and great anticipation for us. This was also the period of preliminary socialization for the group, and those awkward first moments of small talk are really where geek and fan cultures shine. Though agreeing over a shared interest in our modern world has always been a good way to break the ice with someone new, what’s interesting about similar-interest fans—especially otaku—is that there almost seems to be a certain amount of immediate trust and camaraderie that comes with the confirmation that this recent stranger enjoys what you enjoy. The power of the appreciation seems to come with the idea that the product itself is not a mainstream joy, and because you enjoy it, you are an outsider; therefore, if you meet someone else who is also that kind of outsider, you feel that they know your experiences more than others—and you become a part of each other’s inside groups, no matter how temporarily. We bonded as best we could waiting in gestation in layovers and the long flight until we were delivered in Japan, though I can admit that I didn’t socialize nearly as much as the other group members; I had come here with my best friend, Shady, so I already had a zone of comfort.

As I would later learn in my “Japanese Culture” class in Nara, there were many
Japanese terms by which we would come to live our lives in Japan. Although we were unaware of it, we as a group were in the initial stages of exercising a very important Japanese cultural concept learned from a very early age: the *uchi*, or inside, and the *soto*, or outside (Davies & Ikeno, 2002, p. 217). As a collectivist society, the distinctions between inside and outside are crucial in Japan, and in those first few childish days in Nara, we would personally discover this concept physically—in removing our shoes when we step into a house to keep the dirt and potential diseases of the *soto* from being tracked into the *uchi*; and socially, when we recognized that we would most likely be referred to as *gaijin*, or foreign people, by most of the Japanese people we met.

We were to be governed by three teachers, or *sensei* (the literal meaning is “master”) on the trip, each teaching two classes; one was native-speaking Japanese and the other two were born-and-bred Americans. Each was a professor at a Kentucky University, but our Japanese sensei had been hosting another class in Japan just before and would be meeting us there. We were thereby left in the capable hands of our two American professors, one being Hughes-sensei, who had advertised KIIS. Looking back on it now, it seems incredibly fitting that we would not see our Japanese sensei at any point until we arrived in Japan. It served as an interesting dichotomy for the group; our guides through our last moments being in America were American, and even though Hughes-sensei had lived in Japan for three years, and we were flying on a Japanese airline during our long flight, and we had all of these textbooks about Japan to read … the real deal, the Japanese woman with near-perfect English who could better prepare us for what we were about to experience than anyone, would not be there to guide us until we were completely away from everything we were used to and plopped into Japan’s lap.
We arrived in Japan like sleepy babies, the jetlag affecting some of us worse than others. I have always been particularly susceptible to jetlag, and I only slept in fits on the thirteen-hour flight, so the layover from Tokyo to Osaka (where we would then board a bus to Nara) was a blur. I tasted some airport sweets I didn’t recognize, which might actually have been my first mochi (a confection made from pounded sticky rice), although all I can remember is enjoying something very pasty and chewy that many others in my group weren’t fond of—and fell asleep on the connecting flight without even realizing the plane had taken off.

Our Japanese sensei was waiting for us in Osaka with a bus. As it was late and darkening in Japan, the bus ride was a balancing act between devouring everything I could with my eyes and drifting into a restful and necessary nap during the hour-long bus ride. I didn’t sleep much. What I remember most about that first drive through Japan were all the curved Japanese roofs with their many terraces. I didn’t really feel excitement again until I stepped off the bus in Nara, because at that moment, I felt that there was no more real traveling to be done. We had arrived. And, when we walked to our hotel that night (because the bus could not drop us off at our hotel; the street did not accommodate big vehicles), I absorbed the lights and sights and sounds of Nara with the
wide eyes and ears of a child.

Our hotel, the Nara Washington Hotel Plaza, was the loveliest place we stayed in Japan. My family traveled a lot nationally when I was younger, so I had a fair mapping of the American hotel and hotel room in my head. And, from the lobby, I assumed the two were basically identical. As our sensei secured our rooms, many people in our group just stood and waited, recovering from a full day of travel. I was insanely curious, however, my spirit reinvigorated by the realization that we were really, truly here. I explored the lobby to the extent I could and found a closed entrance to a restaurant and a cove with vending machines. To my surprise, in the hotel, there were separate vending machines for both cigarettes and alcohol next to the machine with typical (by American standards) drinks. I would later discover that my early memories of Japan all contained vending machines of some sort; modern Japan is covered in them.
I called Shady over to see, and she expressed similar (if much more exhausted) surprise. Then, when she bumped against the alcohol vendor, we heard the thud of a can dropping to the bottom. As I watched, she reached in and pulled out a can of dark Japanese beer. We hadn’t put in any money.

“Welcome to Japan,” the vending machine seemed to say. “It’s going to be a ride.”

Our rooms were small but sufficient, with two beds, a TV and a window that looked down onto the side view of what lay along the most iconic street of our trip—Sanjo Dori—though I was not able to see our view in the dark. Though the room initially
appeared very Western, our experiences became strange as soon as we took turns in the bathroom. The bath tub was shorter in length than our American tubs but a great deal deeper. The free soap and shampoo were provided in a mounted dispenser instead of tiny replaceable bottles. And, most bizarrely of all, there was a panel attached to the toilet covered in buttons with corresponding, drawn pictures. The electronic panel involved a fan, a bidet, and an *oshiri* spray, which was the one word we did not understand until after we had put that button to use, and our later discovery of the word’s official meaning still makes me smile (“shiri” means butt, and the “o” is an honorific).

Top: The electronic toilet panel (Dombrowski, 2006).

This won’t be the last time I discuss the electronic Japanese toilets, because their stark contrast to the simple, manual toilets of America is one of the most memorable daily parts of the trip, and the variation in the toilets and bathrooms themselves was fascinating. I had found no previous mention of the Japanese toilet system in the media I experienced as otaku … although I suppose I would have no reason to. Regardless, for
my best friend and me, the foreign nature of such a necessary room was a source of wonder and some embarrassed, immature giggling.

As we lay ourselves down that night, Shady looked at me and said, “Amanda, we’re in Japan!”

“I KNOW,” I replied enthusiastically.

This exchange would become a sort of mantra for us, as it was a confirmation that a dream we had had together since we were young was in the act of being realized. The excitement and exhaustion put me into a very deep sleep, and I slipped into dreams about the days of discovery that lay ahead of us.
“We’re in Japan, Shady!”
“T KNOW.”

I chose to greet our first Japanese morning this way as I stared out the window down at the private home hidden away from the heavy foot-traffic of Sanjo Dori. I took careful note of the tiny back yard and the mud-heavy boots left by the deck that led into the house. I peered down every morning that first week in Nara at that secluded little home in search of the human life that inhabited it. I had no success, but I can appreciate that nugget of quietude nestled against the populated street; I would repeatedly experience this dichotomy of quiet peace amongst bustle while in Japan.

Shady turned on the TV for cultural background noise while we prepared to go downstairs for breakfast. In doing so, however, she exposed us to children’s programming on a channel that we would watch every morning while in Nara: NHK. Because I had become otaku from watching Japanese television as a child, I became personally enamored with the idea of watching current television for Japanese children. I awoke when the programming did, at 06:55, when a little rooster made of the numbers 0, 6, and 5 crowed, “Zero roku go go!” and danced to a Bob Marley song. In that way we, like Japanese children, were able to learn the Japanese names of those numbers and many
other important tidbits about words and sentence structure through adorable and
memorable songs with recognizable images, such as “Watashi Neko” (or “I am Cat,” with
the feminine “I”) and “Boku Inu” (or “I am Dog,” with the young masculine “I”).

When we joined some other members of our group for breakfast in the hotel
restaurant, we also experienced the first sensory pleasures in our otaku journey by eating
authentic Japanese cuisine. Most memorably in the first week, we were given two
breakfast options at the restaurant every morning: the Western style breakfast, which
consisted of eggs and toast, and the Japanese-style breakfast made up of fish, pickled
vegetables, and miso soup, which is made from fermented rice or soy. Though many
otaku in our group had tried sushi before, the idea of eating fish for breakfast was very
foreign to them, let alone fish with salty, beany soup and incredibly pink, vinegary
vegetable crisps. Childhood is usually the time in our lives when we experience a fear of
new foods; however, for many, that childhood distrust persists even after their taste buds
have matured, mostly due to dietary habit. And, as cultural children, several members of
our group exemplified this; some simply refused to try the Japanese-style breakfast, even
though we would see this theme of fish and soy many times throughout our stay in Japan.

Food would stay a point of division in our group, separating those otaku who
relished both the food we recognized from media (like udon, ramen, and sushi) and the
food we didn’t know (like mochi, katsudon, and okonomiyaki) from those otaku that
appreciated the food from media but “missed American McDonald’s.” I also think I was
one of very few otaku in my group who ever liked mochi. As I consider myself to be a
food tourist (in that I remember locations most by the food I ate there), I was defined
early as the most adventurous eater of the group; I spent most of my spare money
attempting to try every new food I could, and in Nara I became particularly fond of street food. The last three days we spent staying at the Nara hotel, I purchased Buddha-shaped *taiyaki* (a snack akin to a waffle filled with sweet red bean paste) from a lovely and amicable lady every morning on my way to school, and I bought *takoyaki* (savory, breaded octopus balls covered in sauce and seaweed flakes) and *mochi* every afternoon as I walked out of the mall downhill from school and turned onto Sanjo Dori toward the hotel. Of course, I always waited to go inside or sit before I ate, because I learned that Japanese people don’t like to eat and walk; if I even held the *taiyaki* near my face on my way to school, I could feel the people I passed staring at me.

![Left: Taiyaki in its traditional fish shape (Vanessa, 2012); Right: Takoyaki drizzled with Japanese mayonnaise (Delicious…2014).](image)

Nara was our first run-in with what I call the “souvenir fever” that we were always doomed to fall prey to as otaku in Japan. Merchandise is a large part of most geek cultures, and otaku are no different. We are a culture that revels in products related to our media interests, and the more authentically Japanese, the better. The fact that we could find products related to any aspect of Japanese culture and media we loved and could
couple that product with the experience of actually purchasing the product from a Japanese vendor in Japan itself meant that many otaku in our group had wallets that would grow very thin by the end of this trip. And, although I will be able to discuss my particular weaknesses to souvenir fever more in-depth in later passages, two important aspects of my personal experiences came from Nara, once concerning my souvenir hunt for loved ones and once concerning my own otaku collection.

When I came to Japan I knew I would want to bring back a small souvenir for every important friend and family member, but I had no particular idea what to buy for any but three of my loved ones. I had little to worry about in the long run, because Japan’s modern culture masters in the art of kawaii sa, or cuteness, and Nara specifically saw a lot of tourist traffic. Nara is known for its sacred shika, or small deer, that roam protected parks in Nara and are regularly fed by tourists. In fact, many carts near the parks make fairly good money from the packs of shika senbei (deer crackers) that they sell every day. And, because the deer have become Nara’s icon and main tourist attraction, almost every gift shop in Nara (and there are a lot of them; Sanjo Dori was particularly loaded with them) is filled with many miniature variations of the animals, fashioned to be as kawaii as possible. I bought a different shika figurine at four different shops, all with shika senbei in their mouths, so that I could give matching gifts to my aunt and her three daughters.
Left: A Nara deer displaying its calmness around humans (W, 2013); Right: Popular character Hello Kitty dressed as a Nara deer, holding a shika senbei (Rakuten…2009).

I also had a moment of true otaku collector’s glee in a Nara secondhand store. Although I had walked into the store on a whim because it was close to the hotel and had interesting merchandise that might make good souvenirs for my loved ones, I stumbled upon something wonderful in the back of the store. Behind a glass case, a little crumpled but in good condition, was a stuffed doll of Raidramon from Digimon. Digimon was the show I was most enamored with as a child (and I give it the most credit for my being an otaku today), and Raidramon was my favorite digimon from the second season.
Not only that, but it was a used toy. I feel an extraordinary universal connection in knowing that the things I watched and played were the same things that a group of people in a completely different part of the world experienced, and for many, otakuism has as a lot to do with nostalgia—reliving those old moments of discovery and first love of those shows, comics, and games that shaped us as children. This was a *Digimon* toy that had probably been owned by a Japanese child, probably during or even a few years before I loved *Digimon* on the opposite side of the globe. It was the first gift I bought myself in Japan.

Nara was a unique time for us and it was possibly my favorite place we stayed in Japan. Being a busy street in a tourist town, Sanjo Dori was packed with finely packaged bits of Japanese culture but was very unintimidating to a Westerner. We were poised to slowly acclimate to the act of balancing both the tourist sides of our nature and the students we were supposed to be; even then, having to be a student at all was a point of resentment for some of us. Nara was also a crucial time for us as cultural children.
because we first made friends with people outside of our small American uchi group. We spent time with Japanese English Teaching Students from a university in Nara. As modern Japanese youths our age that were well-versed in English and planning to teach outside of Japan, these girls were a blend of Japanese and Western-influenced values. They were polite and friendly and understood the world in a very Japanese context; however, they were also a little bit louder and more adventurous than perhaps we as otaku had come to believe Japanese youths were. In anime, the Japanese high school student is a regular archetype, normally distinguished by a backdrop of school with strict rules and a focus on identical uniforms, cram schools and college placement exams. Because the media picture of American high school is usually a very different animal, I imagine several of our group assumed we would meet many characteristically quiet, reserved Japanese young adults during our stay. However, much of popular anime does not cover the college student life and the freedom that comes with that in Japanese society, and the college students we met were very much like us; it was an enlightening experience.

We were also surprised to discover that—on our last night in Nara when a group of American and Japanese students all met and went out together—the arcades of Nara, filled with Pokémon and other cultural references otaku recognized, were not the meeting points that our new Japanese friends enjoyed; instead, they took us to the quiet shrines throughout Nara, surrounded by Nara deer. We as otaku were able to experience a profoundly different sort of young adult enjoyment than the media-fed experience we had expected. It was a charged night, full of both calm and fun, and we felt initiated as children of this world. At the end of our visit, we took a group picture of our shoes in a
circle, which I like to think is symbolic. In that circle of feet, no one was strange; we were all the same, all friends, all in Japan, and all ready to continue our friendships long after some of us had left.

The feeling of initiation continued for me into the last morning in our hotel, when the hotel staff allowed us to sit on the tatami mats that seemed to usually be reserved only for Japanese guests. Before that, we had been directed to the booths and chairs one would find in a Western restaurant. That morning, however, we were able to take off our shoes and slip our feet under those traditionally low tables, surrounded by Japanese adults. Shady and I both ordered the fish.
When we went to stay with our host families in different locations around Nara after that, I felt the first real sense of separation from the group since we had arrived in Japan. This was our time of adolescence. We were isolated as charges of new guardians. We were first exposed to the important Japanese concept of *amae*, which translates as “dependence upon the benevolence of others” (Davies & Ikeno, 2002, p. 17). We were dependent upon our host families but independent in that we were forced to be able to travel to and from school independently. This was also our most intimate experience with the etiquette in the Japanese home, which we as otaku see often when watching anime but did not completely grasp until we were being taught the rules as Japanese children would learn them.

We were sorted into our host families long before we left America. I honestly have no idea what criteria or sorting process our Japanese sensei used to find us proper homestays; we simply emailed her a one-page application with a small picture of our faces and a paragraph talking about ourselves. Though most members of my group were placed into host families with children, I was put in a very different situation; I was moved in with the older woman in charge of the KIIS homestay program. At first I was terrified because this woman had seen so many homestay kids before me, and I would
probably be nothing interesting to her. This made the process of gift-giving much harder, because I was hyper-aware of their reactions to their gifts. One of the many things each of our group members had had to prepare before we left the States was a set of gifts for each member of our host families. Gift-giving, or *zoto* (Davies & Ikeno, 2002), is a crucial part of Japan’s culture of appreciation and obligation to others, and the term *giri* is used often when talking about the culture of Japanese *zoto*; *giri* literally means your “duty to others” (Hendry, 2013, p. 215). The act of giving our gifts from America to our Japanese host families was one of the most terrifying aspects of our early trip, because we were to be living with them again and we wanted them to like us; what if the gift or its presentation was wrong, and we seemed thoughtless, or insensitive? I was a bit disappointed when they seemed unfazed by the University souvenirs and chocolates I had bought for them. However, my placement was, in every other way, extremely beneficial to my growth as a person in the sense of the maturation narrative as an otaku in Japan.

My host mother was and still is one of the most interesting people I’ve met in my lifetime. She is more active in what I’m assuming are her sixties than I was at 21; walking with her anywhere eventually became a test for me to see how long I could go without thinking about my feet being in utter agony after very long days. She is an English tutor (like me, funnily enough) and she often used me as an experimental catalyst to see if her students would speak to me. She has friends and students in every possible field imaginable. She works not only as a tutor but also as a tour guide and hosts very important parties for important people and so many other things I won’t even pretend to understand the scope of. She and her husband own an extremely old, traditional house on a mountain slope outside Yamato-Koriyama that ends at the top with *Yata-Dera*, a
Buddhist temple known throughout Japan for its fantastic hydrangeas. She’s allowed to keep the house and host parties there so long as she keeps the ancient structural integrity of the house intact. However, from what I understand, she doesn’t actually live there fulltime. She and her husband each have an apartment somewhere else, his in Nara near his job (even though he’s much older than she is and she thinks he should retire), where he spent most of his time while I was with them; hers was farther down in the heart of Yamato-Koriyama, where she keeps her dog, whom we walked each night.

The first night I stayed with my host parents, my host mother insisted that my host father and I walk up to Yata-Dera and he show me the temple. It was dusk; although the temple was technically closed for the masses that day, we were still able to walk the place. Though I had been to a few temples around Nara by that point, I had never experienced anything so serene. And, although I’ll admit that I was very on-edge about being in this place alone with a man whom I had just met, I will say now that my host father was polite and resigned. The hydrangeas were only in their first stages of bloom, so the coloration around the temple was still modest. The vegetation was damp and healthy from rain, and I was cautious as I walked up and down wet stone. My host father spoke to me of the history of this place and its tiny Buddha statues, but he spoke only moderate English and I understood very little Japanese; much of that experience was awkwardly nodding at the things he said and realizing just how different this experience would be from the luxurious, carefree, tourist-scented toddlerhood I had exploited while discovering Nara.
I would also like to point out here that I see the vein of my story as an otaku in Japan coming in alternating phases, depending on our location. Of the five major locations we visited in Japan, the first, third, and fifth locations, Nara, Tokyo, and Kyoto, showed us Japan in otaku terms of entertainment and merchandise that we recognized and understood. The second and fourth locations, Yamato-Koriyama (or, at least, in the case of my host family) and Hiroshima, exposed a very different, more intimate side of Japan. In my second phase of this journey through Japan, I could no longer be wagamama if I had ever been in Nara. The word wagamama is used to describe the selfish nature of a child, with the root words literally translating to “the self, as it is” (Hendry, 2013, p. 45). A wagamama child is in an untrained state because they have not yet been molded into good Japanese citizens who think about others as much as themselves. The first step to growing out of the wagamama stage is to put oneself in the shoes of someone else and think about their concerns and feelings. Though I don’t think any members of my group were being literally wagamama, I do believe that the contrast between the States’ individualistic culture and Japan’s collectivist culture produces a lot of Americans that are probably, by Japan’s standards, wagamama. For instance, in
America, plain, “straight-forward” speaking is a highly valued trait, because most Americans tend to view any other way of speaking as calculating or dishonest. However, in Japan, speaking plainly and bluntly is seen as a wagamama trait, because only a child or a selfish person would not temper their words to ensure that they hurt no one’s feelings. In those early days of my journey in Japan, I was extremely worried about offending the Japanese people I met, so I tried my best to be well-behaved and modest. I accepted my host mother’s authority because she knew her way around her world and I was merely a guest. I had to be mature and professional and polite to her friends; I had to grow up a little.

My host mother seemed to be a delightful mix of ideals; she was very Japanese in her willingness to give to people, but she approached communication in a direct way I had expected to be too Western to be acceptable in Japan. I respected her forwardness. As a Western feminist, I had come to have an unfortunate assumption that being a woman in Japan came with a certain amount of meekness, and those assumptions were normally reinforced with the kawaii girls that appear in most anime. However, my host-mother was not meek. She has had a life full of interesting experiences and has a gaggle of interesting friends to show for it. She was also incredibly giving, taking me out to kaitensushi (conveyor belt-style) simply because I had mentioned that I had never been and would love to go. She was also willing to make time to ride the bus and train with me from Yamato-Koriyama to Nara the first time, so I would know how to travel to and from school on my own the rest of the week. That experience with buses and Japanese trains helped me train myself early on my time management, navigational skills, and punctuality (which I would put to good use later in Tokyo).
Several of my host mother’s friends and students came to visit us and meet the gaijin my host mother was housing like a distant young relative who had come to stay for the week. My host mother was very keen on ensuring that these meetings happen, because she seemed very interested in the cultural exchanges that would take place, not only for what I could learn from her friends, but also perhaps for the little things her friends could learn from me. And, as I mentioned before, she utilized the opportunity to see if her students were willing to apply the English they had been practicing. Many of the people I met were initially nervous, and I could easily put myself in their shoes, because my host mother also thought that I should apply the little Japanese I knew in speaking to them. In this way, there were often conversations made up of short bursts of one-sided language use. A person would ask something in English, and I would attempt to respond in Japanese. My host mother seemed to approve, which made me very happy.

The people I met through my host mother were all wonderful and unique people who found me interesting. I remember most clearly: a high school boy who had never met a gaijin girl before and was so unnerved by me that sitting across from me made him sweat; a woman who brought over the gooiest and most fun-to-eat mochi, completely homemade; an older musician who played an English song he had written on his guitar and asked me what I thought about gun control in the U.S.; and a couple of business men, one of whom gave me the highest compliment I think I could have received as an otaku (which I will discuss in detail later). I also had the wonderful and rare opportunity to stay for a few hours in the modern home of a young Japanese family similar to most of the host families I assumed my friends were staying with. While I waited for my host mother to take care of some business in town, I stayed with a mother of three and her youngest
daughter, who was in middle school. She and I bonded as she dominated me in Super Mario Bros. on the Wii, and then, when her friend and her friend’s mother came over, the family’s mother acted as hostess and fed me noodles while the mothers both engaged me in one of my more successful conversations completely in Japanese, because neither of them spoke any English.

What I think is so interesting about my stay with my host mother and all of the interesting people I met is that they both expanded my mind with their widely varied hobbies and interest in my culture and met my need for social interaction. Because my group members only saw each other during a few hours of school each day, we didn’t have long to engage in any form of relaxingly monolingual communication with each other; we were isolated and immersed. Therefore, these people I met were very quickly shaping my idea of what Japanese culture meant to me, and I could feel my otakuism changing. I felt appreciated by these people and welcomed, even as an outsider and a gaijin. My host mother’s businessmen students actually joked with me and teased me (which felt like an honor, considering Japanese politeness), bringing me Japanese Kentucky Fried Chicken and milk tea, because Westerners love milk.

Left: Japanese KFC restaurant (MTC, 2009); Right: Japanese milk tea (Magnetic_rose, 2010).
Yet, even in the midst of playing with their stereotypes of Americans—which was an interesting role reversal for me, because I think less engaged otaku think of Japan with their own set of stereotypes—they told me they were surprised by how Japanese I acted. One told me I had a *nihon no kokoro*, which means “Japanese heart.” For an otaku who was intensely enamored by Japanese culture to be told that they had a Japanese heart was a staggering compliment. I’ll never forget it.

What’s more, the conversations I had with my host mother were my most treasured memories, because she was unaffected by the barriers of language and was able to convey her interesting approaches to spirituality and living life. I was able to see the world through a very different set of eyes, and I felt matured because of it. My last evening with her, she told me she thought of me as a child of hers now, and that meant we were connected forever. She insisted that I email her twice a year, so that I could let her know about my life. Then she told me that I should visit Yata-Dera one last time because it was raining outside, and the hydrangeas are at their most beautiful in the rain. As I stood there under her umbrella and stared out at the endless clusters of flowers that surrounded ages-old graves and buddhas, I came to a moment of awareness of myself and my place in Japan and the world at large in a way I had not considered before. I simultaneously felt connected but separated. I was different from the people I met, and yet we were so much the same. It was as if I had grown out of the person who had come here only two weeks before; I thought I could feel the end of my childhood close by.
CHAPTER 4

WEEK 3, 1/2, TOKYO—
PUBERTY (OR COMFORT AND BOLDNESS)

Tokyo was an adventurous, almost pubescent time for us. Our chaperones did not oversee our activities as much as before, and we were bolder and better able to handle the increased stresses that came with the heavy foot-traffic of Tokyo city and the intense Tokyo train system. Had we begun our journey in Tokyo, we may not have fared as well. We needed that adjustment time in the calm, spiritual, modern-but-natural Nara and the period of strain and isolation from the group with our host families to know how best to fare on our own if we separated. We stayed in a youth hostel at the Iidabashi train stop and took the JR trains and subways to go everywhere we wanted to go. Our time in Tokyo—exemplified by our arrival into the city by way of the impressive, iconic shinkansen, the speed trains—was characterized by the JR East Railway Lines. We had to master which direction to stand to catch the train and which trains to transfer to if our current train didn’t take us all the way to our destination. What’s more, we had to move quickly and decisively; Japanese trains are some of the most punctual in the world, and they would not wait for us to fumble or get confused. At first, navigating this world of trains was stressful for those of us who had never really experienced public transport in America, but I found that the more I used the trains the more I realized how magnificently organized and reliable this form of transport really was—and I used the
trains a lot.

Top: A map of the complex Tokyo train system, not including the subways (Wa-pedia, n.d.).

If I continued to follow the religious pilgrimage narrative, Tokyo would be the true heart of our Japanese Mecca, as this was the modern Japan otaku know. Specifically, Akihabara, otherwise known as the shortened “Akiba” or “Electric Town,” is the ultimate otaku district in all of Japan. “Cosplaying”—or dressing as characters from one’s favorite video game, television series, anime, etc.—is a crucial facet of otaku culture, and cosplayers regularly walked the streets of Akiba. Young women in kawaii dresses were standing on corners handing out pamphlets for maid cafés, which were something many American otaku have heard about but rarely ever see. The waitresses in maid cafés act as
your personal servants and dress as French maids, because the maid archetype has been heavily fetishized in manga and anime.

I personally chose not to go to a maid café, but those otaku in my group who did told me that they were treated lavishly and the food they ordered was very cutely decorated. On the subject of maid cafés and Akihabara, it’s important to note that certain parts of otaku culture have a very heavy facet of sexuality. Many otaku have at least once experienced hentai, which is used in otaku groups to denote pornography in manga and anime forms (the word literally means “pervert.”) And, although maid cafés are completely professional and only address the cute, innocent side of the interesting
melding of cute and sexual that is very common in hentai, Akihabara was not lacking in its selection of printed hentai in its manga shops and animated hentai in its anime selections. To push the narrative of puberty further, I would pose that we discovered and openly explored Japan’s sexuality for the first time in Akihabara. We actively perused not only the adult sections and levels of various merchandising shops but also inspected a few adult video and toy stores. We also explored our budding access into the world of adulthood with alcohol, as the legal drinking age is only twenty in Japan. Even though some of us drank in Nara or with our host families, our newfound freedom in Tokyo and our growing confidence led us to consume larger quantities in larger groups. And, as young people unaware of their own limits are often wont to do, many of us overindulged.

The otaku-friendly nature of Tokyo also brought my souvenir fever to its head. Many members of my group explored the merchandise of Tokyo, but I very specifically took on the form of the collector when I was there. I had two gifts to purchase that I knew I was to find in Tokyo, for the two most important people in my life: my father and my significant other. My father’s gift was simple, because he was very specific in that he wanted a knife from Japan. With our Japanese sensei’s expert advice and guidance, I found a prestigious knife maker in the famous Tsukiji fish market and, as a bonus, was subsequently recommended to the best and freshest sushi I have ever eaten. When we told our chef who had recommended us, he laughed, raised his sushi knife into the air, and declared, “Now we’re a knife family!”

My significant other was much harder, because he never gave me any idea of what he wanted. Although he does not identify as otaku, he is a geek in his love for the American version of *Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers*. I knew he would appreciate
merchandise of the Green Ranger, or Dragon Ranger in the Japanese version of the season, but I actually knew very little about Power Rangers or its history in Japan. For every season of Super Sentai that was translated to be Power Rangers for American audiences, there seemed to be five more in Japan, and the show is still on-going today. When I had first asked if a shopkeeper had any green ranger figures, she asked, “Which one?” She had had good reason to ask; almost every season has a green ranger. With my very shallow—uncharacteristically shallow for a geek—understanding of Super Sentai, I insisted that I wanted the Green Ranger from Super Sentai. The shopkeeper balked, responding with something akin to, “But there are so many.” So, like any proper geek collector, otaku included, I had to do some research. I learned the Japanese name of the season of Super Sentai I meant and memorized that particular Green Ranger’s costume design. And, almost as an act of serendipity, I saw a pristine, new figure for purchase my first night at Akihabara’s Yodobashi-Akiba, which is honestly one of the most massive department stores I have ever seen.

Left: The coveted Dragon Ranger figure (Ridden, 2013).
However, to my misfortune, when I asked an employee about the figure, he told me that the toy hadn’t even come out yet; its release date was scheduled for just after I would leave Tokyo. My heart sank, and my quest for an adequate replacement Green Ranger would lead me to return to Akiba once every day until we left Tokyo, more than any other otaku in my group. I scoured used toy stores and collectors’ shops and found nothing worthwhile, and ultimately felt that I had failed in my quest for merchandise in Tokyo. However, the persistence of the collector is a crucial side to fan cultures and to my own stubborn quest for the perfect souvenir, and it is only the Tokyo side of the story that ends here.

Tokyo was rife with otaku-centered days and coming-of-age-themed nights. That week was wild and beguiling and shimmery and terrifying. We as a group became high with the energy of the city and felt recklessly independent, coming to the precipice of cultural maturation and the otaku dream-scape. We would not come down until we were forced to leave.
CHAPTER 5

WEEK 3, 1/2, FREE DAY, MANAZURU—CONNECTION (OR DETERMINATION AND RESOURCEFULNESS)

When I waitressed at a restaurant called “Samurai,” a very kind, intelligent Japanese factory worker hired me privately once a week to meet with him in a Starbucks and teach him what I could about how to speak and understand English. I felt honored to take the position, and I used the tutoring sessions as an opportunity to learn bits of Japanese language and culture from an insider as he and I developed a friendship. And, once I was accepted to the KIIS program, I told the man I was tutoring and he excitedly helped me set up a day when I could travel to Manazuru to meet his friends and experience a smaller, more intimate side of Japan than what my trip offered me.

That plan was the premise of my “Free Day,” the last day we would spend in Tokyo, completely free of sensei or meeting spots or externally posed deadlines. Our larger group divided into smaller sets that would only regroup at the end of the day, and the free day greatly differed from member to member. My free day was a journey of independence and attempted adulthood that rested on proper time management, a good knowledge of train schedules, and my shaky ability to communicate with individuals who at times knew very little English. I had to transport myself—and two other people—from our Youth Hostel in Iidabashi to a transfer train to Tokyo station; from there, we would take a scheduled shinkansen trip an hour out to Atami and then hop on a train to
Manazuru. Interestingly, my group of three had also already dedicated the later part of our free day to going to Mitaka (which lay on the outskirts of downtown Tokyo) so that we could see the Ghibli Museum. Arriving to the Ghibli Museum on time was especially crucial, because the museum is set up in such a way that those who wish to attend have to buy their tickets early from an outside vendor, and you have one time on one day to show up, and the museum only gives you a 30-minute window for error, even if you’re from out of the country. Because of our awareness of the frame our day would have, we got ourselves two return ticket sets on the shinkansen: one set for an ideal return time from Manazuru and another for an absolutely last-minute dash to Tokyo if we missed the first.

We set out extremely early and saw Mt. Fuji on the way to Atami, which was a surprise to us; we weren’t going to see Mt. Fuji at any point as an entire class. I spent a large portion of that day on edge for the same reason that the free day was one of the best experiences of Japan. Because we were no longer a part of the larger group, it would be much easier for us to become hopelessly lost in a distant part of Japan; and, because we had no sensei to act as chaperones, I was forced to take charge of the operation. After-all, I was the only one with a specific reason to travel to Manazuru, the others only coming along to see the ocean; however, we were all invested in the Ghibli Museum, so I had to make sure we made it back in time.

When we got to Manazuru, I realized I had no idea how to get where I was supposed to go, with only a business card in my hand and an email letting my friend’s friend know when I’d be there. What if my friend had been understating the tininess of his hometown? What if no one had no idea where this sashimi shop where his friend worked was?
Luckily, that sashimi shop was apparently one of the best known—maybe one of the only—sashimi shops in the town. When the nice lady at the information booth outside the tiny Manazuru train station told us which bus to wait for and which stop to take, we boarded and the bus dropped us off in the middle of town, no longer in reasonable walking distance from the station. However, I still saw no sign similar to the logo on the business card. The town was an interesting mix of developed and small. As a fishing village buffeted by the sea, it was not quite as pristine as the more touristy areas we had visited; and, although we were surrounded by buildings, they gave you the intimate feeling of streets that don’t receive many visitors; only one person could be seen walking the street.

Top: A shot of Manazuru similar to the perspective I saw from the train ([Manazuru], 2012).
We asked the passerby about the shop (with some rendition of the word doko for “where” and pointing at the card), and she was kind enough to lead us there. Something important to note here is that, though in any other country I would have been much more cautious of strangers, my experience of Japan had been by all definitions safe; the people I met were usually very friendly and polite, and the rare few who weren’t simply ignored me. Though I often walked home alone in Nara and Yamato-Koriyama, I felt incredibly secure—and this place reminded me in ways of Yamato-Koriyama.

The shop was tiny and quirky, with only one table for four and a small bar area. The walls were covered in paraphernalia from everything imaginable, and many artifacts were American advertisements. A small TV hung in a top corner of the shop, facing the bar. My student’s friend and his older female relative (what I ascertained from her behavior toward him) ran the shop and welcomed me in, instantly knowing who I was. I quietly wondered how often gaijin came here. We ordered lunch (because my student told me I must), Shady and our other friend ordering sashimi and me getting a cooked rendition I saw on the menu that looked divine. I received what must have been a fish and a half, all bones and skin and head still in place, prepared with care and soaked in a sauce that my taste buds remember fondly. Other than the sushi in Tsukiji, I don’t particularly remember Tokyo by its meals. This, though? This lunch was beautiful. Shady later said that that meal was some of the best fish she ate in Japan.

While we ate, a man came in with his tiny dog, but he stopped when he saw us. Then the shopkeeper told him who I was, and he introduced himself as another of my student’s friends. I told them their friend was an “ii gakusee,” or good student, and they both laughed at me. Then, when my friends and I had finished our meal and we had
taken a picture to show my student, my student’s friend with the dog surprisingly took
time out of his day to drive us to Cape Manazuru (amae at its best once again), which was
one of the most beautiful spots I went to in Japan. The beach was made of black rock,
and the cove looked out to two large boulders strung together by a paper train to show
that this was a spiritual place.

![Image](image.png)

**Top:** These rocks are the icon of Manazuru (Σ64, 2012).

When it began to rain, I realized my student’s friend was without an umbrella.
While my friends ran with gusto into the surf, I tried to hold my umbrella over his head;
when he politely told me I needn’t do that, I asked, with my toddler’s grasp of his
language, if he would rather return to his car. He thanked me and left the beach.

I was trying so hard to be mature and to think of others. This side of Japan was
something that I as an otaku had not seen before, and it was a very revealing departure
from the Pokémon museums where many other members of our otaku group went. This place and its people were so real and unpolished; standing there, smelling the surf, I could feel the shape of my otakuism changing like it had before in Yamato-Koriyama with my host mother. This was no longer just the love of a fan for an entity I had put upon a pedestal. I was loving Japan as deeply as a creature loves the Earth. I loved the human beings I met as only a growing student of culture could. My heart was expanding; I felt serene.

Unfortunately for us, our enjoyment of the beach made our time run thin; we had already missed our first shinkansen tickets. My student’s friend waited in his car and drove us to the station so we would not have to wait for the bus (his generosity still makes me so grateful), and then the dash began. We hopped from our later shinkansen to an express line that would bypass some of our transfer stops in the hopes that we would get there faster; we were to be there by 5:30 at the latest, and it was already 4:50. This point was probably when I was most a pill to my friends, because I was obsessed with being able to get them and myself to the museum in time. I even told them that we shouldn’t stop to do anything (including use the restroom) until we were safely accepted into the museum; after-all, when we stepped off the train at Mitaka Station, it was already 5:24! However, my stress abated when we were in Mitaka at the station bus stop and the Ghibli bus arrived.
We met up at the museum with some members of our group that had spent their mornings elsewhere in Tokyo. The Ghibli museum was our last otaku destination while in Tokyo, which I think is appropriate; many of us were otaku in part because of the Studio Ghibli movies we had seen. We were able to watch a short film exclusive to the museum and buy Ghibli merchandise, though the Ghibli gift shop was, surprisingly, not as extensive as I had expected. The museum was intimate and whimsical, with stained glass windows of famous Ghibli characters and a recreation of Hayao Miyazaki’s work place. In the mad dash for independence and adulthood that encompassed our journeys in Tokyo, this trip to the land of Ghibli marked an important point in our maturation narrative: we had one last contact with our childhoods, paying them tribute and then bidding them farewell as teenagers are wont to do. We then raced on toward something else.
That evening, I traveled alone to Akihabara one more time to try to find a suitable Dragon Ranger (to no avail, heartbreakingly), but I made it back to the hostel in enough time to meet a few of my friends, and we immediately left again. We traveled to Shinjuku and found our way to a Japanese gay bar. At the behest of our bartender, a magnificently flamboyant man who chanted, “Guri!” (which I have come to believe means chug), three of four of us became tipsy and sang Backstreet Boys karaoke, and then we stumbled to the train home.

As I lay myself down in my bunk that night, I liked to believe that I had handled the incredibly full day with the savvy of a Tokyo native. I had planned ambitiously, left room for error, and taken charge of myself and others. I had been able to befriend and rely on people and I had had time to meditate and be introspective. I had also swung from sweet, aching nostalgia to wild, adventurous confidence. I was an otaku to the last, my body full of Japanese liquor and my nihon no kokoro full of pride. I sank into sleep feeling very, very successful.
CHAPTER 6

WEEK 3, 2/2, HIROSHIMA—ADULTHOOD (OR SOBRIETY AND CATHARSIS)

If Tokyo had been a four-day high, Hiroshima was the inevitable crash. After a long night of partying and living an otaku dream experience, our sensei woke us at the crack of dawn and we traveled early to Hiroshima with hangovers. Shady, who had continued to drink long after I had gone to bed, even vomited into a bag on the train, attempting to be as quiet as she could. I stood on the opposite side of the train and turned my pounding head away.

Shortly after checking into our hotel, we walked to the A-bomb museum, passing the Genbaku Dome that served as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial because it was one of the lone buildings that survived the bomb’s blast. Nothing could be more sobering.

Top: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Building (Koi88, n.d.)
At the museum itself, we were shaken to our cores; one person from our group had to leave the museum early because what she saw made her physically sick. There are many anime and manga about the A-bomb, and titles like *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies* are some of the more popular and well known by otaku; however, facing that kind of imagery is a matter of choice, and I will admit that I was one of the many otaku who avoided the subject in favor of more joyful media. Tokyo had been full of joyful distraction. Tokyo had been a cocky, technology-dazzled otaku puberty. But this town—this museum—was a necessary experience of frustration and grief to force us into adulthood by bringing our focus back from ourselves and onto Japan at large. We saw the event for the first time from the Japanese perspective. We felt not only the tragedy of the Japanese experience, but also our own national guilt that came with the fact that we were Americans there. We stood around a scaled model of the town in rubble after the blast and listened to a video—with English subtitles—of a Japanese official saying that Japan did not blame us, that it was violence from both sides that took it to such an extreme, and that he hoped that that sort of tragedy would never come to pass in the world again. We passed a group of Japanese school children on a field trip who happily waved at the gaijin as we walked by. Many of us lost some part of our innocence (or was it ignorance?) in that museum. I came to tears when I looked down at a boy’s charred lunchbox; my classmate cried with her back to the group once we had exited the building; and Shady squeezed my hand on the bus back to the hotel, sobbing quietly.

Hiroshima was a strained time for the group. Many of us tried to initially recapture the glory of the intoxicated Tokyo nights in our hotel rooms, but Hiroshima was a starker town with a different lesson. However, it would be grossly disrespectful of
Hiroshima to say that we found no beauty in the city while we were there. The rebuilt Hiroshima castle was a magnificent testament to the traditional heart of Japan that existed quietly amongst sprawling modern buildings. The island of Miyajima, too, was elegant and unstoppably full of life; as we had come there during the low tides, the sand around the normally “floating shrine” was crawling with tiny, excitable crabs.

One thing I definitely remember about Hiroshima was the odd sense of displacement I felt upon looking at its young architecture. The buildings of the city were decidedly the most Western I had seen in all of Japan, and although it’s disquieting to say, I understand why. Hiroshima had come to take on a hybrid quality for me, because I felt like I was standing in a small city in Europe that was covered in Japanese words. The
feeling was bittersweet, because although I thought the city was beautiful, I was also melancholy with ideas of what had been before.

I also remember a distinct realization that the priority food shops I saw around me were slightly different. Right next to the station, I found a bakery called *The Little Mermaid*. Although Nara was covered in little sweets shops, the sweets I ate were all distinctly Japanese; this bakery and the little cake shop located further into the station, however, had some very recognizably European baked goods. Shady and I also found an *udon* (a thick noodle soup) shop in the station that we frequented in our two or three days in Hiroshima. We chose our meal from the menu on the vending machine outside the shop, and when we paid and pressed a button, we received a ticket. We then went inside the shop and handed our ticket to the chefs, and they had our food quickly out to us to eat. The interior of the shop was small, and there were no chairs; you simply placed your bowl on the shelf-like table that snaked around the shop and stood while you enjoyed your lunch. Although I had assumed I recognized every kind of Japanese eating environment from the anime I had seen, this set-up was news to me, and I found its convenience smart and satisfying.

What seemed to characterize our group most while we were in Hiroshima was the first air of true exhaustion we shared. We didn’t venture out as far into Hiroshima for food or entertainment as we had in other places; instead, we were content to stay close and recover from everything. We were on the tail end of our penultimate week in Japan. We were no longer happy-go-lucky children, insecure adolescents, or wild teenagers. We were too tired for that. We had seen too much. However, we were more experienced and knowledgeable than before, and that knowledgeability showed itself most in me in my
hotel room when I hopped on one of the rare computers I had had access to during the trip—I had had to go to an internet café in Nara to talk to my family in America—went to a Japanese website, and ordered that new Dragon Ranger figure I had seen in Akiba. We were to leave Hiroshima the next morning, but I still had a week to receive the souvenir if it was shipped to our Kyoto hotel. I was taking a risk, but I knew the reward would be worth it, which felt very mature to me. And, as an otaku who had dreamed of coming to Japan since she was little, being able to tell the website that my delivery location was in the country of the figure’s origin was incredibly satisfying.
We ended our journey in Kyoto, which I found fitting, as Kyoto seemed to be one of the best examples of the strange and lovely dichotomy that is Japan. The city is modern and clean and glossed, but on its edges it houses geisha tradition and some of the most beautiful and spiritual places I went to in all of Japan. On our way to the station from our hotel, we passed an old castle in renovation where feeding the carp in the moats and the birds on the roofs was a regular pastime. Kyoto Station, however, was the grandest, prettiest station we had been to in Japan, with a rooftop garden and a shop outside that played a fountain light show to music at night.

I also returned to my food tourism in a more distinct way than I had in Tokyo or Hiroshima. Nara and Kyoto—my arrival and departure points into this amazing ride that was Japan—were the two places in which I ate the most sweets. Because of that, I came to designate each of them by a certain flavor that I ate most while I was in each place. Nara’s flavor was *adzuki*, or sweet red bean, because whether it was my taiyaki filling or my mochi or any other sweet I randomly chose to partake of, the flavor and texture were almost always of adzuki paste, which was gritty, sweet, and pleasant to me; however, after I heard myself sarcastically mutter, “Adzuki! What a surprise” upon biting into a random, stuffed pastry, I realized I was a bit tired of red bean (although it was probably
my own fault, because I ate so much). Kyoto, on the other hand, was a refreshing change of pace, because it was flavored with melon. Now, by melon I don’t mean the odd, pink, artificial watermelon flavoring we put in candies in America; melon in Kyoto was light and fragrant honeydew. In the Hiroshima-like bakeries of Kyoto—which seemed to be everywhere—I ate plenty of melon bread, and when we went to Baskin Robbins (which I didn’t expect to be so popular in Japan) melon was one of the thirty-one flavors. Melon was the perfect tint of cool and refreshing to soothe me and help me feel calm and contented in those last moments in Japan; it’s the flavor I miss the most.

We experienced our last major otaku landmark in Kyoto: the Manga Museum. Unlike our fast-paced, merchandise-fueled racing in Akihabara, the manga Museum was a place to relax and learn quietly about the comics that intrigued many of us into otakuism in the first place. The upstairs was sectioned into rooms that contained exhibits on historical developments in manga and exhibitions from current manga authors/artists. The downstairs area of the museum was covered in shelves full of manga that were readily available to be read. There were even lounge areas as an option if the museum-goer simply wanted to go somewhere to read comics in peace for a day.
There were few souvenirs, but I did buy myself one. I imprinted my name on a keychain medallion that had *Jungle Emperor Leo* in the center. When I had become very interested in the history of manga and anime, I became aware of Osamu Tezuka’s vast and influential body of work; he has been titled the “Father of Manga,” producing many famous comics and cartoons in the 50s and 60s—like *Astro Boy* and *Jungle Emperor Leo*—that made anime famous all over the world. *Kimba the White Lion*, as he’s known in English, was always my favorite of Tezuka’s characters.
I treasured this little artifact, because I was saddened that I had not had time to go visit the actual Osamu Tezuka museum in Takarazuka while I was in Tokyo. By imprinting this medallion, I felt that I was paying my respects. In a way, I had come to feel that Osamu Tezuka was responsible for setting the groundwork in America for otaku like my group to exist. Without Tezuka’s influence on Japanese media traveling to America, I might never have been as interested in coming to Japan. The realization that he was why I was here was powerful.

A powerful feeling of connection was the pervading sensation throughout our experience in Kyoto. Though we had traveled to shrines and temples during our entire stay in Japan, in Kyoto we were more experienced and more aware of a place’s spirituality; I know that the group’s trip to Inari Taisha (referenced in such movies as *Memoirs of a Geisha*) was one of the more serene and majestic experiences in Japan. Inari Taisha is a shrine made up of a network of smaller shrines that winds up a mountain, its pathways marked by thousands of Torii gates. Torii gates are a symbol of purification, and when a person passes through, they move from the profane to the sacred. When I
walked through the Torii, up the mountain, I saw the breathtaking view of gate upon gate of smooth, orange wood. However, if I turned my head and looked back, I saw, to my shock, that every gate was emblazoned with writing. I could only see what was there after I had passed through. I understood the symbolism immediately, and the feeling that washed over me made my knees weak.

Farthest top: Inari Taisha’s Torii gates, seen as one walks toward the summit (Fushimi…n.d.).

Top: The writing on the Torii gates when one looks back (Fushimi…n.d.).
Inari Taisha was, for me, our iconic experience in Kyoto. It proved to me that we were—that I was—different from the group of young otaku that were deposited in Nara that first night. I imagine that, if I had started in Kyoto, as the child I was, though I would have found it beautiful, my desire for things I recognized, for more modern pleasures like television, or internet, or merchandise, may have made me lose the significance of that place. But I was more mature now, more patient. I remember separating from my group, walking ahead of Shady, and, with a quiet mind, allowing Inari Taisha to lead me as I simply walked. If there was a fork in the path, I chose and kept moving. A goal of Inari Taisha is to choose the right paths to make it to the summit of the mountain, and though a few of our group members achieved that glory, I will admit that the shrine led me to a very different destination. It foisted me out into the back walkway of a modern suburb. I felt alienated in that moment, melancholy in my awareness at the stark contrast between the world of the meditative warmth of isolation I had found in the shrine and the expectant, social world outside. I had been cut off from the world quite profoundly, if only for a moment, as if I had tasted death. However, as I attempted to find my way back to my group, I came upon a tiny shop, almost hidden away. The elderly couple that ran the shop seemed incredibly surprised to see me, a starry-eyed gaijin, stumbling around the outskirts of the shrine. I looked at their sign and realized they sold shaved ice. I ordered a melon shaved ice, as I had not tasted shaved ice while in Japan. The shaved ice slowly brought me back from whatever place I had gone while in the shrine, and I ate that sweet coolness in a moment of great peace while the elderly shop owner watched me eat.

That quietude and isolation pervaded our group interactions in Kyoto. Our free
day in Kyoto was much more individualized and separated, and largely mild compared to our Tokyo days; I spent mine traveling to Buddhist temples with Hughes-sensei, without even Shady nearby. We all seemed to be just a little weary, not only of our travels but of each other. We loved Japan, and we never wanted the journey to end, but we also felt the deep, deep need to go home.

Our group was maturing now, aware of the intricacies of our experience within the frame of the Japanese experience. We were still gaijin, but in understanding and utilizing the concepts and words we learned in order to frame our narrative, we were able to grow as children of the Japanese culture. We had grown out of our wagamama stages and had come to embrace amae and understand our role as American otaku in Japan. We were soto, but that was okay; most of the Japanese people we met were very excited that we were so interested in learning their culture. Perhaps the nature of our fandom served to bring the people of Japan and America, in some way, closer together. We were willing to believe that.

We also were able to experience a last feeling of separating *honne*, the inner self and individual intentions, from *tattemae*, the self that exists in the public realm of society due to restraint (Davies & Ikeno, 2002, p. 115). Japanese people usually live in an almost constant state of tattemae, which was unusual for our boisterous American group, who seemed to live solely by their honne. By Kyoto, we had learned to be more restrained, but we had also come to trust each other more, and as we all sang karaoke in our private room on our last night in Japan, we unleashed our honne in a very private, very fun, very Japanese way.

The night before our last night in Japan, I received a package in the lobby of the
Kyoto Super Hotel. I opened the box slowly, careful with anxiety. If this was the wrong Dragon Ranger or it was damaged, I had no other opportunities. At this point, I felt a sense of giri to my significant other; if I did not bring him back a single souvenir from my month-long stay in Japan, I would feel wracked with guilt. But, to my great fortune, the box was undamaged, and the figure itself was very impressive. I folded the Dragon Ranger very tightly with my other souvenirs amongst snug, cushiony clothes and slid my suitcase back under my bed. In Nara, younger me had been messy and lazy with her things, knowing that she still had a long while in Japan left to go. The Kyoto me, on the other hand, was nervous and tired, and she felt like she could leave Japan at any moment; she’d best have her things packed.
CHAPTER 8

DAY 30 AND ON, COMING HOME—
CULTURE SHOCK (EXHAUSTION AND READJUSTMENT)

The trip back to America went quietly, without much fuss; no one seemed to truly want to go home, but we all knew it was time to leave. For all of my incredibly vivid memories of Japan itself, for the life of me, I have trouble remembering that flight to Chicago; did it feel longer or shorter than the flight to Tokyo a month ago? Did I still order a tasty dinner from the flight attendants? Did I watch any movies, or did I just sleep? None of it seemed to matter.

My heart sank when I realized that I could recognize an American airport by its lack of cleanliness in comparison to Japan. One thing not many people mention about Japan is its incredible cleanliness; everything—even the asphalt—had seemed to be spotless. That fact was almost something I had overlooked until I could see a recognizable difference in the quality of the airport in Chicago. What was strange for my group was that we largely seemed to have more culture shock coming home after being accustomed to Japan than we ever had when we had arrived in Japan. The first time I heard an American voice boom over the intercom, I covered my ears with my hands. It was so loud! Had Kyoto really had that much less noise pollution? Had all of Japan been like that? Why hadn’t I thought about it before?

The other members of my group grumbled to themselves when they interacted
with the gruff American customs officers, who seemed rude to us after a month of
Japanese politeness. When Shady passed through customs and met me on the other side,
she blushed with embarrassment. “I’m going to have to stop bowing and saying arigatou-
gozaimasu,” she said. However, many people in my group immediately bought
McDonald’s upon finding our gate and setting their luggage with those of us who simply
sat and waited. I faintly remember someone saying, “Thank god, I can eat normal food
again.” I just wanted one more Nara taiyaki.

After many of us had divided into smaller cliques and led more solitary lives in
Kyoto, the regathering of the larger group seemed both great and terrible for group
cohesion; many people slept on each other’s shoulders, even when they said things like,
“Man, I can’t wait to get home.” We had established who among us would stay friends
after this trip was over and whom we would be okay losing contact with. I sensed that
we were all sort of tired of the group, but we had great respect for each other now; we
had lived a sort of short, condensed life together, after all.

When we arrived at the airport closest to home, many members of the group
simply faded out of the larger picture once their luggage was accounted for and they had
reunited with the loved ones that had stayed behind. Some of them hardly said goodbye
to anyone else. Others hugged and exchanged numbers, because their phones worked
again now that they were back in the range of domestic networks. I actually rode home
with a member of our group without Shady, because we both lived in Bowling Green and
Shady did not; I hadn’t realized that before the trip began.

When I arrived home, I faced several small moments of zoto anxiety when I
presented my American loved ones with their souvenirs. Some found the gifts quaint or
odd, my father got exactly what he wanted, and my significant other was ecstatic. In a moment of cultural reinforcement that often happens between geek couples, I showed him my appreciation for the thing he loved and added to his collection. What’s more, since it was a new figure, having not even come to America yet, I had surprised him with something exclusive and, therefore, highly valuable in geek collector culture. “You’re the best girlfriend ever!” he said, and placed it on display on his shelf next to his other favorites of his Power Rangers paraphernalia.

For our otaku group, a period of public reflection came those first two weeks home. Many group members uploaded photos of the trip on Facebook and actively enjoyed tagging each other in a nod of solidarity. We had experienced those things in Japan with each other, and no one else, and I’m sure we popped in and out of each other’s stories as we relayed our experiences to American loved ones. And, as months eventually passed, one member would occasionally shout out to others through a post with something like, “Does anyone else find it hard to believe that we were in JAPAN this summer?” They would then receive confirmation in several replies that all followed a vein of dreaminess and nostalgia.

For me, a period of readjustment began once I came back to America. I had returned as a more polite person, with an established sense of tatemae and a stronger sense of giri. I also felt calmer, more spiritual, and more confident in my ability to navigate my situation. However, Japan had been an independent event for which I had set money aside, so I had been fairly able to live stupendously in the moment, needing to give little thought to circumstances at home and any future that existed for me beyond the scope of Japan. Once back in America, I had now to attend to minimum-wage living, an
unsatisfying job, preparation for returning to college life in the fall, and a move to a new location in August. I had a feeling of life panic come over me, not only because I was being forced to think long-term again, but also because I worried I might never return to Japan. This panic is interesting to note, because when my journey began, I had wondered if my otaku reasons for going to Japan would be quickly sated and I would feel no reason to return. However, after I had discovered the dual sides of Japan—the futuristically urban and the traditionally rural, the internationally appealing and the intimate—I wanted nothing more than to grow there more, continuing the life story I felt we began with KIIS.

My experiences from the trip led me to apply to the JET Programme as a prospective English Teacher, and during my interview, I attempted to describe to my interviewers just how little I had felt any sense of displacement in Japan, despite my being a gaijin. I had had only positive experiences, and I needed them to know that I now had a deep need to go back, deeper than I had ever had before I had gone there to begin with. I wanted to eat the food. I wanted to visit the shrines. I wanted to meet my Japanese friends. I wasn’t the only one; as I stepped out of the interview room, unsure of my chances, I waved to a member of my group who had an interview directly after me. I suppose Japan had become an addiction to her too; a month simply hadn’t been enough. We still have yet to hear back about the shapes of our futures.

As it stands now, the things I miss most about Japan are not the things I expected, but rather are more things I had never realized existed before the trip, and going back to never having them again has been difficult. I miss vending machine restaurants and fast, punctual trains. And, most strangely of all, I miss the toilets. I miss the flushing noise that kept me from being embarrassed in some public restrooms. I miss the sprays that
helped me feel cleaner. I miss the deodorizer and fan that were often built into the toilets. I had never heard of those things as an American otaku who only knew of Japan through its media. Now, as much as I was nostalgic for the Japanese programming that had raised my understanding of culture as a kid in America, I was nostalgic for the aspects of Japan I had discovered while being Japan’s cultural child.
POST-JOURNEY

REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The Changing Otaku

What I concluded from our experiences is that the mostly media-fueled otaku that went to Japan came back as lovers of Japan in a broader way. We were of course surprised by the aspects of Japan we did not know, but we were also incredibly shocked by how much of Japan otakuism had revealed to us. Many of my group members said they felt “no real culture shock at all.” Japan was much more palatable to a Western individual than we had expected, and we were also much more prepared than we realized.

We slipped into the situation that was Japan surprisingly easily, and in our innocence, we were raised by the generous and patient people around us to be socially acceptable adults in much the same way a Japanese child would. Because of this experience, I wonder if every cultural newcomer has a childhood and maturation process similar to ours. The only difference may have been that our fandom—our otakuism—put us on the forefront to be more open to cultural education because of our pre-established fascination. I do think that my own personal journey of self-discovery through my discovery of Japan has helped me become what I believe to be a calmer, more culturally aware person.

At the beginning of this piece, I introduced the idea that the concept of otaku has had bad connotations because otaku are thought to be immature, clinging to childish
fancies. The stereotype may have a certain grounding in truth, because many otaku hold onto and obsess over certain media with the exuberance of a child and the nostalgia of someone who misses the innocence and connectedness of childhood. What’s more, for some otaku (who may or may not breach *weeabo* status), the amount of Japanese culture and language they know becomes an idol for adoration, and Japan is thereby put on a pedestal; this pedestal is what makes Japan the Mecca many otaku so desperately crave.

I would argue that, for international otaku, a journey like ours to Japan helps to abate some of the immaturity caused by only limited cultural understanding. By immersing ourselves not only in the culture of the otaku that we knew but also in the greater culture, we were able to learn a broader sense of what it means to be a part of Japan. We came to know facets of Japanese culture not just on terms of fandom but also on the terms of being a human who practices those cultural facets. We grew, and because of that, our otakuism changed. We did not stop being otaku, because for many like myself, our experiences in Japan only strengthened our love for it. However, I believe that our love for Japanese culture comes now not only from a respect for the culture’s differences from American culture, but also from our informed recognition of the two culture’s similarities, and of Japanese culture’s potential pitfalls as well as its many masterpieces. And, though we knew a select few Japanese terms before we began our journey, we developed through the understanding and correct employment of the new terms we learned while in Japan. I now can’t view my own otakuism without them.
My Version of the Story

The amount of otaku in the world is growing all the time as the world becomes more deeply interconnected. And, as the recognition of otaku as an international subculture in America grows, so does the amount of literature produced. I always thought of myself as a typical sort of American otaku, beginning as a child and continuing with my fascination into adulthood. However, I also know that I have not seen as many anime or read as many manga as many otaku, and I focused much more on language and food than other otaku in my group during the trip. I know that my specific loves in otakuism and my own interpretation of my otakuism have the possibility to limit this autoethnography when I apply it to the larger cultural group to which I belong.

I have also had concerns about the quality of the anthropological nature of this work due to the controversial format I chose to employ to tell my story. In the future, as I develop my arguments as an otaku who studies otaku from anthropological perspectives, I hope to be able to enhance my work with other testimonials and narratives from otaku whose experiences parallel and differ from my own. I also do hope, however, that my emotional tale lends itself to other otaku and those who study these culture groups in the framing of their own understanding of the culture. Otakuism can be a very emotional cultural experience, especially when the opportunity to go to Japan arises. I had debated at first whether referring to Japan as a Mecca for otaku was inappropriate for my purposes, but I stand behind it now. Japan is the origin point of the media that make otaku essentially who they are, and this place can lend to incredible self-discovery for otaku once it’s been reached.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **Anime** – Japanese animated television/movies with a large range of topics and demographics (pp. 1; 4-7, 24, 26, 30, 35-36, 49, 51, 55, 68)
- **Amae** – Depending on the goodwill of others (pp. 26; 7, 44, 59)
- **Gaijin** – A foreign person (usually white), generally from America and Western Europe (pp. 12; 7, 31-32, 43, 49, 58-59, 64)
- **Giri** – A feeling of obligation to others (pp. 27; 7, 60, 63)
- **Hentai** – Japanese drawn or animated pornography (p. 36; 7)
- **Honne** – One’s true feelings (pp. 59; 7)
- **Kaitensushi** – Converyer belt sushi (pp. 30; 7)
- **Karaoke** – In Japan, a room where a small party gathers while individuals sing recognizable songs to the rhythm of words appearing on a television screen (pp. 47, 59)
- **Katsudon** – A bowl of rice topped with fried pork cutlets (pp. 19; 7)
- **Kawaii** – Cute; used not only for adorable things/animals/children but also for pretty girls (pp. 21, 30, 35-36)
- **Manga** – Japanese comic books, read right to left (pp. 1; 4-7, 36, 49, 54-56, 68)
- **Mochi** – A confection made from pounded sticky rice, often flavored and filled with sweet pastes (pp. 13; 7, 19-20, 31, 53)
- **Nihon no kokoro** – “Japanese heart” (pp. 33; 7, 47)
- **Okonomiyaki** – A savory pancake made with seafood (pp. 19; 7)
- **Ramen** – Soup made with Chinese wheat noodles, broth, and other garnishes (pp. 19; 7)
- **Sensei** – A teacher or master of a craft or science (pp.12-14; 26, 37, 40-41, 48, 59)
- Shika – Japanese deer (pp. 21; 7)
- Shika Senbei – crackers designed to feed the deer in Nara (pp. 21-22; 7)
- Shinkansen – Japanese bullet trains (pp. 34; 7, 40-41, 45)
- Soto – Outside; can refer to the physical outside and also to those outside one’s group (pp. 12; 7, 59)
- Sushi – Raw or warmed seafood served with sticky rice; can be rolled (maki) or served with fish on top of rice ball (nigiri) (pp. 19; 7, 37, 43)
- Uchi – Inside; can refer to the physical inside and also to one’s home or familiar group (pp. 12; 7, 24)
- Udon – Thick noodles made from wheat flour, normally served in hot soup (pp. 51; 7, 19)
- Taiyaki – A waffle-like pastry usually filled with different sweet pastes (pp. 20; 7, 53, 62)
- Takoyaki – Savory, breaded octopus balls, fried, covered in sauce and/or mayonnaise and sprinkled with seaweed flakes (pp. 20; 7)
- Tatemaе – One’s public persona; can contrast with one’s honne (p. 59; 7, 63)
- Wagamama – Spoiled, selfish children who do not think of others’ feelings (pp. 29-30; 7, 59)
- Zoto – The process of Japanese gift-giving (p. 27; 7, 62)


FIGURE REFERENCES


