

## “This Is Who I Am”: Jero, Young, Gifted, Polycultural

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Jero is Japan’s first black enka recording and performing star. Enka is a genre that dominated Japanese popular music from the late 1940s through the 1970s but that remains an important part of Japanese popular culture for reasons I detail below. Jero, né Jerome Charles White, Jr., was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1981, the grandson of a Japanese woman, Takiko Kondo, and Leonard Tabb, an African American naval officer, who met and married while Tabb was stationed in Hiroshima during World War II. While growing up in Pittsburgh, Jero, who is phenotypically black, participated in hip hop culture—primarily as a dancer—throughout high school and college. However, he had also been singing enka at home with his Japanese grandmother since he was six years old, initially learning the songs phonetically.

His singular success in Japan is all the more remarkable for occurring in a country in which domestic popular music production has maintained an insularity that reflects the Japanese nationalist ideology of cultural distinction and uniqueness. This is registered by the fact that the sales of *hō-ban* (domestic) recordings have outsold *yō-ban* (foreign) recordings since 1966—the time of enka’s highest popularity—which is notable when viewed against the growing global dominance of American popular music at the time. Foreign genres such as rock and rap have certainly had their impact in Japan (and, perhaps understandably, have received the most attention from Western scholars and journalists) but have yet to displace enka as “*Nihon no uta*,” the “song of Japan.”

Enka holds a unique place in Japanese popular culture. Unlike other popular music genres in Japan—domestic genres such as J-Pop, those imported from America, and, ironically in Jero’s case, music that has been racialized as black—enka has not crossed over to any other national audience, including the *Nikkei* (foreign-born Japanese, though the term is used in the US to describe Japanese Americans) audience that has embraced Jero. Japanese Americans do not represent a significant audience for any other enka performer. It is Jero’s *Japanese American-ness* that permits his

visibility as an enka singer in the United States. By contrast, Japanese Americans are considered by the Japanese as distant cousins at best, and are more typically regarded as *gaijin*, or foreigners—a group as distinct from the Japanese as any other nationality or ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Jero actively contests a long history of positioning enka as a distinctly Japanese musical idiom by challenging its construction as the sound of a pre-modern, pre-Western-influenced Japan (despite its blatant use of Western instrumentation and reliance on modern production techniques and technologies). Yet Jero's performative displays of Japanese-ness—his bowing low before elderly Japanese, for example—reinforce rather than challenge Japanese cultural norms. It is, rather, his black body in conjunction with his apparent vocal affinities to enka that undercuts Japanese discourse regarding the distinctive inaccessibility of Japanese culture to non-Japanese. And it is from within this contradiction that, despite being black *and* American, Jero's unlikely turn as an enka star offers a polycultural challenge to think beyond easy correspondences between the categories of race, nationality, and musical genre.

I take the idea of the polycultural from Vijay Prashad, who describes it as “a provisional concept grounded in anti-racism rather than diversity [and that] unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a *host of lineages*” (xi-xii, my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> In Jero's case, we can understand his polyculturalism as the “coherent life” he has fashioned from his own multi-ethnic background in pursuit of a professional enka career. More pointedly, his enka performances demonstrate his desire to transcend phenotype and claim Japanese-ness, contesting the biological determinism that grounds the ways in which racialized thinking about enka inhibits, and even prohibits, bodies that are read as non-Japanese from participating in enka as well as in Japanese culture writ large.

Most of the English-language commentary on Jero has focused on either the Japanese reception of his bid for credibility in a genre understood as quintessentially Japanese, his stardom as a bridge between generations in Japan, or his more recent embrace by Nikkei and hapa (half-Japanese) audiences in the US. While I will touch on those discussions, my focus is to think through the ways in which Jero's claims to Japanese-ness are sounded out in his performances of enka, disturbing notions of blackness and Japanese-ness, as well as the racialized and nationalistic affiliations that attach themselves to the music along the way.<sup>3</sup>

### **Enka, the “Song of Japan”**

Both minyo, or folk music (e.g., work songs, fishing songs, planting songs, harvest songs), and enka vie for the title “Nihon no uta.”<sup>4</sup> However, despite minyo’s folksy authenticity as measured by “its rootedness in amateurism (sometimes semiprofessionalism) and regionalism,” and the fact that its “status was higher than that of enka and its place more esoteric,” enka would come to play a central role in defining post-Allied-occupation Japanese national identity (Yano 18).

It is unsurprising, then, that the period of enka’s greatest popularity, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, was also a period when *Nihonjinron*, or treatises on being Japanese, enveloped the nation as it struggled to define itself in the aftermath of the loss of World War II and the humiliations of the Allied occupation.<sup>5</sup> *Nihonjinron* remains a powerful ideological discourse in Japan, with its emphasis on “the special uniqueness of the Japanese almost to the point of characterizing them as a different species of human” (Murphy-Shigematsu 66). Indeed, the continuing fascination with Jero’s pronunciation skills nine years after he first gained notice in Japan speaks to the ways in which his black and American difference remain signs of foreign exceptionalism.

Though enka emerged as protest music out of the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement, as a way to get around Meiji-era (1868–1912) proscriptions against public political speech, it had been transformed into a popular music genre by the 1920s. With its sentimental view of rural Japanese life and its focused concern with the emotional lives of working-class urbanites displaced from their rural childhood surroundings, enka provided Japanese audiences with an audiotopia, a term I borrow from Josh Kun, who defines it as the “sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well” (Kun 22–23).

In enka’s case, the genre brings together two “normally defined incompatibilities” by blending Western instrumentation with Japanese vocal traditions in a sonic melding of modernity and classicism, bringing the imagined rural spaces of the past into the urban environments in which the majority of enka’s audiences find themselves. Japanese instruments are used as decorative elements in enka even as Western instrumentation is bent to Japanese musical conventions. Moreover, its representation as “Nihon

no uta” developed despite the fact that enka is widely acknowledged as a “commercial music, professionally produced and distributed from urban centers” (Yano 18).

Another indication of enka’s ability to incorporate seeming incommensurabilities is the casual gender-crossing often performed by female and by male singers. While the genre is dominated by female singers, the majority of songwriters, composers, arrangers, producers, and managers (who hold an inordinate amount of control over their artists’ careers) are male. Importantly, however, singers of both genders will sing songs written for either gender without changing the pronoun for the protagonist of a given song. For example, a male singer singing from a woman’s point of view is so common as to be unremarkable, as Jero demonstrates in his first hit, “Umiyuki (Ocean Snow),” in which he adopts a female perspective.

Gender play has a long history in the Japanese performing arts. A tradition of female impersonators in kabuki known as *onnagata* serve as precedents for male enka singers such as Ken’ichi Mikawa, whose feminine appearance undermines the overwhelmingly patriarchal social order.<sup>6</sup> Mikawa and other cross-dressing singers’ vocals do not attempt to hide the fact that they are male singers, and it is the juxtaposition of feminine appearance and masculine vocals that give their performances a distinctive frisson for Japanese audiences. It also gives some insight into audiences’ acceptance of Jero despite the pervasive *Nihonjinron* ideology of cultural purity and uniqueness. *Otokoyaku*, or females who perform male roles such as those involved in the famous Takarazuka Revue, give another indication of a flexible Japanese conception of gender and sexuality, though both *onnagata* and *otokoyaku* occupy marginalized, if often celebrated, positions in the larger social world. Still, the often effusive homosocial bonding between female fans and *otokoyaku* or female enka singers indicates a broader female homosociality that runs just beneath the surface of the patriarchal social norms of daily Japanese life.<sup>7</sup>

Following Yano’s analysis, enka lyrics deal primarily with three interrelated themes: *furusato* (hometown), representing the longed-for rootedness of the displaced urban working-class that served as enka’s primary audience and singers; paeans to longsuffering or devoted mothers; and the darker side of romance and sexuality. These themes, particularly *furusato*, influence the Japanese tendency to hear enka as a uniquely Japanese cultural expression that produces a strong sense of Japanese

culture as homogeneous and unitary—a view that conveniently ignores Ainu, Okinawan, and Korean histories within Japan. As Joe Wood notes, “Japan incorporated Chinese characters into its alphabet; sushi supposedly comes from Korea; the word *arigato* comes from *obrigado*, the Portuguese word for thank you—but the average Japanese still doesn’t think of his or her culture as creolized” (Wood 63). Enka bolstered the monoethnic myth through *furusato* by reassuring Japanese audiences that they remained untouched by the intrusion of foreign influences even as the music, announced through Western instrumentation and popular music conventions, gave the lie to their sense of cultural singularity.

Enka continually provides new twists on its nostalgic themes as new enka songs are composed every year with a crop of new singers to sing them. But a reliance on formulaic genre conventions also ensures that a song composed today would not sound out of date on an earlier enka recording.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, a thriving *natsu-mero*—literally, “nostalgia-melody”—market exists in which singers perform cover versions of popular core repertoires similar to the way jazz artists continually mine the “jazz standards” songbook. In fact, most of Jero’s recordings are titled *Covers*, including his debut, the fourth volume of which was released in June 2011. Arguably, by presenting his recordings in this way, Jero allowed Japanese enka fans who might hesitate to purchase a CD with a young black man on the cover to see lists of familiar songs and thus to comfortably place him in the *natsu-mero* subgenre. His ability to sing in familiar, even “traditional,” ways has certainly helped him gain popularity with enka’s core audience. Of course, as a superstar, Jero easily overcomes such reticence today, yet he continues to release “covers.”

Nostalgia is not the only way enka reinforces its position as *Nihon no uta*. Enka stars, in conjunction with their record labels’ fan clubs, integrate themselves into the emotional and personal lives of their fans.<sup>9</sup> Magazines devoted to enka and karaoke provide words and music to would-be enka singers, creating not only a vast market that reaches beyond its fan base to non-fans who sing enka in karaoke bars self-consciously or ironically, but also ensuring the maintenance of a knowledgeable audience. Thus, despite a dwindling core audience of middle-aged and elderly women, most Japanese, regardless of their age or taste in music, hear enka as a uniquely Japanese expression, and are familiar with its stars and its core repertoire. Most would find it non-controversial to assert enka’s cultural significance.

### From Jerome to Jero

As mentioned, Jero's enka singing was strictly a family affair while growing up in Pittsburgh, and his friends, while cognizant of his ability to speak Japanese, were kept unaware of his fascination with enka. But after graduating from the University of Pittsburgh with an information sciences degree in 2003, Jero immediately moved to Japan with the dream of becoming an enka star. Jero had decided seven years earlier to return to Japan when he visited the country as part of an international speech competition: "[When I visited as a fifteen-year-old] I fell in love with the country and decided [that] *everything I wanted to do with my life is in Japan*. The day I landed, I went to karaoke [and sang enka]" (Hamamoto, my emphasis).

His move came with his adoption of Jero, a nickname his Japanese friends gave him and which, perhaps by sounding more Japanese, gave him a deeper sense of Japanese-ness. In any case, like many enka hopefuls, he participated widely in the many televised karaoke contests. An appearance on the popular TV show, *Nodo Jiman (Proud of My Voice)*, garnered him a JVC recording contract, making him the first professional black enka singer in Japan. Holding a steady day job in the computer industry while he trained with an enka mentor for five years, he released his first single, "Umiyuki (Ocean Snow)" in 2008. He eventually fulfilled a promise to his grandmother by getting invited to participate in the prestigious *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, the New Year's Eve television show that is watched by a majority of the nation's public and features enka singers as representatives of traditional Japanese culture.

Jero's public confession that his career is dedicated to his Japanese grandmother, who instilled a love of enka music in him early in his life, made in a teary dedication to her at his *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* performance, resonates with the middle-aged and elderly female Japanese listeners who comprise the majority of the enka audience. Jero's respectful demeanor, linguistic skills, desire to live in Japan, and obvious love of Japanese culture all serve to justify his black body within the tightly structured and hierarchical world of enka production. For example, young enka artists apprentice under a senior mentor, often sweeping and performing menial chores in the mentor's household for years before even being allowed to sing. Thus, despite Jero's early notice in 2003, "Umiyuki" was not released until after five years of private enka training. While many enka singers labor for years before becoming stars due to an older guild-like system of hierarchical business practices, Jero managed to bypass the journeyman stage when "Umiyuki" became the highest debut ever recorded on the Oricon charts for an enka

title, shooting up to number four in the first week of sales. His career has continued to expand into Japanese television and film.<sup>10</sup>

The hip hop intro in “Umiyuki” and its subsequent abrupt shift into more conventional enka territory suggests that phenotype is just skin deep, and that enka is at the core of Jero’s sound. The slight four-measure introduction of hip hop drum hits and short synthesizer break quickly dissolves into a Japanese shakuhachi (bamboo flute) note that is taken up by an electric guitar. The electric guitar, signifying rock rather than hip hop, has long been incorporated into enka production and does not necessarily mark itself as “non-enka” or “Western.” A clavinet, an instrument associated with 1970s soul and funk music, is buried in the arrangement, appearing and disappearing throughout the track, a presence that lies below the percussion and string sections. In truth, little else in the audio track itself signifies blackness or points to Jero’s blackness apart from the brief introductory material. His singing is in the traditional male enka mode, emotionally charged yet (barely) contained as dictated by the style for male singers. In addition, his bodily stance and posture throughout the majority of the video for the song assumes the still, resolute body positioning of traditional enka male performers, and is meant to convey an emotional control that might only be betrayed by a single tear or by a wide vibrato in the voice. Jero’s video, however, cannot help but make visible his black presence and its foreign-ness.

His body, clothed in hip hop gear, presents an unambiguous black presence. He is, additionally, accompanied by two Japanese male dancers, who are also draped in hip hop gear—one with a New York Yankees baseball cap cocked sideways, both in oversized jackets and pants, and wearing athletic shoes—and who only appear three times. First in the brief introduction, and second in a short dance sequence towards the middle of the song that replaces the *serifu* (recitative) section of traditional enka song form, in which a singer delivers an emotional recitative related to the song’s narrative. We get, instead, a hip hop dance sequence performed by Jero and his two male companions in a space clearly marked as urban. The cement walls behind them are graffitied with spray-painted hip hop graphics and the sequence is shot through a chain link fence, implying not only Jero’s trespass into a Japanese space but Japanese viewers’ distance from Jero and his “black enka.” The rest of the video shows Jero performing at an outdoor concert, in a recording studio, and in isolation on a soundstage. The third time we see the other two dancers is later in the song when Jero is briefly shown outdoors with them, singing against the graffitied wall of

the introduction. For the most part, however, Jero is alone on some kind of stage, reinforcing the performativity of his act and his isolation from Japanese space more generally.<sup>11</sup>

Initially, Jero was reticent to incorporate hip hop dance into enka because he was “afraid people would think of it as a parody, me making fun of enka. I was negative toward it but after doing it and seeing the results, I’m glad that I did” (Betros). But Jero sees his hip hop affiliations as being true to himself, asserting a polycultural brand of Japanese-ness: “I’ve been wearing hip hop fashion since I was in high school. Now, if I were to wear a kimono on stage when I sang, no one would take me seriously and it would look more like a parody. That’s something I didn’t want to do. I don’t think I’d look good in a kimono anyway. I’ve never worn one and have no inkling to wear one” (Betros). As he mentioned to *The Washington Post* a year later, “I’ve lived in Pittsburgh till [sic] I was 21 . . . . The kimono was not a part of who I was, and I never actually wanted to wear one. I didn’t want to be someone else when I went on stage. I wanted to be who I was . . . . I wanted to be me. *I wanted to be true to myself* ” (Ruane, my emphasis).

In fact, Jero’s anxieties about his hip hop clothing were in part a concern about his reception by older enka singers with their strong sense of tradition: “The main thing I was worried about was not how the audience would perceive me, but how other enka singers would perceive me. I’ve looked up to them and I don’t want them to think I’m making fun of enka or trying to change enka” (Ito). As he admitted, “Actually, I don’t think I am reinventing the genre. Rather, I hope I am making it something new for younger people to listen to. I’m really just doing something that I loved to do since I was a kid. Not being Japanese is why I am getting a lot of media attention. If I was just another young Japanese enka singer, it wouldn’t be this big. Still, I wish there could be more focus on the music and the songs rather than having people say ‘Americajin enka kashu’ [American enka singer]” (Betros).

As noted, Jero has steadily distanced himself from hip hop, abandoning its sonic language of programmed drum beats as well as its sartorial gear. While he has not donned a kimono in his enka performances, he now sports fashionable formal wear, exchanging his baseball caps for fedoras and outsized hip hop clothes for tailored suits. Additionally, hip hop dancing has all but disappeared from his act, marking his growing distance from youth culture and a more serious attempt to move into the adult world of enka. While his suits are brightly colored ensembles that suggest black American fashion rather than the somber black and white suits of his Japanese peers,



they do reveal a growing conformance to enka priorities.<sup>12</sup> These shifts, moreover, indicate a conscious deployment of the tensions between enka's Japanese-ness and Jero's phenotypic blackness as a way to legitimize his position within enka. Importantly, Jero emphasizes his American identity.

There is at least one implication for Jero's emphasis on his nationality as a way to "talk around" his skin color. As a star in a genre that is closely associated with a country that is often criticized for its xenophobia, Jero yet hopes that he can send a positive message to the Japanese people. "I think that me being an American and singing enka might change the perception for a few people about their views toward Americans or their views toward blacks," Jero has said. "I would be extremely happy if I can (contribute to) the change in (people's) way of thinking, or [in] changing some stereotypes as well" (Ito).

### **Blackness in Japan**

Jero faces a daunting challenge. His exceptional status in Japan confronts a long Japanese history of both celebrating and denigrating blackness following the lead of Western and, in particular, American conceptions of people of African descent. Part of US Commodore Matthew C. Perry's negotiations with Japanese officials in 1853 was the use of musical entertainment provided by Navy musicians, including blackface minstrel shows.<sup>13</sup> John Russell notes that while "Japanese contacts with Africans and later with African Americans were limited compared to their encounters with whites, their exposure to Western discourse about them was less limited, and shaped how Japanese would perceive blacks when they actually encountered them. These eventual encounters were transacted within a hierarchy of power relations wherein blacks occupied a subordinate position" (Russell 85). In 1983, nearly one hundred and thirty years after Perry's "Black Ships" anchored in the harbor of Edo (Tokyo), the then-Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's widely reported remarks about the United States having a lower average intelligence than Japan due to its inclusion of "black people, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in the United States" indicates the ways in which American ideas about people of African descent remain comfortably aligned with the discourse regarding Japanese cultural and racial superiority.<sup>14</sup>

In his study of jazz in Japan, E. Taylor Atkins contrasts the ideas Japanese held regarding blackness to those they held regarding modernity, which bore a white face, bound by the familiar sets of binary oppositions

that we find in thinking about black/white difference in the United States: emotional/rational, spiritual/intellectual, instinctive/learned.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, echoing the views of white bohemians in the United States, part of the appeal of black music to Japanese jazz musicians and fans was the perception that jazz sounded out a transgressive nature thought to be a core, even essential, element of black music. Black authenticity arrived on the heels of World War II when black American servicemen arrived in Japan, bringing with them a number of jazz musicians who often performed with Japanese musicians. Japanese musicians who could claim close proximity to these musicians—who were closer to the living sources of “real jazz”—could also claim a more authentic musicianship and approach to performing jazz. Yet because of the strong links made between culture and race, Japanese jazz critics never celebrated Japanese jazz musicians to the degree reserved for black American jazz artists.<sup>16</sup>

This view of black American culture and its distance from Japanese culture still holds. Ian Condry, in his study of contemporary hip hop in Japan, notes that early criticisms by Japanese music critics and musicians decried Japanese hip hop as derivative and inconsequential due, in large part, to its separation from African American culture. Japanese hip hop’s initial mainstream popular music success rested largely on its merging of rap and Japan’s own *kawai* (cute) pop music leanings—a move that more politicized underground hip hop fans and artists, who adopt more “authentic,” that is, more black-identified, aesthetics and oppositional politics, denounced. Even so, Condry argues that Japanese hip hop “cannot be seen as straightforward Japanization of a global style, nor as simply Americanization . . . [T]here exists no singular Japanese approach to hip-hop, but rather a wide range of artists competing to promote diverse visions of what hip-hop in a Japanese setting might be” (Condry 11). Jero, by contrast, is not widening the range of what enka might mean. As he admits, he is not “reinventing the genre,” but rather insisting that his enka singing is a sign of his Japanese-ness, and it is his adherence to enka precedent rather than to innovation that his public statements and performances seek to highlight (Betros).

### **Hafu (Half-Breeds) and Biraciality in Japan**

But in fact, Jero’s arrival in Japan is something of an aberration. As the following historical survey will show, Jero’s grandparents may be as anomalous as their grandson “repatriating” to Japan to become an enka

star. In 1953, *Jet* magazine ran a cover story entitled “Do Japanese women make better wives?” with a cover depicting a purportedly happily married Indianapolis couple, James and Teruko Miller, who met and wed in Japan when James was stationed there.<sup>17</sup> However, Japanese women who formed relationships with gaijin were often shunned by friends and family, suffering social isolation or worse. In fact, most of the Japanese women who became involved with US servicemen never immigrated as the happily married wives of these servicemen. Caught between conflicting regulations—the Armed Forces only approved marriages that were registered at the American consulate (the only registration recognized by both American and Japanese governments) along with the stipulation that the GI bring his wife home to the US, which was near impossible given the 1924 Immigration Act that barred Japanese from US citizenship or permanent residence—US servicemen often simply returned home to start new lives.

Many of these abandoned Japanese women were left with illegitimate children. These children did not fare any better than their mothers, as the 1959 Tadashi Imai film, *Kiku and Isamu* (*Kiku to Isamu*), explored in a tale of two hāfu (half, or more accurately, half-breed) children who experience bullying from other children and ill treatment from adults. Indeed, while speculative, it is entirely feasible that this sort of stigmatization may have triggered the Tabbs’ move back to Pittsburgh. Indeed, Jero’s mother has admitted to being bullied and mistreated by other schoolchildren for being hāfu while growing up in Japan (Hamamoto). There is a long history of bullying in Japanese schools, particularly of hāfu children—perhaps unsurprising in a social world in which homogeneity and conformity are closely intertwined with a sense of nationalist cultural identity. As Koichi Iwabuchi notes, moreover, this pervasive sense of Japanese cultural and ethnic homogeneity is juxtaposed with an equally widespread idea that Western society is diverse and multicultural, undergirding a continued sense of Japanese uniqueness that masks social inequality even as it supports the notion of cultural superiority (104).

In 1952, *Collier’s* ran a story titled “Madame Butterfly’s Children: The Plight of ‘GI Babies’ in Japan,” detailing the hardships of these hāfu children, who were often abandoned to grandparents or to orphanages when their fathers returned home to the US as their mothers were unable to face the social stigma of raising often illegitimate children. According to the article, their numbers were estimated to be as high as 200,000, with 90 percent of them fathered by US servicemen. The *Collier’s* article appeared a

mere seven years after World War II had ended, in time to reflect on debates in Japan about the growing needs of a generation of orphan hāfu children about to enter school, taxing post-World War II educational facilities and other material resources.

Seventeen years later, a 1969 issue of *Life* magazine featured a cover story titled “Japan’s GI Babies: A Hard Coming-of-Age,” which detailed the current lives of a handful of hāfu young adults. The article paints a bleak picture, noting, “An undercurrent of prejudice, constant though seldom overt, has driven many of them to the fringes of society. There, some have become true outcasts—prostitutes and drug addicts” (Moser 40). Images of a 20-year-old known only as Danny, sniffing glue, sprawled out in a subway station, speak to the harsh penalties that the rhetoric linking belonging and biology in the discourse of Nihonjinron exacted on people deemed external to “pure Japanese-ness.”

At the same time, there was a fascination with hāfu despite their social ostracization. One of the featured hāfu in the *Life* article, Michi Aoyama, would go on to be a successful jazz singer in Tokyo, having already enjoyed some success as a teen singing star by the time of the article. Still, she suffered from depression, and her situation as a legitimate entertainer, rather than as a “companion” at so-called hostess bars, was singular. There was a popular all-girl group in the 1970s called The Golden Half, whose members were all hāfu (Japanese mothers, white fathers) and whose appeal rested in large part on their “exotic Japanese-but-not-quite-Japanese” look. Joe Yamanaka, a Japanese-Jamaican hāfu musician, who, despite a childhood spent in an orphanage, died in 2011 a well-known and respected rock musician and Japanese film actor. His stature outside Japan is evidenced by his time spent as a replacement for Bob Marley in The Wailers after Marley’s death. Yamanaka had been a member of Flower Travellin’ Band in the 1970s, a Japanese psychedelic rock band that proved that it could hold its own with contemporary Western rock bands, as evidenced by an opportunity to open for The Rolling Stones’ 1973 tour of Japan. Unfortunately, Mick Jagger’s drug conviction derailed the Stones’ tour plans and Flower Travellin’ Band soon broke up. What is important to remember, however, is that the Japanese public’s fascination with hāfu artists did not translate into social policies that would mitigate the hardships faced by a majority of hāfu. Indeed, hāfu artists embodied the very emotional, intuitive, and even artistic essence of the primitive Other that allowed “pure” Japanese to maintain a continued sense of genetic and cultural superiority.

**Blackface in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture**

When blackness does appear in the public sphere, it is often when Japanese entertainers don blackface. No small phenomenon, blackface entertainment continues to enjoy widespread appeal throughout Japan. Popular musical groups such as The Gosperats, Rats and Stars, The Channels, and Kuwaman with Three Bicees, perform in blackface in front of large audiences with a remarkable obliviousness to the racist hue of the practice. Apologists for blackface performances in Japan argue that Japan does not have a history of black slavery or other forms of black-specific discrimination, and therefore that these groups mean to pay homage to, rather than to demean, blacks or their culture. This line of argument is undermined, however, by the borrowing of ideas about black people from Western sources that Russell and others have shown in historical studies, which demonstrate a long history of racism and prejudice aimed at blacks. Murphy-Shigematsu argues even more forcefully that “painting Japan as a monoethnic country also functions as a cover for discrimination and prejudice. If there are no minorities, there can be no discrimination. Of course, discrimination exists but its open acknowledgment is thought to be troublesome in a society that prizes external harmony, and so discrimination is either denied or is labeled as something less insidious. The very word ‘minority’ is often reserved for other, supposedly less fortunate societies” (67).

As mentioned, misrepresentations of blacks have been used to insert Japanese within a global racial hierarchy in which they can be positioned alongside whiteness and, in turn, maintain a sense of racial and cultural superiority over other brown- and black-skinned peoples. While the Japanese musicians undoubtedly enjoy and even revere black musicians and their creative work, their participation in minstrelsy’s legacy reveals an incredibly deaf ear to the discrepant power relations and racist attitudes that inhere to blackface performances regardless of the national context in which those performances are conducted.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a ganguru (blackface) fad during which young Japanese people, primarily female, donned blackface or deep, exaggerated orange-black tans, while wearing blonde Afro-styled wigs, dancing, posing, and otherwise attempting to move physically in black-coded ways, and creating a Japanese slang that mixed local colloquial phrases with borrowings from hip hop and Hollywood. While the fad has passed for the most part, there is still a large subculture of hip hop fans who adopt black mannerisms as seen in hip hop videos and in US popular culture more generally. Nina Cornyetz argues that the fetishization of black skin and,

indeed, of the black phallus, is a bid by young Japanese to contest the myth of cultural and racial homogeneity by donning blackness. While she presents a cogent analysis, I would counter that blackness has always been a space in which non-blacks have acted out fantasies of bodily and psychic liberation from social norms and does little to dispel the essentialization of blacks as primitive, hypersexualized Others. More importantly, fetishizing blacks or blackness has done little to provide social equity to black individuals or groups.

Finally, the continued popularity of Helen Bannerman's 1899 children's book, *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, despite Japanese publishers' decisions to stop publishing the book in the 1980s, has seen a resurgence in its iconography in the recent 2011 publication of a sequel titled *Ufu and Mufu: The Cute Little Twins' Adventures*. The popularity of these two pickaninny-styled characters in children's books and films reinforces the idea of a primitive yet musically skilled essence of blackness and is another indication of the long-lasting legacy of borrowed ideas of blackness, as well as of the ways in which this legacy is folded neatly into a discourse of genetic and racial superiority. A lookalike updating of a black doll, Dakkochan, from the 1960s, is replicated by the Jynx character from the popular children's franchise Pokémon, a black-skinned, large-lipped "species" (as the various types of creatures are named within the Pokémon universe) that moves by wiggling its hips. The correlation to dancing Mammies is clear, and is not entirely uprooted from its Southern US origins, especially if one considers Russell's argument that Japanese anti-black prejudice has its genesis in the adoption of American views of blacks.

There is evidence of a subtle shift in mass media representations of foreigners, and in particular of mixed race individuals, though it remains to be seen if this shift challenges or merely reinforces longstanding stereotypes of the "impurity" of non-Japanese people writ large. The emergence of entertainers who are Japanese-speaking foreigners (gaikokujin tarento, foreign talent) and hāfu television personalities has, as Kenji Kaneko argues, underlined the idea that Japanese culture, despite its uniqueness and homogeneous character, is a dynamic participant in an increasingly globalized planet. Importantly, because these foreigners have "learned from Japanese culture even though they are not Japanese," they appeal to younger Japanese who are "tired of being 'just' Japanese"—a notion, I would argue, that continues to reinforce the uniqueness and significance of Japanese culture as defined by Nihonjinron (Kaneko 103). The overlaying of global cosmopolitanism does not hide the Japanese apprehension of an

increasingly interconnected and transcultural global culture. As Russell notes, “In crafting its self-image, Japan has attempted to ‘elevate’ and ‘distance’ itself from the nonwhite world, while embracing a world view that privileges Western culture, both elite and popular” (“Narratives” 417–18).<sup>18</sup> In thinking about Jero’s position and the manner in which he gained access to it despite Japan’s willful non-recognition of its internal racial hierarchy, we should note that it is gaijin acquiescence—and I mean to include Jero in this designation—to Japanese cultural norms, rather than widespread Japanese acceptance of non-Japanese culture or recognition of Japan’s own internal heterogeneity, that obtains here.<sup>19</sup>

### **Jero, Prodigal Son or Lost Brother?**

Against the historical backdrop I have outlined, it is notable that Jero has made his way back to the US for tours and personal appearances as Nikkei have begun to embrace him. The Berkeley Japan New Vision Award from the University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Japanese Studies, “was established in 2009 to award an individual who has, in recent times, dramatically transformed our vision of Japan. Singing traditional Japanese ballads in an American idiom, not only has Jero rekindled an interest in enka among the younger generation of Japanese but he has also opened up the possibilities for fluent Japanese-speakers from around the world [to break] into the entertainment and other industries in Japan. Given his mixed-race background, he has also become a symbol for the acceptance of a more multiethnic society for 21st-century Japan.”<sup>20</sup> Yano makes the same point in a recent talk in which she characterizes Jero’s move as the return of a prodigal son to his motherland, thereby teaching the Japanese about becoming a multicultural community.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Japanese and Nikkei alike, Jero represents both a youthful turn for enka as well as a reinforcement of its central position within Japanese popular music culture. But it is Jero’s construction as the symbol of an emergent recognition of Japan’s pluralism that most clearly rubs against the representation of enka as *Nihon no kokoro*, or the “heart and soul of Japan.”

In fact, while Nikkei and immigrant Japanese audiences have embraced him, it is still unclear whether Jero announces a broadened conception of Asian American. In works such as those found in the anthology, *Asian American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, for example, while the contributors do an admirable job of dislocating Asian American-ness from imposed identities, especially as it is constructed as liminal,

always-alien, and between black and white racial formations, a space for someone like Jero who, in many ways, is not seeking to be “Asian American” but “Japanese,” remains to be sketched out.<sup>22</sup> The cross-cultural dialogue his presence promises is often denied by his emphasis on his Japanese-ness and a corresponding lack of discourse around any cultural or political attachment to black America. In fact, there is little made of America at all in his public appearances beyond its being mentioned as the place of his birth. Jero’s immersion in and commitment to his life in Japan—he has stated publicly that he will remain there and that he has no plans to return to the US—undermine the kind of solidarity Japanese Americans might desire with Japanese. Indeed, his stardom has yet to ease Japanese attitudes towards blacks in general.

As mentioned, most of the commentary on Jero has focused on his relationship with enka, Japanese fans, and Japanese Americans. However, I would like to briefly think through Jero’s relation to blackness, and to US American blackness in particular. To start, black American reception of Jero has not been as welcoming. Kokujin Tensai (Black Genius), an aspiring African American rap artist in Japan, challenged Jero’s re-working of enka in a video:

I got somethin’ I want to say. Right now, in Japan, there is a famous black guy that can speak Japanese. That person’s name? Jero. Pronounced in English? Jerome.

Jerome, what’s good for ya nigga? I got some words for ya bro. You ready? You feel me? I’m gonna ask a question so Japanese people can understand you.

[in Japanese] Number one. Why you dressin’ hip hop when you sing enka? You stupid or something? I don’t get it at all. How about at least wearin’ a kimono? Hip hop equals rap.<sup>23</sup>

A pair of African American YouTube reviewers question the entire Jero project.<sup>24</sup> As one states succinctly, “[Jero is] breaking down the walls nobody wants to break down.” Jero has not responded publicly to Kokujin Tensai (or to any of his black detractors) but the difference in reception—as well as in the Japanese and Nikkei press’s emphasis on his Japanese-ness and reluctance to fully engage his biracial status—indicates the way in which the downplaying of his blackness in order to market himself as Japanese creates tensions for which normative racist thinking cannot account. In fact, Jero’s



desire to live and “turn Japanese” may cloak his determination to “escape” blackness in some way. Importantly, he has never publicly indicated any inclination to forge links to black audiences in Japan or in America.

We can see this tension in a series of commercials for Marukan instant ramen in which he is positioned as “Japanese-yet-not-Japanese.” He is atypically dressed in a kimono, though with a baseball cap and a do-rag, loudly slurping his noodles the “Japanese way,” and he is properly acquiescent to an elder enka star, Kobayashi Sachiko, in one of the ads. However, in an ad in which there is a flirtatious undercurrent to his interactions with a young Japanese female—also, notably, dressed in a kimono—his alterity is highlighted through his embarrassed reaction to the woman’s smile at the end of the ad. It is also noteworthy that they are both ostensibly enjoying a New Year’s fireworks display, signaling both the longstanding visual trope of attraction setting off fireworks between lovers as well as recognizing the importance of New Year’s for Japanese, emphasizing once again the very Japanese-ness Jero invokes despite his black skin, sideways cocked baseball hat, and white do-rag.

### **Polycultural Enka**

But rather than trying to account for a bifurcated identity, might Jero’s enka performances be thought more productively as instantiations of Vijay Prashad’s description of the polycultural? Arguing against multiculturalism due to its substitution of cultural for biological essence, which merely masks rather than substantively rethinks race, Prashad asserts that both the “conservative theory of the color blind and the racist theory of the indigenous, in their own way, smuggle in biological ideas of race to denigrate the creativity of diverse humans” (xi). As previously noted, Prashad defines the polycultural as “a provisional concept grounded in anti-racism rather than diversity [and that] unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages—the task of the [scholar] is not to carve out the lineages but to make sense of how people live culturally dynamic lives. Polyculturalism is a ferocious engagement with the political world of culture, a painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions” (Prashad xi-xii). The various tensions Jero’s enka career represents—black skin, Japanese sensibilities, *gaijin* interloper, American expatriate—may be more ably addressed through a polycultural understanding than by an attempt to finesse his positioning within the white/black paradigm of normative US race relations.

Using Prashad's template allows us to see the ways in which the Japanese reception of Jero's multilinear descent and cultural hybridity is part of the longer history of *hāfu* marginality and fascination in Japan, as well as of the troubled relationship between African Americans and Asian Americans, immigrants as well as those born in the US.<sup>25</sup> Jero's enka performances act as an abridgement of the ways in which a polycultural analytic productively disturbs ideas of a cohesive racial identity based on phenotype, or an ethnic identity based on cultural affinities that have been constructed by both anti-racist, progressive struggles for equality as well as by the exclusionary Japanese sensibilities as expressed in *Nihonjinron*.

Jero, for obvious commercial as well as for deeply felt personal reasons, has chosen to highlight his connections to Japanese culture through his deep love and affection for his *Obāsan* (grandmother) and *Okāsan* (mother). Pointedly, he was raised biculturally in a home in which Japanese lifeways dominated, and in which their familiarity belied the way he looked in the mirror. His love of hip hop, in other words, never negated or blunted his love of enka. These seeming incompatibilities were comfortably merged in his early enka career as displayed in "Umiyuki," in which the hip hop intro and the hip hop dance break provided him with a springboard for his current trajectory of embracing a more cosmopolitan sensibility that enlarges his articulation of Japanese-ness. In fact, his blend of urbane sophistication with his racial/ethnic mixture, and with his choice of genre in which to pursue a professional singing career, speaks to one possibility for polycultural positionings.

And yet, Jero's rejection by some blacks—and, let's be clear, even beyond the anecdotal evidence I present here, the African American media seems little interested in any enka singer, no matter what she or he looks like—relies on notions of racialist authenticity that cause them to rebuff his multivalent display of polyculturality. This lack of recognition, for the most part, from black America augurs less the utopic desire of Yukiko Koshiro that "translating African American impacts on Japanese history . . . as a central theme [suggest] that trans-Pacific relations have been and will be full of hope and visions for the Afro-Asian century" than an inertial reluctance for some African Americans to accept a broader, more inclusive conception of blackness (441). As a performance of polyculturality, Jero is a case example of how the polycultural pushes against the notion that there are "correct" and "incorrect" ways of being black by demonstrating, instead, that there are ways to live in black skin that are neither "tomming" gestures of black denial nor ghetto-centric tropes of "bein' real, yo."

Still, most of the literature on biraciality or mixed race identity is concerned with mixtures of black and white. The literature on marriages between blacks and Japanese focuses primarily on African American men and Japanese women, but Jero would seem to be an outlier here as well. Christine C. Iijima Hall, quoting another study, and speaking directly to Jero's particular mixture, writes, after noting that black Asian Americans experience difficulty being accepted by African Americans as "real blacks," that "Asian communities have also been unaccepting of racially mixed individuals. Asians have traditionally not seen mixed race Asians as 'real Asians.' This is especially true for African American-Asians. For example, the Japanese American community had denied the racial heritage of mixed Japanese children until the 1970's when the number of interracial marriages and offspring nearly outnumbered the number of Japanese-Japanese marriages and children" (Hall 228).<sup>26</sup>

For obvious reasons, there is little mention in the literature of those who decide to "pass" as non-black *despite* black skin coloration. Passing has typically been characterized as the movement from black to white where racial privilege and social mobility are understandably powerful motivations for obscuring one's blackness. But this is successfully accomplished only by persons with light-colored skin. There is also a long history of whites' desires for ethnic acculturation or, less kindly, for easy claims to "go native" or, more to the point here, "become Negro" as evidenced by jazz musicians such as Mezz Mezzrow or as exemplified by Norman Mailer's "white Negro" beatniks. However, Jero presents an unusual case of a person who is unmistakably black, in a phenotypic sense, and yet who seems to have chosen to "pass" as Japanese. With his stardom in a genre popularly thought of as quintessentially Japanese, Jero defies both essentialist black racial ideologies as well as the discourse of Nihonjinron in his polycultural enka performances.

In closing, I want to suggest that Jero is courageous, inventive, and attuned to the liberatory potential of an increasingly globalized culture in which Japanese youth mimic black Americans through their participation in hip hop culture and their consumption of Hollywood films while black Americans listen to J-Pop, read manga, watch anime, and participate in cosplay. The embodiment of fluid identity sounded out in a song form foreign to his birthplace yet a significant part of his home culture, Jero lights out for the polycultural frontier, disregarding signposts warning him that he does not belong or that this is a solitary, forbidden space. His acknowledgement that he may always hold an alien position in Japan does not deter him from

producing an enka that is not only true to its traditions but also true to his inner sense of himself.

I began this essay suggesting that Jero inhabits a Kunian audiotopia, a space that seeks to reconcile incommensurabilities, even if only fitfully and for the brief space of a song. I mean to highlight at least one audiotopian possibility, and it is this: that Jero's performances of enka show us that negotiating the "painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions" can expand current notions of identity and identity formation that better reflect the multiple lineages we all share. For despite enka's hybrid aesthetic that has been constructed as uniquely representative of Japanese-ness, and despite a recent biography of the singer entitled *Enka Transcends Borders: African-American Singer Jero and a Family History Spanning Three Generations* that positions him firmly as gaijin, Jero has boldly equipped himself as a polycultural explorer.<sup>27</sup> His journey does not merely bridge the generational gap in enka audiences (though it surely does that as well) nor is it enacted in order to grant Nikkei, who are considered gaijin in Japan regardless of "blood relation," a place at the Japanese banquet. Rather, Jero has set out to explore the unmarked territories of the racial imaginary by transforming the songs his grandmother taught him into a polycultural enka, a music formed out of the contradictions and confluences between sound and skin.

### Notes

1. There may be an element of "imagined nostalgia" at work here as well. Enka can be heard as a "traditional" or "quintessentially" Japanese idiom to Japanese Americans, though that nostalgia does not motivate huge sales of enka recordings in the US beyond first generation immigrants.

2. Prashad acknowledges his debt to Robin D. G. Kelley for the idea, though Kelley does not develop it as fully.

3. I am only tangentially concerned in this essay with Jero's reception by Japanese Americans and African Americans. And, unlike J-Pop, enka is a genre that has not traveled widely outside of Japan except as part of immigrant Japanese record collections.

4. I am indebted to enka scholar Christine Yano for her cogent study of the genre, and borrow liberally from her work in tracing the genre's broad outlines in this section of the essay.

5. Besides Yano, see Murphy-Shigematsu and Kaneko. John Russell also comments on Nihonjinron in his articles cited in the text.

6. Indeed, there are a number of cross-dressing male stars in Japan, such as Miwa Akihiro, who are given license to be publicly critical of politicians and other public figures.

7. One can also observe this tight-knit homosociality, for example, in the overwhelmingly Japanese female world of hula in Japan.

8. Christine Yano borrows and develops the term “kata” (“form”) to think about “codified gestures” within enka. The term is borrowed from Japanese martial arts, and refers to a series of choreographed moves that have been developed over centuries by martial artists in order to build in muscle memory for fundamental offensive and defensive moves. It is similar to the methods taught to drummers who receive formal training when they are introduced to military rudiments.

9. Record labels, and not the fans themselves, initiate and organize fan clubs and their activities.

10. Oricon is the Japanese equivalent of the Billboard charts.

11. A paper presented at the 2010 Society of Ethnomusicology conference by Shelley Brunt, “Black Tears, Black Songs?: Image-making, Race, and Cultural Identity in a Case Study of the Hip-Hop “Enka” Singer Jero,” demonstrated convincingly that the iconographic use of the various Japanese scripts throughout the video also signaled Jero’s foreign-ness.

12. An important exception to this is the flamboyant enka star Kiyoshi Hikawa, dubbed the “Prince of enka,” a reference to the equally colorful mixed-race pop star, Prince Rogers Nelson.

13. For details see Yellin.

14. See Page.

15. See Atkins, *Blue Nippon*.

16. This is still true today. African American jazz guitarist Brandon Ross, in a conversation about his tours of Japan, noted that Japanese musicians have invited him to perform there, not only because he is a gifted musician with whom they want to engage but also with the explicit agenda that his blackness legitimates them in the eyes of Japanese club owners, critics, and audiences in ways that their performances on their own could not achieve.

17. See *Jet*’s November 12, 1953 issue.

18. Russell is quoting John Dower, *War Without Mercy*.

19. I am willing to concede that many foreigners, and American otaku in particular, readily align themselves with the idea of Japanese cultural singularity and incommensurable alterity, thus inadvertently reinforcing Nihonjinron.

20. UC Berkeley News <<http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2011/04/04/jero-berkeley-japan-award/>> September 13, 2011.

21. From a manuscript sent to author, courtesy of Yano. See also Kaneko and Kiuchi.

22. See, in particular, in light of the present essay, Nishime's insightful analysis of the film, *Rush Hour*, which explores the ways in which the film "both offers up and forecloses on the pleasures and possibilities of cross-racial bonding and identification" (45). In Jero's case, this possibility is embodied by a single actor who arrives as a result of one kind of cross-racial bonding, if not identification.

23. Kokujin Tensai continues: "Number two. 'Umiyuki.' It's a sad song. Sad. Makes you cry. Why you dancing hip hop to a sad song? Ughh, Jero. I'm a little disappointed. Number three. I'm challenging you. Listen to my voice, Jero. A challenge. I'll make an enka song, you make a rap. The viewers will decide who is the best. Whether you accept it or not depends on if you got the balls, right? There's no way you can beat me!"

24. See <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HK28muI-o&-feature=results\\_video&playnext=1&list=PL890B9D6E35643CA7](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HK28muI-o&-feature=results_video&playnext=1&list=PL890B9D6E35643CA7)>.

25. I am thinking here of the so-called riots following the rendering of the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles in 1992, in which Korean storeowners were singled out by African Americans. See Kim and Dance.

26. Hall refers readers to Houston and Williams-Leon.

27. Title published by Iwanami Publishers in March 2011.

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