Constructing Race in Anime

by
Anne Lei

A THESIS

submitted to
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Honors College

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degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Computer Science
(Honors Scholar)

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Patti Sakurai

Anime and manga’s general lack of brown and black characters may not seem unusual at first considering that the medium is produced in Japan by Japanese creators for Japanese audiences, and thus chiefly features Japanese characters. However, its significant proportion of white characters necessitates a more critical investigation of racial dynamics in anime/manga, especially since the brown/black characters who do appear often suffer from characterizations that put undue emphasis on their brownness or blackness. In this thesis, I discuss racial constructions in anime/manga and their possible implications for the Western viewer. I identify four commonly occurring patterns of racial construction in anime/manga that collectively suggest a particular white/Asian/black racial stratification in which white people and East Asian people are suggested to be equal in racial status to each other through “equal superiority,” over brown and black people. My points are illustrated through the analysis of two case studies, the anime adaptations of the manga series Kuroko’s Basketball and ACCA: 13-Territory Inspection Dept.

Key Words: anime, manga, comics, cartoons, race, racism, fandom, racial hierarchy, racial stratification, racial binary, racial triangulation, minority representation in media, erasure, black stereotypes, Arab stereotypes, Asian stereotypes, white supremacy, Japanese pop culture, kuroko’s basketball, acca 13-territory inspection dept.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Anne Lei, Author
Introduction

In academia, most existing literature that discusses race in anime and manga focuses on white/Asian dynamics (especially in terms of nationality and East/West dichotomies rather than in terms of race) and do not mention dynamics between brown/black characters and white characters, or dynamics between brown/black characters and Asian/Japanese characters. Granted, even the most casual anime watcher or manga reader may notice that there are just not many brown and black characters in anime/manga. Considering that anime and manga is a cultural product produced in Japan for Japanese audiences, this doesn’t seem strange at first glance until we look at the comparably larger proportion of white characters featured. But although few in number, brown and black characters do exist, and their roles and characterizations in anime and manga trigger discussion and even the discouragement of discussion among Western viewers—discussion that often ends up dismissing or misinterpreting potentially racist material due to its origin being simultaneously Asian/non-white and Japanese/non-Western.

In this thesis, I discuss racial constructions in anime and manga and their possible implications for the Western viewer. In particular, I put forward that there are four commonly occurring patterns of black/brown racial constructions in anime/manga that, when taken together, build towards a particular white/Asian/black racial stratification in which white people and Asian people are suggested to be equal in racial status to each other through “equal superiority,” so to speak, over brown and black people:

Pattern 1

*When characters are drawn in a manner that suggests radical racial difference.* There are multiple ways this pattern can manifest. One way is where a given character design evokes
phenotypical stereotypes or even racist iconography such as blackface. Another way is where designs for white and Asian characters barely differ in style while the designs for any black and brown characters of the same series comparatively look very different.

Pattern 2

*When characters are suggested or explicitly stated to be members of an actual real-life human race or ethnicity, and then those characters do something that fulfills one or more real-life stereotypes of that race or ethnicity.* This is especially suspicious if they are not members of the main cast and do not have recurring roles, or if they are the first dark-skinned characters we have seen so far in the series.

Pattern 3

*When all of the darker-skinned characters in the series also happen to be the antagonists and/or characters with ulterior motives.* This is especially suspicious if, in addition, there are no darker-skinned characters who happen to be on the good guys’ side.

Pattern 4

*When darker-skinned characters mysteriously don’t exist or are virtually invisible in globally-oriented settings, or settings based off of locations in the real world where one would usually expect to find darker-skinned people.* This is especially suspicious if these settings do include pale-skinned Japanese or Asian characters who actively participate in the plot alongside white characters.
In this thesis I analyze two case studies, anime series *Kuroko’s Basketball* and *ACCA: 13-Territory Inspection Dept.*, to illustrate these patterns and how their implementation suggests a white/Asian equal-superiority hierarchy over brown and black people.

**Background and Methodology**

**What is Anime And Manga?**

Anime is Japanese animation and usually comes in the form of films and TV series. Manga is Japanese comics and usually comes in the form of serialized chapters in magazines and/or as compiled volumes. Many anime TV series are adapted straight from popular manga series. Throughout this thesis, I may use the term “anime” as an umbrella term for both anime and manga, since many animated series (including the two case studies I’ll be discussing) have an original manga counterpart.

**Other Terms**

This document’s literature review mentions “cosplay” and “fanwork” in passing—cosplay is when fans dress up as fictional characters. Fanwork is an umbrella term that includes cosplay and other activities fans participate in to express their passion for a piece of work—examples include creative endeavors such as “fanfiction” and “fanart.”

**Methodology**

*Kuroko’s Basketball* and *ACCA* both started as manga series by individual creators Fujimaki Tadatoshi and Natsume Ono, respectively, and were faithfully adapted into anime TV series. My analysis exclusively focuses on their anime adaptations. I reference the official translations provided by the streaming service Crunchyroll for both series—the only exception is
the *Kuroko’s Basketball* sequel movie, for which I relied on fan subtitles by the group DASHCP, since the movie has yet to be licensed in the United States as of this writing.

I had two major pieces of criteria for selecting my case studies. First, I wanted each to exhibit at least two of the patterns described earlier in the Introduction of this document. Second, I wanted each to feature some kind of global element in their narratives or settings such that the opportunity for black and brown characters to exist and have meaningful roles in the story would be reasonable to expect. I will be explaining how both series satisfy this criteria.

My analysis approach includes typical methods of literary and film analysis. I use narrative structure analysis extensively to examine how a series’ character arcs and plot occurrences work towards certain racial meanings. For example, *Kuroko’s Basketball* is a lengthy series, but most of its arcs follow the same general formulas that produce the same few themes, from which racial implications of interest can be consistently derived. Similarly, *ACCA*’s narrative structure is very deliberate, and the timing of its character-based plot twists further accentuates the sneakiness of non-white agents and their ulterior motives. Since these shows are moving pictures, I also use to some extent mise-en-scene analysis to further unpack interpretations of certain scenes that may carry racial meaning. The thesis as a whole is a contextual analysis since I am examining Japanese content that contains global elements and its potential meanings for Western audiences.

**Literature Review**

This literature review covers a selection of scholarly pieces that discuss race, anime, race in anime, and Western consumption of anime. The following themes and topics emerged across these readings: racial triangulation/stratification, speculation on the original intent behind anime’s “internationalization,” and Western audiences’ response to this “internationalization.” I
will discuss each of these themes/topics as they relate to the specific texts I reviewed and to my own thesis.

Racial Triangulation and Stratification On and Offscreen

In her landmark essay “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” Claire Jean Kim discusses how racial discourses that take a “different trajectories” approach or a “racial hierarchy” approach are insufficient in their ability to frame race issues beyond the antiquated American Black/White binary. Instead, she proposes a framework that involves a “field of racial positions.” This field can be visualized as a coordinate system with two axes, Superior/Inferior and Insider/Foreigner. Using this framework, Kim demonstrates that Asian Americans have been “racially triangulated” by Whites and Blacks relative to this field of racial positions. According to Kim, racial triangulation is achieved in two distinct but closely interrelated processes: relative valorization and civic ostracism. Relative valorization is the process by which a “dominant group A valorizes subgroup B relative to subordinate group C on cultural and racial grounds in order to dominate both groups, but especially C.” Civic ostracism is the process by which a “dominant group A constructs subgroup B as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership.” Although this piece is specifically about White/Asian/Black relations in the U.S., its concepts of triangulation, relative valorization, civic ostracism, and resulting “double elisions” of distinctions between racial subgroups can be applied to my analysis of the racial dynamics of a given show, since the context for my conclusions has the Western audience in mind.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s “We are all Americans! The Latin-Americanization of Racial Stratification in the USA” also discusses patterns and processes of racializations that are of interest to my thesis, as these patterns and processes are beyond a Black/White binary or a
White/Non-White binary. In this essay, Bonilla-Silva notes that racial demographics in the United States have evolved and are continuing to evolve—for example, particular racial groups’ socioeconomic standings have increased, interracial marriage is becoming more common, Latinxs have replaced Blacks as the largest minority group in the country, etc. As a result of these factors, frameworks used to discuss race that are based on binarism are now moot; Bonilla-Silva in fact argues that a stratified system of racialization similar to the ones that operate in Latin America and the Caribbean is emerging. This stratified system can be visualized as a hierarchical pyramid at which Whites sit at the top, honorary whites (including East Asians) occupy the middle, and a “collective Black” (including Southeast Asians) are relegated to the bottom base. Bonilla-Silva goes on to point out that this is a tri-racial system and that “race conflict will be buffered by the intermediate group… furthermore, color gradations, which have always be important matters of within-group differentiation, will become more salient factors of stratification.” These tri-raciality and intermediate-buffer concepts hearken back to Kim’s theories, except in this case the parties are White/Honorary White/Collective Black instead of White/Asian/Black. As demonstrated, racial triangulation does not always have to occur between three concrete racial categories, especially since, as Bonilla-Silva notes, racial categories are arbitrary and change with time and societal circumstance. I will be referencing Bonilla-Silva’s ideas about racialization, racial stratification, and intra-subgroup racialization vis-a-vis skin color in my own thesis.

Samir Dayal’s essay “Black and Tan Fantasies: Interracial Contact between Blacks and South Asians in Film” applies triangulation concepts similar to those discussed by Kim and Bonilla-Silva to race representations on the silver screen. Even in onscreen fiction, interethnic contact doesn’t conform to racial binaries. Dayal discusses the implications of the presence of a
“perpetual” third party that incites interethnic contact and conflict between two other parties in several example movie plots. His points are located within a framework which assumes that a film that features two or more racial groups usually assigns one of the groups to be the “master signifier,” i.e., an Other who “shows the way” to the other racial group(s). The master signifier is usually represented through a white character, but there are exceptions, especially when there are three parties involved—Dayal goes on to illustrate in his essay that “… it is not always the black man who is denigrated as the lowest of the low and not always the white man who strives to seem superior to another. On occasion, it is a minority figure who seeks to establish himself or herself as the superior of a person of a different minority group, and this is not just about competition between minorities.” One of Dayal’s examples is the sci-fi classic *The Matrix*. *The Matrix*’s main character Neo is prophesied to save the fate of humanity, and can be interpreted as a literal white savior (as an aside, Neo’s actor Keanu Reeves is in fact multiracial and has Asian lineage). However, Neo as a representative white party is not the master signifier in the movie—Morpheus, a black man who heads a rebellion and acts as Neo’s mentor, is. In addition, the members of Morpheus’s revolt against the movie’s antagonistic digital overlords are shown to be diverse both in race and in gender. Meanwhile, the enemy Matrix’s “agents” look like white men who act, speak, and dress identically to each other. One of the movie’s themes thus states that the real world is righteously multicultural and constantly under attack by white masculine forces. This theme is positive and well-intentioned, but Dayal also notes that while the movie features no overtly Asian characters even while Asianness permeates the film—there’s a brown but non-Asian character whose name sounds Asian (Choi, who dies); Orpheus and Neo practice martial arts in a virtual dojo while wearing martial arts uniforms; and a young white boy in the monk robes of a Buddhist student imparts crucial wisdom to Neo at one point in the movie. This
contradictory pairing of the absence of Asians with a presence of Asianness is an example of a triangulation situation in which Whites are not the master signifier and one of the parties is simultaneously visible and invisible. I will be analyzing similar setups and variations in my thesis.

Race and “Internationalization” in Anime: Theories on Original Intent

My thesis will focus more on the implications for Western audiences that racial constructions in anime may produce; it will not investigate Japanese creators’ original intent. However, I did review some literature that does draw conclusions about certain anime tropes based on analyses of Japanese society, culture, and history. These analyses of racializations in anime written by Western scholars can potentially provide insights into how these racializations have particular significance for Western audiences, especially since these scholars are Western audience members themselves too.

Amy Lu’s paper “The Many Faces of Internationalization in Japanese Anime” proposes that there are three different kinds of “cultural politics” that can explain anime’s “internationality” and international popularity. Lu first gives an overview of what she refers to as the “internationalization” of anime. For one, many shows take place in historical or modern-day locations in the West, and there are also many anime series adapted from or inspired by Western literary classics or Western mythology. There is also a trend of Japanese or Asian characters having Western names even when the plot of their shows don’t take place in the West. In addition, Lu argues that the intent behind designing anime characters with fantastically-colored hair and unrealistically shaped bodies is to give them a “global look.” Lu’s first theory to explain such globalization is “depoliticized internationalization,” in which original content creators and producers intentionally incorporate internationalized backgrounds for their shows in order to
appeal to a broader international market. The second theory is “occidentalized internationalization,” in which original content creators and producers depict negative stereotypes of the West to maintain Japanese authority over their own audiences (Lu says that this theory comes into play less and less frequently as more and more anime is exported to the West). The third theory is “self-orientalized internationalization,” which Orientalizes non-Japanese Asian cultures while depicting itself as another country of the West, or the only Western country located in Asia. For the latter two theories in particular, Lu provides several shows as examples to prove her points. Her approach of comparing character designs between characters of the same show but different nationalities will be a good reference for what I will be doing in my own thesis. Of note is the fact that Lu frames her arguments only in terms of nationality and an East/West dichotomy, in which only Caucasian or Caucasian-looking characters are raised as examples of representations of the West.

In Joon Yang Kim’s “Animated Interracial Romantic Fantasies: Japanese Male and Non-Japanese Female Characters,” Kim confirms Lu’s observation that Japanese animation is often characterized by “a-nationality” or “nationless-ness,” which frequently manifests via the multiracial casts and interracial lovers that feature in many storylines. In his essay, Kim analyzes three anime series—Cyborg 009, Yamato, and Macross—to illustrate his claim that depictions of interracial relationships in anime (Japanese man paired with non-Japanese woman) can be a way of expressing a nationalistic assertion that Japan is a state as powerful as any of the other Western powers. Kim states that “The modern in Japan has been mostly understood as foreign, in particular, as Western in a geographic sense, and as Caucasian in a racial sense. The new foreignness excluded Chinese-ness, Korean-ness, and even Japanese-ness…” Kim illustrates this pursuit of whiteness and downplaying of Asianness in his three case studies by comparing it to a
broader framework in which the third world and the first world are linked in their mutual desire to possess third world women. Kim proposes that anime can depict a variation of this framework, in which Japan takes on the role of the first world and the West takes on the role of the third world, and the two entities then vie for control over “the imperial woman.” By unioning a Japanese male character with a Western (white) woman in a romantic relationship, the imperialism of both Japan and the West become gendered—that is, half of the pair is designed to be “images of the Western first world, gendered to be female such that their roles are of mediator and housekeeper.” The other half of the pair, “Main Japanese protagonists, through heterosexual romantic relation to them, thus have access and appropriate status to their vision of the Western first world.” So the union of these two representative characters is a representation of Japan’s assertion that its imperial power is equal to or even greater than that of the West’s. At the end of his essay, Kim poses follow-up questions, one of which has to do with why multinational (and multiracial) secret service teams feature frequently in anime, including in each of his three examples. Indeed, Kim focuses on Japanese male protagonists and their foreign or foreign-looking romantic love interests and does not spend much time hypothesizing about the designs of the supporting cast members, some of whom are not white or Japanese. In this thesis I will be analyzing my own case studies with approaches similar to Kim’s, except that I will also be considering characters who are not ethnically Japanese, white, or East Asian.

Loh and Sugawa-Shimada’s pieces, “Superflat and the PostModern Gothic: Images of Western Modernity in Kurositsuji” and “Grotesque Cuteness of Shoji: Representations of the Goth-Loli in Japanese Contemporary TV Anime,” respectively, also discuss the relationship between Japan’s ideals of modernity and its perception of the West and how that relationship manifests itself in many manga and anime. These two pieces in particular focus less on
imperialism and more on capitalist consumer culture and fashion trends. In “Grotesque,” Sugawa-Shimada provides a historical overview of the history behind the Goth-Loli phenomena in Japan, explaining that Western European culture has been plugged by magazines and other media, including girls’ manga, as “fashionable, romantic, urban, modern, respectable, and sophisticated” to young women and girls since the 1920s. In manga particularly, “Blonde foreign girls were oftentimes the protagonist of these stories” that featured Western or Western-inspired settings, and “Images of the thoroughbred, upright, fashionable, and ladylike are inscribed in narratives of printed and audiovisual works targeting girls.” In “Superflat,” Loh provides an in-depth analysis of a case study manga, the popular Gothic fantasy Kuroshitsuji, which takes place in Victorian London. Loh points out the creator’s depiction of the historical background is inaccurate and heavily idealized, and focuses more on emphasizing a particular aesthetic: “[the author’s] emulations of ‘aristocratic’ food and fashion collectively evoke positive, sunny images of 19th century Western modernity where ‘civilization’ refers not so much to philosophical Enlightenment ideals, but to the possession of both Western commodities and the Western aesthetic disposition or ‘taste’ required to consume and appreciate the aesthetic form of these commodities.” Major character Sebastian, a supernatural, superpowered being moonlighting as a manservant for a human boy, is interpreted by Loh to be an allegory for Japan’s capacity to hybridize cultures. Loh arrives at this conclusion after citing an episode in the story in which Sebastian wins a cooking competition by creating, on the fly, a fusion dish—the curry bun, an actual food invented in modern Japan. Sebastian’s two other fellow competitors, an English man and an Indian man, had prepared traditional Western European and Indian fare, respectively. Sebastian’s superpower, hybridization, is shown to be something that both the East and the West
lack. Loh essentially argues throughout her piece that by romanticizing the West, *Kuroshitsuji* asserts that modern Japan is not only as good as the West, but better.

**Western Perceptions of and Responses to Racializations in Anime**

Two themes have emerged from my preliminary research on these topics. One has to do with how audiences respond to clues in a show that indicate that a story is taking place within the context of a specific culture and/or country. The other has to do with how audiences interpret characters of racial ambiguity.

As Lu argues in “Many Faces,” Japanese content creators may intentionally minimize the cultural odor of their works in order to broaden the scope of relatability for international audiences. Western licensing and “localization” teams do something similar for their own home audiences as they import and repackage anime for distribution in their home countries. Many of the earliest anime and manga to be imported into the United States, for example, were heavily cut and/or had their plots completely rewritten so as to minimize or completely eliminate cues that suggested storylines were not taking place in the West. This was to ensure that viewers would not be distracted by or feel alienated from the narrative that these producers were trying to sell. Rayna Denison examines an example of this in "Franchising and Failure: Discourses of Failure within the Japanese-American Speed Racer Franchise.” The *Speed Racer* anime originated in Japan and was heavily cut, revised, rewritten, and redubbed upon export to the United States. Any clues that indicated the show was originally foreign were eradicated, and many audiences who remember the “original” American cartoon still have no idea of its true origins. Denison illustrates American/Western allergy to cultural odor and foreign Otherness in the media they consume or reject even further with an analysis of the Hollywood live-action film adaptation of *Speed Racer*. Common viewer reactions included confusion over the origin of “the
originals,” e.g. whether the “original” Speed Racer that the film was based upon was an American cartoon or a Japanese one. Those who were aware of Speed Racer’s Japanese origins consistently cited the franchise’s anime origins in order to make meaning of the movie and as part of their explanation as to why the movie was a flop. In other words, these reviewers and audience members attributed Speed Racer’s failure to its (Japanese) foreignness.

Dana Fennell et. al. investigates perception and reception of cultural odor among a less mainstream audience—online anime fans—in their paper “Consuming Anime.” Fennell et. al. studied posts on three online forums that were themed around two different anime series, the Bleach and The Wallflower. The ultimate goal of the research was to compare and contrast scholars’ understandings of race and gender in anime with fans’. To accomplish this, they posed the following three research questions:

- Are the participants discussing race and gender? If so,
- Do they have their own theories regarding race and gender depictions?
- Do the participants perceive Japanese cultural elements in images?

The results of their observations on the forum boards were coded into the following three categories:

- If/how fans compared the fictionalized characters to any real-world racial/ethnic groups;
- If/how fans saw characters as enacting gender roles similar to those in Japan or another nation;
- If/how fans saw these as fictional.

The researchers found that the fans of both series were, in general, aware of the cultural and national origins of the series. For Bleach in particular, different fans had different approaches for interpreting race from character design and background context. One approach
involved assuming that all characters are Japanese, even if they don’t “look” Japanese, until proven otherwise, since the product is Japanese. Another approach would acknowledge that at least some of the characters could be Japanese. Fans who took this approach would rely on cues such as visual character design cues, theme music, the characters’ associated objects (e.g. trademark weapons or magical items), behaviors, body type, and “language” (e.g. etymology of their names) to form hypotheses about characters’ racial origins. This approach can also end up relying on stereotypes—thus, it’s an approach which relies on a fan’s individual personal experiences and cultural knowledge, which of course can be inaccurate. Fans also exhibited an interest and ability in mapping fantasy locales within the *Bleach* storyverse to ones in real life, once again by observing cues relating to characters within a locale, the characteristics of the locale, etymology of names used in the locale, etc. Some of the fans who perceived *Bleach* characters to be of different races “were willing to directly critique the show not representing certain groups positively.” The authors of the paper note that a show such as this may accordingly reinforce ideas that one race/ethnicity/nationality is superior to another. *Bleach* fans in particular noticed that Black characters were “always weak,” “Spaniards” (perhaps Latinx is a more accurate label here; the cues presented by antagonists in the land “Hueco Mundo” do not suggest cultural influence restricted to Spain) were consistently cast as bad guys, and Japanese characters are mostly cast as good guys. Conversely, some fans offered direct praise for *Bleach*, pointing out that the amount of diversity featured in *Bleach* is unusual for anime in general and should be considered progress. The authors of the paper also note that some fans wielded the fantasy elements of the *Bleach* universe to “limit discussion,” for example by “indicating that certain topics” (e.g. racism or characters’ representations of real-world races/ethnicities/nationalities) “are irrelevant as the show is fictional,” or by minimizing the
seriousness of such discussions rather than their occurrence, for example by arguing that arguing over fictional characters is meaningless since they are not real people.

The Fennell et. al. paper referenced another Amy Lu paper, in which she conducted an empirical study of Western viewers’ perception of anime characters’ race. She obtained images of 300 front-facing human or human-looking main characters from Anime News Network and recorded each character’s official nationality and race. Fantasy characters lacking real-world nationality or race were categorized as Other. Each portrait was cropped at the shoulders, and backgrounds, clothing, and other cues that could potentially belie a character’s race or nationality were removed. Approximately 300 participants from a university were selected to take part in the study. Each participant was presented with 90 character images randomly selected from the total pool of 300, and was asked to categorize each character into one of three categories: Asian, White, or Other. They were also asked to rate their level of experience with anime and to list the top features they used to judge the races of the characters. The results of the study concluded that even though more of the cataloged characters were Asian, the audience perceived slightly more Caucasian characters. The study also noted ORP—Own Race Projection—at work: participants of all races (although most were white and American) demonstrated a tendency to categorize more characters as their own race. Lu theorizes that ORP occurs when there aren’t enough visual cues contained within a given character design to suggest race; the viewer then resorts to projecting their own race onto the character. Of note is Lu’s restriction of the racial categories participants were allowed to choose between. The first category is “Asian,” and should thus include Japanese, other East Asian, and all other Asian characters alike. The third category, Other, seems to include both brown/black humans, nonhumans, and perhaps brown/black nonhumans. Lu’s study doesn’t provide much room for discussions of race beyond Asian vs.
White; perceptions of racializations of brown/black people and perceptions of racializations between subgroups of Asians are unacknowledged and unaccounted for.

One of the only pieces of literature I found that discussed race constructions of black/brown characters and not just Asian or White characters was Deborah Whaley’s “Anime Dreams for African Girls: Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water.” In this essay, Whaley examines how the titular and brown-skinned character Nadia’s race and nationality is constructed in the 90s anime, *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water*. She provides a quote from the original creators that reveal that Nadia’s character was intentionally designed to be racially ambiguous—they were considering giving her kinky hair but decided against it to prevent viewers from perceiving Nadia as too alien. Before Nadia is revealed to be an Atlantean princess later on in the series, it is speculated in-universe that she is African, or Kenyan to be more specific. Whaley points out that Kenya is a popular locale when detailing the backstories of African nationals in American comics and other media because Kenyans have traits that a global audience may find more relatable, such as non-black hair colors and non-brown eye colors. Whaley also provides commentary on how Nadia’s exoticism is sexualized both within the series and in promotional material. Nevertheless, Nadia remains a popular cosplay and fanwork subject for black women fans.

**Summary**

So far, the discussions I have uncovered while researching race in anime are more about nationality, “internationalization,” and East/West dichotomies. When focus on race does arise, the focus is usually on Caucasian and Asian characters, and characters of any other race are rarely mentioned. For my thesis, I will be applying triangulation and racial stratification frameworks to analyze particular trends in the racializations of non-Asian and non-White
characters in anime, especially when these racializations occur in tandem with the racializations of White and Asian characters, and what implications these racializations may have for the casual Western audience member.

**Case Study 1: Kuroko’s Basketball**

*Kuroko’s Basketball* is a popular series of the sports genre. The manga consists of 30 volumes and a short sequel, and its anime adaptation has over 75 episodes released across three seasons, in addition to a movie that covers the events of the manga sequel. Collectively, the manga and anime ran from 2008 to 2018.

The series chronicles the trials and tribulations of the titular Kuroko Tetsuya’s school basketball career. During his years at basketball powerhouse Teiko Middle School, Kuroko played alongside five prodigies nicknamed “the Generation of Miracles” (hereby abbreviated as “GOM”) for their overwhelming skill, talent, and power. Although lacking in skill, talent, and power, Kuroko becomes an honorary GOM member of sorts and a secret weapon for the team after the team captain/GOM clique leader discovers his unique and effective passing abilities. Kuroko eventually quits the team and severs his friendship with the GOM over his disagreement with their belief that victory is the only thing that matters in basketball, even if it’s at the expense of team camaraderie and respect for opponents. After they graduate, all six boys scatter to different high schools, and the GOM vow to each other that they’ll meet again in the national championships to determine who is the strongest among them. Kuroko joins the Seirin High School basketball team and partners up with fellow first year and almost-GOM-level player Kagami Taiga, and also resolves to defeat the GOM at nationals in order to prove to each of them that his way of basketball—which emphasizes hard work, team play, and sportsmanship—is superior to the GOM kids’ reliance on inborn talent and individual contributions.
Overview: Kuroko’s Global Element and Pattern Fulfilment

As mentioned in the Introduction, I narrowed down my case study candidates to series that featured a global element of some kind such that opportunities for black and brown characters to participate in the plot can be emphasized. The primary global element offered by Kuroko’s Basketball, is, as the title advertises, basketball—an internationally popular sport originally from the United States. Although the main characters are Japanese and the series largely takes place in Japan, American landscapes do make appearances—for example, Kagami’s parents are diplomats, and the story features flashbacks to his childhood spent playing streetball with neighborhood kids in LA. There are also foreign characters from America, Senegal and China who have roles in the story—almost all are featured as players from rival teams.

One of the core themes expressed by Kuroko’s Basketball is, as mentioned previously, is the idea that a team’s collective hard work and intra-team cooperation is superior to reliance on individual players’ natural strength or talent. This theme is successfully emphasized whenever Seirin wins against an antagonist team—especially a team with a GOM member. Each such match is characterized by a special challenge the antagonist team presents to Kuroko and his friends that they must overcome in order to win and thus assert the validity of their values. For example, Seirin has faced off against teams with super-tall players; players who cheat; players who can make three-pointers or trick shots from very long distances; etc. There are two significant matches in which foreignness is presented as a special challenge: the Seirin vs. Shinkyo match, in which the opposing team Shinkyo has a long limbed international exchange student from Senegal; and the Vorpal Swords vs. Jabberwock match, in which the Jabberwock team is a visiting American streetball team. These two matches extend the hard-work theme into
stereotype-debunking territory by having their foreign antagonists insult and belittle Japanese basketball and Japanese basketball players, only for the Japanese protagonists to valiantly defeat them in the end. I will be discussing how the drama of Kuroko and his teammates’ response to these antagonists and their dismantling of negative stereotypes about Japanese people has as much to do with race as it does with nationality, and how it then plays into patterns 2 and 3.

*Kuroko* and Pattern 2: Black Villains as “Foreign” Delinquents

Again, *Kuroko*’s plot and character motivations all revolve around the internationally popular sport, basketball, of which many professionals are African American. *Kuroko* is one of those few manga/anime series that actually takes real-life racial diversity into account when depicting its global element—famous black athletes such as golfer Tiger Woods and basketball player Shaq O’Neal, for example, are occasionally name-dropped in the story, and scenes of neighborhood basketball games featured during Kagami’s recollections of his time growing up in LA display believable proportions of white-to-non-white civilians and streetballers. However, the black people who actually play active roles in the story tend to have characterizations that are consistent with typical anti-black stereotypes, e.g. penchants for violence and/or laziness. In addition, the plot developments that these characters serve to advance are further reminiscent of concepts such as color-blind meritocracy as a cover for racism, and the interplay between the Asian American model minority myth and the black underclass myth that Claire Jean Kim describes as a component of her racial triangulation theory. The following subsections examine these characters’ characterizations and plot developments in detail.
Papa Mbaye Siki: “Having a Foreign Student Isn’t Fair”

The Shinkyo match is significant to our main characters in Seirin because it’s their first official match of the year and thus the first step in their journey to reach nationals. It’s also the first official match since first-years and protagonists Kuroko and Kagami joined the team, and the first official match covered in play-by-play detail in the series. Although the match is significant because of all these firsts, it should be noted that this significance is still lighter in weight compared to that of most future featured matches, in which nearly all of the opposing teams have players who are aiming not only to win but also to settle personal scores with individuals from Seirin (e.g. the GOM’s conflict with each other and with Kuroko). These matches are the ones that get more screen time and that feature characters who reappear periodically throughout the show, even when they’re not participating in the given match. In contrast, after this match, the Shinkyo team does not appear again (which concludes in just a scant few episodes) until nearly the conclusion of the main series, when they are briefly seen spectating Seirin’s climactic battle against the team with the fifth and last GOM member Kuroko has sworn to defeat. In any case, the Seirin vs. Shinkyo match adheres to the aforementioned plot formula in which victory over the opposing team requires Seirin to overcome a special challenge. For this match, that challenge is embodied by a single character, Papa Mbaye Siki. Papa’s character, coupled with the other circumstances of this match, is one illustration of how Kuroko’s Basketball satisfies the criteria for Pattern 2.

Papa is the first black character to be featured in Kuroko’s Basketball and the only black character to appear in the main series (the other black characters appear only in the short sequel, Last Game). His personality and behavior may play into black stereotypes of laziness and lack of initiative, and his role in Seirin’s/Kuroko’s quest to validate their modus operandi of hard work
over reliance on natural ability is further reminiscent of “colorblind” advocations for meritocracy. Papa is first introduced to Seirin via a headshot picture on their coach Riko’s flip phone. Riko is warning the team that they should approach their first match with extra caution because of this individual player, a foreign exchange student from Senegal. She describes his basketball-advantageous physical features—he’s long limbed and stands at 200 cm (six feet, seven inches), for example. Seirin’s responses include an incredulous “Can they do this?” and “Sorry, but where’s Senegal?” Kagami is one of the few unperturbed—“He’s just big,” he says. His calmness can perhaps be attributed to the fact that he himself is Seirin’s tallest player at 190 cm (6’3), and later on in the series we see that he had plenty of opportunities to play against players taller than him during his childhood in LA. The team’s reactions suggest that Seirin’s overall hangup over Papa’s appearance is closely tied with their awareness of his foreignness. In fact, shortly after these remarks are made, Riko goes on to explain that “More and more schools are inviting students from abroad to increase their power… Shinkyo High was only a middle tier school until last year, but with the addition of a single foreign player, they’ve become a completely different team.” And thus, before the audience or the Seirin players even get the chance to meet him in person, a few main points are established about Papa: his height and his foreignness, and how the connection between the two has contributed to his host team’s success and his upcoming opponents’ pre-game anxieties.

Papa’s role as an antagonist is enhanced by his flippancy and his disrespect for Japanese basketball and Japanese basketball players. He makes his first official appearance by being late and running into the frame of the main gym doors during the middle of warm ups. His response to this blooper is “Everything is short in Japan.” And when Shinkyo’s captain Tanimura provoke Seirin by expressing incredulity that they were able to beat Kaijo, a team with GOM
member Kise, in a practice match a few episodes earlier, Papa follows up with “The Generation of Miracles lost? They brought me here to beat them. I’m disappointed they’re so weak.” The match has not even started, yet the only two Shinkyo characters with speaking roles seem absolutely certain that their victory is predetermined due to the presence of Papa—the big foreigner—on their team. Just as the Generation of Miracles are marked with a fancy title to broadcast their undeniable strength, Papa is marked by his foreignness and his height, which are consistently treated as interchangeable or inseparable features. The fact that Papa was “brought” to Shinkyo specifically as a weapon against the GOM means that Papa’s height and foreignness alone, both relatively static features, are perceived to be enough to measure up to the skill, technique, and experience of a GOM player.

Right after these remarks are made, Papa bumps into a second obstruction—this time it’s Kuroko, who stands at 168 cm (5’6). Papa looks down, picks Kuroko up by the armpits without hesitation, and holds him out at eye level: “No, little boy. Children shouldn’t be on the court.” A convenient breeze slightly lifts Kuroko’s outer t-shirt such that his underlying Seirin jersey reveals to Papa that he is in fact a player. Papa puts him down, then “hmphs” derisively and says, “They lost to a child like him? Are all the Generation of Miracles children?” as he walks away.

Papa’s reaction to Kuroko’s smallness manifests as infantilization, a point that is emphasized multiple times before and during the match—for example, back when Riko was first showing Seirin Papa’s picture, Kuroko rechristens Papa “Dad” (as a pun off his first name) when the team is at a loss as to how to correctly pronounce Papa’s name. The inside joke, when combined with Papa’s perception that Japanese basketball players are like children and thus aren’t worth his time, produces a rebuttal of the foreign paternalism that Japanese basketball players apparently face.
Certain that he’ll win, Papa is completely unmotivated to put any more effort necessary for winning than he needs to. As the starters line up for the tip-off, Papa is seen staring off into another corner of the gym—he even casually puts a hand behind his head and yawns openly. The first-year Seirin bench warmers initially also seem certain that a team with someone like Papa will win—one says “This is ridiculous,” and another follows up with “Having a foreign student isn’t fair.” The latter remark in particular is practically a suggestion that every foreign person in the world is taller than a Japanese person and thus a better basketball player. In fact, Papa is not even the tallest opponent to be featured in the series—one of the GOM players that Kuroko and co. defeat later on in the series, Murasakibara, is 208 cm (6’10), and his team Yousen includes two other players—both East Asian—who are Papa’s height or taller. The Yousen match will be discussed in more detail later.

The link between foreignness and height continues in an exchange between Tanimura and Seirin’s captain, Hyuga. Tanimura says to him, “Are you guys one of those hard-working teams? . . . We see a lot of those. Guys saying it’s not fair we’ve got a foreign player. We’re not breaking any rules… What’s wrong with getting strong players? It’s real easy. All we have to do is pass the ball to him and we can’t help but score.” His remark once again illuminates the direct equivalence being established between “strong” and “foreign.” But, as Shinkyo will realize by the conclusion of the match, the reality is that all Papa has is his height and his foreignness—Seirin is easily able to overcome Shinkyo through their superior skill, experience, and intra-team communication.

Papa is not humbled by his loss to Seirin. In his last interaction with Seirin before he disappears for most of the series, he approaches Kagami, supposedly with the intent to make amends: “I lost. Please play hard for me in your next game.” This is something a good sport
would say to his opponent after a loss. Kagami is surprised but heartened, but Papa then immediately breaks into a smile and changes his tune: “I mean, you’re an idiot! An idiot!” Tanimura has to drag Papa away as he waves his hands comically and continues his insults (“You moron, I won’t lose next time!”). In this way, it becomes clear that “Dad” was the real child this whole time, and seemingly incapable of positively changing his behavior even after being disciplined.

Papa’s presentation demonstrates pattern 2. Papa is the only black character featured in the main series (the others are introduced in the short, post-GOM-defeat sequel). His only active participation in the plot is when he is first introduced, in a match with Seirin that concludes in just a few episodes. Papa’s personality and his behavior potentially fulfill black stereotypes of being lazy and lacking initiative—like when he shows up late and quickly loses motivation to expend more effort than what he thinks will be necessary to defeat Seirin’s “children.” His and his team’s rote reliance on his static physical advantage of height also emphasizes this. Again, one of the series’ overarching main themes is the importance and value of hard work, and the fact that Papa is black, an antagonist, eschews hard work in favor of relying on what he was born with, and is finally defeated by hard-working Asians may carry negative, anti-black racial implications. For a Western or American viewer, the situation can convey special meaning that recalls the faulty “colorblind” reasoning that blacks are the underclass instead of the model minority, because unlike Asians they refuse to pull themselves up by the bootstraps.

Of course, the other characters’ reactions to Papa’s physical and personality characteristics are explicitly expressed in terms of nationality, never race. Plus, Papa is not even American, so applying American-centric racial theory may seem like a stretch. But the characters’ repeated references to his height and his foreignness as a single package deal come
off as strange, especially since the conclusion of the match indicates that Papa’s height was the only potential obstacle for Seirin’s victory. The much more minor threat manifested from his foreignness—that is, his disrespect for Japanese players—did not diminish Seirin’s victory even though they apparently failed to fix his attitude. That is not to say that Papa’s preconceptions were irrelevant to this storyline—the implementation of the match serves the purpose of debunking the suggestion that all foreigners are unbeatable because they’re all just so tall. The match is the first of many in which the underdog team Seirin proves to snooty opponents that their hard work can measure up to and overcome their opponents’ “natural” talents and physical advantages. So the Shinkyo match is in line with the overall series’ central themes—it’s explicitly the titular Kuroko’s mission to show his opponents, especially his ex-middle-school-teammates, that hard work (among other ideals, such as teamwork and sportsmanship) is superior to their reliance on individual play and inborn talents/physical advantages. In the case of the Seirin/Shinkyo match, foreignness—or, rather, the characters’ interpretation of Papa’s brand of foreignness—was featured as one of the innate and static advantages that can be defeated by the dynamic advantages of experience and hard work.

But is Papa’s role in the story as one of many antagonists who are averse to the idea of hard work and sportsmanship simply about foreignness? I argue no—perceptions of race are definitely at play here too. I mentioned that Papa’s personality and character background may reflect anti-black stereotypes, but we can also compare the Shinkyo-Seirin match with two other matches in which Seirin defeats teams that have big and foreign players: the Seirin vs. Yosen match that takes place later on in the main series, and the Vorpal Swords vs. Jabberwock match featured in the short sequel.
Liu Wei: He’s Just Big

Yousen High School’s team’s number one ace is GOM member Murasakibara Atsushi, who staunchly relies on his size and natural strength when playing basketball, and who sees no point in attending practice since he always wins anyway. He has no love for the sport and only plays because he enjoys being good at it. The match is significant to the overarching storyline for a few reasons—the primary reason is because Murasakibara is a GOM member, so the match with Yousen is another opportunity for Kuroko and Seirin to bring down the GOM and their blind belief in natural ability. Another reason is the introduction of two new characters, both from Kagami’s past: Himuro Tatsuya, the first and best friend he made during his childhood in LA, and Alex Garcia, their American ex-WNBA basketball mentor. Kagami and Himuro had had a falling out prior to Kagami’s return to Japan, so the Yousen match is a stage for them to settle their differences. Alex comes to Japan to spectate her former disciples’ match. In addition to Kuroko and Kagami’s interpersonal conflicts, the special challenge that the Seirin team must overcome is Yousen’s collective stature—three of their starters are at or over 200 cm: Murasakibara is the tallest at 208 cm (6’10”), team captain Okamura is exactly 200 cm (6’7”), and small forward Liu Wei is 203 cm (6’8”).

Once again, Seirin is intimidated by their opponents’ height—Hyuga exclaims to himself that Murasakibara in particular “makes Shinkyo’s Papa look cute.” Papa is 200 cm, so he is the same height as Okamura and shorter than Murasakibara and Liu Wei. Liu Wei in particular shares another trait with Papa besides similar stature—he too is a foreign exchange student, from China. However, Liu Wei’s foreignness is never alluded to or discussed between any of the characters during the Yousen match. This is in stark difference with the Shinkyo match, in which Papa’s foreignness—in tangent with his height—was the centerpiece of the match. From Seirin’s
point of view, Yousen is clearly more formidable than Shinkyo, both in terms of power and in
terms of potential for further interpersonal conflict between certain players: again, Yousen has
three Papa-sized players, a GOM member, and the formidable Himuro, whose skill is noted by
other characters to be almost GOM-level. As an aside, recall that Kagami has also been
described as on par with the GOM. Although Seirin knows about Himuro and Kagami’s shared
formative years in America, their “returnee” foreignness also goes uncredited during the match.
So between two matches that both feature opponents’ height advantages and that both feature
foreign/foreign-influenced characters, why is foreignness only discussed in Papa’s match?

Both the audience’s and the characters’ perception of “foreignness” may be shaped by the
nature of the foreignness being presented, e.g. Papa’s Senegalese nationality may invoke
different imagery than Liu Wei’s. For example, recall that one Seirin member wasn’t even sure
where Senegal was, and none of the players had any idea on how to pronounce Papa’s name. On
the other hand, Liu Wei is from China. One would expect that these Japanese students probably
know more about China than they know about Senegal—thus Liu Wei may seem less foreign
compared to Papa just because he is of a nationality the characters are geographically closer to.
However, I posit that race and ethnicity are the more significant factors which shape the
characters’ perception of how foreign a given character is; that is, “foreign” isn’t a one-time
static label that carries the same weight for any character of any non-Japanese nationality. The
Seirin kids made a bigger deal about Papa’s presence on the Shinkyo team because they saw his
picture and recalled a stereotypical association between black people and inherent aptitude for
basketball. This could be one of the reasons why Kagami was one of the few nonplussed Seirin
members, who simply reacts to Papa’s picture with a “he’s just big” comment. Not only is
Kagami used to playing people as tall or taller than him because of his time in LA, he’s also used
to playing with and against players who are black or of other non-Japanese ethnic backgrounds. We see this in multiple flashbacks when Kagami recounts his time spent in LA playing streetball with Himuro and various groups of diverse kids. This also explains why the other Seirin characters and the Shinkyo captain refer to Papa’s height and foreignness as a single advantage rather than two distinct ones; they discuss Papa’s height and foreignness as though the former automatically comes packaged with the latter. But it clearly doesn’t, because we have a character from China who is even taller than Papa. Since there’s no relevant racial stereotype to apply, Seirin discuss their difficulties combating Yousen’s collective height without referring to or complaining about Liu Wei’s foreignness. In summary, Liu Wei’s foreignness is not held against him because Seirin’s original aversion to Papa isn’t nationality-based, it’s race-based; Liu Wei isn’t considered to be a foreign threat because he’s East Asian. In the words of Kagami, “He’s just big.”

In fact, the characteristics of the Yousen team is an opportunity to directly counter the stereotype that Japanese people/Japanese basketball players are small/short, a belief that Papa voiced in his trash talk with Seirin. If we combine this conclusion with the race-over-nationality hypothesis presented above, we can conclude further that the inclusion of a Chinese exchange student on the Yousen team was intentional, and that the actual stereotypes being debunked here isn’t nationality based but race based—that is, by having one super-tall ethnically Asian team lose to a not-as-tall ethnically Asian team, the double messages of “Asians can be as tall as ‘foreigners’” and “size doesn’t have to matter,” are effectively conveyed. An examination of the Jabberwock vs. Vorpal Swords match will further illustrate how Kuroko’s critique of foreign dismissal of Asian athleticism carries racial implications.
Vorpal Swords vs. Jabberwock

The Vorpal Swords vs. Jabberwock is the focal point of Kuroko’s short movie sequel, Last Game. This sequel takes place after the events of the main series. Third-year (senior) characters have graduated, with many now in university, and Kuroko is once again on good terms with the Generation of Miracles. Kagami and various other characters from Seirin and the GOM’s teams look forward to watching a live broadcast of an exclusive, highly anticipated streetball tournament happening locally for which a famous American streetball team, Jabberwock, has been invited to come compete. They witness Jabberwock brutally destroying home team Strky, as well as the tirade the captain goes on afterwards in which he viciously disparages the caliber of Japanese basketball. Kagami and the other characters watching are especially incensed since the home team that was humiliated is made up of graduated third-years from Seirin and each of the GOM schools. Coach Riko’s father, Kagetora, a sports professional who is serving as Jabberwock’s host and translator, arranges for a revenge match to happen one week later. He recruits Kuroko, Kagami, and the Generation of Miracles to form the Vorpal Swords team. As with every match featuring villainous opponents, it’s a tough and close battle, but the Vorpal Swords eventually and dramatically succeed in defeating Jabberwock. The events surrounding this match are significant with respect to Kuroko’s further implementation of pattern 2. For the first time since the Shinkyo match, the special challenge that Kuroko and his friends must overcome in order to assert their values is a foreign threat, one that directly attacks the validity of Japanese basketball and, once again by extension, Asian athleticism.

Collectively, the Jabberwock team, which has both white and black starters and reserve players, can be characterized as irresponsible, disrespectful/rude, egotistical, delinquent-like, etc. Throughout the Strky match, starters Nick (white), Allen (black) and Zack (black) physically
humiliate the Strky players by bouncing the ball off their heads and faces, putting their fingers on their foreheads to keep them at bay, and over-excessively gloating over steals. That same night, the whole team goes to a club on Kagetora’s dime and are terrible guests—they’re rowdy, loud, and their tables are littered with overturned glasses, food scraps, and spilled drinks. Other guests and the wait staff keep their distance and look intimidated.

Their status as bad guys is further emphasized through visual character design—they’re big, are noted by the Strky players to look older than they actually are, and almost all of them have tattoos and/or piercings. In fact, upon the big reveal of their complete appearances at the start of the Strky match, the camera focuses on just parts of the starters’ bodies as they walk onto the court. For example, in one shot we see a player chewing gum with his mouth open, with only the lower half of his face visible, and we see that he has a small lip piercing and at least two additional ear piercings. There’s also a shot of another player’s torso such that we can’t see his face, but we can see the tattoos that cover his left arm. This incremental presentation serves to suggest Jabberwock’s collective external delinquency and foreshadow their ensuing delinquent behavior.

Two of the Jabberwock starters in particular are allocated more speaking lines and more characterization by the narrative: the captain, Nash Gold Jr., who is white, and the ace, Jason Silver, who is black. Having two characters out of a pool of five or more characters be the representative voice of a rival team is something that *Kuroko* implements frequently—for example, only team captain Tanimura and ace Papa had speaking lines in the Shinkyo match, and GOM member Murasakibara and Kagami’s old frenemy Himuro had the most dialogue in the Yousen match. Nash and Jason’s complementary surnames further emphasize their significance as characters. The reserve players don’t have dialogue and the other three starters don’t have
many lines. Although the white and black players of Jabberwock seem equally evil at first
glance, a closer examination of the differences between Nash and Jason’s roles and
characterizations as antagonists may suggest reliance on racial stereotypes. Both characters
express anti-Asian racism via infantilization and dehumanization (comparing the Japanese
characters to monkeys).

The Strky players’ incredulity about how the Jabberwock players are apparently the same
age as them is revealed to be a 2-way street, especially on Jason’s part, who is the largest person
on the Jabberwock team. Jason insults the Vorpal Swords by comparing them (especially
Kuroko, who is the shortest person on the makeshift team and one of the shorter players featured
throughout the main series) to children. When Kuroko follows Kagetora to the club that
Jabberwock is partying at and tries to chastise them about their attitude, Jason makes a joke
about how he should take his business to an orphanage, and another joke about how his mother
must be worried since it is getting late. He even tries to pat his head. On the day of the revenge
match, Jason asks the Vorpal Swords if they brought diapers.

Nash goes straight for animal comparisons. Right after Strky’s defeat, Nash is
approached first by Strky player Kasamatsu, who wants a handshake, then by the tournament’s
MC, who is excited about Jabberwock’s performance and wants a statement. Nash goes on a
tirade attacking the caliber of Japanese basketball. He calls the players “monkeys” and says that
monkeys who attempt to play basketball should kill themselves. His usage of the insult
“monkeys” can easily be construed as deliberately racist, although if this is the case, it comes
across as ironic since three of his closest comrades are black, and ape comparisons have
historically been used against black people to justify supposed evolutionary inferiority.
Furthermore, his suggestion that Japanese players/the Strky players should kill themselves may
also be loaded; Western popularization of suicide concepts from Japan might qualify this as a customized insult. After his speech, Nash spits on Kasamatsu’s still-outstretched hand. Nash also calls Kuroko a monkey to his face during the confrontation scene in the club, and kicks him in the stomach with enough force to knock him down. Nash continues to refer to his Japanese opponents as monkeys during the Vorpal Swords revenge match as well.

Clearly, both Nash and Jason represent the foreign paternalistic attitudes that Kuroko seeks to decry. Nash is arguably even eviler than Jason because he uses physical violence against the series’s beloved star Kuroko. In general, however, their antagonism manifests differently in ways that suggest racial stereotype and bias. Jason is black—he’s also big and scary. He’s more outwardly hostile compared to Nash, and has a quicker and hotter temper. And he only defers to the authority of one character, Nash. One of the Vorpal Swords, Midorima, is intimidated when he first discovers this—he concludes to himself that Nash’s ability to placate and direct Jason, who is the biggest and strongest player and tries to solve all his problems on the court with brute force, is evidence of Nash’s formidable, intellectually-based leadership skills.

While other characters can tell that Jason is bad news at a glance (even his own teammates, with the exception of Nash, are shown to be afraid of him, especially when he is angry), Nash’s external persona is one of respectability. The first time we see him—when Jabberwock touches down in a Japanese airport—he is clearly the best dressed with a nice white coat, a collared shirt that covers most of his tattoo, and a knotted scarf. The rest of the Jabberwock players are all in streetwear. During the Strky game, he and Jason stay out of frame while the other three starters openly mock the Strky players; the audience only becomes aware of Nash’s true villainy after the game’s conclusion when he opens his mouth to make his speech. Although he is not the biggest or most powerful player on the team, he is the smartest and is thus
the leader and most respected person on the team. This is revealed in the Vorpal Swords match, in which the climax of the match features Nash going head to head with his Vorpal Swords good-guy counterpart—Akashi, the smartest player and de facto leader of both the Vorpal Swords and the GOM. It’s also no coincidence that Midorima is the one who first notices Nash’s intelligence and leadership skills, as Midorima is also a smart character who values the power of intellect.

In conclusion, villainy is manifested differently for this movie’s two main antagonists in ways that suggest stereotyping, especially at Jason’s expense. Nash, due to his whiteness, is afforded more flexibility in his character and in what the audience and other characters may initially expect of him; his villainy becomes a surprise. Jason is relegated to the role of satisfying the anti-black stereotypes of being angry, threatening, hypermasculine, and delinquent-like, subservient to whiteness (Nash), and unintelligent (mostly implied by his strong preference for action over contemplation, and especially in comparison to the intellect of his partner, Nash, who is responsible for the team’s game strategies). Both brands of villainy are squashed by a joint effort between Kuroko, Kagami, and the GOM, thus rendering Jabberwock’s racially suggestive insults moot. In this way, the Japanese characters assert their superiority over a collective foreign enemy, in this case Western and American. The enemy is also white and black, and while these two camps demonstrate the same level of evilness, the white camp’s level of evilness is of a higher class than that of the black camp’s. In this way a hierarchy between the races of the characters of Kuroko is initially suggested, where Japanese and East Asians are higher ranked than white foreigners, who are in turn superior to black foreigners. This hierarchy is further acknowledged and complicated by a few other characters from the main series, one white and
two ethnically Japanese but potentially black-coded. These characters’ designs, roles, and how they demonstrate *Kuroko*’s fulfillment of Pattern 3 is discussed in the following section.

*Kuroko* and Pattern 3: Blackness as an Overt Marker of Villainy

There are two *Kuroko* characters, Aomine Daiki and Haizaki Shougo who are ethnically Japanese but are potentially black-coded due to both visual and nonvisual signifiers. Aomine has noticeably darker skin compared to most other characters, and other characters even point this out to him on occasion—his childhood friend/high school team manager, for example, calls him a *ganguro* when they get into a big argument. Haizaki, on the other hand, is pale-skinned but sports cornrows, a traditionally African hairstyle. Aomine and Haizaki have many characteristics in common in addition to being former teammates on the Teiko middle school basketball team, such as penchants for violence, rudeness, and other forms of delinquency such as lateness and truancy for both class and practice. The execution of these two characters, when taken together with the execution of the non-Japanese darker-skinned characters of the show indicates that the series may use blackness as a marker of villainy. Conversely, white characters are granted benefit of the doubt when it comes to their potential for antagonism.

*Aomine as a black-coded redemptive antagonist*

Like the other members of the GOM, Aomine is initially presented as an antagonist. Even among the GOM, he is an especially significant antagonist due to his status as the “strongest” player among the GOM, his ex-friendship with Kuroko, and his dramatic transformation of values and personality while at Teiko. The flowering of Aomine’s basketball super-strength in middle school kickstarted the rest of the GOM’s rapid growth, which in turn eventually pointed them towards the conclusion that the means don’t matter as long as victory is the ends. Aomine
in particular, after witnessing the dwindling motivation of the disheartened opponents he would crush over and over again, began to believe that effort and ambition don’t matter in the face of overwhelming natural talent. Since Aomine was formerly Kuroko’s best friend as well as the first GOM member to question and reject Kuroko’s values, Aomine is the poster boy for Kuroko’s anti-GOM crusade, and thus their matches feel especially high-stakes. Aomine’s importance in the story is further compounded by the fact that Seirin actually loses their first match against Touou—this is the first and only time that Seirin loses an official match to a GOM team on their first try. Aomine is a foil to Kuroko beyond their conflicting values as well—at Teiko, they were known as the light and shadow of the team because of the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it way that Kuroko would support Aomine, an obviously brilliant player, by passing from the shadows. Even their character designs reflect this relationship and their oppositeness—Kuroko is very pale while Aomine is dark; Kuroko has powder blue hair while Aomine has dark blue hair; they also have a significant 24 cm (10 in.) height difference between them.

Aomine’s darker skin is possibly an intentional marker of his character and character arc. He is one of the most outwardly hostile GOM members prior to defeat at Seirin’s hands, as well as the epitome of the GOM’s fixation on individual skill and the staticness of ability. Unsurprisingly, despite being the team’s ace, Aomine is not particularly popular at Touou because of his bad behavior and arrogant attitude. He frequently skips both class and practice, and shows up to matches late, including his matches against Kuroko. Aomine also has no qualms expressing himself through violence, even with his own teammates. In the episode that he is officially introduced, he gets into an argument with Touou starter and upperclassman Wakamatsu that is settled after Aomine kicks Wakamatsu in the stomach and nonchalantly and unapologetically breaks a basketball hoop through the sheer force of a dunk. Aomine also
deployed violence in ways that actually sheds light on his redemptive qualities of love and loyalty for his friends/ex-friends—after Seirin first loses to Touou, for example, Aomine slams a benchwarmer teammate against a locker when he starts badmouthing Kuroko’s performance. Another notable instance involves Haizaki—Aomine knocks him out cold when Haizaki refuses to leave GOM member Kise alone.

To recap, the only black or brown characters to have roles in the series are Papa the Senegalese exchange student, and members of the American Jabberwock team, most notably Jason, who only make their appearance after the conclusion of the main series after Kuroko and Seirin have defeated the GOM. Aomine shares the following characteristics with these characters: rudeness, an intimidating demeanor (in Papa’s case his intimidation factor is more of a perception created by Seirin rather than rooted in reality), “super strength,” both on and off the court, overconfidence in his skill. Just like Papa and Jason, he is also an antagonist with a mentality that conflicts with protagonist Kuroko’s idealistic worldview. There is only one other character with a skin color darker than the rest of the casts’ besides Aomine: Eikichi, a starter on the Rakuzan team, which is the last and most formidable GOM team that Kuroko and his friends defeat at the end of the series. Eikichi is a large man with a hairstyle that might be African American. He loves to eat and proclaims himself as a muscle maniac and shows preference for brute forcing his way out of challenges on the force (e.g. his one-on-one confrontations with Kiyoshi). So he too shares traits with Aomine, Jabberwock and Papa in that he has a kind of super strength simply by association with the last-boss GOM member, Akashi, and also by his muscle power and his reliance on his muscle power. His values are also aligned with Akashi’s so he is an antagonist not just by circumstance but also by mentality/creed. Aomine and Eikichi are different than the foreign characters of Papa and Jabberwock in that they are GOM members or
are close teammates with a GOM member. The audience can expect from the beginning that
Kuroko and co. will defeat all the GOM teams by the end of the series since that is the point of
the story. By the time that Aomine is introduced, the audience can also reasonably expect that
Kuroko’s relationship with each of the GOM members will also be reconciled after each defeat
since that is what happened with the two GOM members that Kuroko defeated prior to facing off
with Aomine. These two characters’ skin color may be a visual reflection of their character. This
reflection can be interpreted as being consistent with black stereotypes. But neither are actually
black. Thus they are redeemed as characters immediately after their respective defeats. Aomine
returns to being Kuroko’s friend, and even coaches him a little in preparation for his next big
match. Akashi does the same after his defeat, so his teammates naturally follow. Pattern 3 at this
point is visible. All the dark-skinned characters start out as antagonists. There are no dark
skinned characters who start out as a supporter of Kuroko and Seirin and remain a supporter until
the conclusion of the series. This coding actually goes beyond skin color and into “blackness,”
specifically as we will see in the next section about Haizaki, who has very light skin yet is also
potentially black coded.

*Haizaki as an unredemptive black-coded antagonist*

Haizaki is not one of Seirin’s opponents, but his character arc does further demonstrate
the validity of Kuroko’s values and the series’s ongoing theme about how unsportsmanlike
behavior merits eventual defeat. Haizaki is first introduced shortly after Seirin defeats Yousen,
between the tail end of the second season and the beginning of the third/final season. Himuro and
his mentor Alex Garcia are outside the stadium reflecting on the game when Haizaki approaches
Alex and tries to hit on her. He does this crudely:

Alex: (With hostility) Who are you?

Haizaki: So you can talk.

Haizaki invades Alex’s private space—he gets in real close and leans down so that they’re eye to eye. He asks her for her number and invites her to go out with him. He suddenly moves to put an arm around her—Alex immediately exclaims “don’t be ridiculous! Don’t casually touch me!” and pushes him away. Haizaki immediately looks angry. When Himuro tries to intervene, Haizaki recognizes him as a Yousen starter and says “you really do look like a loser up close.” Then Haizaki tries to punch him. Himuro is surprised that a competing athlete would be willing to start a fight and risk consequences such as disqualification. Kagami, who was looking for Himuro, arrives on the scene just in time to witness a winded Himuro on his knees and Haizaki holding Alex up by her throat. Alex breaks loose by swinging a leg towards Haizaki, who lets go to dodge with a remark of “How scary. That’s not how a woman kicks.” GOM member Kise shows up at that moment and manages to defuse the situation by explaining that a physical fight would potentially interfere with his opportunity to formally battle Haizaki on the court. Fortunately, Haizaki agrees and walks away.

Haizaki’s relationship with his team is even worse than Aomine’s. Haizaki’s teammates don’t like him but feel that they have no choice but to go along with whatever he says since he’s the primary strength of the team. Haizaki openly disrespects his teammates, and during his game against Kise, he even slaps one of his upperclassman in full view of the entire stadium when he fails to follow Haizaki’s instructions. Various spectators do not fail to comment on how despicable he is.

Haizaki was a troublemaker during the GOM’s middle school years as well. It is revealed through flashbacks preceding the game against Kise that Haizaki used to be the fifth starter on
the Teiko basketball team, and would have had a claim to the Generation of Miracles name if he had stayed. However, since his behavior was problematic for the rest of the team (random fights, various interpersonal conflicts with then-newbie Kise, rudeness to teammates, etc.), Akashi forced him to quit the club. Kise describes Haizaki as the most dangerous man to be on the Teiko team. It is notable that in middle school, Haizaki’s hair was unstyled. He has cornrows in high school though. Out of all the characters who we see middle school scenes of, Haizaki’s transformation is the most obvious just because of his hair. It reflects the upgrade in his delinquency.

Haizaki’s special character quirk both in daily life and on the court is stealing. He casually nabs pieces of food from teammates, tries to steal a girlfriend from Kise, and his specialty move on the court is the copying of other players’ special moves such that the original players can no longer perform them. Haizaki does not hesitate to steal moves from his own teammates.

Haizaki’s hair is definitely an indication of delinquency, which gets worse with time. The fact that it is a black hairstyle, combined with his other characteristics of violence, uncontrollable temper, disrespect, misogyny, and theft, align with the hypothesis that actual blackness is being used to indicate blackness of heart. Unlike the other Teiko grads, Haizaki is not redeemed at the end of his arc. His last scene is when he wakes up after getting his lights punched out by Aomine, then throwing away his basketball shoes, a suggestion that he quits basketball a second time since he also threw away his shoes in middle school shortly before quitting at Teiko.
White Characters: Benefit of the Doubt/Further Comparisons between Kuroko’s International Casts

There are a total of four black characters featured in *Kuroko*: Papa from the main series, and the three Jabberwock starters in the sequel movie, of which ace player Jason is one of two primary villains. There are a total of three white characters featured in *Kuroko*: Alex from the main series and the two Jabberwock starters in the sequel movie, of which captain Nash is one of two primary villains alongside Jason. There are collective differences in characterizations between *Kuroko*’s black and white characters. Both major black characters of *Kuroko* appear as antagonists and are characterized by racial stereotypes, both in appearance and personality—they both are of sizes and builds that intimidate their opponents; Papa is lazy and rude, Jason is violent and angry; both put emphasis on natural talent rather than further development of that talent via personal effort. Neither show remorse for their unsavory actions, nor are they explicitly redeemed by good-guy characters or by the narrative at the conclusion of their arcs. The major white characters of *Kuroko*, on the other hand, are given more leeway in terms of predictable characterization. This of course is due in part to the fact that there are few “anti-white” stereotypes under which these characters can be examined—that is, it is much more typical to mark black characters as Other than it is to mark white characters as Other. It can be said that both Alex and Nash are stereotyped through their appearance—they both have blond hair, pale skin, and light-colored eyes. Nash is probably intended to be attractive in-universe—as discussed previously, he’s a much sharper dresser compared to his teammates, and his outward persona radiates coolness. The differences in Nash and Jason’s characterizations have been discussed; Nash’s external persona is one of respectability. He is Jabberwock’s brains while Jason is its brawn.
It is also possible that there are stereotypes applied to Alex’s appearance and character on the basis of her gender, race and nationality. Her first introduction is very dramatic. The team comes over to Kagami’s, who lives alone in a nice apartment, after a tough win. Seirin member Koganei is wandering towards the bathroom. When he passes by Kagami’s bedroom, there’s a big person-shaped lump under the covers. Curious, he flips the covers off to reveal Alex laying on her side facing away from the camera, topless in only her panties. There’s the sound effect of a female moan to suggest meaning to the situation. Koganei screams and runs back to the rest of the team; Alex wakes up from the ensuing commotion. She leisurely pulls on a tank top in a slow motion that exposes the bottom of her breasts as she exits Kagami’s room. When she sees Kagami, she immediately closes in for a kiss, her lips puckered comically. Kagami and co. are mortified. The team is surprised to learn that this immodestly dressed, kiss-crazed blonde woman is Alex. From the shortened form of her full name, Alexandra, they (and probably most viewers) probably assumed that Kagami and Himuro’s American mentor was a man. Alex introduces herself through ensuing dialogue with the team, and they learn that she studied Japanese in college (which explains her fluency) and that she is a prominent ex-WNBA player who had to quit due to an unspecified illness that impaired her eyesight. There’s a “gag” scene in the middle where coach Riko moves in closer to ask Alex a question; Kagami tries to warn her but it’s too late. Alex says “Japanese girls are so cute,” while putting an arm around her and kisses her on the lips too. Everyone freaks out for the second time that night. Kagami scolds Alex: “Don’t do that to everyone!” to which Alex yells back “What are you talking about? I only kiss girls and children!”

Alex’s notable characteristics manifest as a balance between her “foreign” sex appeal and her expertise in professional basketball. Beyond her “kissing bug,” she can be serious, cares
deeply for her students and their athletic careers, and obviously has a lot of professional basketball expertise—she offers detailed, expert commentary for viewers’ benefit when she spectates games just as the senior players on Seirin and other teams do. Kagami respects her greatly as his mentor, and even runs off back to LA for a few days with barely any notice to his coach to receive extra tutelage from her in preparation for Seirin’s second match against Aomine. Alex is the only foreign character who is not an antagonist and who does not act antagonistically. The closest she gets to being a threat to Kuroko and Seirin’s shared values is the day after they discover her in Kagami’s apartment—they take her to spectate a game the next day in which GOM Midorima is playing. As the game opens, she remarks “Honestly, I wasn’t expecting much from Japanese basketball. I’d better apologize for that one. They’re lacking in size and power, but their speed and strategies are excellent.” In this remark, she is aligned with the other featured foreign characters in that she assumed a lower standard of quality in Japanese basketball, but immediately her character is redeemed and she is identified as the protagonists’ ally when she subsequently shows her agreement with the series’ points that size and power are not the only two things that can win games, and thus that Japanese basketball is valid and should be taken seriously. Just like the rest of the foreign characters, she initially underestimates the ability of the GOM until she sees them in action.

Is it just happenstance that Kuroko/Seirin’s only foreign ally is white and a woman? On one hand, her character is an opportunity for “exotic” fanservice in a way that could not be achieved in the same way by a Japanese female character (for example, her strange kissing habit can be explained away by her wild American sexuality). On the other hand, her race and gender minimize any threat that Seirin would otherwise feel in regards to their values and the protection of their national pride. Since she is a woman, there is no way anyway that Alex could present as
a typical antagonist, even if she were high-school age, since her gender would prevent her from being an official opponent. Her identity also provides an opportunity for the male characters to demonstrate either their masculine-oriented valor or villainy—for example, when Haizaki gets violent with her and Kise, Kagami and Himuro subsequently intervene. In this way, the series’ black characters are hypermasculinized—they are male, large, and rely only on their bodies on not on their brains to play. White character Nash gets to be cool, smart, and a leader. Alex gets to be sexy, smart, and a damsel in distress. In this way, the series’ portrayal of foreignness is also gendered and further reveals its racialization.

Conclusion

*Kuroko’s Basketball’s* global element is basketball, it makes sense for the series to feature international/black/American characters and settings. Although *Kuroko* does not omit black characters from its global premise the way many other anime series of international flavor do, these characters often end up characterized via stereotypes and are cast as villains and/or antagonists. Although one could read the themes of *Kuroko* at face value, which posit seemingly straightforward ideals of effort, teamwork, and sportsmanship, the arena in which these values are asserted are defined along nationality in major instances throughout the series. The themes themselves, when coupled with the presence, characterization, and roles of black characters, are suggestive of anti-black prejudice rather than the broader anti-foreign sentiment that it seems to advertise on the surface. In summary, *Kuroko*, an anime/manga series with a prominent global element, demonstrates two patterns with respect to its treatment of racially-marked or coded characters: Pattern 2, in which there are black characters whose characterizations align with real life anti-black stereotypes such as “violent,” “lazy,” and “criminal/delinquent.”; and pattern 3, in which all darker-skinned characters in the series, black and ethnically Japanese alike, also
happen to have roles as antagonists. It should be further noted that the black characters of these instances are not recurring characters, and as antagonists are not shown to show remorse, nor are redeemed/forgiven by Japanese protagonists as most of the Japanese antagonists are (e.g. the GOM, who pop up periodically throughout the story even when they’re not scheduled to be Seirin’s opponents). With these patterns combined, the narrative does not just establish a structure in which Japanese basketball players prove themselves to be on par with international counterparts; it also establishes a racial hierarchy that assumes baseline equity between Japanese, East Asian, and white characters unless those individuals prove themselves unworthy otherwise, and an incorrigible inferiority of black characters.

**Case Study 2: ACCA**

*ACCA: 13-Territory Inspection Dept.* was originally a 6-volume manga serialized from 2013 through 2016; its 12-episode anime adaptation aired in 2017.

*ACCA* takes place in the fictional continent-country Dowa, which is comprised of thirteen distinct districts. Dowa and its districts are governed by both a monarchy and the independent governmental organization ACCA, which oversees public services and institutions both at national and district levels. Protagonist Jean Otus works for ACCA’s Inspection Department, which is responsible for ensuring that each district’s local ACCA branch is following protocol. The routineness of Jean’s days is disrupted when the kingdom’s sole male heir’s coming of age approaches. Prince Schwan is unpopular with the public, and unrest begins to simmer in each ACCA branch when rumors spread that Schwan intends to disband ACCA when he ascends. In response, Jean’s department instructs him to audit all thirteen branches in the span of six months to check for suspicious activity. The series follows Jean as he travels from district to district and unwittingly finds himself at the center of a national coup conspiracy that aims to protect ACCA
from Schwan. Further complications arise when it is discovered that Jean is of a royal lineage that prioritizes his right to the throne over Schwan’s.

Overview: ACCA’s Global Element and Pattern Fulfilment

The conflicts that drive ACCA’s plot stem from the domestic unrest between the thirteen districts of Dowa and rely on the story’s setting and worldbuilding. Each district is mostly self-sufficient and has a culture, landscape, and overall appearance so distinct from its neighbors that multiple characters have noted that each district is practically its own nation. Indeed, the king’s response 100 years ago to promote unity and quell fractiousness between the districts and opposition to the monarchy was to found ACCA and to formally grant each district autonomy.

The series’s worldbuilding collectively assumes Westernness and whiteness as a default, especially at a national level. Non-western cultural signifiers are mostly locally concentrated in three districts: Hare, Rokkusu, and Furawau, the latter of which seems to be the only district to feature people with noticeably browner skin. The rest of the districts’ landscapes and culture seem to inspired from specific Western locales and aesthetics, and feature residents who appear white. The following is a brief description of all thirteen districts in the approximate order that they feature on Jean’s audit:

**Badon**

Dowa’s national capital and home to ACCA’s national headquarters. Jean’s home district. It’s a generically-characterized urban area with modern amenities. When he was in high school, Jean attended a prom in which students dressed in formal wear and elected a prom king and queen. The existence of such a tradition suggests that Badon is designed to have an American city aesthetic.
Famasu

Dowa’s primary agricultural district. The landscape is peppered with fields of crops, pickup trucks, and American-style diners. Corn appears to be a major crop. The imagery easily suggests inspiration from the Midwest United States.

Jumoku

Land of the supersized. Produce is 2.5 times larger than average, and the average height of the local youth is 2.22 meters (over seven feet). It’s home to a popular fast food chain, Basswood, that features fries, burgers, and soft drinks in plastic to-go cups. They also have supermarkets with refrigerated aisles and shopping carts. The imagery of the fast food and the supermarkets paired with the concept of super-sized people and food but minus the obesity suggests inspiration from a selectively generalized American culture.

Suitsu

A district that exemplifies the dramatic gap in living style that can exist between a given district and national Dowan culture. Suitsu is clearly meant to evoke revolutionary-era France. Residents are said to be living in the past; there’s a technology ban that forbids electronics, automobiles, and more. There are horses and buggies, and the locals’ dress is also reminiscent of revolutionary France’s fashion. The deciding piece of evidence that Suitsu is inspired by France and the French Revolution is that the residents are dissatisfied with their leadership and are constantly inciting rebellions against the local government.
**Birra**

A perpetually snowy district with coniferous forests and wood cabins. The locals wear fur hats and parkas and have reindeer pull their sleighs. Going by these cues, Birra can perhaps be located as Northern European/Scandinavian or Northern Canadian. Considering the latter case, there is no indication of indigenous influence in Birra’s culture or the appearance of their people. Reindeer husbandry is practiced in Asia as well (Mongolia and China), but the phenotypes of the locals suggest “white” rather than “Asian.”

**Rokkusu**

A district personally significant to Jean due to it being the site of his parents’ death in a train accident some fifteen years ago. It is also the home district of ACCA Chief Officer Grossular, Jean’s favorite ACCA figure as well as the narrative’s initial prime suspect for antagonism prior to a certain plot twist in Episode 9. Rokkusu’s scenery is Southwest American in nature and seems to be a mashup of Wild West pop culture and Southwest Native American aesthetics.

**Hare**

The nation’s sole island district. Residents here have the longest average lifespan in the nation. They credit good food and positive attitudes as the key to their longevity. Hare’s food appears to be non-Western. Hare’s lifespan attribute, its style of food, and its status as an island suggest that is based off of Japan’s Okinawa.
**Dowa**

Home to the monarchy. It shares the same name as the nation, and is most definitely European-themed going by the castle’s design, the appearance of the cobbled streets and rustic storefronts, and the clothing that the royalty and their servants wear.

**Korore**

A district that operates on a culture of matriarchy rather than one of patriarchy or egalitarianism. Jean’s other ACCA idol and co-conspirator Director General Mauve hails from this district. Other than the women’s higher status, the rest of Korore’s landscape and culture is neutrally flavored; there are no particular cues that suggest that Korore is or is not based off a specific or generic Western culture, besides perhaps tenets of Western feminism.

**Peshi**

A district bordering the sea that centers around maritime activities. Seagulls, docks, and sailboats are prevalent in its scenery. The local ACCA officers’ uniforms are modeled after Western sailor uniforms. Rustic decorations and the technology inside the boats also suggest Western inspiration.

**Yakkara**

A glitzy district full of palm tree-lined avenues and casinos where residents love to gamble. According to the Yakkara-stationed ACCA subordinate who accompanies Jean on this leg of his audit, the residents all have a go big or go home mentality. Going by the scenery and the popularity of gambling, Yakkara is clearly modeled after the United States’ Las Vegas.
**Pranetta**

A district where everyone lives underground and only visits the surface in the evening, when it is less hot. It’s a mining district; the resources they are digging for is never named but is implied to be oil. Pranetta is possibly modeled after Australia’s Coober Pedy, which is famous for its dugout town. There are no suggestions that any of the locals of Pranetta are based off of Aboriginal people; skin color is fairly light all around, and there are no cultural cues that suggest the existence of any native culture.

**Furawau**

ACCA’s fan wiki suggests that “Owing to its masses of energy resources, architecture, the skin tone of its people, and governance, it is highly likely that Furawau is based on rich Persian Gulf monarchies in real life, such as the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, etc.” Furawau’s city skyline features buildings highly reminiscent of some of the United Arab Emirates’ most famous architecture, traditional and modern alike. Other cues include the residents’ appearance both in terms of dress and phenotype; the environment, which features expanses of sand dunes beyond Furawau’s main city; and cultural foods and artifacts such as hookahs, dates, and tea sets.

Since ACCA’s setting takes inspiration from around the world, it counts as a globally-oriented setting and thus has opportunity to feature non-white characters. Hare, Rokkusu, and Furawau have the most potential for this given the inspiration behind their settings (Southwest Native America, Japan/Okinawa/the Pacific Islands, and Persian Gulf nations, respectively). A closer examination of the execution of these three districts in comparison with how the rest of Dowa is characterized yields manifestations of Patterns 2, 3, and 4. In regards to Pattern 2, Dowa is a fictional continent-country, but characters can still be identified by race given the worldbuilding’s various cues. The most significant example of this is with Furawau, whose
residents are of an ethnicity that can easily be equated to the real world’s equivalent of Arab. Characters featured from this district go on to fulfill Arab stereotypes. ACCA’s implementation of Pattern 3 also has to do with Furawau—all of the darker-skinned characters of the series all originate from Furawau and also happen to be the most significant and dangerous antagonists of the narrative. ACCA manifestation of Pattern 4 has to do with its worldbuilding’s pursuit of a white aesthetic instead of simply a Western one, and suggests a racial hierarchy that valorizes white people and whiter-skinned people over overtly brown people, and excludes black people altogether.

ACCA and Patterns 2 and 3: The Villain as a “Graceful Black Adder”

The characterization of the character Lilium, his family, and their home district of Furawau fulfill racial/ethnic stereotypes via both plot and setting. Revelations about Lilium’s true nature and political motivation are only revealed three quarters of the way through the series, during the ninth episode. Until then, the audience only knows that he’s one of ACCA’s five Chief Officers (the highest rank in ACCA, and analogous to a prime minister capacity), he’s from Furawau, he has two brothers, and that he is charismatic and has offered main character Jean seemingly sage advice concerning the brewing coup d'état. Furawau is the last district that Jean audits, and thus its scenery and disposition is only featured for the first time late in the series at the tail end of Episode 10. As we will see, this buildup serves to emphasize the insidious, two-faced nature of ACCA’s true enemy, which turns out to be Lilium of Furawau rather than Prince Schwan of the monarchy. The methods and signifiers used to achieve this rely on imagery reminiscent of popular conceptions of the Middle East.
Characterizing Lilium

Lilium’s visual character design and the scenery he is often located in easily suggests that his background is inspired by the Middle East and Arab culture—however, when compounded with his personality, actions, motivations, antagonistic role in the story, this has negative implications in terms of race and ethnicity.

As stated previously, indications of Lilium’s insidiousness do not come to light until the ninth episode. Likewise, there is nothing suspicious or particularly distinctive about Lilium’s first appearance onscreen, when he is introduced in the first episode along with the other four Chief Officers. With regards to visual character design, his attractiveness does not differ much from the other four chief officers or the other members of the main cast. His most distinguishable feature when compared to the other characters introduced in the first episode is probably his skin color—throughout the series, only Lilium, his brothers, and most of the residents of Furawau are seen to have noticeably browner skin. Comparatively, most other characters across all the districts of Dowa have skin tones that range from very pale to tan-colored. Lilium also has the dark hair and dark eyes typical of people from his district, and he wears gold earrings.

Lilium’s appearances prior to Episode 9 present him as a dependable, wise, and cool character. His mellowness is emphasized whenever he has a disagreement with fellow Chief Officer Grossular, who has a reputation among the other Chief Officers for being cold and hard to read. The two have several disagreements in front of the other officers—it is revealed in Episode 9 that they are doing it on purpose, such that the rare occasions of their agreements will spur the other Chief Officers to jump on their bandwagon. In addition, whenever Grossular comes up in conversations that Lilium has with the other officers or with Jean, he portrays him as enigmatic to the point of being illogical or insidious. Lilium’s dialogue, appearances and
positionings so early in the series prime the viewer, who is anticipating political conflict in the series, to anticipate that Lilium will be involved in the unrest, but on the good guys’ side. Conversely, Grossular is built up as an equally important character, but one who is maliciously pulling strings behind the scenes. In addition to Lilium’s observable attitude towards Grossular, the narrative further emphasizes the suspiciousness of Grossular’s character by showing him making and receiving mysterious phone calls, and by having an especially ominous scene where he appears to assign a spy to tail Jean.

Lilium’s good-guy credit is also built up whenever he gives advice to the troubled and reluctant protagonist Jean. Prior to Episode 9, Lilium’s speculations with Jean about what’s going on with the coup and who may be responsible positions him as a minor character whose role is to guide the mild-mannered and good-natured protagonist’s way, and who responsibly uses his power and connections to achieve this for the benefit of Jean, Dowa, and ACCA. But in fact, it is revealed that Lilium was getting close to Jean to further his own machinations by nudging suspicion onto Grossular away from himself, or by strategically leaking or fabricating information about the coup to goad the usually-reluctant and neutrally-minded Jean into taking action. In fact, Lilium is how Jean first finds out that people suspect him of being an intermediary between districts for the brewing coup, since the nature of his work allows him to travel from district to district and inspect local affairs. In their brief encounters, Lilium is always quick to assure Jean that he doesn’t believe that he is involved in the coup, and tells him that he thinks Grossular started the rumors as part of his supposed plot for ACCA to have absolute power over Dowa. He beseeches Jean for his support “to preserve peace in this nation.” He provides similar lip service for the other Chief Officers once they also learn of the rumors—he insists that Jean has nothing to do with the coup and declares that “I am his ally.”
Lilium’s character setup as a concerned government official and Jean’s ally dedicated to the preservation of national order and Jean’s wellbeing is sustained for most of the series, and thus makes the reveal of his true character, motivations, and relationships all the more dramatic. He is set up this way such that neither the audience nor the characters targeted for deception are aware of it until late in the series. As stated previously, the reveal happens during Episode 9, which is titled “A Graceful Black Adder Bears His Fangs.” During this episode, the secretive Grossular finally discloses to his fellow chief officers inside information about the coup, the nature of his own supposed role in it, and his plan to have ACCA spearhead the coup for the country’s sake. He asks for their support, but remarks that he expects at least Lilium to disagree with him, since they always disagree. But Lilium does agree, which, as he predicted, surprises the others. They immediately comment on the rarity of the occasion, and agree to Grossular’s plan. Chief Officer Pine, for example, immediately agrees to cooperate with Grossular in his plan for ACCA to lead the coup because “Your [Your and Lilium’s] opinions have aligned, there is no reason to object.” Even the actual reveal is in the form of a gradual build up—shortly after this scene, Grossular and Lilium are alone together. Lilium invites Grossular to have a toast at his place. For the first time we see Lilium in his “natural habitat,” a large house of Furawauan architectural and decorative flair. He’s also out of uniform and is wearing clothing typical of Furawau. Thus he is situated in a place where there are Furawauan cultural signifiers everywhere, which the viewer may directly interpret as Middle Eastern since Jean has not introduced Furawau to the audience yet through his audit. The deception is revealed through the ensuing dialogue between Lilium and Grossular:

Lilium: It was simple, yes? This is why I opposed you at every turn before those three.

There’s no need to look at me that way now. From now on, we have to stay in agreement,
remember? We must make this an entertaining game. Otherwise, Chief Officer Spade and the others will tire of it. Ensuring Director-General Mauve stays quiet is our next step.

[He begins to fill Grossular’s champagne glass].

Grossular: That will be the most difficult challenge of all.

Lilium: We’ll manage.

Grossular: I wonder.

Lilium’s abusive nature finally becomes apparent. As soon as Grossular’s glass is full and he starts to pull away, Lilium grabs his long hair and pulls him down toward him with enough force to make Grossular step forward and spill some of his drink. Lilium grits out “You… will manage,” his neutral smile finally gone. He immediately plays the good guy again, trying to reassure him, as he lets the hair go: “She will listen to you. Am I wrong? It will be fine. Don’t worry, Chief Officer Grossular.” Finally Grossular can straighten up—we don’t see any signs of resistance, his face is turned downcast so we can’t see his expression. The scene ends as Lilium finishes with “You merely need to do as I say.”

Lilium is thus constructed as a two-faced character with a penchant for telling the victims of his manipulation that everything will be OK—he reassures Jean in a similar manner later in the series after Jean agrees to participate in the ACCA-led coup. The title of this episode, “A Graceful Black Adder Bears its Fangs,” encapsulates this. Lilium is certainly graceful, both by his behavior in the previous episodes as well as his visual character design. He is also revealed to be a snake, and a venomous one at that. The metaphor carries implications of slipperiness and deceit. The color descriptor, black, is notable as well—it emphasizes the darkness of Lilium’s character. Of course, since he is the only major character in the series to have darker skin (the other two characters with a similar skin color are his own brothers and have a much more minor
role in the story compared to Lilium), “black” can even reference his non-white origins and thus associate it closely with his villainy.

The duality of Lilium’s character is reflected in the characterizations of his family and his home district. In Episode 11, Lilium finally comes completely clean to his unequal co-conspirator Grossular by admitting that his scheming is all for the sake of the Lilium family. Interestingly, most of ACCA’s characters are only identified by their surnames; Lilium and his brothers are no exception. Their given names are never revealed—thus the association between Lilium the politically ambitious man and Lilium the politically ambitious family is seamless.

Lilium’s characterization, especially when compounded with the characterizations of his family and of Furawau, is one facet of how ACCA demonstrates Pattern 2. Assuming that Furawau is inspired by imagery from the Middle East and particularly Persian Gulf nations such as the UAE, Lilium’s corresponding characterization as a brown and ethnically Arab/Middle Eastern man checks off several stereotypical boxes, including a tendency for abuse, a greed for wealth and power, and a status as a terrorist. In regards to abuse: Lilium’s hair-pulling scene with Grossular takes place away from the public eye within the sanctum of Lilium’s private Furawauan-style home. Although he and Grossular are related only by shared governmental rank and their temporary partnership in crime, the scene evokes domestic abuse, an offense that Arab men are stereotyped as frequent perpetrators of. Concerning his characteristic of greed, Lilium’s desire to keep power, wealth, and resources within his own family and home district recalls popular images of the stereotypical Middle Eastern business tycoon or sheikh. His motivation to control the throne through the innocent Jean and his eventual decision to have Furawau secede from Dowa at the end of the series positions him both as a domestic terrorist and a foreign one.

In summary, Lilium is presented for most of the series as a sage and judicious advisor to the
protagonist, a character role that heightens his position both as a prominent political figure and as the narrative’s secret and most dangerous antagonist. It is only towards the end of the series that we are shown that his true role and relation to Jean and the others is actually one of a saboteur.

The following sections describe how the characterizations of Lilium’s family and the worldbuilding of their home district, Furawau, further contribute to each other and the manifestation of Pattern 2.

**Characterizing the Lilium Family**

Lilium tells Grossular that his motivations for preventing Schwan’s ascension, supporting Jean for the throne, and sustaining ACCA is all for the sake of the Lilium family. The only family members to be featured in the narrative—and the only other Furawauan citizens to have speaking roles—are his older and younger brother, who, as mentioned previously, are never named. The older brother is the district chief of Furawau, aka the head non-ACCA leader of the district, and the younger brother is the ACCA branch chief, aka the head of local ACCA operations in Furawau. Their roles are minor and their screen time is limited—before Furawau is formally introduced at the tail end of the tenth episode (recall there are only twelve episodes total), only the older brother has dialogue, and it is in a brief scene in which he casually discusses with Chief Officer Pastis the local affairs of his home district Suitsu, which Jean happens to be currently auditing. Other than the parallels between Suitsu’s domestic peasant uprisings and the brewing national coup, and the choice of having a Lilium be Pastis’s conversation partner as a possible hint of Furawau’s underhanded role in the coup, the scene is not overtly significant with respect to the holistic series. Although they have much less screen time and dialogue than their middle brother, the two brothers’ visibility and lines in the series further characterizes Lilium and the entirety of Furawau as an agent and den of evil, respectively.
The eldest and youngest Liliums’ screentime is mostly consolidated late in the series as things come to a head for Jean, his friends, and the coup. They are there to receive Jean at the tail-end of Episode 10, when he arrives in Furawau for his last audit. Other than a still of the Furawauan skyline in the opening credits and the imagery from Lilium’s residence in Badon, this is the first time viewers actually see Furawau. The next episode, the penultimate Episode 11, is titled “Furawau’s Flowers Smell of Malice.” Almost immediately the general idea of the brothers’ collective personality and shared values is conveyed during tea with Jean shortly after Jean’s arrival. At one point in their small talk, the brothers compare Furawau’s flowers, which are ubiquitous throughout the district and are nationally renowned, to their residents—they are cheerful and elegant. Jean makes a related segue and compliments one of their politicians, a councilor, by agreeing that the comparison suits him. He wonders if he is family? They coolly reply that he is a good subordinate and leave it at that. The exchange suggests that the Liliums distrust people outside the family. This is confirmed by Lilium in the last episode when he learns that the councilor provided testimony against him to Director General Mauve incriminating him for his plotting. The brothers seem disdainful towards outsiders in general; when the conversation strays towards Pranetta, a poor but hospitable district that Jean had audited before Furawau, one of them says that Furawau can “offer only sincere condolences to Pranetta. Had the Central Council’s budget been allocated to improve their cities” instead of being allocated towards mining efforts, “by now Pranetta would have become friendlier to live in. Perhaps it was their leaders’ arrogance.” The resulting dissonance between Jean’s pleasant experience in Pranetta and the Lilium brothers’ passive aggressive opinions is a solid moment that confirms that the Lilium family, not just Lilium, are definitely antagonists. In the same conversation, they emphasize their middle brother’s dedication to serving Dowa; the revelations of the previous two
episodes of Lilium’s true nature heightens his hypocrisy as well as his brothers’ and collective family’s.

The next time the two brothers appear is the last time, in the twelfth episode in which they are nervous and confused as they watch Jean and his true allies deviate from Lilium’s plans for the coup.

In conclusion, Lilium’s brothers, the only representatives of the family that Lilium is so devoted to seizing power for, are characterized in many of the same ways that Lilium is. They are all politicians with appropriately charming exteriors that hide their true and malevolent intentions. They share phenotypes, as one would expect from a trio of siblings, and this happens to mean that they are the only characters with speaking roles who have indisputably brown skin. They are also the only characters from Furawau with speaking roles. Taking the worldbuilding of Furawau itself into consideration, ACCA’s Pattern 2 manifests as anti-Arab/anti-Middle Eastern, and, ultimately, anti-brown. Similar to Kuroko’s implementation of Pattern 2, Lilium, his brothers, and the district of Furawau have their villainy foreshadowed by both skin color and foreignness. A discussion of how this is specifically achieved is discussed in the following section.

Characterizing Furawau and its Residents

To recapitulate, Furawau’s landscapes and residents are characterized in a way such that it is easily suggestable to the viewer that Furawau is an Arab land and that its people are Arab. In turn, these characterizations further influence the main Furawauan characters’ profiles—most notably, of course, Lilium’s—and altogether they contribute towards ACCA’s manifestation of Pattern 2.
With regards to landscape, it has already been noted that Furawau’s scenery, characteristics, and cultural artifacts evoke the Middle East. For example, Furawau’s skyline features buildings that resemble a few of the UAE’s most notable skyscrapers and architecture styles. Furawau is also supplies 90% of Dowa’s oil. There are great expanses of sand dunes beyond the skyline, and strategically placed setting indicators such as a bowl of dates, lines of palm trees, and a hookah make appearances in the backgrounds of scenes.

With regards to the Furawauan people, only the three Liliums have screen time and dialogue in the narrative. The rest of the citizenry don’t have speaking roles. However, their “look” in the background of scenes contributes to the establishment of Furawau as a Middle Eastern inspired land, as well as the eventual establishment that Furawau is a collectively evil antagonistic entity. This look is constructed via phenotype, clothing, and perhaps even gender. Going by crowd scenes, Furawauans all have dark hair and their skin color seems to range from “tan” to “brown.” A still in Episode 11, displayed as Lilium explains his true ambitions to Grossular, features a number of especially brown hands reaching skywards while the Furawauan district’s flag flutters in the background. Furawauan cultural dress appears to include long, light-colored collared shirts and headscarves. The citizens we briefly observe through Jean as he goes about his audit all appear to be men. What the audience sees of his brief tour, combined with what they have recently learned about Lilium and his brothers, solidifies the suggestion that Furawau is based on a stereotypical vision of the Arab world, e.g. a world of brown people who dress somewhat exotically and may be exclusive towards women.

Furawau is also assigned a collective personality not just by Lilium’s brothers, but also by Jean. The episode in which most of the audit takes place, Episode 11, is titled “Furawau’s Flowers Smell of Malice.” The episode is likely titled as such based on the conversation that
Jean has with the Lilium brothers over tea. The tea is apparently made from Furawau’s flowers, which Jean notes that there are plenty of in the district. One of the brothers agrees: “They are the district’s pride and joy. It is a beautiful place where many flowers bloom. The residents are just like the flowers—cheerful and elegant.” Later, as Jean gets into a taxi with Furawau’s ACCA branch manager, he confirms to himself that residents look “upbeat” and are “always smiling”—however, it’s “more of a show of bravado rather than cheer. It’s different from Pranetta.” Recall that Pranetta was the district that the Lilium brothers criticized for being an underserved and naively idealistic district, and also the district that Jean had most recently audited prior to his arrival in Furawau. The episode title is a direct metaphor for how Furawauans’ external demeanor may be beautiful, but underneath they have malicious intentions. This is the same way that Lilium and his brothers are characterized.

Out of all the districts, Furawau is thus collectively presented as Dowa’s baddest seed. Lilium, ACCA’s most dangerous individual antagonist, is not portrayed as alone in his ambition for Furawau to take control of Dowa; the established personality of Furawau and Episode 11’s image of brown hands raised in revolution cements every person who originates from there as Lilium’s co-villain. Indeed, there are no Furawauan natives who have good-guy roles in the narrative. The fact that Lilium’s goal is to seize power for his family and his district rather than for his own individual person also helps paint Furawau as a monolithic antagonist.

It’s also significant that the other antagonistic force of ACCA’s narrative is a small faction of the royal family, specifically Prince Schwan and his eldest aunt, who is the first princess. Schwan’s antagonism is rooted in his intention to disband ACCA and his worry over the sudden discovery of his two cousins Jean and Lotta, the former of whom is emerging as an automatic coup representative due to his appeal as an alternative royal heir and his status as a
humble ACCA employee. Schwan is never portrayed as a formidable villain due to his youth, brattiness, self-entitlement, and lack of practical and political experience. Most notable is his meekness towards confronting his problems head-on. For example, he refuses to interfere when his closest aide Magie warns him of the first princess’s intent to assassinate Jean and Lotta, even though he has a soft spot for the latter cousin. Additionally, during the last episode’s coup, he agrees to ACCA’s continuation without too much fuss after the coup masterminds first scare and then flatter him in front of his public coronation’s audience. His malleability is also demonstrated when he finally accepts Jean and Lotta as his family after Magie gives him the credit for preventing Lotta’s assassination. Conversely, the first princess’s antagonism is much more pronounced than Schwan’s given the extremes of her actions. However, she has less screentime than Schwan, and her actions are indirect since they are carried out by faceless and nameless minions. Her actions do not put emphasis on the corruptness of her character the way Lilium’s are on his character, mostly because she is simply not around much. Instead, her assassination attempts serve more to trigger developments for other characters. For example, her assassination attempt on Lotta allows supporting characters such as Magie, their cop friend Rail, and Jean’s boss to have a moment to shine as they intervene to save her, and her assassination attempt on Jean ends up affecting his best friend instead, and thus ends up being the last straw that motivates him into formally agreeing to cooperate in the ACCA-led coup. The first princess is redeemed by both the narrative and by her would-be victims; Lotta goes as far as sending her bread as a gift and explains to Schwan, who is surprised by the act, that she forgives her since she apologized (presumably offscreen) and because she is her mother’s sister. It’s significant with regards to Pattern 3 that both of these white antagonists are portrayed as less villainous than the Furawauan antagonists. It’s also significant that the two royals are shown to accept their
offers of redemption, while Furawau rejects any hope of reconciliation by preemptively seceding from Dowa after Jean and co. uncover and thwart Lilium’s original plans for the coup.

In conclusion, the characterization of Furawau parallels the characterization of the Liliums, and helps establish ACCA’s fulfillment of Patterns 2 and 3. Furawau’s scenery and the appearance of its locals heavily suggests worldbuilding inspiration taken from Middle Eastern locales and cultures, especially the Persian Gulf. Its flowers and people alike are attractive but secretly malevolent, just as Lilium and his brothers are. Cultural cues such as a lack of women in public and a fixation on wealth, resources, and family loyalty play into Middle Eastern/Arab stereotypes. Furawau’s dissonance with the rest of the nation also evokes anti-terrorist anxieties not unlike the nature of modern Islamophobia in the West; Furawau is Dowa’s only treacherous district and also the only noticeably brown one. The fact that Furawau is simultaneously a part of Dowa but also clearly marked as non-white distinguishes their terrorist threat as both foreign and domestic, which in turn heightens the feeling of their potential dangerousness. At the series’s conclusion, Furawau goes full-on foreign by seceding from Dowa. Dowa does not suffer at all from their absence—Pranetta has a breakthrough in their digging activities at around the same time, and replaces Furawau as Dowa’s primary energy supplier.

ACCA and Pattern 4: Dowa as a Selectively Western and White Utopia

As previously mentioned, Dowa at the national level is collectively characterized as Western. Almost all of the districts appear to be based off of real life locales or cultures, and the only districts out of the thirteen that suggest inspiration from non-Western locales or cultures are Hare, Rokkusu, and Furawau. Hare’s characterization suggests that it’s directly inspired by Japan’s Okinawa island, although a cursory glance at just the visuals for the Hare scenes could suggest to the casual Western viewer that Hare is based off of Hawaii or some other American-
associated Pacific territory, which would connote simultaneous Western and Pacific flavors. Rokkusu’s scenery seems to be lifted from Southwest America and features both American-Western and indigenous cultural cues. This section discusses the racial implications behind the characterizations of Hare and Rokkusu, and how the worldbuilding equates to a preference for a “white” aesthetic rather than just a Western one. Recall that I have defined Pattern 4 to apply to situations where there exist opportunities for non-white characters to feature in the narrative due to the setting having global elements. Indeed, ACCA takes inspiration from all around the world, but most notably from Western locales where white people—or the idea of white people—are especially visible. And even within the pool of real-life Western locales in which non-white people should make up a sizable chunk of the population, they are not particularly represented in ACCA’s overall scenery. In addition, ACCA’s conflicts are entirely domestic, and there are no visuals or dialogue that mention anything about other countries or continents existing outside of Dowa, which further emphasizes the selective whiteness of ACCA’s worldbuilding.

Although Hare and Rokkusu are a couple of the few districts that more overtly suggest predominant populations of nonwhite locals, their characterizations are still constructed such that they are eligible for association with whiteness, unlike Furawau, which is actively marked through setting and plot development as nonwhite, and irreconcilably foreign to the point that it initiates its own expulsion from the nation. Its secession from Dowa is essentially the rejection of the only clearly-brown people from the nation, thus making Dowa even whiter. Despite their inbetweenness both in terms of racial and cultural terms, Hare and Rokkusu’s people are “safe” and compatible with Dowan cultural standards because they are intentionally situated within a baseline context of whiteness and Westernness. ACCA’s resulting manifestation of Pattern 4 yields a particular racial hierarchy with three to four layers. The topmost layer consists of white
characters. The layer below that consists of in-betweener characters such as Hare and Rokkusu characters who can be concluded to be people of color, but are also compatible with whiteness via attributes such as skin color or strong elements of Westernness in their surroundings. The next layer is “brown” characters, of which Furawau’s people singularly represents as the only overtly brown district. The last layer is for characters of color who are missing altogether from the ACCA/Dowa universe, e.g. black people who don’t have their own district and aren’t shown to exist in the Western districts of Dowa either.

ACCA’s Worldbuilding: Constructing Dowa’s National Culture

Dowa is evidently large enough to have different time zones and multiple airports. If there is a “national” or shared culture between all the districts, it is probably exemplified in Badon, since it is Dowa’s governmental capital, ACCA HQ’s home base, and the protagonist’s home district. Badon is modern in the sense that it has all the technology and modern day-to-day staples typically found in any first-world Western country, including regulated automobile traffic, computers, smartphones, internet, flat screen TVs, home appliances, skyscrapers, alarm-based security systems, pubs, cute bakeries, etc. This characterization of the nation’s government’s home is sometimes at odds with how the rest of the districts are characterized, and of course some of that dissonance is strategically placed such as to generate contradiction—especially between ACCA and the monarchy—and thus motivate the direction of the coup-based plot. For example, there’s a scene in the last episode where a SWAT team armed with guns surrounds Schwan and his guards, who look justifiably nervous since all they have are swords. Another poignant detail is how Dowa contains a district governed by matriarchal standards, yet the nation’s royal family still prioritizes male heirs. The rest of ACCA’s worldbuilding-related dissonance is a side effect of the narrative’s attempt to combine old-fashioned aesthetics with
modern ones. For example, Jean’s best friend Nino, who is a professional photographer but also moonlights as a spy for two different parties, takes all of his pictures, including the ones related to his spywork, with a bulky, old-fashioned analog camera instead of his smartphone. There doesn’t seem to be much logic behind this beyond a fashionability factor.

Other unsolved mysteries involve Dowa’s languages and worldly neighbors. Concerning language, the text featured in text messages, office signs, official documents, news broadcasts, etc. appears to be romanized Japanese. However, English text makes occasional appearances as well, such as on restaurant menus, party banners, and storefront signs. It is unclear whether multiple languages exist throughout Dowa; however, the clues of English existing alongside a Westernized form of an Eastern language is an early indication of the kind of racial hierarchy that has been discussed in this document, in which East Asianness is actively conglomerated with whiteness. Compounding this is the lack of discussion around the world outside of Dowa—we are only ever shown maps of the continent and never a complete map of the world. There are no mentions of other countries even existing outside of Dowa—all of the narrative’s political strife is confined to this one wildly variegated yet consistently Western nation, up until Furawau finally leaves due to incompatibility with said Westernness. Although Dowa includes multiple districts based off of locales in which prominent racial diversity is expected, e.g. American-inspired locales, most of the main cast and the anonymous background characters who mill about in the background during Jean’s audits seem white; there are no cues to suggest otherwise. In fact, a revelation in Episode 9 implies that concepts of whiteness and ethnicity do exist in the ACCA universe. A cafe owner tells Jean’s sister Lotta that “Dowa, Korore, and Suitsu have a lot of folks with blond or blue hair.” The statement, which is presented fairly late in the series, may be surprising for viewers used to anime and manga such as Kuroko’s Basketball where
“unnaturally natural” hair color, so to speak, is never pointed out in-universe, and is simply utilized by the narrative to mark certain characters as particularly plot-relevant. Indeed, much of ACCA’s main or recurring cast (including blue-haired Nino and Magie from Dowa and blue-haired Mauve from Korore) have unnatural hair colors that, in Episode 9, are suddenly revealed to be an actual genetic phenotype exclusive across a few select districts. Recall that Dowa and Suitsu are overtly Western. Dowa in particular is the home of the royal family. The royal characters featured in the story are Jean and Lotta; their mother and second princess Schnee; their aunt the first princess; the lone prince Schwan, and the king. With the exception of the king, who is greying due to his advanced age, all of these characters have blond hair and blue eyes. This look is already “natural” in real life, and when combined with their Western names (including Jean and Lotta’s surname “Otus,”) and the visuals surrounding their heritage (namely, Dowa’s big Western castle and the castle dwellers’ dramatic royal dress), it is easily believable that Jean and his relatives are intended to be white. It is also easy to assume that the characters with blue hair are also white since they too hail from this particular cluster of districts. The only districts in which whiteness is not so easily assumed are Hare, Rokkusu and Furawau. However, Hare and Rokkusu’s characterizations have caveats that point out the series’ overall preference for white-oriented Western aesthetics.

**Hare**

Although Hare seems to be Okinawa-inspired based on the novelty of its food and the impressiveness of its residents’ lifespans, the actual imagery of the district invokes a Pacific Islander feeling with its thatched roofs and tiki torches. If the viewer interprets this as “Hawaii,” or some other tropical American territory, then Hare, in a way, counts as yet another Western-inspired district. Regardless, the conclusion that a bulk of Hare’s residents must be non-white is
logical. The few images of the locals that we see do not contradict this conclusion, but also does not clearly support it either. This is because the only local characters who are featured up close are the Hare ACCA representative that Jean meets with, and a couple of attendants who serve the food and drink the night that Jean stays there. All of them are elderly and have white, gray, or black hair, and eyes perpetually crinkled because of wrinkles, smiling, or both. Skin color ranges from pale-skinned to “tan” (but not as “brown,” as, say, the Liliums or other Furawauans). The crinkled eyes and skin tone range make “Asian” believable for the Hare people. However, it should be noted that members of the main and recurring cast are on the younger side and have roles significant enough to merit intentionally-distinctive character designs, while characters such as Hare’s branch representatives appear for only as long as Jean’s audit lasts in a given district. Therefore, comparing the visual designs of the few elderly Hare characters we meet through Jean to those of other characters may not be an effective way to definitively determine racial distinction.

Hare has less direct significance to the narrative than Rokkusu or Furawau does. It is, however, clearly aligned with the good guys. All thirteen districts’ ACCA representatives were instructed to gift Jean a cigarette as a secret signal of their support for an ACCA-led coup and for his royal candidacy. Jean ends up collecting all thirteen cigarettes, including one from Hare, and unlike other legs of his audit, nothing inconvenient, dangerous, or uncomfortable happens during his stay in Hare. In fact, he has a relaxing night with the Hare ACCA branch people, so even among the other districts on Jean’s audit who also signaled their approval of him and the coup, Hare stands out as one of the most benevolent. Rokkusu, which may also have non-white residents, has a portrayal that isn’t as straightforward, mostly due to the fact that major character Grossular hails from there and was set up to be an antagonist for most of the series. In any case,
the few Eastern-based characters who count as good guys also happen to be paler-skinned and interpretable as East Asian, and are safe from the drama that occurs with Grossular and Lilium, both of whom represent districts that are home to non-East Asian people of color.

Rokkusu

As stated previously, Rokkusu is a combination of multiple cultural factors. The Old American West can be seen in the streets and storefronts. When Jean arrives, it’s apparently around Christmas time, since there are ornaments, garlands, and other festive decorations around (note that there is no in-series explanation for Dowa’s celebration of what appears to be Christmas; the related implication of having Christianity or the possibility that Dowa even has one or more religions is also never discussed. “God” is mentioned a single time by Jean as he stands on the roof of his apartment building while wondering if anyone is spying on him). The visual landscape of Rokkusu is that of a desert, peppered with saguaro typical of the Southwest United States region. The way locals look and dress contrasts slightly with any cowboy-themed aesthetics that an audience member may have expected from the Old West design of Rokkusu’s downtown. Many citizens—both men and women—keep their hair long, and wear colorful patterned shawls. In addition, the local ACCA uniform and the uniforms worn by branch representatives include feathers in the hair. Overall, the residents emit an indigenous vibe, although their phenotypes are as ambiguous as the Hare residents’—skin color ranges again from pale to tan, and hair colors can be light. The ACCA representative that accompanies Jean on this leg of the audit notes that many locals resemble Grossular because of his long white hair. Grossular’s skin is also very pale. Coming to the conclusion that Rokkusu has people who are non-white is a less straightforward process than with Hare, but a conclusive indication is the elaborate, native-inspired traditional dress that Grossular and his fellow governor wear during
official political functions, as well as the style of the uniforms that other Rokkusu ACCA employees wear.

Grossular and, by extension, Rokkusu are aligned with Jean and the rest of the good guys just as Hare and the rest of the districts (sans, secretly, Furawau) are. However, until the Lilium reveal of Episode 9, Grossular is postured as one of the series’s major antagonists. Pattern 3 describes situations where a story’s darker-skinned characters also happen to be the antagonists and/or characters with ulterior motives. Grossular may not completely qualify as a channel for Pattern 3’s manifestation, but some elements are still there. Appearance-wise, he doesn’t register as “brown,” until Episode 5, when we see Rokkusu for the first time and see how he and the other Rokkusu citizens look and dress. As a most-likely ethnically non-white and non-East Asian character, he does initially get grouped with the villains, but is exonerated from suspicion by the series’s conclusion. In this sense, Grossular isn’t brown enough to be as evil as Lilium, but also isn’t white enough to escape initial exoticization of his pseudo-villain status earlier in the series. Grossular’s ethnically ambiguous appearance and Rokkusu’s equal doses of Western/white elements and non-Western/non-white elements are potentially used to stoke the ambiguity of his true allegiances and motivations. Grossular’s goodness is ultimately validated through demonstrations of his love for ACCA. ACCA’s mission is to keep Dowa a unified nation; its implementation has the side effect of providing a blanket of generic national culture over each uniquely defined district, and this culture is modern, Western, and, ultimately, mostly white in nature, to the extent that the brownest district Furawau decides that it is incompatible with Dowa and ACCA and secedes entirely. On the other hand, Hare and Rokkusu still qualify for and are satisfied with national harmony because unlike Furawau, they are assigned their own brands of Westernness and whiteness.
Conclusion

ACCA manifests Patterns 2, 3, and 4. Lilium, his family, and the monolithic mass of his entire home district are antagonists. Elements of their characterization echo anti-Arab stereotypes, which in turn have close associations with colorism, xenophobia, and the terror aspect of Islamophobia. The Liliums and Furawau are the only darker-skinned people to feature in the story, are the most dangerous antagonists of the story, and go unredeemed at the series’s conclusion. They even secede such that the rest of Dowa becomes even whiter. East Asian characters apparently also make an appearance through Hare, but are relatively minor characters. The fact that they don’t rock the boat during the narrative is significant, though; they are demonstrated to be on the same cooperative page as all of the other districts who agree to participate in the ACCA-led coup. On the other hand, Rokkusu, which is also supposed to have non-white people, has a pale-skinned character as a significant representative. Grossular is set up as a villain at first, but is redeemed by the end of the series through his consistent support of ACCA, which provides a unified national culture across districts which is overtly Western in nature. In this way Grossular escapes brownness, which is reserved for marking the unconditionally villainous and self-exiled Furawau.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I demonstrate that each of my case studies, *Kuroko’s Basketball* and *ACCA*, each have a globally-oriented setting such that the opportunity for black and brown characters to exist and participate in the narrative is there, and how their respective pattern fulfillments actually construct a hierarchy where East Asians and Whites share the same superiority (in terms of power, higher moral ground, or both) over black and brown people.
Let’s review the existing groundwork that I laid out in the introduction and literature review sections of this document. First, on the subject of racial triangulation and stratification, the established takeaways are that race does not manifest and should not be discussed as a simple binary, as many laypersons—especially American ones—would initially be predisposed to do. Race in fact manifests as constructions and layered groupings with fluid attributes that change with time and society. And in media in particular, racial dynamics that portrayed between multiple groups is not always so straightforward; participating parties can simultaneously exist and not exist. The black/white binary that Americans are used to discussing in day-to-day racial discourse is clearly unsuitable for analyzing most anime and manga series, due to the typical cast being mostly Japanese and the low numbers of brown and black characters, especially in comparison to white ones. Approaching with the idea of layering and groupings makes more sense, and I have done so in my thesis: as demonstrated by both of my case studies, white characters and white-associated characters of color can be grouped together in closely situated layers, while brown and black characters are relegated to bottom layers through narrative/character developments or illogically complete omissions from the plot/setting. Second, regarding the notable “international” flavor many anime and manga display, which oftentimes simply manifests as an abundance of Western white people compared to a lack of non-East Asian people of color, Western or otherwise, various research theories outlined in my literature review about how international-looking or nationally-neutral casts are utilized to enhance or send messages about Japan’s cultural power are potentially fulfilled by my two case studies. Whether or not these theories about original Japanese creators’ intent are true, it’s undeniable that the mechanisms implemented by many series offer interpretations that have special significance for the Western viewer. Lastly, regarding Western perceptions of and responses to racializations in
anime: as a Western viewer myself, I was able to identify and break down four patterns more unique to anime and manga than to Western media. As my analysis illustrates, when they are taken together, they point towards racial dynamics that may not be obvious to the casual Western viewer but in fact apply to many anime and manga series. In general, analyzing race in cartoons is not as straightforward as analyzing race in live action film, since the media is 2D and will have its own character design styles. Analyzing anime and manga in particular has an added degree of complexity compared to analyzing Western cartoons simply because anime and manga is not Western—conclusions the casual Western viewer draws may be confused because the race dynamics demonstrated in a particular series might not align with common Western-defined race dynamics they are used to seeing in Western media. My thesis illustrates that for such a medium, analysis should be approached with care—taking into account cues from not only visual character design, but also from character interactions, narrative set up, character arcs, worldbuilding, etc. is important even within a Western-perspective context.

Bibliography


