



## Research Note

### The “Kimono Wednesday” Protests

#### Identity Politics and How the Kimono Became More Than Japanese

This research note gives an overview of the issues raised by the protest of a group of Asian Americans and their supporters against the allegedly Orientalist and discriminatory nature of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts’s event “Kimono Wednesdays.” In this note, I assess the protestors’ claims that the kimono try-on event at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (hereafter Boston MFA) was an instance of cultural appropriation taking place within an Orientalist framework conceptually linked to modern-day violence and discrimination toward Asian Americans. I then go on to reveal the key role of North American racial politics and identity in the protests and demonstrate how the protestors’ sense of the kimono as a symbol of pan-ethnic Asian American identity became a source of disagreement over who has the authority to represent others and say how a cultural symbol such as the kimono is worn or used, but also over Orientalism, cultural imperialism, and the concept of cultural appropriation.

KEYWORDS: kimono—Orientalism—Asian American identity—pan-ethnic identity—cultural appropriation—Japanese cultural symbols

WHETHER IN Japan or abroad, the kimono is an unmistakable marker of Japanese culture. Customary dress in Japan before the political, economic, and social shifts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the kimono is now Japan's national costume and is usually worn by women on ceremonial occasions. Even though it is now only rarely worn on an everyday basis, the kimono enjoys high status as the quintessential symbol of Japan. As Liza Dalby puts it, "no item in the storehouse of material culture maintains as strong a hold on the Japanese heart, mind, and purse as kimono" (DALBY 2001, 3). Such is the power of the kimono to evoke Japanese culture and aesthetics that most forms of visual advertising designed to attract both domestic and foreign tourists will feature a woman wrapped in a kimono somewhere in its footage (MILHAUPT 2014, 240). Western writers and media rave about the kimono, both in its traditional form and as a muse for trends in the global fashion system (MARTIN 1995), and their Japanese counterparts do so just as much, with a little more nostalgia for a time when the kimono was not so much a symbol as a part of everyday life (MASUDA 2010, 12).

How did this quintessentially Japanese item of clothing become a flashpoint in the racial politics of the United States? Controversy over the symbolic nature of the kimono began when the Boston MFA ran the event "Kimono Wednesdays," initially scheduled to take place every Wednesday night from 24 June to 29 July 2015. This event was concerned with the nineteenth century fascination (some may say obsession) with all things Japanese, known as Japonisme, which swept throughout France and then Europe with wide-ranging consequences on European art and aesthetics. The event itself showcased French impressionist artist Claude Monet's painting *La Japonaise*, depicting Monet's then wife, Camille Monet, wearing a kimono, surrounded by various *uchiwa* fans and holding a fan bearing the colours of the French tricolore.

The event featured a replica kimono, commissioned by the national Japanese broadcasting company NHK from a kimono artist in Kyoto, which museum-goers could try on. The museum's goal was for visitors to "engage with the painting in a different way" and, more playfully, to "channel your inner Camille Monet."<sup>1</sup>

However, shortly after the event started, a group of protestors self-identifying as Asian American began to appear with their supporters on Wednesday nights beside the exhibit, carrying signs that read "try on the kimono, learn what it's like



FIGURE 1. *La Japonaise*, by Claude Monet (1876) via Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain).

to be a racist imperialist !!!today!!!”<sup>2</sup> and “this is racism. This is appropriation. This is orientalism” (see FIGURE 2). They were also active on social media, initially on Facebook under the name StandAgainstYellowFace and later on Tumblr as DecolonizeOurMuseums.<sup>3</sup> It was not long before the museum’s Facebook and social media were flooded with messages denouncing the allegedly racist event: “This is honestly one of the most vilely racist things I’ve ever seen. White folks wanting to play dress up and feel Japanese? Please, don’t.”<sup>4</sup> Another commentator added, “There’s a difference between appreciation and appropriation, MFA.... let’s all appreciate Camille Monet and the orientalism of the past by bringing it into the present and framing it to be ‘okay.’”<sup>5</sup>

Not everyone agreed with the protestors, however, and counter-protestors began to appear at the events. Several people, mostly Japanese and Japanese-American, stood alongside the protestors with signs that read, “I am Japanese. I am not offended by Kimono Wednesday.”<sup>6</sup> Although the Boston MFA initially brushed off the protestors, with the then director Malcolm Rogers claiming that “a little controversy never did any harm,”<sup>7</sup> the pressure built as the support for the handful of protestors rose on social media, leading the MFA to issue an apology<sup>8</sup> and modify the event so that museum-goers could no longer wear the replica kimono but were instead only allowed to touch it. Additional lectures and explanations of the painting and Japonisme were also organized. That was not enough for the protestors, who continued to raise concerns that touching the kimono still fell under the umbrella of Orientalism.

In this research note, I will unravel the complex web of concepts and ideas about cultural symbols, pan-ethnic Asian American and Japanese identity, cultural appropriation, and the right to speak on behalf of others highlighted by this event, starting with an analysis of the protestors’ accusations of Orientalism and cultural appropriation. I then discuss the issues raised by the protestors’ wish to represent and defend a pan-ethnic Asian American group and the role played in the protest by the current climate of racial tension in the United States. In the final section of the note I will discuss the significance of Japan’s relative silence and lack of interest in the protest.



FIGURE 2. Protestors at the Boston MFA (credit: John Blanding/*The Boston Globe* via Getty Images).

WHO TOOK WHAT, EXACTLY?  
 ASSESSING THE CHARGES OF ORIENTALISM AND  
 CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Although the protestors were relatively few, their actions were widely reported in the Western media, and the controversy quickly crystallized around the idea of whether it was “alright” for non-Japanese to wear a kimono, and debates raged between the protestors, counter-protestors, and museum-goers as to who was “allowed” to wear a kimono. This was, in fact, not the protestors’ message. The key points of concern on the DecolonizeOurMuseums Tumblr handle are as follows:

We have been organizing in response to the MFA’s events “Kimono Wednesdays” and “Flirting with the Exotic” exhibit because it is an Orientalist representation of culture by an internationally-recognized art institution. As an institution that prides itself on its exhibits’ historical foundation and expert academic grounding, the MFA has the responsibility to create exhibits that promote educational awareness and explore, as well as be critical of, archaic values and belief systems that promote racism by way of cultural appropriation and cultural insensitivity.... This exhibit activity reaffirms the notion that Asian-identified folk are the Other, that they do not exist here, and that their cultures’ histories with oppressive imperialist practices are mere entertainment fodder. Rather than interrogating these notions of cultural appropriation and Orientalism, the MFA has allowed its visitors to participate in a horrific display of minstrelsy.<sup>9</sup>

From the above passage, it is clear that the protestors see the event as an example of cultural appropriation within an Orientalist framework, perpetrated by a historically white institution with the authority and power to represent—and therefore dominate—other cultural and ethnic groups. The conceptual debt to Said and the notion of cultural appropriation are evident in this passage. Although much discussed and rehashed since its original publication in 1977, I find it useful to return here to Said’s original definition of Orientalism:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (SAID 2003, 3)

Said’s Orientalism was highly influential in postcolonial studies and has gone a long way in redefining university curricula, particularly with regards to Middle-Eastern studies. Said is not without his critics, however. His work was mainly concerned with the Middle East, and not with Japan, China, or India (SAID 2003, 17), but his concept has since been extended as applicable to these countries by postcolonial scholars. One of Said’s most vocal critics, Ibn Warraq, accused Said of anti-Western essentialism by choosing to ignore the works of Western intellectuals

who were sympathetic, respectful, and knowledgeable of the so-called “Oriental” countries (WARRAQ 2007, 36–37).

The protestors applied a particularly hardline version of Said’s Orientalism, claiming that since the event was “orientalist” it was also “inappropriate” and therefore had to be stopped. They also articulated the concept of Orientalism with specific reference to the notion of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is defined by Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao as “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (ZIFF and RAO 1997, 1). Ziff and Rao argue that cultural appropriation is hard to pin down because of the sheer range of possibilities suggested by the word “culture”: anything from physical items to abstract value systems and moral codes. Furthermore, “appropriation” suggests the idea of one group or person “taking” something from another, which indicates a relational aspect: two groups or people are necessarily involved, those who take and those who are dispossessed. So to track down cultural appropriation, we must start by asking “who took what?” and it is in answering this question that the Kimono Wednesdays incident reveals its complexity. One of the protestors’ placards read “let’s dress up Orientalism with more Orientalism!”<sup>10</sup> thus equating not just Kimono Wednesdays but Japonisme and Monet’s painting with Orientalism as well. To assess this claim, it is necessary to explore Monet’s painting in greater depth.

*La Japonaise* depicts Camille Monet, his wife, posing in a style reminiscent of courtesans in *ukiyo-e* prints, loosely draped in a red *uchikake* surrounded by various *uchiwa* fans. Mary Gedo analyses the painting in the following way:

Most certainly [Monet] did not intend—as Whistler presumably had—to create a convincing fusion of visual and stylistic elements of East and West, for the painting seems to parody both Western art and Japanese prints with equal freedom. Monet, who owned numerous prints of courtesans ... must have been well aware that woodblock artists characteristically represented courtesans ... with rather impassive facial expressions far removed from the “come-hither” smile Camille wears in *La Japonaise*. Every aspect of the painting—from the exaggerated realism, to the fierce little fellow embroidered on the kimono’s visible right-side panel, to the agitated movements of the *uchiwa*, to Camille’s blond wig and simpering expression—suggests that the composition was created in a spirit of raillery ..., reminding us that Monet began his juvenile career as a caricaturist.

(GEDO 2010, 172)

In Gedo’s analysis, then, *La Japonaise* is a wry take on the French obsession with Japan. There is also a suggestion that Monet painted *La Japonaise* in order to stay afloat financially by catering to the French appetite for Japanese art, since a letter dated 1875 states that Monet came to own a kabuki kimono upon which *La Japonaise* was based but he had no choice but to sell it due to his financial circumstances. Whether it was due to the painting’s erotic undertones (Monet typically did not include such a theme, according to Gedo) or the fact that he was obliged to paint it for money, it seems that Monet disliked *La Japonaise*, and the painting

remains a somewhat conflicted instance of Japonisme. Monet was to be a key figure in Japonisme, as his later works (such as the series of paintings of a Japanese-style bridge in his own garden) reflect a deeper and more subtle engagement with Japanese aesthetics.

For the protestors, however, the fact that *La Japonaise* can be read as a commentary on Japonisme is largely irrelevant because, in their understanding, both the painting and Japonisme as a whole reflect an unhealthy, damaging fascination with Japan that falls within the remit of Said’s definition of Orientalism. To say that Japonisme is an inevitably negative, toxic Orientalistic project is a somewhat radical step. Japonisme is more of a spectrum, with some pieces that reflect a fascination with the exotic “Other” that has fuelled Western misunderstandings about Japan, and Asia in general (MILHAUPT 2014, 144), and other works that reflect a sincere admiration for Japanese aesthetics and a wish to emulate them, which in turn deeply restructured Western understandings of beauty (WEISBERG 1975).

An absolutist understanding of Japonisme as “inflicted” upon Japan also robs Japan of its agency: Japan in fact actively fuelled this originally French fascination, but also exercised its *own* fascination with the West. The European nations were not colonial powers in Japan, and Japan was aware of its influence over the European nations, which lead to the widespread trade in Japanese art and, indeed, in Western arts and goods. While there was indubitably a social Darwinist aspect of thought in the nineteenth century that placed the so-called Western “race” above all others (HAWKINS 1997), there was also a considerable degree of mutual fascination and depiction of what was, to each side, the Other and their cultural trappings. Japan’s post-Meiji Restoration taste for all things Western, from clothes to chairs and houses, attests to this (HANLEY 1999). Indeed, some have argued that appropriation and incorporation of foreign elements into a given culture is an inevitable part of how cultures evolve and change, and this varies immensely in terms of the way it is done. Whether Japonisme may or may not be considered a part of Orientalism depends on each person’s understanding of Said, and is therefore a matter of debate rather than certainty.

Fast-forward to 2015 and the Kimono Wednesdays event at the Boston MFA: the museum organizes an event during which the museum-goers can try on a replica of the kimono worn by Camille in *La Japonaise*, encouraging visitors to “channel their inner Camille Monet,” and the museum is accused of cultural appropriation by a small but vocal protest group made up primarily of Asian Americans. We have seen that the case for cultural appropriation in Monet’s painting is a matter of debate, but this is where the waters get murkier. If the (presumably) white museum-goers try on a replica of a kimono from a painting of a French woman by a French artist, is there cultural appropriation going on? As the owner of the blog spot Japanese-American in Boston pointed out, if Monet was indeed mocking the French fascination with Japan, then the event is somewhat ironic because museum-goers are, in a sense, embodying what Monet was mocking, which is a far cry from cultural appropriation.<sup>11</sup>

As it is, the museum left itself open to criticism by failing to provide, according to multiple sources, sufficient context for the event. It was framed as a playful, casual event<sup>12</sup> that would help museum-goers engage with the painting in a more sensory fashion. However, since this may well be the only kimono that the visitors will encounter, it could end up being the sole representative of all kimonos for some visitors. In fact, this event was not about the kimono or about authenticity but about *La Japonaise* and Japonisme, and, in its inception, the event came about through a collaboration between Japan and the United States. The painting toured in Tokyo, Kyoto, and the Boston MFA's sister museum in Nagoya during 2014 before starting in Boston.<sup>13</sup> The replica kimonos, for both children and adults, were commissioned by NHK from a kimono maker in Kyoto and were available for the public to try on. The event was, according to multiple sources, a success.<sup>14</sup> In Japan, people dressed up in the kimono (or *uchikake*, to be precise) and took photos, and no one, it seems, was in the least bit offended.

Given that NHK commissioned the kimonos for the Japanese tour and then gave them to the Boston MFA, it seems likely that it was originally a Japanese idea to organize kimono try-on sessions. Orientalism and cultural appropriation are usually conceptualized as a one-way street: culture A (usually the West, or a subgroup thereof, such as white Americans), has authority over and appropriates from culture B (the "Orient," or a subgroup such as African-Americans). As Ziff and Rao point out, identifying cultural appropriation demands that a "boundary line" be drawn and some attempt be made at establishing to whom the original practice belonged. In this case, Monet was inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, namely Utamaru and Hokusai, which he avidly collected, but the event itself is the fruit of a collaboration between the "victim" and the "thief" in the cultural appropriation model. Surely the fact that Japan, whose people are, after all, those with the best credentials to claim cultural identification with the object in question, was not only on board with the event but orchestrated it in such a way that it could happen in the United States, should have put the protestors' fears to rest?

The protestors, however, dismissed the problem of Japan's role in the event. In the FAQ section of the DecolonizeOurMuseums site, the protestors responded to the question "This event happened in Japan. How is this different?" in the following manner: "The Japanese government is promoting its own culture in a context where Japanese people do not have a history of being discriminated against in Japan for being Japanese."<sup>15</sup> This is not entirely correct, since the replicas are a Japanese reimagining of Monet's painting given physical form, so if anything they are a blend of cultures, and likely a type of kimono that would be unique for Japanese museum-goers. For the protestors, the Japanese and American contexts are completely separate:

Having the *uchikake* made in and tour around Japan does not validate the cultural appropriation specific to American history. We are not saying Japan cannot curate its own events. An event that is welcomed in another country can have a completely different meaning in the U.S. within the context of this country.



Japanese people in Japan do not face the same under- and misrepresentation that Japanese-Americans and other AAPI do here. Therefore, the MFA did not do its due diligence in curating the programming.<sup>16</sup>

Insofar as the protestors are concerned, although the original act of cultural appropriation by Monet, if it is to be perceived as such, took place in nineteenth century France, and although the replica kimonos were freely given by NHK, the donning of this kimono by white Americans (there is no mention of people from other ethnicities, who presumably also tried on the kimono), is directly linked to prejudice, discrimination, and even violence against Asian Americans in the North American context: “Our concern with the MFA’s event has to do with the specific issues AAPI face in U.S. culture. AAPI have historically been either under- and misrepresented in American media and culture.”<sup>17</sup> The underlying concept here is the MFA “stole” the cultural symbol of the kimono not from the Japanese, but from the broadly defined AAPI group. As such, they are claiming that, in a sense, the kimono with all its signifiers of Japanese culture, represents them as much as it does the Japanese.

#### WHO SPEAKS FOR WHOM?

##### CULTURAL SYMBOLS AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF PAN-ETHNIC IDENTITY

The word “Asian” designates different people depending on the social context. In the United Kingdom, for instance, it usually designates people with ties to the Indian subcontinent. In the United States, it usually designates people with ties to East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea), but also Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and so on). In Japan, “Asian” designates people from the continent, and most Japanese do not consider themselves to be part of the Asian group. “Asian” is therefore a mutable and context-specific term, as indeed are many terms used to designate ethnicity, given that ethnicity itself is a highly variable construct.

In the context of the United States, migrants from the Asian continent (in its broadest definition) as well as Latin Americans are relative latecomers to a charged racial context with a powerful black/white conceptual binary (OKIHIRO 1994). Since this binary was so pervasive and its two categories so rigid (consider, for instance, the one-drop rule, which dictated that having “one drop” of blood from an African ancestor meant that one was “black”), newcomers on the scene, wherever they may be from, found themselves placed on one end or the other of the spectrum. Given the political, cultural, and economic dominance of the white segment of society, it was preferable to be on the white side of the equation. Initially, Asian Americans were classified as closer to African-Americans in terms of their treatment by the dominant white group. Dan Caldwell demonstrates, for instance, how Chinese immigrants were vilified in the mid-nineteenth century (CALDWELL 1971). Later, in the run-up to World War Two, Japanese-Americans found themselves being transported to internment camps due to the suspicion and hostility attached to Japan (KASHIMA 2004). The racial climate was very hostile towards

Asian Americans, who were frequently cast as a threat due to the infamous notion of “yellow peril.” More recently, Asian Americans are being characterized in different terms, as the “model minority” (an implied opposition to African-Americans and Latin Americans), successfully assimilated into American society, as evidenced by educational and professional success (SAKAMOTO, TAKEI, and WOO 2012; WU 2014).

The term “Asian American” itself polarizes scholarly opinion. On the one hand, the term is imbued with a sense of solidarity in the face of discrimination by the white majority through a sense of a common connection to roughly the same geographical area. Yen Le Espiritu argues that “reactive solidarity” in the face of anti-Asian violence (in particular the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin) has been the greatest catalyst for Asian American solidarity:

Because the public does not usually distinguish among Asian subgroups, anti-Asian violence concerns the entire group—cross-cutting class, cultural, and generational divisions. Therefore, regardless of one’s ethnic affiliation, anti-Asian violence requires counterorganization at the pan-Asian level. Research on ethnicity has indicated that external threats intensify group cohesion as members band together in defensive solidarities. (LE ESPIRITU 1992, 134)

The term can also be seen as a way to circumvent the black/white binary and avoid the tendency to situate Asian Americans either on one side or the other of the spectrum (OMI and TAKAGI 1996). Others, such as Kent Ono, actively reject the term:

The very idea of Asian American, as a collective assignation, is a problematic issue. Indeed, Asian American can only be theorized as an imaginary discursive formation, with no possibility of ever describing, containing, or producing such a community.... Attempts to position Asian American as a signifier is a process replete with questions of subjectivity, representation, and resistance.

(ONO 1995, 75)

The term Asian American thus embraces diversity but also obscures it, and as with almost all terms used to designate ethnic affiliation, it can in some circumstances do a disservice to those it describes.

The protestors claim to be speaking on behalf of Asian Americans, but they also frequently used the term AAPI, or Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The AAPI group is vast, consisting of approximately twelve million people, with ties to twenty-eight Asian nations and a further nineteen Pacific Island nations, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>18</sup> The AAPI identity cluster that the protestors identify with is conceptually grounded in the idea of pan-ethnic solidarity. This is the tendency of diverse marginalised groups to form alliances across national origin boundaries when under pressure by a more numerous and dominant group. The language employed by the protestors demonstrates that the kimono, however altered it was by Monet and NHK in this case, is a cultural symbol of the group as a whole:

The act of non-Japanese museum staff throwing these kimonos on [passersby] [sic] as a “costume” event is an insult to not only *our* identities, experiences, and histories as Asian Americans in America, but affects how society as a whole continues to deny *our* voices today.<sup>19</sup> (Emphasis added)

“Our” is a powerful word, hence the italics. It denotes belonging, and it also assumes that what is originally Japanese belongs to the larger pan-ethnic grouping. A commentator on the blog spot Hyperallergic who agreed with the protestors’ message phrased a similar sense of threatened pan-ethnic identity and suppressed voices:

What needs amplification, in this situation, are the historical and contemporary voices of people of the Asian diaspora, as survivors of several centuries of American and European imperialism, forced migrations, labor exploitation, and genocidal warfare. We are not being “sensitive” here. We are fighting for our image, because the circulation of images is often linked to our survival.<sup>20</sup>

The reasoning behind the protest assumes that what will offend one member of the group will offend *all* members, since they share a common baseline of experience and identification. But this cannot be the case with a group as large and as diverse as the AAPI. Japanese-Americans and Japanese are inevitably going to be “higher up,” as it were, in terms of the legitimacy of their claims to the kimono as a symbol of their cultural identity. It is not surprising then, that when a specific cultural marker belonging to one of the constituents of the group is evoked, the pan-ethnic group will fragment as members disagree on the usage of the cultural marker



FIGURE 3. Protestors (left) and counter-protestors (center and right) debate at the Boston MFA (photo by Kayana Szymczak).

and the legitimacy of the claim to “own” it. This is why the counter-protestors featured many Japanese and Japanese-American holding signs with messages such as: “I am Japanese. I am not offended by Kimono Wednesdays.”

Speaking out on behalf of a group you consider to be under threat without checking that they do in fact feel threatened is somewhat problematic. It effectively subverts the agency of the group by denying their ability to say that, in fact, they do not feel slighted. As we have seen, a particularly rigid framework for Orientalism and cultural appropriation must be adopted in order for the event to be seen as irredeemably Orientalist and appropriative, and it is clear from the counter-protest that a great many Japanese and Japanese-Americans did not share this view. In effect, the protestors’ rigid adherence to the frameworks of Orientalism and cultural appropriation and their commitment to the pan-ethnic Asian American group ended up obscuring Japanese and Japanese-American voices. In other circumstances, the effacing of differences, be they cultural or ethnic or even differences in opinion, between Asian American groups can be very offensive indeed. This commitment to the pan-ethnic Asian American identity is all the more surprising because of the geopolitical tensions that still exist between Asian countries that are passed down to the Asian diaspora. For the legacy of tension between Japan and other Asian nations to be disregarded in favor of defending the pan-ethnic Asian American group speaks volumes about the power of race-based thinking in the United States.

Another aspect of the protestors’ charges remains to be addressed. For the DecolonizeOurMuseums protestors, there is a direct link between the event and the stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans in the media:

AAPI are rarely portrayed in films or television, and when they are, it’s often as a sidekick, Fu Manchu, exoticized sex worker, or a near-sighted buck-toothed Mr. Yunioshi (i.e. *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*). This, therefore, becomes an issue about racism in this country, when replicated on this soil without critical discourse by institutions like the MFA.<sup>21</sup>

Things are conceptually a little tangled here. The charge is that the portrayal of Camille and the modern-day museum-goers wearing a replica of her kimono are effectively linked to twentieth and twenty-first century media representations of Asian Americans. In other words, there is conceptual continuity between these elements for the protestors. The charge is a serious one, in effect claiming that Kimono Wednesdays propagated the same sort of dehumanizing representation of Japanese people as Mr Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. As was typical of the time (LEWIS, GRIFFITH, and CRESPO 2008), Mr Yunioshi was played by a white actor (Mickey Rooney in cringe-worthy makeup) and the depiction was intended to elicit cruel laughs at the expense of Japanese. The idea of “yellow peril” generated many such pejorative representations in the media (Fu Manchu is another) that are one-dimensional, unsympathetic, and designed to cause derision and a sense of superiority in the viewer, who was assumed to be white. While American film and television in the 2000s normally shies away from such bluntly discriminatory

portrayals, Asian Americans, like African-Americans and Latin Americans, occupy relatively marginal spaces in the media. Again, the ability to see the event at the Boston Museum as offensive depends on how salient the link between Japonisme, Orientalism and modern-day representations of Asian Americans is felt to be. A Said-based interpretation of Monet's *La Japonaise* that puts aside the Western interest in Japanese aesthetics and instead focuses on the painting as one of the earlier instances in which Western artists emulated the courtesans of the *ukiyo*e prints in order to garb white, female muses in a kind of eroticised "otherness" allows for a reminiscence with other images of exoticized and sexualised Asian women or white women in Asian clothing, and this reminiscence is quite possibly what prompted the protest in the first place. The problem here is that equating the Kimono Wednesdays event with portrayals such as *Fu Manchu* or *Mr Yunioshi* is to say that a deliberate attempt was made to debase Asian Americans, and it seems clear that given the collaborative nature of the event with Japanese museums and authorities, there was no intention to cause the kind of derision and dislike that is the mainstay of racist portrayals such as *Fu Manchu* or *Mr Yunioshi*. As such the charge that the Kimono Wednesdays and these representations are similar is somewhat extreme.

There is a further link being made between the negative portrayal of Asian Americans of which Kimono Wednesdays was considered a part (even though in this case no actual Asian-American was emulated, but the kimono served as a placeholder), and the violence perpetrated against Asian Americans. The protestors and their supporters evoked the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, for instance. What is striking here is the absolute nature of the language and the direct, even causal link made between Monet's painting, Japonisme and Kimono Wednesdays (conflated with the portrayals of Asian Americans in the media as discussed above), and violence committed against Asian Americans. The protestors held placards reading, "AAPI women are statistically the least likely to report rape because violence against our bodies is that normalized"<sup>22</sup> and "it wouldn't be so bad without White institutions condoning erasure [sic] of the Japanese narrative + Orientalism which in turn supports dehumanization + fetishizing AAPI + it is killing us" (see FIGURE 3) which shows how direct a link they feel it is.<sup>23</sup>

It is not that the protestors do not have a point. The marginal and often one-dimensional representations of Asian Americans in the media and race-based violence against Asian American are real issues, but it can be argued that the choice of the Boston MFA's event as a platform to voice those concerns undermined the message. This is because, for many and especially for the counter-protestors, the causal link between the purported Orientalism and the threat to the AAPI group was considered difficult to grasp or even nonexistent. The protestors were also ill-served by their use of the hashtag #whitesupremacykills, which is typically associated on Twitter with police violence against African-Americans and often used together with the hashtag #blacklivesmatter by members and supporters of the activist group of the same name. The previous use on Twitter of the #whitesupremacykills hashtag was for the murder of nine African-Americans by Dylann

Roof at the Emanuel Church in Charleston on 17 June 2015. Using the hashtag for Kimono Wednesdays is tantamount to saying that the Kimono Wednesdays event was underpinned by the same vitriolic white supremacist thinking that drove Roof to murder nine African-Americans, which is problematic, and it can be argued that levelling this charge against the Boston MFA is exaggerated and extreme. Better contextualisation and information would have helped the Boston MFA steer clear of the charge of cultural appropriation completely. Their initial choice of language (such as the initial phrasing “Flirting with the Exotic,” which was later removed) would also have benefitted from some reviewing, since although it was no doubt chosen to reflect the feelings of Monet and others at the time, in a modern context it is rather insensitive. However, the MFA is not advancing “the rhetoric and (economic, social and political) practices of reducing another human being to a set of signs (within a certain pre-existing hierarchy) that are primarily physical features, and thereby dehumanize him or her” that forms the basis of racism, as one commentator put it.<sup>24</sup>

The urgency and uncompromising nature of the DecolonizeOurMuseums protest is very much informed by the current climate of racial tension in the United States. Police violence against African-Americans has a long history, and the country has seen a series of high-profile cases in recent years such as the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012 which led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Michael Brown by Darren Wilson in August 2014 in Ferguson which led to the Ferguson protests, to name just two. Correcting discrimination on the basis of sex, race, sexual orientation, or disability is a preoccupation of many young Americans, as is evident from the plethora of popular articles on the subject.<sup>25</sup> The DecolonizeOurMuseums’ FAQ directs the reader to many such “7 reasons why”-style articles that are widely circulated on social media and read by many millennials concerned with issues of social justice.<sup>26</sup> The urgency of the calls to end violence and discrimination in contemporary North America, the consumption of these articles, and a strict adherence to postcolonial theories on Orientalism are the foundation of the protestors’ beliefs and are clearly visible in the language they employ. This is further evidenced by the protestors’ immediate response, which was to try and have the event cancelled rather than approach the MFA for alterations. They may well not have succeeded without the support they received on social media, and such is the stigma for an institution to be tarred with the brush of racism and cultural appropriation that after initially refuting the accusations of racism, the MFA eventually changed the event so that visitors could no longer try on the *uchikake*, effectively removing any opportunity for debate.

If “Asian Americans as a group are... a crucial barometer of the contemporary racial climate,” as Omi and Takagi argue, then the United States can look forward to some stormy weather (OMI and TAKAGI 1996, 161). Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin indicate that many Asian Americans experience discrimination and are represented infrequently in the media, but that their experiences of discrimination are frequently overlooked because they are “doing all right” by the standards of the model minority narrative (CHOU and FEAGIN 2008). Since I am neither Asian nor

American, I cannot provide any personal experience on this, but judging from the not inconsiderable support for the protestors (although some perhaps had a knee-jerk reaction to the words “racist” and “cultural appropriation”), these are voices that wish to be heard and issues that must be addressed. The issue here is that the protestors claimed that Kimono Wednesdays embodied the problems Asian Americans face, when in fact the presence of Orientalism, the “negative” portrayal of Asian Americans and thus the causal link with violence, is a matter of debate rather than absolute certainty in this case. Borrowing language and tone from the Black Lives Matter’s movement, whose issues are clearly visible and whose cause is highly visible in the media, made the protestors’ claims seem exaggerated, particularly since their messages could be contested due to the collaborative nature of the event and the unintentional silencing of Japanese(-American) voices.

In the end, support or rebuttal of the protestors’ message hinges on each person’s understanding, acceptance, or rejection of the following:

- Said’s Orientalism, its applicability to Japonisme and the Kimono Wednesdays event
- the belief that Orientalism is pervasive and harmful
- personal understanding of (and relation to) American racial politics
- a continuous conceptual link between Japonisme and modern-day media representations of Asian Americans
- the causal link between “Orientalist” imagery and violence towards Asian Americans
- discomfort with the inadvertent silencing of Japanese-Americans and Japanese people in favor of the larger pan-ethnic grouping
- discomfort at the language borrowed from Black Lives Matter

There is, however, one significant actor in the events that unfolded during the Kimono Wednesdays protest that has remained almost completely silent.

#### JAPAN’S MUTED REACTION TO THE PROTEST

There have been few reactions from Japan, and the Kimono Wednesdays event seems to have gone largely unnoticed by Japanese news outlets. Yahoo and Record China (a Japanese news site affiliated with Yahoo that usually reports on Chinese news) relate the events of the Kimono Wednesday controversy in a very succinct manner. Both articles state that the protestors caused the event to be discontinued, which is not in fact the case, and they state that the protestors’ message was that the event was “racist” (*jinsbu sabetsu* 人種差別) and “imperialist” (*teikoku shugi* 帝國主義). The word “imperialism” caused a lot of misunderstanding among the handful of Japanese bloggers and commentators who wrote on the subject of Kimono Wednesdays. For many Japanese, “imperialism” refers not to Western imperialism but to Japanese imperialism in Korea, China, and Southeast Asia. For these bloggers, the idea that the Boston MEA was appropriating the kimono through a

Western imperialist framework was entirely alien and led to the mistaken idea that the protest was against the kimono. This notion gained steam when the commentators assumed that the protestors were all of Korean or Chinese descent, and in some more right-wing cases, assumed that there were stirring up controversy on behalf of China or North Korea.<sup>27</sup> The point of the protest was, in effect, missed.

In many ways, the kimono is among the worst possible cultural artifacts the protestors could have chosen to argue the case for cultural appropriation. Japanese people are fervent consumers of their own culture, with a thriving domestic tourist industry that includes, among many things, kimono try-ons and *geisha* or *maiko* experiences, particularly in Kyoto. These services welcome non-Japanese people as well as Japanese people. For Kei Hiruta, writing on the University of Oxford's Practical Ethics webpage, the enthusiastic use of such services by the Japanese could be understood as partaking in self-Orientalizing behavior and he argues that one may even question whether Orientalism is systematically a "bad" thing.<sup>28</sup>

The kimono is also one of the most mutable fashion icons in the world, thought to be partially responsible for the major shifts in women's fashion in the Western world in the early twentieth century and still deeply influential in global fashion trends through the efforts of Japanese high fashion designers such as Kenzo Takada, Hanae Mori, Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto. Yuniya Kawamura attributes the success of these designers to their ability to alter Japanese sartorial customs to their benefit (KAWAMURA 2004). One of the most frequently evoked qualities of the kimono is its "one size fits everyone" characteristic, given that it is wrapped around the body rather than tailored to fit it (SLADE 2009, 54). The kimono is powerfully symbolic of Japan, but Japanese people hardly ever reject the idea of a non-Japanese person wearing one. As cultural symbols go, the kimono has nowhere near the sensitivity associated to the Native American head-dress or African-American hairstyles in the United States. While it is true that no nation and no ethnic group lives apart from the systems of power and the social hierarchies that permeate the modern world in which, typically, Western nations and white people find themselves privileged, each instance in which a white person tries on an item from a culture not their own differs depending on the cultural, political, historic, and economic context in which this happens. Applying a narrow and systematic definition of cultural appropriation to every person and every object in such a way that white people are automatically oppressors and the cultural item is inevitably "stolen" or devalued is to ignore that context and even the wishes of those who can make the strongest claim about what they feel the cultural object represents and how it may be used. Reporting for the *Japan Times*, Shaun O'Dwyer quotes an employee at the Nishijin Textiles Center in Kyoto: "Anyone can appropriate and creatively modify kimono styles whenever and however they like."<sup>29</sup> O'Dwyer further argues that the kimono industry in Japan is struggling, and that stylistic innovations and the expansion of kimono wearing beyond Japanese soil might be necessary for the kimono's survival. O'Dwyer argues that if the kimono, particularly the more casual yukata, is to make it abroad, it will need sup-



port from foreign buyers, who may now be too concerned over issues of cultural appropriation to give the kimono and yukata the support that they need.<sup>30</sup>

When the event toured Japan, NHK saw one such opportunity to “remake” the kimono—to bring Monet’s vision to life and reestablish the history of the character on the *uchikake*. Gedo wrote that to date the identity of the character on Camille’s *uchikake* had been unknown (GEDO 2010, 172), but NHK claimed to know it was Taira no Koremochi from the play *Momijigari*.<sup>31</sup> As such, they no doubt felt that they were restoring historicity to the kimono and bringing it to life, thus enabling Japanese museum-goers to experience what it might have been like for Camille to slip on the kimono. Granted, as first encounters with Japanese dress go, it might be a little strange for Western people to try on this particular kimono instead of a more common type of kimono, but the NHK gave the replica kimonos based on the idea that non-Japanese people wearing a kimono is not problematic. To my knowledge, there is nothing in the press reporting NHK’s reaction to the Boston MFA altering the event, but one may guess that it cannot have been a pleasant piece of news, and there is something off-key about a protest against cultural appropriation that is potentially insulting to those it originally tried to defend.

From the information I could gather online about the reactions of Japanese people living in Boston at the time, it seems that reactions ranged from indifference to bafflement and, for some, dismay and anger. Jiro Usui, the Deputy Consul General of Japan in Boston, reflected the baffled stance: “We actually do not quite understand what their point of protest is.... We tried to listen to those people who are protesting, but we think together with the MFA we should encourage that Japanese culture be appreciated in a positive way.” Others, who actively counter-protested, such as Japanese-language teacher Timothy Nagaoka and Etsuko Yoshiro, an organizer of Boston’s Japan festival, felt that the protesters were impeding cultural exchange with Japan.<sup>32</sup> The owner of the blog spot “Japanese-American in Boston” has compiled a selection of Japanese and Japanese-American reactions,<sup>33</sup> and summed up the counter-protest as follows: “I see it as Japanese people and non-Japanese kimono lovers wanting to make it clear that they do not believe it’s racist to try on or wear a kimono and that they don’t agree with the protesters linking their issues around racism and sexism to Kimono Wednesdays.”<sup>34</sup>

Generally speaking, the Japanese reaction to the Kimono Wednesdays was muted, which highlights how the incident was generated by a specifically American understanding of racial politics. However, the relative lack of Japanese support of the protest and the majority of puzzled and dissenting voices among those Japanese (-Americans) who did react suggest that the kimono remains a Japanese cultural symbol, and those who identify as Japanese have the highest authority to state what may or may not be done with a kimono.

## CONCLUSION

The Kimono Wednesdays event and the ensuing protest stimulated a debate about identity, cultural symbols, Orientalism, and cultural appropriation.

The protests highlighted how a sense of pan-ethnic Asian American identity fragments when the “correct” and “respectful” usage of a cultural symbol belonging to one of the national components—such as the kimono—is evoked, leading to a debate about who has the right to speak for others, even in defence. The protests also highlighted the enduring influence of Said and the applicability of his theories, both in the present day and retroactively to movements such as Japonisme. Perhaps most strongly of all, it highlighted the climate of tension around issues pertaining to racism, discrimination, and cultural appropriation in the United States. The power of these issues is manifest in the speed with which the protestors’ message was transmitted through social media and the speed with which the Boston MFA changed the structure of the event. There is a marked desire among minorities in the United States to present a unified front against discrimination and racism by the white majority, but as the above discussion suggests, discrimination and racism comes in as many shades as people do, and while the African-American community is affected by one set of issues (such as police brutality), Asian Americans are affected by others, such as the model minority narrative. The protestors clearly wished to highlight the issues Asian Americans in the United States face, but their message divided opinion since many people, in particular the Japanese(-American) counterprotestors and their allies, did not perceive the Kimono Wednesdays event as a site in which Asian Americans were discriminated against. These protests demonstrate that rather than attempting to emulate the language and tone of the Black Lives Matter movement, a different strategy would be more helpful in raising awareness of the issues around discrimination and representation faced by Asian Americans.

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#### NOTES

1. See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/museums-kimono-wednesdays-cancelled-after-claims-of-racism\\_559eb64ee4b05b1d028fe7e8](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/museums-kimono-wednesdays-cancelled-after-claims-of-racism_559eb64ee4b05b1d028fe7e8) (accessed 27 August 2015).
2. See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2015/07/07/mfa-backs-down-over-kimono-event-response-protests/lv9NHcnpWolsRE77d9hvkI/story.html> (accessed 7 August 2015).
3. See <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/> (accessed 7 August 2015).
4. See from <http://www.japanrends.com/boston-museum-fine-arts-kimono-racist-orientalism-protests-monet-painting/> (accessed 7 August 2015).
5. See <http://www.japanrends.com/boston-museum-fine-arts-kimono-racist-orientalism-protests-monet-painting/> (7 August 2015). See also <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-33450391> and <http://observer.com/2015/07/mfa-boston-cancels-kimono-dress-up-after-allegations-of-racism/> for other examples of reactions on social media (accessed 14 September 2015).
6. See <http://japaneseamericaninboston.blogspot.fr/2015/07/counterprotest-this-wednesday-mfa.html> (accessed 7 August 2015).
7. See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2015/07/07/mfa-backs-down-over-kimono-event-response-protests/lv9NHcnpWolsRE77d9hvkI/story.html> (accessed 8 August 2015).
8. See <http://www.mfa.org/news/2015/july> (accessed 8 August 2015).

9. See <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/post/125348836324/full-response-to-mfa-kimono-wednesdays> (accessed 8 August 2015).
10. See <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/07/08/world/cries-racism-prompt-boston-art-museum-cancel-kimono-wednesdays/#.VctuBvnpMI> (accessed 12 August 2015).
11. See <http://japaneseamericaninboston.blogspot.fr/2015/07/monets-la-japonaise-kimono-wednesdays.html> (accessed 9 September 2015).
12. See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2015/07/07/mfa-backs-down-over-kimono-event-response-protests/lv9NHcnpWolsRE77d9hvkI/story.html> (accessed 13 August 2015).
13. See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2015/07/07/mfa-backs-down-over-kimono-event-response-protests/lv9NHcnpWolsRE77d9hvkI/story.html> (accessed 13 August 2015).
14. See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2015/07/07/mfa-backs-down-over-kimono-event-response-protests/lv9NHcnpWolsRE77d9hvkI/story.html> (accessed 13 August 2015); see also <http://hyperallergic.com/223047/the-confused-thinking-behind-the-kimono-protests-at-the-boston-museum-of-fine-arts/> (accessed 13 August 2015).
15. See <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/post/125347896294/faq-made-of-our-concerns> (accessed 13 August 2015).
16. See <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/post/125348836324/full-response-to-mfa-kimono-wednesdays> (accessed 13 August 2015).
17. See <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/post/125348836324/full-response-to-mfa-kimono-wednesdays> (accessed 13 August 2015).
18. <http://www.epa.gov/aapi/primer.htm> (accessed 18 August 2015).
19. See <http://fusion.net/story/163380/museum-of-fine-arts-boston-revises-kimono-wednesdays-after-asian-american-group-protests/> (accessed 7 August 2015).
20. See <http://hyperallergic.com/223694/seeing-beyond-kimono-wednesdays-on-asian-american-protest/> (accessed 4 September 2015).
21. See <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/> (accessed 19th August 2015).
22. See <http://hyperallergic.com/223047/the-confused-thinking-behind-the-kimono-protests-at-the-boston-museum-of-fine-arts/> (accessed 20 August 2015).
23. See <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.VdXZGfnpML> (accessed 20 August 2015).
24. See <http://hyperallergic.com/223047/the-confused-thinking-behind-the-kimono-protests-at-the-boston-museum-of-fine-arts/> (accessed 20 August 2015).
25. For example, see <http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/5-things-white-people-cultural-appropriation/>; <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/08/white-feminist-with-dreadlocks/>; and [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-solis/10-easy-ways-to-reduce-homophobia-a-guide-for-straight-people\\_b\\_3490937.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-solis/10-easy-ways-to-reduce-homophobia-a-guide-for-straight-people_b_3490937.html) (accessed 20 August 2015).
26. <http://decolonizeourmuseums.tumblr.com/post/125347896294/faq-made-of-our-concerns> (accessed 20 August 2015).
27. See [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.Vdnyz\\_npyML](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.Vdnyz_npyML) (accessed 23 August 2015).
28. See <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2015/07/stop-orientalism-on-boston-mfas-kimono-wednesdays/> (accessed 19 August 2015).
29. See [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.Vd8\\_ppfpyML](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.Vd8_ppfpyML) (accessed 27 August 2015).
30. See [http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.Vd8\\_ppfpyML](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/04/commentary/japan-commentary/kimono-cultural-appropriation/#.Vd8_ppfpyML) (accessed 27 August 2015).

31. See <http://japaneseamericaninboston.blogspot.jp/2015/07/monets-la-japonaise-kimono-wednesdays.html> (accessed 27 August 2015).

32. See <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/2015/07/18/counter-protesters-join-kimono-fray-mfa/ZgVWiT3yIZSIQgxGhAOFM/story.html> and <http://japaneseamericaninboston.blogspot.fr/2015/07/counterprotest-this-wednesday-mfa.html> (accessed 28 August 2015).

33. See <http://japaneseamericaninboston.blogspot.fr/2015/07/japanese-american-and-japanese-reaction.html> (accessed 28 August 2015).

34. See <http://japaneseamericaninboston.blogspot.fr/2015/07/part-2-protest-and-counterprotest-july.html> (accessed 28 August 2015).

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