

“Vain Imaginings about Place and Power” : Mikado Trade Cards, Gender, Race, and Leisure

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Introduction

At the beginning of the DVD of the stylized and spirited Opera Australia production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885) filmed at the Sydney Opera House in 1987, as the overture is performed, the camera slowly pans across the stage curtain and we see that it is comprised of a collage of advertisements. Most of them feature cast members of *The Mikado* or Japanese figures: a fierce-looking samurai face asks, “Good morning. Have you used Pears soap?”; the advertisement for Liberty Art Fabrics as well as the panel for the Savoy Theatre feature several characters in costume while the Three Little Maids are dressed in Victorian girls' outfits named after them to advertise “Three Little Maids School Outfits”; a woman models “The Katisha Corset” above an advertisement for “Drawing Room Screens by the Mikado Co.”; and other advertisements for hats, bicycles, eyeglasses, sheet music, and so on foreshadow the use of these products in the opera itself. These images indicate the confluence of East and West; indeed, in the middle of the curtain is a large fan, decorated with a suspiciously Queen Victoria-like woman dressed in exaggerated Japanese drag superimposed upon a Union Jack background.

These mixed images serve two purposes. First, despite the Japanese setting of the play, because they advertise many goods by manufacturers that are clearly demarcated as non-Japanese (many of the adver-

tisements bear addresses of companies located throughout England), the images connect what is to transpire upon the stage with the British Empire of the nineteenth century and accentuate that this is a play that parodies British mores even though the actors are in Japanese costumes. G. K. Chesterton understood this work in this light: “I doubt if there is a single joke in the whole play that fits the Japanese. But all the jokes in the play fit the English” (429). And secondly, the images remind us that *The Mikado*, from its inception, has had strong ties to the culture of consumption.

The Mikado simultaneously took advantage of the Western craze for things Japanese and accelerated it with the Mikadomania that swept through nations on both sides of the Atlantic. Gilbert and Sullivan were wary of unauthorized productions of their operas so with *The Mikado*, they had Richard D'Oyly Carte, who was in charge of the theatrical production in London, organize another troupe to travel to New York in order to perform there. *The Mikado* opened at the Fifth Avenue Theater on August 19, 1885, five months after it opened at London's Savoy Theatre on March 14, 1885. Ian Bradley notes that *The Mikado* became so popular that “on one evening in 1886 there were said to have been 170 separate performances across the United States, no doubt including at least one in the city of Mikado, Michigan, which was named in that year. Richard D'Oyly Carte had five companies touring North America, four in Britain and another touring Continental Europe” (555).

Diana Birchall writes of her grandmother, Asian American writer Winnifred Eaton (aka Onoto Watanna) and her sisters living in Montreal being caught up in Mikado fever in 1886: they were so enthusiastic, they donned kimonos for a photograph (18). Later, when Eaton debuted as a writer, one of her first publicity photographs took its cue from those of *The Mikado*¹.

Even fictional characters were charmed: in Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), Drouet takes Carrie to a theater in Chicago one evening to see *The Mikado* “an opera which was hilariously popular at that time....That spectacle pleased Carrie immensely. The colour and

grace of it caught her eye. She had vain imaginings about place and power, about far-off lands and magnificent people” (72–73).

Carrie was not the only one to have vain imaginings: many of her real-life contemporaries did too. Because of this craze not only for *The Mikado* but for things from Japan (“a far-off land”), the cast of *The Mikado* (the “magnificent people”) was instrumental in nurturing not only specific forms of consumption (the purchasing of fans and parasols and other knickknacks) but also a white female subjectivity that had an attitude toward Asian female bodies that was different from its attitude toward other bodies of color. Advertising cards from the 1880s that were inspired by photographs of cast members of the American production of *The Mikado* not only helped sell products and merchandise that targeted women but also engendered and reflected the japoniste desires of white middle-class American women: these cards assist in fathoming the depth and breadth of how this form of Japonisme was naturalized in everyday domestic practices. In this essay, I examine advertisements from the 1880s that make use of the images from *The Mikado* and explore how the cards give us a glimpse into how race and leisure work at the turn into the twentieth century: that is, how imaginings, vain or not, of a specific place led to a solidifying of power for white middle-class women.

Chromolithographic Trade Cards and *The Mikado*

The advertisements I examine in this paper are trade cards, small advertising cards popular in the last third of the nineteenth century. According to Robert Jay, trade cards existed in North America since the early eighteenth century (7), but it was not until affordable chromolithography became available in the latter half of the nineteenth century that printing, distributing, and collecting trade cards became widespread. After the Civil War, trade cards—advertising cards, usually about 7-8 cm x 10-11 cm in size, printed in bulk and distributed free to the public at retail shops, world’s fairs, and other places—became a major method of

advertising. Companies and retail stores would use trade cards to advertise their wares. They featured colorful designs on one side, and often had additional product or retail shop information on the reverse side. Some companies would have trade cards designed specifically for a certain product and included them in the packaging for that product but most took advantage of the thousands of designs pre-printed on cards, known as stock cards, available from printers and had their product information added afterwards.

As Jay notes, in trade cards, “color was the biggest attraction. At a time when color scarcely existed in periodical publishing, lithographic printing in full color was still a novelty for the general public” (32-33). Interestingly, the designs for these cards, which ran the gamut from children, animals, and flowers to landscapes, historical figures and events, ethnic caricatures, and so on, did not necessarily correspond with the product being advertised². Some of course took pains to make sure that the pictorial image suited the product, but when it didn’t, what was important was choosing a card design that would catch the consumer’s eye. And among these were the colorful trade cards featuring cast members of the American production of *The Mikado*³.

Publicity photographs of costumed cast members of *The Mikado* were available, often through marketing ploys, to an eager public: figure 1, which shows Courtice Pounds as Nanki-Poo, the Mikado’s son who is disguised as a wandering minstrel, is part of a set of seven cabinet photographs featuring the cast of *The Mikado* that consumers could acquire if they sent in to I. L. Cragin & Co. fifteen wrappers of Dobbins’ Electric Soap⁴. This photograph is the source for a trade card for Lautz Bros. & Co.’s Pure and Healthy Soaps (figure 2); the overall layout of the card is the same as the photograph and provides more detail and color: the artist delineates faded parts of this example of the photograph and also adds fanciful touches. Not only the details, but also Nanki-Poo’s exposed legs are made clearer in the trade card version so we see how chromolithography helps to enhance the attraction.

Lautz Bros. & Co.’s Pure and Healthy Soaps as well as J. and P.

Coats' Best Six Cord Thread offered trade cards of the major *Mikado* characters to advertise their product lines. That they had the same characters in similar poses suggests that they were copied from the same photographs that were also part of the series to which the Nanki-Poo photograph belongs. Thomas Beckham explains that a 1885 photograph of actor Frederic Federici costumed as the Mikado was the source of trade cards with his image (13) ; figures 3 and 4 show how two different manufacturers made use of this image for their cards. Like figure 2, figure 3 is one of a series of cards for Lautz Bros. & Co.'s Pure and Healthy Soaps. The cards have the Lautz Bros. & Co. name and message ("Best in the Market") stamped on a preprinted card, indicating that the company chose to use stock cards for their advertising. Figure 4, for J. & P. Coats' Best Six Cord Thread, despite the foreshortened headdress, is evidently from the same photograph as figure 3.

But J. & P. Coats chose not to use stock cards : by having cards de-



Figure 1. Courtice Pounds as Nan-Ki-Poo [sic]. I. L. Cragin & Co., Philadelphia. c. 1885.



Figure 2. Lautz Bros. & Co's Pure and Healthy Soaps trade card. C. Brigham & Co., Northboro, MA. c. 1885.

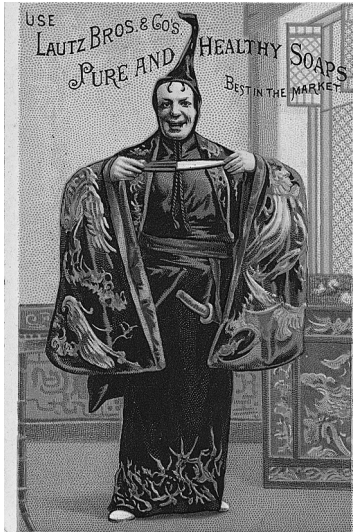


Figure 3. Lautz Bros. & Co's Pure and Healthy Soaps trade card. Jacob Gohn, Wrightsville, PA. c. 1885.

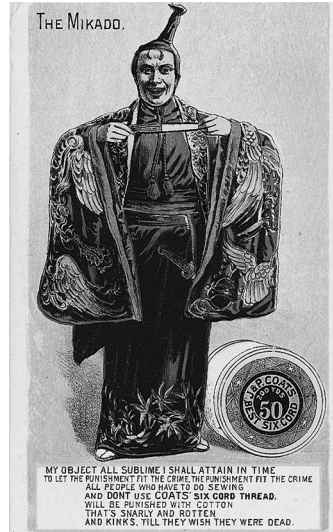


Figure 4. J. & P. Coats' Best Six Cord Thread trade card. c. 1885.

signed for the company, they were able to integrate the image of the spool of thread into the card (something impossible when using a stock card) and also print lyrics from the opera, slightly altered, to reflect favorably upon their product. In Act II of *The Mikado*, the Mikado sings :

My object all sublime
 I shall achieve in time—
 To let the punishment fit the crime—
 The punishment fit the crime ;
 And make each prisoner pent
 Unwillingly represent
 A source of innocent merriment!
 Of innocent merriment! (Act II, ll. 337-44)

Whereas, on the trade card, the J. & P. Coats Mikado sings a slightly different set of lyrics :

My object all sublime I shall attain in time

To let the punishment fit the crime, the punishment fit the
crime

All people who have to do sewing
And don't use Coats' Six Cord Thread,
Will be punished with cotton
That's snarly and rotten
And kinks, till they wish they were dead.

The altered five lines show a disregard for Gilbert's steadfast meter and masculine end rhymes but nonetheless, we have here a precursor of today's celebrity commercial endorsement, complete with not only visuals but a commercial jingle that shamelessly exploits a popular tune. At the very least, the cards induced, if not consumption of said products, frequent visits to retail outlets so that avid collectors could complete their sets of Mikado cards.

Mikado Cards and Representing Women

Though the many cards advertising different products featuring the male characters of *The Mikado*—Nanki-Poo, Pish-Tush, Ko-Ko, and the Mikado—indicate the popularity of the opera as well as that of the chromolithographic trade card, the cards generated from photographs of female cast members are in many ways more significant because they are directly connected to not only Mikadomania but also the rage for dressing, if not in kimonos, then in outfits with accessories that suggest something Japanese. Unlike the photographs and trade cards of male characters in *The Mikado* who are mostly in place for comic relief, the images of the female characters and the actresses who play them serve as a conduit between the high culture Japonisme of antiques and curios that was only accessible to those who were moneyed and the happy popular cross-dressing as a *Mikado* character that democratized the consumption of things Japanese in the United States.

The fascination with Japan in Europe, particularly in France, as well as in the United States, predates *The Mikado*. Though information and

things trickled out of Japan during its centuries of isolation during the Edo period, it was predominantly after Commodore Perry's visit and the subsequent opening of Japan that Japanese things became available to the West. Artists were intrigued by Japanese things and incorporated them into their works. White women in kimonos and/or holding fans became a recurring motif in paintings by Western artists in the 1860s and 1870s: of these, Claude Monet's 1876 painting of his wife surrounded by fans and wearing a bright red kimono, entitled "La Japonaise" may be the most famous, though other artists, such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler and James Tissot also created works in this vein⁵. According to Gabriel P. Weisberg, unlike the Europeans, "[i]n the years immediately after the Civil War, few American were interested in the Far East and in things aesthetic ... [and so they] became familiar with Japanese culture and artifacts through French and English reports and collections" (Meech 16).

The Mikado offered photographic images of white women in Japa-



Figure 5. Geraldine Ulmar as Yum-Yum. I. L. Cragin & Co., Philadelphia, PA. c. 1885.



Figure 6. Poppy Oil Soap trade card. Geo. S. Wiley, Naples, NY. c. 1885.

nese dress, making accessible and affordable to the masses the fascination with things Japanese that was up until that time limited to the well-to-do. As with the photographs of the actors, the photographs of the actresses quickly metamorphosed into trade cards that were freely available and avidly collected. Figure 5 shows Geraldine Ulmar as Yum-Yum, in the same cabinet photograph series from I. L. Cragin as Nanki-Poo. She illustrates the rules white women in Japanese drag must follow to achieve the Mikado style: no discernable yellowface make-up, a big smile, a loose kimono and obi sash, an oversized fan, hair ornaments that look like fans, and bad posture. Figure 6, the trade card for Poppy Oil Soap ("The most Healthful and Economical Soap in the World") shows Ulmar's pose in reverse, but echoes the same characteristics as the photograph.

Figures 7 through 9 show variations on the same theme; these trade cards too most probably took for their inspiration publicity photographs from *The Mikado*. All three have product and retail outlet information printed on stock cards. And all three share the same traits as fig-



Figure 7. Bell's Hazel Oil Soap trade card. R. E. Warren, Utica, NY. 1886.



Figure 8. Rosenbloom Bros. trade card. Providence, RI. 1886.



Figure 9. Mabley & Company's Bazaar trade card. c. 1885.



Figure 10. Misses Ulmar, Forster & St. Maur as Three Little Maids From School. I. L. Cragin & Co., Philadelphia, PA. c. 1885.



Figure 11. Tricora Corset trade card. D. H. Stacy & Son, South Berwick, MA. c. 1885.

ures 5 and 6: a kimono worn like a dressing gown, an oversized fan, a Caucasian face with no pretense toward yellowface, and fan-like decorations in their hair—all indicating not only exoticism but exhibitionist repose in a non-everyday setting.

Not all companies and shops were satisfied with cards that simply copied publicity photographs. For instance, figure 10, which is a photograph of the “Three Little Maids From School” from *The Mikado* performed by Geraldine Ulmar, Kate Forster, and Geraldine St. Maur, was copied by the trade card for the Tricora Corset (“Affords Great Relief and Comfort”) in figure 11, but altered slightly to have the three maids hold their fans open so that the product name “Tricora” could be displayed.

Other manufacturers made more radical changes. As we can see in Figure 12, Thomson’s Patent Glove-Fitting Corsets have slightly hunch-backed Three Little Maids, with their names listed conveniently under-

neath, holding not fans (though fans remain in their hair) but individual corsets. Thomson's trade card is rare in its attempt to inject some authentic Japaneseness into the image by having someone write in bad Japanese handwriting "Mr. Thomson government patent" (translation mine) underneath the crown trademark. In figure 13, which is derived from a different photograph, the three maids carry giant spools of Clark's Mile-End Spool Cotton Thread. Their faces are less distinct than the other examples and their kimonos are strangely multi-colored and multi-layered. However, though unlike the other cards, this one has de-



Figure 12. Thomson's Patent Glove-Fitting Corsets trade card. C. O. Anderson, Wakefield, MA. 1886.



Figure 13. Clark's Mile-End Spool Cotton Thread trade card. c. 1886.



Figure 14. Three Little Maids from School trade card. Wm. Hafner. c. 1886.

terminedly black hair for the maids, the faces and the other characteristics remain the same.

As for figure 14, because of the amazing success of *The Mikado* as an opera as well as a tool for advertising, it was only a matter of time before parody cards such as this one, featuring an African American version of “Three Little Maids from School” became available. The number 49 in the lower right corner suggests that this is a stock card that Wm. Hafner chose to distribute to current and potential customers. The three black girls have bare feet, large decorated hats, and patched clothing. As they hold flowers and their schoolbooks, they smile and simper like the Mikado maids. Because the whiteness of the Mikado maids is naturalized, the blackness of these three maids and their large heads and cartoonish features is in sharp contrast with the chromolithographic trade cards that copy the cast member photographs. The parody is unsettling and heavyhanded.

The Female Consumer, Race, and Leisure

The differences between the African American “Three Little Maids” and those trios of white women in kimonos holding fans or corsets or spools of thread start to illuminate the mainstream “vain imaginings about place and power” in which Dreiser’s Carrie delighted. Whereas the white female consumer might delight in Mikado cards and wish to emulate Yum-Yum or Peep-Bo or Pitti-Sing, she would not necessarily wish to become one of the African American little maids—or rather, she probably would not unless it were an act of minstrelsy.

Marilyn Maness Mehaffy addresses the issue of race in her analysis of representations of African American women in nineteenth-century advertising trade cards. She argues :

[T]he late nineteenth-century trade card occupies an integral place not only in the history of U. S. advertising but also in the imagistic development of the United States as a specifically white, consumer nation : first in the cards’ crucial early valida-

tion of commodity culture and advertising as a therapeutic, redemptive epistemology and pursuit, and, second, in the cards' facilitating the mass reception of a new consumerist ideal of Euro-Anglo American domesticity, both female and national. (133)

Mahaffy examines how the cards "promoted products by advertising a formulaic, albeit revised, nineteenth-century narrative of raced female bodies" and "the visual narrative of ideal (white) consuming domesticity takes shape through her juxtaposition with a mirroring black female figure, typically associated, in contrast, with preindustrial technologies and economies of home production" (133-34). This dichotomy makes sense in light of nineteenth-century ideas of race; that even advertisements subscribed to the same ideology to reinforce white female superiority and privileged consumption indicates the extent to which everyday life was saturated with such conventions. Because the white female consumer ascribes a certain place to the black woman, a place that naturalizes bare feet and patched clothes, and codes her as Other, she is unlikely to want to emulate the African American little maids and is more likely to read this card as a parody that further secures her own position at the top of the consumer hierarchy.

Though it is tempting to extrapolate from this a formula that suggests that the same kind of oppositional white female superiority operates in all relationships between white women and people of color, since each group comes with its own distinct histories, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, elsewhere I have written about how late-nineteenth century trade cards featuring the figure of the queued Chinaman as laundryman and domestic worker complicate the representation of race relations. On one hand, some cards predictably employ images of shooing the Chinese back to China after they lose work because of advances in household products. On the other hand, other cards cast Chinese workers as allies of housewives because they understand the drudgery and toil of household labor ("Representing the Oriental" 200-17). These trade cards as mirrors reflect multiple things, and complicate

our understanding of race, labor, and leisure.

So though Mehaffy's argument is compelling, especially in the context of the black female figures in the trade cards she uses to illustrate how this narrative operates, it does not necessarily translate easily to other cards that feature people of color. And though Mahaffy's point about trade cards reinforcing the primacy white female subjectivity holds, Mikado cards reveal a different side of that subjectivity: though these cards are about race, they are not cards of people of color. In these cards, instead of pitting herself against the ethnic or racial subject, the white woman cross-dresses to become temporarily the Other.

Or does she? Given the scarcity of Japanese women in the United States in the 1880s, the vacuum created by their absence was easily filled by Japanese things and white women portraying the Yum-Yums and the Katishas in ever-multiplying productions of *The Mikado*. Stepping into the place of the Other were white women dressed as Japanese women; therefore, what seems oppositional is actually not oppositional at all. Let me explore this curious slippage as symptomatic of this facet of American Japonisme.

In the 1870s and 1880s in the United States, the vacuum made by the absence of Japanese bodies⁶ was filled with the massive influx of Japanese things. Gilbert opens *The Mikado* with Japanese nobles who sing: "On many a vase and jar—/ On many a screen and fan, / We figure in lively paint: / Our attitude's queer and quaint—/ You're wrong if you think it ain't, oh!" (Act I, ll. 5-9), articulating this substitution of things for people. A few years after *The Mikado* opened, Oscar Wilde, in his essay, "The Decay of Lying" (1891), pointedly questions how this substitution of things for people, or representations of people on/in things, supersedes and then erases the existence of Japanese bodies: "Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? ... In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people" (988). It is because Japan is pure invention that white women can cross-dress as Japanese with such ease.

The Mikado—a prime example of Japan as pure invention—also served as the impetus for making things that stood in for Japanese bodies available and affordable to the public. Cynthia Brandimarte notes that though Japanese antiques and novelties, which were in the pre-*Mikado* days too exclusive for popular consumption, were nonetheless available at ports as well as locales where the well to do shopped such as New York, Newport, Lowell, New Orleans, and San Francisco (6), it was only after Japanese novelty stores took advantage of the popularity of *The Mikado* to create a market for inexpensive Japanese goods that “Americans from the lower and middle classes who lived far afield from style centers and who had neither the expertise nor the means to acquire antique Japanese objects for their homes could suddenly participate in Japanism” (1). Mikado clubs became popular with men and women “foster[ing] the consumption of Japanese goods” (11) which could be purchased at Japanese novelty stores such as Vantine’s (New York, Boston, and Philadelphia), Morimura Brothers (New York, Boston, and Chicago), Yamanaka and Company (New York and Boston) and other stores also in the South and the West, though in those locations, the Japanese novelty stores also offered Chinese goods and many of those stores had Chinese names (11)⁷.

The white female consumer at the turn of the century, empowered by her position as the target audience for advertisements for domestic and luxury goods, fulfilled her role as the Gilded Age conspicuous consumer of the household to prove not only that she possessed the cardinal virtues of True Womanhood but also that she managed the household well enough to deserve time for leisure. This reflected well upon her husband (who after all bankrolled her conspicuous consumption) and herself as well. As Mahaffy’s argument illustrates, because race relations between white women and black women are played out predictably in trade cards, then visually, trade cards reflect dominant ideology while simultaneously instructing the consumer on how to act. And because these cards serve as behavioral prompts, Mikado cards instruct white female consumers what to do in their leisure time : cross-dress as Japa-

nese.

Though Mikado cards as well as related items suggest leisure time, simultaneously, they are significantly devoid of any trappings of labor. Though they often advertise household goods such as thread and soap or purveyors of dry goods, the pictures are not of women darning socks or doing the family laundry : they are pictures of smiling white women, wearing kimonos as if they were dressing gowns, holding giant fans, and decorating their hair with fanciful little fans. The illusion of having no cares (the smiles) or constraints (the dressing gown-like kimono wearing) is a fantasy of leisure. The “Japanese” leisure the women depicted in these cards embody was made possible, if not by the housewife’s own hard work using time-saving new gadgets and products introduced to the public in trade cards, then by the labor of others who are also depicted as such in trade cards. Among them are people of color—African American servants, Chinese American laundrymen—but pointedly they are not Japanese, thus sustaining the illusion of Japan as a far-off land of leisure, uncontaminated by the dreariness of household labor.

The slippage I alluded to earlier, that is, white women and Japanese women seemingly in opposition but actually not because the “Japanese” women are also white, manifests itself in the advertising of cosmetics from “the Orient” offered by A. A. Vantine & Co. Established in 1854, Vantine’s was a major Japanese novelty store in New York ; their cosmetics were itemized and catalogued in a pamphlet entitled *Beauty Hints* (1909). Its opening paragraph speaks to the white female consumer’s continuing fascination with Japanese women : “The crown of Japan is the Japanese woman, who is a vision of grace and loveliness.... Can she give her sister of the Western world a hint or two regarding beauty?”⁸ These beauty hints rhetorically pit women from Japan against those from the West in an extended unpaginated instruction manual. The introduction defines what is superior about the Japanese woman :

For one thing, the almond-eyed beauty is not afraid of the sun and air.

Then again, the belle of the Flowery Kingdom has discov-

ered that to be beautiful she must be always serene. That she must commence the day with a smile. Melancholy and beauty cannot exist together, is her theory. Nerves, too—those beauty destroyers—are kept out of the Island Empire by giving the body abundant rest, the siesta being a part of the daily routine. Above all, little Chrysanthemum never worries.

So we get a hint from all this, comprehended in the one word, “DON’T.”

The rhetoric here is, as expected, oppositional: East versus West, serene and calm and happy versus melancholic and anxious and worried. This is especially ironic since the end of the nineteenth century saw the rise of female neurasthenic illnesses and purported cures, not the least celebrated of which was S. Weir Mitchell’s Rest Cure, most famously criticized in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” (1892). Since “[m]elancholy and beauty cannot exist together,” it follows that if one wants to be beautiful like Japanese women, one must be permanently happy and at leisure. This is the leisured felicity pictured in the Mikado trade cards.

Though all of the advice consists of statements that start with the word “DON’T” and reinforces the opposition between the Japanese woman and the American woman, a closer look at the *Beauty Hints* shows that this opposition does not hold: the pages of “DON’T”s are simply commonsensical advice (“DON’T brush the hair in any other direction than that in which it grows”) interspersed with product advertisement (“DON’T forget that the best and purest emollient is Vantine’s Oriental Cold Cream for dry skin, or Geisha Disappearing Cream for oily skin”) and occasional touches of “oriental” wisdom (“DON’T think you can be beautiful if your heart is full of bitterness; be cheerful and sunny, if you would be pleasing to look upon”). Despite the introductory passage that makes the Japanese woman Vantine’s imagines for the public a desirable Other to which one might aspire, the “DON’T”s that one must follow, though the capital letters are somewhat alarming, make no attempt to disrupt conventional wisdom; in fact, the list caters to what

the woman of leisure, who might need to be gently reminded of what the best creams and cosmetics are for any given situation, might want to hear.

What is remarkable about cross-dressing as a Japanese woman at the turn into the twentieth century is the ease with which one may accomplish this goal. Taking the actresses from *The Mikado* as models already places cross-dressing white women several removes from real Japanese women; however, since they are not cross-dressing to pass, but rather cross-dressing to fulfill a fantasy of leisure, authenticity is not important and issues of race are left unconsidered. The real lives of Japanese women concern them less than the staged illusion of *The Mikado*. This disregard enables and empowers the white female consumer: there are no stakes involved in representing herself as seemingly Other because she never was Other to begin with.

In his essay on Oscar Wilde and Japan, Jeff Nunokawa introduces us to the concept of desire lite, “[t]he light desire that partakes of a late-Victorian climate of manufactured and manipulable passion associated with Wilde in particular, and Aestheticism in general” (44). He names *The Mikado* as one of sources for desire lite since it “supplies local habitation and a name for passions light enough to carry on stage, and agreeable enough to be left at the church door” (50). Mikado cards featuring women operate much in the same way: unlike real desire, which can have a tenacious grip on both the subject and the object of that desire, these cards engender a tame, manageable desire light enough to assume through cross-dressing (a comfy kimono, a loose sash, a fan or two, a smile) and agreeable enough to discard when duties pertaining to everyday life call. Nunokawa comments that “this performance of desire works not to subvert heterosexual normativity, but rather to cooperate with it” (45). The cross-dressing desires of which Mikado cards are a part seem to subvert racial hierarchies and stereotypes of women of color, but as I have explored here, desire lite in this context too, cooperates with existing ideologies and thus reinforces white female consumer privilege.

Conclusion : The Persistence of Parasols

Though figures 15 and 17 have copyright dates that precede *The Mikado*, they foreshadow the Mikado craze to come. Compared to the Mikado cards, the women in these two trade cards seem more contemplative but already, the kimono-like dresses and parasols intimate the attention to outfits and accessories such as parasols that hint at the future rules of Mikado-style cross-dressing. Figure 16 is a photograph that is undated but roughly contemporaneous to these cards. The similarity of this woman's clothing, parasol, and pose to those of the two other trade cards speak to the influence images such as these had.

The parasol is especially important in signifying this woman's participation in a culture that encourages casual cross-dressing. Brandimarte discusses how umbrellas were "embraced by Americans as the synecdoche of Japanese decoration and culture" (18) at the turn into the twentieth century and includes in her essay photos of women in Japanese garb holding parasols, one of which is of women of Hispanic descent living in Texas (21). That women of color cross-dressed as Japanese is fascinating in itself, but if, as I have argued, cross-dressing as Japanese in the Mikado style means cross-dressing as white women who assert their privilege as consumers and as women who can afford leisure time, then Hispanic women, in the same sorts of Mikadoesque outfits and matching conventional accessories as white women might wear, announce their arrival as leisured consumers by cross-dressing as leisured white women.

Parasols persist as a synecdoche of Japan in this undated kitten trade card. Given what we know about *The Mikado*, its popularity, and the dissemination of trade cards, it is hard not to mentally name these kittens Yum-Yum, Peep-Bo, and Pitti-Sing, compare these kittens to conventional representations of the Three Little Maids, and enjoy the visual joke. At the same time, we can not help but recall the grandmother's cat, Pitty Sing, in Flannery O'Connor's signature short story "A Good



Figure 15. Murray & Lanman's Florida Water trade card. H. S. Higby, New Haven, CT. 1881.



Figure 16. Photograph of a woman with a parasol.



Figure 17. J. D. Larkin & Co.'s "Creme" Oatmeal Toilet Soap trade card. Buffalo, NY. 1882.

Man is Hard to Find” (1955). In a deliberate departure from the sweetness of the Three Little Maids (and these sweet-looking kittens), a snarling Pitty Sing precipitates the car accident that leads to the deaths of the grandmother’s entire family and ends up the sole survivor of this tragedy. O’Connor’s antisentimental streak is made even more caustic when one recognizes the irony of the pet’s name.

Parasols and fans persist in the popular imagination as signifiers of a form of leisure that must be performed. In a recent *New York Times* website interactive feature, Bill Cunningham provides a voice-over for the photographs he took at a 1920s themed tea dance picnic on Governors Island which is a short ferry ride away from Manhattan. Many of the photographs were of women in approximations of period outfits, carrying paper parasols and large fans that they had purchased in Chinatown for this playful and leisurely event.

The decade before the 1920s was responsible for the continued interest in orientalist motifs. As Peter Wollen explains, decorative artists such as Paul Poiret, Leon Bakst, and Henri Matisse who had each “created a scenography of the Orient that enabled them to redefine the image of the body, especially, but not exclusively the female body” in the pivotal years before World War I (5). Wollen declares them the last orientalists in art and the first modernists (8) : the Orient of Poiret “who

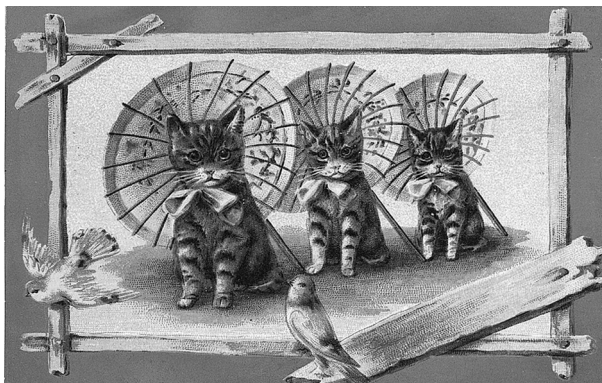


Figure 18. Kittens and parasols trade card.

sealed the fate of the corset” (10), Bakst, and Matisse was the Near East but in their lush imaginings of the world of Arabian nights, they extended the shelf-life of leisurely oriental cross-dressing, making possible the recent retro playfulness of tea dance parasols and fans.

For the racial diverse crowd on Governors Island, the props that represented the vain imaginings of the late-nineteenth-century white female consumer no longer signified the same power and privilege ; what remains is the illusion of “Japanese” leisure. However, even today kimono-like jackets and dresses continue to be created and purchased by women of all colors in United States, Canada, and Europe who, knowingly or not, allude to a specific kind of female subjectivity from yesteryear. One cannot help but wonder if their wearing these items of clothing reveals a desire to (re)assert those vain imaginings about place and power and privilege—or to challenge them.

Notes

1. I discuss Winnifred Eaton’s cross-dressing as being influenced by *The Mikado* and trade cards in more detail in “Onoto Watanna’s Japanese Collaborators and Commentators.”

2. In addition to Robert Jay’s *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America*, Dave Cheadle’s *Victorian Trade Cards : Historical Reference & Value Guide* provides many examples of the diversity of trade cards.

3. The original American cast (Fifth Avenue Theater, New York, August 19, 1885-April 17, 1886, 250 performances) was as follows :

The Mikado : Frederic Federici

Nanki-Poo : Courtice Pounds

Yum-Yum : Geraldine Ulmar

Ko-Ko : George Thorne

Pooh-Bah : Fred Billington

Pish-Tush : George Byron Browne

Katisha : Elsie Cameron

Pitti-Sing : Kate Forster

Peep-Bo : Geraldine St. Maur

4. All figures (photographs and trade cards) are from the author’s collection.

5. Later, in the 1880s and 1890s, artists whose works were informed and influenced by Japanese woodblock prints include Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, and Aubrey Bearsley. For an excellent overview of Japonisme in Western arts and crafts, see Lionel Lambourne's *Japonisme : Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West*. Also, Julia Meech and Gabriel P. Weisberg's *Japonisme Comes to America : The Japanese Impact on the Graphic Arts 1876-1925* provides an intriguing account of Japan's influence in the United States, showing how it both shares with and diverges from European Japonisme.

6. Brandimarte notes that only 55 Japanese were reported living in the United States in 1870, 148 in 1880, and 2,039 in 1890 (23).

7. For further discussion of the phenomenon of Japanese things, see Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East : White Women and American Orientalism* (especially Chapter 1) ; Christopher Bush, "The Ethnicity of Things in America's Lacquered Age," and Thomas W. Kim, "Being Modern : The Circulation of Oriental Objects."

8. *Beauty Hints* consists of 24 unpaginated pages, with most of the recto pages devoted to the list of "DON'T"s and most of the verso pages listing their wares : "Oriental Perfumes," "Oriental Sachets," "Oriental Toilet Specialties," "Oriental Toilet Soaps," and "Oriental Toilet Waters." There are photographs of various locations in Japan as well as one of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India.

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本稿は成城大学特別研究助成（「マスコミュニケーションに関する統合的研究」）に基づく研究成果の一部である。