

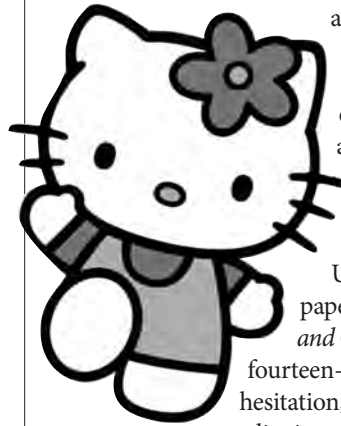
## On Another Playground Japanese Popular Culture in America

WRITTEN BY CHRISTINE YANO, KEIKO IKE, AND WILLIAM KELLY  
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AND CENTER FOR AMERICAN STUDIES, DOSHISHA UNIVERSITY

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Reviewed by Carl Rachelson

However we cast it, there has been an Eastern awakening among Westerners in recent years. Whether *manga*, Ichiro, or an inhalation of spider rolls has prompted this stirring, it is clear that Kanji-tattooed folks sporting Kanji-drawn T-shirts often ponder Asia. So if I were to seek classroom material that I could use in order to slake this thirst, I might tend toward topics discussed in this new DVD, where anthropologists present case studies on *Hello Kitty*, sushi, and baseball. These three may seem like strange bedfellows, but they commingle in *On Another Playground: Japanese Popular Culture in America*, a DVD set designed, edited, and co-produced by David Plath



at the Center for American Studies at Doshisha University in Kyoto. After all, what fervent Japanophile could resist exploring their nascent interest by way of at least one of these beloved topics?

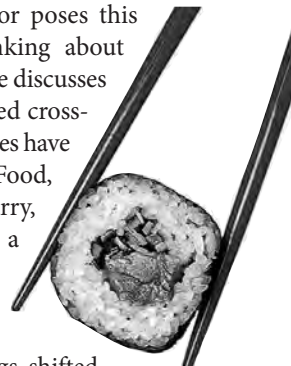
Quick—why do people buy *Hello Kitty* paraphernalia? After watching Professor Christine Yano from the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, read her paper called *Kitty Does Dallas: The Marketing and Consumption of Japanese Cute*, I asked my fourteen-year-old daughter this question. Without hesitation, she answered, "Because it's cute, and the quality is good. Japan is cool." Professor Yano is a tad more analytical than a fourteen-year-old, so as scholars often do, she deconstructs. In a nutshell—if meticulously deconstructing *Hello Kitty* is of weighty significance to you, this lecture strikes the mother lode.

Professor Yano examines *Hello Kitty* more rigorously than Toyota prepares for April's issue of *Consumer Reports*. Discussing the realm of *kawaii*—cuteness—and how it has been localized, she veers to the forces that form the basic core of the existence of its purchasers. In the *Hello Kitty* blogosphere, there are some pretty incendiary views! Professor Yano notes how *Hello Kitty* "basks in the glow of Pink Globalization," and introduces the "Global Chorus of Beings" who consume because of their "empathy, nostalgia, healing, and sentimentality." Professor Yano suggests that shopping for *Hello Kitty* provides therapy, empowerment, and pleasure in the daily lives of the most ardent fans. When Professor Yano concludes her theory with the mention of pleasure, my daughter had been vindicated.

Ted Bestor from Harvard follows with *Sushi and the Western Imagination of Japan*. Early on, Professor Bestor poses this question, "How did Americans go from thinking about 'Charley the Tuna' to 'sashimi-grade maguro?'" He discusses cultural changes like global markets, unanticipated cross-fertilized ideas, and the ways that crossed boundaries have reframed maps, leading to trendy developments. Food, Professor Bestor explains, is an example. Indian curry, Chinese-American food, and the casting of a culinary net by the wealthy in dominant societies are all pressed into his sushi story.

Historically, Americans were consciously dismissive toward Japan for decades, until things shifted. Professor Bestor unveils a humorous 1929 article in which the use of language not only reflects a disdain for Japanese food, but also captures the squeamishness we still hear uttered by children and gastronomic miscreants. Another foray shows the Tokyo Union Church's guide to the overseas housewife, blonde of course, struggling at the Tokyo marketplace. Professor Bestor notes that fear, reluctance, and repugnance are traits that run through the American encounter with sushi. He follows this with a cartoon asking whether bait and sushi are the same.

Primarily, according to Professor Bestor, the Allied occupation didn't inform Americans as much as emerging 1950s tourism, trans-pacific jet service, and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Western exports like tempura and sukiyaki, and Kikkoman's American introduction of soy sauce and teriyaki sauce, led to sushi, nouvelle cuisine, and pan-Asian food. Here Professor Bestor might have filled in the gap between the



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## "How did Americans go from thinking about "Charley the Tuna" to "sashimi-grade maguro?"

50s and the 90s a bit more; it leads one to think that a bit of magic took place. Yet when Professor Bestor frames the Western appreciation of sushi, explains the motivation of the elite who cherish it, and illustrates sushi's cool factor, he enlightens us on health, zen, gestalt, aesthetics, innovation, craftsmanship, and the sort of cool excellence that Americans have come to imagine when thinking of Japanese-ness. Finally, he explains how mass-marketing affects sushi, its status suffering as supermarkets get it, kitsch clutches it, how the word itself becomes a symbol of mockery and mischievousness, and like lemongrass, persimmon, and green tea, an idea worth squeezing out every dollar.

The final lecture, a scrupulous inspection of baseball given by Yale's William Kelly, touches several bases. For hardball fans of any persuasion, Professor Kelly's examination probes the migration of athletes to and from both US and Japan, touching on themes that will enthrall any devoted disciple of the diamond. Herein lies the problem; aficionados will be far better attuned to the topics and names dropped ever so inoffensively throughout the lecture. As a member of the cognoscenti, I see how Professor

Kelly adds compelling visuals to help the uninitiated (or soccer fans).

Professor Kelly talks about not only the stars, but in a quintessentially American way, the scrubs, though no upright Japanese would use that word within earshot of other decent Japanese. He also shows ironically how "Japanese" American baseball is, with its profit sharing and recognition of the small market teams, and how "American" Japanese baseball has been, with the Yomiuri conglomerate dominating the business.

Professor Kelly assesses the nature of foreign born players in both America and Japan, and how Matsui and Ichiro jerseys outsell all others. For sports enthusiasts, it is compelling. Brilliant as it is, it is best for fans only.

I am not a scholar. Most often, I am an eighth grade English teacher with interest in Asia and a few years' experience teaching about it. For years, my students have enjoyed my simple stories about Japan. Here, conversely, are three fifty-minute lectures in color, DVD format, the latter two with ample visuals. Broken into sections, parts of each might be, in the right hands, quite compelling. At the end of the day, passionate lovers of Japan just cannot get enough. ■

**CARL RACHELSON** participated in a one-year AET Program between the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the city of Omiya, now part of Saitama City in 1992. He remained there for five years. Upon returning to the US, he began an exchange between the Palmer Trinity School and Omiya West High School that has continued for ten years, sent nearly one hundred twenty members of the community to Japan, and hosted a similar number. He has participated in both the JapaNet and National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) programs at Florida International University with Steven Heine.



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