

## Racist Attachments: Dakko-chan, Black Kitsch, and Kawaii Culture

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In the summer of 1960, John Dominis, a noted American photojournalist for *Time Magazine*, took a picture of a line of Japanese people winding down a Tokyo street (see fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The children in the foreground of the image sit on stools. It is clear that everyone came prepared for a long wait. With this assignment, Dominis, who had served as a combat photographer during World War II (Vitello 2013), found himself back in Japan, tasked with capturing what might have seemed to be a far more innocent spectacle: the sudden consumer frenzy surrounding a doll named Dakko-chan ダッコちゃん (Dakko-chan) (see fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> In what came to be called the Dakko-chan būmu ダッコちゃんブーム (Dakko-chan boom) of the early 1960s, tens of thousands of Japanese people lined up to purchase an inflatable blackface doll with a circular red mouth, grass skirt, and winking hologram eyes. In Japanese, dakko 抱っこ means “to hug,” and Dakko-chan’s astronomical



**Figure 1** Waiting in line to purchase a Dakko-chan doll. Courtesy of LIFE Photo Collection.



**Figure 2** A young woman posing with Dakko-chan dolls. Courtesy of LIFE Photo Collection.

popularity resulted in part from the way the doll could be worn as an accessory, attached to the body by its hugging arms (Saitō 1978: 260). This article asks what it meant for Japan, a nation still recovering from the racialized violence of the war and contending with the deflation of its imperial ambitions, to quite literally embrace American blackface imagery in the form of an embraceable doll.

In Japanese *kawaii* 可愛い (cute) culture, blackface has proved difficult to abandon, persistently reappearing since World War II despite numerous efforts to expose its violent origins and damaging effects. The attraction of

blackface in a nation with historically a relatively small Black population, and without the specific history that gave rise to blackface in the United States, begs the question of how and why black kitsch has been able to evoke such powerful emotional attachments across cultural contexts. In Japan, blackface has assumed a variety of forms across media ranging from comedy to commercial advertising to anime and manga. Yet kawaii culture has played an especially crucial role in the circulation of blackface by lending racist caricatures a “cute” shape explicitly designed to inspire feelings of affection. As evidence, during the height of the Dakko-chan boom, as many as 2.4 million Dakko-chan dolls were sold, with more than 6 million sold in all, and the doll continues to inspire feelings of nostalgia into the twenty-first century (“Dakko-chan ‘seiki no henshin’” 2000). However, much of the scholarship on kawaii has not attended to blackface’s role in its development or to the racial logics that underpin this minor aesthetic. Christine Yano (2013) and Leslie Bow (2019) examine kawaii’s relationship to whiteface and yellowface, respectively, but scholarly attention to its relationship to blackface remains sparse. From the opposite angle, John Russell (1991) studies blackface in Japanese popular culture, but does not explore in depth how its popularity has been informed by the kawaii aesthetic. That is, while kawaii is often understood to embody Japan’s sense of infantilization in response to World War II and the US occupation, kawaii’s cathexis of the racial politics driving this history has not been explored. This history is important because racist kawaii characters have drawn significant criticism of Japan abroad, while it has been these very kawaii qualities that have enabled some Japanese people to insist on their transcendence of race. I argue here that far from being racially innocent, when Dakko-chan emerged at a critical juncture in US-Japan relations, the doll gave material form to many of the racial feelings running through this moment in history—feelings that still cling to kawaii culture today.

Of course, as Mitzi Carter and Aina Hunter argue, Blackness in Japan cannot be understood as merely figural. They observe that much of the research on anti-Black racism in Japan does not reflect the full complexity of their experiences as Black women. As Carter and Hunter (2008: 197) write, “What academics need to further emphasize is that not all Japanese accept black people as appendages—chopped up, packaged, and ready to be

consumed.” While this article focuses on racist representations rather than the ways in which Black people and antiracist allies challenge these representations, I acknowledge the importance of their critique and aim to contribute to the project of de-essentializing scholarship on Blackness in Japan. In exploring the twisted logics that enable race to simultaneously appear and disappear in figures like Dakko-chan, this article identifies (anti-)Blackness as intrinsic to *kawaii* itself, an aesthetic that has frequently been viewed through essentializing frameworks that posit Blackness as antithetical to its “uniquely Japanese” nature. At the same time, because of this article’s investment in understanding anti-Black racism in 1960s toy culture, the picture it presents of Blackness in Japan is necessarily limited. Will Bridges (2020), Yukiko Koshiro (1999), Yuichiro Onishi (2013), and other scholars offer a broader view of cultural and political exchanges that have transpired across the Black Pacific, emphasizing Afro-Asian solidarities and the experiences of Japan’s racial minorities. Moreover, scholarship on the relationship between *kawaii* and Blackness should eventually account for the increasing visibility of Black-Japanese multiracial women, including Ariana Miyamoto and Naomi Osaka, and their influence on perceptions of Black femininity in contemporary Japan as well as the growing participation of Black people across the globe in *kawaii*-adjacent fandoms. Although I focus on the Dakko-chan boom as a historical phenomenon, these demographic and cultural shifts, which highlight the importance of challenging anti-Black racism in *kawaii* culture, motivate and contextualize my critique of *kawaii*’s origins.

As scholarship on American blackface has shown, racist kitsch fixes itself in the cultural imagination by cloaking racial harm under a “cute” surface. Robin Chandler (1996: 17) argues that the “visual terrorism” that Black kitsch collectibles perform—their capacity “to express contempt for, to disempower and to terrorise” Black people—has been eclipsed by the ease with which dominant groups can dismiss such objects as mere “innocuous playtime.” Comparably, Robin Bernstein (2011) coins the term “racial innocence” to point to how childhood’s putatively sheltered world enacts the erasure of racial memory under the pretense of its ignorance toward racial trauma. In the American context, childhood innocence and its associated objects thereby retain the cultural memory of slavery and segregation while simul-

taneously functioning to deny the ongoing impact of those very histories. Not only does the kawaii aesthetic draw from these associations to confer racist objects with an imagined innocence, it also posits that their entry into a Japanese context gifted them with an additional layer of unknowing. Although it may be true that the meanings attached to racist images shift when they move across cultural contexts, the continual return of blackface in Japan should indicate that these images have hardly been stripped of racist significance: As its enduring popularity shows, blackface did not lose its significance when it came to Japan, but instead amassed affective registers, becoming *hyper-loaded* with signification.

Therefore, instead of simply understanding kawaii through the relationship between subjects and objects, as Sianne Ngai (2012) does in her influential study of cuteness, this article understands kawaii as an affect that binds together collective bodies. In her work on the politics of affect, Sara Ahmed (2004: 119) writes that “emotions work by sticking figure[s] together . . . a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective.” This sticking often occurs through “happy objects,” objects animated by our desires that accumulate affective value as they get passed around (Ahmed 2010: 21). As quintessential “happy objects,” kawaii commodities promise happiness in the form of small trinkets such as key chains, wallets, and stationery goods, items designed to contain and transmit social value. Sanrio, a Japanese company famous for creating Hello Kitty and other popular kawaii characters, markets its products under the slogan “Small Gift, Big Smile,” a phrase that encapsulates the significance of interpersonal exchange to the work that kawaii commodities perform (Yano 2013: 70). Hiroshi Nittono (2016: 90) explains one way in which this occurs through what he calls the “kawaii spiral”: “When someone feels kawaii, this feeling is expressed by the facial expression of smiling. Another person sees the former person as kawaii (remember that a smile is a powerful factor of kawaii) and also smiles.” In other words, one person’s expression of pleasure in response to a kawaii object can inspire a reciprocal reaction in another person, thereby intensifying the object’s affective power. In this way, kawaii acts as an affect that passes not only between subjects and objects but also between subjects and subjects, with kawaii objects acting as conduits of positive feeling.

Within this framework, the kawaii aesthetic’s mechanisms of attach-

ment offer a new perspective on racial innocence. While racial innocence has sometimes served to insulate racist caricatures from the criticisms that antiracist activists have leveled against them, this alone cannot explain the affective charge that such images and ideologies have assumed across time and space. Because idealized notions of childhood still maintain an extraordinary portability and power, we should note how innocence not only protects and preserves emotional attachments to racist constructs but also gives them their force. Enabling us to indulge in feelings of safety, comfort, and connection from which it can be difficult to disentangle ourselves, innocence sets into motion the psychic mechanisms that lend attachment its very potency. *Kawaii* facilitates this dynamic by aestheticizing racist objects, signifying not only innocence but also its particular appeal. In what follows, I unpack the racial logics that structure *kawaii* before tracing Dakko-chan's history from its emergence in postwar Japan through to its contemporary recirculation in the global flows of twenty-first-century commodity capitalism. In so doing, I illustrate how *kawaii* objects have appropriated black kitsch to put a "cute" face on racial domination and to falsely defend that domination as a form of loving embrace.

### **"Made in Occupied Japan"**

As a rapidly expanding body of scholarship has observed, the cute aesthetic hinges on a play of power relations. Cute objects assume infantile forms of smallness, roundness, and softness, and these forms are thought to trigger in the aesthetic subject the desire to hug, play, nurse, and protect. However, these vulnerable qualities can also evoke reciprocal compulsions, such as the desire to crush, devour, manipulate, and possess (Ngai 2012: 65). Hence, Ngai characterizes cuteness as a fundamentally ambivalent "commodity aesthetic" (5). Producing pleasures linked to control and consumption, the cute is intimately bound up in power differentials. This power play bears a relationship to the ambivalence of racial fetishism in which racial difference not only becomes a site of terror but also incites desire. bell hooks (1992: 367) elucidates this idea in her article "Eating the Other," writing that "when race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as

constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.” Racist kitsch items (Turner 2002) like mammy cookie jars and Sambo coin banks embody this dynamic by literalizing the objectification and consumption of Black people. At the turn of the century, with the rise of Jim Crow in the American South, these objects were increasingly put into service in the domestic space, where they enabled racial domination to be made intimate while serving as a literal form of containment.

Although “kawaii” is typically translated as “cute,” the Japanese term suggests an array of unique associations that resist direct translation. Yuko Hasegawa (2002: 128) writes, “The concept of kawaii includes elements such as cute, pretty, and lovely, but it is not restricted to these. It also implies something precious: something that we are drawn toward and which stimulates one’s feeling of wanting to protect something that is pure and innocent.” While the cute aesthetic emerged in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, many scholars read kawaii’s flourishing in postwar Japan as a response to the nation’s defeat, demilitarization, and subordination to US military power. In the wake of the war, Japan earned a reputation for assimilating Western culture with shocking speed, enveloping American forms and figures in Japanese aesthetics while imbuing them with a wounded love. The Japanese pop artist Takashi Murakami (2005: 141) champions this perspective, asserting that Japan’s role as a postwar “testing ground” for Western capitalism catalyzed the playful consumerism that kawaii products promote. He writes, “Whatever true intentions underlie ‘Little Boy,’ the nickname for Hiroshima’s atomic bomb, we Japanese are truly, deeply, pampered children. And as pampered children, we throw constant tantrums while enthralled by our cuteness.” However, it is also important to recall how racism was pivotal to this history. Prior to and during World War II, the United States issued yellow-peril propaganda that framed Japanese people as racially inferior threats to American power, propaganda that led to the unjust imprisonment of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans in US concentration camps, while Japan attempted to justify its imperial aggressions by portraying itself as the chosen “leader” of Asian nations in a global fight against white supremacy (Koshiro 1999: 1). Given the racism that propelled World War II and its aftermath, kawaii

subsumed not only the traumas of war and occupation but also the racial feelings in which these geopolitical conflicts were mired.

The paradox that underlies *kawaii*'s simultaneous claims to universality and particularity further informs the racialization of this aesthetic. Many scholars have contended that *kawaii* reflects the unique psychology of Japan's supposedly insular and exceptional culture. Namely, in *Amae no kōzō 甘えの構造 (The Anatomy of Dependence)*, Takeo Doi (1981: 8) explains *kawaii*'s rise through *amae* 甘え (dependence), or what he calls the profound wish in Japanese society "to be dependent and [seek] the other's 'indulgence.'" Doi (1981: 163) states, "The desire to look cute is, as hardly needs pointing out, a typical expression of *amae*. It is interesting that this trend should be found all over the world today, and not only in Japan, long known as a 'paradise for children.'" Published in 1971, about a decade after the Dakko-chan boom, *The Anatomy of Dependence* has proved controversial for essentializing Japanese culture. Yet it remains foundational to many common conceptions of *kawaii*. For instance, the Japanese designer Miki Kato draws from Doi to locate contemporary *kawaii*'s origins in traditional aesthetics of simplicity, irregularity, and perishability and argues that these values reflect Japan's history and landscape. She (Kato 2002) notes, "Living on isolated islands surrounded by seas, the Japanese have had few invasions and developed gentle and non-aggressive traits. These meteorological and geographical aspects have helped to create people who love milder, softer, and lighter things." Accordingly, she contends that *kawaii* cannot truly be appreciated outside of its Japanese context. She asserts, for example, that on encountering a British man with a Hello Kitty tattoo, she felt perplexed. The permanence of the tattoo conflicted with what she understood as the qualities of fragility and transience essential to *kawaii*. In this way, *kawaii* has frequently been understood as an aesthetic native to Japan, an aesthetic that could only have arisen within Japan's unique social milieu. This idea of its peculiarity points to cultural and ethnic tensions at the heart of *kawaii*: it is believed paradoxically to represent both a universal affective response and a culturally and ethnically specific aesthetic.

Thus, although *kawaii* absorbs and adapts elements drawn from Western cultures, those very acts of absorption and adaptation have been thought to lend *kawaii* products a unique "Japanese" style. Despite *kawaii*'s globaliza-



tion, the idea that it retains distinctly Japanese forms and feelings remains intact. Inuhiko Yomota (2006: 182) explains, “As kawaii culture expands and crosses over the ocean, globalization serves as its premise. Hello Kitty, Chihiro [from Hayao Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*], and Pikachu are, so to speak, children of globalization.” He then muses, “Kawaii is a special aesthetic unique to Japan. In response to globalization, could it become diffused across the world? Or is it a universal aesthetic for humankind?” (2006: 185). According to Yomota’s counterintuitive logic, kawaii can be both a “special aesthetic unique to Japan” and a “universal aesthetic for humankind,” because part of kawaii’s global appeal arises from its embrace of the foreign. Koichi Iwabuchi (2004: 58) uses the term *mukokuseki* 無国籍 (statelessness), literally “without a nationality,” to describe this quality of contemporary Japanese popular culture, its disavowal of cultural and ethnic meaning through amalgamation. The anime character Sailor Moon, for example, appears white—with her blonde hair and blue eyes—but is framed as ethnically Japanese, bearing the name “Usagi Tsukino.” Because kawaii characters, media, and products are believed to be “culturally odorless,” they supposedly possess the ability to travel fluidly into new cultural contexts while vacating themselves of racial meaning.

Accordingly, if the universal view of kawaii risks naturalizing those for whom people should care, rendering nurture a matter of attractiveness, the particularized view risks associating kawaii too narrowly with a psychic structure assumed to be common to a given ethnic group. To put it another way, the idea that aesthetic values are tethered to distinct national psyches contains hints of racial exceptionalism. Here, the explanation that “the Japanese have had few invasions and developed gentle and non-aggressive traits” does more than simply gloss over the historical record, overlooking Japan’s histories of imperialism and wartime atrocities, but also makes the dubious assertion that the kawaii aesthetic creates a “people” who not only share a culture but also are bound together by an exclusive set of inherent affective tendencies arising from the “meteorological and geographical aspects” of Japan. In this way, the emotional makeup necessary to appreciate the kawaii aesthetic is deemed accessible only to Japanese people. Altogether then, whether understood as universal or particular, kawaii hinges on notions of cultural and ethnic inclusion and exclusion.

Because kawaii circulates as a social affect that both masks and diffuses racial feelings, its convergence with blackface raises the question of how kawaii products have facilitated the transference of these feelings on a global scale. The history of this phenomenon becomes especially apparent in Japan's manufacture of blackface commodities in the aftermath of the war. During the American occupation from 1945 to 1952, Japan became a primary producer of black kitsch collectibles that were designed for export to the United States (Russell 2015: 197).

Although most of these Occupation-era products likely had limited domestic circulation, they predicted the rise of kawaii blackface in the years that followed. Of particular significance, Helen Bannerman's 1899 children's book *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was published in Japan in 1953 and quickly became a runaway bestseller. Starring a "kawaii black boy" as its protagonist, the book narrates the boy's escape from hungry tigers (Bannerman 2004: 2). As I argue elsewhere, the book's recourse to food metaphor—"I just want to eat you up!"—helped establish the intimate relationship between kawaii culture and "eating the other" (Kalnay 2020). Dakko-chan continued this trend while giving it a material shape. Appearing less than a decade later, the doll became another major force in embedding blackface in kawaii.

### "A Doll to the Last"

When the Dakko-chan boom hit in 1960, Japan had already sustained a long and complicated history of imagining Blackness. As early as the sixteenth century, dehumanizing images of Black people began to circulate in Japan following contact with African and East Indian servants who worked for Portuguese and Dutch traders (Russell 1991: 5). In 1854, when Commodore Matthew Perry "opened" Japan to the West by providing Japanese diplomats with an American minstrel show (Hughes 2003: 338), this performance marked the salience of race to ensuing US-Japan relations. Since that time, as Russell has argued, Black people have served as a "reflexive symbol through which Japanese [people] attempt[ed] to deal with their own ambiguous racio-cultural status in a Eurocentric world" (1991: 6). In other words, many Japanese people looked to people of African descent to understand their place

in a Western racial hierarchy. These reflexive processes of racial formation assumed various forms, ranging from alliance to disavowal. While young people and radical thinkers found inspiration in and sought political, cultural, and artistic alliances with Africa and its diasporas (Onishi 2013), the government sought to assert Japan's elevated status as quasi-"white" relative to other non-Western nations. In the postwar period in particular, African Americans were often scapegoated to strengthen Japan's postwar identity without harming American relations (Hughes 2003: 337). That is, if Japanese people could not easily criticize their white American occupiers, they could look down on African Americans as a more indirect means of criticizing America. For example, many of the "pan-pan girls," or Japanese sex workers who served the occupying forces, assumed a lower status if they associated with African American GIs (Takeuchi 2010: 92). Within this context, Dakko-chan's abstract qualities offered an especially powerful "reflexive symbol" that seemed capable of absorbing a wide range of contradictory feelings.

Kigen Oki, Dakko-chan's inventor, was only nineteen years old when he joined the toy design department at Takara, then called Sato Vinyl Industry Company, in 1959. In an article recalling Dakko-chan's creation, he states that the concept for the doll emerged not from its trademark hugging action or winking expression, but from its color. Oki (2013: 348) visited toy departments around Tokyo in his spare time to observe everyday consumer behavior. He recalls watching one young woman who "seemed to be a mother" pick up a product and say to herself, "I wish this came in black." At the time, the Japanese toy industry typically manufactured its products only in the primary colors that were considered most appealing to children. By choosing to make Dakko-chan black, then a fashionable color, Oki hoped to attract adult customers. After deciding on black, he then elected to manufacture the doll out of vinyl, a material with a "fresh feeling." Prior to the 1960s, such toys were usually made out of rubber or celluloid, giving the new plastic a sense of novelty (Saitō 1978: 262). Onto the doll's twelve-inch vinyl body, Oki placed cheap plastic-and-cardboard hologram eyes originally manufactured in America. The eyes appeared to wink depending on the doll's angle in relation to the viewer (Aku 2005: 164). Finally, he outfitted both male and female dolls in grass skirts and distinguished the girls with red bows (Oki 2013: 348).

Oki's assertion that he made Dakko-chan black simply to experiment with a new marketing strategy points to the racial disavowal that has surrounded the doll. Oki (2013: 348) maintains to this day that Dakko-chan's black color bears no relation to race. Reminiscing on the trend, he states, "Dakko is a 'doll' to the last. It is not modeled on humans or animals." There is, of course, something nonsensical about his refusal to acknowledge any anthropomorphic or zoomorphic content in his creation. A doll is, by definition, typically a model of a human or an animal, and Dakko-chan at one point went by the name *kuronbo bura-chan* 黒ん坊ブラちゃん (swinging pickaninny), *kuronbo* 黒ん坊 being an anti-Black racist slur (Saitō 1978: 260). To add to the dubiousness of Oki's claim, Yasuta Sato (2010: 319), Takara's company president at the time, asserts that he found in Dakko-chan an opportunity to recast one of his favorite scenes from *Bōken dankichi* 冒険 (*The Adventures of Dankichi*), a manga he loved as a child. The manga chronicles a boy adventurer's encounter with simian-like, dark-skinned "savages" on an island. For Sato, Dakko-chan recalled a scene in which one of these characters climbs a tree to pick a coconut. Yet, if the conceit that Dakko-chan is "not modeled on humans or animals" remains specious, it does reveal a striking desire to lift Dakko-chan from all referential content, to render the doll a pure affective signifier. As "a doll to the last," Dakko-chan came to be perceived by many as a floating embodiment of the tender feelings commonly associated with dolls, an abstract symbol of love and attachment.

The *kawaii* aesthetic facilitated Dakko-chan's disavowal of racism. *Kawaii* not only involves a process of formal abstraction but also attaches this abstraction to its role as a conduit of positive feeling. Accordingly, in 2014, Sanrio caused an uproar on English-language social media when the company declared that "Hello Kitty is not a cat," but instead "a little girl, an icon, a superstar, and ultimately, a friend" (Miranda 2014). Dakko-chan has similarly been framed as an imaginary character able to transcend referentiality, including such mundane, and implicitly Western, preoccupations as race. Takara (2001: 161) states: "Dakko-chan is not a product modeled on Black people, but a child who burned pitch-black in the sun. Dakko-chan is a 'deformed' symbol of intense energy. There is definitely nothing like an intention to discriminate."

The word *deforme* デフォルメ (deformed), borrowed from the French word *déformer*, here refers to artistic distortions used in anime and manga. These distortions can involve simplifying, emphasizing, exaggerating, or omitting physical characteristics for purposes of affective expression. *Chibi* ちび, or miniature characters who appear in anime and manga, often popping up to underscore a character's heightened emotions, embody this "deformed" quality. Takara claims that Dakko-chan similarly represents a concentrated affective state—in this case, a state of "intense energy." Although Takara asserts that this "deformed" state forecloses racism, its investment of feeling in a simplified form resonates with what Ngai observes are the entwined processes of animation and racialization. Because both involve stereotyping and subjection to external control, "the seemingly neutral state of 'being moved' becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject" (Ngai 2005: 91). In Oki's own words (2013: 349), he created Dakko-chan to evoke strong but tender feelings, to give everyone "the same small happiness as everyone else."

In the summer of 1960, desire for this "same small happiness" swept through Japan, as Dakko-chan became popular with children, teenagers, and adults alike. In contrast to the Hula-Hoop, another toy that had generated a fad of its own only a few years earlier, Dakko-chan could not be rapidly mass-produced, causing a product shortage that intensified the fad even further (Saitō 1978: 261). Although Takara churned out more than seven thousand dolls a day ("Dakkochan Delirium" 1960), toy departments sold out within minutes, forcing department stores to adopt a ticketing system to control demand. Street vendors, some of them connected to the yakuza, took advantage of the shortage by selling Dakko-chan on the black market for as much as five times the market value (Saitō 1978: 260). In response to this frenzy, Yoshihiro Suda, a planning chief at Takara, stated, "The whole thing is crazy" ("Dakkochan Delirium" 1960).

Rather than adhere to a single explanation, the "craziness" of the Dakko-chan boom seemed to respond to a vague collective feeling. When asked to provide a rationale for the doll's popularity, a number of teenagers merely replied, "It's so cute and lovable that I just have to have one" ("Dakkochan Delirium" 1960). However, others attempted to offer up a variety of more pointed explanations, many of which spoke to the salience of Dakko-chan's

race. The critic Soichi Oya observes, “A black doll could only be embraced during a time when interest in Black culture was strong thanks to developments such as the popularity of mambo music, a boom in Black cinema, and independence movements in Africa” (Saitō 1978: 260). The artist Setsu Nagasawa likewise cites the mounting popularity of jazz music, stating, “A Negro culture wave seems to be sweeping Japanese youth” (“Dakkochan Delirium” 1960), while the novelist Tensei Kawano elaborates, “We of the younger generation are outcasts from politics and society. In a way we are like Negroes, who have a long record of oppression and misunderstanding, and we feel akin to them” (“Dakkochan Delirium” 1960). By describing the connection that drew young Japanese people to Black cultures as a “feeling,” Kawano illustrates the affective load that Blackness carried in the postwar period. In the 1960s, many young Japanese people looked to the African diaspora, and African Americans in particular, in search of mutual recognition in what they perceived as shared oppression. By doing so, they hoped to reject the imposition of “white culture” associated with conservative ideals and Japan’s political subordination to the United States (Saitō 1978: 261).

Others attributed the Dakko-chan boom to Japan’s rising investment in children and children’s culture. Suda states, “[The] Japanese have always been soft on children, and standing all night in line to buy a toy is just another proof of that. I feel guilty about the situation” (“Dakkochan Delirium” 1960). At a time when children were assuming greater sentimental and economic significance in Japan, Dakko-chan helped articulate the role of toys as conduits of love between adults and children. One picture from the era evokes this resonance strikingly well, depicting a Dakko-chan clinging onto a child who in turn clings onto their mother (see fig. 3). Through this triple hug, the picture captures one sense in which Dakko-chan represented emotional attachment via a *kawaii* spiral: parents would buy the doll as a sign of love for their children who felt that they “just had to have one.” Unlike most other commodities, however, Dakko-chan seemed to participate in this exchange. If the child—and, by extension, the parents—felt dependent on the doll, Dakko-chan demonstrated its own dependence by hugging back.

While Dakko-chan in this way aligned with the “passive love” of the *amae* relationship, it also represented a fetish object. As a blow-up doll and



**Figure 3** Mother and child with Dakko-chan doll. Courtesy of LIFE Photo Collection.

added appendage, the doll possessed sexual connotations that resonated with the commodity fetish's capacity to elicit desire. This resonance was further emphasized by Dakko-chan's wink, which suggested that the doll, too, was in on a secret. Not only did the wink enable the doll to appear to respond to the feelings of its owner, it also captured the commodity fetish's glimmer of mysterious, quasi-animate power. The photograph of Dakko-chan with mother and child preserves this aspect of the wink: Both mother and child face away from the camera; it is the Dakko-chan doll who turns to the camera and winks, as if disclosing intimate knowledge about the situation. The wink unhinges the imagined innocence of Dakko-chan's pretenses to "passive love," to the *amae* relationship's view of familial relations washed clean of Oedipal violence. Here we can see how *kawaii*'s ostensible asexuality eas-

ily falls apart as the cute object assumes a sexual charge. As Ngai (2012: 72) writes, “Cuteness is a way of sexualizing beings and simultaneously rendering them nonthreatening.” Accordingly, in addition to meaning “to hug,” the word *dakko* can carry overtly sexual connotations that vulgarize this basic meaning. When written in the kana alphabet, *dakko* だっこ can mean “to make love to” or “to have sex with.” As an object that both winked and clung, Dakko-chan not only embodied familial embrace but also flirtatious suggestion and relentless desire.

Correspondingly, although Dakko-chan was a children’s toy, young adults also coveted the doll, latching onto its fetishistic connotations. Because Dakko-chan could more easily be worn over bare skin than over clothing, it suggested summer and exposed flesh. These associations were reinforced by a June 1960 Dakko-chan commercial in which people could be heard remarking, “The vinyl feels so good against bare skin” (Sato 2010: 319). Dakko-chan was therefore often worn at the beach and became a popular accessory for women in bathing suits (Saitō 1978: 261). In some of Dominis’s photographs, Dakko-chan appears in a performance with topless burlesque dancers, clinging onto their arms, thighs, and ankles. The dancers wear headdresses and bikinis decorated with large feathers. Their outfits borrow from the Caribbean carnival tradition, further emphasizing the sensuality associated with what was perceived as a kind of primitive cultural expression. If the carnival partly represents the overturning of authoritarian social norms and power structures through raucousness and sensuousness, its pairing with Dakko-chan brings to light the doll’s evocation of a similar form of play. As Brian J. McVeigh (2000) notes in his work on Hello Kitty, cuteness and campiness are closely linked aesthetic categories. Dakko-chan set the stage for Hello Kitty and other kawaii characters to tap into the appeal of both cute and campy aesthetics and be consumed by people of many different ages while assuming a wide array of social meanings. By combining racial innocence with racial fetishism, it revealed the extent to which children’s culture intersects with adult forms of play and pleasure.

However, while the burlesque dancers seem to assume a dominant position over the Dakko-chan dolls, this dynamic sometimes flipped. “Dakko-chan” also became a derogatory term for sexualizing women. In *Shōwa omocha bako* 昭和おもちゃ箱 (*Showa Toy Box*), Yu Aku (2005: 166) recalls: “At the



time, Dakko-chan was also used as a disdainful nickname for women. Some men would make comments that nowadays would be considered sexual harassment. For example, “That girl is a Dakko-chan, isn’t she?” Even after the Dakko-chan boom waned, this lewd use of the name lingered. Then, before long, it too disappeared unnoticed.” In this way, Dakko-chan embodied the power play at the heart of *kawaii*; it could occupy both the dominant and subordinate positions in turn. It thus captured what Anne Anlin Cheng observes is the way in which Black skin has been appropriated into a highly ambivalent symbol, signifying both primitivism and futurity. Through a reading of Josephine Baker, Cheng argues (2011: 11) that “we cannot address the history of modern surface without asking after the other history of skin, the violent, dysphoric one . . . that speaks to the objectification, commodification, and fetishization of racial skin.” As a vinyl “skin” filled with air, Dakko-chan embodied this modern hollowing out of flesh into synthetic surface. Moreover, because it was worn as an accessory, it served a metonymic as well as a metaphorical function, occupying the ambiguous position between being an extension of the self and a representation of the self, an object of desire and identification. Like Baker’s campy, sexy “banana dance,” Dakko-chan refused a single, simple interpretation, instead calling attention to the difficulty of distinguishing between desire and identification in racial performance. This can be seen in what Russell (1998: 133) notes are the “inversions” that Dakko-chan inspired. In the 1980s and 90s, the doll’s original name “kuronbo bura-chan” would carry over to the term *burasagari-zoku* ぶら下がり族 (dangling tribe), used to describe sexually “promiscuous” Japanese women who “dangled” from the arms of Black men.

Despite the existence of a female Dakko-chan type, the doll’s popularity primarily hinged on the pairing of Japanese femininity and Black masculinity. In postwar Japan, African American men were frequently regarded as fetish objects. *Burakku pawā* ブラックパワー (Black power) not only signified Black political resistance but also stereotypical notions of Black men’s supposedly superhuman levels of physical ability and sexual prowess. Russell (1998: 130) writes, “Whether the ‘thing’ being signified is an intumescent organic appendage or the once popular Dakko-chan doll—another inflated commodity—one mounts or is mounted by the Other; the physical proxim-

ity of these objects to their owners' bodies belies the cognitive and emotional distances that divide them." As an "intumescent organic appendage," Dakko-chan was a fetish object in a very literal sense: it took the form of an actual appendage, a substitute phallus, superadded to the body. In a nation that had recently been "castrated" by the West, Dakko-chan signified the fetish object's substitution of traumatic loss with pleasurable fantasy. When Murakami (2005: 140–41) reflects on the national psychology of the postwar period, he alludes to the feeling that Dakko-chan seemed to instantiate, stating, "We don't have both arms, yet we imagine that we feel the presence of two normal limbs. None of us recognize that one is a phantom. We feel pain in an arm that doesn't actually exist." In this way, Dakko-chan might be thought to represent the phantom limb of a castrated nation, embodying a mixture of pleasure and pain that could only be felt in an imaginary location.

In testament to the range of meanings that Dakko-chan assumed, for some young people, Dakko-chan also signified political rebellion. In the summer of 1960, Japan experienced what is still to date its largest-scale modern political demonstration in response to the amendment of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Originally signed in 1951, the treaty's amendment affirmed Japan's subordinate position in relation to US military power, securing Japan's cooperation with and dependence on the United States in international affairs. Calling for resistance against the treaty, often called *anpo* 安保 (security) for short, the protests represented a spectacular mass display of popular resistance in which youth played an important strategic and symbolic role (Aku 2005: 166). As a political conservative, Doi argues that the *anpo* protests exemplified the same Japanese *amae* tendency to behave childishly that he links to the *kawaii* aesthetic. He understands the willful behavior of the protesters, regardless of actual age, as examples of *amae*, alleging that they expressed a desire to be "indulged" in immature behavior. Doi (1981: 163) elaborates, "To say that the present age is strangely permeated with *amae* is much the same as saying that everyone has become more childish. Or it might be more correct to say that the distinction between children and adults has become blurred." When the Dakko-chan boom took off that same summer, it also enabled people of all ages to perform the nation's uncertain feelings concerning its subordination to the United States, while

simultaneously finding a ludic, and often erotic, pleasure in the disintegration of the old social order.

Several writers have affirmed the ways in which the Dakko-chan boom responded to the politics of the era. In his history of Showa-era toys, Ryōsuke Saitō (1978: 263) situates the Dakko-chan boom amid the *anpo* protests: “In June of that year, a demonstration shouting ‘Opposition against *anpo*! Strike down Prime Minister Kishi’s cabinet! Dissolve the National Diet!’ had started to rise in waves. Alongside these intense feelings of political tension, an innocent black doll inspired a fad that surpassed even the Hula-Hoop boom.” Comparably, Aku (2005: 166) reflects, “[1960] was a year that experienced the confusion of *anpo* and a pervasive social melancholy. Whether or not these developments were related to the Dakko-chan phenomenon cannot be known for certain. Still, the boom carried a feeling of ‘such is life.’” While neither writer asserts a direct correlation between the two phenomena, *kawaii* itself has been understood as a form of political resistance. Sharon Kinsella (1995: 250) observes the impact of social disaffection on the rise of *kawaii* culture, noting that associations between progressive politics and childish behavior emerged in the 1960s and 70s. As a result, Japan saw “the adoption of children’s culture as an alternative to mainstream ‘adult’ culture . . . ‘Adult’ came to have the additional meaning of conservative, while ‘childlike’ and play came to have the additional meaning of progressive and open-minded.” Dakko-chan’s status as an inflatable toy aligned it with these playful, rebellious associations, its use of pneumatics suggesting a breezy, feel-good aura and sense of futurist optimism. Placing pneumatic art in relation to the global student protest movements of the 1960s, Marc Dessauce (1999: 13) notes, “Pneumatics and revolution agree well. Both are fueled by wind and the myth of transcendence; as the balloon enraptures the child, they animate and transport us on the promise of an imminent passage into a perfected future.” Much as Dakko-chan called for people to breathe life into its plastic form, Japanese youth hoped to reanimate what they viewed as a deflated society.

While Dakko-chan never inspired the same excitement abroad, the doll did play a role in advancing the international market for Japanese-made toys. Dakko-chan made its way all over the world, including to Canada, Great Britain, France, Mexico, and Poland (Saitō 1978: 263).<sup>3</sup> In one strik-



**Figure 4** KLM flight attendants with Dakko-chan dolls. Courtesy of National Archives of the Netherlands.

ing picture of the era, flight attendants for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines throw Dakko-chan dolls in the air (see fig. 4). Standing in front of a KLM airplane, the flight attendants wear joyful expressions and hold their arms outstretched, as if caught in a moment of pure exuberance, with the dolls suspended midflight. The photograph captures a sense of buoyant levity, the lightness of the inflatable dolls reflecting their imagined role as floating signifiers of international affection. However, in October 1960, when approximately 120,000 Dakko-chan dolls were exported to the United States, they received a disappointing reception. Initially, Dakko-chan seemed positioned to become an “international fad” (Nagle 1960). It was given away as a carnival prize, and even inspired a pop song “Winkie Doll (Dakkochan)” that tapped into sexual innuendos similar to those that the doll inspired in Japan:

“With your ruby red lips and your flashing eyes / When you winked at me, you took me by surprise” (Fuller, Fielding, and Barnett 1960: 3). Yet Dakko-chan failed to live up to expectations, with American people remarking, “This doll does not have rhythm and action, and so it is not suitable for Americans,” and “Black dolls cannot be popular in America” (Saitō 1978: 263). Instead of starting a fad, Dakko-chan was primarily received as a bizarre Japanese novelty, an “ugly black plastic toy” that had sparked a strange craze in a nation known for manufacturing cheap trinkets (Nagle 1960).

In the United States, the central point of reference for understanding the doll remained an August 1960 article in *Time Magazine*, titled “Dakkochan Delirium,” which was accompanied by Dominis’s photographs. The article illustrates how the racial disavowal associated with Dakko-chan was not necessarily unique to Japan, especially at a time when books like *Little Black Sambo* were still widely enjoyed by white Americans despite criticisms from the Black community (Larrick 1965). While the article quotes Japanese people who attribute Dakko-chan’s popularity to the “Negro culture wave,” the article itself simply declares that Japanese people have become obsessed with “what appear[s] to be a baby Martian.” Indeed, although the Civil Rights Movement was in motion, the article makes no mention of the doll’s use of racist caricature. The level of cognitive dissonance that surrounded Dakko-chan’s racism was therefore not limited to Japan, but tethered to the racial innocence associated with children’s culture and *kawaii*’s formal abstraction.

By layering the neocolonialism of the American occupation on top of histories of colonialism and slavery, Dakko-chan would become a powerful symbol of wounded love, a phenomenon that should force us to reconsider the racial dimensions of *kawaii* as a “commodity aesthetic.” Oki (2013: 349) reflects: “When you think of it, picking up a Dakko-chan doll doesn’t fill your stomach or serve a particular function . . . In moving from needs (requirements) to wants (desires), I think that it was groundbreaking in contemporary consumer society.” Likewise, Sato (2010: 320) writes, “The Dakko-chan boom was a symbol of freedom after the war . . . of the freedom to enjoy life with a playful heart and acquire *kawaii* things.” However, there is a paradox in these assertions that Dakko-chan could symbolize both freedom and attachment: Did the doll represent the “playful heart”



**Figure 5** Inside a Dakko-chan factory. Courtesy of LIFE Photo Collection.

of consumer culture, or did people “just have to have one”? And why were people seeking freedom in an image associated with bondage? These contradictions become difficult to ignore in a photograph taken inside a Dakko-chan factory, where hundreds of dolls lie piled up on top of one another, as rows of employees assemble and inflate them (see fig. 5). The image recalls the slave trade’s commodification of the lives of Black people and centrality to the emergence of global capitalism. It also captures not just a piling up of bodies, but also Dakko-chan’s piling up of semantic resonances. As Saidiya V. Hartman (1997: 25–26) writes, “The figurative capacities of blackness and the fungibility of the commodity are directly linked. The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body or blackface mask to serve as the vehicle of white

self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment.” What Dakko-chan shows is that the “figurative capacities of blackness” were not fixed within the context of American slavery and white supremacy, but were capable of being transferred to Japan, where they would be taken up by Japanese people. With Dakko-chan, an aggregation of historical violences—slavery, imperialism, war—were all compressed within a tiny and supposedly *kawaii* object.

### “The Age of the Hug”

Although the Dakko-chan boom died down within a few years, its effects have lingered into the twenty-first century. With Dakko-chan’s likeness as its logo, the company Takara prospered, creating a variety of popular toys, including Transformers and Licca-chan, a *kawaii* alternative to Barbie (Hadfield 2001). However, by the 1980s, mounting tensions between Japan and the United States caused American audiences to eventually notice the presence of blackface in Japanese popular culture. In 1988, an article by a journalist named Margaret Shapiro (1988) called attention to a line of *kawaii* “Sambo” goods produced by Sanrio, which had by then achieved a sizable presence in the US market. On learning of these products, many Americans condemned what they saw as the entrenchment of racism in Japanese society. During the “Japan Panic” of the 1980s and ’90s, the United States viewed Japan’s expanding economic power as a threat, and the two nations became embroiled in a trade war. Within this context, as Russell (2015: 206) writes, “Racism was employed rhetorically and strategically as a means of othering.” Disavowing their own involvement in the creation of *kawaii* blackface, many white Americans perceived Sanrio’s Sambo line as proof that Japanese people were incontrovertibly racist (Brown 1988: 161).

Accordingly, as a result of mounting political and economic pressures, and thanks to the efforts of antiracist activists in both Japan and the United States, Takara permanently altered the Dakko-chan logo it had used for more than twenty-seven years in March 1990 (Takemori 2002: 161). But the doll nevertheless continued to reappear in new guises.<sup>4</sup> In 1997, Takara hoped that by casting Dakko-chan in a rainbow of new colors the company could preserve the doll’s emotional attachments without all of the historical baggage. The company tried bringing Dakko-chan back in blue and pink,

but protests from activists in Japan halted these efforts (“Dakko-chan ‘seiki no henshin’” 2000). Nevertheless, the company attempted to do so yet again in 2001, with the new president, Keita Sato, claiming that “it was a bad decision to kill the product altogether, as there is nothing wrong with the doll’s name or its characteristic to hug . . . I don’t think there is any other doll that is being remembered so fondly by everyone” (Hadfield 2001). This time, however, the company worked extra carefully to avoid inciting pushback. Designers at Takara created a two-column list detailing which elements of the doll they wanted to keep (the hugging, the winking) and which elements they deemed offensive (the dark skin, the round lips, the grass skirt) (Takemori 2002: 168). They then attempted to reimagine the doll’s significations: its hugging gesture became a metaphor for “heart connections,” while Dakko-chan’s head assumed the shape of an upside-down heart. The resulting Dakko-chan dolls looked like a family of small rainbow aliens, harkening back to *Time*’s 1960 declaration that “what appeared to be a baby Martian” had captured the hearts of Japanese people. Satoko Takanashi, a manager in Takara’s Girls Marketing Department, stressed the importance of abstraction to the alleged “innocence” of the new line, stating, “I was thinking I would make its form as abstract as possible, because I wanted to emphasize its connotations of a fictitious existence” (Takemori 2002: 169).

These hyper-“deformed” Dakko-chan dolls allegedly not only stripped away the original’s racist significations but also would come to represent precisely the opposite. Symbolizing “heart-warming contact with others,” Dakko-chan now supposedly embodied the hope that people in the twenty-first century might forget racial conflicts and “join hands together.” Sato states, “I’m sure the 21st century will be the age of the hug” (Hadfield 2001). In this way, the new Dakko-chan detached itself from any connotations it once carried of political resistance and international conflict so as to become a fraught symbol of gentle multiculturalism and world peace. In a corporate memo that announced its release, Takara (2001) declared that the product was being reimaged as a representation of international community: “Through familiar goods called ‘toys,’ we imagine a ‘heart culture’ and ‘life culture’ that comes in the form of the emotional sense of satisfaction of everyone’s dreams, aspirations, feelings, and mutual connections. This is our company philosophy, ‘play is culture,’ and we consider it a corporate obli-



gation.” These attempts at rebranding paid off financially: When the new Dakko-chan debuted and Takara’s phones started ringing, most of the callers were not contacting the company to express their anger, nor were they children who “just had to have one.” Rather, most of the callers were people ages fifty or older who wanted to share their joy and appreciation at seeing a familiar and much-beloved toy back on the shelves (Takemori 2002: 158).

Emerging at a critical juncture in US-Japan relations, Dakko-chan destabilizes the idea that kawaii has ever been essentially Japanese or essentially innocent. Rather, it reveals how kawaii has long been an aesthetic shot through with racial traumas and desires, an aesthetic with an extraordinary capacity for accumulating affective attachments. As a blow-up doll, Dakko-chan provided a kind of empty skin that seemed capable of containing and transmitting the postwar period’s feelings of promise and woundedness. Predicating its imagined innocence on its abstraction, Dakko-chan embodied the idea that Blackness could serve as a container for the emotional release of Japanese people, an idea that itself originates in white supremacy and anti-Black racism. As Hartman (1997: 21) argues, it was chattel slavery that made “the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, and values.” From this perspective, anti-Black racist caricatures in kawaii culture become not meaningless but *meaningful*, suggesting that layers of meaning—racial, sexual, and geopolitical—accrue rather than dissipate through the circulation of kawaii objects.

## Notes

I am grateful to Leslie Bow and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable insights.

- 1 To avoid the recirculation of racist images, I have elected to include only those images that I deem essential to supporting my argument. Additional images of Dakko-chan can be found on Google Arts & Culture.
- 2 All passages quoted from Japanese-language sources have been translated by the author.
- 3 Overseas, Dakko-chan sometimes went by other names, including “Winky Blinky” and “Hug-a-Bug” (Nagle 1960).
- 4 Murakami directly engages both Little Black Sambo and Dakko-chan in his work of the early 1990s. Installations such as “Fall in Love” (1995) feature whitewashed, hyperfeminized Dakko-chan dolls alongside his signature kawaii character Mr. DOB (Cruz, Friis-Hansen, and Matsui 1999: 53).

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