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AFTERWARD



ANIMATION ISOLATION

How anime's booming popularity in the 2000s became my personal reckoning of what it means to be Japanese-American

By Erica Lee

When I was in the ninth grade, I achieved the unthinkable. I got a “C”.

My friends in Ms. Gunde's first period class had to know why. How did I barely pass my Japanese 1 course when my own mother is Japanese?

I am Nisei, a second-generation Japanese-American.

According to the Pew Research Center, there were over 1.2 million Japanese-Americans living in the United States in 2022. 75% of those 1.2 million were born in the United States, but the numbers are inconclusive on how many of that

majority have mixed Japanese heritage.

Sometime between the late '70s and the early '80s, my Mom boarded a Los Angeles-bound flight from New Tokyo International Airport with no idea of what kind of future was waiting for her.

She wasn't in it for the “American Dream.” Her grandmother, her last close relative in Japan, had just died. The rest of the family had moved to California years ago.

She had nowhere else to go.

Eventually, my Mom enrolled at CSU Long Beach and found a job in finance before marrying and starting a family with my Dad, a native Californian with

Irish and German roots.

Growing up, I thought I had a good idea of what it meant to be a second-generation Japanese-American.

It was having natto rolls for lunch and okonomiyaki for dinner. It was reading bedtime stories about Urashima Taro and Kaguya-hime, the Moon Princess. It was watching “Sailor Moon” and “My Neighbor Totoro” on our blocky, wood paneled TV.

Having these things in my life made me stand out in a mostly-white





elementary school in Rancho Palos Verdes, California.

When I started the ninth grade at Peninsula High School in 2005, I had to take Japanese. It was a no-brainer and I figured it would be an easy class.

After all, I've seen "Pokemon" and Hayao Miyazaki movies in Japanese. And I had a Japanese parent who could help along the way. It couldn't be that hard. Right?

Japanese is not an easy language to learn. Not at all.

“Being Japanese was half of who I was, but now everyone wanted it to be 100% of my identity.”

It's actually one of the hardest languages for English speakers to pick up, according to RosettaStone.com. There are honorifics and three writing scripts to memorize: hiragana, katakana and kanji.

Most teachers recommend their students watch TV shows and movies in the language they're studying to better understand the material.

However, this was 2005 and streaming was in its infancy. Hulu wouldn't debut for another two years and Netflix was still a DVD rental service.

Back in the Dark Ages, if we wanted to watch Japanese shows, we had to rely on torrenting, bootlegs or finding a video store in Torrance or Gardena that stocked the latest anime and movies, a rarity.

Thankfully, for my classmates, we

were learning Japanese at a time when anime became mainstream.

Toonami, a program block on Adult Swim, began airing titles such as "Dragon Ball Z" and "Evangelion" in the early 2000s.

Once they found out, my classmates were hooked. Soon, anime was taking over the pop cultural consciousness of our high school year.

On Fridays the class was treated to episodes of "Naruto" after wearing out the small selection of Miyazaki movies Ms. Gunde had.

But I couldn't get into the hype.

I don't know if it was the overly-exaggerated art styles of "Naruto" and "One Piece" that put me off watching, or their fanbases.

Worse was admitting that I couldn't get into it.

People would say to me, "You're Japanese. What's so hard about getting into anime?"

Being Japanese was half of who I was, but now everyone wanted it to be 100% of my identity. After that "C," I realized that I wasn't as Asian as I thought I was.

My failing Japanese grades meant that I wasn't a credible consultant on Japanese culture anymore.

Friends now joked that I didn't look that Asian, backed up by relatives who said I was the spitting image of my Dad's sister in her teens.

My "Harry Potter" fantasticism, which defined a large part of my personality at the time, was the killing blow.

In my defense, while Pokemon was dominating the airwaves in the late 90s, Hogwarts was my escape from the harsh reality of my Grandfather's failing health and the days spent in hospital waiting rooms after school.

If anyone asked what kind of anime I liked, I said I couldn't stand them.

It was true. Anime was taking over my life and creating an identity crisis I am still grappling with over

20 years later.

People judge me for not liking media they think I should watch based on my cultural heritage.

Everyone always forgets that I'm descended from Lees who lived in Ireland, not Asia.

My roommate once accused me of being embarrassed to be Asian.

After all, what kind of Japanese-American can't speak their mother tongue? Or want to go back and reconnect with her cultural heritage with a grand tour of Japan?

Even today, I'm still struggling to find that happy medium between being Japanese and American.

I can cook Japanese meals, watch "Shogun" and know my way around Sawtelle and Little Tokyo.

But to the critical eye of others who have never lived my life, it's not enough.

Recently, I confessed to my roommate Elena that I never watched "Power Rangers" as a kid.

Even though the Yellow Ranger was Asian, my Mom never pushed me to watch. She knew I didn't like the show and left it alone.

That is something I have always loved my Mom for. She never forced me to conform to the mold of what an ideal Japanese-American should be.

She gave me the space I needed to explore what I liked and build my identity from there.

"Wait," Elena said after I told her why. "Why didn't you watch Power Rangers? You know the Yellow Power Ranger is Asian, right?"

Oh no, I thought. Not this again.

