Anime's Other Identities: New Frameworks for Black Anime and Beyond

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Abstract: This paper is based on a 'Black anime' presentation given at the first 'Transnational Perspectives on Anime' symposium at Lancaster University in 2025. It introduces the topic of 'Black anime' as emerging from the globalisation of Japanese anime. By exploring the development of 'Black anime' over time, it charts this new genre's increasingly delineated form as a complex process and hard-fought battle for ownership and identity, overcoming academic and cultural barriers and borders.

Bio: Cerise Jackson (she/they) is a PhD candidate at Oxford University's Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Their research at the intersection of black and Japanese popular culture explores the emergence of 'Black anime'. In particular, they analyse the work of African-American anime director LeSean Thomas and the socio-cultural impact of his debut during the height of the BLM protests.

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Introduction

Sprawling transnational and transcultural spaces continue to highlight a multitude of deficiencies concerning anime's established definition as an art form unique to Japan.[1] As the area-studies framework at the heart of Japanese Studies, within which anime is primarily situated, lacks the analytical tools to re-conceptualise 'anime' as both bounded and unbounded to 'Japan', scholars now look to other disciplines, organise conferences to exchange diverse interpretations of anime, and release journal special issues on the topic of anime's transnational consumption.[2][3][4] The search for a new definition for today's global anime is very much on, but a consensus is still a long way off.

Against this backdrop, it is both a daunting and enticing prospect for this paper, and the early-career researcher behind it, to throw another spanner into the works: to introduce the topic of 'Black anime' to an academic field still in contention over the definition of anime 'proper'. However, this paper is also encouraged by scholars such as Robin Reid, who argue that integrating critical race, black cultural studies, decolonial, and postcolonial theory will set the standards necessary for foundational change.[5] Anime studies' current search for and synthesis of new anime frameworks will hopefully be strengthened, not stalled, by extending to and even centering the *Black* and *other* anime forms emerging from transnational and transcultural spaces.

Semiotic Beginnings

When Commodore Perry first arrived on the shores of Japan, he brought with him enslaved Africans, and his crew performed a Minstrel Show for Japanese

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dignitaries.[6] Donning afro-style wigs, painting their skin black, and highlighting their mouths in red, Perry's sailors took to the ship's deck and demonstrated to the Japanese how black bodies could be made into entertainment and *cartoonified*. At the time, Japanese artists catered to the mass-oriented popular culture of late-feudal Japan and had long engaged in exaggeration and caricature.[7] This potent cultural combination lent itself to fixing blackface as a popular form of black representation in Japan. In the late 1800s, seemingly innocuous exports and the subsequent popularity of the British children's book *Little Black Sambo* would further emboss this derogatory style of black cartoon representation upon Japanese popular culture.[8]

We can trace a line from these anti-black semiotics to today's controversial issue of blackface in Japanese anime, variety shows, and most infamously in the NHK's (the largest public broadcaster in Japan) anime portrayal of George Floyd and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.[9] There are complex relationships of cultural appropriation and appreciation regarding the triadic relationship between Japan, America, and the Black diaspora, underscored by harm, profit, and cultural power.[10] While that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, what is clear is that interpretations of racist depictions in Japanese anime and popular culture have prompted various responses, including publisher boycotts and widespread criticism.[11-12] Another type of response can be seen in anime itself, where anti-black representations have been countered with pro-Black representations. These might be defined as the first 'Black anime'.

The First 'Black anime'?

Afro Samurai (2007) and *The Boondocks* (2005) are two of the most obvious and early examples of 'Black anime'.[13-14] These anime epitomise the intersection between

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black and anime culture and how existing academic frameworks have failed to capture their seismic impact.

Afro Samurai originated as a Japanese manga series by Takashi Okazaki, who struggled to find a publisher in Japan and therefore sought opportunities in America. This decision would make *Afro Samurai* the first anime to be made and aired outside of Japan, before being imported back to Japan a few years later.[15] Due to its Japanese creator, *Afro Samurai* is largely considered a Japanese anime, despite its overtly black cultural identity. The show's titular character, 'Afro', was voiced by the Academy Award-winning African-American actor Samuel L. Jackson, who was credited as a producer but crucially also created the authentic delivery of the script in African American vernacular English (AAVE). In Rayna Denison's (2011) discussion of the transcultural flows behind *Afro Samurai*, there is no explicit reference to the contribution of black culture. Rather, an area-studies approach identifies the role of nations, Japan and America, with Okazaki credited as the creator and Jackson as the performer.[16] Question marks appear over who should be considered the performer or creator, the cultural appropriator or the appropriate-*ee*.

On the other hand, *The Boondocks* is an example of a 'Black anime' predecessor that is largely denied recognition as 'anime' because of its *lack* of Japanese ownership. Referred to awkwardly as 'anime-inspired animation' or 'anime-style animation' in Reddit discussions, the show's identity is hotly debated in fan circles.[17-18] However, anime critics also argue persuasively that *The Boondocks* was the first 'Black anime'.[19] The show's flat anime-esque style and complex narrative content were overwhelmingly

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read by fans of anime *as anime*, and this was always the intention of Aaron McGruder, its African-American creator.[20]

Today's 'Black anime'

We can continue to draw a line from these 'Black anime' predecessors to today. On the creative team for *The Boondocks* was animator and storyboard artist, LeSean Thomas. He would eventually become known as the first 'Black anime' director of the first 'Black anime'.

Thomas made his directorial debut in October 2016. Earlier that year had been the announcement of *Black Panther* (2018), a milestone for black representation in the Marvel-superhero franchise. We also saw the first explosion of the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the double-murder of two black men by non-black police officers that summer, and the subsequent uptick in social media hashtags #blacktober and #blackanime, which created a space for Black anime creators and fans to be acknowledged for their work and to celebrate blackness in the anime form.[21] This was a moment in which the anime community was primed to accept a *Black anime* identity. Although it wouldn't be until nearly a decade later for Thomas to explicitly say the phrase himself, a critical mass had been reached. 'Black anime fans', a 'Black anime director', a 'Black anime movement' and the 'Black anime hashtag' all encouraged a simple yet powerful linguistic truncation to, simply, 'Black anime'.[22]

'Black anime': The Making of a New World

LeSean Thomas' *Children of Ether* was first revealed during its announcement at New York Comic Con in 2016 through a promotional video called '*Children of Ether:*

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The Making of a New World'. The video does not focus on the anime's content. Instead, through interviews with a Black, Japanese and French, transnational and visibly transracial team of animators, this 'new world' emerges as something that lives as much off-screen as it does on-screen. Mitsuo Iso (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*, 1995) makes a comparison between this Black anime project and his experience with Japanese projects, noting a level of creative freedom that was hard to come by in Japan.[23] Eddie Mehong, owner of French-Japanese studio Yapiko, states his requirement for hiring team members who could work with a foreign artist, and LeSean Thomas makes it clear that he invited Hiroshi Shimizu (*The Girl Who Leapt Through Time,* 2008) the join the project because he demonstrated the ability to represent black characters in a socially literate way on another predecessor 'Black anime' called *Michiko to Hatchin* (2008). [24] The video highlights the existence of a culture and ideology that encourages diverse and, specifically, *Black anime* identities.

Children of Ether was eventually released a year later as a fourteen-minute video made available for free on YouTube and Crunchyroll. Although this was likely not Thomas's desired outcome and could be considered a failure, it nevertheless embedded *Black freedom of expression in the anime form* as a core definition of 'Black anime'. This is because it did not deliver the expected black and male-centric perspective with Japanese references, as we had come to expect from *Afro Samurai*. Instead, it opens with a quote by trans-indigenous Puerto Rican, Shey Rivera Rios.

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"Ancient waters coil around the bones of our kingdom in war. The mother, the Ether, is the undertow where her children rest. She waits for them to awaken and connect us all."
– Shey Rivera Rios

In a dystopian future, sea levels have risen, and water has become toxic. People have reclaimed the underground and skyscrapers, covering them with graffiti. The main character, Rhonda Vega, is an Afro-Latina femme-presenting character who wields a samurai sword and an unknown power. She is aided by two street children who acknowledge that their racial differences do not define their own definitions of kinship as siblings bonded by life on the streets. She also seeks assistance from the 'Vandal Shepherds', a gang that protects the underground and its inhabitants, led by Gio, who speaks in English accented with Spanish and in Latin American Spanish. In the end, Rhonda encounters a non-binary presenting character whose alter ego is 'the mother, the ether', as per Shey's original quote. *Children of Ether* reframes the idea of climate disaster as a positive decolonial example of the rebirth of society as the "bones" of capitalist patriarchy sink into matriarchal waters that leech away its poison.

Frameworks

Denison's analysis revealed the complex transnational flows behind 'Black anime' predecessors such as *Afro Samurai*, but did not account for the Black culture, at the heart of that creativity.[25] Stevie Suan's *Anime's Identity* takes a formalist approach to move beyond Japan as the definition of anime.[26] This is a notable stride forward; however, its emphasis on form doesn't account for anime's apparent ability to change, to include new forms and representations, as in *Children of Ether*, while still being perceived as 'anime'.

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A more useful framework for analysing 'Black anime' may be found in Translation Studies. Marais reminds academe that translation was not originally theorised as a process restricted to verbal-linguistic content.[27] Rather, translation in its truest sense is an intersemiotic process that occurs between modalities: between painting and literature, the human physique and sculpture, and between the Black experience and the anime form.

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