

Michelle Liu Carriger

**“MAIDEN’S ARMOR”: GLOBAL GOTHIC LOLITA FASHION
COMMUNITIES AND TECHNOLOGIES OF GIRLY
COUNTERIDENTITY**

I wish I was born in the rococo period. . . . Life then was like candy. Their world, so sweet and dreamy. . . . A frilly dress and walks in the country: that’s how I wanted to live.

—Momoko, in *Kamikaze Girls (Shimotsuma monogatari)*¹

It starts with a dress, or dresses. Among a menagerie of rainbow variations, certain features are standard: lace and ruffle-decked blouses under jumpers, aprons, or high-waisted belled and crinolined knee-length skirts; more skin covered than bare; headwear including bonnets, miniature hats, or massive bows over ringlets and long tresses. So many ruffles; so much lace (Fig. 1). Beginning in the late 1990s, *gothic lolitas*—overwhelmingly young women in their teens and twenties, and overwhelmingly girly in their outsized bows, platform Mary Jane shoes, and petticoated skirts—stood out as defiantly, bizarrely out of place and time on the Tokyo street scene, all bright white and concrete in Harajuku, a built-up postwar neighborhood of Tokyo known as a youth haven since the 1960s. More than twenty years later, although most Harajuku fashions have died out in keeping with a fad’s typically short life cycle, the gothic lolitas have persisted and even multiplied, thanks in large part to the Internet, which has helped muster an army of misfit girl aristocrats not just in Japan but around the globe.

Michelle Liu Carriger is an assistant professor of Critical Studies in the Theater Department of UCLA. Her first book project, tentatively entitled Modes of ReDress, looks at the historiography of clothing and fashion controversy in Britain and Japan as well as contemporary fashion practices as amateur historiographical engagement. Her work has appeared in TDR: The Drama Review, the Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, and Theatre Research International. Her article “‘The Unnatural History and Petticoat Mystery of Boulton and Park’: A Victorian Sex Scandal and the Theatre Defense,” won the TDR student essay prize and Gerald Kahan Scholar’s Prize.



Figure 1.

Ny.jonjon and Crypt.kasper at RuffleCon 2017, Stamford, CT. Photo courtesy of ny.jonjon (Instagram).

In this article, I examine the rise, fall, and undead spread of gothic lolita, and what it might mean to think of gothic lolita's backward-looking, over-the-top "Victorian" finery, now transmuted by a Japanese pop-cultural lens, as a type of subject formation—one that posits a culturally hybrid hyperfemininity as a vehicle for group identification, no matter the nationality, race, gender, or sexuality of the adherent. Fundamental to this inquiry is reckoning with a number of things often

dismissed as minor or “superficial.” Foremost on this list are *girls* (marked by both gender and youth as insignificant in world history, politics, and economics), and secondly *fashion*—which (like theatre) has battled centuries of critical disdain and outright hostility to its imbrication with commerce more than art, the body more than mind, women more than men, fakery instead of truth.² My focus on the stakes of the superficial will also extend to an examination of the ways in which Japanese transnational cultural borrowings have typically and problematically been read in the West as “empty” imitation. Indeed, as the word “performance” itself oscillates between connotations of emptiness, as when it’s used as a synonym for “theatricality,” and attributions of depth, as in classic performance theory’s positing of performance as more real than theatre,³ most of the aesthetics and activities I deal with here—girls and girl culture, fashion and subculture, the literary and subcultural gothic—resonate with a tension between depth and superficiality. This does not mean that I work here to reveal hidden depths to things previously designated “shallow”; rather I aim to articulate and critique scholarly attachments to the “deep” and “serious,” seeking alternative ways to recognize the importance of cultural practices like the spectacular subculture of gothic lolita.

In this article I have two major concerns: First, how does gothic lolita function as a technology of the self, one that mutes typical markers of an individual’s demographic identity (such as gender, age, race, class, nationality) under a banner of anachronistic femininity? Second, and intertwined with the first, how do we reconcile the distinct Europeanness of gothic lolita’s historical, cultural, and aesthetic references with its indelible (and desirable) “cultural odor”⁴ of Japanese cool? Although it is not often invoked by gothic lolitas or their academic observers, what if we read gothic lolita as one creative response to Asian postcoloniality (by which I mean both Japan’s semisubjugated status to Western powers in the nineteenth century and post–World War II *and* its foray into colonizing neighboring Asian nations in the early twentieth century)?

In the following I zigzag between the Japanese context and the ways in which gothic lolita fashion has been taken up in other geographical areas, primarily the English-centric, but by no means solely Anglophone, Internet communities of non-Japanese lolitas. The United States hosts one of the largest populations of enthusiasts, but they are connected via the Internet to active communities in Canada, across Europe, cities in Mexico and South America, Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and mainland China. (The only populated region on the globe in which I have not been able to identify a lolita presence is Africa, although there was at least one online community for South African lolitas in the past ten years.) Methodologically, I draw on a variety of sources and approaches, including the primary sources of Internet communities, gothic lolita publications, especially periodicals online and in print, as well as my own participant observation at various in-person events and locations in Japan, the United States, and Europe, primarily the RuffleCon alternative fashion conference in 2015 and 2017. After initially discovering gothic lolita by picking up a *KERA* magazine in Japan in the year 2000, I faithfully bought the magazine every month for the two years I lived in Japan, from 2001 to 2003. I continued picking up back issues and magazine-books like *Gothic & Lolita Bible* on every trip back to Japan

and when I found them at US outlets, and visiting Harajuku every time I was in Tokyo. Thus, though I've never considered myself a gothic lolita practitioner, my knowledge base has been compiled in an analogous way to which I now apply my performance studies training. Certainly, to have spent any time at all trying to chart out a coherent narrative of gothic lolita's visual spectacularity, worldwide spread, and simultaneous underground niche status (by no means is the fashion necessarily widely known even in Japan after twenty years) is to be forced to recognize the inadequacy of any one account. Thus, I proceed with the overt understanding that my arguments and conclusions are an exercise of power upon a living dynamic, and that my arguments and conclusions are provisional—my own version of posing as a gothic lolita, anchoring fashion performance into discourse, for better or for worse.⁵

A TAXONOMY OF FRILLS

Both popular and academic accounts of gothic lolita frequently pursue either a taxonomy or a genealogy model of description; lolitas themselves tend to value encyclopedic knowledge, dropping connoisseur information about brands, specific prints, and dress styles into highly specialized conversations. For example, a major resource for Anglophone lolitas is lolibrary.org, where volunteers catalog every dress, blouse, accessory, shoe, headpiece, and bag they can from each brand (including recent fast-fashion “off-brand” Chinese retailers) with original selling prices, colorways, dates of release and rerelease, and notes like how quickly the run sold out in the preorder period. Dress types are further separated into specialized terminology for standard silhouettes like “OP” (“one-piece” dress) and “JSK” (“jumper-skirt,” a sleeveless dress usually worn with a blouse). Indeed, the words “gothic lolita” don't name a discrete style so much as a family of associated aesthetics, practitioners, and brands that have been chronicled in specific magazines (especially *KERA* and *Gothic & Lolita Bible*) and sold next to each other in specific geographical areas—like Harajuku's Takeshita-dori, the Laforet shopping mall in Shibuya, and KERAshops across Japan—and virtual, like the “EGL sales” community on LiveJournal.com and lacemarket.us. Practitioners have a number of other abbreviations and terms they favor, including ゴスロリ (*gosu-rori* or goth-loli) or just ロリータ (*rori-ta/lolita*), and only some of the styles collected under this umbrella moniker have clear gothic tendencies. I use the phrase “gothic lolita” in this article, lowercase, to denote this loose complex of aesthetics and practices; considerations of both the “gothic” and the “lolita” in the fashion's name will emerge in the course of the text.

By way of setting the stage, I briefly stray down the well-worn path, offering a description of some of the gothic lolita substyles that proliferate like so many storybooks lined up next to each other, shared tropes in endless variations on a few themes, available for the right price. Imagine if you will an *x*-axis with the endpoints deemed Darkness and Light. On the Dark end, you will find the gothically inclined styles like gothic lolita, *kuro-rori* (lit.: “black lolita”) moving toward steampunk styles, classic lolita (in solid shades, with ribbons and trims), and country lolita (red, floral prints), eventually arriving at sweet lolita, in baby pastels and

sugary prints of things like cupcakes and teddy bears (Fig. 2). On the y-axis, you will see the variations on the standard knee-length crinoline silhouette and puff sleeves. Foremost among these must be EGL and EGA, “Elegant Gothic Lolita” and “Elegant Gothic Aristocrat,” naming more “mature” styles with longer, slimmer skirts, darker, richer colors, maybe a corset; *wa-lolita* (Japanese ruffly kimono style) and the recent invention, *qi-lolita* (Chinese style); and *ouji* (Prince) or “Boystyle.” *Ouji* names nominally masculine, Little Lord Fauntleroy-type outfits with knee breeches and capelets, occasional military accents, jackets and vests, worn interchangeably by people of all gender identifications (as indeed all the lolita styles are).⁶

The very tendency of gothic lolita fashions—and, more to the point, most published attempts to understand them—to spread outward in proliferating lists and charts of elements and substyles draws attention to the ways gothic lolita may seem to resist or belie “deep” meanings. Although fashion has perennially excelled at selling repurposed signifiers apparently stripped of previous meanings, there is something about the extreme spectacularity of gothic lolita dress that excites speculation, and indeed disbelief, about the meanings and motives of wearers. For example, *Gothic eZine* commentator David Graham grappled thus with the style in 2003:

The Gothic Lolita is another example of how Japan’s popular culture has appropriated imagery without the content. Witness the past interest in Elvis and ’50s American culture, for example. It was a superficial and accurate take on a cultural phenomenon, and the motivation was completely devoid of irony. Likewise, the Victorian costumes are huge signifiers in Western culture. We interpret the wearing of such clothing as infantilizing [*sic*] women, but the criticism is lost on the Tokyo Gothic Lolitas much the same as we would not understand the subtle meanings associated with various styles of kimonos.⁷

I am less interested in critiquing the factual correctness of this commentator’s claims than I am in using it to articulate a number of intertwined assumptions about transnational and transtemporal fashioning: Graham perceives gothic lolita appropriations as totally empty “imagery without the content,” although he also apprehends them as “accurate.” He further asserts that “we” Westerners interpret Victorian costumes as infantilizing. (Surely by this he must also have in mind gothic lolita practices of dressing like a child or doll, although he doesn’t mention this specifically.) Graham’s statements are particularly interesting in a goth publication because they curiously mirror typical dismissals of goths themselves: on the one hand, “Goth style becomes such an effective means of drawing distinctions because it is assumed to speak for the real self,”⁸ but on the other, goths’ spectacular appearances have been characterized as mere shock tactics, or “phases” that one grows out of—not true emanations from a dark interior.⁹ However, Graham identifies something specifically *Japanese* about the emptiness he identifies in gothic lolita’s Victorian looks, as well as the rockabilly enthusiasts to whom he compares them. Western assertions about the emptiness of Japanese representations



Figure 2.

Geraldine Fahr Sindram at a bus stop in sweet lolita, Kiel, Germany (2012).
Photo © Deborah Geissler.

is a project with a long history, in fact—as we shall see, the same claims have been made since at least the nineteenth century.

How much “depth” repurposed and redeployed signifiers like gothic lolita’s “Victorian” dresses contain is obviously a primary concern throughout the rest of this article, but that should not come at the expense of considering the potential of *shallowness*. It may be precisely the flatness of the gothic lolita aesthetic that allowed it to travel so fluidly across oceans, language barriers, and networks, to inspire new enthusiasts across the planet. The superficial distinctiveness of the “Victorian” silhouettes that gothic lolita fashions cribbed from dolls, children’s book illustrations, and fantasized European pasts now have picked up valences from their reinvention as Harajuku fashion. Indeed this emptiness is closely akin to overfullness, where now the look of the European doll comes across as unmistakably Japanese, an uncanny reincarnation of Victorian values in the persons of contemporary young Japanese women (and others). Here, though, gothic lolita girls adopt past modes associated with the oppression of women in order to declare their independence from contemporary regimes of heteronormative hegemony. As Vera Mackie points out, “frills and decoration actually draw attention away from the body, obscuring rather than accentuating the shape of the body, . . . making the clothes into an especially dense border between the body and the outside world.”¹⁰ Conceiving of gothic lolita hyperfemininity as resistant belies any binary between acquiescence and resistance to the status quo; rather, gothic lolita spectacularity makes visible a web of competing and indeed often irreconcilable interpellative societal demands made upon young women (and others).

From a fashion-history perspective, the standard move in documenting gothic lolita is to recapitulate an origin story, tracing the evolution of gothic lolita’s panoply from girly 1970s brands like Pink House and Milk, through 1980s Jane Marple (Milk and Jane Marple are still in business as gothic lolita-adjacent brands), to the 1990s and 2000s explosion of Harajuku youth fashions.¹¹ Facilitated by the weekend traffic closure of Omotesandō, the main road through Harajuku to create a *houkousha tengoku* (歩行者天国, “pedestrian heaven”), teenagers, out of school and uniform, could loiter throughout the area on Sundays, forming “style tribes” and attracting the anthropological lenses of street snap fashion photographers like Shoichi Aoki and pop-culture encyclopedists, who helped perpetuate their images across the globe.¹²

Competing origin stories name Osaka as the birthplace of gothic lolita and/or focus on Visual Kei, a hard-rock popular music genre in which spectacular costumes inspired by goth and historical fantasy were as important as sound—hence the name, meaning “visual style.”¹³ The most important figure in the Visual Kei version of this history is Mana—the guitarist for the Visual Kei band Malice Mizer and later head of the band Moi dix Mois—who, although he does not identify as transgender or queer, wears almost exclusively skirts and dresses in the gothic lolita style for public appearances. Although he never speaks publicly (he whispers into the ears of bandmates or translators in order to answer interview questions), he is nevertheless credited with coining the term “Gothic Lolita,” as well as “Elegant Gothic Lolita” (EGL) and “Elegant Gothic Aristocrat” (EGA)—all of which, incidentally, Mana also sells under his highly

successful brand name, *Moi-même-Moitié*, founded in 1999.¹⁴ It seems that in choosing the word “Lolita,” Mana did not intend to reference any aspect of Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel except youthful femininity, but more on that connection anon.

Although American pop singer Gwen Stefani arguably made Harajuku style(s) world famous with her 2004 solo album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* and the debut of her four “Harajuku girl” backup dancers, who featured in live shows and videos for the album, hers was only the loudest (and not uncontroversial) paean to Japanese street style; a flurry of illustrated and photo-rich books purported to present a more thorough account. Foremost has surely been Shoichi Aoki’s book compilations *Fruits*, *Fresh Fruits*, and *Gothic & Lolita*, released in 2001, 2005, and 2007 by Phaidon (all culled from Aoki’s street-style magazine *FRUiTS*); these set the stage for *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno: Tokyo Teen Fashion Subculture Handbook* (2007), *Style Deficit Disorder: Harajuku Street Fashion Tokyo* (2007), *The Tokyo Look Book* (2007), *Japanese Goth* (2009), *Japanese Street Style* (2012), and *Kawaii! Japan’s Culture of Cute* (2013), among others.

Along with Bill Cunningham in New York and the seminal magazines *i-D* and *The Face* in the UK, Japanese street fashion photographers like Aoki anticipated and inspired the Internet-enabled explosion of street portraiture and fashion photography. The street snap format works powerfully to suggest that the fashionable subjects of the photo are individual creative geniuses, simply caught by chance and the photographer’s luck on a street corner. The Japanese fashion magazines that foregrounded this format (*FRUiTS*, *KERA*, and others) therefore took on an aura of documentation of individual, amateur fashion masters, while in effect also creating a class of semiprofessional models who appeared in the magazines’ pages month after month, vaulting from there to the staged fashion spreads in the same magazines.¹⁵ (*FRUiTS* was an advertising-free magazine of nothing but street snaps by Aoki and associates.) That is, although there are certainly a large number of fabulously fashionable “regular people” on the streets of Tokyo, the magazines and photographers have had a powerful hand in framing, curating, and therefore defining the seemingly autochthonous “style tribes” of Harajuku. Magazines, individual enthusiasts, and fashion brands function together as an ecosystem devoted to the perpetuation of “street” styles.¹⁶

Perhaps because of its spectacularity, maybe due to its repetition of familiar storybook European aesthetics (with an exotic difference), gothic lolita traveled far beyond Japan, more quickly and more effectively than any other Harajuku subculture—first through coveted *KERA* magazines and *Gothic & Lolita Bibles*, brought from Japan or purchased at massive markups in Japanese bookstores in major US cities, and then scanned by kind, copyright-flouting souls to be posted in Internet message boards and blog platforms. The clothes traveled too, more slowly than images, since the original Japanese brands are costly, expensive (or sometimes impossible) to ship abroad, produced in limited sizes, and hard to order for non-Japanese-speaking enthusiasts. As Web communities have grown and evolved, English-speaking lolitas have congregated on LiveJournal, Tumblr, Facebook, and even 4chan and Reddit. This is not to suggest that gothic lolita lives primarily on the Internet—it is, fundamentally, a clothing fashion that

requires material bodies to get dressed; rather, new media technologies have facilitated in-person interactions at conventions, meetups, and teas, and in turn, new communities have created new media presences.

Gothic lolita seems to have traveled especially as one part of the larger fad for Japanese cultural exports, particularly manga, anime, and cosplay in the 2000s, a wave helped along by the official government-backed “Cool Japan” campaign beginning in 2006.¹⁷ As cute-culture ambassadors like pop idols and Sanrio characters buoyed up their influence, English-speaking gothic lolitas got access to the internationally released 2004 film adaptation of Novala Takemoto’s lolita novel *Shimotsuma monogatari*, published in Japanese in 2002 and in English in 2008, and to five issues of the *Gothic & Lolita Bible* in English, published by English-language manga producer TOKYOPOP during 2008–9. Since then, a number of independent brands and small-business lolita dressmakers have sprung up around the world. Most recently, the Chinese fast-fashion industry has transformed the market by offering their own styles and direct knockoff replicas, often custom-sized and directly shipped to consumers around the world, thereby undercutting the high resale values of costly and hard-to-procure name brands from Japan. The expansion of fashion production beyond the Japan-based name brands may eventually diffuse the still-strong sense of gothic lolita as a distinctly Japanese export, but for now, the girliness of gothic lolita still owes much to specific Japanese regimes of gender, to which I turn next.

SHŌJO SENSIBILITIES AND CUTE COMPLICATIONS

In its Japanese context, lolita fashion is imbricated in a rich, varied, and controversial tapestry of Japanese girl-centric sensibilities grouped under the catchall descriptor *shōjo*. *Shōjo* (少女) is one of the primary terms used in Japanese to designate girl culture, and it also articulates the sense of liminality so important to girliness: the characters directly translate to “not-quite-female female.”¹⁸ Foremost among *shōjo* cultural products are manga, anime, and of course fashion, although the *longue durée* of Japanese *shōjo* culture stretches at least as far back as the 1910s and 1920s, when the regularization of girls’ education contributed to the emergence of a girl-students culture along with other changes in girls’ social status, like increasing employment, the 1920s invention of the *moga* (a contraction of “Modern Girl” rendered in phonetic Japanese), and the founding of the Takarazuka all-women’s revue company.¹⁹ All these changes marked increasing visibility for women beyond the domestic space, but only for females not subsumed within a nuclear family as wives or mothers. Linguistic and especially orthographic innovations marked early schoolgirls’ culture and continued over the intervening decades, notably with the 1980s fads for *koneko-ji* or *burikko-ji*, supercutsey handwriting called alternately “kitten writing” or “fake-child writing.”²⁰ As can be deduced from the inherent censure in a phrase like “fake-child writing,” young women’s effects on the broader culture have often been editorialized as deleterious, much like contemporary US American hand-wringing over feminine linguistic innovations “vocal fry” and “upspeak.”²¹

Concurrent with recognition of their impact on the wider social sphere, *shōjo*²² have come to occupy a highly ambivalent place within Japanese discourse. Specifically linked with commodity consumption and *non*productivity (both as likely not to be working, or employed in minor ways, and definitionally not yet part of a reproductive economy), *shōjo* both constitute a key market for the consumption of goods and are singled out for scorn: “The *shōjo*, that new human species born of commodification, has today commodified everything and everyone,” declared critic Naoto Horikiri.²³ Horikiri’s claim, although polemically negative, nevertheless attributes great power to the category of *shōjo* (real or imagined); further, John Whittier Treat points out how, formulated more by behavior, aesthetics, and consumption choices, Horikiri’s statement constitutes the *shōjo* as a discursive category and figure of difference much more than one tied biologically to specific young female bodies. The youth and femininity of the *shōjo* could thus come to function as a space within the status quo that—when entered and barricaded like a fortress, rather than moved through as a liminal stage—constitutes a sort of refusal of society’s demands on the individual to submit to chrononormativity, to borrow Elizabeth Freeman’s provocative term.²⁴ Nobuko Anan identifies just such a dynamic in her book, *Contemporary Japanese Women’s Theatre and Visual Arts*, delineating girls as those who “reject stereotypically defined female material bodies,” for example through recourse to “strategic reconceptualization of the notion of female ‘innocence’” to emblemize “nonconformity to the patriarchal, heteronormative social structure.”²⁵ Although gothic lolita figures only in three brief mentions in Anan’s book, her analysis of what her book’s subtitle terms *Performing Girls’ Aesthetics* presents a list of congealed affects and desires that very closely mirror those exhibited by gothic lolitas. Many gothic lolitas certainly refuse to fall into line with hegemonic societal expectations; they escape, like many *shōjo*, not into strident opposition, but into themselves and an imaginative world removed from time and space where they can, as Anan puts it, “move freely across geographical, cultural, and historical borders”²⁶ In this context, the “Victorian” or “rococo” of gothic lolita fantasy is less important for what it is than for what it *isn’t*: the contemporary landscape with attendant social and familial ties and obligations that face the young women (and others). “Normal things like getting married, having a child, having a household—that kind of future is something I can’t completely imagine. I want to forever remain *otome* [a maiden]. What I consider normal is different.”²⁷ This is, however, a “weak” resistance—a mode of building up a repeatedly breached barrier between the self and societal expectations, “an imaginative reconfiguration of what is given rather than an attempt to overthrow the oppressive social structure.”²⁸

Although most lolita practitioners eschew all connections to *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel of adult male lust after the enigma of girlish flesh, we might instead consider the coincidence of the name as an example of what Anan calls “imaginative reconfiguration.” As the moniker *shōjo* is itself used in competing and contradictory ways by foes and friends of the *shōjo*, so Nabokov’s eponymous nymphet has been alternately reckoned with and disavowed by gothic lolitas. Many Japanese lolitas have never heard of Nabokov’s book, and tend to be disgusted when they learn what it is about, whereas for Anglophone lolitas the

question comes up fairly regularly, and answers range from complete disavowal of any connection between the two uses of “lolita” to rehabilitation of the character of Dolores Haze to emphasize her innocence of the latter connotations of the nymph as seducing or leading on older men.²⁹

Despite Japanese lolitas’ ignorance of the provenance of the name, its excessive semiosis predates the rise of the fashion, since in Japan “Lolita” had already been appended to “the Lolita complex,” typically abbreviated *rori-con* (ロリコン). Adapted from the title of a 1966 book by Russell Trainer that describes adult men who desire young girls, the term has acute applicability in Japan, where the pornographic imaginary features a particularly large subsection of youth tropes. Despite sharing a name, lolita fashion drastically diverges from typical *rori-con* aesthetics: standard-issue middle-school uniforms that everyday, status quo, pubescent girls wear, rather than outlandish, fairy-tale frocks. The common denominator, however, seems to lie with a perceived essence, not any visual marker: a shared obsession with the girlish innocence attributed to *shōjo* or younger girls. Or, to reverse the formulation, as Vera Mackie points out, they both “share common roots in an anxiety about adult female sexuality.”³⁰ Pornographic *rori-con* representations employ youth (middle-school uniforms, not high-school ones) and rape motifs to signify girlish innocence, whereas gothic lolitas preserve innocence by strategically escaping to a different time and place (the past, fantasy Europe) to avoid the threat of defilement. Indeed, the very quotidian banality of *rori-con* porn tropes suggests a credible reason for girls to want to escape to a delicious fantasy land: when the trappings of daily life, like your required school uniform, have been appropriated into an extensive pornotopia with extensive sadistic overtones for the gratification of older men, you may indeed prefer to escape your everyday milieu. In the shared space of the Internet, linguistic anthropologist Isaac Gagné has even documented alternate phonetic spellings (ロリイタ and ロリキタ) that Japanese lolitas have invented in order to avoid unwanted overlaps during Web searches.³¹ In fact, in the decade since Gagné’s article was published, it seems that the *shōjo* and fashion lolitas have triumphed over the *rori-cons*, perhaps by popularity or perhaps with governmental and commercial assistance: as of this writing in 2018, even without safe-search functions, basic Google searches for ロリータ turn up all gothic lolitas, not *rori-con* pornographic sites. On the other hand, lolitas discuss unwanted encounters and both malicious and clueless interactions online and in person, and virtually every Facebook group for lolita fashion is protected by moderators to keep out creeps: those who can’t answer a few basic questions demonstrating basic knowledge about the fashion, are barred from joining.

Shōjo and gothic lolita’s “free trade” in fantasies has been facilitated by the free trade in certain cute commodities, an imbrication with commodity capitalism that dilutes or complicates the resistant power of gothic lolita and *shōjo* more generally by reentangling them with “the real world” at the level of consumerism and marketing. “Cute” and the analogous Japanese aesthetic *kawaii* bear a special relationship to commerce. Sianne Ngai, for instance, emphasizes the “commodity aesthetic” of cute with Walter Benjamin’s description of the commodity’s sentimental bent as it “see(s) in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to

nestle.”³² That is, cute weaponizes affect and desire to move consumers to consume; cute's affective charge might be said to function as a sort of commodity enchantment Marx described in *Capital*. Like youth itself, cute dynamically hovers between ephemerality and aura. Frances Richards declares:

[C]ute suggests an inherently fleeting, forgettable, throwaway quality, but this is distinct from ephemerality, since by its very vapidity or inoffensiveness, cute remains indestructible. Cute stabilizes infancy, or the frailty of old age, or the foolishly unconscious actions of a supposedly competent adult, by reframing them in an atemporal, non-biological, and consequence-free zone, not entirely unrelated to the fixed reality inside a picture.³³

Lorraine Plourde invokes Daniel Harris and Ngai in reminding us that the cute also implies violence and sadism toward the cute object.³⁴ Sharon Kinsella, writing on *kawaii*, points out that the term hovers between positive cute affects and abjectness. The sense of diminution in *kawaii* also forms the root of the word *kawaisō*—meaning pitiful, pathetic, and sad, and not in a cute way.³⁵ That extreme polarization of sweetness to abjection and violence brings us back around to darkness—lolita back to gothic.

Explicitly “gothic” looks are now more or less a minority in the larger lolita panoply, eclipsed by the international popularity of sweet lolita; but, just as cute and *kawaii* contain an ambivalence, a current of gothic sensibility runs through even the pinkest, sweetest strands of sweet lolita. As Anan points out, for some *shōjo* the quest to stop time and remain young and cute forever leads to themes of suicide and death as the ultimate means of stopping the clock and refusing society's demands.³⁶ Momoko, the protagonist of the novel and movie *Shimotsuma monogatari* (released in English as *Kamikaze Girls*),³⁷ is a sweet lolita, not a gothic one, but she narrates the darkness of her lolita tendencies by acknowledging how her willfulness put her at odds with not just her small town's social standards, but also moral ones, which in the Japanese context continue to emphasize filial care and family loyalty. Momoko steals her father's counterfeit goods to sell them to schoolmates herself in order to afford to buy her expensive name-brand lolita dresses. “So what if I was deceitful?” she declares. “My happiness was at stake. It's not wrong to feel good. That's what Rococo taught me. But actually my soul is rotten.”³⁸ Although fictional, Momoko elucidates a key *shōjo* and lolita tenet, positing her lolita self-fashioning as a mode of individualistic self-fashioning that cannot be reconciled with her family's and society's demands that she acquiesce to the strictures of the group. Indeed, the central plot line revolves around Momoko's belief that she cannot even make and maintain friends, much less the wildly different *yanki* (motorcycle punk) girl, Ichigo.

Jane Mai and An Nguyen used Momoko's word “rotten” to name their book of gothic lolita essays and comics: *So Pretty/Very Rotten*. Using this dichotomy between “pretty” and “rotten,” they muse on the bank-breaking expense of filling a lolita closet, mean-girl antics within the community, the apparent paradox of self-realization through commodity consumption, and issues of isolation, mental

health, and depression. “How can something so beautiful also make you feel so sad, angry, and detached?” they ask.³⁹ The overall effect of the collection uses the two authors’ experiences (and Nguyen’s Ph.D. research) in gothic lolita fashion to reckon less with the details of the aesthetic and more with the existential work and angst of trying to forge a self—a verb I choose for its dual valences of creation through hard physical labor and fakery.

TECHNOLOGIES OF GIRLY COUNTERIDENTITY

Much of Mai and Nguyen’s book eloquently questions the stakes and state of gothic lolita as a form of community- and self-fashioning, and asks whether a fashion that disproportionately appeals to individuals who feel like misfits could possibly simultaneously be a sound forum for group identifications. Although both enthusiasts and academics have debated whether gothic lolita can sustain the designation of “subculture” by indexing the amount of music, literature, and other shared cultural products necessary to rise beyond “fashion,” my focus is rather on interrogating how a fashion or subculture contributes to subject formation. Like other minoritarian identifications, defining the boundaries of gothic lolita is a perennial matter of concern and debate for adherents of the fashion. Lolitas fight to define and explain themselves to each other and outsiders; to define the boundaries of lolitaness suggests a meaningful form of self-making. As one member of the Facebook Rufflechat forum asked in August 2018:

At what point are you considered a lolita? I’ve heard some people say you have to actually have Lolita clothing in order to be Lolita. If so what is the right amount? One item or one dress/main piece or one full coord or is it having a functional wardrobe? Can you be Lolita and not be wearing the fashion (like you have an interest in it and know alot [*sic*] about it but currently lack garments)? What makes you Lolita?⁴⁰

More than fifty replies over the next few days generally agreed that one should own and wear lolita clothes, but also ran through the differences between brand-name clothes, off-brand clothes, and “lo-able” clothes (garments considered sufficiently frilly or poufy enough to pass as lolita fashion, but not originally intended as such), how many outfits one should own, how often one should wear them and to where (only to anime conventions once a year was a bit suspect). “I consider lolita something I wear, not something I am,” one commenter wrote, pithily articulating a tension in all performative modes of identity formation. It is less the details of the definition that emerges than the fact that the boundaries of the group are being negotiated constantly that performatively coalesces gothic lolitas as a subculture or even an identity group. Their clarity as a recognizable group is hardly ensured. There are many competing forces with which both Japanese and global lolitas have to contend: aesthetic overlap with cosplay, another clothing-based Japanese cultural export; unwanted sexualization and co-optation into *otaku* (pop-culture obsession) and pornographic aesthetics; and the pure incomprehension of outsiders, within but especially beyond Japan.

In taking up gothic lolita as a form of self-fashioning, it can be instructive to look at the allied practice of cosplay: although gothic lolita traveled extensively overseas along with cosplay and other anime- and manga-related fan practices, most gothic lolita fashion adherents are adamant about drawing a boundary between cosplay and true gothic lolita fashion. Quite simply, cosplayers are dressing up as *someone else*—a character—whereas gothic lolitas are dressing as *their true selves*.⁴¹ The thin and repeatedly breachable margin between a costume and an expression of selfhood is indexed in the foregoing Rufflechat post by attempts to draw a line between “conlitas” (convention dress-up lolitas) and “real” lolitas. Gothic lolitas have typically shored up this boundary marker through additional articulations of difference, such as the claim that cosplayers wear cheap, simple costumes, whereas gothic lolitas’ ensembles are detailed and expensive. However, policing this divide is made more complicated by the fundamental slippages that happen not only because of the burgeoning market for cut-rate and knockoff lolita fashions, the increasing number of gothic lolita anime and manga characters that exist to be cosplayed, and the number of people who alternate between practices, but also through a deeper and fundamental ambiguity about how identities are formed and manifested. Indeed, we might use the coincidence of cosplay, fan cultures, and international lolita fashion to ask pointed questions about technologies of self-making in a context of transnational cultural and capital flows. After all, why wouldn’t dressing up as a fictional character constitute an act of identity formation any more or less than dressing to instantiate yourself performatively as a loner princess exiled from her era? Or just dressing up as a girl who loves ruffles and bows? The spectacularity of lolita looks also incites policing from the mainstream, where hegemonic norms for gender, race, and age self-presentation undergird the hostile or disbelieving reactions many lolitas encounter (see Fig. 2).

Accounts of gothic lolita self-fashioning might take into account both post-structural recognitions of subjects as provisionally, contingently *in process* as formations, rather than formed and fixed. They may also draw on alternative models like the Japanese concepts of *honme* and *tatema* (discussed below), which could offer means of understanding the cross-cultural popularity of a culturally marked practice like gothic lolita. Or they may simply incorporate how gothic lolitas themselves habitually talk about their own identifications, in casually identificatory statements like “I am a lolita,” “I met some lolitas at the anime con,” and so on.⁴² One variation on the question of lolita as an identity (which is largely absent from Japanese communities) is the “lifestyle lolita” versus occasional, con (meaning “convention”), and other part-time lolita practices. The question of whether lolita is an identity and how it is expressed is of as much fascination to lolita enthusiasts as it is to academics; Anglophone communities of gothic lolitas (as in many Western subcultures) continuously debate about what a gothic lolita identity must entail to be “real.”

The notion of forging an identity through fashion—we could even say *fashioning* an identity—is inherently paradoxical, since “identity” presumes, at least etymologically, a fixed and unchanging selfsameness, one which in Western thought paradigms asks subjects to “be themselves” unflinchingly in every situation.

This conception of identity is both culturally bounded—Japanese psychologists have alternative models of selfhood that recognize multiple “authentic” selves in different contexts—and also becoming outmoded in poststructuralist and post-modern theories. For example, relevant sociological and psychological concepts would include the concepts most famously explicated by sociologist Takeo Doi of *honne* and *tatemae* (“inner feeling” and “external face”), which, although they might diverge, may still be thought of as equally true or “authentic” aspects of an individual’s personality.⁴³

Transnational gothic lolita communities actively engage in concerted, if incomplete, performative and discursive efforts to redraw the boundaries and limitations of gender, race, nation, size, color, sexuality, and so on, all under the aegis of a fantasized transnational, transtemporal, frilly femininity that is made equally available to all by virtue of affective affinity and fashion. In both online forums and in-person conventions, like RuffleCon, the majority of participants make concentrated efforts to create inclusive spaces coalesced around outfits and interest, not around individual demographic factors like gender, race, or sexuality. Gothic lolitas use a number of performative technologies to overwrite the usual divisions of identity: one is certainly clothing and modes of dressing. Expertise regarding dress patterns, where to buy, how to size, and how to perfect coordinates (full outfits) is liberally traded in convention panels and in Internet forums. A popular format for these discussions consists of an uploaded photo of a person in a “coord,” on which other users then comment, with compliments and critiques. In Facebook and LiveJournal forums, these discussions are usually instigated by the subject of the photo uploading her own image, and the ensuing discussion is heavily moderated for kindness. There are also more outlaw groups, particularly on Reddit and 4chan, dedicated to trash-talking “ita” (derived from the Japanese for “ouch!” or “pain”) coordinates. Another technology is gesture and pose. One of RuffleCon’s most popular events was the “posing workshop” where participants worked to master a vocabulary of cute and romantic poses for photos and fashion shows.⁴⁴ Gothic lolitas have ample opportunities to study vocabularies of posing and expression in photos of both models and enthusiasts that circulate freely on the Internet. Kind and cruel discussions alike serve to map and remap continuously the shifting edges of what and who will count as “lolita.”

Although the vast majority of participants in Japan and beyond are cisgender young women, there are enough cisgender men who dress occasionally in lolita fashions that they have acquired their own affectionate (and controversial) term: “bro-lita.” There are also a number of trans and nonbinary people who participate, like Andrea Nicole Baker, a longtime Atlanta-area lolita enthusiast, who uses the financial assets she’s built up to support areawide events, even organizing a lolita convention in Atlanta for two years (Fig. 3). There are even a number of lolita participants who otherwise shun conventional modes of feminine self-presentation. Geraldine Fahr Sindram (see Fig. 2) is a longtime sweet lolita wearer and active participant in online lolita communities. Fahr identifies as FTM (female-to-male) transgender but declares he has no intention of giving up lolita fashion as he continues with his transition. Jane Mai explains that she came to gothic lolita fashions as an inveterate tomboy. Observing male Visual Kei musicians, with their



Figure 3.

Andrea Nicole Baker, a lolita enthusiast from the Atlanta area, shows off a coord while queuing for a RuffleCon 2017 fashion show. Photo by Michelle Liu Carriger.

avowedly straight, cis-male bodies in feminine frills, helped her to recognize the *performance* of gothic lolita–fashioned femininity as untethered to any specific body, sexual orientation, or personal disposition.⁴⁵ Novala Takemoto, the author generally hailed as “the Lolitas’ Bard,” has expressed similar sentiments: “I am . . . a Rococo writer who has been racing headlong in full-blown Lolita mode for years, in spite of being a straight male.”⁴⁶ It’s worth noting that although there are trans and male gothic lolitas in Japan and abroad, in general there is more hostility and distrust of “bro-litas” within Japanese communities, perhaps because of the closer conjunction with sexual fetishism and, in particular, straight-male preying on young girls there.⁴⁷ In rambling online discussions, Anglophone lolitas also discuss the difficulties of balancing a welcoming community for everyone with the need to neutralize sexualized threats and discomforts aimed particularly at girls and women who have dared to stand out in public.⁴⁸ Thus, gothic lolitas use varieties of performative means to make over-the-top femininity a category available to the

self-selected—replacing demographic diversity with fashionable diversity: “prince” and “boy” styles for girls and boys and everyone else alike, dresses in pink or black or teddy bear print for all.

To be clear, when I suggest thinking through subcultural fashion as a technology of fashioning a self, I am not in any way disregarding or discounting the coercive interpellative power of performative norms to instantiate identitarian characteristics upon individuals. I’m thinking here of Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity or (to name just one relevant theorist) Rey Chow’s trenchant observations on how raced subjects are compelled to conform to stereotypes in order to be intelligible at all.⁴⁹ Indeed, despite advances in making a greater variety of gendered expressions available to a greater variety of bodies, transnational gothic lolita communities have been beset by microcosmic, we might even say heterotopic, issues of discriminatory bullying that mirror the vagaries of the societies they draw from, such as sizeism, ageism, colorism. Gothic lolitas consistently report patterns of mean-girl hierarchizing and policing, despite (or perhaps directly leading to) direct, concerted efforts to make gothic lolita a welcoming community for all genders, body shapes, income levels, and so on. The infamous website 4chan, for example, hosts the dark side of Facebook’s heavily moderated (albeit still frequently contentious) lolita community discussion; users grab images from other sites like Instagram and repost them with disparaging comments regarding the taste level or looks of the individual in the image. At a longer-running site, “Behind the Bows” on LiveJournal, moderators collate email contributions and post them weekly, anonymized—these are sometimes calling individuals ugly or fat but more often insult individuals for bad taste in outfits or tagging pictures as lolita when they aren’t. Many more of the anonymously posted “secrets” are about frustrations with brands, outsiders, and even recently a GIF declaring that non-Japanese participants were culturally appropriating Japanese culture and urging them to quit the fashion.⁵⁰ The nature of online communication, however, is so vague that it was impossible to tell whether the creator of the appropriation GIF was being serious or not.

Of course, there could be a limit to the coalition-building prowess of an eclectically gathered group of girls (broadly defined) who generally pride themselves on being self-centered loners and princesses. “Princesses,” after all, are hardly neutral political figures. Despite the dark pockets of the online community, gothic lolita constitutes an inversion of social hierarchy toward the feminine and an extension of the possibility of community formation under a frilly, feminine, youthful, anachronistic banner by obscuring, literally covering over, other identitarian aspects such as nation, masculinity, age, and temporal era. However, there are additional caveats to this (literally) rosy picture, beyond the existence of mean-girl backbiting. For instance, those who materially benefit the most from the propagation and capitalization on girl culture are not necessarily girls. For the most part, magazine publishers, fashion manufacturers, and even two of the most prominent lolita culture makers—Novala Takemoto and Mana—are not young women. That is, just as girlishness is available to a variety of bodies on the consumer end of things, so is it exploitable or producible by any number of bodies; gothic lolita femininity is an eminently alienable quality. Indeed, it seems likely that people

like Mana, Novala Takemoto, and male fashion designers get ahead precisely due to conventional markers of privilege—male bodies, relative age—in the larger dynamics of Japanese economics and society. The persistence of societal inequities, bad feelings and behaviors within the gothic lolita subcultural heterotopia, available only to those who can pay the Internet bill and/or the dressmaker, emphasizes that this is not a heroic resistance narrative, wherein girly ruffles cover over human difference, resulting in world peace; rather it is potentially a more modest, or maybe brash, notion that subcultural affinities, characterized by obsessive study and creation, and deep affect, might point toward methods of thinking past essentialism.

Gothic lolita may offer a grassroots transcultural understanding project, one that, if we choose to take it seriously, may also offer a series of clues about individual reckonings with national and transnational legacies of colonialism and “The Past” writ large in everyday life. I am aware that it is not standard to take obviously pop-cultural representations of a clearly fantasized past as historical narrative, but that is what I intend to muse on now. So far I have considered what worn invocations of some kind of past does for those who choose to wear it today, but now I shift to ask what gothic lolitas may be doing for history. The borders established by gothic lolita clothes maybe be “superficial” in the way that clothing is literally hollow—waiting to be filled out and completed by a body, whatever the body—but they are also dense, if not exactly with precise and clear significations, than with inchoate ones: Meiji Westernized “Enlightenment,” fearful Victorian inheritances, and imaginative eternal maiden wonderlands.

MAIDEN/MEIJI

It's 1872: another teenager, this time Mutsuhito, the four years “restored” Emperor Meiji of Japan, trades his centuries-old imperial attire for a haircut and a magnificent military uniform not unlike the braid and brass detailing popular in certain strands of military-esque gothic lolita ensembles (Figs. 4, 5). Emperor Meiji's makeover came complete with a proclamation to the newly minted citizens of Japan, declaring that Chinese influences (meaning kimono and traditional court dress) had too long dominated the court, and that henceforth “we should no longer appear before the people in these effeminate styles.”⁵¹ Although the transnational costume change took time, the pictorial record of the Meiji period demonstrates that interest in importing and adopting Western fashions grew steadily (or at least documenting and promulgating information and ideas did, if actual wardrobes more slowly), in sometimes unique and piecemeal ways.⁵² That is, Meiji elites undertook the same painstaking processes of study and adoption as non-Japanese gothic lolitas do today. They went through their own “ita” phases, according to foreign observers, but also sometimes amazed with the brilliance of their adaptations. It is precisely the high Victorian fashions that were being adopted into Japan then that are name-checked now in gothic lolita anachronistic references, no matter that the actual details and silhouettes of gothic lolita fashions are not particularly precise replications of historical Victorian garments. Notably, both the Meiji and the gothic lolita projects are highly gendered: the Meiji



Figure 4.

Emperor Meiji, 1872. Albumen silver print from glass negative in the Elisha Whittelsey Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

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makeover was, as is made clear in the emperor's proclamation, specifically a *defeminizing* fashion project, whereas gothic lolita is obviously the opposite. And both projects have been dogged by foreign assertions about the emptiness of Japanese imitation. As just one example, the novelist Pierre Loti wrote of a European-style ball he attended in 1888: "And when I think that these costumes, these manners, this elaborate etiquette, these dances, were something learned, and learned very quickly, . . . I tell myself that these people are really marvelous imitators and a soirée such as this seems to me a most interesting tour de force on the part of people who are uniquely skilled at sleight of hand."⁵³ For Loti and many other foreigners in Meiji Japan, there could be no "deep" Japanese apprehension of European things, only a truly enchanting trick of mimicry. I want to emphasize,



Figure 5.

Military lolita ensemble by Chinese indie brand Lost Angel. Photo courtesy of LolitaWardrobe.com.

though, that this is far more illuminating of European attitudes toward their Asian neighbors than it is an accurate assessment of what Japanese westernization projects actually achieved.

We might want to argue that any gothic lolita resonance with the “real” past is also just a trick of semblance: obviously, individual gothic lolitas are not (often) consciously or specifically invoking Emperor Meiji, Empress Haruko, or the specifics of nineteenth-century imperialism when they get dressed. However they do *activate* that history with the images, tropes, even (or especially) “imported” and domesticated fantasies. For instance, Takemoto’s *Shimotsuma monogatari / Kamikaze Girls* opens with several pages of disquisition on French rococo—how it comprised a feminine counterpoint to the masculine baroque; how Madame Pompadour makes a much better rococo icon than Marie Antoinette.⁵⁴ Momoko’s fervent identification with the French rococo aesthetic is not a case

of self-hate—it's a serious, intellectual and philosophical engagement (even as it uses its knowledge to make a case for self-centeredness, pleasure, and a distinctly postmodern aesthetic) balanced by Momoko's devotion to the Japanese sweet lolita brand Baby, the Stars Shine Bright (often abbreviated as "Baby" or BTSSB). Momoko emerges as an active agent of knowing and employing (foreign) history in a project of negotiating a milieu she experiences as hostile.

Although gothic lolita has mostly been considered in ethnographic, pop-culture, and fashion studies contexts, taking the possibility of historical redress seriously puts me in closer dialogue with neo-Victorian studies of literature and film. Elizabeth Ho writes that the "'neo-Victorianism' and other 'neo's'... do not simply look back to the past but reiterate and replay it in more diverse, complicated and troubling ways."⁵⁵ We could potentially read gothic lolita with Ho's treatment of neo-Victorian novels from postcolonial nations as emphasizing "a present still haunted and seduced by colonial structures or privilege"—a replaying, perhaps, of the Meiji Restoration.⁵⁶ Or we might read it, as we have become accustomed in performance studies, as a surrogation that entails a repetition with a difference: What if we read gothic lolita as indexing the unfinished nature of the Meiji Restoration? What if we saw an ongoing feminist struggle for Japanese girls and women to find an inhabitable time and place—one which, ironically, is simultaneously read as oppressive and "infantilizing" of women? What if it were both at once—working unevenly, playing out the aftershocks of histories in individual bodies with unpredictable results? What if we accepted that a femininity that appears to most of us as excessive, theatrical, and out of place and time in fact feels true and pleasurable to its adherents, no matter their chromosomal makeup or professed gender identity? Gothic lolita's successful reexportation of European history back to Europe and most of its former colonies—those most successful in the project of global neoliberal capitalism—suggests to me something further about how tides shift, how the unfinished revolutions of the past continue to haunt, with both fear and desire, pain and sweetness, the dreams of both colonized and colonizers, and those who are both at once.

ENDINGS FOR GOTHs

Evolution and indeed decline are part of the typical life cycle of a fashion trend. In fact, this article might serve as a eulogy of sorts, as recent events have heralded the "death" of lolita fashion, after record longevity that far outlasted and outtraveled other Harajuku trends: in 2017, the seminal Japanese street-style magazines *FRUiTS*, *KERA*, and *Gothic & Lolita Bible* all ceased print publication, although *KERA* persists as a website and complex of online and brick-and-mortar shops in cities across Japan. Rather than pointing to the dire financial state of print periodical media, Aoki, the founder of *FRUiTS*, declared the magazine was folding because "there are no fashionable kids left to photograph."⁵⁷ Although the decline of swanning in the street around Harajuku is confirmed by many sources ("Japan's Wild, Creative Harajuku Street Style Is dead. Long live Uniqlo," declares one headline),⁵⁸ still the styles continue to ripple out across national borders, via online fashion sites, like the *FRUiTS*-esque website TokyoFashion.com

and Instagram, into and out of physical spaces (the shopping streets of Harajuku and adjacent Yoyogi Park), cons and meetups. RuffleCon, North America's one "alternative fashion" conference (which was founded and dominated by lolita fashion adherents), also announced its dissolution in early 2018, after its final event in November 2017. Endings, however, are complicated when it comes to the gothic, which precisely thrives on death, revivification, fearful inheritances, and the revisitation of the repressed past on the unsuspecting or unwelcoming present.

Just like other irrepressible gothic returns of the irrational, we have seen how the gothic lolita look has largely failed to obey the cyclical, regular, rationalized dictates of fashion commercial production in its own self-nourishing subcultures, growing and shifting over the years, and especially seeing adherents come and go from the fashion in their own microcosmic life cycles.⁵⁹ Although we may concede that doubling down on modesty, girliness, spectacle, and anachronism is a weak resistance, gothic lolita's excessive fashions congeal and materialize the excess of feeling, particularly feminine feeling, desire, and darkness, unattended to and uncontained by rational modernity and patriarchy. The sumptuous black blot of the gothic erupting in the now critiques the present in its very remaining. Visual Kei musician Arika Takarano declares:

Gothic and Lolita clothes are a maiden's armor, which even a knight's armor cannot compare to. A maiden's lace is her steel. Her ribbons are chains. Her dress hat is her helmet, and she surreptitiously changes the blood that flows from her wounds into true red rose petals. Thus, the maiden fights. After all, to live is to fight, and to become beautiful is to become stronger.⁶⁰

ENDNOTES

1. *Kamikaze Girls (Shimotsuma monogatari)*, directed by Tetsuya Nakashima (Japan, 2004). DVD, in Japanese with English subtitles. San Francisco: VIZ Pictures, 2006.

2. See, for example, "Explaining It Away" in Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, 2d ed. ([1985]; London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 47–66.

3. I'm thinking here of works by Richard Schechner, for example, an antitheatrical habit of early performance studies ably explicated by Stephen J. Bottoms, "The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpicking the Theatre Studies/Performance Studies Dichotomy," *Theatre Topics* 13.2 (2003): 173–87.

4. Here I am borrowing an evocative term from Koichi Iwabuchi's theorization of Japanese cultural exports in *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 27–8.

5. This elucidation of my method and concerns around how theorizing affects contemporary subculture is composed especially in dialogue with Caroline Evans' work on subculture in Evans, "Dreams That Only Money Can Buy ... Or, The Shy Tribe In Flight from Discourse," *Fashion Theory* 1.2 (1997): 169–88.

6. For more exhaustive encyclopedic treatments, see Theresa Winge, "Undressing and Dressing Loli: A Search for the Identity of the Japanese Lolita," *Mechademia 3: Limits of the Human* (2008): 47–63; and An Nguyen, "Maiden's Fashion as Eternal Becomings: Victorian Maidens and Sugar Sweet Cuties Donning Japanese Street Fashion in Japan a North America" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Program in

Anthropology, University of Western Ontario, 2012), *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*, 1042, accessed 20 July 2018, <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/1042>.

7. David Graham, "Gothic Lolitas: Goth Girls Just Wanna Have Fun!" *Gothic eZine*, n.d. [2003], accessed 3 May 2018, http://gothic.lilithazine.com/gothic_Lolitas.html.

8. Amy C. Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 44.

9. For example, *ibid.*, 25; Paul Hodgkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*, 8th ed. (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 79; Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby, "Introduction" in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Goodlad and Bibby (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–37, at 12–13; Gavin Baddeley, *Goth Chic* (London: Plexus, 2002), 19.

10. Vera Mackie, "Transnational Bricolage: Gothic Lolita and the Political Economy of Fashion," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 20 (April 2009), accessed 31 August 2018, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/mackie.htm>, ¶25.

11. Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (New York: Berg, 2012), 72.

12. *Ibid.*, 29. "Style tribes" is a contested term for fashion subcultures used by Caroline Evans and Ted Polhemus, among other influential fashion and subculture scholars.

13. Valerie Steele et al., *Japan Fashion Now*, exh. cat., Museum at FIT, New York City, 17 September 2010–8 January 2011 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 96.

14. "Moi-même-Moitié: Elegant, Gothic Lolita, Aristocrat, Vampire, Romance," accessed 3 May 2018, <https://moi-meme-moitie.com/>.

15. We might think of this process as roughly analogous to but predating the phenomenon of the "social media celebrity"—many examples of which, of course, have also created their own spaces not just through the knack of crafting viral images, but through savvy combinations of institutional assistance and framing, which is usually obscured.

16. Caroline Evans describes the analogue dynamic in the the street style-inflected British magazines *The Face* and *i-D* in Evans, "Dreams That Only Money Can Buy . . . Or, The Shy Tribe In Flight from Discourse," *Fashion Theory* 1.2 (1997): 169–88, at 176.

17. There is much to be said about Japan's "Cool Japan" and other soft-power campaigns. See Laura Miller, "Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan," *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 20.1 (2011): 18–29, at 19–20. Also Iwabuchi, e.g., 32–4.

18. Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 66; Nobuko Anan, *Contemporary Japanese Women's Theatre and Visual Arts: Performing Girls' Aesthetics* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 33.

19. See, for example, *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan*, ed. Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller, and Christine Reiko Yano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 6.

20. Isaac Gagné's 2008 article on linguistics and gothic lolita contains much more on the subject of language, writing, and gothic lolitas: Gagné, "Urban Princesses: Performance and 'Women's Language' in Japan's Gothic/Lolita Subculture," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18.1 (2008): 130–50.

21. Douglas Quenqua, "They're Like, Way Ahead of the Linguistic Currrrve," *New York Times*, 27 February 2012, accessed 26 August 2018, www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/science/young-women-often-trendsetters-in-vocal-patterns.html.

22. The plural of Japanese nouns is the same as the singular: one *shōjo*, two *shōjo*.

23. Quoted in John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: *Shōjo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 19.2 (1993): 353–87, at 363.

24. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

25. Anan, 2.

26. *Ibid.*, 7.

27. "Justine," a Japanese lolita, in an interview with An Nguyen, 1 May 2010. Nguyen, 213.

28. Anan, 9.

29. Jane Mai and An Nguyen, *So Pretty/Very Rotten: Comics and Essays on Lolita Fashion and Cute Culture* (Toronto: Koyama Press, 2017), 15; Kyla Daniëll Robinson, "Empowered Princesses: An Ethnographic Examination of the Practices, Rituals, and Conflicts within Lolita Fashion Communities in the United States" (honors thesis, Georgia State University, 2014), 96, accessed 20 July 2018, https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/anthro_hontheses/11; P. R. Hinton, "Returning in a Different Fashion: Culture, Communication, and Changing Representations of Lolita in Japan and the West," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1582–1602; and Kathryn Adèle Hardy Bernal, "The Lolita Complex: A Japanese Fashion Subculture and Its Paradoxes" (M.Phil. thesis, AUT University, 2011), accessed 20 July 2018, <http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10292/2448/HardyBernalKA2.pdf?sequence=3>.
30. Mackie, ¶24.
31. Gagné, 135.
32. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.
33. Frances Richards, "Fifteen Theses on the Cute," *Cabinet* 4: *Animals*, accessed 4 May 2018, <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/4/cute.php>, ¶IX.
34. Lorraine Plourde, "Babymetal and the Ambivalence of Cuteness," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21.3 (2016): 293–307, at 295.
35. Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Scov and Brian Moeran (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 220–54, at 222.
36. Anan, 22–3.
37. "Kamikaze Girls" is a choice of "translation" that has nothing to do with lolita fashion or Takemoto's narrative. Shimotsuma is a town in Ibaraki prefecture, about two hours outside Tokyo by rail; *Shimotsuma monogatari* simply means "Shimotsuma Story" and comes off as a tongue-in-cheek nod to classical Japanese titling conventions—e.g., *Genji monogatari* for *The Tale of Genji*.
38. *Kamikaze Girls*, DVD subtitles.
39. Mai and Nguyen, 9.
40. Michelle MacKay, Rufflechat Facebook post, 21 August 2018; accessed 27 August 2018, www.facebook.com/groups/rufflechat/permalink/1778728848889125/.
41. Cf. Nguyen, 262–3.
42. These are paraphrases from the Rufflechat community on Facebook; the same dynamics typically hold everywhere where lolitas get together to discuss. A convenient ethnographic bonus to the rise of the Internet is how many frank conversations among subjects are now preserved complete with timestamps. Rufflechat, accessed 27 August 2018, www.facebook.com/groups/rufflechat/.
43. Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 149–50. *Honne* and *tatemaie* also correspond neatly with Erving Goffman's sociological concepts of front- and backstage in *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life*.
44. Although numerous videos offering gothic lolita-specific advice for posing exists if you search YouTube.com, here is one that recaps the 2015 RuffleCon posing workshop, accessed 28 July 2018: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQtHTI6oG_E.
45. Here, for example, is the permalink to an in-depth conversation among Anglophone lolitas regarding their personal impressions of the overlap between non-Japanese lolitas and queer identity: Rufflechat, Facebook, accessed 28 July 2018: www.facebook.com/groups/rufflechat/permalink/1570909126337766/.
46. Kathryn A. Hardy-Bernal, "Novala Takemoto's *Shimotsuma monogatari*: Kamikaze Girls and the Japanese Lolita," posted 1 September 2009, accessed 24 August 2018, www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/guestblog/novala-takemotos-shimotsuma-monogatari-kamikaze-girls-and-the-japanese-lolita/.
47. Nguyen, 275.
48. See, for example, Rufflechat, Facebook, accessed 28 July 2018, www.facebook.com/groups/rufflechat/permalink/1527284090700270/.

49. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

50. Secrets Post #239, Behind the Bows, accessed 27 August 2018, <https://behind-the-bows.livejournal.com/177501.html#comments>.

51. Quoted in Keiichirō Nakagawa and Henry Rosovsky, “The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry,” *Business History Review* 37.1–2 (1963): 59–80, at 62.

52. In other work I address the Meiji Restoration and adoption of Western fashions thoroughly. See Michelle Liu Carriger, “Theatricality of the Closet: Clothing Controversy in Victorian Britain and Meiji Japan” (Ph.D. diss., Theatre and Performance Studies, Brown University, 2013), and my forthcoming first book (working title, *Modes of ReDress*).

53. Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986), 151.

54. Novala Takemoto, *Kamikaze Girls*, trans. Akemi Wegmüller (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2002), 1–11.

55. Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London: Continuum, 2012), 9.

56. *Ibid.*, 11.

57. “‘オシャレな子が撮れなくなった’: スナップ誌「FRUITS」が月刊行を終了した理由,” accessed 24 August 2018, www.fashionsnap.com/article/2017-02-03/fruits-stop/; translation mine.

58. Marc Bain, “Japan’s Wild, Creative Harajuku Street Style Is Dead. Long Live Uniqlo,” accessed 3 May 2018, <https://qz.com/909573/japans-wild-creative-harajuku-street-style-is-dead-long-live-uniqlo/>.

59. See, for example, numerous Internet clothing sales with the tag “Leaving Lolita” as a headline.

60. Arika Takarano, “Oh Maiden, Advance with a Sword and a Rose,” *Gothic & Lolita Bible 4* (Los Angeles: TOKYOPOP, 2008), 10–11, at 11.