

GANGURO IN JAPANESE YOUTH CULTURE: SELF-IDENTITY IN CULTURAL CONFLICT

The research presented in this paper was conducted with the support of the Spelman Bush-Hewlett Grant Program (Dr. Anne B. Warner, director), Spelman College Museum of Fine Art: *irona rozeal brown: a³...black on both sides* (Dr. Andrea D. Barnwell, director), and Department of Foreign Languages at Spelman College (Dr. Anthony Dahl, chair).

This research project would have been impossible without the Japanese participants of University of Tokyo (directed by Dr. Kairong Yang) and Kyoritsu Women's University (directed by Professor Hisako Yanaka).

Special thanks also go to the participants in this research project at Spelman College: Tiffany N. Tyson, Jason Woody, Charli Kemp, Chris Shaw, Sheena Young, Aryen Moore-Alston, Joseph Barden, and Erin Aisha Williams.

Xuexin Liu
Spelman College

Introduction

This paper reports a study of the *ganguro* phenomenon¹ as a new fashion style² prevailing among young Japanese girls in some Japanese

¹ By imitating their idols Lauryn Hill and TLC (see footnotes 17 and 18), *ganguro* girls want to make themselves look like black Americans. Signs posted outside hair salons advertise the newly popular “buraku” (black) or “afuro” (afro) hairstyles. Also, in the cosmetics aisles of mainstream supermarkets, dark beige powders and tanning lotions are sold. In pursuit of a special color beyond tan, they frequently visit tanning salons, use sunlamps, or smother their faces in brown make-up. Because of their limited means, some girls even color their entire faces with a brown magic marker. “Yamanba” is another name for *ganguro*. Yamanba, “mountain grandmother,” is the name given to a mythical hag said to haunt the Japanese mountains.

² *Ganguro*, meaning “black face” in Japanese, became a popular fashion style spreading among some Japanese teenage girls. The basic characteristics of this fashion style are bleached-blond hair and a deep tan,

major metropolitan areas. Most previous Japanese social and cultural studies³ only described the phenomenon, without exploring the sources and nature of such a social and cultural development. However, this study not only describes the phenomenon, but also investigates the personal motives for some Japanese girls to practice *ganguro*, potential social and cultural consequences of such a practice, the unavoidable conflict between this new youth culture and the traditional one, the influence and impact of *ganguro* on the current younger Japanese generation's social attitude and behavior, and the relationship between such a subculture and the Japanese mainstream culture. It assumes that *ganguro* girls intend to identify themselves as free individuals departing from the social behaviors and cultural values as established or commonly accepted in Japanese society. The research project relied on the direct input and feedback from some young Japanese students about their understanding of *ganguro*. Sixty-six participants from two Japanese universities in this research project were given a questionnaire covering the most relevant questions regarding the issues under investigation. In addition, this research project involved several organized

produced by tanning beds or make-up. *Ganguro* girls intend to produce the look of a tanned, blonde California beach girl look or that of an African-American woman. They wear particular accessories like high platform shoes or boots, purikura photo stickers, and cellular phones. Japanese metropolitan areas like the Shibuya and Ikebukuro districts of Tokyo are the center of *ganguro* fashion. This fashion goes against the usual Japanese standards of female beauty, which calls for skin as white as possible. This fashion is said to have begun in the mid 1990s, starting with a popular tanned Okinawa singer named Amuro Namie (see footnote 16).

³ Several previous studies of the hip-hop impact on Japanese youth culture and Japanese pop culture include Sir George Bailey Sansom, *A History of Japan* (Kent: Dawson, 1978); Wilhelm Heine, *With Perry to Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990); Boleslaw Szczesniak, ed., *The Opening of Japan: A Diary of Discovery in Far East, 1853-1856* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Kate Klippensteen, *Ganguro Girls: The Japanese "Black Face"* (Hungary: Kőnemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2000); Rebecca Mead, "Shopping Rebellion," *The New Yorker*, March 18, 2002, pp. 104-121; Kinga Talarowska-Kacprzak, "Media and the Construction of the Ganguro Trend in Japan," *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 2/1 (2001): 92-105.

discussions among several African-American students about their views and attitudes toward *ganguro* girls. One of the most important findings of the study indicates that such a self-identity is unavoidably in conflict with Japanese traditional culture and society.

Hip-Hop as a Communicative Tool for Self Expression

A dynamically expressive verbal art form known as rap music first appeared in the inner city streets of New York during the late 1970s. Rap music was deeply rooted in the rich African-American socio-cultural continuum, and, as a particular art form, it became known as the verbal expression of a contemporary youth culture. Rap music was initially becoming popular among young African-Americans, but later it had become an outstanding pop culture called “hip-hop.”⁴ As Marriott points out, “‘Hip-hop’ is the total expression, in attitude, dress, dance, graffiti, art, and music of an ever growing African-American youth subculture which challenges the status quo and moves them into a crucible of change.”⁵ Using rap music as an artistic and cultural form, African-American youths have developed a powerful communicative tool for self-expression.

With a “blend of reality and fiction, rap is a contemporary response to the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America.”⁶ Decades later, hip-hop culture still remains a very present and

⁴ Rap music has become the most prominent genre of music in America today since it first appeared in the early 1970s. Hip-hop music originated as the voice of African-Americans who were largely oppressed and confined to the urban ghettos. For these people, hip-hop was a form of expression they had previously been denied. Rap carried on the African-American oral tradition and reintroduced the importance of music with something to say. Hip-hop culture, comprised of rap music, graffiti art, break dancing, ‘b-boy’ fashion and a rebellious attitude, has blown from its cradle in New York City across the globe.

⁵ Michael Marriot, “Hip-hop’s hectic takeover,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 3/3 (1990): 207-216. Marriot specifically points out that the African-American oppressed use rap music, part of “hip-hop” culture, to make their voices heard in order to change their status quo.

⁶ Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), p. 1; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1994), p.

most popular expressive art form. This is mainly because of the fact that hip-hop is a representation of the indigenous socio-cultural form of a rich African-American tradition, and this strong tradition continues to function as the socio-cultural background for rap artists to dramatically voice their concerns about issues that speak to the young urban African-American population.⁷ Sager calls rap music “rhythmic American poetry.”⁸

With its powerful socio-cultural influence, hip-hop culture has made an indelible impact not only on the African-American community, but also on the American community as a whole. One of the most important reasons for hip-hop culture to have been accepted and appreciated by the general American community is that more and more young Americans, black and white alike, find socio-psychological self expression, thought provoking verbal dexterity, emotionally involving and explicit content, and outward physical expressions or body language as saliently conveyed within rap or hip-hop. Rap not only has become the language of hip-hop culture but also has entered mainstream American culture because of its significant socio-cultural and socio-psychological effects. As often observed, hip-hop influence keeps growing and spreading itself to the global community. Today, in many parts of the world, more and more young people make an idol of rap artists or hip-hop culture in order to express themselves and make their voices heard.

***Ganguro* as a Subculture in Japanese Society**

Ganguro, which literally means “black face” in Japanese, has emerged as a trend of new fashion style among some Japanese girls in big

2. These authors emphasize that rap is a representative and explicit display of the realistic problems of black urban life in contemporary America. According to them, rap music is used as a communicative tool for those who intend to make a positive change.

⁷ James Bernard, “Rap Is Testimonial to Black Pride,” *Billboard* 24 (November 1990), p. 11. Bernard believes that hip-hop, as an art form, is deeply rooted in a rich African-American tradition and expresses the difficulties and problems that the young urban African-Americans face in their everyday life.

⁸ Mike Sager, “The World according to America’s Most-Wanted Rapper,” *Rolling Stone* (October 1990), p. 78. Sager regards rap as a particular type of literary work that enters mainstream American culture.

cities like Tokyo.⁹ As often observed, some Japanese girls, especially teenage girls, adopt this new fashion style for promoting a unique individual expression of “being a woman.” They wear boots with solid platform soles over ten centimeters high, brightly colored tight mini-skirts, have blonde or white hair, and wear make-up that shimmers. Some of them even have their faces and necks tanned or blackened, often highlighted by white make-up, to look like black women. In today’s Japanese fashion crazy culture, such a *ganguro* look stands out dramatically as a look entirely unique to Japan.

The phenomenon of being *ganguro* or blackening faces is actually not entirely new in Japanese society. As noted by Barnwell, as early as the 1840s, a popular form of entertainment by blackface performers’ ridiculous attire and outlandish skits had widespread appeal in Japan to entertain the Japanese commissioners, who “enjoyed the imitations of the Negro and laughed very heartily.”¹⁰ As a renowned artist, Iona Rozeal Brown¹¹

⁹ “Black face,” also often called “dark face,” means *ganguro* girls’ faces are darkened to the color of football pigskin, their eyes are ringed with stark white panda make-up, and their hair is dried, fried and blown to the side. *Ganguro* girls make their faces blackened to look like black women. Some observers suggest that this *ganguro* fashion is also a representation of the *yamanba*, a Japanese folk figure whose name translates roughly as “monster mountain woman.”

¹⁰ Andrea D. Barnwell, “Guilty (Blackfaced) Pleasures,” *Iona Rozeal Brown: a³...black on both sides* (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2004). Barnwell, director of Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, reviews the history of “black face” in Japan and some previous studies of the phenomenon in today’s Japan.

Boleslaw Szczesniak (ed.), *The Opening of Japan: A Diary of Discovery in the Far East, 1853-1856* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 153. Szczesniak mentions that as early as in the 1840s, ‘black face’ already appeared for comedic entertainment in Japan

¹¹ Iona Rozeal Brown is one of the nation’s most exciting emerging artists. She explores the theme of a³, an afro-asiatic allegory, in her first major solo project ‘black on both sides’ at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in 2004. Brown’s work is heavily influenced by the geisha, courtesans and artists depicted in seventeenth century Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Her subjects are also influenced by twenty-first century popular culture.

devised a theme after she traveled to Japan in 2001. The theme she particularly devised for her paintings is named “*a³*,” the artist’s shorthand for ‘*afro-asiatic allegory*’. Inspired by the young Japanese girls with drastically darkened faces, at Spelman College in 2004 Brown exhibited her paintings,¹² entitled “*a³...black on both sides*,” exploring the global influence of hip-hop, commercialism, and African-American culture as fetish. More than forty works in Brown’s exhibition examine many provocative issues such as the history of black face performance traditions in Japan and the current fascination with hip-hop among Japanese youth. *Ganguro* began to appear as a fashion style in Japan in early 1990s and remains popular among some Japanese teenage girls.¹³ By means of their outlandish fashions, platform shoes, darkened faces, dyed hair and eccentric white make-up, *ganguro* girls distinguish themselves in conservative Japanese society. Barnwell specifically mentions several speculations, among which some suggest that *ganguro* girls are using such fashions to rebel against wearing traditional school uniforms in order to express their individuality.¹⁴ Others suggest that a Japanese singer and model, Namie Amuro, who became substantially popular in Japan in the 1990s, was the initial stimulus for *ganguro* girls when she performed with darkened skin.¹⁵

¹² The Spelman College Museum of Fine Art presented *Iona Rozeal Brown: a³...black on both sides* in 2004. Brown’s paintings are well known as an unprecedented mixture of anonymous courtesans, geisha, and other Japanese subjects in black faces. Her paintings particularly address the global influence of hip-hop, commercialism, and African-American culture as fetish, and her works as exhibited explore many provocative issues such as black face performances in earlier Japan and hip-hop impact on contemporary Japanese youth culture.

¹³ Rebecca Mead, “Shopping Rebellion,” *The New Yorker*, (March 18, 2002), pp. 104-121. Mead mentions as early as in the 1990s, *ganguro* was first recognized as a new fashion style being popular among some Japanese teenage girls in big cities like Tokyo.

¹⁴ Andrea D. Barnwell, “Guilty (Blackfaced) Pleasures,” *Iona Rozeal Brown: a³...black on both sides* (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2004).

¹⁵ Namie Amuro was known as one of the most popular singers in Japan during the 1990s and perhaps the most successful of all time. Amuro’s musical talent and dance ability combined with her characteristic uncanny

Still others suggest that some Japanese teenagers, inspired by the perceived coolness, want to be *ganguro* girls by imitating African-American hip-hop acts that they admire and emulate popular performers like Lauryn Hill¹⁶ and TLC^{17, 18}.

stage presence has gained fame all around the world. She became the best of the Japanese music industry and perhaps the first Japanese sensation. As one of the best known singers and models in Japan, especially when she performed with her face blackened, Amuro became a popular idol of many Japanese teenage girls. Some researchers in Japanese social and/or cultural studies speculate that Ai Iijima was also a great influence on *ganguro* girls. Ai Iijima was known as an adult video star. She had light brown hair and wore colorful, ultra sexy clothes. At the moment when cosmetic giants like Shiseido were starting the rage for whitening skin products, Iijima sported a deep tan.

¹⁶ Lauryn Hill, known as one of the best African-American pop artists and hip-hop musicians, has stepped fearlessly into the musical arena, dealing with subjects that are close to her heart. At times, her humor is wry and candid and her pain and anger startling, but she is never bitter. She has been galvanized by her life experiences. Produced by Lauryn Hill herself, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is a deeply personal album, running the gamut from affairs of the heart to socio-political issues, set against a sonic backdrop displaying the remarkable talent of this young artist. She explains: "... the concept of 'miseducation' is not really miseducation at all. To me, it's more or less switching the terminology...it's really about the things that you've learned outside of school, outside of what society deems school, outside of what society deems appropriate and mandatory...It's really our passage into adulthood when we leave that place of idealism and naivete." Well known as a singer, a writer, a rapper, a Grammy winner, an activist, an innovator, and a crossover artist, Lauryn Hill is an amazing phenomenon.

¹⁷ Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins, Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes, and Rozonda "Chilli" Thomas formed TLC (from the initials of their nicknames) at the behest of Perri "Pebbles" Reid, a 1980s recording star and wife of a LaFace Records executive. TLC literally burst onto the music scene in 1992 with their debut album, *Ooooooh...On the TLC Tip*, a unique blend of styles combining core R&B and hip-hop with a touch of 80s funk and rap.

¹⁸ Kinga Talarowska-Kacprzak, "Media and the Construction of the *Ganguro* trend in Japan," *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 2 (February 2001):

For whatever speculations, “*ganguro*” is the name not given by the Japanese girls with darkened faces but by the Japanese public who decided that these creatures reflected all that was ill in society. As with most tribes, naming is important for its implicated meaning. Some members of the *ganguro* tribe call themselves *ganguro*, meaning those with salon tans; some members call themselves *ganguro*, meaning those with fake tans; some members call themselves *gals*, meaning teenagers, or *gal onesan*, literally meaning big sister gals who are usually in their early twenties or *otona gal*, literally meaning adult gal with a more polished look, and other members call themselves *gal mama*, meaning teenage gals with infants. No matter how they call themselves, such *gals* are mostly academically disinclined and lack ambition for personal success. For this reason, the Japanese public disdains them. However, as observed by Klippensteen, *ganguro* girls have made their own choice to not follow the pack but, instead, they have chosen a carefree and open approach to living for the moment and for escaping from being ignored or neglected at home and isolated, bullied or depressed at school.¹⁹ Largely unconcerned with money and material gain, *ganguro* girls, like everyone else, want to have fun in their lives, and they prefer to put on a flamboyant outfit and hang out with their friends rather than worry about toiling away at boring studies or jobs.

Although *ganguro* as a fashion style does not fit well with traditional Japanese social standards and cultural values, it is becoming popular among some Japanese girls who are just approaching adult life.

92-105. Talarowska-Kacprzak’s paper “claims that Japanese media have managed to effectively disseminate, and to shape the further development of a new style trend called *ganguro*. The *ganguro* trend among high school girls has had a significant and growing influence on everyday life in Japanese society.

¹⁹ Kate Klippensteen, *Ganguro Girls: The Japanese “Black Face”* (Hungary: Kőnemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2000). Kate Klippensteen and Everett Kennedy Brown, in their quest to interview and photograph *ganguro* girls in Shibuya, Tokyo, got to know a group of girls with their striking looks: platform boots, miniskirts, fantastical make-up, and tanned skin. These girls, known as *ganguro* girls, have become part of popular Japanese youth culture. Klippensteen’s book provides an insight both into the looks and thoughts of the *ganguro* girls.

Many non-*ganguro* girls and boys readily accept some of the *ganguro* elements, and fearing exclusion, some may often conform to the style due to peer pressure.

***Ganguro* in Conflict with Japanese Society**

Some scholars believe that such a new fashion style is the young generation's revenge against Japanese society's traditional values; others believe that because this new fashion style differs from the traditional one and is promoted by those who intend to change the peripheral female position in Japanese society; others believe that it is some Japanese girls' explicit self-expression of sexual attractiveness; others believe that it is just some Japanese girls' imitation of elements of an African-American woman's appearance to be a 'woman,' and still others believe that it simply makes girls *kawaii* (cute) or cool because it makes them look different from others. Although the *ganguro* phenomenon, or the so-called new fashion style, has been largely observed among some Japanese girls, it has been recognized as being in conflict with Japanese society.

Out of the various reasons for *ganguro* to be in conflict with Japanese society, as speculated by scholars in Japanese social studies, three particular reasons may indicate roots of conflicts.

First, the inadequate relationships between some Japanese children and their parents cause frequent childhood neglect and stress. Most parents are overwhelmed by their work, and in order to keep their job or get promoted they fully devote themselves to their companies. Such overwhelmed and devoted employees have to spend over 90 percent of their daytime hours working and have no sufficient time to communicate with their children to learn about and listen to their children's problems. Children growing up in such a difficult family environment become stressful and feel ignored. They tend to look for companions outside their families so that they get a sense of belonging.

Second, the fierce competition and many difficulties at school cause extreme stress, frustration and depression. In Japan, competition starts at an extremely early age in life. Young children have to vigorously prepare themselves for entrance exams to good or highly recommended kindergartens and so on, up to top universities. Better education is the fundamental requirement for higher positions in Japanese society. Committing suicide is not uncommon in Japan for those young Japanese who experience frequent failure, frustration, or stress at school. Those who

struggle to survive but are stressed by the competition tend to seek a carefree lifestyle outside school.

Third, the strict conformable and compulsory school rules and standards imposed upon young children cause severe constraints on children's individuality, freedom, and behavior. Children are not expected to conduct themselves as individuals in school but as components of the group. They must wear school uniforms and even use similar knapsacks. All school activities are designed to shape and promote a sense of communal strength. Similarly strict rules are enforced in high schools, where students must wear school uniforms while make-up and jewelry are prohibited. Starting from a very early stage of their school life, young children begin to sense the lack of freedom and, more seriously, when they become teenagers, they begin to sense the severe suppression of their individualities and differences. Throughout the many years of restraint and suppression in school, some teenagers tend to look for fun and freedom in their "normal" life outside of school.

Among other factors, family neglect, fierce competition in school, and strict conformable rules and standards have become the most important motivations for those Japanese girls to join the *ganguro* tribe. In other words, being *ganguro* indicates an escape from many problems they encounter with family, education, and school environment. The outlandish and expressive appearance of *ganguro* girls does not comply with family and school standards but openly expresses their attitudes of defiance. *Ganguro* girls want to look different in order to be noticed, understood, and regarded as real and free individuals in society.

***Ganguro* as Viewed by Others**

To explore the most relevant issues regarding the *ganguro* phenomenon and its conflict with Japanese society, instead of subjective speculations or judgments, this study relied on the direct input and feedback from some young Japanese students about their understanding of *ganguro*.²⁰

²⁰ This is the author's own specially designed project to investigate the *ganguro* phenomenon. In order to know what average young Japanese of the same generation thinks about the *ganguro* phenomenon as observed in their everyday life, the project involved sixty-six Japanese participants between seventeen and twenty-five years of age from The University of Tokyo and Kyoritsu Women's University. All the participants were

Sixty-six participants from two Japanese universities in this research project were given a questionnaire covering the most relevant questions regarding the issues under investigation. The most commonly shared opinions, views and positions as reflected in the responses to the questionnaire, are highlighted and summarized to discuss the relevant issues. The following table contains the ten specific open-ended questions. Since the questionnaire invites different answers rather than multiple choices, the responses are generalized from the participants' individual answers.²¹

required to respond to a specially designed questionnaire covering the most relevant issues of the *ganguro* phenomenon and participants' opinions and views about it from their individual perspectives.

²¹ The questionnaire was specially designed by Xuexin Liu by focusing on the most relevant issues (questions) for the study to elicit opinions and views from the Japanese participants about the *ganguro* phenomenon as observed in their everyday life. The participants' opinions and views are generalized in the columns so that the most common ones can stand out. Also, the different opinions and views can be clearly seen in the table. Although the irrelevant responses are included, they are not calculated in terms of their effects on the commonly shared ones.

The Questionnaires for the Study and Feedback Types
(L2n, 210%)

Question	Response	Percentage	Feedback Type	Percentage	Total		
1. What is 'jirigoro' in Japanese society?	44	67%	Followable appearance	9	0	66	
			Group identity	Indication of ability	0	0	
2. What are the most important reasons for being generous?	40	60%	11	17%	12	5	66
			Interactable and individual	Open-minded and generous	Indifferent		
3. What do you think about generous girls in Japan?	7	11%	42	64%	15	2	66
			Sometimes interested	Little interested	Indifferent		
4. Do you think Japanese young people are really interested in Japanese culture?	31	47%	18	27%	6	11	66
			No	Generational differences	Indifferent		
5. Do you think Japanese as a generation's average against the Japanese traditional value?	54	82%	6	9%	23	1	66
			Not think and indifferent	Think over others for personal success	Indifferent		
6. Do you think Japanese as a generation intend to change the 'jirigoro/female problem' in Japanese society?	28	43%	16	24%	14	7	66
						11	66

7. Do you think gangsters is seen young Japanese girls' explicit self-expression of sexual attractiveness?	Yes see appeal	Not for me appeal	Self-expression not related to sex appeal	Inappropriate
	15 25%	35 50%	12 18%	6 9%
8. Do you think gangsters is seen young Japanese girls' indication of an Asian woman's appearance to be a 'woman'?	Not indication of an Asian woman's appearance	An indication of a woman's appearance	Hip-hop image	Inappropriate
	28 42%	4 6%	27 41%	7 11%
9. Do you think one of the important motivations for Japanese girls to purchase gangsters is to identify themselves as individuals depending from the economy accepted Japanese social behavior?	Individuals depending from the economy accepted ones	Individuals as personal choices	Self-identification	Inappropriate
	38 56%	19 28%	4 6%	5 8%
10. Do you think gangsters as a self-identity is necessarily in conflict with the Japanese traditional culture and society?	Unavoidable conflict	Inevitable conflict	No conflict	Inappropriate
	24 36%	17 26%	8 12%	17 26%

Notes:
 (1) 66 Participants: 28 (19 male/9 female), University of Tokyo; 38 (female), Kyushu Women's University.
 (2) Ages of participants: 17-25.
 (3) Inappropriate: response not related to the questions; no response

The research findings provide strong evidence in support of the assumption that *ganguro* in Japanese youth culture is for individual Japanese girls' self-identity in cultural conflict with Japanese society. These findings are understood and interpreted as follows.

In response to question one, sixty-seven percent believe "blackened face" is a typical outward appearance of *ganguro*, rather than simply a fashionable appearance, while only twenty percent of the responses believe so. This means a "blackened face" may mean more than a new fashion style.

In response to question two, sixty percent believe that the most important reason for being *ganguro* is for them to be "different for attention," rather than simply an "imitation of a celebrity" which only eighteen percent of the responses believe is the case.

In response to question three, sixty-four percent think *ganguro* girls are "inconceivable and indisposed," which indicates the lack of understanding of *ganguro* girls by most of the public.

In response to question four, forty-seven percent believe they are "very interested" and twenty-seven percent of the responses believe they are "somewhat interested" in hip-hop culture, which indicates a general influence and impact of hip-hop culture on *ganguro* girls.

In response to question five, fifty-two percent believe that *ganguro* as a new fashion style is the young generation's revenge against the Japanese traditional value, which indicates a special social and cultural meaning of *ganguro*.

In response to question six, forty-four percent do not think *ganguro* as a new fashion style is promoted by those who intend to change the "peripheral female position" in Japanese society, which means that *ganguro* girls are either unhappy with their current social status or they choose this fashion style for personal reasons.

In response to question seven, fifty percent do not think *ganguro* is some young Japanese girls' explicit self-expression of sexual attractiveness, which means that *ganguro* may not always be for sex appeal.

In response to question eight, forty-one percent believe *ganguro* is some young Japanese girls' imitation of hip-hop image, rather than an imitation of an African-American woman's appearance, which indicates a strong hip-hop influence.

In response to question nine, fifty-eight percent think that Japanese girls who practice *ganguro* identify themselves as individuals departing

from the commonly accepted Japanese social behavior, which indicates a clear conflict between *ganguro* girls' behaviors and the commonly accepted ones in Japanese society.

In response to question ten, thirty-six percent think *ganguro* as a self-identity is in unavoidable conflict and twenty-six percent think such a self-identity is somewhat in conflict with the Japanese traditional culture and society, which indicates a general conflict between the two.

These findings strongly support the general belief that the *ganguro* phenomenon is in conflict with Japanese society and its traditional culture. Different from some of the previous speculations are that *ganguro* is not simply an imitation of a celebrity,²² *ganguro* girls do not necessarily intend to change their "peripheral female position" in Japanese society,²³ and *ganguro* is not necessary always for explicit sex appeal.²⁴

What is interesting and important in this investigation lies in the fact that although the participants may view the same issues from different perspectives, the general understanding of the *ganguro* phenomenon in terms of its conflict with Japanese society is clearly reflected.

In addition to the investigation conducted among the Japanese participants, supported by the Spelman Bush-Hewlett Grant Program, this research project involved several organized discussions among some African-American students at Spelman College about their views and attitudes toward *ganguro* girls.²⁵ All the participants in the discussions have

²² Andrea D. Barnwell, "Guilty (Blackfaced) Pleasures," *Iona Rozeal Brown: a³...black on both sides* (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, 2004).

²³ Kinga Talarowska-Kacprzak, "Media and the Construction of the Ganguro Trend in Japan," *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 2 (2001): 92-105.

²⁴ Kate Klippensteen, *Ganguro Girls: The Japanese "Black Face"* (Hungary: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2000).

²⁵ Anne Warner is the director of the Spelman Bush-Hewlett Grant. She initiated and organized several Bush-Hewlett Fellows Workshops at Spelman College. The American students who participated in the research project offered their opinions and views in the format of essays about the *ganguro* phenomenon as they observed during their visits in Japan. Warner reviewed the participants' essays and published them at the website of the Spelman Bush-Hewlett Grant (http://www.spelman.edu/bush-hewlett/about_grant.html.)

been involved in study-abroad programs in Japan, and they have become very interested in the issues of the *ganguro* phenomenon as they have personally observed. Cited below are what they think about *ganguro* at the Annual Japanese Speech Contest hosted by the Japan-American Society of Georgia in cooperation with the Consulate General of Japan in Atlanta (March 2004)²⁶ and from their essays published at the Iona Rozeal Brown Exhibition: *a³...black on both sides* held at Spelman College and at the Spelman Bush-Hewlett Grant website.²⁷

Tiffany Tyson and Jason Woody participated in the Annual Japanese Speech Contest hosted by the Japan-American Society in cooperation with the Consulate General of Japan in Atlanta, Georgia. Their topics for the speech contest were focused on their understanding of the *ganguro* phenomenon as they observed as part of their study abroad experience. In his speech, Jason Woody commented, “I see Japanese rap groups on posters in Tokyo and at the same time Missy’s new video begins with a Japanese skit with some fake *ganguro* girls.” Tiffany Tyson said:

I was particularly fascinated by young Japanese students’ interpretation of African-American hip-hop style....I was amazed to see young men in Adidas sweat bands, Sean Jean outfits, Timberland boots, and large diamond studded necklaces. Young women were wearing Kangol hats and bananas, Baby Phat outfits, Minolo boots, and large gold hoop-earrings. Long, jet black hair was replaced with intricately designed cornrow braids on the heads

²⁶ The Annual Japanese Speech Contest is hosted by the Japan-American Society of Georgia in cooperation with the Consulate General of Japan in Atlanta, Georgia for the purpose of promoting Japanese language learning and educational and cultural exchange between the United States and Japan. All the Japanese speech contest participants are American college students who have acquired a certain level of Japanese proficiency for a particular level of speech contest. Their topics include various themes ranging from the relationship between the United States and Japan to cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

²⁷ Barnwell, “Guilty (Blackfaced) Pleasures.” The Spelman College students who participated in Liu’s research project contributed their essays about their opinions and views toward the *ganguro* phenomenon to the Iona Rozeal Brown Exhibition: *a³...black on both sides* at Spelman College.

of males and females...It was great to see that they are embracing a positive aspect of my culture especially because of historical incidents of mistreatment by the western world. Although this external shift in culture is evidence that Japanese society is becoming less traditional in its acceptance of western ways, one thing that I found the most interesting was the ability for young Japanese people to revert back to their traditional ways when necessary.

Joseph Barden, Charli Kemp, Aryen Moore-Alston, Chris Shaw, Erin Aisha Williams, and Sheena Young contributed their essays on the issues of the *ganguro* phenomenon as they observed to the Iona Rozeal Brown Exhibition: *a³ ...black on both sides* (2004) at Spelman College. Cited in this paper are parts of their essays most relevant to the issues under investigation.

Student Charli Kemp commented:

I view the *ganguro* girls as a big part of the younger generation that is breaking away from the Japanese traditional ways. I see the *ganguro* girls looking to another very popular culture that seems to communicate what they are trying to say....African-Americans in the hip-hop culture display the carefree attitudes of the rap artists and their go-against-the-grain standpoints. In the *ganguro* girls' culture, they seem to have the same carefree attitude, as if they do not want to fit the mold anymore. I see a direct correlation between the two cultures.

Chris Shaw stated:

I remember seeing images of brown skinned girls on the cartoon motifs of the ubiquitous sticker picture machines (or purikura). These images were usually clad in what some might call "hip-hop hoochie" fashion, baggy pants or mini skirts, big hoop earrings, and tight tops. I perceived this to be some sort of "ghetto fabulousness." I was fascinated.

Sheena Young said:

When I first saw a *ganguro* girl in Japan last fall, I was amazed. I could not believe that there were girls in Japan walking around with darkened skin.... To me, it didn't seem as though Japanese girls were getting dressed up and putting on dark make-up to mock the African-American culture but, instead, to idolize it.

Joseph Barden contributed:

[They]...find life easier in this “black face” because it moves them outside of mainstream Japanese culture. By adopting that lifestyle, they are able to absolve themselves of the obligations omnipresent in Japanese culture.... So the adoption of darker skin is used by those in the subculture as a visual cue to the rest of Japanese society that they are not participating on the same terms as everyone else” (Barden, 2004).

Erin Aisha Williams noted:

They go against the normalcies of Japan's homogenous society – adding color to the wash of fair skin and black hair, making themselves a target of interest for outsiders. The *ganguro* is a rebel, albeit cheerful on the outside. ... for they are essentially starting a revolution – breaking free of the rules and expectations, set upon them passed down from generation to generation.

Finally, Aryen Moore-Alston said:

I don't use the term “black face” negatively because I see this painting as a compliment to black culture rather than having a derogatory connotation.

What those African-American students said clearly reflect their understanding of the *ganguro* phenomenon and their positive views toward *ganguro* girls. Like most of the Japanese participants, they also believe that *ganguro* for self-identity is against Japanese traditional culture beyond an imitation of the “black” side.

Conclusion

This paper goes beyond superficial descriptions of the *ganguro* phenomenon by exploring the sources and nature of this particular subculture based on the input and feedback provided by the Japanese and American participants in the research project. From social and cultural perspectives and through an analytical approach, it offers an objective and critical analysis of this particular phenomenon. Some of the most commonly expressed speculations on the social motivations for some Japanese girls to become *ganguro* and the potential impact of such a subculture on traditional Japanese culture have been verified. Based on the research findings, this paper has reached the following conclusions:

1. *Ganguro* is more than an imitation of some celebrity's facial color and physical appearance, or for explicit sex appeal. *Ganguro* girls blacken their faces, wear make-up that shimmers, dye their hair, and wear hip-hop clothes not simply to adopt a new fashion style but, more importantly, to make themselves stand out as being different from others. They do so because they intend to be noticed rather than ignored. They are usually those who face problems with their families, fierce competition in education, school rules, and standards.

2. *Ganguro* girls do not necessarily attempt to change the "peripheral female position" in Japanese society but to express their unhappiness with their current social status. Most such girls seek a carefree life style to escape from their stress and depression.

3. *Ganguro* girls adopt this particular fashion style to promote their self-identity as free individuals who refuse to follow the majority of their own generation. They do not want to be constrained by the established or commonly accepted social standards.

4. *Ganguro* girls' self-identity is unavoidably in conflict with traditional Japanese culture and society. They attempt to identify themselves as free individuals departing from the commonly expected social behaviors, a phenomenon of rebellion against society.

5. Although *ganguro* has become a relatively common feature of ordinary life in the streets and private sectors of Japan, it has not become a social and cultural trend among Japanese teenagers. It represents a particular young population, attempting to redefine Japanese young womanhood, individuality, community, collectivity, and meaning of life.

6. *Ganguro* is a cultural borrowing phenomenon. Like any other cultural borrowing, *ganguro* is socio-culturally meaningful and significant.

Ganguro makes an idol of African-American culture or the hip-hop image for its positive impact on society. Although *ganguro* has not entered mainstream Japanese culture, it has exerted an impact on Japanese traditional social standards and cultural values.

This paper provides a transparent window through which researchers in the field of Japanese social and cultural studies see more than just beyond the superficial phenomena. Only in this way can research become not only observational and descriptive but also analytical and explanatory.