

Book Review

Himawari House

Harmony Becker

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Becker's (2021) young adult (herein referred to as YA) graphic novel, *Himawari House*, details a year in the lives of three young women living abroad in Tokyo, Japan. The narrative opens with the first-person focalization of Nao, a Japanese American returning to Japan for the first time since immigrating to the United States with her Japanese mother and American father; however, it would be misleading to label Nao as the protagonist because her narrative becomes intricately intertwined with, and shifts to, the perspectives of Hyejung, from Korea, and Tina, from Singapore. Nao, Hyejung, and Tina all live in Himawari House: a shared rental space for students studying abroad. The three main characters come to Japan for different reasons, but they are united in defining and redefining their notions of home and family as they navigate living independently from their nuclear families in a foreign country.

The black and white illustrative style of *Himawari House* reflect the characters' (arguably mostly Nao's) melding together of Western and Japanese cultures in employing American comics and Japanese Manga tropes. For the most part, characters are illustrated in a naturalistic style commonly seen in American comics/graphic novels, but the illustrations often employ Manga characteristics. For example, the characters' facial expressions use Manga styles to communicate more intense emotions such as popping veins to express irritation, sweat drops to indicate anxiety or confusion, colour lines dropping over characters' faces to show embarrassment, and characters transforming into chibi deformations (short, round, and "cute" versions of the characters) that are meant to emphasize sweet and silly moments. Unlike the typical two by four panel grid of Manga comics, Becker did not follow a regular panel grid. Instead, the number of panels on each page shifts in seemingly innumerable shapes and sizes. This made the narrative dynamic, full of movement and energy, and flexible. Often characters are illustrated as "breaking out" of the panel borders, and this further contributed to the overarching theme of the characters' growth throughout their year together. Overall, Becker's choice of visual details and organization emphasized the graphic novel's themes of cultural hybridity and growth.

Language is a key theme throughout the graphic novel that is linked to the characters' developing sense of belonging in Japan. Language is first linked to culture and belonging when Nao reflects upon losing the ability to speak in her mother tongue. *Himawari House* opens with Nao considering what she remembers of Japan from her childhood, and she laments that the pursuit of "fitting in" with her Western peers severed much of her connection with Japan. Becker used the metaphor of smell to illustrate this loss of connection: Nao recalls the smell of her treasure box, which she brought with her from Japan, as being what would connect her to home, but this smell fades over time. Becker directly links the fading smell of Nao's childhood treasure

box to her fading “knowledge of my mother tongue” (Becker, 2021, p. 7). Just as the smell from the treasure box slowly dissipates the longer Nao is in the United States, so too does her ability to speak Japanese. Relearning Japanese comes to represent Nao’s pursuit of reconnecting with her Japanese identity.

At first, language functions as a tool of exclusion (both real and perceived), rather than belonging. Once in Japan for her gap year between high school and college, Nao initially feels like an outsider because of her struggle to communicate in her mother tongue, and this causes her to feel that she is “barely treading water [in the] sea of Japan” (Becker, 2021, p. 24). All three main characters attend the Haseda Japanese Language Institute. On Nao’s first day, she is disappointed to be placed in a lower class than she expected and struggles to understand her teacher’s instructions. Throughout the graphic novel, Becker visually represented language misunderstanding in characters’ word bubbles. For example, the Japanese teacher’s word bubbles have two lines running horizontally parallel to one another: the top lines are written in Japanese characters and directly below is the English translation. Yet, in instances when Nao, and later Hyejung and Tina, cannot understand the Japanese characters, the English translations are replaced with grey smudge marks. As a result, readers experience by proxy how much Japanese the characters understand and share in their sense of confusion and dislocation in these moments of misunderstanding. Nao’s first Japanese class is an excellent example of this, as most of the teacher’s English translations are smudged. These speech bubbles are accompanied with an image of Nao with Manga sweat drops and a patterned black and white background that together create a sense of isolation and displacement (Becker, 2021, p. 45). With readers being given the same amount of information from the teacher as Nao, we share in her confusion, which arguably adds to the panic of the scene. The graphic novel has many strengths, but this representation of language is especially strong for the unique reading experience it offers prospective young readers, and this in turn can foster empathy for those learning new languages, especially when they are immersed in a location where their mother tongue is not commonly spoken.

Hyejung’s and Tina’s storylines also have the same blurred word technique and similar moments of anxiety and exclusion are illustrated from their misunderstandings. This is perhaps best highlighted when Tina begins a new job as a server at a Japanese restaurant. When Tina cannot understand all the food orders, customers have little patience with her. When she is at their table, they patronizingly speak about her being “cute but ... spacey” as if she cannot understand (Becker, 2021, p. 181). Although Tina’s Japanese is further along than Nao’s, even a few missteps mark her as an outsider to these Japanese customers and this elicits behaviour from them that further establishes and diminishes her as an outsider. In this case, language functions as a gatekeeper from belonging.

However, learning languages is also a means of fostering belonging, as it is the foundation for the friendship between Nao, Tina, and Hyejung as they help to improve one another’s Japanese and English—and Nao learns some Korean and Singlish (a mixture of the languages spoken in Singapore). Tina and Hyejung are also learning English alongside Japanese. When the three friends speak to one another in English, Tina and Hyejung speak in accented English. In a note at the end of the graphic novel, Becker explained there has been “a long history of portraying Asian people in offensive, one-dimensional ways” in Western media, and this often has the consequence of characters “written with thick foreign accents for comic or exotic effect” (Becker, 2021, p. 375). Long Duk Dong from John Hughes’s film *Sixteen Candles* (1984) comes to mind here as an example: the foreign exchange student, Duk Dong, is largely characterized by his attempt to practice his conversational English, which is played for laughs, and he is made into an offensive

caricature. The accents written for Hyejung and Tina “sound” much like those that have been offensively portrayed in popular Western media; however, Becker’s use of these accents is not intended to poke fun at characters, but to reclaim them. She explained that her intention “was to allow characters who spoke with accents, who occasionally stumbled over their grammar, to be fully actualized, three-dimensional people” (Becker, 2021, p. 375). Becker continued that she hoped this graphic novel would further shift accents from being considered a point of shame to that of pride, as “after all, what is an accent but proof of the ability to speak more than one language” (Becker, 2021, p. 375). Becker accomplished her task, as characters who speak in broken English are not the butt-of-jokes, nor are they solely characterized and defined by their accents. Rather, Hyejung and Tina are three-dimensional characters who are depicted as highly accomplished in their abilities to speak more than one language.

In addition to language being a uniting factor between the friends, each of the three main characters is experiencing life without their immediate family for the first time. For Nao, being away from her parents and the United States represents a return home rather than building new family structures, as is the case with Tina and Hyejung. Nao returns to her grandparents’ home, which had acted as the main stage for her memories of Japan when she was living in the United States. Although the first visit with her extended family is “exhausting” because of the language barrier—communicated with the same blurred English translation of Japanese as described above—Nao’s subsequent visits contribute to the shift from feeling like an outsider in her homeland to being reintegrated (Becker, 2021, p. 166). During a visit with her extended family during the Japanese New Year (Hatsumode), Nao is given her mother’s furisode (a formal kimono) to wear. For Nao, being reconnected with this familial object feels like “being wrapped in history. Like I’m being welcomed home” (Becker, 2021, p. 236). Reconnecting with her extended family and being gifted family heirlooms is important in Nao’s transition from feeling like an outsider to feeling integrated in Japanese customs and traditions. For Nao, striking out on her own involves a return home that includes a return to family, and the relationship with her extended family is essential in Nao’s reconnecting with her Japanese identity.

Outside of rebuilding bonds with blood relations (which also takes place in Hyejung’s storyline), the events in the graphic novel emphasize the importance of building a chosen family, the foundation of which is built around dinner tables. Unlike Nao, who does not express any longing for the United States while in Japan, Tina and Hyejung have come to Japan to seek a path for themselves outside of their immediate families’ influence, but they often yearn for Singapore (Tina) and Korea (Hyejung). Both Tina and Hyejung turn to their respective cultural foods when missing the countries of their birth and they share this cuisine with their roommates. For example, it is only after moving to Japan that Hyejung learns to cook the Korean dishes she grew up eating as a strategy to combat homesickness. Though Hyejung believes her meals never taste as good as what her mother made, representing the difficulty of recreating family and culture in their absence, Hyejung develops her own style of cooking that she uses to nourish herself and her roommates. Hyejung attempts to make a life for herself that combines what she values from her past—such as Korean dishes—with decisions that were not accessible to her when living with her parents—such as pursuing an art degree. The possibilities offered by hybrid identities are demonstrated in Hyejung carving out her own life that combines Korean culture and the freedoms that Japan affords.

In the example of Hyejung preparing Korean food, it is essential who joins her around the dinner table: her *Himawari House* roommates. It is over shared meals that the group is the most vulnerable with one another: they share their hopes and dreams, their failures and successes, and

at one of their last meals, they communicate to one another that these relationships have transcended friendship to that of family (Becker, 2021, p. 355). These deepening relationships provide an example of a chosen family that is supportive of individual members as they navigate the divide between Japan and the countries of their birth. The family unit created at *Himawari House* is like a lab for the characters to experiment with their identities, and each emerges with a firmer and more confident hybrid identity that combines what they want to maintain from their past with their future pursuits.

Readers of the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* who are teachers themselves may find the graphic novel a fruitful resource in Junior and Senior High classrooms. Though Becker arguably accomplished her goal of reclaiming accented English, if *Himawari House* was to be used in the classroom, the intention behind the accents should be foregrounded to deter from any poking fun at the expense of the characters. This potentially opens space for conversations in the classroom regarding how depictions of accented English have been, and continue to be, used to exclude and demean, and how this graphic novel may push against these damaging stereotypes. A study of the graphic novel provides opportunities for discussion surrounding the intersections between identity and culture and the ways in which coming-of-age is made complex when negotiating between several cultures. As well, the graphic novel explores the well-trodden terrain in YA novels of characters pushing against the social structures that have been modelled to them by their parents and other adult characters. *Himawari House* is a welcomed departure from the Eurocentric representations that have dominated the YA genre for decades with its depiction of hybrid identities. In YA literature, it is common for characters to be put in circumstances where they must choose between completely breaking free from the structures of their childhood or giving up their period of rebellion to be reconciled with the power structures of their communities. A more flexible model of coming-of-age is depicted in *Himawari House* where characters determine for themselves which values to carry on with them into their future, and their hybrid identities make space for options beyond the rebellion or assimilation binary.

Reference

Becker, H. (2021). *Himawari House*. First Second Books.

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