On the 20th of January 2009, Barack Obama rose to the headlines as the first United States President of African American and mixed-race ancestry. Millions around the globe celebrated his victory in what was dubbed “Obamamania,” including highly enthusiastic fans in Japan. A Gallup Poll conducted in Japan during the summer of 2008 indicated that approximately 66 percent preferred Obama over John McCain (15 percent) as President of the United States.\(^1\) Furthermore, a 22-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey shows that in 2009, 85 percent of Japanese respondents believed that President Obama “will do [the] right thing in world affairs.”\(^2\) Examining Japan’s 2008 and 2009 periods of Obamamania provides a critical case study in public dialogues, controversies, and media representations concerning race.

This is particularly pertinent given contemporary attitudes towards African Americans in Japan—attitudes that lay bare a complex history of racialized ideology and practices. This history includes, on the one hand, a denigration based on skin color and placement within a global power-based hierarchy, as well as damning statements on African Americans made by no less than Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro in the 1980s. On the other hand, it also includes a media-fueled idolization of African Americans in sports and entertainment, as well as hypersexualized attitudes and tensions associated with United States military bases in Japan and the African Americans stationed there. These often contradictory attitudes and practices contribute to what I call “categorical confusion”\(^3\)—that is to say, an inconsistency between blood-based

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\(^1\) Furuya, 2008.


\(^3\) I borrow the term “categorical confusion” from Anne Anlin Cheng’s work on the American-born, French-famed black entertainer Josephine Baker. Cheng (2011:3) interprets Baker as a celebrated and contradictory figure of Modernism, whose image entwines with Primitivism in a crisis of race, style, and subjectivity. The categorical confusion of Baker
ideas and assessments drawn from other spheres of influence in Japan. This cognitive discomfort creates a slippage that selectively celebrates and denigrates African American individuals. Categorical confusion does not call into question the actual identity—individuals are unambiguously African American, often following the American one-drop rule, whereby any amount of African blood automatically identifies the individual as black. However, it does arise in peoples’ interpretations of the category and the actions that result from them, framing identities within different contexts and meanings.

This chapter examines some of the issues surrounding race in contemporary Japan, and specifically insofar as they relate to African Americans, by using the commodification and consumption of the image of Barack Obama as a case study. Although some may argue that Obama is far too exceptional to be utilized as a case study, I contend that his very celebrity and singularity place racialized attitudes in the spotlight. We must thus examine both the commonalities and the contingencies that Obama brings to the discussion of race in Japan. This chapter asks not only how Barack Obama is racialized as black in Japan, but also how the Japanese might interpret Obama, including the possibility of overcoming ‘blackness.’ It also seeks to examine the conditions and symbols of Obama’s racialization, and the manner in which skin (as both color and surface) acts as a metaphor in social constructions of power. Our discussion will also suggest some broader implications of the assumptions and practices of race that go beyond Obama particularly in a country that has built a certain degree of national pride around its putative racial-cultural homogeneity. In the process of preparing this study, I traveled to the town of Obama in Fukui prefecture during the summer of 2009 and interviewed a number of key figures. I have also assembled a collection of Obama memorabilia sold in Japan, and performed a textual analysis of the Japanese media coverage of Obama’s election and subsequent presidency.

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4 The one-drop belief holds true in Japan as well, specifically through the notion of kurosui [“black stock,” including burakumin or outcasts] and shirosui [“white stock,” Japanese]. The mixed-blood product of such miscegenation (i.e., the child of burakumin and “untainted” Japanese) is classified as forever sullied and effectively turned “black” (Robertson, 2005: 336–337).