

The Indigenous Shôjo: Transmedia Representations of Ainu Femininity in Japan's *Samurai Spirits*, 1993–2019

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Abstract: Little scholarly attention has been given to the visual representations of the Ainu people in popular culture, even though media images have a significant role in forging stereotypes of indigeneity. This article investigates the role of representation in creating an accessible version of indigenous culture repackaged for Japanese audiences. Before the recent mainstream success of manga/anime *Golden Kamuy* (2014–), two female heroines from the arcade fighting game *Samurai Spirits* (*Samurai supirittsu*)—Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu—formed a dominant expression of Ainu identity in visual culture beginning in the mid-1990s. Working through the in-game representation of Nakoruru in addition to her larger mediation in the anime media mix, this article explores the tensions embodied in her character. While Nakoruru is framed as indigenous, her body is simultaneously represented in the visual language of the Japanese shôjo, or “young girl.” This duality to her fetishized image cannot be reconciled and is critical to creating a version of indigenous femininity that Japanese audiences could easily consume. This paper historicizes various representations of indigenous Otherness against the backdrop of Japanese racism and indigenous activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s by analyzing Nakoruru’s official representation in the game franchise, including her appearance in a 2001 OVA, alongside fan interpretations of these characters in self-published comics (*dôjinshi*) criticized by Ainu scholar Chupuchisekor.

Keywords: Ainu, indigenous studies, shôjo, gender, arcade gaming, stereotypes

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Introduction

Like many stereotypes of indigenous culture across the globe, there is a tremendous gap between the real and the imagined bodies of native Ainu in Japan. This essay examines how the corporeal representation of two unlikely Ainu heroines—Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu of SNK Playmore’s console and arcade fighting game *Samurai Spirits*—are negotiated across a transmedia landscape. With the exception of essays by Ainu historian and musician Chupuchisekor, scholarship rarely considers the role that popular culture plays in establishing positive and/or negative stereotypes through the 1990s and 2000s, even though there have been many recent contributions to the evolving discourse about Ainu and indigenous representation.¹ Popular culture is ripe ground for the circulation of ideology through mass consumption. The appearance of Ainu characters in anime, manga, and video games prompts us to consider the various ways that these representations support—and occasionally subvert—particular Japanese narratives of Ainu identity in the present. It forces us to reconcile the growing gap between the Ainu people’s actual lived experience in contemporary Japan and the visual manifestation of Ainu culture in mediatized space.

Samurai Spirits (Samurai supirittsu), better known in the United States as *Samurai Shodown*, was a popular arcade and console fighting game of the mid-1990s.² Nakoruru, who appears in the first iteration of the game in 1993, is a sword-toting Ainu priestess of nature (Figure 1). Her sister, Rimururu, was added to cast in *Samurai Spirits III: Peerless Blade of Zankuro* (Samurai supirittsu: Zankurô musôken, 1995).³ While there are a few characters in popular culture that are coded as indigenous—such as *Shaman King*’s Usui Horokeyu Usui (“Horohoro”) and his sister Usui Pirika⁴—few

reach the intense popularity of Nakoruru. Her likeness has dominated the *Samurai Spirits* franchise and its numerous spin-offs, now numbering over twenty games. She has also been featured individually in her own adventure game in 2001,⁵ an original video animation (OVA) in 2002,⁶ and her own dating simulation in 2005.⁷ In addition, Nakoruru was selected alongside Terry Bogard, a male protagonist first appearing in *Fatal Fury: King of Fighters* (1991), to serve as the mascot for a social activism campaign committed to teaching children how to be environmentally and health-conscious. The height of Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu's surging popularity in the mid-1990s and early 2000s coincided with a rising tide of Ainu activism. As the two sisters fought against and alongside an international cast of characters in *Samurai Spirits*, the Ainu community struggled to legitimate their existence in the eyes of the United Nations and the Japanese government.



Figure 1: Nakoruru's Ending Scene. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown* (Samurai supirittsu), 2019. (American release). Accessible on YouTube, https://youtu.be/Ri_OfmZXk7c.

Historically, the Ainu people inhabited territory that extended from the island of Hokkaido in northern Japan to the peninsula of Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands. Visual

stereotypes of Ainu culture propagated from the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries in Japan and abroad through the media of photography and woodcut engraving. Seen as uncivilized by Japanese and Western explorers to the region, the Ainu were often described as primitive, uncultured, and occasionally violent.⁸ While texts portrayed older men as covered from head to toe in hair, often giving them the nickname of the “hairy Ainu” in Western travelogues, younger women (menoko) were fetishized for the elaborate tattooing of their hands, arms, and face. Certain American and European travelers speculated that the Ainu had proto-white or proto-Aryan roots, and in both a Japanese and Western context the Ainu were not viewed as Asian or Japanese.⁹ Even in today’s contemporary moment, these same nineteenth-century images are often invoked as accurate illustrations of Ainu culture. This move undermines the constructed nature of such images and the impact of Japanese colonialism on Ainu society. It also ignores the vibrant culture that exists today and frames Ainu culture as something permanently located in the past.

The rise and plateau of Nakoruru and Rimururu’s popularity in *Samurai Spirits* mirrors significant shifts in Ainu politics. One year after Nakoruru’s debut in 1993, Kayano Shigeru—an activist, teacher, and leading figure in the Ainu ethnic movement—became the first Ainu politician to sit on the Japanese Diet. He worked to foster the national recognition of Ainu culture and its value by furthering the Act on the Promotion of Ainu Culture and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge About Ainu Tradition in 1997. In the same year, he and landowner Kaizawa Tadashi challenged the expropriation of their ancestral land for constructing a large industrial dam in the town of Nibutani, Hokkaido. Although the Sapporo District Court denied the

plaintiffs substantive relief, their decision was critical in recognizing the Ainu as a distinct ethnic group within Japan.¹⁰ After Kayano's passing in 2006, Japan voted in favor of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007. However, it was not until May 2019 that an act legally recognizing the Ainu as the indigenous people of Japan came into law, even though many feel that this falls short of similar legislation in other countries.¹¹ Nakoruru and Rimururu's brief history in media culture straddles this crucial historical moment of awareness and increasing politicization of the Ainu cause. Nevertheless, their intense popularity made it easy to spread misinformation about Ainu culture to those who treated their representations as accurate. In a mediascape that was devoid of any representation, they were generally embraced as characters with a positive image (*pojitiba imêjina kyara*).¹²

Before the recent mainstream success of Noda Satoru's *Golden Kamuy* (*Gôruden kamui*, 2014–)¹³—an anime/manga that features an evolving friendship between a veteran of the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War and a young Ainu girl written in consultation with an Ainu linguist—representations of Nakoruru and Rimururu formed a dominant expression of Ainu identity in visual culture beginning in the mid-1990s. As battling indigenous heroines created by the Japanese game company SNK Playmore, understanding the circulation of their representation and narrative helps us grapple with the proliferation of indigenous stereotypes. It also aids us in exploring how popular culture was mobilized to create an accessible version of indigenous culture repackaged for the Japanese mainstream. This essay explores Nakoruru's popularity and her role in communicating Ainu culture through a transmedia discourse of the body, or more

specifically, the bodyscape. A term coined by art historian Nicholas Mirzoeff, the bodyscape is a complex of signs. Mirzoeff writes, “The body in art must be distinguished from the flesh and blood it seeks to imitate. In representation, the body appears not as itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent itself and a range of metaphorical meanings, which the artist cannot fully control, but only seeks to limit by the use of context, framing, and style.”¹⁴ The body, and particularly the indigenous female body, has always been a contested site. Rather than view Nakoruru’s body as a self-contained entity within the official game franchise, it is essential to examine her body in terms of its excess to question how her image reproduces, masquerades, and reinforces notions of ethnic Otherness. While it is important to recognize her “official” image as produced by SNK Playmore, I argue that it is just important to reconcile how her image circulates beyond what the company can fully control. As an example of what Henry Jenkins has called transmedia storytelling, Nakoruru’s narrative cannot be contained in a single game or platform; her story is dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels.¹⁵ Her game representation is but only one facet of how she manifests in the larger anime media mix.¹⁶ The indigenous excess of Nakoruru’s bodyscape is best understood when examining her image through various popular cultural contexts beyond her in-game appearance, including the 2002 OVA titled *Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person* (Nakoruru ~Ano hito kara no okurimono ~), and expansions to her story found in fan-produced dōjinshi comics. To cite Marc Steinberg’s notion of the anime media mix, each instance of Nakoruru’s consumption “must be regarded as a form of production that further develops the entire media franchise and the consumer desire that supports it.”¹⁷ Reflecting on the theories posited by Mirzoeff,

Jenkins, and Steinberg, I argue that the bodyscape of Nakoruru and her sister is consolidated across platforms, and understanding its overall impact in visual culture requires us to look beyond any one media or visual text. Considering the scarcity of Ainu representation in popular media, Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu often stand in as a model and metaphor of Ainu femininity for a non-Ainu Japanese domestic audience in the 1990s.

However, while Nakoruru and Rimururu represent the Ainu in visual culture, they are often understood, consumed, and even fetishized according to what Sharalyn Orbaugh calls the hybrid Japanese *shôjo*.¹⁸ The term *shôjo* (or “young girl”) is typically invoked to describe the constellation of anime, manga, or video games targeted to a young female audience that engage in a consistent and hyper-feminized visual morphology. Frenchy Lunning describes the “expanding quantum” of fan practices and commercial products that “spiral around this enigmatic and singular center: the *shôjo* character,” who is ubiquitous but ultimately constitutes an absent center in her own discourse.¹⁹ The *shôjo* evades a stable meaning, but the term is often defined in opposition to material targeted to young boys, or *shônen*. While the *shôjo* and *shônen* audiences remained more or less separate through the 1980s, the 1990s saw an increasing hybridization of *shôjo* motifs—such as a strong female protagonist and an emphasis on female transformation and strength—with *shônen* elements—such as action, social responsibility, and the visual exploitation of the protagonist’s sexuality.²⁰ I agree with Orbaugh’s characterization here, and while Nakoruru’s character reinforces longstanding stereotypes of the Ainu and their inextricable closeness to nature, her physical body de-familiarizes her own Ainu identity (or the Ainu excess of her

character), making the exotic known in a way that is consumable through modes of the hybrid shôjo. While Nakoruru is a strong character who harbors a great power, her success is primarily due to her more hybrid qualities—namely, her fighting prowess, her desire to protect the environment, and her sexualized body. Lunning explains that the shôjo “wears her cultural abjection on the surface”; and that these bodies are “in no ways stabilized and in no way actual.”²¹ While Lunning is discussing the shape-shifting nature of the shôjo, I want to embrace her exploration of the body as surface.

Nakoruru’s indigenous identity is an ethnic costume that she can don while fighting and that aligns her with Ainu activist imperatives, but one that she can ultimately remove revealing the unmarked and elusive shôjo body underneath. This duality of her body is critical to creating a version of indigenous femininity that Japanese audiences can easily consume.

Nakoruru’s “Official” Representation

To understand Nakoruru’s transmedia bodyscape, we first need to establish her appearance and character in the *Samurai Spirits* franchise (Figure 2). When Nakoruru debuted in 1993, she already had a tough act to follow. Two years earlier, Capcom’s 1991 *Street Fighter II* not only developed the fighting game formula that would be adopted in *Samurai Spirits*, *Mortal Kombat* (1992), *Tekken* (1994), and *Dead or Alive* (1996), but they also debuted the first female playable character, named Chun-Li.²² Outside of role-playing games, female characters in action games often occupied supporting roles, or debuted as the occasional villain or target to be rescued. Nakoruru was an early part of this 1990s trend in arcade fighting games.



Figure 2: Nakoruru. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai supirittsu II* (Samurai Shodown II), 1993. (Japanese release)

Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu are the only Ainu characters in the arcade fighting genre. While *Samurai Spirits* is generally set in during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), neither Nakoruru nor her sister bears any of the traditional markers of Ainu femininity of this period, such as face and arm tattooing that not only warded off spiritual/physical evils but served to mark a woman's maturity.²³ As their bodies are unmarked, their Ainu identity is made obvious through clothing that has patterned borders loosely inspired by the intricate appliqué designs or the needlework of Ainu embroidery on traditional garments such as attush robes, ruunpe robes, and matanpushi headbands (Figure 3). While Nakoruru's original character design by artist Shiroy Eiji simply had wide red bands of color to indicate these borders (Figure 2), later versions of her design make use of a linear pattern akin to the Ainu protective designs that mimic brambles and thorns (ay-us-siriki) (Figure 4).²⁴ This can be seen in the character art for Nakoruru and Rimururu in *Samurai Spirits III*.



Figure 3: The ay-us-siriki or “thorn” patterns can best be seen on the embroidered borders of the garment. AINU attush robe, 19th century (Meiji period). Elm-bark fiber with appliqué of indigo-dyed tabby. Public domain. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/51082>



Figure 4: Rimururu vs. Nakoruru. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown III* (Samurai supirittsu III: Zankurō musōken), 1995. (American release).

Her character design in the 2019 *Samurai Spirits* most closely mirrors AINU design-motifs by including a “double-whorl” pattern (ski-uren-morew-siriki) and an “eye” pattern (sik-siriki) on the back of her outfit (Figure 4).²⁵



Figure 5: Nakoruru's Ending Scene. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown* (Samurai supirittsu), 2019. (American release). Accessible on YouTube, https://youtu.be/Ri_OfmZXk7c.

Traditionally, this craft would have been passed from mother to daughter and the meaning behind these designs often had regional variation. Tsuda Nobuko argues that these designs often constituted a kind of “embroidered resistance” to the colonial brutality of Wajin (Japanese) men during the Tokugawa, and that sewing techniques had the very real capability of protecting the wearer from harm.²⁶ Patterns such as the embroidered thorns represented protection from and survival of such violence. The designs in the clothing of Nakoruru and Rimururu merely mark their Ainu difference while ignoring the real and practical meanings embedded in these patterns. Nakoruru's character in particular also plays in a loose kind of cultural fusion; her dominant color palette of red and white is visually reminiscent of the clothing of Shinto shrine maidens (miko). Even though there is no connection between Shintoism and the Ainu, it nevertheless lends itself to the interpretation of her role as a “priestess” of the Ainu.

In the game narrative, the sisters perform their Ainu identity through excessive reference to nature. The relationship between the Ainu people and the natural world is a

common trope of the native, and it is evoked in a dangerous conflation between indigenous and green political movements.²⁷ While often a reductive stereotype, both Japanese and Ainu alike tend to invoke this connection to nature. As anthropologist Lisa Hiwasaki has remarked, many prominent Ainu activists and politicians publicly promote the image of the Ainu as the nature-preserver, while framing the Japanese as the nature-destroyer.²⁸ Nakoruru and Rimururu are “priestesses” of the Ainu who live in a village called Kamui Kotan, the name of which combines the Ainu words for god and village. Nakoruru is aided in battle by her hawk (Mamahaha) and wolf (Shikuru), and she is notable for being the first character in a fighting game where her animal companions actively contribute to her fighting strategy. Her fighting style combines swift, short-range attacks with her ceremonial makiri knife (called chichi-ushi; it is often referred to an Ainu “kodachi”) and varying kinds of air strikes. Rimururu idolizes her older sister, and as such her fighting style is similar with some modifications in its execution. She calls upon an ice spirit (Konru) that she uses to freeze her foes. The names of their skills are all inspired by the Ainu language.



Figure 6: Nakoruru's Kamui Kotan stage backdrop. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai supirittsu II* (Samurai Shodown II), 1993. (Japanese release)

When you fight Nakoruru in *Samurai Spirits*, the scene changes to a snow-covered Ainu retreat, with male and female elders (her grandparents) at the entrance to the

home and a cast of animal friends (Figure 6). Nakoruru has the ability to speak to animals and predict the weather—a utility that makes her an asset to her village community. Even in the dating game, *Days of Memories: Ôedo Love Scroll*, your first encounter with Nakoruru is facilitated through nature—you meet her hawk, Mamahaha, and witness Nakoruru listening to the voice of nature (shizen no koe) that nobody except Rimururu can hear. Nakoruru is not only enamored with the natural world, but it is her sworn duty to protect it. After each win in battle, she exclaims, “Receive nature’s punishment!” (Shizen no ikari wo ukenasai!) or, “This is nature’s punishment!” (Daishizen no shioki desu!), a winning phrase that she also shares with her sister in *Samurai Spirits III*. Nakoruru’s taunts play on the popular catchphrase of *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon* (Bishôjo senshi Sêrâ Mûn, 1991), who would say “In the name of the moon, I punish you!” (Tsuki ni kawatte oshioki yo!) before she took care of her enemies.²⁹ While Nakoruru’s identity as an Ainu woman is virtually inseparable from her attachment to the natural world, her set phrases seem to consciously invoke the archetype of the Japanese shôjo through this linkage with *Sailor Moon*. Nakoruru’s popularity is built on her legibility within the logic of the hybrid Japanese shôjo popularized in anime and manga of the 1990s.

Nakoruru as the Hybrid Ainu Shojo

Although they did not personally work on Nakoruru’s early concept, game designers Oda Yasuyuki and Kuroki Nobuyuki were surprised at Nakoruru’s intense popularity with fans despite her “modest, non-sexualized appearance.”³⁰ Oda recalls, “A lot of characters were popular because of their sexiness, but Nakoruru doesn’t show a lot

of skin.”³¹ I argue that Nakoruru was not consumed in the same way as other female fighters because she is easily deciphered within the language of the shôjo. Nakoruru’s presentation as the hybrid Japanese shôjo defined by Sharalyn Orbaugh is best seen through example. Shortly after SNK Playmore released an adventure game based on Nakoruru’s character for PC and Sega Dreamcast called *Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person* in 2001, they released an original video animation (OVA) on DVD in support of the project in 2002. While originally intended as a thirteen-episode anime series, only a single episode was released to the public when issues of funding stagnated the production. Despite its commercial failure, the OVA continues to have a strong fan following.

The anime closely mirrors the narrative of Nakoruru’s adventure game. In the *Samurai Spirits* franchise, she is a self-described pacifist who only fights when compelled by the destruction of nature. This tension lies at the heart of the adventure game and the OVA. In the anime, her deep connection to nature manifests when friendly forest animals start to behave strangely, signaling impending conflict (Figure 7). Towards the beginning of the episode, a young child visits a recovering Nakoruru and is then bit on the finger by her pet squirrel. Later, a white rabbit consumes the body of a dead deer by the side of a pond with crimson blood streaking down its face. Finally, a dark sky looms over a bear frothing at the mouth, about to attack. The bear, in particular, is sacred to the Ainu, and this scene presages the disaster about to befall the village of Kamui Kotan.



Figure 7: Aberrant animals. Screen captures from *Nakoruru ~Ano hito kara no okuri mono~* (Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person), dir. Kanazawa Katsuma, 2002; available on YouTube. Accessed 1 June 2020. <https://youtu.be/S-ssCvT8n3w>

These aberrations of the natural world motivate Nakoruru into action. But the anime also uses her body as a freighted signifier. Images of her bare flesh are often paired with a flashback or premonition of natural calamity. Despite her visual objectification, Nakoruru's naked body is never sexually activated in the OVA, which is crucial for her to remain the shôjo. For example, her second nude scene in the short episode involves Nakoruru bathing alone (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Nakoruru's bathing sequence. Screen captures from *Nakoruru ~Ano hito kara no okuri mono~* (Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person), dir. Kanazawa Katsuma, 2002; available on YouTube. Accessed 1 June 2020. <https://youtu.be/S-ssCvT8n3w>

Ripples disturb the water's surface before cutting to an image of Nakoruru's feet standing in a waterfall. The image slowly pans up showing the mature curves of her body, with hands clasped in front of her as if in prayer. She is sexualized but framed as pure. The anime cuts to her face with eyes closed, as she takes in the last moments of peace. She opens her eyes, walks forward, and reaches for a robe draped over a tree branch. As soon as she wraps her body, a black feather falls into the water, disturbing the smooth surface. Nakoruru turns around abruptly in horror and the scene cuts from the tranquil cool colors of the forest to a rust-colored sky, with bodies strewn all over the ground and crows hovering. Her body is shown in monochrome and she covers her ears to prevent the taunting of a disembodied voice accusing her of causing the carnage due to her unwillingness to fight. She collapses to the ground, hands still covering her ears, and the scene cuts back to "reality" where her friends are calling for her. The bathing scene is pivotal in the way it references disaster; in this case, a nearby village succumbed to a plague. Throughout the anime and her appearance in the *Samurai Spirits* games, Nakoruru is often torn between the desire for a relationship (with her childhood friend Yantamu in the anime; with the American ninja Galford D. Weller in the arcade game) and her responsibility to save Kamui Kotan and the natural world.

Nakoruru is sexually mature, but despite her exposure, the viewer never sees any overtly sexual act—in many ways, the anime presents her body as virginal. Lunning explains that the abjection of the shôjo's maturity and the desire for agency and power are "configured through a masquerade of innocence and purity."³² We learn throughout

the anime that Nakoruru is a priestess who must never consummate physical love lest she betray her duty. For Nakoruru to fulfill her destiny in saving nature, she must remain pure and unmarked. However, in our ability to visually objectify her nude form, these scenes also seem to contain her Ainu excess through the absence of tattooing. As mentioned earlier, considering the story's Tokugawa timeline, Nakoruru's body might be expected to mirror that of an Ainu girl/woman living in the same period, most notably in the practice of tattooing. While video games and animation certainly take liberties when depicting other cultures, the politics of tattooing were a salient point of debate for the Ainu community. In 1871, the Meiji government issued tattoo bans and communities resisted these laws through the 1930s. Tattoos were an important cultural practice with connections to both marriage and the afterlife, and women bearing these marks on their faces, hands, and arms were one of the most abundant signifiers of Ainu culture in visual representation in and outside of Japan. Six years after the release of Nakoruru's anime and adventure game, the last tattooed Ainu woman would pass away, marking a true end of the practice. While Nakoruru indeed occupies a fictional world, the overarching story of *Samurai Spirits* asserts a kind of historical authority by referencing actual sites of Tokugawa-era conflict and real period figures along an alternative historical timeline. Nevertheless, rather than a tattooed body, Nakoruru demonstrates her ethnicity through her constant voicing of concern for nature, and through removable objects—her ruunpe robe, jewelry, and weapons. When she casts these ethnic signifiers off, as in her bathing scene, Nakoruru is effectively reframed not as an example of Ainu femininity, but as the sexualized, but pure, hybrid Japanese shôjo.

The viewer expects Nakoruru to sacrifice her life to thwart impending apocalypse (Figure 9). She does not join with her love interest and must become a spirit, or *kamuy* in the Ainu language, by relinquishing her mortal body. In his work *The Anime Machine*, Thomas Lamarre explores the relationship between the *shôjo* female, technology, and self-sacrifice in works like Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky* (1986) and Hideki Anno's *Nadia* (1991).³³ He reflects that while it is only a young girl who can save us, it is primarily a male audience that demands salvation at her hands.³⁴ Despite her ability to fight and protect the environment, Nakoruru becomes the *shôjo* to enact her sacrifice for the primarily male, Japanese viewer. Similarly, Sharalyn Orbaugh sees the new hybrid *shôjo* of the 1990s as an active and powerful force against evil. Orbaugh explains, "the power of the battlin' babes *derives from* the tension between their sexual potential and their refusal to activate it... they must entirely reveal their liminal bodies—sexually mature, as seen from the full breasts, but 'pure' and somehow still childish, underscored by the lack of public hair and imperforate genitalia—in order to *take on* their power."³⁵ In both the anime and the video game, Nakoruru has romantic desires and reveals the entirety of her "liminal body," but ultimately refuses the sexual encounter in order to save the world and nature itself. To allow for sex would allow for the potential of motherhood and the disruption of the *shôjo* ideal.

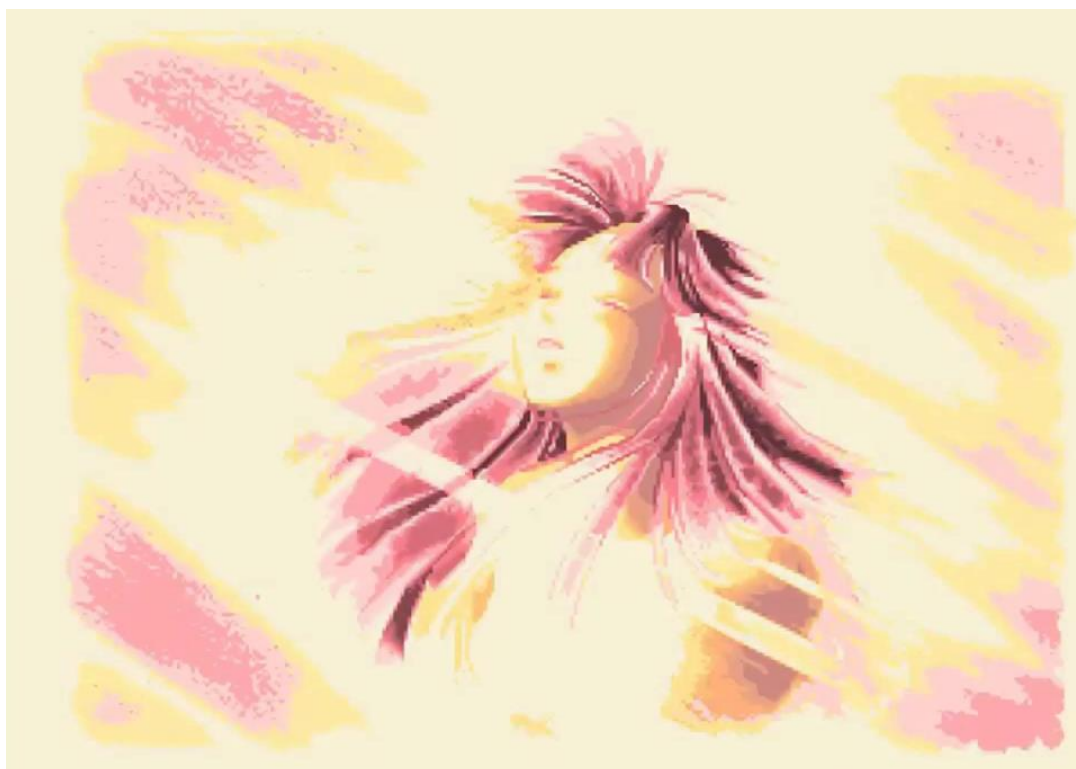


Figure 9: Nakoruru's sacrifice. Screen captures from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown II* (Samurai supirittsu II), 1993. (American release)

Nevertheless, Nakoruru's Ainu identity activates the core of her power. While both Orbaugh and Lamarre discuss the shôjo in terms of the technological, Nakoruru derives her power not through cyborg superiority or technical advancement, but rather through a spiritual link created through an imagined ethnic tie to the land itself. This link resonates with contemporary debates over the deforestation of traditional Ainu land, and makes Nakoruru an ideal mascot for environmentally conscious activism. She is a strong and powerful character who harbors desire for another, and through its denial, she attains power to save the natural world. But only at the cost of her life. Her Ainu identity is worn on the surface, while her body retains the transformative potential of the shôjo hidden beneath.

Nakoruru's operation within the confines of the shôjo heroine frames her as a friendly representative of Ainu culture for a Japanese audience. Her character served as an important introduction to Ainu dress, beliefs, and language, even though she supported many indigenous clichés. She would come to represent the face of environmental protection efforts at the city and prefectural level outside of Hokkaido. For example, in 1994, she was featured as a mascot for Mitaka city's water services department and used to advertise direct debit into the national pension insurance program. The same year, Nakoruru would represent Kyoto's afforestation campaign to commemorate the 1,200-year transfer of the capital. The imagery of posters featuring Nakoruru is often largely disconnected from the issues they are used to campaign for, and often isolate and romanticize her in natural settings. Ten years later in 2004, Nakoruru and Terry Bogart would become the dual mascots of the Nakoruru and Terry Club meant to encourage environmental awareness and healthy habits for children.³⁶

And although Nakoruru had somewhat plateaued in her popularity, in March 2011, character designer and comic artist Shiroi Eiji contributed a drawing of Nakoruru to support the victims of the tsunami and earthquake in Tohoku. While her likeness is frequently mobilized for environmental causes, her indigenous identity is often implied. These posters or promotional materials from the Nakoruru and Terry Club never explicitly reference the fact that she is Ainu and depend upon her visual adherence to the shôjo ideal to remain legible. The changing nature of her bodyscape gives her the ultimate flexibility of purpose.

Nakoruru and Rimururu's Representation in Dôjinshi

Along with their rise in popularity, Nakoruru and her sister became the subject of fan productions—particularly in the realms of cosplay and self-published fan works (niji sôsku dôjinshi). Dôjinshi often take the form of magazines, manga, or novels, and these works are frequently, but not always, parodies or alternative storylines involving the worlds of popular manga, game, or anime series. Fans are often at the forefront of the media industry. While these fans are critical to the success and growth of any popular cultural series, in their hands, characters can expand beyond the boundaries of their original narrative world, entering territory that sometimes contains erotic and/or sexualized portrayals. Building upon Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling, Nakoruru and her sister's stories unfold across several media outlets and platforms—both official and unofficial—in which a portion of end-users take an active role in the process of expansion. In the 1990s, these fan depictions became part of how we understand the bodyscapes of Nakoruru and Rimururu.

As Nakoruru and her sister gained in popularity through the 1990s, they frequently appeared in sexually explicit dôjinshi. These representations need to be framed against the political discourse surrounding Ainu culture during this very same period. The late Ainu musician and historian Chupuchisekor sounded the alarm bells when he became aware of several dôjinshi that specifically fetishized Nakoruru and Rimururu's ethnic identity.³⁷ Chupuchisekor was not rallying against pornography per se. For example, Nakoruru was featured in several pornographic dôjinshi manga that paired her with other female characters in the *Samurai Spirits* universe, such as the blonde French noble Charlotte, and he did not target these works in his criticism. Rather, he identified and called attention to several dôjinshi that exploited Nakoruru and Rimururu's Ainu identity by vaginally penetrating them by "Mother Nature" or having them engage in zoophilic intercourse with bears and wolves.³⁸ According to Chupuchisekor, these comics denigrated their Ainu bodies for the entertainment of Wajin, or ethnic Japanese. He feared that loyal fans of Nakoruru and Rimururu, who were brainwashed (*sen'nô sareru*) by this particular type of pornography, might think that this was an accurate representation of the Ainu world.³⁹ Indeed, by-and-large these fan-produced manga are not made for the benefit of those of Ainu descent, and Nakoruru's mere popularity in *Samurai Spirits* makes her a prime subject for dôjinshi like many other shôjo heroines; in other words, her shôjo identity takes precedence over her indigenous one. However, Chupuchisekor criticizes online defenders of these fan productions who have said that such pornographic representations of Nakoruru could actually be perceived as love or fondness of Ainu culture.⁴⁰ Between these debates, it is clear that Nakoruru and

Rimururu's representation balances the desire for the body of the ethnic Other with the desire for the body of the shôjo that operates independently of her Ainu identity.

In his writing on racial fetishism, Homi Bhabha explains the ambivalence at the heart of racial stereotyping.⁴¹ The racial fetish often defines the colonized as "Other," but as a fixed and knowable stereotype; the Other is both distant and familiar at the same time. Bhabha writes that the body is always inscribed in both an "economy of pleasure and desire" and an "economy of discourse, domination and power."⁴² Nakoruru and her sister simultaneously occupy both economies of representation. Images of the Ainu represent a series of paradoxes. As Bhabha explains in his reflection on Franz Fanon, "It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces."⁴³ While Fanon and Bhabha are interrogating stereotypes of Blackness, there is considerable overlap when examining indigenous stereotypes in Japan. Considering the historical and continuing subjugation of the Ainu, we have to question how the representation of Ainu women—who are typically framed in terms of their Otherness—becomes palatable and knowable for a dominantly Japanese audience. The example of Nakoruru and Rimururu allows us to consider the polymorphous nature of Ainu representation in Japan according to Bhabha's logic. While they stand in as the indigenous Other through the trappings of Ainu ethnic identity symbolized in clothing and a closeness to nature, it is ultimately the visual language of the shôjo that allows

these characters to become familiar and knowable to the Japanese viewer. This “split” or “separation” of their character is never truly reconciled. As Bhabha states, “it is the visibility of this separation which, in denying the colonized the capacities of self-government, independence, Western modes of civility, lends authority to the official version and mission of colonial power.”⁴⁴ In making the ambivalent separation visible and never reconciling the simultaneous repulsion/attraction, these Ainu heroines can never quite transcend their stereotype, which ultimately reinforces official narratives of power.

Conclusion

By operating within the confines of the hybrid shôjo heroine, Nakoruru and Rimururu’s indigenous identity was rendered legible and made familiar to a Japanese audience. Although Japanese game designers constructed Nakoruru and Rimururu for a domestic audience, these characters nonetheless serve as an important introduction to Ainu culture, dress, beliefs, and terminology, even though they unwittingly support clichés of indigeneity and inaccuracies about the Ainu world. While the Ainu collectively organized in the mid-1990s, Nakoruru, in particular, would come to represent the bright, young face of environmental protection efforts at the city and prefectural level. Her popularity derives from her flexibility of both purpose and appearance. As we increasingly analyze indigenous representations in the media, and as native peoples work to produce popular media that reflects their culture and embraces indigenous modes of storytelling, it is worth considering the early role that Nakoruru, and later her sister, play in the transmedia landscape.

Nakoruru's character simultaneously supports a diluted version of indigenous femininity while embodying the hybrid shôjo in both official SNK Playmore productions and fan adaptations. To return to the concept of the bodyscape, it is the flexibility of Nakoruru's image that supports her transformation into an embodiment of both Ainu culture and environmental activism. Following Mirzoeff's formulation, Nakoruru's meaning cannot simply be contained by what he calls an "artist" (or in this case, a character designer, a director, or a development team).⁴⁵ Rather, her bodyscape is characterized by the various contexts, framings, and styles circulating beyond the official *Samurai Spirits* games and animation. Fan appropriations of Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu's image are hardly stable stylistically. Their bodies change depending on the artist or situation and range from childish portrayals of doe-eyed innocence (as seen in The Nakoruru and Terry Club) to the seductive and/or pornographic representations of the girls engaged in sexual relations with the very nature they swear to protect. These multiple, and occasionally contradictory, layers inscribe meaning onto Nakoruru and Rimururu's ever-changing imagined bodies, and fan representations are often authentically embraced in the evolving narrative of *Samurai Spirits*. Alongside other video game characters, Nakoruru and her sister were also frequently cosplayed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which further mapped their indigenous image onto the real bodies of women and men, most of whom were not Ainu in terms of identification. Whether these characters were created from video game pixels, an artist's brush, or a real body in costume, all of these representations collectively contribute to their larger bodyscape within the anime media mix.

Between official releases and fan appropriation, Nakoruru and Rimururu evade a stable identification. If the shôjo is the black hole—the absence—in the center of a swirling universe of objects as described by Lunning, we have to ask how indigenous identity is grafted on to this unstable fixture.⁴⁶ Nakoruru and her sister occupy a liminal space. As fighters, they represent Ainu women through superficial dress and imagined ties to the land. At the same time, these characters abide by the fantasy of the hybrid shôjo that requires a partial elision of Ainu identity; they are always shôjo first and Ainu second. Their ethnic Otherness seems to preclude our ability to render both their Ainu and shôjo identity simultaneously; we ambivalently flicker and hover between each, refusing to see either as whole. While we need to recognize Nakoruru and Rimururu for the way that their images engage in a particular history of Ainu representation in the 1990s, we also need to challenge the construction of Ainu femininity and the limitations of such stereotypes.

- ¹ Chupuchisekor, "Ainu bunka to media" (Ainu Culture and Media), Fukyû keihatsu seminâ (Public Awareness Seminar), Ainu bunka kôryû sentâ (Ainu Cultural Exchange Center [Sapporo Pirika Kotan]), (Tokyo: Edo jidai no Ainu kotoba wo kangaeru kai [Society for the Consideration of Edo-period Ainu Language], 2000), 96, <https://www.ff-ainu.or.jp/about/files/sem1109.pdf>.
- ² SNK Playmore, *Samurai supirittsu* (Samurai Shodown), 1993 (Japanese release).
- ³ SNK Playmore, *Samurai supirittsu: Zankurô musôken* (Samurai Spirits: Peerless Blade of Zankuro), 1995 (Japanese release).
- ⁴ Takei Hiroyuki, *Shâman kingu* (Shaman King), 32 vols. (Tokyo: Shueisha, 1998–2005).
- ⁵ Inter-Let's, *Nakoruru ~Ano hito kara no okuri mono~* (Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person) (published by SNK Playmore), 2001. (Japanese release).
- ⁶ *Nakoruru ~Ano hito kara no okuri mono~* (Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person), dir. Kanazawa Katsuma (2002); available on YouTube. Accessed 1 June 2020. <https://youtu.be/S-ssCvT8n3w>.
- ⁷ SNK Playmore, *Days of Memories ~Ôedo ren'ai emaki~* (Days of Memories: Ôedo Love Scroll), 2006. (Japanese release).
- ⁸ There are too many examples to list, but a notable Western travel text that addresses the Ainu in this manner is Arnold Henry Savage Landor, *Alone with the Hairy Ainu: Or, 3800 Miles on a Pack Saddle in Yezo and a Cruise to the Kurile Islands* (London: John Murray, 1893).
- ⁹ S.A. Arutiunov, "Ainu Origin Theories," in *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh and Chisato O. Dubreuil (Washington D.C.: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, 1999), 29–31.
- ¹⁰ Mark Levin, "Kayano et al. v. Hokkaido Expropriation Committee: 'The Nibutani Dam Decision,'" *International Legal Materials* 38 (1999): 394–434. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1635447>.
- ¹¹ Umeda Sayuri, "Japan: New Ainu Law Becomes Effective," *The Global Legal Monitor*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/japan-new-ainu-law-becomes-effective/>.
- ¹² Funahashi Masahiro, "Gêmu to Ainu mondai ~Nakoruru wo tsûjite~ (Games and the Ainu Problem through Nakoruru)," Blog, Ai-Link, July 24, 1997, <https://ailink-web.co.jp/managerblog/cat-15/post-990.html>.
- ¹³ Noda Satoru, *Gôruden kamui* (Golden Kamuy), 21 vols. (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2014).
- ¹⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *BodyScape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.
- ¹⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Revised edition (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 95–97; Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," Blog, Henry Jenkins, March 21, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.
- ¹⁶ Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 135–41.
- ¹⁷ Steinberg, 141.
- ¹⁸ Sharalyn Orbaugh, "Busty Battlin' Babes: The Evolution of the Shôjo in 1990s Visual Culture," in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, ed. Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson, and Maribeth Graybill (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 202–3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn1gr.15>.
- ¹⁹ Frenchy Lunning, "Under the Ruffles: Shôjo and the Morphology of Power," *Mechademia: Second Arc*, User Enhanced, 6 (2011): 3–7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41511568>.
- ²⁰ Orbaugh, 215–16.
- ²¹ Lunning, 7–8.
- ²² Capcom, *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior*, 1991. (Japanese release).
- ²³ Mari Kodama, "Clothing and Ornamentation," in *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh and Chisato O. Dubreuil (Washington D.C.: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, 1999), 313–26.
- ²⁴ SNK Corporation, *Samurai supirittsu*, 2019. (Japanese release); Sapporo Pirika Kotan, "Ainu-Siriki," City of Sapporo, accessed July 2, 2020, <http://www.city.sapporo.jp/shimin/pirika-kotan/jp/kogei/ainu-siriki/index.html>.

²⁵ Sapporo Pirika Kotan, "Ainu-Siriki."

²⁶ ann-elise lewallen, *The Fabric of Indigeneity: Ainu Identity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Japan*, School for Advanced Research Global Indigenous Politics Series (Santa Fe, Albuquerque: School for Advanced Research Press, University of New Mexico Press, 2016), 130–31.

²⁷ Richard Siddle, *Race, Resistance and the Ainu of Japan*, Sheffield Centre for Japanese Studies/Routledge Series (London: Routledge, 1996), 184–89.

²⁸ Lisa Hiwasaki, "Ethnic Tourism in Hokkaido and the Shaping of Ainu Identity," *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 3 (2000): 409, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2672026>.

²⁹ Takeuchi Naoko, *Bishôjo senshi Sêrâ Mûn* (Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon), 18 vols. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991).

³⁰ Alex Kane, "The Making of *Samurai Shodown* (2019)," *Polygon*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2019/6/21/18700422/samurai-shodown-2019-snk>.

³¹ Kane, "The Making of *Samurai Shodown* (2019)."

³² Lunning, 8.

³³ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 213–17.

³⁴ Lamarre, 214.

³⁵ Orbaugh, 220.

³⁶ SNK Playmore, "Nakoruru & Terry Club," SNK Playmore Official Homepage, June 9, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20070609120216/http://www.snkplaymore.co.jp/nakoruru_terry_club/index.php.

³⁷ Chupuchisekor, "Terebigêmu 'Samurai supirittsu' Ainu no bishôjo senshi Nakoruru no hasei dôjinshi e no gimon" (Questions about Dôjinshi Derived from the Ainu Woman Warrior Nakoruru in the Video Game *Samurai Spirits*), in *Ainu, ima ni ikiru* (Ainu in the Present), ed. Hiroki Nishiura (Tokyo: Shinsensha, 1997), 97–98.

³⁸ While Chupuchisekor describes the content of these dôjinshi, he does not actually call out any specific circles, artists, or volumes in his critical essay.

³⁹ Chupuchisekor, "Terebigêmu 'Samurai supirittsu,'" 97–98.

⁴⁰ Chupuchisekor, "Terebigêmu 'Samurai supirittsu,'" 97–98.

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 95.

⁴² Bhabha, 96.

⁴³ Bhabha, 118.

⁴⁴ Bhabha, 118.

⁴⁵ Mirzoeff, 3.

⁴⁶ Lunning, 17.

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