

AP[®] RESEARCH 2016 SCORING GUIDELINES

AP Research Performance Task Rubric: Academic Paper

Content Area	Performance Levels		
1 Understand and Analyze Context	The paper identifies the topic of inquiry. 2	The paper identifies the topic, and describes the purpose and focus of the inquiry. 4	The paper explains the topic, purpose, and focus of the inquiry and why further investigation of the topic is needed by connecting it to the larger discipline, field, and/or scholarly community. 6
2 Understand and Analyze Argument	The paper identifies or cites previous works and/or summarizes a single perspective on the student’s topic of inquiry. 2	The paper summarizes, individually, previous works representing multiple perspectives about the student’s topic of inquiry. 4	The paper explains the relationships among multiple works representing multiple perspectives, describing the connection to the student’s topic of inquiry. 6
3 Evaluate Sources and Evidence	The paper uses sources/evidence that are unsubstantiated as relevant and/or credible for the purpose of the inquiry. 2	The paper uses credible and relevant sources/evidence suited to the purpose of the inquiry. 4	The paper explains the relevance and significance of the used sources/cited evidence by connecting them to the student’s topic of inquiry. 6
4 Research Design	The paper presents a summary of the approach, method, or process, but the summary is oversimplified. 3	The paper describes in detail the approach, method, or process. 5	The paper provides a logical rationale by explaining the alignment between the chosen approach, method, or process and the research question/project goal. 7
5 Establish Argument	The paper presents an argument, conclusion or understanding, but it is simplistic or inconsistent, and/or it provides unsupported or illogical links between the evidence and the claim(s). 3	The paper presents an argument, conclusion, or new understanding that the paper justifies by explaining the links between evidence with claims. 5	The paper presents an argument, conclusion or new understanding that acknowledges and explains the consequences and implications in context. 7
6 Select and Use Evidence	Evidence is presented, but it is insufficient or sometimes inconsistent in supporting the paper’s conclusion or understanding. 2	The paper supports its conclusion through the compilation of relevant and sufficient evidence. 4	The paper demonstrates a compelling argument through effective interpretation and synthesis of the evidence and through describing its relevance and significance. 6
7 Engage Audience	Organizational and design elements are present, but sometimes distract from communication or are superfluous. 1	Organizational and design elements convey the paper’s message. 2	Organizational and design elements engage the audience, effectively emphasize the paper’s message and demonstrate the credibility of the writer. 3
8 Apply Conventions	The paper cites and attributes the work of others, but does so inconsistently and/or incorrectly. 2	The paper consistently and accurately cites and attributes the work of others. 4	The paper effectively integrates the knowledge and ideas of others and consistently distinguishes between the student’s voice and that of others. 6

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9 Apply Conventions	The paper's use of grammar, style and mechanics convey the student's ideas; however, errors interfere with communication and/or credibility.	The paper's word choice and syntax adheres to established conventions of grammar, usage and mechanics. There may be some errors, but they do not interfere with the author's meaning.	The paper's word choice and syntax enhances communication through variety, emphasis, and precision.
	1	2	3

NOTE: To receive the highest performance level presumes that the student also achieved the preceding performance levels in that row.

ADDITIONAL SCORES: In addition to the scores represented on the rubric, readers can also assign scores of **0** (zero).

- A score of **0** is assigned to a single row of the rubric when the paper displays a below-minimum level of quality as identified in that row of the rubric.

AP[®] RESEARCH 2016 SCORING COMMENTARY

Academic Paper

Overview

This performance task was intended to assess students' ability to conduct scholarly and responsible research and articulate an evidence-based argument that clearly communicates the conclusion, solution, or answer to their stated research question. More specifically, this performance task was intended to assess students' ability to:

- Generate a focused research question that is situated within or connected to a larger scholarly context or community;
- Explore relationships between and among multiple works representing multiple perspectives within the scholarly literature related to the topic of inquiry;
- Articulate what approach, method, or process they have chosen to use to address their research question, why they have chosen that approach, and how they employed it;
- Develop and present their own argument, conclusion, or new understanding;
- Support their conclusion through the compilation, use, and synthesis of relevant and significant evidence;
- Use organizational and design elements to effectively convey the paper's message;
- Consistently and accurately cite, attribute, and integrate the knowledge and work of others, while distinguishing between the student's voice and that of others;
- Generate a paper in which word choice and syntax enhance communication by adhering to established conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics.

The Modern Mythical Place: San Fransokyo, Hiro, and Hybridity in Disney’s *Big Hero 6*

Abstract

Hybridity is defined by seminal postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha as a ‘Third Space’ where cultures converge, combine, and are continuously changing. In postcolonial theory, hybridity is considered a radical re-imagining of racial politics wherein cultures have moved beyond reductive binaristic categories, thus lessening the power struggles inherent in those polarities. Therefore, hybrid racial representations are seen as liberal and progressive, with the capacity to empower marginalized ethnicities as opposed to Hollywood traditions that perpetuate existing racial hierarchies, such as Orientalism and tokenism. In this film analysis of the Disney animation feature *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014), I argue that San Fransokyo, the fictional Japanese-American fusion setting, and Hiro, the film’s mixed-race protagonist, are examples of hybrid representation that attempt to break away from these traditions. This paper further examines how, while the film posits itself as a celebratory form of the Bhabhian ‘Third Space’ through its blended Japanese-American aesthetic, hyper-real mise en scène, and the liminality of its main characters, *Big Hero 6*’s agenda to promote hybridity is undermined by latent hierarchies suggested by the process of its world-construction and binary oppositions constraining the development of its secondary characters. The effect of this representation is the creation of a highly realistic yet imaginary world at once both familiar and alien, and neither American nor Japanese, but far from the hybrid utopia San Fransokyo was lauded as in articles following the film’s release. This conclusion has implications for evaluating racial representations in cinema, reminding film scholars that dominant ideologies regarding race are often as naturalized and entrenched in media as they are in society; even within texts that appear on the surface to be progressive or subversive.

1. Introduction

In the opening shot of the critically acclaimed Disney animation feature, *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014), what appears to be the Golden Gate bridge redesigned with traditional Japanese gates emerges from ocean fog to frame the glittering city of San Fransokyo, a fictional near-future fusion of Tokyo and San Francisco. In the next scene, the film introduces its fourteen-year-old Japanese-American protagonist, Hiro Hamada, his older brother, Tadashi, and their Caucasian aunt, Cass, who live in a San Fransokyan Victorian house turned Japanese-style coffee shop, the Lucky Cat Cafe, where Cass sells donuts alongside yakisoba. Even this early on, it is clear that the film abounds with notions of cultural hybridity, a view shared by the cast and crew. Although the filmmakers never explicitly reference the postcolonial concept, the film is richly evocative of seminal postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s definition of hybridity as a ‘Third Space’ beyond reductive binaristic politics or polarities, wherein cultures formerly known as the ‘colonizers’ or the ‘colonized’ converge, combine, and continuously change (155-57). In line with this aspect of the film, executive producer John Lasseter states, “the modern, mythical combination of Tokyo and San Francisco . . . make[s] this film genuinely innovative” and director Don Hall explains, “Even the characters embody a blend of cultural aesthetics” (Julius 6-7). Following the death of Tadashi, Hiro, a

robotics prodigy, transforms himself, Tadashi's healthcare robot, Baymax, and his multiracial group of friends into high-tech heroes in order to save San Fransokyo from the masked villain who killed his brother. While the film's address of loss, revenge, and technology prompted critical attention, reviewers and audiences focused in particular on the film's hybrid racial representation, which was generally lauded as progressive. Critics praised the film in terms reminiscent of the postcolonial sense of hybridity, such as a review by Robbie Collin in *The Telegraph* stating, "In *Big Hero 6*, cultures don't clash, they compound". Likewise, Japanese-American popular culture expert Roland Kelts, writing for *The New York Times*, noted, "authentic details add up to a portrait of two onscreen cultures sharing the same world, undiluted by their affinities, tethered by mutual respect". Given the centrality of hybridity to the film's production and reception, it would not be so far-fetched to argue that the nuanced depiction of racial politics could have perhaps contributed to the film's critical and box office successes. *Big Hero 6* won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2015 and grossed over 657.8 million USD worldwide, making the film the third highest-grossing Disney animated picture of all time after *Frozen* and *The Lion King* (IMDb.com). Considering the widespread success *Big Hero 6* garnered and the popularity it continues to enjoy - a sequel TV series was announced in March 2016 - it is worth exploring the film's salient aspects of race and culture (Snetiker). Within the contexts of its production and critical reception, *Big Hero 6* has certainly established a progressive position in terms of racial politics, but upon closer analysis of the film itself, to what extent is this agenda promoting cultural hybridity supported or subverted by its setting and characters?

Asking this question has serious implications for evaluating the recent history of racial representation in cinema, and consequently, how entrenched racial hierarchies and categories remain in today's globalized society. Analyzing *Big Hero 6* is especially illuminating since it is a contemporary title by Disney, arguably the world's leading transnational media conglomerate. Disney has historically been criticized for its portrayal of race perpetuating - in direct opposition to the concept of hybridity - stereotypes that separate and subjugate ethnic minorities. Contemporaneous with the civil rights movements, critical race theorists published analyses of Disney's animation classics in seminal readers such as *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* criticizing Disney on these fronts. In response, film scholar Eve Benhamou writes that the Studio actively set to rectify its past by producing films in the 1990s-2000s featuring diverse characters and messages of tolerance such as *Mulan* and *The Princess and the Frog* (153). Benhamou sees *Big Hero 6* as the latest in these attempts (162). Through studying *Big Hero 6* we can evaluate how much progress Disney has made in promoting racial representation. Furthermore, as Disney is a purveyor of the American entertainment industry, we can examine the film in light of its relation to larger Hollywood traditions of misrepresentation that unfortunately still pass for authentic portrayals of race, such as Orientalism, wherein Western readings are imposed on foreign cultures, and tokenism, wherein minorities are often cast to fill arbitrary political correctness quotas. While *Big Hero 6* is generally regarded as progressive, the extent to which it advocates for hybridity beyond superficial means such as those above is symptomatic of society's readiness to embrace hybridity. After all, as media scholar Michael Omi has argued, "popular culture has always been an important realm within which racial ideologies have been created, reproduced, and sustained" (Maasik and Solomon, 628). Studying *Big Hero 6* allows the exposure and self-reflexive exploration of the seemingly natural hierarchies and polarities society imposes on race.

The computer-generated world of San Fransokyo can be studied in direct relation to the real world since world-construction, especially in the medium of animation, is inherently shaped by dominant social ideologies. Film is not just entertainment, but a representation of how we might make sense of the world around us, and the animation film, critic John Halas wrote, "is concerned with metaphysical reality - not how things look, but what they mean ... [as opposed to] the live action film's job to present physical reality" (qtd. in Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 7). In other words, Halas sees animation as the most ideologically dependent of all cinematic forms, since animators must draw on and give form to cultural mythologies to construct a world from scratch. As producer Roy Conli stated, "There are no found objects in animation - you literally have to create the grain of the wood" (Keegan). Similarly, the science-fiction genre, which *Big Hero 6* belongs to as well, is often not rooted purely in futuristic fancy but instead mired in real and current debates over the nature of humanity, justice, and public policy (Nichols, 249). It may seem an overstatement to argue that through moving images we can understand the real world, yet the nature of film itself, as art, technology, product, and experience, is at once pervasive and personal, and always directly situated in its context of production, no matter how experimental it might be (Nichols, 5-15). Media scholar Paul Hodkinson writes studying media allows us to study "interpretations of the world around us ... [and] resources for the forging of identities and imaginations" (1). What better way to analyze society that society's imaginings and dreams of itself, its contemporary cultural mythology? In summary, a close reading of the cinematic elements in a context of hybridity in *Big Hero 6* that goes beyond the denotative levels of meaning in the text offers

us a deeper and richer examination of the fundamental ideological frameworks in which we view race and culture.

Despite the symptomatic potential, no scholarly film analysis of *Big Hero 6* has yet been published. By establishing a critical reading as a starting point for a discussion on the film, this paper aims to address the need to critically engage with mass media representations of race and culture, especially in animation, a medium leading animation scholar Paul Wells notes has been traditionally dismissed by academia due to perceptions of it being “only children’s entertainment” and lacking ideological content (“Animation: Forms and Meanings”, 237). Besides helping reclaim animation as an academic topic of analysis, this paper also contributes to the growing body of work evaluating racial representation in contemporary Disney-Pixar animation films. More personally, as a researcher from mixed cultural backgrounds, I am fascinated to discover how notions of hybridity in this popular media text might relate to transcultural identities such as my own. Although this inquiry is limited to in-depth analysis of only one media text, understanding hybridity in *Big Hero 6* is a problematic that involves the study of complex intersections of race, identity, and technology in contemporary society; inquiry that is all the more warranted given the rapid acceleration of globalization and the ubiquity of media in our world.

2. Approach

To begin exploring these larger questions, this film analysis uses an interdisciplinary approach combining film theory with postcolonial theory to suggest that San Fransokyo and Hiro in *Big Hero 6* are examples of celebratory hybrid cinematic representations attempting to break away from Orientalist and tokenist traditions. However, this paper further examines how latent hierarchies and binary oppositions within the film’s setting and characters problematize this posited embodiment of a utopian Bhabhian Third Space. Drawing on previous scholarship of hybrid film settings, recent analyses of relevant animation films, Bhabha’s ideas about cultural hybridity, production history, critical reception, and close reading of cinematic elements informed by introductory film theory texts, this analysis establishes *Big Hero 6*’s nuanced portrayal of racial politics and its broad socio-cultural significance, theorizing that even ‘progressive’ media texts can naturalize racial hierarchies. For the reader’s benefit, a quick glossary of key critical terms for this paper’s argument is provided in Appendix A.

Since film studies is a relatively new field existing at the crossroads of several disciplines, ranging from philosophy, psychology, sociology, and so on, there is no set methodology to analyzing film; rather, film analysis is more accurately defined by Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky as a fluid and creative process with the aims of understanding “how motion pictures are constructed, how they create meanings, how they affect us, and how they are intricately embedded in the cultural and ideological frameworks we inhabit” in order to “question conventional assumptions, discover new insights into films and into the culture or time that produced them... and reveal problematic aspects of our own thinking and assumptions” (1016). Additional parameters of film analysis are broadly set by the three central assumptions of contemporary film studies outlined by Bill Nichols in his textbook, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*: “firstly, that film’s social implications are paramount even though the cinema relies on aesthetic means to convey these implications affectively; secondly, viewers respond to films in direct relation to their actual social and historical situation, and as a result, the perceived significance or greatness of a film will vary with time and place; and thirdly, different viewers and groups of viewers in the same time and place interpret any film, including great films, in different, but understandable ways” (sec. ‘To the Instructor’). These assumptions are incorporated in the dual formal-social approach popularized in film studies during the 1970s, which takes both textual and contextual factors in account when analyzing film, such as the film’s story and world events concurrent with the production. Accordingly, this research adopts the definition, assumptions, and dual formal-social approach above as the basis for its reading by examining an eclectic mix of both textual and contextual sources. The qualitative nature of film analysis, and the flexibility and engagement it allows in applying theory, was well-suited to the exploratory and emergent design of this inquiry.

Critical theory was chosen for its study of the relationship between ideologies, culture, and identity, and postcolonial theory chosen since the concept of hybridity in racial politics originates from postcolonialism. Hybridity in this paper refers to notions of the term popularized by Bhabha, who published extensively on hybridity as a ‘Third Space’ where culture lacks “primordial unity or fixity”, and thus, “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (157). In other words, hybridity is a radical re-imagining of racial politics dissolving binary oppositions such as us/them; national or ethnic groups, traditionally the ‘colonizers’ and ‘colonized’, lose their boundedness and become “mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture”, whereas

before they competed for control (Haj, 31). Furthermore, hybridity is significant to Bhabha in that “it may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the *diversity* of culture, but on the inscription and articulation of culture ... the “inter” - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between” (157). Put another way, hybridity emphasizes an international culture with nuanced communication between cultures, rather than mere co-existence. Bhabha’s theories are useful for suggesting a basis for what hybridity means and how it might manifest in the setting and characters of *Big Hero 6*.

3. Findings and Analysis

San Fransokyo as Third Space

At one point in his essay, Bhabha writes that the Third Space is characterized by cultural signs being “appropriated, translated, dehistoricized, and read anew” (156). These transformations are embodied throughout the blended Japanese-American aesthetic of *Big Hero 6*, but are most readily apparent in the mise en scène of San Fransokyo. Mise en scène, as defined by Nichols, is “the arrangement of the so-called theatrical elements before they are actually filmed; these include sets, lighting, costumes, and props”; in animation, mise en scène refers to the animation model of the setting, and how it is rendered and presented to the audience (506). The mise en scène of *Big Hero 6* places cultural signs in new contexts through the application of postmodern techniques such as bricolage and pastiche, which animation scholar Susan J. Napier characterizes as drawing inspiration from and combining a medley of cultural influences (290). San Fransokyo is infused with this eclectic spirit - for instance, Hiro’s family home, a Victorian house, features a prominent *maneki-neko*, or lucky cat figure, over its front door; outside his home, cherry blossom trees line hilly suburban streets, and Japanese lanterns swing from cable cars (see figs. 1-3). In downtown San Fransokyo, pagodas stand side-by-side the headquarters of tech industries, and wind turbines shaped like *koinobori*, or carp streamers, power stately skyscrapers bearing resemblance to the iconic Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco (see figs. 4-5). The entire city’s design echoes and blends architectural details from the Ginza and Shibuya districts to the neighborhoods of Haight-Ashbury and Presidio. Interestingly, the hybridization of Japanese and American elements, which the animators described as uniting the “tight urban environment” of Tokyo with the “idyllic quaintness” of San Francisco, seem unusually harmonious rather than staunchly juxtaposed -- it is unclear where exactly the Japanese and American influence begins and ends, as in Bhabha’s theory on the dissolution of binary oppositions (Julius, 26-28). In this sense, the setting of the film can truly be read as symbolizing and supporting the movie’s hybrid agenda through the reinterpretation of Japanese and American cultural signs.



Fig. 1. “Lucky Cat Figure on Victorian House.” Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author’s screenshot.



Fig. 2. "Cherry Blossoms on Hilly Streets." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 3. "Japanese Lanterns on Cable Cars." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 4. "Pagoda Near Krei Tech." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 5. “Koinobori Wind Turbines and Skyscrapers.” Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author’s screenshot.

Moreover, the capacity for the setting to advance the hybrid agenda is increased when considering how the backstory of San Fransokyo can be read as a re-historicization of Japanese-American culture. As a logical explanation for the near-future existence of San Fransokyo, art director Scott Watanabe speculated that “after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, Japanese immigrants rebuilt the place using techniques that allow movement and flexibility in a seismic event” (Julius, 19). Japanese culture, along with architecture, eventually occupied such an integral role that the city was re-named San Fransokyo in honor of the contributions of both cultures. If the juxtaposition of disparate cultural elements in the city’s design seems unusually harmonious in *Big Hero 6*, this may be on account of this idealistic alternate history, which reviewer Sean Miura, writing for *Nerds of Color*, observes is a far cry from the anti-Japanese sentiment encapsulated by the passing of the 1906 Naturalization Act in the same year, which mandated that only White immigrants could become naturalized citizens. Although this backstory is never mentioned in the film, the additional context of hybridity present in the film’s production evokes the utopian nature of Bhabian theory, wherein even cultures with animosity can quite literally become “mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture” (Haj, 31).

This reading is further supported by how San Fransokyo differentiates itself from dystopian fusion cities in film history, such as the oft-studied settings of well-established films *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995), which have been analyzed in contexts of hybridity by science fiction researcher Wong Kin Yuen. While Disney animators cited both films as an influence on the overall aesthetic of *Big Hero 6*, and the nighttime back-alleys of San Fransokyo do bear some similarity to the seedier locations of both films, the portrayal of San Fransokyo distinguishes itself by avoiding the domination of a chaotic, neo-noir density of urban signage and establishments, or a fragmented cyberpunk tone; thus, steering clear of dystopian subtexts such as “decadence, anarchy, and fantasy on one hand, and a mistrusted high-tech hyper-reality on the other” (Yuen, 1). Instead, *Big Hero 6* achieves a sense of distinct, utopian realness through a more celebratory approach to mise en scène (see figs. 6-7). Whereas Halper and Muzzio, writing in *Journal of American Culture*, see the degenerate Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* as regressing into a “third world country” that “does not celebrate multiculturalism”; they would most likely consider San Fransokyo the opposite - a clearly developed, thriving multicultural metropolis, if the stunning proliferation of skyscrapers, a state-of-the-art technology sector, and the gentrified neighborhoods Hiro and his multiracial group of friends live in are any indication (387).



Fig. 6. "Street in *Blade Runner*." *Stillsfromfilms.wordpress.com*. Warner Bros. Studio, 1982. Screenshot. 3 August 2013.



Fig. 7. "Street in *Big Hero 6*." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

Additionally, *Big Hero 6* enhances the utopian qualities of San Fransokyo as Third Space through the employment of advanced animation technologies and innovative cinematography falling under the category of hyper-realism. This animation style, characteristic of Disney-Pixar, is defined by Catmull as "a stylized realism ... with a lifelike feel without being photorealistic" and by Pallant as "a self-regulated mediation of the 'real'" (Pallant, 133). This is significant since technological innovations allow for greater focus on and naturalization of stylized realities shown on-screen, including social realities. Specifically, the hyper-realism of *Big Hero 6* augments the hybridity agenda by illuminating the city's blended Japanese-American aesthetic in a flattering light, making the city seem highly realistic, yet both familiar and alien, and neither American nor Japanese. This effect is best seen in the opening aerial shots, where the use of new rendering systems - Hyperion for light, and Denizen for crowd complexity - allow for an impressive and lifelike exploration of San Fransokyo. The shots reveal a city bright with a medley of warm, sodium lights and cooler, white lights inspired by blending the atmospheric temperaments of Tokyo and San Francisco. Below street lamps, neon jumbotrons, and train stations, six thousand distinct characters drive cars and walk along the streets (see fig. 8). The overall impression is of a bustling city profiting from its embrace of modernity and hybridity, and the utopian message is enhanced by the hyper-realism of other scenes in the film, such as the unshakeable naturalism of the soft, warm light over the bay during Hiro and Baymax's first successful test flight (see fig. 9). In summary, the animation works with the aesthetic in naturalizing a beautified reading of San Fransokyo as the Third Space.



Fig. 8. “Urban Lighting.” Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author’s screenshot.



Fig. 9. “Natural Lighting.” Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author’s screenshot.

In this discussion of San Fransokyo as the Third Space, it is worth noting that any incorporation of foreign culture by a Western film risks succumbing to Orientalism, or the imposition of Western reading on that culture. However, I would argue that by merit of *Big Hero 6*'s nuanced and cognizant Western reading of Japanese culture, which is more reflexive than in Orientalist cases, the representation of San Fransokyo still stands as hybrid and progressive.¹ While *Big Hero 6* is by no means a “true” representation of American or Japanese culture, its approach to the Japanese elements in Japanese-American culture is respectful and conscientious, and refrains from using fictionalist Orientalist texts as its only points of reference. Instead, calling the film “a visual love letter to Japan”, directors Don Hall and Chris Williams looked to Japanese films, such as *Akira* (Katsuhiro Ôtomo, 1988) and the oeuvre of Hayao Miyazaki for inspiration (Julius, 14). Moreover, a certain level of authenticity was demanded in the animators’ proposed Japanese motifs informed by several research trips to Tokyo; to the point where Japanese journalists, upon seeing the movie, were impressed by how the film managed to replicate the exact stacking of empty beer and sake bottles required by Tokyo’s complex recycling system (Collin). In short, *Big Hero 6* distances itself from the Orientalizing tradition by incorporating and translating authentic details of the foreign culture in its fluid, hybrid cultural reading, as opposed to consulting other Eurocentric or Americentric sources to posit a more essentialist vision of Japanese culture.

However, for all its progressiveness, the hybrid representation of San Fransokyo remains problematized by latent hierarchies in the process of its world-construction. San Fransokyo may not be overtly Orientalist, but to some extent it is still what Bhabha would criticize as an “non-equivalent site of representation” contrary to the balance of

cultures suggested by hybridity (qtd. in Yuen, 4). Japanese and American cultural signs are clearly delineated by American geography forming the ‘base’ of the city while Japanese elements constitute the ‘decorations’. Japanese signage, lanterns, food stalls, and cars can be found everywhere in San Fransokyo, but this incorporation is superficial; San Fransokyo is fundamentally an exact geographical copy of San Francisco due to animators adapting the city’s open data program. The unquestioned use of San Francisco as the base for hybrid world-construction is problematic since it embodies an assumption of American culture as the norm for or foundation of global culture, suggesting an ethnocentrism at odds with the hybrid agenda of the film. San Fransokyo is San Francisco, but Japanified, and not as easily read as Tokyo, but Americanized; a distinction that weakens the idea that both cultures equally influence and merge with one another. Admittedly, the use of San Francisco as the base is understandable since the film was made by Disney for a primarily American audience, but it is worrisome that the contradictions of a hybrid utopia where Japanese elements constitute the ‘decorations’ alone is ultimately subsumed by the hyper-real naturalization of the film’s blended Japanese-American aesthetic, which posits a straight-forward reading of San Fransokyo as Third Space.

Besides its process of world-construction, San Fransokyo’s hybridity is undermined by its subservience to the film’s plot. Even though the directors stated that the city was almost like a character in the film, the setting has surprisingly little to do with the story. The lack of incorporation exacerbates the sense of superficiality in including Japanese elements “like the roof shapes and color choices” while more explicit explorations of hybridity or Japanese elements are excluded from the narrative (Julius, 30). For instance, the main conflict was marketed as Hiro trying to save San Fransokyo, but in the film, Hiro is more concerned about avenging his brother’s death than the preservation of his hybrid city. It is also telling that despite the propensity of Japanese signage in San Fransokyo, implying that a sizable population is fluent in Japanese (including Hiro, Tadashi, and Cass since Japanese writing is visible in their home), the narrative is never advanced by the use of Japanese language, even one as simple as the reading of a Japanese sign. Although the animators stated that they attempted to fix incorrect *kanji* characters, generating over two-hundred unique Japanese signs for the film, these attempts seem somewhat shallow in promoting hybridity, as they are largely for decorative purposes (Julius, 34). To summarize, the setting of *Big Hero 6* is posited as a hybrid utopia, but it is not yet fully the Third Space.

Hiro as Hybrid Hero

At another point in his essay, Bhabha writes that through the Third Space, “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (157). The hybrid flexibility of cultural identity is apparent in the characterization of *Big Hero 6*, which attempts to resist stereotyping and binary oppositions. This is most pronounced in Hiro, who character designer Shiyoon Kim modeled after Asian-American youth and described as “embodying the mash-up aesthetic of the world he lives in” (Julius, 80). Hiro is Disney’s first explicitly mixed-race protagonist and is portrayed by Ryan Potter, who is also of mixed-race heritage; a casting choice that the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center praised as ground-breaking, lending further support to the film’s hybrid agenda (Luis). By Hiro’s name alone, the film already implies a re-historicization of the Western notions of the hero. Hiro’s superhero origin story, bildungsroman, and role as a leader Bhabha’s writings on “a liberator who initiates the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change as a bearer of hybrid identity” (156). Hiro, as a Japanese-American, is certainly a bearer of hybrid identity, and this hybridity is compounded by his inhabitation of multiple liminal spaces. Liminality, as defined by Napier, is “a threshold state ... associated with aspects of ritual, initiation” and by Victor Turner as “being betwixt and between” (Napier 291; 295). Hiro is triply liminal - he is between cultures, stages of life (childhood and adulthood), and moralities (heroism and anti-heroism). In several scenes, he struggles with his desire for revenge and what Baymax diagnoses as “pubescent mood swings”. Hiro’s liminality strengthens his reading as a hybrid character. In terms of cultural hybridity, his nuanced characterization resists being labeled under Asian stereotypes such as the ‘nerd’, ‘kung-fu master’, or ‘sidekick’. Although media scholar Sunny Huang criticizes the film for not exploring Hiro’s Asian parentage and his experience as a mixed-race person, I argue that Hiro is still a progressive hybrid character in that he occupies the leading role of the film while displaying several types of hybridity, thus being far from a token Asian character.

Notably, the film revolves around the friendship between Hiro and another hybrid - his brother’s robot nurse invention, Baymax, who becomes Hiro’s surrogate brother and helps him find closure after Tadashi’s death. The endearing, inflatable Baymax, arguably the film’s most iconic and lucrative character, also inhabits multiple liminal spaces. Firstly, although he has no ethnicity, his design can be read as being “between” Japanese

and American culture. Baymax's face was inspired by Japanese bells at a Shinto shrine, and his 'huggable design' was inspired by innovations in soft robotics in American universities. The directors stated that Baymax's nature - which is primarily altruistic but modified for destruction when confronting the villain - draws from both Japanese perceptions of robots as helpmates and American fears of robots, suggesting technological conceptions at the cross-roads of culture (Shoji; Julius, 10). In this sense, Baymax is an embodiment of a blend of Eastern and Western popular culture. Secondly, Baymax is liminal in that he has both human and robotic qualities, appearing to act in a capacity between consciousness/agency and programming. When Tadashi first introduces Baymax to Hiro, Baymax explains that he is a robot and cannot be offended; but later on in the film, Baymax appears to express affront and distress over Hiro's re-wiring his healthcare protocol. While much more could be said on this technological hybridity, I suggest for the purposes of this reading that the centrality of Hiro and Baymax's friendship to the story reinforce the film's hybrid agenda. The joyous sequence when Hiro is reunited with Baymax at the film's closure further cements Hiro and Baymax's symbiotic relationship and serves as an allegory for the utopian benefits of embracing hybridity in all of its meanings (see fig. 10).



Fig. 10. "Utopian Hybrid Friendship." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

The film's hybrid agenda is further advanced by how Hiro, enacting his identity as a programmer, eventually foregoes seeing what film scholar Eric Herhuth observes as programming's seemingly "internal, non-negotiable structure" to view it instead as an "external set of conditions open to manipulation" (65). In Herhuth's analysis of a related Pixar robot film, *WALL-E*, he reads programming as "a social metaphor for technical, determinative, immutable structures" (65). This theme is mirrored in the beginning of *Big Hero 6*, where Hiro's tendency to program his robots with mutually exclusive personalities can be read as a binary opposition restricting the fluidity of identity. When the viewer is first introduced to Hiro, he is participating in an illegal underground robot fighting tournament, and his robot has two faces; one being an innocuous smiley-face to lull opponents into complacency, and the other a snarling frown for employing the robot's full fighting capabilities. Hiro, too, is somewhat two-faced; he acts like a guileless kid while actually being an accomplished con-man (see figs. 11-12). In upgrading Baymax with fighting capabilities, Hiro symbolically plugs his red skull-and-crossbones programming chip next to Tadashi's green, smiley-faced chip; during the film's harrowing climax, Hiro becomes so enraged that he throws out Tadashi's chip and commands Baymax to kill the villain (see figs. 13-14). The effect of this juxtaposition is to emphasize the tragic binary oppositions that constrain Hiro's growth. The narrative conflict is resolved by Baymax encouraging Hiro to think beyond absolutes - he reminds Hiro that Tadashi "will always be here" even if not physically. By the end of the film; Hiro has reconciled his productive and destructive traits. During the film's final fight, he fluidly commands Baymax to use commands from both chips, and encourages his team to adapt their scientific prowess to "look for a new angle", which becomes a catchphrase in the film. The message seems to be that nothing, from grief to culture, is fixed, and even identity can be an "external set of conditions open to manipulation"; an insinuation that fits well with notions of hybridity (Herhuth, 65).



Fig. 11. "Hiro as Guileless Kid." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.



Fig. 12. "Hiro as Con-Man." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

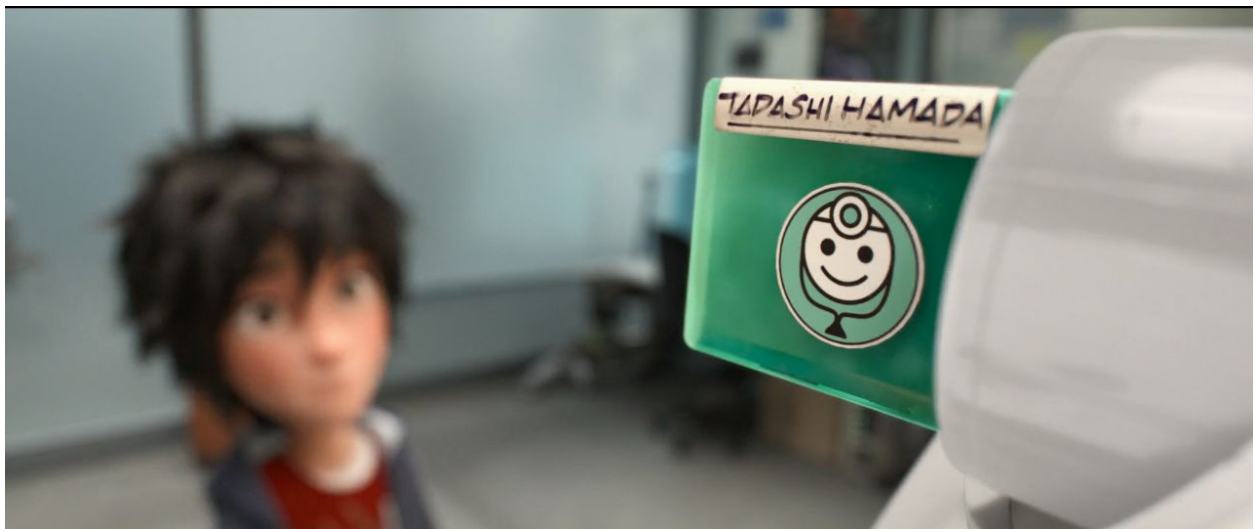


Fig. 13. "Tadashi's Chip." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

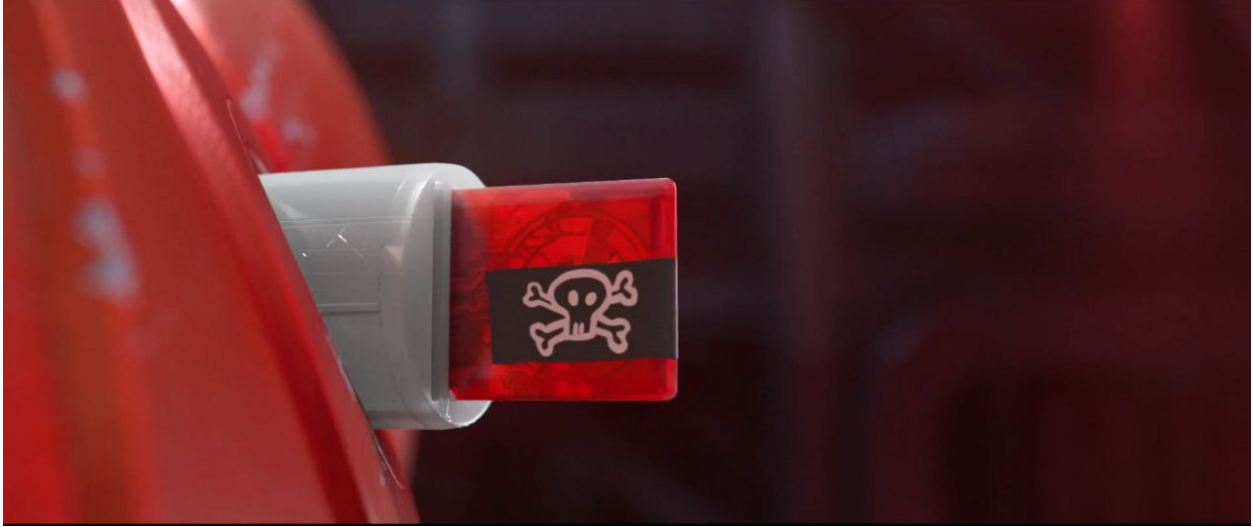


Fig. 14. "Hiro's Chip." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

However, the hybrid agenda is problematized by the secondary characters of *Big Hero 6*, who fail to embody hybridity as completely as Hiro and Baymax despite the filmmakers' attempts to create a multicultural group of heroes. Rather than exploring the complexities of culture, the other heroes are what Edward Soja would criticize as a "pluralistic jumble of equals", sacrificing a nuanced discussion for a semblance of cultural diversity presenting race in a fixed manner (qtd. in Bhabha, 156). On one hand, I agree that the secondary characters are more than token minority presence since they fully participate in the film's superhero plot, but on the other hand, I argue that the characterization appears to merely reverse stereotypes. While film and television magazine *Diegesis* applauds the film for "characters that shirk traditional stereotypes and tropes"; conversely, to reverse the stereotype is not to remove it (Russell). The characters' backstories are hardly explored: Korean-American Go Go Tamago is squarely "an adrenaline junkie" and "speed demon" and not a polite, shy student; African-American Wasabi No-Ginger is a "risk-averse neatnik" instead of a tough, brazen muscleman; Latina Honey Lemon is a sweet, clever chemist as opposed to an over-sexualized service worker; Caucasian Fred, who appears to be "the dirtiest, grungiest, slacker-est member of the team" is actually phenomenally wealthy (see fig. 15) (Julius 107; 113; 119; 124). But the reversal of these stereotypes is not as progressive as they seem since they fundamentally traffick in binary oppositions, trading in one fixed image for another and thus at the very least hinting to latent power structures undermining the film's hybrid agenda.



Fig. 15 "Big Hero 6 Team." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

Perhaps most worryingly, the film contains latent power structures legitimizing white privilege in nearly every institution shown, despite being set in a hybrid world. Figures of authority in San Fransokyo (at least, those who have authority over Hiro) are disproportionately white. For example, Caucasian characters Aunt Cass, Robert Callaghan, and Alistair Krei occupy the highest positions of power in the film: Cass is the proxy matriarch of the Hamada household, Callaghan is the renowned robotics professor who serves as the gatekeeper to admission to the university Hiro wants to attend, and Krei is a billionaire industrialist looking to develop Hiro's inventions (see fig. 16). Even the policeman and the military officials given lines in the film are white; the fact that the only Caucasian member of the superhero team, Fred, is by far the most socio-economically well-off also merits critical attention. Besides Hiro, Go Go, and Tadashi (who dies early in the film), the only other Asian authority in San Fransokyo with dialogue is Mr. Yama, an underground gang boss who appears in only one scene. To summarize, the dearth of Asian characters in legitimate positions of power further problematizes the film's position of San Fransokyo as a hybrid utopia wherein cultures are equally represented.



Fig. 16. "Callaghan and Krei Attempting to Sway Hiro's Opinion." Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014. Author's screenshot.

4. Conclusion and Future Directions

In conclusion, *Big Hero 6* paves the way for progressive racial representation through its hybrid setting and main characters, but audiences should bear in mind that Bhabha's Third Space is not so easily achieved. It is ironically fitting that Lasseter describes San Fransokyo as a modern, mythical place: the world of *Big Hero 6* is representative of the contemporary American view of the hybrid utopia, yet this place is indeed ultimately "mythical" as its very construct is flawed. It is sobering to realize that despite *Big Hero 6*'s blended Japanese-American mise en scène and the liminality of its main characters, its hybrid agenda is undermined by latent hierarchies suggested by the process of its own world construction, and binary oppositions constraining the development of its own secondary characters.

However, by merit of *Big Hero 6*'s well-meaning attempts to portray hybridity, this film analysis does imply actionable solutions for the media industry. Studios should follow *Big Hero 6*'s lead in portraying hybrid settings and characters with a firm denouncement of Orientalism and tokenism; however, they ought to go further by integrating hybrid settings into their stories, and featuring diverse, fully developed characters who are more than the reversal of stereotypes. With the sequel *Big Hero 6* TV series slated for release in 2017, Disney has the opportunity to spearhead this change themselves by re-examining their approach to San Fransokyo. By delving more deeply into the city's Japanese elements, providing more nuanced backstories for the rest of the superhero team, and introducing additional non-white characters in positions of authority, Disney can more fully realize *Big Hero 6*'s hybrid agenda.

In context of the broader field of film studies, the implications of this research is that more critical attention should be dedicated to studying the relationships between animation and the promotion of alternative ideologies. This analysis of *Big Hero 6* has shown that although innovations in storytelling technologies can appear to create novel worlds free of the dominant ideologies of our own, these technologies may also at times distract from,

subsume, and naturalize problematic social constructs, as evidenced by the hyper-realism of San Fransokyo glossing over its latent hierarchies. As digital film-making techniques become increasingly sophisticated and salient in mediascape, it would serve film scholars well to be reasonably skeptical of the progressiveness of their world-building qualities, and explore further the interplay of modern technologies and the ideologies they present on-screen.

Although hybridity in *Big Hero 6* may seem of concern to only a small group of media scholars, this research should in fact concern anyone who cares about racial representation. After all, as Hiro suggests in the film, it is only through looking at issues through new angles that we can come to understand their adaptability and capacity for betterment. Film studies, with its multidisciplinary approach to analyzing film, culture, and society, may just be one way to advocate for these changes.

Note

1. Orientalism is generally distinguished by the Western domination of culture-specific texts. For example, Disney's *Aladdin* is considered an Orientalist text by film scholars such as Leslie Felperin since the film occupies a story of culture-specific significance - *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* - with an empathetically Western worldview and yet attempts to mimic Arabian aesthetics in its presentation, thus appearing to try pass its reading as emerging from purely Arabian, and not American, influence. Felperin further characterized Orientalism in *Aladdin* through an engagement with other Eurocentric accounts, "fictionalist Orientalist texts" (139). In contrast, *Big Hero 6* inhabits an explicitly novel hybrid world that does not attempt to occupy any culture-specific text; the obscure titular Marvel comic series that the film was loosely based on lacked widespread significance to American or Japanese culture.

Appendix A

Glossary of Key Critical Terms

Binary oppositions - Either/or categories such as us/them, black/white, good/evil, based on fixed images of others (Nichols, 494)

Hybridity/Third Space - Radical re-imagining of racial politics where cultures converge, combine, and are continuously changing (Bhabha, 155-157)

Hyper-realism - A stylized realism that is life-like and yet not photorealistic; a self-regulated mediation of the 'real' (Pallant, 133)

Liminality - A threshold state defined by Victor Turner as being "betwixt and between"; associated with aspects of ritual, initiation, and even 'carnival' (Napier 291; 295)

Mise en scène - The arrangement of the so-called theatrical elements before they are actually filmed; these include sets, lighting, costumes, and props (Nichols, 506)

Orientalism - Imposing Western readings and writings onto foreign cultures; particularly Asian or Middle Eastern cultures (Felperin, 137)

Tokenism - Superficially including one or a small amount of characters from a minority or marginalised group in order to appear inclusive (Hodkinson, 298)

Appendix B

Additional References on Film Analysis and Research Design

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AP[®] RESEARCH 2016 SCORING COMMENTARY

Academic Paper

Sample: 1

Content Area: Understand and Analyze Context — Row 1 Score: 6

Content Area: Understand and Analyze Argument — Row 2 Score: 6

Content Area: Evaluate Sources and Evidence — Row 3 Score: 6

Content Area: Research Design — Row 4 Score: 7

Content Area: Establish Argument — Row 5 Score: 7

Content Area: Select and Use Evidence — Row 6 Score: 6

Content Area: Engage Audience — Row 7 Score: 3

Content Area: Apply Conventions — Row 8 Score: 6

Content Area: Apply Conventions — Row 9 Score: 3

HIGH SAMPLE RESPONSE

"The Modern Mythical Place: San Fransokyo, Hiro, and Hybridity in Disney's *Big Hero 6*"

Content Area: Understand and Analyze Context — Row 1

The response earned 6 points for this row because it clearly and elegantly communicates the topic of hybridity in the Disney film *Big Hero 6*. The response narrows the focus and purpose to the exploration of hybridity as a vehicle for examining racial hierarchies in film and offering rationales for the value of such an investigation. Further, the response explicitly connects the investigation to the scholarly community by discussing "implications for evaluating racial representations in cinema, reminding film scholars that dominant ideologies regarding race are often as naturalized and entrenched in media as they are in society, even within texts that appear on the surface to be progressive or subversive," (p. 2).

Content Area: Understand and Analyze Argument — Row 2

The response earned 6 points for this row because it examines a number of scholarly pieces of foundational literature on the topic, examining what each has contributed to the conversation and entering into the scholarly discussion rather than summarizing the pieces individually. The director's perspective on the topic, film critics' analyses of the film, and cultural experts' points of view are all considered together in the beginning of the paper as a means of setting up the rationale for the investigation (p. 2). The Findings and Analysis section (p. 4) begins with another strong example of considering sources in conversation with each other (Bhabha, Nichols, Napier) to lead to the paper's eventual understanding. It is the sophisticated weaving together of sources that examine multiple perspectives on the topic of the *Big Hero 6* film that develops the clear investigation of the area of inquiry from multiple perspectives.

Content Area: Evaluate Sources and Evidence — Row 3

The response earned 6 points for this row because it consistently uses scholarly, relevant, and credible sources that are explained as such throughout the text of the paper (e.g., references to "animation scholar Susan J. Napier," the "film's executive producer John Lasseter," "cultural expert Roland Kelts," and "film scholar Eve Benhamou"). Their significance is made clear in the paper's argument — namely, that each source (different scholars in different fields) offers insight into cultural elements of the film to offer a foundation for the eventual conclusion.

AP[®] RESEARCH 2016 SCORING COMMENTARY

Academic Paper

Content Area: Research Design — Row 4

The response earned 7 points for this row because it clearly and explicitly details the intended approach for examining the topic and for arriving at a strong, evidence-based answer to the posed question. The paper offers a strong rationale in the Approach section for the selected method of combining film theory and postcolonial theory to as a legitimate approach by referencing a number of other approaches and practices in the related scholarly fields of film study and cultural study (p. 3).

Content Area: Establish Argument — Row 5

The response earned 7 points for this row because it presents a sophisticated argument that supports its claims consistently throughout the paper. The paper provides specific evidence and analysis to arrive at a new understanding of the film *Big Hero 6* as a study of hybridity, though one that still suffers from hierarchical stereotypes within its subtext. The paper also addresses the implications of its findings within the broader discipline: "Although hybridity in *Big Hero 6* may seem of concern to only a small group of media scholars, this research should in fact concern anyone who cares about racial representation. After all, as Hiro suggests in the film, it is only through looking at issues through new angles that we can come to understand their adaptability and capacity for betterment. Film studies, with its multidisciplinary approach to analyzing film, culture, and society, may just be one way to advocate for these changes" (p. 14).

Content Area: Select and Use Evidence — Row 6

The response earned 6 points for this row because it developed its strong argument about hybridity and race in the film *Big Hero 6* through examination of the film itself, as well as through film criticism and cultural scholarship on the topics of hybridity and racial representation in film. It consistently buttresses the claims with a synthesis of the scholarship in the related fields. (See the section on Hiro as Hybrid Hero for synthesis of evidence to support the claim of the utopian benefits of hybridity, pp. 9–10.)

Content Area: Engage Audience — Row 7

The response earned 3 points for this row because its design elements, from section headings and subheadings that are appropriately labeled, to the inset film cells, not only support the communication of the paper's argument, but enhance the reader's ability to follow the message of the sophisticated argument.

Content Area: Apply Conventions — Row 8

The response earned 6 points for this row because it consistently and accurately references the works and ideas of others, and because it effectively integrates this knowledge to build an argument, rather than simply inserting quotes or paraphrasing information. See the first two paragraphs of the paper (pp. 1–2) or the subsection on San Fransokyo as Third Space (p. 4).

Content Area: Apply Conventions — Row 9

The response earned 3 points for this row because it is written in sophisticated, scholarly, and fluid prose that effectively weaves together the research literature, well-chosen evidence, and the student's own analysis and builds to a logical conclusion with precise, erudite language that enhances the message of the paper.