

Special Contribution

Negativity and Hope, or Addressing Gender and Race in Japanese Studies

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In my response to Dr. Andrea Petó's talk on the gender studies ban in Hungary, I would like to address the need to continue troubling gender and race in Anglo-American Japanese studies. An obvious contrast exists between my paper and the other responses: while they mostly concern problems of Japan and Japanese institutions, mine involves the space of Anglo-American Japanese studies, often geographically located "outside" Japan and part of the post-World War Two history of area studies in the United States—to outsiders, what might appear to be peculiar configurations of gender and race despite their continued violence in shaping the field. As a Japanese literary and cultural studies scholar educated in the United States, I bring up concerns specific to my field because powerful solidarity can begin with knowledge of what is taking place "elsewhere" or "over there."

Building on Shu-mei Shih's (2019) argument for rethinking the distance between "there" and "here" to racialize area studies, I want to suggest that we rethink the normalization of such distances with Japanese studies alongside questions of how we relate to each other as gender studies scholars. As a Taiwanese American doing queer feminist readings of Japanese texts, preparing to teach gender studies in Hong Kong, I am often working out what it means to do feminist and queer work across contexts differing dramatically in racial politics as well as in disciplinary and institutional histories. I also reflect upon how this question relates to my own ways of finding sustenance and negotiating survival under shifting circumstances, and the mutating entanglements of minority status and privilege that I embody in my gendered,

queer, and racial otherness, elite education, and other forms of mobility.

This talk is an invitation to gender studies scholars to stop in our daily routines, to shift gears, to listen to these stories from “over there” as part of today’s reflection upon feminist solidarity. As Dr. Petó’s story makes clear, survival is about institutional presence, but arguably, it is also about transforming the nature of something firmly embedded, about problems in the past that actually still require work in the present. As an interviewee of Sara Ahmed put it, “Diversity is like a big shiny red apple...it all looks wonderful, but if you actually cut into that apple there’s a rotten core in there and you know that it’s actually all rotting away and it’s not actually being addressed” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102). Following, my narrative of negativity and hope is my way of cutting into the apple.

Dr. Petó mentions the harassment of gender studies scholars by strangers on the street and anti-feminists on the Internet, suggesting cases where the oppression of feminists means the threat of physical violence. In daily life, however, there is not just “hate,” what is so obvious in Dr. Petó’s account, but also slower, banal oppression that closes off opportunities for radical research or keeps certain bodies out of the academy.

Following, I take two main points of entry into problems of gender in the context of Anglo-American Japanese studies. The first concerns the state of gender-related research, and the second relates to gender in the spaces of the academy. Noticeably, my account does not remain fixed upon “gender” as an artificially isolated factor but takes as its object intersections of gender, race, and other forms of difference. While I refer generally to Japanese studies, my narrative originates largely in my perspective, specifically as a Japanese literary and cultural studies scholar educated in the United States.

At the March 2019 Association of Asian Studies (AAS) meeting in Denver, Colorado, a panel on the “Death of Japanese Studies” drew a large crowd for a discussion on shrinking departments, the lack of tenure-track lines, reduced interest in Japanese language, competition from Chinese and Korean studies,

and so on. On the one hand, the inflated language of the panel should be seen as a gimmick feeding upon long-existing anxieties concerning the life of area studies, as well as recent ones occasioned by the rise of China.

Nevertheless, if we agree with the premise that Japanese studies is *struggling* at least, I propose that this crisis prompt not only the discussion of tactics for dealing with the corporatization of the academy, but also self-critique within Japanese studies regarding problems of gender and race acknowledged informally, but rarely in formal venues of research and writing. In short, how might we argue that Japanese studies has become antiquated due to its own problematic histories and tendencies? *What* or *whose* “death” is being acknowledged here? Meanwhile, how does such a framing block out the existence of problems that continue to drag on, or “live” on in Japanese studies?

First, it seems safe to briefly state that work on gender—if equated with research on women, women’s writing, and so on—has largely been normalized in Japanese studies. For example, also in March 2019, the UCLA/Waseda University Yanai Symposium “The Woman in the Story” brought together scholars from history, literary studies, and other humanities fields in Japanese studies, showcasing an impressive roster of senior scholars instrumental in raising the visibility of women’s issues with understandably celebratory overtones regarding these achievements.

Despite the strengths of the event, few queer and intersectional papers appeared in the program, with clear tensions arising between participants sensitive to such a lack and those less so. Diverging sharply from other perspectives, Rajyashree Pandey’s call to reflect upon assumptions of “agency” had the potential to stimulate theoretical engagement with questions surrounding female/feminist agency that spoke to issues at the heart of the event. However, participants awkwardly stepped around this critique, such as when one person offered a “trigger warning” as a joke before using the word. Meanwhile, Japanese studies arguably continues to lack awareness concerning both intersectional approaches and queer ones, if we consider “queer” in its

more radical political implications, not simply shorthand for LGBT identities. Partly due to a sense that Japan is “there,” not “here,” theoretical contributions of Anglo-American gender studies, queer studies, and ethnic studies are sometimes dismissed as too U.S.-centric and have not been easy to absorb into Japanese studies.

If we address gender and other questions of difference *outside* of scholarship, in both institutional and informal spaces making up Japanese studies, there is an equally mixed sense of how successful the field has been.

Outside of Japanese studies, considerable research in English shows evidence of problems faced by women and people of color in the academy. The sources gathered in Danica Savonick and Cathy N. Davidson’s (2017) online bibliography on “Gender Bias in Academe” include problems of bias related to the classroom, publishing, citation, funding, hiring, and retention in graduate programs and the academy at large. Troy Vettese’s “Sexism in the Academy” (2019), a recent article in *n+1*, mentions many of the same issues—in addition to those above, sexual harassment, assumptions of male “brilliance,” lack of credit for authorship, and other problems that female, non-white scholars such as myself do not consider to be news at all.

At the 2019 AAS conference, an equally packed discussion of #MeToo in Asian studies took place at the meeting of the Gender Equality in Asian Studies Group. The opening of Asian studies to conversations surrounding #MeToo—in Japanese studies, particularly through the interventions of historian Amy Stanley with her article “Writing the History of Sexual Assault in the Age of #MeToo” (2018) and public presentations based on the same piece—is highly welcome and must continue to take place.

At the same time, such activism must not rely upon self-congratulatory tones assuming an undivided front. Instead, it must open itself to conflict and criticism, including uncollegial forms of anger from other women and minorities, and recognition of what is *not* being said by voices consigned to the periphery. As a participant at the UCLA/Waseda symposium, I was moved by

reminders of the intense struggle of earlier generations of women scholars working on gender across Japanese studies, but simultaneously found myself reflecting upon how personal experiences of sexism might make it difficult to recognize one's own shifting place in gendered, racialized dynamics of power within the academy. One of the most painful, yet familiar experiences for a junior female scholar is the crystal-clear flash of recognition when once again faced with condescension in another woman's gaze or tone, or serious forms of verbal harassment and professional obstacles. Japanese studies must recognize and confront power harassment often directed by women at other women. This includes addressing romanticized notions of female/feminist solidarity that serve to *perpetuate* hierarchical violence through denial of how experiences are inflected by race, sexuality, class, and other forms of difference.

We need to recall that the founding of Japanese studies depended upon racialized, gendered forms of desire. In "Postcoloniality's Unconscious/Area Studies' Desire," Harry Harootunian points to the pattern of male (presumably often white) Japan studies scholars "driven by the desire to gain entry in order to penetrate and thus grasp the concealed secrets of native knowledge and sensibility" (2002, p. 161-162), often doing so by possessing Japanese "wives who could double as native informants" (2002, p. 162). Referring to earlier critiques by Harootunian, Masao Miyoshi, and Naoki Sakai, Shih (2019) illustrates how the continued desire to possess Asia surfaces as antipathy towards ethnic studies, particularly Asian American studies, usually populated by Asian Americans. This anxiety can be described by the question, "who is better equipped to explain Asian culture, the Asian area experts or the Asian Americanists, who actually, or merely, look Asian?" (Shih, 2019, p. 40).

It is understandably unpleasant to feel accused of being the sort of Orientalist described by Rey Chow as "[remaining] blind to their own exploitativeness as they make 'the East' *their* career" (2010, p. 41). Japanese studies scholars might assume that general knowledge of the shameful *past* of Japanese studies means that there is no reason for continued shame in the

present, even as problems live on. For example, Japanese literary studies scholars James Fujii (2014, p. 195) and Alan Tansman (2002, p. 13) have commented briefly upon the historically feminized role of Japanese language instructors, in that Japanese language instruction has largely been a task for (mostly Japanese) women as opposed to the more elite work of teaching “content” courses on Japan, a dynamic continuing in the present. I have heard white male colleagues bring up the “native informant” role of Japanese female romantic partners in Japanese studies as a joke, as if this speech act exempts them from any sticky complicity. Recently found guilty of sexual harassment, Tansman is a clear example of how passing acknowledgment of structural discrimination has little to do with genuine commitment to anti-sexist or anti-racist purposes.

Here, I was reminded of a 2017 article by Japanese literary scholar Damian Flanagan in *The Japan Times*, titled “How a love of Japan led me to stop dating its women,” in which he explains in self-satisfied tones his “love affair with Japan” that *surprisingly* does not currently involve relationships with Japanese women, referencing past experience not only with Japanese women, but also women from the Philippines, China, Korea, Thailand, and Nepal. Checking the archives of *The Japan Times*, I saw that he has gone on to write numerous articles and reviews, including a book review for the recent edited volume *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms* (2019). The extreme irony makes this case an exemplary example of how arrogance might compel a Japanese studies scholar to think that he or she is “past” these problems, and how—in the name of civility and collegiality—the field of Japanese studies, and the academy at large, comfortably enfolds privileged members known for such indiscretions.

Touching upon tensions among scholars working on women and gender, #MeToo and power harassment as the “elephant in the room,” and the continued problematics of desire in Japanese studies, I outline issues troubling my field that still wait to be seriously addressed in public, formal venues, not only with informal outlets consisting of self-deprecating humor—by those

comfortable in their roles as allies—or gossip, despite my own personal appreciation of the latter in helping with psychic and professional survival in the academy.

When I reached out to a range of both senior and junior colleagues to ask for sources related to Japanese studies, it seemed telling that several recommended work by Chow and Shih; arguably, this reflects not only the relevance of Chinese studies to Japanese studies, or the more generalized problems of Asian/area studies, but also a dearth in self-reflexive writing engaging with problems of gender and race for the field of Japanese studies. Almost two decades ago, Miyoshi and Harootunian's *Learning Places* (2002) was a major achievement in its critique of Japanese studies and area studies at large—the question is, who will continue to take up this critique and extend it in terms of critical feminist and queer perspectives for Japanese studies?

Recently, I was stunned by Gutiérrez y Muhs et al.'s *Presumed Incompetent* (2012), a forceful collection of first-person accounts from women of color working in the U.S. academy, brimming over with anger over sexism, racism, and classism. We can only imagine similar sorts of rage exploding in accounts coming from Japanese studies, in which people of color—particularly non-Japanese or non-Asian—and queer people—especially those who are not gay white men—are still few and far between. In an atmosphere of justified hopelessness over the academic job market, perhaps I should not have been surprised to learn about colleagues complaining of reverse discrimination. Indeed, there might be the attraction of interviewing (if not hiring) a job candidate who fulfills one or more check boxes for diversity: woman, person of color, feminist or queer work, or (possibly) actually queer. But this sense of victimhood ignores the continued absence of “others” in a field still white- and male-dominated, and the psychic realities of shame, pain, and isolation for tokenized minorities.

If those outside of Japanese studies remain unaware of problems such as those I have addressed, they nonetheless view the field in ways indicating the

struggle of Japanese studies to reimagine and recreate itself as a field with a critical edge that contributes to social justice in a climate of rampant racism, sexism, xenophobia, and general hate in the United States today.

As a visiting faculty member at liberal arts colleges in the United States, I encountered students swept up in a desire for knowledge and tools with which to battle social injustice. Many students, however, never looked towards Japanese studies for such support. Despite increasing scholarly work dealing with racism, class, and sexism in Japan, most American students still access Japan through respectful appreciation of a different culture “over there.” Small Japanese programs emphasize a tight-knit community built around immersive language practice and cultural activities such as making rice balls. U.S. gender studies programs, too, have little interest in hiring specialists on Japan over those working on race relations in the U.S. or the Global South.

The perception is that Japan and Japanese studies scholars are not political—instead, we remain at a remove from radical thought or politics. This is in part a misconception, but also a reality related to the racialized, gendered postwar legacy of Japanese studies, which we have not left behind in the past. Dr. Petó’s keynote was about the survival of a gender studies program; my response is about the survival of radical queer and feminist work, and scholars needed to transform the gendered and racialized status quo of Japanese studies, or how both must be better nurtured in order to create a better field. I have been told by colleagues that unseemly critique of my own field makes me similar to a religious cult member, or delusional. But my observations are part of an ongoing attempt to make visible structural dynamics of gender, race, sexuality, and other forms of difference that need to be addressed alongside the more perfunctory encouragement of work on gender in Japanese studies.

I have focused on outlining the situation in Anglo-American Japanese studies, but what happens if we return to my initial proposal that we develop feminist solidarity construing differently the distance between “here” and “there?”

First, as Chelsea Schieder also suggests, there can be no mention of solidarity in the academy before acknowledging the reality of job precarity for scholars in the United States, Japan, and elsewhere. A recent *Asahi Shimbun* article on the 2016 suicide of Buddhism scholar Nishimura Ryo comments upon the particularly dire circumstances for humanities scholars in Japan. After her failure for over a decade to carve out a place in the academy, Nishimura's sudden attempt to marry—in order to secure a more conventionally legible, plausible future—shows a particularly gendered form of desperation in the context of an academy for which it appears doubtful whether “the hiring process, particularly for female candidates, is fair and just” (Komiyama et al., 2019).

Appearing around the same time in *The Atlantic*, the story of historian Thea Hunter—who struggled for years before dying at the end of 2018 without health insurance—is one that speaks strongly to the racialized and gendered precarity of a black woman in the U.S. academy, where about three-quarters of faculty are now nontenured (Harris, 2019). Any belief in reverse discrimination should be dispelled by statistics showing that underrepresented minorities increased by 230 percent in non-tenure-track part-time positions from 1993 to 2013, but only by a mere 30 percent in full-time tenure-track positions (Harris, 2019).

On the affective experience of job precarity for someone who made it through, during my four years on the job market, I became familiar with the yearly ritual of tumultuous cycles of a very particular combination of accelerated and desperate labor, hopelessness, robotic suppression of emotions, and welling up of shame that characterizes a junior scholar awaiting her expiration date in the academy.

So, why should we even think about expanding our notions of solidarity? I would argue that minority scholars and those isolated for unruly interests—such as of the feminist or queer persuasion—already learn to become particularly skilled in locating and nurturing friendships of the sort that keep

one going through difficult times.

And for Japanese studies and area studies, the task of problematizing boundaries and assumptions of distance is particularly significant; others have suggested how the ethical stakes and radical potential of our fields depend upon such work. Shih agrees that race “over there”—in China, Japan, and so on—should receive critical attention, but also argues that “we need to bring it *over here* and set the two in active confrontation and dialogue” (2019, p. 57) (emphasis mine) to have area studies scholars in the U.S. engage in “ethical reflection on their relationship to racialized minorities in their midst” (2019, p. 57). Writing on Masao Miyoshi’s legacy of humility in mentoring graduate students in Japanese literary studies, Reginald Jackson traces Miyoshi’s “willingness to challenge the limits of his own knowledge to support student learning that outstripped the mandates of department-sanctioned expertise” (2019, p. 83). Without Miyoshi’s “disregard for disciplinary boundaries” (Jackson, 2019, p. 83), Hideki Richard Okada and others would never have found a path to survival in the academy.

I cannot predict exactly what might be made possible by stronger collaboration between gender studies scholars in Japan, Hungary, the U.S., Hong Kong, and other places. As Natsumi Ikoma and Chelsea Schieder’s efforts make clear, such collaboration is already underway; I only hope that my reflections upon solidarity, or “there” versus “here,” help promote more such efforts. In her introduction to *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed writes, “Feminism: how we pick each other up” (2017, p. 1). What a remarkable feeling when someone makes the impetuous move to overcome a seemingly formidable, or perfectly sensible distance—one that might be geographical, disciplinary, institutional, or affective—in order to pick us up. That moment of surprise—or the accumulation of moments of anger, hope, and other feelings shared in conversation—has the potential to be life-giving.

On a basic level, we need to read and translate each other’s work, as well as collaborate on events such as this one and on writing that can fuel future

generations of gender studies scholars. On the other hand, we might create more spaces specifically to share knowledge concerning the circumstances of the institutions and disciplines in which we teach and research gender studies; if we have little understanding of what is happening “over there,” it makes it harder to imagine ways to pick each other up. My critique of gender and race in Anglo-American Japanese studies needs to be rounded out by stories that I have not heard, from colleagues in the Japanese academy and elsewhere.

As suggested earlier, we need not only celebratory narratives of research on women and gender in Japanese studies or the appearance of a #MeToo movement in Asian studies, but also those reflecting conflict and violence between women. I am sure that my own impulsive language—and the gaps and errors in my narrative—warrant considerable irritation and correction at the very least. Drawing from queer approaches to negativity (Love, 2007; Halberstam, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012), however, I also want to argue for hope produced by accepting the inevitability of negativity and failure in our feminist attempts. In a description of the feminist killjoy, Ahmed remarks, “However she speaks, the one who speaks as a feminist is usually heard as causing the argument. *Another dinner ruined*” (2017, p. 62).

My queer vision of feminist solidarity is one that frequently ruins the mood at dinner and at meetings, where feminists are open to anger and conflict among themselves, and also to facing darker aspects of feminist hope involving failure, shame, dissatisfaction, brokenness, and depression. Clearly, this is not advice for pessimists, since I advocate continuing to try anyway. In an academy that has at times felt suffocating, alongside the accumulation of countless moments feeling like papercuts digging into my skin, I also remember moments of sheer joyful encounter and community felt through queer and feminist writing, and small spaces opened up for me through the imagination and persistence of individuals committed to feminist and queer forms of solidarity.

As I read his argument concerning the powerful effects of Miyoshi’s legacy

of pedagogical commitment, I could not help but recall Reggie Jackson's own role in planting such seeds in my life over the past decade or so, in the building of a friendship that started with him picking up the phone an ocean away and has involved many lessons concerning style, generosity, imagination, awkwardness, and—indeed—solidarity. Building on his points concerning Miyoshi, I can say that my optimistic readings of negativity and hope come from my own debt to Reggie and others who have helped pave the way for my life as a queer feminist, with its numerous forms of love and sustenance. It might only be with this type of unreasonable commitment that we, too, can do the indispensable work of continuing to create radical spaces of solidarity and imagination to nurture students and others around us.

In their introduction to *Presumed Incompetent*, Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. González refer to reasons why some women of color academics did not contribute to the collection, such as fear of retaliation or a sense that their experiences were “relatively benign” compared with other stories of discrimination (2012, p. 13). Also, they touch upon lack of time and energy, as well as how some women “felt too wounded spiritually and psychologically,” besides dealing with stress-related illnesses including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and cancer (Harris & González, 2012, p. 11). My reflection upon feminist solidarity needs to be qualified by my own acknowledgement that we cannot always do big acts of solidarity. We are exhausted, depressed, sick, and sometimes need a break from being “useful” in service of a frequently disheartening academy, or even the causes that—at other times—give us reasons to keep on going.

But, finally, I was struck by Dr. Petó's powerful story about the pins worn to support her university. What are other pins that we can wear? We should not forget that the simple act of wearing a pin can be one of solidarity. Sometimes it might take very little effort, while at other times it might demand real courage. I read it as a fashion statement with deeper implications, as might arguably be the case with many fashion statements. Wearing a pin does not,

for example, produce more jobs in the academy. But this act of visibility does produce small moments of hope that might carry us through to something bigger. Wearing a pin—or speaking up with an awkward truth, being vulnerable about one’s own struggle, sending a kind word out into the void. After today’s event, too, I would like to imagine other small ways that we pick each other up: in the academy, in the classroom, on the street, in places we’d never think of, working our collective energy towards a better future.

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