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DIGITAL ASIA

Reading Images, Visualizing Texts: Teaching Visual Analysis through Manga

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This paper explains several techniques I use to help students develop visual analysis skills in my Japanese Visual Culture class. The in-class exercises outlined here teach students to examine the media they love—manga—through the lens of context, both historical and visual. By challenging students to closely read images and various forms of media, this pedagogy works to help students expand their understanding of Japanese popular culture while also integrating universal design for learning into the classroom. This gives visually oriented students a chance to participate more fully through privileging the visual over the textual for part of the class. Finally, the pedagogical exercises discussed can be done with manga whether on paper or online, bridging the oft – perceived divide between digital and analog experiences in the classroom.

Keywords: Japan; visual culture; manga; universal design for learning; classroom pedagogy

In today's media- and image-saturated context, one of the critical skills that is important to include in any liberal arts curriculum is media literacy through visual analysis. Just as many of us in small liberal arts colleges have long taught textual analysis through close reading, contextual reading, and theoretical approaches, those of us teaching courses outside of art or media studies have tended to privilege textual skill development over the equally vital skill of visual analysis. This paper addresses several mechanisms I have developed for my course, Japanese Visual Culture. Most students come to this class through an interest in *anime* and manga. As a manga scholar, teaching primarily non-Japanese-studies students in an interdisciplinary context, I want my students to learn about manga and anime, but in so doing, to learn about how contemporary media evolved and how the media form itself shapes the storytelling. Focusing on these visual media my students love allows me to teach critical analysis of images, giving students a richer understanding of manga and anime as well as a broader sense of where they fit into the cultural landscape in Japan.

While K-12 education research addresses the importance of “media literacy”, students often do not apply these skills to their “reading” of Japanese popular culture. The term media literacy is typically used in applying critical thinking skills to contemporary media (television, online sources, and social media) asking questions about production effects, audience response, and the assumptions behind any form of mediated text. My students are often comfortable approaching literature (thinking about author, context, and genre) with these critical skills, but have not had much opportunity to study other media genres in a formal way. Addressing this gap is part of what I have been doing through this class. In order to deepen students' understanding of Japanese media, the course begins with historical examples of mass culture—*The Tale of Genji* and *Chūshingura*. Each of these historical units examines the role of images (scrolls, prints, manga) in enhancing the experience and understanding of the texts in their own times and places. In the second half of the class, we turn to contemporary popular culture, looking at manga, anime, and also the commercialization of cute and contemporary art (not addressed here). The goal is to give students both a basic visual vocabulary of Japanese aesthetic terms past and

present, along with practice of the skill of reading images closely and analyzing them contextually. Each unit includes images or other visual media, enabling us to think about the evolving forms of representation over the course of the class.¹

The focus of this paper is the in-class exercises I developed for teaching students how to become more critical visual readers of Japanese popular culture. My aim in this essay is twofold: 1) to demonstrate the ways that the close reading of manga can help students think more concretely about images in this particular medium, and; 2) to provide faculty who are not trained in visual studies with some concrete ideas for integrating visual analysis of manga in the classroom. Beyond discussion of what I do in class that might be useful to other faculty, there is a broader argument here that resists the distinction often made between digital media and printed works. While many of the images I use in class are accessed digitally through internet art archives and academic resources, in the manga unit students engage with images primarily through a printed text. Yet I would not argue that there are no differences between digital and analog texts, recent research, in fact, shows that digital media significantly shapes the way we read (Carr 2010, Shirky 2010). These in-class exercises serve to hone students' ability to read manga images whether they are holding a book, a smartphone, a tablet, or are at a computer. Attention to the visual dynamics in manga has the capacity to enhance the ways that students think about images and visual reception beyond the pages of manga of any format. Finally, the focus on visual media in this class takes into account the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

UDL aims to provide flexible methods for learning rather than assuming all successful students learn in the same way. These methods may include varying assignments, in-class pedagogy, and other support mechanisms (National Center on Universal Design for Learning 2017). The in-class exercises discussed here let students who think and learn visually, or who are not always as adept with written texts, shine in the classroom where they are more often quiet. Similarly, the in-class visual work discussed in this paper provides *in situ* practice at critical analysis of

¹ The appendix includes a sample syllabus including readings I have found useful.

images, thus equipping students with visual analysis skills necessary for engaging with media beyond the classroom.²

Japanese Visual Culture: An Historical Media Approach

The pedagogical challenges of teaching this course stem from the fact that it is filled primarily by students with an interest in Japanese popular culture, but who do not have any background in Japanese studies or the analysis of visual culture. Because I teach in an honors college, most of my students are fairly good at reading prose closely and critically, but they are not yet equipped to turn those same analytical lenses to images, analog or digital. When I first designed this course, I wanted to provide students with both historical and social contexts for visual culture, as well as with the visual skills to engage more critically with the “objects of their affection”. What became clear the first few times I taught the course was that it was the visual analysis and a historical sense of visual analysis that was lacking in their abilities at the end of the semester. Thus, I developed the approach of teaching the interplay between text and image through a combination of historical and contemporary examples, in order to enable students to think more deeply about the popular culture they love by emphasizing the context (historical, aesthetic, and commercial) through which media are produced and consumed. Through the in-class exercises I will describe here, I scaffold in a group setting what will be required of them in their visual analysis assignments and the exam.

Before delving into the pedagogical practices to teach manga as visual media, I will provide a brief overview of the broader course within which these practices are embedded. There are four units in this class, each focusing on a text/medium: 1) *The Tale of Genji*, 2) *Chūshingura*, 3) manga and anime, and 4) commercial cute and contemporary art.³ Each of these units includes some historical context for the period

² It should be noted that I am an anthropologist of Japan and not an art historian. This article is aimed at faculty in a broad range of Japanese studies classes who teach about manga. The field of art history has a range of visual analysis pedagogies that are outside of my area of expertise, and thus, the scope of this article.

³ The construction of this course is shaped in part by the constraints of our very small Japanese program. Because this is likely to be one of the only Japanese studies and certainly one of the only

under consideration, reading translations of the texts themselves, discussion of genre context for each (poetry/prose, theater, manga/anime, character goods), and finally, visual analysis for each text and its images. Each unit includes a discussion of the visual components or versions of the texts; and in each unit students are introduced to Japanese aesthetic categories that inform their reading of the text and images.

Beginning the semester with two quintessential pieces of Japanese literature allows me to introduce students, most of whom will not take another course on Japanese literature, to literary traditions and aesthetic techniques in Japan. In class we approach each of these historical texts as forms of popular media of their era because both *The Tale of Genji* and *Chūshingura* have richly historical visual components, reading/listening/viewing practices, and both have been reinterpreted across a variety of media throughout the ages. Many of the visual themes, artistic devices, and aesthetic concerns from the two historical units are referenced again in later units, so that the more contemporary objects (manga, anime, contemporary art) are contextualized historically, textually, and visually. By taking this historical media approach, students learn that we can ask the same kinds of questions about old and new media, high and low art, without tethering manga or anime directly to these two early forms of visual culture.

While I will spend most of my time in this article outlining two in-class manga exercises, I want to provide an example of the earlier visual work I do in this class as context for the pedagogical practices discussed later. One of the great joys of teaching this unit on *The Tale of Genji*, is students' surprise at the richness of the novel. When they sign up for a class about manga and anime, and then I tell them, "We will start with a classical novel which weaves together prose and poetry," many are visibly dismayed. However, once they start reading they are hooked—surprised by the scandalous story, its twists and turns, and the depth of analysis it facilitates. In this unit, I alternate reading the translated text with articles which provide historical context; analyze the role of nature and the seasons; explain the uses of poetry and

Japanese literature courses my students are able to take, I aim to give them a broad cultural and historical exposure.

prose in the text; and examine early images of the text. The final two class periods of this unit are spent on thinking about the visual culture of *The Tale of Genji* throughout the ensuing centuries, ending with a bilingual excerpt from Maki Miyako's manga *Asakiyumemishi* (Yamato 2001). Framing these discussions of *The Tale of Genji* as popular media of its time enables us to discuss how it was made, who it was for, how it was likely circulated, and where some of the most famous images came from, in ways that inform our reading of contemporary media later in the semester.

In this unit on *The Tale of Genji*, two of the features that I introduce explicitly are allusion and the ways that this text has multimedia aspects to it. I introduce the idea of *mitate* or allusion when discussing the ways that poems from the *Man'yōshū* and *Kokinshū* are seamlessly woven into the text and would have been readily identifiable to many of the texts' early (and later) audiences. This brings students' attention to ways that Japanese prose/texts were understood and experienced, which is quite different than they might be today. I end this unit by reading a manga version of *The Tale of Genji*, to introduce the ways that this text has been imagined throughout history and across a wide range of media.

Chūshingura then provides another rich example of a layered text, with a long history of performance and illustration, and a continued presence in Japanese popular culture.

These first two units create an understanding of *The Tale of Genji* and *Chūshingura* as early forms of mass media with multimedia practices that have lasted into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. Having thought about earlier visual cultural texts then shapes the way students approach new media like manga and anime. In particular, intertextuality comes up frequently as they hear the wooden clappers that start a theater show in the background of anime, and as they notice subtle references to poetry, or nature, or references to *Genji*, or the treasury of loyal retainers. Furthermore, because they have explored the range of ways that people interacted with, viewed, read, and experienced *The Tale of Genji* and *Chūshingura* in their own times and throughout the ensuing years, students are better able to contextualize manga and anime in a broader cultural media context. To be sure, these are not straight links, but starting with these canonical

texts and treating them like popular media of their day shapes both the kinds of questions students ask about contemporary media and the ways they seek cultural and historical connections.

Teaching Visual Literacy Skills through Manga

As a manga scholar, part of what I focus on in the manga unit is the history and production of manga. This media approach comes naturally after the kinds of conversations we have had about production and audience in the first half of the course. This section begins with an overview of the history of manga and the manga industry (see appendix). The goal here is to contextualize this form of visual culture in postwar Japan. From there we turn to discussing the genre itself—the pacing of narrative in manga, what drives the stories, the ways that serialization affects the story, and finally the dynamism of words and images. These early weeks set up the context and understanding of manga that enable students to do close reading of the manga in the following weeks. Furthermore, through this unit students come to understand what makes manga appealing as a visual experience.

After a week on manga in production and manga as a genre, we read two different manga. While the titles have varied over the years, most recently I have assigned *Lone Wolf and Cub, Volume 1: The Assassin's Road* by Koike Kazuma and Goseki Kojima (Koike 2013), and Volume 1 of *Nana* by Yazawa Ai (Yazawa 2005). My goal is to pick titles that most students have not read already, as well as ones that will connect with topics we have covered previously for some consistency of theme. I also try to represent different styles, in the case of these two manga, *gekiga* and *shōjo* manga. The term *gekiga* means “dramatic pictures” in reference to theater, indicating the serious and dramatic rather than whimsical or comical nature of these comic books. *Gekiga* manga was most prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s; stylistically, *gekiga* manga is realistic and gritty, often grappling with contemporary social issues. *Shōjo* manga on the other hand, refers to the genre of popular girls’ manga serialized in mainstream manga magazines. While *shōjo* manga also addresses broader social trends or concerns, it is light and playful, often characterized by characters with

unnaturally large eyes and big hearts. The primary focus in shōjo manga is typically on character development and human relations.

After discussing the broader context of manga production, we spend several days discussing the ways visuals work in manga using our texts as specific examples. In this section, I introduce some basic comic theory about the use of frames as well as the use of detailed background and iconic faces. Both of these techniques are common in comic books generally, but have evolved in particular ways in manga. Comic books are typically thought of as a medium filled with square frames lined up neatly with word balloons to express speech; however, manga have become known for playing around with the frames of comics. In comics, moving from frame to frame directs the narrative of the story, setting the speed and flow of the page and the story itself. In some ways, the frames act as lenses allowing the artist to zoom in and out, or pan around a particular scene. As comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud explains, the movement of the story happens across the gutter, the space between the frames (McCloud 1993).⁴ Japanese manga have become known for their creative use of frames, especially for the development of montage frames. Rather than a strict linear lineup of frames, manga frequently includes angled frames, frames that span a two-page spread, or even images that break free of their frames and move across frames. This use of images shapes the way the scene feels on the page even before the reader starts to process what is happening. Action and emotion can be emphasized or enhanced through a montage use of frames.

In Japan, this technique was first cultivated in the shōjo manga of the late sixties and early seventies. The young female artists at that time experimented with the placement of frames as well as the use of interior monologues to create more of an aesthetics of feeling than had been previously possible in the genre. These artists discovered that a montage frame format makes it easier to tack back and forth among characters' actions, dialogue, and thoughts. Montage frames can be used to slow down the action, to clarify the underlying emotions or importance of a scene,

⁴ McCloud's book is a rich and easy-to-use resource for understanding the visual grammar of comics. He also has several sections discussing some of the unique features of manga.

or to speed up a scene intensifying the action and suspense. While montage frames are harder to read at first because they force the reader to tack back and forth across the page rather than reading linearly from one frame to the next, the emotional state of the character (mixed up, contemplative, emotional, angry, etc) is elicited at first glance at a page beyond the individual images or text. Both *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Nana* make great use of this feature and are easy to identify even to a new reader.

In classes where manga is our primary text I have found that my students are enticed by the speed at which they can prepare for class, and tend to read manga more quickly and carelessly than they do other texts. They tend to read for the big picture issues—plot, character development, overarching theme, and ethical implications—without taking into account the role the images play. Thus, when we read *Lone Wolf and Cub*, I structure an entire class period around close reading of an eight-page scene. This is a technique many faculty use with literature, to help students slow down and think about use of language, patterns, and prose. I use it for images, to help students slow down and think about pacing, zoom-ins, subtle mood shifts, and framing. As students arrive, I explain what we are going to do and ask them to turn to the first page of the scene at the beginning of Chapter 11 (Koike 2013). As they turn to the page, whether in their books or on their laptops, I ask, “What do we have to pay attention to here?” The first comments are typically about plot or about what is happening. Two or three students weigh in, and they all turn the page. At this point, I remind them that we are slowing down and repeat the question; gradually students begin to notice the details. They note the way frames are arranged; where images are stopped or cut off by the frame, or cross frames; when the pacing speeds up on the page or slows down; and even minor details in the drawings that we all had missed in our first foray into the text.

We do this close reading of a scene for about 40 minutes: beginning with plot; diving into panels, frames, and image details; and then back to characters and plot with each page turn. Over the course of the eight-page sequence, students gradually discover the many layers through which manga stories are told. Things that made reading manga feel faster at first become thicker in texture by how we understand the depth of the storytelling. After this exercise, students are able to notice more

about visuals in the manga; the ways that they enhance the feel, pace, and emotion of the story. If you are not used to a long slow close read in the classroom, this exercise can be painful at first because students are unsure what to look for in the images. Even with careful prompting, they are reading for action and plot. Teaching this visual habit in the classroom starts to train students in what to watch for when reading this genre.

For faculty who may only have a few days' focus on manga, this exercise can work by using one or two representative frames. By asking students to identify how the chosen frame enhances the meaning, feeling, and understanding of the page, you can help them understand the value of close visual reading with manga. This can be done as an assignment for class preparation or as an active reading exercise at the beginning of class. However, it is most effective if you have done some close reading with students first, in class. The close reading of manga in class or for class shapes the way students read the next manga, even though it is a significantly different genre. This carries over into the way students approach anime, as well.

The second visual technique that I emphasize during our manga unit, aims to teach students to pay attention to the level of detail in backgrounds and characters, especially in faces. One of the central features of much mainstream manga in the late twentieth century, known as story manga, includes a combination of realistic detail in the background and clothing, combined with iconic faces (Prough 2011). In manga, especially shōjo manga, the faces are large and almost devoid of detail other than the eyes and mouth. Scott McCloud calls this "masking", arguing that the less detailed or more iconic the face is, the more likely it is that any reader can identify with the character. McCloud points out that masking is used more for main characters and less for villains, subtly shaping who readers identify with (McCloud 1993). Masking is a characteristic that manga has cultivated to a new level, resulting in the infamous overly large eyes of shōjo manga. In discussions about manga, this is sometimes referred to as *mukokuseki*, indicating a lack of nationality or ethnicity of the characters (Prough 2010). Moreover, in shōjo manga, this use of iconic faces is often paired with techniques that create detailed and vivid, realistic settings (even in fantasy). The combination of iconic faces for identification and realistic settings to

set the scene works to draw the reader into the story. This, too, is a feature of shōjo manga that has come to distinguish manga from other comic genres internationally.

In order to help students see this stylistic technique, I first explain the ways that this particular practice allows readers to identify with a character and thus feel like they are a part of the story world. After we have read the text and discussed the basics of the story and plot, I assign about half of my students to examine just the background detail and find a page where this is significant to the story; the other half are instructed to examine just the character's faces and bodies and find an example that significantly shapes the way the story feels, is told, or unfolds. I have assigned this both as homework and as an in-class assignment, depending on the structure of the class time. Like the close reading discussed above, this exercise habituates students to pay attention to details at multiple layers on the page. They begin noticing the *mukokuseki* or masking effects that most story manga use today. Yazawa Ai's manga works particularly well for this conversation because she uses photographs enhanced by computer to capture the background of life in Tokyo (Yazawa 2005).

This exercise, focusing in on stylistic techniques in this visual genre, immediately draws parallels and provides contrasts for students, both with the forms of visual representation we have discussed in the two earlier units, as well as with other manga or anime that students have read or seen outside of class. Drawing back to my earlier example of *The Tale of Genji*, students always make note of the stylized faces in *The Tale of Genji Scrolls*, the realistic interiors, and the effect of reading with images. While manga did not evolve directly from *The Tale of Genji Scrolls*, it is shaped by broader cultural and aesthetic traditions. Paying attention to these varied features enhances students' ability to analyze visuals in the text and, like the earlier units, draw on a multivalent experience of the text/visuals.

Each of these exercises teaches visual vocabulary as well as the habit of slowing down and doing multilayered reading of manga. When we first start the unit and I ask how the reading went, students inevitably say, "It was fun." At first, many students are delighted to read a manga for a class but view it as easy. At the same time, other students new to manga admit that it took a lot longer than they thought because they got distracted looking at all the images. This is one point where an element

of Universal Design for Learning comes into play. While this unit can privilege manga fans who have more familiarity with how to read manga, it also gives voice to students who are visual learners, those who think better with images than with prose arguments. After these in-class experiences, all students read manga more closely, acknowledging the layers of interpretation that are happening across the page. They carry this same set of skills to anime in dialogue with earlier narratives, aesthetics, and visual media we covered in class. These carefully structured in-class or for-class assignments give students practice at reading images more closely, preparing them to engage with manga and also contemporary visual media in a variety of ways.

One final note: this edition of *AsiaNetwork Journal* was framed around the idea of digital media in the classroom. Here my paper argues against the grain. While most of my students bring print copies of the manga we read to class, a few read electronic versions on their laptops, tablets, or (with much less ease in the classroom) their phones. Even though this exercise is conducted primarily with a printed page, it is not confined to a printed page. This kind of close reading happens also when students read manga online and ideally that shapes their approach to digital media—which is always visual. That is, even though most of my students have used a printed book for this in-class exercise, this is an exercise which can be done with any format of manga. Furthermore, these exercises, with their attention to layers and meaning in images, can serve as a broader training for visual literacy, translating into students' other digital media experiences.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed several in-class and for-class techniques I have developed to help students engage with the media they love—manga and anime—through the lens of context: visual, historical, aesthetic, and commercial. By challenging students with the close reading of images throughout this class, their relationship with media is no longer only literary (as in plot, context, and authors' intention) but also visual. Some of what draws students to manga in the first place is the visual aesthetic, and the exercises outlined here help them probe that very aspect of the media within context. Moreover, this visual literacy with manga teaches

close reading of images, a skill which students can transfer to other visual media in our digital age. Perhaps most importantly, the exercises outlined here serve as an in-class Universal Design for Learning element where a range of students can learn a new skill, but those who are visual learners can demonstrate an ability to engage more directly in class, as well as on visual assignments. By incorporating these in-class assignments that demonstrate forms of analysis (which are later required in written analysis), students get to try their hand at reading images before the assignment, thus, pedagogically treating visual literacy similarly to textual literacy. In the end, these relatively low-stakes in-class assignments give students practice at reading images more closely and contextually, preparing them to engage with contemporary visual media beyond print in a variety of ways.⁵

Appendix

Japanese Visual Culture Sample Syllabus

Week 1—Introductions—to the course, visual culture, and Japan.

Week 2 *The Tale of Genji*. Murasaki, Shikibu. 1990. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Edward Seidensticker. New York: Vintage Books. Shirane, Haruo. 2008. "The Tale of Genji and the Dynamics of Cultural Production." In *The Tale of Genji: Media, Gender, and Cultural Production*, edited by Haruo Shirane, 1–48. New York: Columbia University Press. Shirane, Haruo. 2012. "Visual Culture, Classical Poetry, and Linked Verse." In *Japan and the culture of the four seasons: nature, literature, and the arts*, edited by Haruo Shirane, 57–87. New York: Columbia University Press.

Week 3 *The Tale of Genji*. Murase, Miyeko. 2001. *The Tale of Genji: Legends and Paintings*. New York: George Braziller, Inc. Watanabe, Masako. 1998. "Narrative

⁵ Unfortunately, I was not able to get image permission for this essay. However, Comixology, which is partnered with Amazon, provides a 30-day free trial which will enable you to examine these two manga and consider using the site for your own classroom. It should be noted that in some cases the Comixology subscription is cheaper than buying two manga; in other cases, buying the two print books is less expensive. <https://www.comixology.com/unlimited>.

Framing in the “*Tale of Genji Scroll*”: Interior Space in the Compartmentalized Emaki.” *Artibus Asiae* 58 (1/2): 115–145.

Week 4 *The Tale of Genji*. Hirota, Akiko. 1997. “The Tale of Genji: from Heian Classic to Heisei Comic.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31 (2): 29–68. Kitamura, Yuika. 2008. “The Tale of Genji in Modern Japanese Translations and Manga.” In *The Tale of Genji: Media, Gender, and Cultural Production*, edited by Haruo Shirane. New York: Columbia University Press. Yamato Waki. 2001. *The Tale of Genji: Flowers Part 1*. Translated by Stuart Atkin and Yoko Toyozaki. *Kodansha Bilingual Comics*. Tokyo: Kodansha International. manga.

Week 5 *Chūshingura*. Ikegami, Eiko. 1995. “Honor or Order: The State and Samurai Self-Determinism.” In *The Taming of the Samurai*, 197–222. Cambridge, MA: Harvard. McClain, James. 2002. “The Tokugawa Polity.” In *Japan: A Modern History*, 5–47. New York: WW Norton.

Week 6 *Chūshingura*. Chikamatsu. 1997. *Chūshingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play*. Edited by Donald Keene. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Ikegami, Eiko. 1995. “The Vendetta of the Forty-seven Samurai.” In *The Taming of the Samurai*, 223–240. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Week 7 *Chūshingura*. Chikamatsu. 1997. *Chūshingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play*. Edited by Donald Keene. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Week 8 Introducing manga. Bouissou, Jean-Marie. 2010. “Manga: A Historical Overview.” In *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods, 17–33. London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd. Prough, Jennifer. 2011. *Straight from the heart: Gender, intimacy and the cultural production of shōjo manga*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. Prough, Jennifer. 2018. “Sampling Girls' Culture: An Analysis of Shōjo Manga Magazines.” In *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, 277–286. New York: Routledge.

Week 9 Gekiga manga. Suzuki, Shige (CJ). 2018. "Gekiga, or Japanese Alternative Comics: The Mediascape of Japanese Counterculture." In *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, edited by Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, 263–276. New York: Routledge.

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Week 10 Shōjo manga. Prough, Jennifer. 2010. "Shojo Manga at Home and Abroad." In *An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods, 93–105. London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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