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ARTICLE

The Future Is Also a Different Country and We Should Do Things Differently There

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This essay is an attempt to think about how concerns regarding disciplinary boundaries and distinctions intersect with the most current critique of Asian studies in the wake of the multi-disciplinary call for “transnational” or “global” approaches to scholarship and pedagogy. This constitutes no manifesto—simply an encouragement of what I call “globally sensitive Asian Studies.”

Keywords: Area studies; Japanese studies; Asia knowledge; discipline; teaching; visual culture

This essay is an attempt to think through concerns about disciplinary boundaries and distinctions and how those intersect with the most current critique of Asian studies in the wake of the multi-disciplinary call for “transnational” or “global” approaches to scholarship and pedagogy. It constitutes no manifesto—just an encouragement of what I call “globally sensitive Asian studies.” Borrowing the spirit from Martha Nussbaum’s notion of “globally sensitive patriotism” (Nussbaum 2008), the “globally sensitive Asian studies” I propose would not rest on apolitical connoisseurship, nor would such an education be pursued in the interest of “the American (or some other) people.” Instead, it would embrace collaboration and interdependence, welcome vulnerability and discomfort, and honor incomplete identities. Our core goal would be training culturally and linguistically knowledgeable “students of the world” who would readily recognize the increasingly dynamic relationships among the local, the regional, and the global—recognition that would enable us to overcome the boundaries of nation states as key parameters of scholarship, return the individual to her rightful place at the center of our stories, and take seriously institutions and the public sphere.

Globally sensitive Asian studies rest on two premises that generally guide my teaching. Premise #1 is really Theodor W. Adorno’s: “The value of thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar” (Adorno [1951] 2006: 80). Premise #2 is, at least in spirit, Michel Foucault’s: A core goal in life and in university-level teaching is becoming someone else, someone you were not in the beginning. Accordingly, I pursue three things with my teaching. First, I strive to create a class culture that balances nurture and discomfort; second, I design courses that de-familiarize my students with the world in which they live; and third, I help students to develop the analytical tools information, the questions to challenge their views, and the intellectual instruments to help them think through the social and political implications of their attitudes and opinions.

My own area of scholarship is in Japanese studies. As an instructor of undergraduates, from 10 to 300 at a time, I teach transnationally, comparatively, historically, sociologically, and anthropologically. I combine humanistic and

social-science approaches and borrow from feminist studies, visual culture studies, and sometimes literature. How I experience and practice the teaching of undergraduates regarding modern and contemporary Japanese culture will, for the most part, tame my remarks in the following pages. The current cohort of undergraduates is ethnically and socioeconomically the most diverse in my twenty years of teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara. And though many students grew up consuming vast amounts of Japanese popular culture in the US or elsewhere, and though quite a few are also fans of K-pop, for the majority of my students my course is the first they have taken on things Japanese. I will share some of my strategies for mobilizing interdisciplinary perspectives, employing a range of methodologies and sources, and integrating knowledge on Japan while addressing life-and-death questions transnationally and comparatively.

But first, let us consider how we got here. The question of what Asia expertise and teaching about Asia ought to be is an essential one; its shape and status impact the future world we are creating, particularly within but also beyond academia. In addition, there are several local, transnational, and global “worlds of relevance” (Limoges 1993) at play that connect in a variety of ways. Coined in the context of public debates about science, the notion of more than one “world of relevance” suggests two things: First, that our collective attempt to better integrate Asia knowledge into undergraduate teaching might take on different shapes in different political, religious, and/or cultural arenas; and, second, that what is at stake evolves over time as “worlds of relevance” converge or diverge (Limoges 1993: 420). We ought to keep in mind the idea of areas critical of “meta-geography,” namely, that “areas” need to be thought about as the result of processes, including research processes, rather than as objective clusters of cartographic, cultural or material facts (Guneratne, Appadurai, Bhabha, and Collins 1997). These processes are increasingly impacted by both the demographic shifts in Asia (Reid 2013, Mandler 2015, Szanton 2002) and the almost complete lack of attention to Africa (Auerbach 2017). While I cannot critically address these issues here, I hope that my observations and strategies will open up ways to critically address them.

Connectivities and Learning Crowds

Without rehashing the history of the origin of area studies, I do wish to recall some of its key moments beginning with a consideration of various terminologies.¹ The French word “*cosmopolite*” represents a “free citizen without a permanent home and [without] ties of citizenship to a particular fatherland.” The German term “*Weltbürger*” signifies a “person with a worldly disposition,” at once a “citizen of the whole world” and a “fellow-citizen of the whole” or, in Goethe’s terms, one who is “at home everywhere” (Ette 2001: 170). In the spirit of the Enlightenment, “cosmopolitan conceptions” were presented in opposition to “feudalistic provincialism.” In subsequent decades, cosmopolitanism was resignified several times before it lost its progressive legitimacy and instead appeared reactionary, especially in contrast to the more recently coined concept of “internationalism.” Thereafter, from a socialist point of view, cosmopolitanism served as the underbelly of bourgeois nationalism and chauvinism, and was blamed for national betrayal and as the foundation and legitimization of the international unification of capital (Ette 2001: 171).

In the United States, the concept of the cosmopolite resurfaced after World War II in a dramatically different light. In 1951, Earl James McGrath proposed that educators’ roles in turning Americans into “world citizens” lay in the twofold goal of educating “our own citizens concerning the changed position of the United States in world affairs” and “attempt[ing] to educate the citizens of other nations concerning the purposes and objectives of the United States” (McGrath 1951: 237). He considered the “vigorous ... development of area studies” to be crucial to achieving this twofold goal, and advocated that “every student be required to study the life of at least one other nation or area.” Area studies— one enduring framing for Asian studies—would acquaint students with another way of life, preparing them for a “tolerant and constructive understanding” of different perspectives. Area studies would contribute to the “cultivation of international harmony” through an understanding of difference

¹ This is an extended version of a keynote address delivered at the 27th Annual ASIANetwork Conference—*Asia in Undergraduate Education: Integration, Enhancement, and Engagement*, University of San Diego, April 12–14, 2019.

and would facilitate the appreciation and respect of the individual, regardless of place, race, creed, or nationality (McGrath 1951: 237).

In the political environment of the Cold War, and upon “reexamination of international relations,” McGrath reversed his prior opinion and became a strong advocate of the study of foreign languages, albeit with two reservations: students who showed “obvious incapacity” should be exempt, and the emphasis on instruction should be on the spoken rather than written word (McGrath 1951: 240). He was aware of potential obstacles to his cosmopolitan educational vision, namely, the lack of properly qualified instructors, inadequate interdepartmental co-operation, and conflict with advocates of further professional specialization. Yet he urged, “the fact remains (that) understanding of other peoples and cultures is fundamental to enlightened citizenship in our mid-century democracy.” McGrath joined many other visionaries in considering how education could be tied to national security objectives. One in particular, Mortimer Graves of the American Council of Learned Societies, thought about area studies in terms of “the national security problem,” noting that “deeper understanding of the world is the foremost ingredient of the calm leadership which alone will avert crises” (McGrath 1951: 241).

Others saw area studies as “a neglected field of academic responsibility.” Marshall K. Powers, for instance, envisioned area studies as the basis for preventing war and achieving durable peace by “keeping our nation prepared.” Siding with Julian H. Steward, he saw the four basic objectives of area studies as providing knowledge of practical value about important world areas; giving students and scholars an awareness of cultural relativity; providing understanding of social and cultural wholes as they exist in areas; and furthering the development of a universal social science (Powers 1955: 83). Indeed, he envisioned “a valuable contribution to the concept of total peace...through the creation of soundly conceived and wisely administered area-studies programs.” He also saw interdisciplinary training as essential to the success of area studies programs, and believed instructor qualifications must include a period of residence in the region, command of its language(s), and solid training in disciplines other than area competence (Powers 1955: 87–89).

Many others have since chimed in, whether declaring progress or resurrecting old accusations. One former president of the Association of Asian Studies declared in 1980 that area studies had long “disengaged from the circumstances of their origin,” and that its practitioners were driven by the “burning interest in areas such as India, China, and Japan that...leads them to communicate with each other across the formidable barriers and jargons set up by their disciplines” (Schwartz 1980: 15). Speaking decisively and more loudly, others cite the importance of studies that further American interests, hegemony, and preparation for future conflict, rather than the prevention of such. For example, one facet of the US Human Shield Program employed hundreds of so-called “embedded anthropologists” with area expertise so as to “increase the US Army’s cultural IQ” (Shay 2009). In his report on that program, Dahr Jamail joined a majority of anthropologists in pointing to the history of anthropology as the “handmaiden of colonialism,” warning it could become “just another weapon” rather than a “tool for building bridges between people” (Jamail 2010). Of course, given the history of anthropology, this criticism feels somewhat cheap, for it overlooks the fact that the majority of anthropologists has specifically neglected the study, analysis, and critique of the very institutions that embody and drive armed conflict (Frühstück 2010).

The work some of us do has been critiqued from another corner of academia as well. While literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak has acknowledged that area studies “exhibit quality and rigor,” that “the quality of the language learning is generally excellent,” and that “the data processing is sophisticated, extensive, and intensive,” she also claims that these elusive traits are “combined with openly conservative or ‘no’ politics”—that practitioners are “tied to the politics of power and their connections to the power elite in the countries studied” (Spivak 2003: 7). Indeed, historian Harry Harootunian (2017: 4) has repeatedly declared as much about Japanese studies while, ironically, appearing unaware or being utterly disinterested in Japanese studies practiced outside of the U.S. and beyond the shadow of the Cold War. Others have mounted a formidable defense. Anthropologist Thomas Looser, for example, suggests that without area studies, “the disciplines risk becoming

increasingly generic, self-identified, and indifferent to each other" (Looser 2012: 107). Without area studies effectively serving as mediating grounds for other disciplines, "a common mediating basis for the social [might be] dissipating" (Looser 2012: 108). More importantly, our vision and knowledge of the world outside ourselves becomes ever more shaped by the world within, without area studies. Moreover, do we not forget the substantial changes to the student body? Today, I teach many more students than ever before who already embody the makings of globalized citizens of one sort or another. I am no longer surprised to speak to, let's say, a young man of Chinese ethnicity, with Italian as a native language and an Italian accent in English, and with pretty good but far from perfect Mandarin reading and writing skills.

Discipline and Disciplinarity

In conjunction with the ever-evolving issues of area studies in general and Asian studies in particular, discipline and disciplinarity have generated their own problems and debates. Scholars on the disciplines' side of the imaginary fence between area studies and the disciplines readily acknowledge that discipline as academic orderliness "has been in bad odor" (Hunt 1994: 2). Lynn Hunt, for example, a historian who has significantly pushed the boundaries of historiography insists that "[i]nterdisciplinarity cannot live without the disciplines," and that one cannot cross boundaries if one doesn't know where they are (Hunt 1994: 1). Thus, the disciplines provide potential interdisciplinarians with necessary vantage points. In addition, Hunt acknowledges that "learning a new language, learning how to translate, can open up previously unsuspected riches..." And yet, "[i]n order to learn from other disciplines' otherness and from one's efforts at translation requires that those other disciplines remain foreign" (Hunt 1994: 2). This is a strange claim coming from a specialist in the history of France, and is in contradiction to Hunt's insistence that "[a] good interdisciplinary conversation depends...not on giving up one's own [discipline], but on following the other at least part of the way in which it leads. Such a commitment, like learning a foreign language and experiencing a foreign culture, creates a different relationship to one's own discipline. One gains a certain distance from one's own discipline and a measure of imperviousness to the conventions that

define it" (Hunt 1994: 6). Hunt worries that "the creation of a true interdisciplinary space (taking the methods and sources of the other discipline seriously) makes you vulnerable to new kinds of criticism...but at the same time gives you permission to try out approaches that our own discipline may discourage" (Hunt 1994: 6).

I join Julie Thompson Klein in thinking that Hunt overstates the case against interdisciplinarity on two counts. One, when we speak of a discipline we speak of a body of knowledge and a set of practices by which that knowledge is acquired, confirmed, implemented, preserved, and reproduced. To invoke the authority (or continuity and stability) of a discipline is to suggest a regulative idea of a disciplinary unity that is false. Two, to invoke the authority of a discipline would also minimize or deny differences that exist across the plurality of specialties grouped loosely under a single disciplinary label; would undervalue the connections across specialties of separate disciplines; and would discount the frequency and impact of cross-disciplinary influences (Klein 1993: 190).

Besides, in research in the humanities and social sciences these boundaries have already long given way to a wealth of interdisciplinary conversations and flows of knowledge. The humanities and the social sciences are not mono-paradigmatic but multi-paradigmatic: they "allow many theoretical flowers to bloom simultaneously" (Schäfer 2010: 5). In short, we need to recognize that the bounds of disciplines have been more flexible and vulnerable than some have stated they are; we need to continue to probe which "intellectual work is real and good (as opposed to [that which is] merely 'tactical' or 'pragmatic' within the micro-arbitrating cosmology of *Homo academicus*)" (Community of Inquiry 2018: xii). And, again, our students already bring at least snippets of essentially decentered area studies and/or interdisciplinary sensibilities into the classroom. Some know, let's say, East Asian history through the lens of Korean nationalism, for instance; others, being global studies majors, are equipped with a strong sense of justice and intend to save the world without being able to speak its many languages (other than English).

More pragmatically, comparative literature specialists Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih noted that "disciplinary boundaries...would keep us on very different

professional tracks, and thus not lead us to meet with each other” (Shih and Lionnet 2005: 1). Instead, crossing boundaries opens up the many benefits of collaboration. Collaborating requires constant translation from one language into another, one methodology into another, one intellectual style into another. It makes visible the edges of our comfort zones, our vulnerabilities, and our biases. This distance, discomfort, and vulnerability is instructive, productive, and useful precisely because it forces us and our students to look at the world from different angles, [to] recognize networks and connectivities (Cooppan 2013). As actor Willem Dafoe put it, “[Y]ou do your best things when you’re a little off-balance, a little scared” (Rose 2012).

There is something else we need to be aware of, as Shih and Lionnet state: the “logic of globalization is centripetal and centrifugal at the same time and assumes a universal core or norm, which spreads out across the world while pulling into its vortex other forms of culture to be tested by its norm. It produces a hierarchy of subjects between the so-called universal and particular with all the attendant problems of Eurocentric universalism. The transnational, on the contrary, can be a space of exchange and hybridization, and where cultures can be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center. While being part and parcel of the process of globalization, the transnational can be less scripted and more scattered. The transnational, therefore, is not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities” (Shih and Lionnet 2005: 6). Many of my students are inherently transnational and only need help in the classroom (and possibly beyond) with recognizing and fearlessly articulating how their specific vantage points enrich our understanding of the world.

Incomplete Identities

Just as every frame reveals and obscures a different portion of a picture, every discipline illuminates and shadows a different angle of the world. If we are to effectively integrate Asian studies into undergraduate education, we need to fully experience what Leon Wieseltier calls “the opposite of homesickness,” to develop a

tolerance for the vulnerability that comes with stepping outside our disciplines. Only then can we “concentrate [ourselves] without references, to vibrate in a featureless environment, entirely out of [our] own powers, with an energy that owes nothing to the energy of origins” (Wieseltier 1996: 26). “The opposite of homesickness” is more than sickness of home. It is a mindset wherein questions can be raised that disciplinary boundaries and practices make invisible. It is where challenging the disciplinary order of the world we live in prompts us to shake up the bag of questions we allow ourselves to ask.

When writing about identity here I mean disciplinary identity, keeping in mind that “[t]he vigorous expression of identity in the face of oppression is...an exercise of heroism.... [I]t is impertinent to address the criticism of identity to those whose existence is threatened” (Wieseltier 1996: 14). In what Leon Wieseltier refers to as “good times,” by contrast, the habitual clinging to boundaries easily degenerates into laziness, into habit devoid of intellectual rigor. For example, I have never understood why people ask whether I am an historian, an anthropologist, or a sociologist. What could the answer possibly reveal they don’t see in my scholarship? In such questions I hear only “Who are you like?” I see disciplinary identity as “an insulation; a doctrine of aversion; an exaltation of impassability” (Wieseltier 1996: 6). To my mind, if the interrogator belongs to a different discipline, she has decided she doesn’t need to occupy herself with the questions I raise or the problems I address. Appropriating Wieseltier’s aphorisms on identity just slightly, the lure of disciplinary identity is “the lure of wholeness. It proposes to bind up the parts and the pieces of a life and transform them into a unity, into a life that adds up. It promises coherence, consistency, sameness, and loyalty.”

But is there really nothing worse than a life that does not add up? Perhaps Erik Erikson was right to remark that “an increasing sense of identity... is experienced as a sense of psychosocial well-being,” but “the thirst for wholeness is [also] indistinguishable from the thirst for death” (Wieseltier 1996: 32).

Though it will remain difficult to achieve globally sensitive Asian studies, we must remember what is at stake: a vastly distorted view of the world, an impoverished archive of human experience, and far fewer approaches with which to address the

formidable problems of the twenty-first century. A number of Japanese studies experts have examined the place of “Japan knowledge” (to adopt the name of a database) in the humanities and social sciences: in literature (Tansman 2002, Treat 2018), anthropology (Robertson 1998), history (Gordon 1998, Harootunian 2017), or religious studies (Hardacre 1998). Various, they have critiqued its political embeddedness, noting its lack of impact, and its marginality within academia. These experts have contemplated Japanese studies’ relationships to a range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. They have also ascribed this reality to various causes: a lack of interest on the part of Japanese scholars to converse across national and linguistic boundaries; the difficulty of the Japanese language, especially in that it hinders disciplinary experts from engaging with, producing, and incorporating Japan data into their studies; and the fact that area studies specialists embrace a Japanese exceptionalism that undercuts transnational and comparative projects. A range of reasons more specific to individual disciplines just adds to the list. I recount three examples: the history of philosophy, world history, and transnational history. The first concerns who can take part in the conversation; the second concerns whose stories get told; and the third concerns what questions can be asked. All three necessitate deep area-studies knowledge combined with the “deep craft culture” of the humanities—“its attention to the contours and effects of language and rhetoric, cultural specificity, historical change, logical argument, complex causality, narratives of imagined worlds, subjective experience, and the aesthetic power of form” (Reid 2013: 12).

Historian of philosophy C. S. Goto-Jones, for instance, asked, “If the past is a different country, are different countries in the past?” Interestingly, he found that philosophy is one of many disciplines where Japan is “unusually under-represented,” despite the Japanese canon of philosophy being a “particularly useful example of a school of philosophy which can shed wisdom on the question of how to internationalize the history of philosophy” (Goto-Jones 2005: 30).

Julia Adeney Thomas (2017: 187) has found the same to be true for history. She writes that, “[d]espite the best efforts of world historians, the discipline of history does not encompass the world.” In fact, in the United Kingdom and the United

States, more than three-quarters of all historical research concerns Europe, the US, and Canada. For North Atlantic scholars, “East Asia” hardly figures at all. It attracts less than 9 percent of American historical research, less than 6 percent of Canadian research, and a measly 1.9 percent of UK attention” (Thomas 2017: 191). Similar “small world geopolitics” exist around the world. Yet, as compared to Goto-Jones’s findings, it is not so much the problem of “disproportionate representation” that is at issue. It is the “inadequate presentation” of places that are vital to essential current-day questions, such as the roots of environmental degradation, the persistence of gender inequality, and alternatives to modern growth economies (Thomas 2017: 204). Since “vigorous critiques of this ‘small world’ geopolitics emerging from area studies, postcolonial studies, environmental history, and world history have done little to dislodge it,” Thomas proposes to “remap history’s worlds” so as to help us better understand and critique such processes as those which have led to planetary environmental degradation (Thomas 2017: 206, 209).

Could such remapping be accomplished by transnationalizing nation-centered histories and area-centered scholarship alike? Sheldon Garon proposes just that. Transnational history, he writes, can “explain local and global developments in ways that nation-centered historians and area specialists cannot” (2017: 65). Garon recommends we “think of emulation as a multidirectional process within a global marketplace of ideas and practices,” and suggests that “scholars of Japan could make valuable contributions to global history if we started thinking more transnationally about Japan” (Garon 2017: 69–70). While there is no one way to write transnational history, prime attention to connections, comparisons, and causality ought to be its core features. At the same time, Garon notes, “we must not ‘flatten’ the differences in our cases,” we must “broaden the frame” so as to not restrict our inquiry to Japan plus one other country, and “we must consider our ‘positionality’” in order to refrain from being locally centered in Europe or the United States (Garon 2017: 90–91).

And so we might reconsider which approach would be best: Goto-Jones’s vision of the rescue mission of philosophy, Thomas’s remapping of history’s world, or Garon’s transnationalizing of Japan’s history. But note that none of these strategies can do without the “accumulated regional knowledge, cultural *Fingerspitzengefühl*, and

linguistic competence of area studies”—in short, “the flesh and bone of our brave new world” (Schäfer 2010: 2). All three scholars have nation-centered and area-studies expertise—though the difference one makes out among the national, regional/area, and the transnational lies as much in the questions one asks as in different skill sets.

Transnationalizing any area-studies field, then, will require all the area-studies expertise we have to offer. It also requires the will to collaborate, to learn additional languages, to embrace vulnerability (interdependence and interdisciplinarity), and to acknowledge that identity may remain forever incomplete.

The Popular Culture of Life and Death

The pasts of the disciplines and disciplinarity and of Asian studies may well seem to us a different country. How do we make the future less foreign? My own offerings to that end combine a transnational and comparative perspective, an interdisciplinary frame, and the employment of popular culture. I will briefly describe my experiences teaching my course “Representations of Sexuality in Modern Japan,” which addresses culturally and historically bound values; identitarian politics; life-and-death questions; and practices laden with legal and ethical norms. Most generally, the course traces the history of various sex/gender/sexuality themes from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. This includes the role of sexuality in nation-, state-, and empire-building; sexual slavery and other instances of sexual violence; the politics of prostitution; gender ambivalence; LGBTQI history, activism, and identities; traditional, new, and international women; family planning from infanticide to adoption; and representations of sexuality in visual culture and literature. Needless to say, the course offers plenty of life-and-death issues to examine through these prisms. Note that many of my students already consume a great deal of Japanese popular culture—manga, anime, and video games. Given that fact, I have found it most effective to start at the opposite end of the spectrum, where there might be the greatest potential friction arising from, shall we say, “prim” sensibilities, and from there work toward nuanced, historically and culturally informed analyses, thereby opening paths to other as-yet undiscovered realms of Japanese culture. Perhaps particularly with respect to sexuality, popular cultural lenses also serve as tools in the struggle with current-day (American) sensibilities.

Take, for instance, infanticide and other methods of family planning, which had long been the object of many folk stories—and which, beginning in the late nineteenth century became the object of increasing control and criminalization by the Japanese nation state. As our students today witness yet another onslaught on reproductive rights in this country, very productive discussions are sure to emerge from sharing with them the story of a certain Suzuki Fumi. Born in 1898, she had survived a botched attempt to be killed as a baby on account of her “terrible ugliness,” phrasing that most likely speaks of a disfiguring disability (Saga 1987:203–205).² Another take on the life-and-death question is told by none other than Yanagita Kunio, founder of Folklore studies and compiler of the *Legends of Tōno*. In that collection of legends, he writes that “certain children” who were deemed “grotesque” were “hacked to pieces, put into small wine casks, and buried in the ground.”

In stark contrast, today’s educational campaigns tend to heavily employ the techniques of popular culture, ranging from colorful and cheerful elements to cute and endearing imagery (Frühstück 2007:116–147, 2017:165–209). For our in-class discussion about the historically evolving approaches to contraception, family planning, safe sex, and reproductive rights, I use examples that exemplify the amalgamation of education, popular culture, and advertising. We might analyze, for instance, current-day advertisements for condoms, for which a full-page ad in the 2 July 2002 issue of the youth magazine *Popteen* is a perfect start. A smiling, pretty young woman holds a large number of single-condom packages decorated with colorful images; the ad includes the slogans “original condoms” and “this is something very important.” Next, I might show a commercial for Okamoto Zero One condoms featuring two copulating dinosaurs ostensibly from “70 million years ago,” when “the world had no love.” After a certain amount of thrusting the female pulls away and ferociously growls at the male, who turns away in shame. Next come the slogans “Mankind has Okamoto,” followed by “Let’s wear ‘love.’” Thus, love and condoms are equated with conscientious copulation. I might then contrast these

² I am grateful to Ann Wehmeyer of the University of Florida for pointing me to the folk stories mentioned in this essay.

ads for contraceptives with a U.S. abstinence-campaign poster from the George W. Bush era in which three ethnically ambiguous, fresh-faced teenagers in a boy-girl-boy line-up proclaim, “Because I value my virginity,” “Because I don’t want warts,” and “Because abstinence has given me a second chance.” The lines “Abstinence is my choice,” and “Because not everyone wants warts,” serve as a subtitle to the entire appeal.³ Such a trio of advertising examples sets a productively wide frame for discussing the legal, religious, cultural, and historical conditions within which these and numerous other pronouncements have emerged.

In another example of exploring modern-day issues, starting from the point of how several states within the United States have recently legalized assisted suicide, I might launch a discussion of the transnational, comparative, and interdisciplinary potential of the historical practice of a passive euthanasia that in Japan has been narrated countless times under such titles as “The Mountain Where Old People Were Abandoned.” One narration of this legend goes as follows: “Long ago when people had reached the age of sixty and were unable to do anything, they were thrown into a mountain canyon. This was known as ‘sixty canyon abandonment.’” Given that such legends appeared as early as in the eleventh-century *Konjaku Monogatari*, this tale reports a Japanese historical practice while also linking the premodern with the modern and contemporary. The tale also serves as the subject of a global excursion, since it is “scattered throughout Europe” where it has often been ascribed to King Solomon. It also appears in six variants in China, and in five in India, highlighting unacknowledged connectivities and offering rich material for comparative perspectives on dramatic reconfigurations and ruptures (Dorson 1962: 222; Seki [1956–57] 1963: 183–186).

In Japan, popular cultural representations of sex have long worked as objects of humor and play (Linhart 1999). To be sure, there is much amusement to be found in Katsushika Hokusai’s strange print (circa 1810) whose title was translated by at least

³ For a study of the abstinence campaign, see Jesseca Boyer, “New Name, Same Harm: Rebranding of Federal Abstinence-Only Programs,” *Guttmacher Policy Review* (2018) vol. 21, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2018/02/new-name-same-harm-rebranding-federal-abstinence-only-programs> (accessed May 22, 2019).



Figure 1: A still from *Shinjuku Boys* (1995), directed by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams.

one catalogue as “Mr. Prick and Ms. Cunt,” or in the egg sequence in Nagisa Ôshima’s film about Abe Sada, *In the Realm of the Senses*. Indeed—to take up one of Shimada Yoshiko’s feminist and pacifist credos—there is much of interest in “Art that makes you uncomfortable.” As for tamer examples, Kim Longinotto’s documentary *Shinjuku Boys* (1995) features a queen show whose transgendered host solicits confirmation from the audience regarding how, “despite one performer’s remarkable shoe size, she is still a beautiful woman (See **Figure 1**).”

To this, most of my students laugh as readily as does the show’s television audience. It is also quite obvious to my students that the participants in annual festivals such as the Festival of the Steel Phallus (Kanamara Matsuri) or the Naked Festival (Hadaka Matsuri) enjoy the queer reinvention of much older rituals designed to celebrate virility and fertility and (admittedly strictly) heterosexual masculinity and femininity. (These festivals were once prohibited by the nation- and empire-builders of late-nineteenth-century Japan). When I relate to my students the above range

of historical settings in Japan I'm able to shift the parameters of sexually inflected humor and reexamine the mostly male and mostly heterosexual norms of their production, from a geographically and culturally different angle. I am able to draw an arc from the significance and uses of erotic wood block prints in the nineteenth century, to Ôshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* take on Abe Sada in the late twentieth century, continuing to current-day media mocking heterosexual partner-matching game shows. More broadly, we reevaluate the role of humorous sexual rhetoric in the public sphere.

I would like to end with some of my students' responses to controversial class content. I have always liked screening at least parts of Ôshima Nagisa's 1976 work *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no koriida*) (See **Figure 2**). An artsy critique of 1970s sexual morals in Japan, the film includes many explicit sex scenes that provoked scandal and censorship in Japan and abroad.



Figure 2: A still from *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no Koriida*, 1976), directed by Nagisa Ôshima.

In the course, the film also serves as one of three different takes on the real-life story of Abe Sada together with William Johnston's *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan* (2004) and Christine L. Marran's treatment of Sada and other transgressive female figures in *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japan* (2007). This portion of the story of Abe Sada (1905–1971) is set in the 1930s. A former geisha and prostitute, she pursues an extended, intense sexual relationship with the owner of the inn where she works as a maid. After strangling him in the height of passion, she cuts off his penis and testicles and leaves the scene. Since the film ends at that moment, it does not convey how the actual Abe Sada was caught by police just days after the incident, still carrying her unusual keepsakes.

Abe became notorious; her story was widely covered by the print media of the time and has since been frequently adapted as a literary subject and studied and examined by a number of experts from various fields of medicine and law.

The film also features a fair amount of witty conversation, playful teasing, and laughter, not all of which include explicit sexuality. In previous years, in the dark of the lecture hall, students laughed at some of the playful, erotically charged scenes. They also occasionally shrieked or (rather light-heartedly, it seemed to me) articulated disapproval of certain scenes. For instance, an audible murmur often went through the room when Abe Sada exchanged sex for money with an elderly man whom she referred to as “teacher.” And some scenes prompted the occasional “eew” from the audience—though none as noisily as did the bloody end.

Screening the film in class offers me the opportunity to discuss what made modern Japanese sexuality modern; the production of scientific knowledge; erotic art versus pornography; and feminism, agency, and gendered standards of morality. But I also screen parts of the film in the hope that its 1970s radicalism may help students approach more-current mainstream popular culture and its treatment of sexual themes with fresh eyes. In our discussions we collectively question the widespread assumption that sexual mores travel on a continuous path toward liberation and freedom. I have come to think that perhaps what was shocking in the

eyes of many audiences in the 1970s differs from what occupies the undergraduates of my course today. In recent years (prior to the #MeToo movement), more than the usual handful of students start walking out less than 30 minutes into the film. I have wondered whether particular parts of the film, or maybe the fact that I screened it in class, offended their sensibilities. I speculate that one reason might lie in the fact that sex, and nudity more specifically, have become carefully sanitized in mainstream U.S. media culture. Or perhaps they are surprised that the nude scenes do not include body doubles? Or have the products of contemporary body enhancements distorted people's expectations of what a naked body looks like? (This seems likely, given the general anxiety about nudity in American mainstream culture, the obsession with bodily imperfections, and the simultaneous rise of ever-more-perfectly obese bodies.) Or were these responses just the result of staunch conservative or religious fundamentalist backgrounds?

To explore this more, I developed a paper assignment: students were to read my earlier deliberations and then write a short anonymous response to the visual materials presented in class. The following are several examples of what they wrote, grouped by topic. Specifically, on the bloody end of *In the Realm of the Senses*, one student wrote:

“Would a similar bloody scene that depicted an arm or a leg being cut off as opposed to a penis garner as much of a reaction? When I asked myself this, I came to a realization. The sensitivity of male genitalia is a concept familiar to most people of any gender. Even as a cisgender woman, I know this because the media I grew up on would often emphasize this fact, usually humorously. Thinking about it, it feels rather strange that I, who never had a penis, still wince in pain whenever I am shown that particular area of a man being harmed in some way. What's even more unsettling is how much people are unfamiliar with female genitals in comparison... I became keenly aware, more than ever, of the media's constant, usually unconscious, pandering to male audiences and their problems.”

Some students found the film and other visual materials eye-opening:

I am glad that the film was shown because it opened my mind and allowed me to take off the taboo element surrounding sex as an open discussion topic... Without the film, I would have no idea what the term "erotic art" means. The sex was a crucial part of the plot, so I see why the filmmaker included it.

The final scene did cause some discomfort because of the graphic content. I also feel that if it was animated rather than live action, I would have responded much differently to the cutting off of the penis. I think I would have found it more funny, instead of being horrified by what I was watching.

I believe the goal of opening us up to analyze and understand another culture's perspective was reached. When used appropriately, popular culture is a great way to connect concepts of sexuality in modern Japan with their tangible, real-world effects.

In the beginning, I found many of the visuals very uncomfortable. It was not the content that fazed me, but rather, the company. Something about seeing visuals such as Mr. Prick and Ms. Cunt in the presence of my fellow peers was extremely uncomfortable. Nevertheless, as the course progressed, it occurred to me that the discomfort was part of the learning process... When Professor Frühstück first showed the film, I noticed that my peers were more intrigued by the audacity of Frühstück and her ability to show such a film without approaching it like a high school teacher would a love scene in a rated movie.

Some students grapple with the class content to the very end:

Thanks to a rollercoaster of emotions and intriguing visuals, I am able to see beyond my judgments and look deeper into the many disciplines regarding Japanese modern sexuality.

Much as Michel Foucault believed that “the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning,” I walk out of this course with an open mind and memories of images both hilarious and horrific.

Concluding Remarks

It seems to me that the more universal (or natural or normative) certain topics appear to be—sex, war, death—the more essential it becomes to denaturalize both students’ individual beliefs and attitudes and that which they understand to be “Japanese culture.” Of course, accomplishing this might mean quite different things at different institutions, and could easily be complicated and enriched by a number of factors, including the political climate at a particular moment in a particular place, the composition of students’ collective knowledge and sensibilities, and the sources of information they draw from beyond formal university education. What might be hypersensitive at one institution might meet complacency in another. Regardless, collegiate discussions of life-and-death questions, whether situated in recent history or earlier, typically succeed in creating the distance necessary for students to consider the familiar with fresh eyes. I envision a globally sensitive Asian studies that embraces collaboration and interdependence, welcomes vulnerability and discomfort, and honors incomplete identities.

Note

- ¹ The history and future of area studies, even regarding various incarnations of Asian studies, has produced a substantial body of commentary: “Area studies under the Axe” 1973; Coppaan 2013; Gordon 1998; Guneratne, Appadurai, Bhabha, and Collins 1997; Hardacre 1998; Harootunian 2017; Katzenstein 2002; Krämer 2016; Looser 2012; McGrath 1951; Morris-Suzuki 2000; Powers 1955; Rausch 2017; Robertson 1998; Schäfer 2010; Schwartz 1980; Szanton 2002; Tansman 2002.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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