On Optic(s) in Sexual Contact Zones

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1. When one culture encounters another, at the moment of contact there occurs a transformation of both. Neither one can remain self-evident, thereby putting the identities of each on shaky grounds. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt coins the term 'interculturation' to refer to this evolving process of cultural mingling. By defining a 'contact zone,' as 'the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations,' Pratt attests to the importance of realising not only continuing unequal power dynamics and their exploitations, but also the changing and hybrid relations and interactions created among the different parties involved.[1] Albeit duly acknowledging the difficulty of executing such a task, Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, nonetheless, encourages us to ask the following questions:

   - What do people on the receiving end of empire do with metropolitan modes of representation?
   - How do they appropriate them?
   - How do they talk back?
   - What materials can one study to answer those questions?[2]

   These critical inquiries are essential not only to the cases of European colonialism and expansionism on which Pratt's study focuses, but to any cross-cultural encounters that involve power relations.

2. This special issue, entitled 'Post-Colonial and Contemporary Sexual Contact Zones in East Asia and the Pacific (China, Japan, Australia),' takes to the task of making these critical inquiries with reference to case studies found in East Asia and the Pacific regions. Of particular interest is how notions of gender and sexuality intersect with the discussions of cross-cultural encountering and boundary crossing. This special issue grew out of papers presented at an international workshop, 'Sexual Boundary Crossings and Sexual Contact Zones in East Asia,' in Japan.[3] The workshop brought together scholars and researchers who were attempting to analyse the productive merger of cross-cultural studies with gender and sexuality studies.

3. Discourses on binary concepts of gender and sexuality, such as female/male, feminine/masculine, woman/man and homosexuality/heterosexuality have been frequently deployed as metaphors through which concerns over cross-cultural phenomena can be explored, precisely because of their common focus on the idea of 'crossing' and 'transgressing' preconceived binaries and boundaries. Furthermore, the binary logic of gender and sexuality is appropriated for the purpose of discussing the issues of cross-cultural mingling due, in large part, to its inescapable association with power relations and politics, such as the notion of the 'weaker' sex and the 'stronger' sex. Finally, reading practices of cross-cultural phenomena through an optic of gender and sexuality lead us to be mindful of an array of other social factors intersected with the subjects under study, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, nationality, class and ableness. This is because any discussion of gender and sexuality constructions that does not take into consideration their association with these intersecting ideas would be incomplete.

4. Take, for instance, media treatment of the 3.11 Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. In one way or another, post-3.11 Japan became a spectacle for global media audiences. Scenes capturing surging waves of the tsunami swallowing towns and cities along the coast line of north-eastern Japan, as well as the collapse and destruction of nuclear power plants in Fukushima prefecture were disseminated all over the world. The events were recognised with fear and sympathy. In the aftermath there was the additional media hype regarding the risk of everything Japanese. Almost immediately there arose a discourse of *Japaneseness*—a stylised characterisation of Japan's culture, people and society.[4] When Japan was on display, the country was discussed in its entirety along with some preconceived templates which people outside Japan wished to impose.

5. Among others, the most salient of such preconceptions is the assumption that there is an emphasis on group-oriented and egalitarian ethics among the Japanese, even in times of crisis. In the months following the 3.11 incident, this line of rhetoric was disseminated around the global media circuit to praise the supposedly empirical situation of Japan, in which refugees from disaster-affected areas did not cause disorder and chaos in shelters, even during food shortages and other hardships. According to this rhetoric, such was only possible because of the collectivist attitude embedded in the Japanese people. It is perhaps not necessary to remind ourselves that this line of logic can only foster an age-old orientalist tongue that many Saidian postcolonial theorists have fought against for decades.[5] And yet, the legacy of orientalism still persists in our time.

6. Even more intriguing is the way in which the Japanese media themselves capitalised on this outside appraisal of their own country, using the discourse in an effort to stabilise a national identity which was on the verge of erosion. This lays bare the fact that sovereignty and any sense of national belonging are bound to be assured and reinforced not necessarily at the time of their ascendancy, but rather at the time of their temporary suspension.[6] The post-3.11 succession of essentialising currents on *Japaneseness*, both from within and outside Japan, helped to construct a particular optic through which Japanese people, culture and society could be viewed.

7. Slogans such as *ganbaro nippon* (hang on Japan) and *nihonjin nara dekiru* (we the Japanese can make it) have been incessantly repeated to reaffirm the solidarity of the Japanese people and their collective identity. In the face of this ongoing upsurge of nationalist sentiment, one must wonder how people whose identities are not fully congruent with this monolithic idea of *Japaneseness* define themselves. It is a matter of course that contemporary Japanese society is multicultural, despite its mythical reputation for being otherwise. How have the many ethnic minorities and foreign nationals living in Japan dealt with the critical period of post-3.11? Do we have any available optic—epistemological capability to realise—to rescue their voices and perspectives?

8. It goes without saying that such a collective identity has the potential to do more harm than good, not only to ethnic minorities and foreign residents, but also to gender and sexual minorities. Concerns for queer minorities in post-3.11 Japan have certainly not been a focus of the general public. These often overlooked, yet nonetheless important, issues were the main focus of discussion at the opening symposium of the 4th Annual Conference Meeting of the Japan Association for Queer Studies (November 2011). Entitled 'On Being Queer in Post-3.11,'[7] the symposium aimed to address critical conditions and situations facing sexual and other minorities in post-3.11 Japan. One of the issues raised at the symposium is particularly relevant here: the needs and experiences of sexual minorities who were living in shelters as a result of the mass evacuations.

9. One panelist, who works for an organisation which promotes human rights for sexual minorities, shared with the audience her experience of assisting transgender people who were staying at shelters after the earthquake. According to her story, some transgender individuals expressed great concern over not being able to use a mirror on a regular basis. For many transgender people, whether or not they are able to pass

as a person of the gender that they identify themselves with is a matter of great importance. Using a mirror to check their appearance is one way not only to assure their identity, but also to make sense of their existence. At the evacuation shelters, many goods were in short supply, and no doubt the essentials such as food, water, electricity and warm clothes needed to be prioritised. And yet, perhaps for some transgender persons, a mirror with which they could scrutinise themselves was just as essential, just as much of a life line. Not being able to wear makeup or to shave, not having access to wigs and hormone pills, and being entirely without privacy in the shared bathrooms of the shelters had the propensity to stir up their fear of being 'outed' and consequently rejected by the people around them.

10. The optic through which the Japanese people are seen as a monolithic collective, which was diffused throughout both the international and national media circuits during the post-3.11 period, does little to shed light on the subjectivity represented by the stories of transgender people. In fact, in order for such an optic to be promulgated at all, such stories must be ignored. A heteronormative definition of *Japaneseness* is possible only by sacrificing the many other subjectivities that deviate from that definition, and thus there is a critical need for us to pay attention to these diverse and varying viewpoints and subjectivities in order to make sense of each actor's desire in the context of sexual cross-culturation.

11. Through a variety of methods and analytical perspectives, each paper included in this special issue offers critical insight into the meaning-making processes of the subjectivities of those actors who are involved in the sexual cross-cultural phenomena found in East Asia and the Pacific regions. In their co-authored paper, James Farrer and Andrew David Field present a trans-historic analysis of Shanghai's nightscape as a site of interracial sexual encounters. In comparison to the Republican era (1911–1949), they demonstrate that contemporary Shanghai offers what they call a 'transzone' in which interracial sexual encounters less couched in colonial and hierarchical terms take place. Looking back nearly a century, Field's paper provides detailed descriptions of the world of social dance halls and cabarets that prospered in Shanghai during the early 1900s. Through the use of foreigners' as well as locals' viewpoints, he examines diverse ways of articulating the sexual interracial encounters that took place both inside and outside such dance halls and cabarets.

12. When we attempt to analyse social phenomena that involve cross-culturation, it is near impossible to neatly separate who would belong to one side or the other. Masakazu Tanaka's discussion paper proposes the critical use of the notion of an 'intermediary' to tackle this predicament, and employs the term as a framework to elucidate in-between positionalities. Using the discourses surrounding Japanese female prostitutes who catered to U.S. military servicemen during the U.S. occupation of Japan, Tanaka suggests how the avatar of female prostitutes functioned as a discursive mediator through which the different actors affected by the U.S. occupation expressed their concerns and anxieties toward it. As Tanaka demonstrates, more often than not the impressions and perceptions projected upon those prostitutes were negative. However, those concerns and anxieties were expressed in order to negotiate the contour and identity of *Japaneseness*.

13. The interrogation of monolithic national identities, such as *Japaneseness*, does not take place only within one nation state. The ever-dynamic mobility of people across different nation states is evident in the increasing numbers of voluntary migrations and international marriages of our time. When people are on the move, the identifiable definitions attached to them are equally in motion, and thereby subject to modification. Both Kumiko Kawashima's and Mayuko Itoh's papers take on the task of surveying different ways in which people who relocate themselves in different cultures make sense of their identities and subjectivities through a perspective of gender, ethnicity and nationality. Both papers deal with the subject of Japanese migrants, either temporary or permanent, found in metropolitan cities of Australia, such as Sydney and Melbourne. Kawashima's paper focuses on both female and male temporary Japanese migrants, including working-holiday makers, temporary labourers, and students. She examines how the concept of gender is realised when those migrants articulate their own subjectivities in relation to both Japanese as well as Australian norms in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality and economic status.

Meanwhile, Itoh's paper focuses on a series of interviews she conducted with Japanese migrant women in international marriages, asking how those women exercised their agency in negotiating often asymmetrical power relations with their non-Japanese spouses. Using the hegemony of the English language as an analytical point of departure, Itoh sheds light on the ways in which Japanese migrant women in international marriages address their concerns and desires, sometimes under suppressive and non-egalitarian conditions and circumstances.

14. Finally, S.P.F. Dale's paper describes the emergence of *X-jenda* (X-gender), a term that only appeared within the past fifteen years or so in Japan, and that refers to an alternative identifiable category that is either both female and male or neither female nor male. The paper provides an introductory reading on the subject of *X-jenda*, and illustrates how the creation of a new (non-)gender identity has been developed in Japan in relation to both pre-existing indigenous and imported constructions of gender and sexuality, such as those of transgender, transsexual and gender identity disorder.

15. All in all, the papers included in this special issue collaboratively illuminate a variety of subjectivities in motion—modes of being-in-the-making—found in East Asia and the Pacific regions in both historical and contemporary contexts. Although each paper presents a distinctive case study, what binds them together is the overarching belief that the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ableness and nationality is the fundamental optic required for understanding any form of interculturation.

16. Of course, this special issue has its own shortcomings. Papers selected for inclusion only present studies pertinent to Japan, China and Australia: three nations with relatively large economic and cultural capital in East Asia and the Pacific regions. Moreover, all the case studies employ, in varying degree, a 'West versus non-West' binary as an analytical point of departure, in that, in the context of cross-culturation, the dynamics of inter- or intra-Asia and Pacific interactions are relatively undermined. Having noted that, we simply wish this special issue, despite being nowhere near complete, can recommend an understanding of cross-culturation in gender and sexuality terms, and that such an optic merits further investigations and analyses in the field of Asian and Pacific Studies.

Endnotes

[1] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, [1992] 2008, p. 8.

[2] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, pp. 7–8.

[3] 'Sexual boundary crossings and sexual contact zones in East Asia,' workshop, Institute of Comparative Cultures, Sophia University, Japan, 2 October 2010.

[4] There is rich literature on what is termed *nihonjinron*, meaning a theory of the Japanese, which is an epistemology of distinctive characteristics of Japanese people, culture, and society. For a comprehensive discussion of *nihonjinron*, see Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of* Nihonjinron, Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001.

[5] For Edward Said's renowned and now classic critique of western caricaturisation of the Orient, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

[6] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso, 2004, p. 60.

[7] 'On Being Queer in Post-3.11,' 4th Annual Conference Meeting of the Japan Association for Queer Studies, Tokyo: Chuo University, November 2011.

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