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List of Contributors

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FRIEDERICH Lee

Lee Friederich received her Ph.D. in Japanese Language and Literature and Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis. Earning an M.A. in Literatures in English, as well as an MFA in Creative Writing and graduate certificates in English and a Second Language and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, Friederich has taught an array of courses in Japanese and English-based literatures, creative writing, and ESL in her twenty years of teaching in Japan and the U.S. In addition to directing Wisconsin Reads *The Round House: An NEA Big Read on Ojibwe* writer Louise Erdrich's novel in 2018, she is currently directing a film about the challenging impact of the travel ban on Somali immigrants in Barron, Wisconsin. Friederich is currently as Associate Professor at Akita International University.

SHORB Patrick

Patrick Shorb is a Professor in the Faculty of International Communications at Kansai University of International Studies and Director of Institutional Research. His academic field of specialty is the history of education, particularly the transnational history of pedagogical practice centering around Japan. His current research focuses on contextualizing the grass-roots practitioner movement of *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata* (Daily Life Writing) in a larger global context. He served as the Director of the Active Learning and Assessment Center between the years of 2014-2019, where he was also involved in coordinating the Faculty Development program and supporting international benchmarking efforts in curriculum reform and theme-based housing.

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Inhabiting Survival: Reading Asian American Women Writers

Lee Friederich
Akita International University

Abstract

“Inhabiting Survival: Reading Asian American Women Writers” explores three works by Asian American women writers—*The Ocean in the Closet* by Japanese American writer Yuko Taniguchi, *Comfort Woman* by Korean American writer Nora Okja Keller and *The Song Poet* by Hmong American writer Kao Kalia Yang. Analyzing how each writer makes use of two narrators, the paper describes the teaching of these works within the Liberal Arts curriculum, particularly within the high impact practice of Global Learning. Making use of the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ “Global Learning VALUE Rubric,” with the strong emphasis it places on identity “within a global context,” the essay shows the ways in which identity formation is mutually-constitutive among characters as well as students in a multicultural classroom.

Introduction

I will never forget walking into my first class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to teach “Inhabiting Survival: Reading Asian American Writers,” a course I had developed in a very different context the year before at one of Wisconsin’s thirteen two-year colleges. A new postdoc, I was given free-reign to teach a course of my design in Madison’s First-Year Interest Group Seminar. Populated primarily by students who chose to participate in my “interest group” seminar featuring writing by Japanese, Korean and Hmong American writers Yuko Taniguchi, Nora Okja Keller, and Kao Kalia Yang, my FIG Seminar would become the core course for a learning community of approximately 15 students who would

also enroll together in a Japanese or Korean language course, as well as an introductory course in Asian American Studies. Now in my tenth year of teaching “Inhabiting Survival,” this course continues to teach me the difference setting can make when it comes to the ways in which students engage in Asian American literary studies.

While my class at UW-Barron County in rural Rice Lake was comprised primarily of white, first generation, returning female students who were encountering for the first time the harsh realities of Asian American women’s twentieth century experience that this course focuses on, two-thirds of my students in the FIG Seminar at UW-Madison were the children of Hmong immigrants forced to flee their homes in Laos after the Vietnam War. If I have learned anything about my own experience through the teaching of “Inhabiting Survival,” it is that my own privileged subject position and experience growing up as the daughter of white teachers in rural California is vastly different from that of my students and that I must first acknowledge that I have as much to learn from students as I have to offer them.

Navigating the difficult ways in which our course materials can intersect with their own experience, students attracted to this course have thrived best in a supportive environment that provides expression for a parent’s PTSD inflicted by events that happened while fleeing Laos, for instance, or painful memories of sexual abuse in any context. In addition to detailing the ways in which multi-vocal narration allows for a mutually-constitutive process of building identity among characters, I wish to show the ways in which I encourage students, through their interactions with these texts and one another, to explore and articulate their own identities as well through online and small group discussion, for instance, as well as through writing assignments that allow for and facilitate creativity and self-reflection.

Returning to Japan after a twenty-five year teaching and learning detour in the U.S., I have come full circle with the opportunity to prepare Japanese university students to study abroad in a variety of social contexts in which they may inhabit the subject position of the ethnic “other,” if not come to live, even temporarily, squarely within it. Helping students think about what it might mean to encounter assimilationist notions that tend to “reduce” Asian American women to a “single, homogeneous narrative,” I hope to also excite Japanese students about the diverse ways in which Asian American women writers seek to reinvent themselves within a familiar history that “mainstream America,” for instance, “would rather forget” (Nguyen and Gasman 341; Feng 20 qtd. in Najmi 215). While this essay will focus on my experience teaching “Inhabiting Survival” in the U.S., I will also present a rationale for teaching “Inhabiting Survival” in the Japanese context I have returned to, with the hope of helping readers to foreground setting and audience in their teaching and their students’ learning.

With their focus on shifting, mutually-constructed identities, the works of the contemporary Asian American women writers that this essay explores have the potential to contribute deeply to a liberal arts education that foregrounds Global Learning as a “high impact practice” at universities in the U.S. and beyond. The reason is this: As counter-intuitive as it may seem, the sense of identity these works explore can be seen as the lynchpin that unites these texts to student experience and Global Learning.

According to the AAC&U VALUE rubric most clearly identified with notions of self and identity, Global Learning, by definition, aims to “enhance students’ sense of identity, community, ethics, and perspective-taking.” While my colleagues and I have at times questioned the problematic ways in which the outcomes of this rubric might be misconstrued as superficial “learning about other cultures,” this essay will address the ways in which these multi-vocal, first person texts by twenty-first century Asian American women authors have helped students of diverse backgrounds

to “articulate” and shape their identities “in a global context,” to quote some of the language of the Global Learning VALUE rubric. Coming to “evaluate and apply diverse perspectives” to the “complex subjects” that this literature evokes, students begin to recognize their own and others’ experiences within global “power structures,” and emerge from the course with an increased ability to “take informed and responsible action to address ethical, social, and environmental challenges in global systems” (“Global Learning VALUE rubric”).

Despite the ways in which the liberal arts curriculum embraces the inclusion of ethnic studies as an interdisciplinary mainstay, however, the profound ways in which it “foster[s] intellectual curiosity about questions that will never be definitively settled – questions about justice, about community, about politics and culture, about difference in every sense of the word,” (“Joint Statement on the Value of Liberal Education by AAC&U and AAUP”), prominent institutions of higher learning in the U.S. such as Duke University struggle to reflect its increasing Asian American population in its curricular offerings (Constante). In my experience of teaching “Inhabiting Survival” with recent high school graduates at UW-Madison, this trend bears itself out on the high school level as well: Even with the second and third highest populations of Hmong in the U.S. after California, none of my students from Minnesota or Wisconsin had encountered Yang’s memoir *The Latehomecomer* in their Wisconsin or Minnesota high schools, despite its publication almost three years prior to my teaching it. The study of identity and difference, as the AAC&U Global Learning Rubric suggests, becomes an important educational experience for students who have not yet encountered a space to do the deep thinking and self-reflection that this inquiry requires. Hearing Hmong and non-Hmong students alike express their eagerness to learn more about their own or longtime classmates’ cultural and historical backgrounds, I can say that seeing Hmong family history reflected in a text explored in their first year of college became a threshold experience for many in this learning community.

Reflecting on my teaching of “Inhabiting Survival” has also helped me to see my teaching more broadly within the discourse of “redress culture” that Lisa Yoneyama describes in *Cold War Ruins*, the “previously untold stories of loss, violence, betrayal, unlikely alliances, alternative and fluid identities, and even hopes, which have long been suppressed or marginalized within the national and global historical narratives that have dominated most of the post-World War II decades.” As Yoneyama suggests, “This shift has critical ramifications on the politics of knowledge production,” including, and perhaps especially, what and how we teach (6).

One thing that I believe helps students engage with these particular works is that they are each coming-of-age narratives. And yet, these are American bildungsroman with a twist, set, in each case, not primarily within the culture in which they were created, but against a “violent political history of invasion and war” that pushed many of these protagonists to flee their home countries. The stories that “Inhabiting Survival” explores embrace Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi’s contention that Asian American women writers are taking up “new,” previously forbidden Western forms by actively breaking down barriers “between European and Asian American traditions” to offer “new models of Asian American identity reconstruction.” These particular stories show the “complexity and diversity of Asian America” through the authors’ use of multi-vocal narration (8). Taniguchi and Okja Keller’s novels *The Ocean in the Closet* and *Comfort Woman* and Yang’s non-fiction memoir *The Song Poet* each weave complex stories that engage the reader in an intimate space between their intergenerational narrators, despite their vastly different of geographies and mental timeframes.

Despite the painful, often transnational locales these narrators must at times inhabit, they remind us that, as Asian American author Shawn Hsu Wong writes, “identity is a word full of home” (qtd. in Grice 31), even though “home” is so often “contested, lost,

out of reach,” as Helena Grice puts it (31). Indeed, home for characters who inhabit these works is so often a function of memory, a mental construct that demands a return to the war zone to facilitate a sense of healing for those who will survive, though never completely heal, from the trauma of war. So doing, each work explores identity formation as a deeply communal, rather than a solitary, act that becomes a catalyst for students to “adapt” from the narrators’ subjective experiences “a deep understanding of multiple worldviews, experiences, and power structures” while initiating, often with other students in the multicultural classroom, “meaningful interactions...to address significant global problems” (“Global Learning VALUE Rubric”).

The Ocean in the Closet: Inhabiting Emotion

While both Okja Keller and Yang make use of the inherently intimate parent/child relationship in their narratives (mother-daughter in the case of Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and father-daughter in Yang’s *The Song Poet*), the narrators in Yuko Taniguchi’s *The Ocean in the Closet* have never met. Making an appropriate choice for a novel that explores the theme of cultural and familial estrangement through transnational adoption, Taniguchi narrates her novel through the voices of Hideo and his great niece Helen, his sister Ume’s granddaughter. Falling in love with the imaginative, deceptively straightforward voice of nine-year old Helen, who eventually travels to Japan on her mother Anna’s behalf to help her reconnect with the family and culture she lost when she came to the U.S. at the age of five, students slowly develop, through these two very different narrators’ relationships with the largely-silent protagonist, Anna, a profound understanding of the role that personal history must play in identity formation and survival.

One pedagogy that helps students develop these intimate connections to characters is the use of an online discussion format, which I have found to encourage more in-depth thinking and communi-

cation among students than early face-to-face discussions and, in turn, breaks the ice for more engagement in the classroom. This “flipped classroom” approach also allows for more elaborate activities in the physical classroom such as role-plays in which students might interview these narrators, or other characters such as Anna, whose voice we so seldom hear in the novel.

As a soldier in Indonesia and as a child whose father was, in the end, tried and executed for the war crimes he committed in Manchuria, Hideo and his wife Chiyo suffer profoundly during and after the Pacific War. While it is clear neither Hideo nor Chiyo will completely recover from their wartime experience, Helen and her Uncle Steve’s visit to their home in Kamakura not only benefits Anna, but also allows Hideo and Chiyo to finally process the painful death of Hideo’s sister Ume, who dies shortly after giving birth to Anna. Getting to know Anna as a teacher during her early years at the orphanage she began her life in after her mother’s death, Hideo is as much in need of Helen and Steve’s visit as Anna is. In other words, not only does the experience of meeting Hideo provide Helen with the knowledge of a family in Japan that loved and cared for her before her adoption to the U.S., but Hideo and Chiyo’s encounter with Helen fills in painful gaps surrounding the loss of Ume and her young daughter Anna, thus providing a first example of healing as a mutually-constitutive process among characters.

One of the rationales for reading *The Ocean in the Closet* first in this course, in addition to its accessible, compelling voices, is Taniguchi’s introduction of the short-lived Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA) that Ume fell victim to as a young, poverty-stricken woman at the end of the Pacific War. Encountering the RAA early on in the course immediately problematizes the notion of the aggressor/victim dichotomy when it comes to the euphemistically named “comfort woman” system that Japan perpetuated throughout Asia, a system writ large in the next novel we read, Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*. While distinctly different from the

sexual enslavement of women who suffered mass rape in camps located within or near combat zones throughout Korea and China (as well as several other Asian countries) Taniguchi's well-researched depiction of the RAA in *The Ocean in the Closet* shows some similarities that are worth noting: Like many of the women who ended up in these "comfort camps" of mass rape, Japanese women who ended up in the RAA believed they were signing on for office work, for which they would be compensated (Min 945; Molasky 105).

Another similarity between these groups was the way in which the Japanese government rationalized both practices, claiming that the sacrifice of certain economically disadvantaged women would prevent the mass rape of other, primarily upper class, women (Soh 140; Molasky 107). Many non-Asian students in particular are shocked to learn that American GIs participated, even for a short time, in the RAA, a fact that confounds their previous understandings of who was participating in sexual aggression during the Pacific War. Some of the Korean international students express surprise by this lack of awareness about the connection between sexual aggression and war. While the RAA is new to most students, many of the Korean students have a strong awareness of the prostitution occurring around American bases in Korea, for example. Sometimes eager to share their knowledge at juncture of the class, these students create important inroads for looking at larger structures of sexual servitude, within which women with few opportunities are entrapped. A topic that offers a prime opportunity to formulate a common understanding among students through online discussion, followed by small and large group discussion in the classroom, the RAA offers a sobering example of the intersectionality of gender and class that we build on when we get to Okja Keller's *Comfort Women*, when, racism and colonialism become major factors as well.

In Taniguchi's historically-attentive depiction of the RAA, Ume conceives Anna in Komachi-en, the first of many RAA brothels to

be established before the RAA was disbanded after a few months of operation by General MacArthur because of the rampant spread of venereal disease (Molasky 105-107). When asked directly by Helen's Uncle Steve, who accompanies Helen to Japan, if Anna ever met her father, Hideo cannot bring himself to talk about the circumstances surrounding Anna's conception. While these details are muted by the fact that they exist only within Hideo's thoughts, students are often concerned about the ethics of Hideo's choice not to reveal these details to Steve when asked. Indeed, the form of this highly-subjective narration demands that the reader, rather than the characters, carry the burden of this knowledge.

Students find interesting, and often strongly empathetic ways of dealing with this burden of history, and their writing about *The Ocean in the Closet* helps to show that literature can be an important vehicle for considering these historical silences. Since Taniguchi offers a very open-ended conclusion to her novel that some readers find frustrating, one of the writing assignments that I give in this course is a creative writing prompt to write an alternate ending to the novel. One non-Asian male student chose to write his new ending from the vantage point of Helen some fifteen years later as a graduate student investigating the psychological impact of postwar adoption in Japan. In this version, which is a kind of "afterward" to the novel, Helen discovers her mother's birth heritage and Ume's role in the RAA. Going straight to the heart of the identity questions Helen is seeking to explore at this stage in her life, the student imagines an opening in the intergenerational silences that continue to hover around Helen and her mother. So doing, this student suggests that secrets withheld by distance, time, and even families themselves can be made visible. Critical of the ways in which Helen is forced too early to take on the issues of her mother, becoming, in some sense, a caretaker for her mother, which, as we will see in the next section of this essay, has sharp parallels to the experience of Beccah in *Comfort Woman*, this student's essay also reveals the sadness and anger of a young woman who mourns the loss of a childhood in which she was forced to

support her mother in many challenging ways. In other words, discovering another important source of the silences surrounding her mother's, and hence her own life story, the student offers Helen an important path forward, another outcome that parallels Beccah's journey after her mother's death.

Another student, this time a female international student from China, replicated Taniguchi's multi-vocal approach by writing a reflective postscript to the novel in the voices of Helen, her mother Anna, and her Uncle Steve. In this version, Helen's mother Anna acknowledges and to some extent begins to work through her trauma that can only be suggested in the novel since, as mentioned earlier, her character is developed primarily within the thoughts of narrators Helen and Hideo. An important image the student develops in Anna and Steve's narration is that of the sunflowers that remind both narrators of Helen for the strength she exhibits in both of their lives. In his narration, Uncle Steve reflects on the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder his brother James suffers as a veteran of the Vietnam War. Introducing the garden that Helen and her younger brother plant with their mother, Uncle Steve and his wife Mary in the conclusion of the novel, the student also brings Anna's husband and Helen's father James to the garden, a key character who is missing at the end of Taniguchi's novel. Steve's narration, offers an image of a healing sunflower that "not only" captures Helen's "bright and brave character," but also the flower's capacity "to purify the polluted soil and makes it healthy again," an image the student includes not only to speak of the necessary healing process James must undergo, but, I believe, the historical trauma surrounding Anna's birth as the daughter of a Japanese woman unknowingly conscripted into the RAA and the American GI she was raped by in the Komachi-en brothel. As a reader who knows more than any of the characters present in the garden scene she envisions, the student is well-positioned to do so.

The closet, like the secrets that lurk within these intimate family relationships, is a revelatory and highly ambiguous space in *The*

Ocean in the Closet. As this title suggests, the image of the closet carries a great deal of personal meaning for the characters, as well as for students who grapple with the silences and sense of intimacy that the closet evokes. Early on in the novel, students often interpret the closet as an image of abuse when they see Anna depositing Helen and her young brother Ken in the closet as a means of coping with the challenges of single-parenthood once her husband James returns from Vietnam unable to help her care for or relate to their children at home because of his strong experience of PTSD. However, learning more about Anna's arrival in the U.S. as a young child herself, students come to reflect back on their early impressions of the closet when they come to see, later in the novel, her own childhood closet was in fact her refuge away from her new, disorienting life in the U.S. In this way, it becomes possible for students to believe that, in some ways, by putting her children in the closet, Anna is seeking the protection for her children that she once found in her own childhood closet. Once again, online discussion becomes a helpful way to facilitate students' ability to reconsider earlier impressions as they begin to understand Anna's background.

While many students do not fully discount Anna's abuse of her children early on in the novel, the closet is also complicated by the fact that it originates as a shelter from racism, as Ume enters the closet with Anna to try to keep her cries "from spreading through the apartment building," knowing that the other tenants would try to evict her as the mother of "a mixed blood" baby. Helen's mention of the time she has spent in the closet makes Hideo think about the deep impact of our earliest experiences, whether "what we feel through our skin is the soil of our memories... [A]lthough we may not have...concrete memories," Hideo believes, "we remember certain sensations." Worried that Ume's hardships somehow "seeped through her skin to Anna's body, so that Anna's body would hold the memory of her mother...the memory of hunger" she suffered as an infant (221), Hideo invites us to think about Anna's earliest experiences in Japan, already marked as a

“mixed race” baby, and the small, safe space in which Ume tried to sooth and protect her, at least in that moment, from the ordeal of being “mixed race” in Japan, so that she could literally continue to provide a roof over young Anna’s head.

Now emerging as a strongly social space as well that evokes the discrimination against mixed race children in postwar Japan, the closet is also the reservoir of Hideo’s fear of what Anna might have experienced growing up in Japan, as well as the guilt he currently feels, learning that growing up in America was also a harsh experience for her. In effect, students are asked to step into these many dimensions of a closet that spans the transnational space between narrators and multiple generations, to interpret Anna’s actions as a young mother through her earliest childhood experiences, which provided her with only the most fragile sense of a maternal bond, since Ume dies only a few days after her birth. While some students are more drawn toward creative projects asking them to write an alternative ending of *The Ocean in the Closet* or even their own family memoir, an assignment inspired by Yang’s work, others are drawn to a more analytical prompt asking them to examine the layers of meanings and emotion within the tangible space that Taniguchi’s evocative image of the closet offers.

Voiceless herself in the novel, Anna’s fragility as a character is revealed only through Hideo’s memories and her daughter Helen’s experiences of her. Once she returns from Japan, Helen is pressed to the limits of her ability to cope with her family’s difficulty, expressing her sorrow in the form of anger and frustration over the parents who cannot come back together to give her what she needs growing up without them. In this way, Helen herself is willing to feel the sadness and despair Hideo remembers Ume hoping her daughter would ultimately come to feel and express. Through the important act of feeling and expressing her anger, Helen is also able to deliver this important message about learning to express feelings to her mother on behalf of her mother’s mother, Ume, who died too soon to raise her daughter to own her emotions. Though

too young to understand the full meaning of her grandmother's words, Helen tells Anna what she has learned from her Great Uncle Hideo: "Grandma Ume wanted you to cry when you are sad" (249). Even as a child wise beyond her years, Helen can do only so much for Anna; nonetheless, providing Ume's advice, gleaned no doubt through her own traumatic experience during and after the war, simultaneously opens up paths for Anna back to her own mother and culture, the place of healing Anna is seeking.

Comfort Woman: Inhabiting the Body

While the connection between Ume and her daughter Anna is circuitous and requires the intervention of both narrators Hideo and Helen in *The Ocean in the Closet* for Helen to pass Ume's wisdom to Anna, Nora Okja Keller embodies the mother/daughter relationship in *Comfort Woman* through the voices of mother Akiko (the Japanese name given to her in the "comfort camp" in which she is imprisoned, the name she continues to use the rest of her life) and her daughter Beccah, whose very birth Akiko sees as a kind of miracle, given the sexual abuse Akiko suffers in the camp. Like Anna, Akiko's protection of her daughter is skewed by her own traumatic experience. Having first encountered Anna's struggle to mother her children, students are able to grasp the benevolence behind Akiko's seemingly bizarre actions, especially as her daughter undergoes puberty, which is precisely the time Akiko was thrust into her role as a comfort woman in a military comfort camp, where her "poji" is sold to the highest bidder, after which time she is repeatedly raped even before she has had her first period.

The progression from *The Ocean in the Closet* to *Comfort Woman* is a jarring one for many students. Not only is the abuse that Akiko and other women in the camp suffer painfully graphic, but Akiko's shamanistic, sometimes hallucinogenic thought-process can be challenging to follow as well. And yet, the autonomous sense of bodily ownership Akiko seeks to instill in her daughter from infancy could not be more clear. This bodily knowledge becomes

a lifeline to her own survival, offering the sense of hope she feels in raising a daughter who will live the life that was taken from her mother in the camp. A moving memory that reverberates throughout the novel as a strong reply to the repeated rapes she suffered in the camp, Akiko comes to “touch each part of...[Beccah’s infant] body, waiting until I see recognition in her eyes...until I see that she knows that all of what I touch is her and hers to name in her own mind” (22).

Knowing the importance of breaking the silence about her life as a comfort woman to her daughter, Akiko does so only after her death through letters and tapes she leaves for Beccah. Long in coming, this knowledge is nonetheless portrayed as urgent generational knowledge that ultimately leads to the daughter’s own self-knowledge as well. Early in Beccah’s life, Akiko muses that one day she will tell Beccah about “the box that kept my mother’s past and future, and though she will never know her grandmother’s name, she will know who her grandmother is. Later,” she continues, “when she is older,” Beccah “will sift through... [Akiko’s] own memories, and through the box that I will leave for her...come to know her own mother – and then herself as well” (183).

While the shock of the recognition that her mother had quite possibly “served” as a comfort woman in a Japanese “comfort camp” is overwhelming to Beccah, it allows her to trace the outline, if not the precise details of her mother’s suffering and subsequent abilities as a shaman, protecting Beccah from or with the spirits her mother lived with throughout her life. As Yoneyama implies, however, this ghostly knowledge that Akiko passes on to Beccah is tenuous and “Beccah cannot confirm the final truth in her mother’s absence” (167). Nonetheless, receiving Akiko’s attempt to communicate about not only her own, but thousands of women’s trauma, Beccah’s response, her strong willingness to carry out the ceremonies her mother requests, confirms that even this ghostly knowledge is a step toward knowing herself as one who will seek

redress for these women. In the end, *Comfort Woman* shows the ways in which identity is not only mutually constitutive, but the ways in which the act of demanding redress is bound to identity. As Yoneyama writes, “The novel thus suggests that in order to make it possible for Beccah to translate her mother’s words into a ‘prayer for justice’ (197), Beccah need not necessarily know if her mother actually lived through the past that now demands redress” (167).

While Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* is an important work to read in a variety of settings, it may be particularly valuable reading for university students in Japan, where, as translator Suzanne O’Brien writes in her translator’s introduction to Yoshiaki Yoshimi’s *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, Korean women have “call[ed] upon the Japanese government to investigate and reveal the truth about its wartime conduct...and educate younger generations about Japan’s war crimes so as to prevent their repetition.” O’Brien goes on to say that the women’s vision “demands that the Japanese government develop a habit of remembering its crimes and that it foster this habit among its citizens through educational initiatives” (“Translator’s Introduction” 1). This education is particularly critical considering what Yoneyama describes as “conservative historical revisionism” that has “evolved around the Textbook Reform Society and its network since the turn into the new millennium,” claiming that, as Yoneyama puts it, “the history textbooks that teach Japanese military atrocities and colonialism work in tandem with progressive gender and sexuality curricula to produce an abject national identity, thereby preventing the Japanese from feeling love and pride for one another and their country” (114). On the contrary, as I attempt to show in this essay, literature helps to put a very human face on suffering. Offering countless paths through the sense of an “abject national identity,” literature becomes a place where readers can encounter and inhabit their own sense of empathy.

Before getting too far into Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*, it is important for students to understand the "comfort woman" phenomenon as a global system implemented by Japan as part of its expansionist policy throughout Asia, through which women were "systematically rounded up and imprisoned in 'comfort stations'" (Yoshimi 1). And, while that system was dismantled after the Pacific War, it is also important for students to understand the many years the Japanese government has taken to issue an apology that the former "comfort women" can accept, an awkward reality obliquely reinforced by the U.S. as Japan's primary ally, as well as by the fact that, as Yoneyama puts it, "the history of Japan's military comfort system prefigured the military camp town and other continuing structures of violence against women that have been sustained around U.S. bases throughout the region" (27-28). In one iteration of the course, we read Okja Keller's *Fox Girl*, which explores the life of women entrapped within these military camp towns. As Yoneyama points out, U.S. paternalism is very strongly suggested in *Comfort Woman* as well, in the figure of Akiko's husband, an American missionary who "rescues" Akiko by marrying her well before she is ready, simultaneously forcing her into American citizenship and a Christian baptism in which she nearly drowns. In this way, *Comfort Woman* also "offers an effective critique of the paternalistic relation between the United States and Asia" (Yoneyama 166).

As mentioned above, based on what students reveal in their online discussions, international students from China and Korea vocalize, along with dismay or anger toward the Japanese government, which they are often careful to distinguish from the Japanese people, more of a ready awareness of the suffering of their country's women than non-Asian students born in the U.S. do. Many of the international students from Korea and China, however, state that they are eager to learn more of the factual details of this history and, especially, to discuss this history with others who are interested in learning more about it because they have lacked forums in their own countries in which to discuss these issues. Nonetheless,

I have come to realize it is also important to give these students the space they need *not* to become an active participant in these discussions as well if that is their preference.

While some students from China and Korea will take this opportunity to speak openly about the “comfort woman” phenomenon, my understanding, based on my experience of teaching this course, is that others may be reluctant to discuss this topic because, while they may have strong feelings about it, the subject of comfort woman may still be considered rather taboo in their own cultures. Students too come to respect silence as a response to this challenging subject matter, with the understanding that race and ethnicity does not determine who will feel like speaking and who will feel more comfortable staying silent. A basic understanding that I like to convey early on is that while open discussion is encouraged, everyone should have this choice to speak or remain silent, and to leave the room when needed.

Addressing the capstone criterion of the Global Learning rubric that challenges students to “use deep knowledge of the historic and contemporary role and differential effects of human organization and actions on global systems,” I do my best to provide students with established historical facts about the “comfort woman” with readings by historians such as Yoshimi, whose introduction to *Comfort Women* helps to show the historical background of Okja Keller’s novel. Primarily responsible for finding the documents that revealed the intentional institutionalization of a comfort woman *system* throughout Asia, Yoshimi’s ground-breaking research emerged in the early 1990s, just as former Korean “comfort women” were emerging from their long silence to come to Japan demanding an apology and retributions from the government that instigated their suffering as young girls, which, in a culture that cherishes female chastity so strongly, made any return to “normalcy” futile after the war.

Fiction such as Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* offers a compelling view into the psychological trauma of these women's suffering, especially if it is accompanied by Yoshimi and others' evidence, such as that offered by the former "comfort women" themselves in a mock tribunal carried out in Tokyo in 1999 and documented in the film *Breaking the History of Silence: the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery*. With the assistance of a team of judges from around the world to serve on the tribunal, the project was carried out because these particular crimes against so many Asian women were not included in the Tokyo wartime trials after the Pacific War. Made in 2000, the film commemorates not only a new century for Asian women, but also celebrates the past decade in which their voices were finally heard. *Breaking the History of Silence* can be seen as a vital form of "unrelenting social activism" that allows for "the pursuit of historical justice and redress" (Yoneyama 9). Even a mock trial can have its impact, especially in the classroom where students are learning to think critically and stretch at the edges of the status quo as they explores ways to solve the injustice of the world. As Yoneyama explains, "precisely by virtue of its imaginary status, [the film]... offered a connection between justice and social transformation in ways the actually existing legal system or other state apparatuses could not dare to propose" (127).

A difficult film for students to watch as the women resurrect their experience in the comfort camps in their testimony, students nonetheless comment on the film as a significant part of the class in their course evaluations, likely because of the undeniably human ways in which it drives home lessons of intersectionality they have learned through the course. As Yoneyama puts it, the film "critically examine[s] the intersecting historical and structural asymmetries of race, class, and colonialism as important elements that constitute gendered and sexualized violations" (124). Through these sources and others—including the observations of Korean and Chinese students who feel comfortable sharing their impressions of those the former "comfort women" the Korean stu-

dents know affectionately as *halmoni* (grandmother) – students are in the process of building up a base of knowledge “to develop and advocate for informed, appropriate action to solve complex” and deeply human “problems” (“Global Learning VALUE Rubric”).

Following our study of Japan’s RAA through Ume’s experience, as well as the “comfort woman” system through both *Comfort Woman* and the historical sources that support this work, students come to see the very different lenses through which Japanese and Korean feminist scholars view the “comfort woman” phenomena: As Pyong Gap Min shows in his article “KOREAN ‘COMFORT WOMEN’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class,” while some Japanese scholars have often approached the RAA and Comfort Women phenomena through the single lens of gender, Korean scholars see the experience of Korean comfort women through the twin lenses of Colonialism and its accompanying racism, as well as class and gender (939). This important reading allows students to readily grasp the importance of intersectionality as a feminist tool for examining the sources of oppression for both Japanese and Korean women entrapped by the policies of the Japanese government and the treatment of the military. While intersectionality can show that oppression does not present itself as a level playing field, many students in the course, especially after seeing *Breaking the History of Silence*, nonetheless come to the conclusion that there is a “point of no return” beyond which it becomes futile to measure one woman’s oppression against another’s.

One of Ume’s wishes in *The Ocean in the Closet* for her daughter Anna is that she will learn to name and express her own sadness. Going several steps further in *Comfort Woman*, Akiko leaves her daughter a tape in which she not only expresses her pain to Beccah, but also asks her daughter to give voice to it. While her mother’s message is hazy, Beccah performs a ritual to lay her mother to rest, honoring her mother’s life work as a shaman who gave voice to the women she was close to who died in the camps. Reflect-

ing the degree to which Akiko herself had suffered in the camps, her shamanism is an important means through which Akiko too is able to commune with and help appease her lifelong companion, or “spirit mother,” the spirit of Induk, the woman Akiko replaces as “Akiko 41” at the camp after Induk is brutally murdered by Japanese soldiers for her vehement refusal to perform any longer as a comfort woman.

A spiritual guide to Akiko who helps her develop a sense of autonomy and purpose in her life once she leaves the camp, Induk becomes a fixture in Beccah’s life as well, though Beccah does not know Induk was a real person, the woman who wore the burlap dress labeled “Akiko” and inhabited the narrow stall Akiko came to live in after Induk was murdered. Used to her mother’s specialized spiritual knowledge that sets Akiko apart, as a child, Beccah assumed the role of her mother’s protector when Akiko’s descended into the world of spirits, the trances that also prevented Akiko from being “present” and available for her daughter for days at a time.

Despite the many battles that Beccah had waged against her mother in life, only after her mother’s death can Beccah begin to finally piece together parts of the puzzle of her mother’s life, especially her mother’s treatment of her, which had been such a frustrating part of Beccah’s life. Realizing too late the reasons for Akiko’s anxiety about her menstruation and budding sexuality, physical processes which Akiko kept at bay as long as she could, Beccah realizes that she is the one who must lay her mother’s suffering spirit to rest, in much the same way Akiko performed the burial rites for her own mother. As also suggested in *The Ocean in the Closet*, it might not be possible for a daughter to really know her own mother without first understanding her mother’s relationship with her own mother. Even though these rites are usually carried out by a son, Beccah, as her mother’s only child, must come to understand not only her mother’s life, but Akiko’s bond with her own mother, as well. Doing so will not only finally absolve Akiko of her suf-

fering, but will also allow Beccah a way to move forward in her own life and development as a woman. In a larger sense, performing these rites for Akiko is Beccah's initiation into shamanism, through which she is asked not only to tend to her mother's spirit, but to remember the countless women who suffered as comfort women for Japan's military, a task her mother had carried out the last many years.

In a tape that Akiko leaves Beccah, in which she reveals to Beccah her given name of Soon Hyo, which means "the true voice," Akiko asks Beccah-chan, as she endearingly calls her, to "lead the parade of the dead...[to] lead the Ch'ulssang," the armies of Korean women conscripted into sexual slavery, "with the rope of your light." Continuing, Akiko asks Beccah to "clear the air with the ringing of your bell, bathe us with your song." Beccah must continue for her mother what Akiko's death prevents her from doing: "When I can no longer perform the *chesa* for the spirits, we will look to you to feed us. I have tried to release you, but in the end I cannot do it and tie you to me, so that we will carry each other always. Your blood in mine" (197).

Reminiscent of the ways in which Akiko touched Beccah's body as an infant, Beccah's readies her mother's body for her journey into the afterlife, reifying the body that had been so utterly abused in the camps, the body that had managed to give birth to a daughter who would come to know her suffering. Washing Akiko's body, Beccah narrates her intentions to her mother as she restores her body to its original strength: "I will massage your arms with perfumed water blessed by the running river. I will massage your legs until they are strong enough to swim you to heaven" (209). As Najmi affirms in her essay "Decolonizing the *Bildungsroman*: Narratives of War and Womanhood in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*," Beccah's massage is meant to sooth her mother's pain with her love: "Touching every part of her mother's naked body with fingers dipped in the waters of the river, Beccah reenacts her mother's tenderness toward her as a baby and at the same time

retraces the path of the Japanese soldiers' violence, but with the sanctity of a daughter's love" (225).

Discussing the ways in which Asian American women writers make use of "rememory," a term invented by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*, as a means of providing "'textual 'recognition' of a history that mainstream America would rather forget" (Feng qtd. in Najmi), Najmi points out it is Okja Keller's multi-vocal experimentation with the narrative form of the coming-of-age story, *bildungsroman*, that allows her "evocative conclusion" to "synchronize...the *bildung* of mother and daughter, in a moment that the novel represents as death, on the one hand, and as life retrieved on the other" (223). Helping her mother feel a sense of comfort in her own body, just as she must leave it to journey to the afterlife, Beccah's recognition of her mother's past and her own role as her mother's caretaker as she journeys into the afterlife contributes to Akiko's identity as a survivor and brings to life the notion that Beccah's own growth and identity are deeply enmeshed in that of her mother's. As Najma puts it, "If Soon Hyo's *bildung* finds completion in this moment, so too does Beccah's, for she arrives at self-knowledge through her act of rememory." (225). And because Beccah's act of rememory is made in not only in recognition of her mother's identity, but also on behalf of the Ch'ulssang Akiko had cared for all these years as a shaman, Beccah's rememory is a significant form of redress as well.

The Song Poet: Inhabiting A Home through Art

Choosing to honor her father's song poetry through one of her most recent works, *The Song Poet*, Kao Kalia Yang carves out a very different autobiographical space from that of her earlier *The Late-homecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, which chronicles her family's difficult journey to Thailand, as well as their eventual emigration to the U.S. While very different in terms of genre and geographical focus from the two works discussed above, Yang's work not only takes up a compelling multi-vocal daughter-father narrative,

but it also provides a very local view of her family's challenges in the nearby Minneapolis area. Yang's accessibility as a writer has on occasion resulted in visits to our Wisconsin-based classrooms (both in person and over Skype), as well as in opportunities to attend her readings in the area. Visibly inspired by Yang's charismatic and yet very personable presence as a storyteller in the classroom and the lecture hall, Hmong and non-Hmong students alike, including veterans and other returning students, have had easy access to connecting with Yang over social media, following her career, as well as her observations and discoveries as a writer for years to come, which in turn helps to extend their learning from this remarkable woman.

Showing the Yang family's struggle to make ends meet in an environment rife with racism and an overall lack of social support outside of the Hmong community, *The Latehomecomer* also traces the Yang's perseverance as well as their firm belief that through hard work and especially education, they will not only endure, but prosper. *The Song Poet* calls this hope into question, with a crucial caveat: while the application of education is a long-term, multigenerational effort that cannot erase the trauma of war and racism, the expressive value of art can offer a vital chance to encapsulate experience, and, to some extent, ease suffering, past and present. Moving seamlessly from her father's song poetry, with which she introduces many of the chapters, or "Tracks," to the voice of the song poet that she invents for her father and her own autobiographical voice, Yang's artistic decision to narrate *The Song Poet* as a father-daughter duet allows her to simultaneously pay homage to her father as a song poet, or a singing storyteller in the Hmong tradition of *kwo txbiaj*, while at the same time tap her roots as a Hmong artist. It is no surprise that Yang considers her father a major "literary force" in her life (17).

A contradiction that Yang must contend with by giving her father voice in written words is that his art is a form of singing poetry written in the heart and never on paper. Song poetry can be re-

corded though, and Yang brings to life her childhood memories of her father making his first album in this memoir, which his community all but demanded after a 1989 New Year's performance in St. Paul, Minnesota, where the family first settles in the U.S. However, having only produced this one album by the time the book was written, Bee Yang does not identify as a song poet. First and foremost, he describes his devotion to his family, to his wife and children, whom he supports as an automotive machinist, as his "life's work" (17). Lamenting at the end of her introduction that *The Song Poet* "can never be your second album, Father," Yang describes the book as only "an answer to the songs that you've sung but have not recorded because of us" (19). In addition to presenting many moving song poems that have not been widely shared, this multi-vocal portrait of her father allows Yang to approach the complex issues of ethnic and racial identity that the family continues to face in their search for "home" in the U.S. from the many vantage points that her family members offer, especially that of her father Bee, Bee's adopted brother Shong, and Yang's siblings, brother Xue and sister Dwab.

Evoking a powerful emotional response to a song he performs in November 1989 at the St. Paul Civic Center for the Hmong New Year's Celebration, Bee captures the collective grief that of Hmong gathered so far from home for this important holiday: "lost are the ones who run through jungles without shoes, the young screaming for their elders to run faster, a giant moon on the other side of a river, the glittering water a mirror for what will come" (9). The grief in the huge arena is palpable: "men and women reached into pockets and purses and came forth with folded pieces of wrinkled napkins; they tore up the napkins to share; those with nothing in hand began wiping away their tears on their sleeves" (9).

Indeed, as Yang shows, her father's journey to becoming a song poet is highly emotional, in part, a result of his loneliness as a child within his large family of nine children. And sadly, the death of his mother many years later in 2003 caused him to "forget all his

songs,” which had never been written down. As Yang explains, “They were either recorded on old scratched tapes or memorized in his heart. His heart had broken” with the death of his mother and “the songs had leaked out” (16). In many ways, *The Song Poet* is a love song to help her father remember where his songs come from.

And yet, like the other works described in this essay, *The Song Poet* brings to the forefront the notion that despite a dramatic change of geography, for many immigrants, lived experience continues against the backdrop of war, in this case, the “secret war” and its aftermath, which so profoundly impacted the trajectory of Hmong forced to flee Laos for Thailand before emigrating to the U.S. or Europe. Both artistic forms—the father’s *kwo txbiaj* and the daughter’s memoirs—endeavor to preserve a distinctly Hmong legacy of the Vietnam War that the dominant culture in the U.S. does not recognize, one of the “previously untold stories of loss, violence, betrayal, unlikely alliances, alternative and fluid identities, and even hopes, which have long been suppressed or marginalized within the national and global historical narratives” as Yoneyama describes the aftermath of the Cold War (6).

Since a physical sense of home has been culturally elusive for the Hmong, the deep personal history *The Song Poet* remembers in the emotional space between father and daughter provides a sense of home that the Hmong continue to seek. Delineating “home” within the borders of art, Yang provides a sense of permanence through language for her father’s ephemeral song poetry as well. Adopting her father’s voice in the memoir, Yang’s loving attention to the details of the natural world that her father inhabits as a child invokes the sense of connection that the notion of a family home inspires.

Yang’s previous book *The Latehomecomer* became a centerpiece for incoming Hmong students entering “Inhabiting Survival” at UW-Madison. Our study of Yang’s recent “family memoir” be-

came a way of building family in the classroom among Hmong students, as well as strong bonds between Hmong and non-Hmong students, who seemed eager to get to know fellow students in their “learning community.” On many occasions, I had the pleasure of watching students leave together to make the long (and often chilly) trek to their Introduction to Asian American Studies class over Bascom Hill on the other side of campus. In a more general sense, the few non-Hmong students in the class gained insight into the Hmong at home in their Wisconsin communities, whom, most admitted, they knew very little about. Indeed, when non-Hmong students enter the classroom unaware of the historical background of the Hmong in their own communities, they leave with the knowledge of a people who deserve much better as faithful allies of U.S. during the Vietnam War.

Thanks to a generous budget provided to First Year Interest Group Seminars at UW-Madison, this cohort of student “allies” had the added benefit of being able to design many special events that would enhance their learning, as well as that of the larger community. In addition to inviting Yang to visit our class, we also planned a Hmong feast in which class members cooked a class meal together at my home and showed the documentary film *Hunted Like Animals*, an outreach project that students felt compelled to take on after reading *The Latehomecomer* to help educate a wider community about the ongoing trauma of Hmong people in the jungles of Laos. With an audience of over fifty people who turned out on a frigid December night for the film showing, we partnered with the Hmong Student Association to provide information about the “repatriation” of Hmong to Laos since the refugee camps in Thailand were set to close even though the continued hostility toward the Hmong in Laos was still very apparent, as *Hunted Like Animals* illustrated.

The Song Poet offers multiple stories that describe the primacy of family in Hmong culture, and the sense of community in the classroom encouraged Hmong students to vocalize their own family

stories as a means of elaborating on the ones Yang offers in *The Latehomecomer*, or to begin discussions with family members about their own family histories that parents may not have been fully described to their children. While a few of the students in the course at Madison chose to write their final essay on *The Ocean in the Closet* or *Comfort Woman*, many chose to use *The Latehomecomer* as a model for their own family or “ethnic memoir,” turning a very personal lens to the ways in which their ethnicity has impacted their life experience in the U.S. or elsewhere.

Returning to the two-year UW campus in northern Wisconsin after completing my postdoc at UW-Madison, I was encouraged by the campus’ significant growth in its international student population. Both *The Latehomecomer* and *The Song Poet* were of particular interest to international students from China, who seemed to know vaguely about the Hmong as an ethnic minority in China they knew little about. Understanding that the search for something as common as a sense of home, which both of Yang’s works foreground, remains tenuous for the Hmong in China, Laos, and now the U.S. (as well as in other countries in which they have settled), cultivates a sense of curiosity and empathy among students, who are become eager to know more about the Hmong.

The search for home in song poetry becomes a literal act of “re-memory” to return to Morrison’s term, as Yang shows by returning to her father’s childhood, when his birth as a song poet began. As Yang shows in the narrative voice she creates for her father, after his own father died just two years after his birth, Bee grew up in the shadows of his grown brothers and sisters. His mother traversing the hillsides for the herbal remedies she concocted in her work as a shaman, Bee spent his time alone in nature while his older brother’s worked the fields: A careful observer of the world, “instead of talking to the world,” Bee “took to listening to it. I heard how the night wind whistled through the bamboo walls...I heard the whisper of morning light in the throats of the roosters...how the children of the village laughed and cried and

talked among each other and to their mothers and fathers about their pains and their fears” (49). Developing a closeness to nature that helped compensate for what he may not have been finding in his own human relationships, Bee began to compose songs because “there were words I yearned to hear and there was no one to say them” (54). His songs allowed him, as well as family members, “to feel...[their] longing for those words that were impossible to live up to but unforgettable to hear, the promise of eternal care: ‘Do not be afraid. Everything will be all right. I will not let anything hurt you’” (56).

Despite the promise of Bee’s songs, they cannot stop the ways in which war would come to sever the Yang family, which included Bee’s oldest brother Shong, who became an especially profound presence in his life as a father figure after his father died. Memorializing her father’s adopted brother Shong in the memoir, Yang also shows the darkness of the Hmong experience in Laos, the tragic ways in which Shong was tortured when the Pathet Lao came for the Yang family. All of the Yang family members except Shong and his wife and children were able to escape. Deciding to stay behind because their youngest child had been shot and would not survive the journey through the jungle, Shong’s family was forced to stay and eventually endure his torture after he refused to reveal the direction the family had fled. Hearing the news of Shong’s torture and subsequent inability to provide for or relate to the family he had devoted his life to, Bee observes that “what happened in Laos has happened inside of him. Like the country, he is now a collection of open pits, broken trees, and burnt houses” (89-90).

While Bee’s experience teaches him that the family cannot overcome their overwhelming sense of loss, they also know that only family can protect against the harshness of experience. Even though Shong did not appear in their dreams after his death to say good-bye as they very much hoped he would, Bee and his brothers and sisters found a way to speak of their hope “that on the

other side of life there is a place where justice is not delivered in a courtroom but around the hearth of a home" (93). As he writes to his "tender...wounded heart" in the song poem that begins Track 3, he "wishes to begin again," before "the wild dogs entered our house, and feasted on my brother's fallen body," to a time "before the mountains and the water, before the sorrows, when I knew joy at my brother's side" (57).

Facing new challenges in the U.S. that shake their unity as a family, the Yang children call the values of the parents into question in unexpected and suddenly irrevocable ways. Narrated mostly in the daughter's voice, which helps to mediate the tension between the parents and their children, the second half of the book, "Song for My Children," describes the experience of her siblings Dwab, the Yang's eldest child who was born in Laos and nearly dies on the journey from Laos across the Mekong River to Thailand, and Xue, their first born son.

Evoking the family's continuing struggle for not only a home, but the sense of belonging in a community that having a home implies, Xue is born in the U.S. after six miscarriages his mother suffers in Laos (98-100). Fulfilling the considerable obligations of the first born son could not have been more challenging for Xue though as one of only a few minority students in suburban Andover, where the family moved when he was fourteen, a new high school student (181). Despite his parents imploring him to ignore the hateful words of some of the other students, Xue strikes out against his racist tormenters, is suspended multiple times over his high school years, and finally drops out of school in his senior year. Devastated by Xue's choice to leave not only school, but the family home Bee had worked so hard to provide, Bee eventually comes to see Xue's transformation into a man who can stand up for himself and others in the racist environment of work, an environment Bee and his colleagues at work eventually stand up to as well. As in the other works discussed in this essay, we see mutually-constitutive journeys of children and their parents in *The*

Song Poet as well. Following the wisdom of his son Xue, Bee walks away from decades of racism (not to mention the loss of his health) in the workplace.

As Yang explains in her ED Talk after the publication of *The Song Poet*, the Yang daughters have had fewer obstacles in achieving the education their parents had hoped for all of their children (“A Hmong View of Public Education”). Already in college and on her way to becoming a lawyer, Dwab, with all of the “strength with which she pursued life” as an infant crossing the Mekong River to Thailand, was well on her way to fulfilling her parents’ dream of their eldest daughter becoming a lawyer. In many ways though, it is Dwab’s education that leads to a moment of deep division in the family in which she calls out her father’s attitudes toward a Hmong woman beaten by the white man she was dating. When her father comments that the woman should have “never been with the man in the first place,” as it was “dangerous to pit a Hmong woman’s small fists against... [those] of...a white man’s,” Dwab jumps to her feet. Emotions are running high all around: in one moment Dwab is shaking her finger in her father’s face, calling his idea “racist,” and in the next moment he slaps her, “the force of his hand turn[ing]...her head” (156). An “unmediated reflex,” as Yang describes it, the slap to his daughter’s face was his “instinctual response to Dwab’s finger in his face, her one word and all that it implied: you are ignorant, uneducated, and wrong” (157).

As Yang points out, up until this moment—well before the family’s experience in Andover—“education had always been a path full of light,” and “the American story that we were entering,” learning about “Christopher Columbus, slavery, the Civil War, and affirmative action...had all made sense.” Putting an education into practice, however, is, as Yang shows, a multigenerational effort, sometimes requiring us to use our knowledge “not in support of those who love you but as a response to them” (157). Responding to the racism that her own father expressed was not

something that Dwab's education had prepared her for. Pointing out both her father and sister's refusal to back down from their strongly-held beliefs, Yang shows that the path to reconciliation was a long one that eventually unfolded with time, as winter gave way to spring (162). A powerful statement for students of all backgrounds who may be in the same kind of intergenerational struggle with their own parents or children, class and online discussion of this protracted father-daughter reconciliation becomes a place for students to pause to reflect on the ways in which they can apply the writer's experience to their own. While much of our discussion at this juncture will necessarily address the racial origins of this conflict, this is also a place in the course that inspires a sense of commonality as well when it comes to themes of intergenerational growth, reconciliation, and change.

Just as readers can see that the Yang daughters have come far in overcoming the loneliness they feel in their "educational lives," which "grew as a normal consequence of...[their] dreams," we can also hope that Bee, through his daughter's story of his life as a song poet, can recover, if not the impulse, the memory of his childhood impulse to engage the world with song. Encompassing the profound despair her father has suffered as a parent, Yang's intimate portrait of her father enlarges the sense of home the family will always inhabit, whether together or apart, in this world or the next, through her father's song poetry. In doing so, she also claims an important origin of her own story telling, a cultural wellspring of her identity as a Hmong writer.

Asian American Women's Writing as a Path to Global Learning

In her 1989 essay "A Woman-Centered Perspective on Asian American History," Sucheta Mazumbar asks, "What does it mean to be a Chinese woman in nineteenth-century California? Or a Japanese woman on the sugar plantation in early 20th c. Hawaii?...If society has ever thought about these women, it has often been in

clichés: the depraved prostitute in nineteenth century San Francisco; the quiet, courteous, and efficient Asian female office worker today...their identity has been formed by the lore of the majority community, not by their own history, their own stories” (qtd. in Grice 17). This essay offers an opportunity to explore the ways in which contemporary Japanese, Korean, and Hmong American women writers Yuko Taniguchi, Nora Okja Keller, and Kao Kalia Yang have taken up “their own histor[ies]...their own stories” through multi-vocal narrative strategies that help them show complex, evolving relationships through which their characters’ identities are constructed. These mutually-constitutive identities—constructed intergenerationally in these works mostly, but not exclusively, by parents and their children—are portrayed here as a primary means of human and cultural survival.

Helping students develop “a deep understanding of multiple worldviews, experiences, and power structures while initiating meaningful interactions with other cultures” (AAC&U Global Learning Rubric), “Inhabiting Survival” embraces the understanding that, as Indira Nair and Margaret Henning write in their 2017 “Models of Global Learning” for the AAC&U, for global solutions to be shared, “we must understand one another as people based on an awareness of what our own sense of self is” (4). Part of a “broader discourse on violence and justice,” the rhetoric of “redress” that Yoneyama so eloquently describes, these stories of survival are “inseparable from the (re)constitution of self, sociality, and history” (7). As Nair and Henning assert, “global learning” implies “transnationalism,” which encompasses not only learning about, but engaging people of different ethnicities or cultural backgrounds (4). For students in “Inhabiting Survival,” the development of a “transnational” self is encouraged through the literature they read, as well as through the conversations they have with one another about the difficult crossings families have made to inhabit a completely new environment, now called “home.”

Not only describing the crossings of physical borders, transnationalism can also describe the intellectual crossings of postcolonial knowledge that students embark on as well, the conflicts they will necessarily encounter with their prior learning, “insurgent memories, counterknowledges, and inauthentic identities that have been regimented by the discourses and institutions centering on nation-states,” as Yoneyama puts it (7). Unraveling notions of “self” based in stereotypes and assimilationist ideologies, the characters in these novels offer a new version of themselves, a “transnational self” that emerges from the intergenerational experience of trauma, racism, and violence. The bifurcated, multi-vocal voices that facilitate these openings or ruptures within “familiar borders and boundaries – whether political, cultural or psychological” offer a transnational space in which students too can dwell, so that the sense of shared empathy they develop through their interactions and conversations with one another in their discussions will translate into meaningful thought and engagement outside the boundaries of the classroom as well (Nair and Hemming 4).

As Yoneyama shows, it is never too late to reap the benefits of this learning so often unrecognized by the status quo. Referring to the 2000 Women’s “mock” Tribunal described in the section on Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*, Yoneyama writes, “For the tribunal’s findings to gain any significance, audiences had to realize that its justice could not be located in the present, in institutional realism or the status quo. Instead,” she writes, “its significance had to be sought out in the future, as yet unseen, born out of a transformed present.” As Yoneyama asserts, “the Women’s Tribunal’s historical efficacy will depend on whether and how those who respond to the survivor’s testimonial accounts becomes transnationally and nationally engaged so as to intervene critically in long-inherited institutions and knowledges,” whether this intervention, I would add, takes place in university classrooms of diverse students in the U.S., Japan, or someplace else (127).

Just one of literally thousands of courses across the globe seeking to develop “ethical community-based learning” and “meaningful engagement...[among] people from diverse backgrounds,” as Nair and Henning put it (4), “Inhabiting Survival” provides an environment in which students learn to negotiate borders of race and ethnicity as a means of developing a fuller and more engaged understanding of themselves as they respond to the seemingly insurmountable pain and trauma they encounter in the course, and through the course, the world.

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Placing “Akita” in the “International Liberal Arts University:” The Liberal Arts, “Life Guidance,” and the Potential Legacy of the Northern Education Movement (*Hoppo Kyoiku Undo*) on Akita International University

Patrick Shorb

Kansai University of International Studies

Abstract

This essay explores how the Akita-based prewar pedagogy movement, the Northern Education movement (*Hoppo Kyoiku*, hereafter, NEM) could have relevance to the educational mission of Akita International University (hereafter, AIU). Specifically, this study will compare and contrast NEM’s “life guidance” with the similarly holistic, communication-centered “international liberal arts” of the University. NEM’s emphasis on communal engagement, grass-roots practitioner collaboration and reflective practice, and students’ critical thinking and self-mastery all could serve as useful touchstones for how AIU might reshape its education program moving forward. This essay is not necessarily suggesting that AIU abandon the original “global human resource” vision of its founding president. However, it is suggesting that through a more active engagement with the pedagogical tradition of NEM, AIU might further enhance and legitimize recent trends towards a more multi-dimensional, Akita-based educational model.

Introduction

One of the intriguing parallels between the most important education innovation of Akita during the 21st century, the founding of Akita International University (hereafter, AIU), and the most important education innovation of Akita during the 20th century, the emergence of the Northern Education movement (*Hoppo Kyoiku*-

ku Undo, hereafter NEM), is the emphasis that both have placed on broad-based, communication-focused learning.

That AIU embraced a holistic education partially inspired by a U.S. liberal arts model is well documented.¹ AIU's Japanese name of *Kokusai Kyoyo Daigaku* literally embeds "liberal arts" in the middle of its name.² Moreover, AIU's first president, Mineo Nakajima,³ first branded AIU as a uniquely "international" liberal arts university. Cosmopolitan, forward-looking and pragmatic, it was an education more directly inspired by the techno-futurism of a Steve Jobs than the classical humanism of a Cardinal Newman. Nakajima particularly emphasized the importance of foreign language mastery as it helped students "adapt" to a rapidly globalizing world through its cultivation of technical competencies and a more "decisive" personality. As he explained:

1 E.g. AIU consciously benchmarking Ivy League models of the liberal arts, cf. Mineo Nakajima, *Gakureki Kakumei: Kokusai Kyoyo Daigaku no Chosen* (The Revolution of Degree-based Society: The Challenge of Akita International University), K. K. Besuto Ser-aazu, Tokyo, 2012, p. 24. Recently, AIU used the American liberal arts institutions of Dickinson College, the College of William and Mary and Georgetown University as global benchmarking partners. Cf. AIU, "Top Global University Project (Type B): Akita International University, p. 5. Accessible at: <https://tgu.mext.go.jp/en/universities/aiu/pdf/chosho.pdf>

2 Insung Jung has traced the origins of the western liberal arts tradition to the Ancient World, specifically to the *paideia* curriculum of Hellenic Greece and the *liberalia studia* of ancient Rome. In medieval times, European universities formalized their curriculum into the seven liberal arts of the scientifically-oriented Quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy), and the humanities-oriented Trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric). In trying to articulate "liberal arts" more precisely in an modern, global context, Jung uses Rebecca Chopp's definition of "liberal arts education" as a broad-based curriculum emphasizing the three principles of "critical thinking, moral and civic character, and using knowledge to improve the world." Jung's and Chopp's definition of the liberal arts is a useful reference, but any generalized definition of "liberal arts" masks important differences and contradictions within the term. This essay will therefore avoid categorical definitions of liberal arts and instead explore how AIU and NEM chose to articulate their own version of holistic, communication-focused education on their own terms. Insung Jung, "Introduction," in Jung, Nishimura and Sasao eds. *Liberal Arts Education and Colleges in East Asia*, Springer, Singapore, 2016, pp. 2,5. Jung's citation of Chopp: "Remaking, renewing, reimagining the liberal arts college takes advantage of change," in Chopp, Frost and Weiss eds., *Remaking college: Innovation and the liberal arts*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2014, pp. 13-24.

3 This essay will adopt the western naming convention of placing first/given names before family names.

The international liberal arts of AIU builds upon past liberal arts models, but also adds practical courses to help (students)⁴ adapt to an ever-changing global society. This includes perfecting one's foreign language ability to engage in international society, and through this, to create intellectual experiences that will cultivate students' ability to make decisive actions (in life). That is AIU's purpose. This international liberal arts curriculum will also merge with the advancement of technology as (Steve) Jobs has argued for; it will allow students to engage in the new information technology environment and adapt to contemporary society. This is how we will realize liberal arts education.⁵

Seventy-five years prior to AIU's founding --above a tofu shop near Akita Station-- another education project emphasizing the importance of language mastery and broad-based content knowledge was started by a group of disaffected public elementary school teachers.⁶ As a regional variant of a larger prewar composition-writing pedagogy movement, the Daily Life Writing movement (*Seikatsu Tsuzurikata Undo*, hereafter DLW),⁷ NEM educators

4 Parenthetical annotations in quoted passages have been inserted by the author.

5 Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 43. Unless otherwise indicated, all Japanese translations in this essay are by the author.

6 Initially funded by tofu-entrepreneur and former Mitane substitute teacher, Narita Chukyu, NEM educators first began their activities in 1927 as a pedagogy discussion society. The actual NEM organization was incorporated in 1930. Cf. Kato Shushiro, *Waga Hoppo Kyoiku no Michi: Aru Seikatsu Tsuzurikata Kyoshi no Showa-shi* (The Way of Our Northern Education: The Recent History of One Life Composition Teacher), Mumeisha, Akita, 1979, pp. 55-56.

7 English-language scholarship on the DLW gives a good summary of the major figures and issues related to the movement. Cf. Satsuki Hiraoka, "The Ideology and Practices of *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata*: Education by Teaching Expressive Writing," *Educational Studies in Japan: International Yearbook*, 6, 2011, pp. 21-31, and Ayako Kawaji, "Daily life writing' in school: Creating alternative textbooks and culture," in Hiroyuki Kuno and Yoko Yamasaki eds., *Educational Progressivism, Cultural Encounters and Reform in Japan*, Routledge, London, 2017, pp. 109-123. The scholarship of Kaoru Miyazawa has highlighted the iconoclastic aspects of DLW and has sought to locate it within a broader "critical pedagogy" discourse. Cf. Miyazawa, "Creating a new space and a new alliance in the global age: A dialogue between Freirian pedagogy and *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata*" in Pierre Orelus, ed. *Interrogating Critical Pedagogy: The Voices of Educators of Color in the Movement*,

viewed communication, specifically the development of student writing, as essential to developing pupil's long-term success in life. As Masayuki Suzuki, an elementary school teacher who worked in present-day Nikaho argued, writing was students' most important "life tool" that enabled them to address their own needs and act upon their own life ambitions.⁸ Although NEM teachers did not draw upon American "liberal arts" models per se, in cobbling together a holistic "life guidance" (*seikatsu sido*) curriculum, they also imagined education as fundamentally transformational. As an elementary school teacher once assigned to the hard-scrabble port neighborhood of Tsuchisaki, Sasaki Ko, argued, the act of writing was not simply practice in formal communication, but the linchpin around which children learned and deepened their understanding about various aspects of daily life. By making students aware of their "life foundations" (*seikatsudai*), NEM teachers helped students articulate a *de facto* "life philosophy" "in the broadest sense." As with Nakajima a century later, Sasaki also sought to integrate language and technology. As he explained:

...the writing side of the (elementary school) curriculum should not continue, as before, based on a formal subject-based approach. Rather, it should include the entirety of children's life in some way or other. This so-called "life guidance" is the foundation of our approach... For us, it is the combination of a math/technology curriculum and a writing-based curriculum, but it is an integration built upon the latter.... It is not simply the combining of life-based topics with learning materials, but rather arranging life-based topics as the learning materials. Through this approach, the issues of learning technology issues etc. will solve themselves. ...In thinking of students from the lower classes (in particular) we must consider their life

Routledge, New York, 2015, 187-204.

⁸ Masayuki Suzuki, *Suzuki Masayuki no Hoppo Kyoiku Chosakushu* (Suzuki Masayuki's Collected Works on Northern Education), Yuri Insatsu, Akita, 1992, pp. 42-43.

philosophy and through this think of approaches emphasizing the productive nature of life in the broadest sense.⁹

On those occasions when NEM teachers explicitly invoked the discourse of *kyoyo* (whose meaning alternately meant “cultivation,” “refinement” or *bildung* in the prewar, and “liberal arts” in the postwar), the parallels to AIUs vision became even clearer. As the Yamagata-based educator Toshitaro Murayama argued, a truly effective *kyoyo* also had to be forward looking and adaptable. “In order to insure a minimum level of *kyoyo* for the people,” Murayama intoned, “it cannot be determined simply by setting curricular guidelines based on the current (and past) education system ... what we need (instead) is (a *kyoyo*) based on the needs of the peoples’ actual lives, or more accurately, standards determined by a critical analysis of where the people’s actual needs will be tomorrow.” On a curricular level, Murayama also anticipated Nakajima’s call for a broad-based approach to knowledge, noting that the biggest obstacle to the “formation of (an effective) *kyoyo* is (having) a *kyoyo* insufficiently imbued with (a knowledge of) science, economics and history.”¹⁰

AIU and NEM were two initiatives that emerged from radically different educational contexts: the former a self-conscious attempt to create an “elite,” “global standard” of 21st century Japanese

9 Reflecting the impoverished nature of their students, NEM teachers were much more conscious of the class ramifications implicit in education. When devising a curriculum of “life-based topics” they specifically avoided what they saw as the overly “play-centered” nature of middle-class educators, influenced by American progressive education. As Sasaki critically noted of such education, “the current approach to life-based topics is centered around child’s play as if children’s life is actually just one of fun.” Ko Sasaki, “Seikatsu-Sangyo-Kyoiku (Life-Production-Education),” *Seikatsu Gakko* (Life School), June, 1938, p. 13.

10 Toshitaro Maruyama, “Our Kyoyo” (*Watashi-tachi no kyoyo*), *Kyoiku Kokugo*, March 1940, reprinted in *Murayama Toshitaro Chosakushu* (Collected Works of Murayama Toshitaro), vol. 3, pp. 250-253, and cited from Ayako Kawaji, “Senzen seikatsu tsuzurikata ni okeru kyoiku hyokaron no kozo: 1930 nendai no ‘shudanteki gohyo sagyo’ no bunseki wo chushin ni (Construction of the theory of education assessment in prewar daily life writing: with particular analysis of ‘group mutual evaluation activities’ in the 1930s’), *Nihon Kyoiku Hoho Gakkai Kiyō: Kyoiku Hohogaku Kenkyū* (Education Methods Research: A Research Bulletin of the Japan Education Methods Association), vol. 30, 2004, p. 6.

higher education;¹¹ the latter, born out of a Depression era attempt to head-off the socio-economic dislocation of impoverished rural Tohoku elementary school students. Despite their different origins, they both devised a language-intensive, holistic educational program dedicated to addressing the life-needs of their learners. Their similarities are therefore intrinsically interesting. Indeed, if AIU was so inclined, it could reasonably lay claim to being the modern-day inheritor of this almost century-old tradition.

Yet the example of NEM is also a useful reference for the way the two educational visions diverged. This study will highlight how these differences manifested themselves and explore how these contrasts could provide a valuable reference for AIU's future course. As AIU finishes its second decade of operation and reconsiders its education mission for the long-term, NEM's own legacy of "life guidance" arguably provides a useful complement to Nakajima's original vision of "international liberal arts." In particular, NEM could provide insights in at least three areas: the way education institutions should relate to local community, the way educators should approach teaching and learning, and the fundamental goals of an education curriculum.

A Pedagogy of Communal Engagement

First, NEM's emergence as an educational movement was intertwined with its attempt to ameliorate society during the context of the unprecedented socio-economic immiseration of the Great Depression. According to a 1931 Akita prefectural survey, over 5000 impoverished children were reported to be going without lunch or experiencing malnutrition, and only about 100 of Akita's roughly 350 elementary schools reported no student food insecurity. The collapse of rice prices, cold weather and the ensuing crop failure in 1931, 1932 and 1934 turned an economic catastrophe

¹¹ With regards to liberal art helping Japan develop "elite" human resources, e.g. Mineo Nakajima, *Naze, Kokusai Kyoyo Daigaku de Jinzai wa Sodastu no ka* (Why is AIU Able to Develop Human Resources?), Shodensha, Tokyo, 2010, pp. 77-78; with regards to AIU leading way on "global standards," e.g. Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 184.

into an intractable social one.¹² Climaxing in the brutal famine of 1934, crop yields dropped 40% in the region as a whole and forced many into emergency starvation diets of eating tree bark and plant bulbs. This decade-long collapse also led to a corresponding disintegration of rural society. The pain and dislocation of time epitomized by the wide-spread phenomenon of *musume-uri*, literally “daughter selling,” where poor families were forced to indenture female family members in exploitative contracts of prostitution and manual labor.¹³

The contemporary writings of NEM teachers expressed the collective horror of the times, but they also made clear that they also saw the suffering as a man-made creation. One elementary school teacher in the mountainous area of Senboku, Sakamoto Fukuyuki, expressed how “dumbfounded” he was teaching in a “feudal” community of crushing inequalities. He noted how a few landowning families dominated 600 “serf/slave-like” (*reizoku*) tenant-farming families.¹⁴ In such dire economic circumstances, moralistic platitudes and the comfortable injunctions of “desktop humanism” could no longer “provide solutions.” To be a responsible educator, meant simultaneously working with the community stakeholders, and recognizing that the very complexity of these social problems limited the ways they could actually help. Sakamoto lamented his plight:

The current situation is not a problem that can be settled by simply saying ‘behave better.’ The reality is too serious. I would only look like an idiot (for doing such). This year, (two students) were sold to a red-light district in Hakodate

12 Ayako Kawaji, “Kato Shushiro no tsuzurikata hyokaron to sono jissai (Kato Shushiro’s theory of composition assessment and its reality),” *Kyoto Daigaku Daigakuin Kyoi-kugaku Kenkyuka Kiyo* (The Research Bulletin of the Graduate Education Faculty of Kyoto University), vol. 48, 2002, p. 380.

13 Kerry Smith, *A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression and Rural Revitalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), pp. 243, 250, 113.

14 Fukuyuki Sakamoto, “Hokokuki (A record of reports),” *Hoppo Kyoiku* (Northern Education), vol. 16 January, 1936, pp. 18-19. With regards to Sakamoto’s Senboku, Akita address, *Ibid.* p. 22.

(in southern Hokkaido). Working with the town hall and clergymen, we tried to prevent this from happening. However, one of the fathers came to us pleading against this intervention. With this red-light district's money, (the father) argued, he could find work in Kamchatka (and support his family moving forward). He noted that he would have to pay back the money he already received otherwise. The other four members of the family would starve. If it was just saving the life of the child, that would be one thing; but (it is) a choice between the sadness of the sold child or the pain of a starving family. I am at a complete loss on how to go forward.... In this time of famine, desktop humanism and (current) educational approaches do not provide solutions.¹⁵

Faced with such bleak choices, NEM teachers tried to develop a new kind of pedagogy that would help students make the best of an unimaginable situation. On the one hand, they elaborated their approach to "life guidance" by cultivating within students' an ability to meet the intense challenges of Depression on their own. In response to Sakamoto's complaints, a teacher in neighboring Kitakami, Iwate, Atsushi Yoshida, argued that it was essential to support students through the concept of "roman-ten-ism."¹⁶ Not simply a misspelling of "romanticism", Yoshida appeared to be drawing upon the original German *bildungsroman* emphasis of "coming of age" and personal growth. To help students, a "roman-tenism-centered" education would develop "life skills," and foster a "will" (*iyoku*) to live based on a better understanding of one's "life foundation" and its relationship to the world around them. In concrete terms, NEM teachers designed classroom writing assignments asking them to unflinchingly describe daily life as it really was. To an extent often not seen among other contemporary Daily Life writing movements, NEM educators used this realism

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Atsushi Yoshida, "Sakamoto Ani no' hokokuki' wo yomu (Reading Older Brother Sakamoto's 'A record of reports')," *Hoppo Kyoiku* (Northern Education), vol. 16, January, 1936, p. 20.

to create a total approach to education. As Yoshida summed up, it was incumbent on teachers to help children grasp the “reality” of all of village life: students could therefore develop an “attitude towards the reality of village life...(and) gain the life skills to live out their lives.”¹⁷

On the other hand, NEM educators also explicitly called for communal amelioration. Even as Sakamoto and Yoshida pointedly avoided advocating “strange” or “frightful” (i.e. Marxist) ideas and concepts,¹⁸ this did not mean that they did not see their actions in broader social-political terms. If NEM writing classes were meant to strengthen students’ understanding of Depression-era life realities it became increasingly difficult to ignore other underlying “colonial” realities. As the “organizational plan” of the NEM-sponsored teacher association, the Northern Japan National Language Education Alliance (*Kita Nihon Kokugo Kyoiku Renmei*, hereafter NJNLEA) summed up in 1935, the stakes for composition education in the Tohoku region could not be higher. Their fight was no longer to assist in the uplift of individual students, but to help them understand the broader structural inequity that “oppressed” and “muddied” rural society more generally. NEM practitioners saw their mission as no less than saving the “exposed children” and their communities by helping them better “achieve control” over their very lives:

...Except for the colonies, no other part of Japan has been as culturally ignored as north Japan; nor has the steely oppressiveness of feudalism, with its corresponding modes of production, been allowed to continue in its raw form (as here). Moreover, in this harsh environment, this region of muddy, dark streams, we all equally have a “life founda-

17 Atsushi Yoshino, “Sakamoto Ani no ‘hokokuki’ wo yomu,” *Hoppo Kyoiku*, 16 (January 1936), pp. 20-21. For more historical background on this exchange between Sakamoto and Yoshida, cf. Naoto Tsuchiya, “1935-nen zengo ni okeru hoppo kyoiku no itidanmen: Yoshida Atsushi no itironko kara (A cross section of Northern Education around the year 1935: From the debates of Yoshida Atsushi),” *Iwate Daigaku Bunkaronso* (Iwate University Cultural Series), vol. 7-8, 2009, pp. 118-127.

18 Sakamoto, *op. cit.*, p. 19; Yoshida, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

tion" (*seikatsudai*). It is only upon an education based on a righteous attitude thereto that true education and enlightened guidance may be grasped and established. Moreover, because of this, we educators of northern Japan are conscious of the fact that we can only contribute to all of Japan by actively and systematically raising children up (in this way). In order to cultivate in our students this righteous attitude towards their "life foundations," we cannot simply observe the facts of a child's life and sit back contemplatively, with crossed-arms. We must enter the muddy waters and go right up to the exposed children. More than ever we must throw away pointless liberalism; we must help them in achieving control over their lives quickly and establishing their raw ambitions (*iyoku*).¹⁹

Equally important, this call for social amelioration was not simply rhetorical: many NEM teachers used their status as leading members of the local community to facilitate grass roots rural reform. As leading NEM scholar, Ayako Kawaji, has noted, Sasaki saw the trajectory of education as one leading "'from the individualistic to the social.'" As the 1930s unfolded, Sasaki himself worked to organize and strengthen educational programs within the rural cooperative movement. Meanwhile former Kawabe-elementary school teacher, Kato Shushiro worked to improve career guidance programs for under-privileged adolescents.²⁰ NEM

19Kita Nippon Kokugo Kyoiku Renmei, *Kita Nippon kokugo kyoiku renmei: Sekkeizu* ("Northern Japan national language education alliance - Design plan"). *Kyoiku Kita Nippon*. (*Education Northern Japan*), vol. 1, January, 1935 p. 1. It is worth noting that this self-image of Tohoku being a marginalized, "backwards" part of Japan would later be reworked in a conservative postwar setting to affirm the region's more putatively "authentic" Japanese values. Cf. Nathan Hopson, *Ennobling Japan's Savage Northeast: Tohoku as Postwar Thought, 1945-2011*, Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, 2017.

20 Kawaji, *op. cit.*, 2017, p. 114. Kawaji is, in turn, drawing from points made in Takashi Ito and Hirokazu Sato, "Sasaki Ko Kenkyu (Research on Sasaki Ko)", in Sasaki, *op. cit.*, pp. 277-358. For an example of Sasaki affirming NEM cooperation with late 1930s rural cooperatives, cf. Sasaki, "Akita no hoppo kyoiku undo," *Kyoiku* (Education), October, 1939, as reprinted in Sasaki, *op. cit.*, pp. 225, 230-231. For more on Kato's efforts in career guidance, cf. Hajime Kimura, "Hoppo kyoiku to kagaku kyoiku undo: Kato Shushiro no shokugyo sido jissen ni chumoku site (Northern Education and the Scientific Education movement: With focus on Kato Shushiro's career guidance practice), *Hitotsubashi Ronso*

teachers also used classroom assignments to directly benefit the interests of the broader community. One widely publicized classroom activity was the so-called “investigative compositions” (*siraberu tsuzurikata*) assignment, which asked students to observe the world through surveys and other “scientific” approaches. By investigating society in a deliberate manner, teachers sought to develop students’ ability to analyze the world around them better. Although the practice itself did not start in Tohoku,²¹ NEM practitioners infused these investigative assignments with a community-focused sensibility that transformed them into a qualitatively different kind of educational experience. Whereas DLW educators in the western prefecture of Tottori might have students conduct an “objective” writing project mapping where students stumbled at a school athletic event, in contrast, Yamagata prefecture teacher, Ichitaro Kokubun, had students collect data on yearly snowfall patterns. This was to help the village community better prepare for winter, and head off the “famines” that so “dominate the misery of humans.”²² Kato similarly devised an assignment where middle-school age students engaged in “collaborative research” projects that explored the potential causes for classmates’ family’s financial struggles. In one example, Kato’s students diagnosed the root cause of a classmate’s family’s loss of income: the collapse of the student’s grandmother’s *shamisen* school. Kato’s student researchers ultimately placed blame for the family’s struggles on a recent licensing-system implemented by the local *shamisen* instructors’ association that prohibited instruction by non-professionals.

(Collected Essays of Hitotsubashi), 114(2), August, 1995, pp. 234-252. Kato’s career as a teacher started literally down the road from AIU at Kawabe’s Kamikata elementary school. Kato, *op. cit.*, p. 53

21 These investigative approaches were being developed around Japan by adherents of the DLW movement through much of the early 1930s. The work of Tottori elementary school teacher, Mitsushige Mineji is probably one of the better known examples. Cf. Kiyomichi Kitaoka’s chapter on Mineji in his monograph, *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata Jissenshi Kenkyu* (Research into the History of Daily Life Writing Teaching Practice), Keisui, Hiroshima, 2009, pp. 85-128.

22 Kiyomichi Kitaoka, *op. cit.*, p. 105; Ichitaro Kokubun, “Seikatsu benkyo-noson tsuzurikata (Life study and farm village writing)” in *Tsuzurikata Kyoiku Jissen Sosho Dai-ichi: Tsuzurikata Seikatsu Sido no Soshikiteki Jissen* (Writing Education Practice Series Volume #1: Daily Life Writing Instruction and Organizational Practice), Toen, Tokyo, 1935, p. 49.

The students' responses touched upon the policy implications of this research by noting the seeming unfairness of the situation. They also advanced suggestions for how their classmates' family could escape their current plight.

In one early instance, Kato's classroom exercises could at times skirt the border of explicit socio-political protest. In an attempt to have students go beyond a "narrow moral consciousness," he asked students to consider why some of their poorer classmates (who often had to go without lunch) had families who could not pay their tenancy rents. Some students even pointedly wondered why it was that some families had to starve when wealthy landowner families already had more than enough rice to eat.²³ This practice of student-led, policy-focused communal research also continued into the postwar period. In the best-selling 1951 work of Yamagata middle school teacher (and Kokubun protégé) Muchaku Seikyo, *Mountain Echo School (Yamabikko Gakko)*, students applied a critical eye to the ways macro-inflation, changes in local commercial relations, local politics, as well as government rural revitalization efforts all impacted daily life. As Adam Branson and Yamaguchi Toya have also noted, NEM-inspired pedagogy initiatives also prompted students from across Japan to consider larger issues of postwar geo-politics and labor reform.²⁴

23 Kawaji, *op. cit.* 2004, pp. 8-9. Kawaji's analysis in turn cites from Kato, "Seikatsu tsuzurikata no genjitsu no mondai-III (The problems of reality and life composition -Part III)," *Hoppo Kyoiku* (Northern Education), vol. 12, August 1933, p. 38.

24 E.g. Asae Nakahashi and Yuriko Seino, "Zasshi ha naze tubureru ka (Why do Magazines go bankrupt?)" in Seikyo Muchaku ed., *Yamabiko Gakko*, (Mountain Echo School), Iwanami Shoten (reprint), Tokyo, 1995, pp. 111-115; Tosaburo Sato, "Boku wa ko kangaueru (This is what I think)," *Ibid.*, pp. 151-159; Yoshinori Kawai, "Kome toroku (Rice Registration)," *Ibid.*, pp. 243-255. Cf. Adam Branson, *One Hundred Million Philosophers: Science of Thought and Culture of Democracy in Postwar Japan*, Hawaii, Honolulu, 2016, pp. 123-160; Toya Yamaguchi, "1950 nendai zenhan no Iwakuni beigunkiti to seikatsu tsuzurikata: Onda Misao ni your gakko bunshu 'deruta' hensen to sono hankyo ni chakumoku site" ("Iwakuni US Military Base and 'Seikatsu-Tsuzurikata' in the early 1950s: Focusing on responses to Misao Onda's compilation of a collection of school essays, 'Delta'"), *Nihon no Kyoikushigaku (Studies in the History of Japanese Education)*, Vol. 61, pp. 19-31.

NEM educators' consistent efforts to link student learning to local community issues, could therefore serve as a useful reference for AIU efforts moving forward. Indeed, one criticism that could be leveled at AIU during its first decade of existence is the slowness with which it incorporated "Akita" into its larger educational vision. As noted above, President Nakajima, drew his liberal arts models from Steve Jobs and the Ivy League, as well as his direct experience as a visiting fellow at the University of California San Diego. When looking for inspiration within Japan, he likewise focused on non-Akita educators such as Shoin Yoshida, Inazo Nitobe and Shinichi Suzuki.²⁵ Akita's role in AIU's liberal arts was initially passive and generic, alternately characterized as rustic *chiho* ("countryside") valorized for its peaceful environs, or as a quintessentially "Japanese" site of cultural encounter (e.g. through Namahage festivals). In less charitable renderings, Akita's remote location has been identified as a potential "handicap" that AIU must overcome to reach the "global standards" of a leading liberal arts institution.²⁶ Linking NEM's heritage of communal involvement to AIU's liberal arts model would therefore be a symbolic first-step towards binding Akita prefecture's and AIU's fortunes ever closer.

The Akita assembly and the local taxpayers who fund the University need not see AIU as an institution developed by and for outsiders. Indeed, by consciously engaging NEM's educational heritage, AIU could also solidify the communally focused trends that have already been taking place within the University over the last decade. The success of the University's award-winning

25 With regards to how Job's saw 21st century success as a blending technology and liberal arts, cf. Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 40-42. For Nakajima's inspiration from his time at University of California at San Diego, cf. *Ibid.*, 25, 175. Nakajima did mention the intellectual heritage of specific Akita intellectuals such as Shoeki Ando and Naito Konan, but they were mentioned in passing. In contrast, he expressed intense admiration for Yoshida's active embrace of foreign learning and the way he helped create "human resources that would give rise to the highest leaders of the Meiji period." Nitobe was similarly praised for how he used his mastery of English to more deeply explore his own identity as a Japanese; Shinichi Suzuki's violin method was also held up as a model of applied, habit-based skill-building. *Ibid.*, 207, 168. Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 2010, pp. 127-133.

26 Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 2012, pp. 204-205, 187. Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 2010, 105.

Project Based Learning (PBL) program is the most concrete manifestation of this tendency. These short-term courses have allowed students to work with local stake-holders to address pressing communal issues (e.g. “aging society,” “rural economic revitalization,” “international migration”). Through local internships and service learning coursework, AIU also continues expand the place of “town-gown” relations in its education profile.²⁷ Thankfully, the Akita of today does not face the socio-economic collapse of the prewar period; but the challenges of pending *demographic* collapse are no less real.²⁸

Teacher Collaboration and Reflective Practice

Second, NEM’s unique approach to teaching and learning emphasized practitioner collaboration and reflective practice. NEM was arguably one of the most successful grass-roots education movements --the so-called “popular education movements” (*minkan kyoiku undo*)—of the interwar period. Coinciding with the expansion of the normal school system and the overall professionalization of Japanese teachers between the 1910s and 1930s, this era witnessed the formation of a generation of elementary school teachers more self-consciously committed to their own professional development. Led by prominent educators from leading private schools, normal schools and an emerging education journalism industry, these grass movements generated an educational dynamism that belies the regimented image of a prewar education system dominated by the Ministry of Education, prefectural officials or the semi-official teacher organizations of the Imperial Education Association.²⁹ Indeed, due to a lacuna in the late Meiji el-

²⁷ Peter McCagg, *Internationalizing Higher Education in Rural Japan* (Provost Perspective Series), Association of International Education Administrators, Durham, NC, 2015, p. 7. Accessible at https://www.aieaworld.org/assets/docs/Provosts_Perspectives/provost%20perspectives%20-%20akita-%20mccagg.pdf

²⁸ Cf. Akita Prefectural Government, *Akita Jinko Mondai Repooto: 2040nen, Jinko 70 Man-nin Shakai e no Chosen* (Report on Akita’s Population Problem: The Challenge of Dealing with a Society of 700,000 people), *Jinko Mondai Purojekuto Tiimu*, 2015. Accessible at: <https://www.pref.akita.lg.jp/pages/archive/9318>

²⁹ For a brief synopsis of the formation of the nation-wide normal school system, and the other trends of the interwar period, cf. Masami Yamamoto, *Nihon Kyoikukushi: Kyoiku*

elementary school curriculum, prewar composition instruction was never bound by a state-prescribed textbook as in other subjects. As a result, Japanese writing education was given surprisingly wide latitude to develop on its own. Educators increasingly developed pedagogies emphasizing free formed, life-focused essay writing. These teaching approaches included Ashida Ennosuke's, "elective topic writing approach" during the 1910s, the aesthetic realism of Suzuki Miekichi's *Red Bird* magazine that enjoined students to write about life "as is" (*ari no mama ni*) during the 1920s, and the social realism of DLW pedagogues such as Sasaoka Tadayoshi in the early 1930s.³⁰

NEM followed in the footsteps of these other movements, particularly overlapping in ideas and personnel with the DLW. Nonetheless, NEM was particularly noteworthy for its horizontal and collaborative organizational nature. Whereas, the center of gravity of other writing movements centered around the progressive education world of Tokyo—and the continuing influence of such charismatic figures as Sawayanagi Masataro and Entaro Noguchi—the situation in the North remained decentralized.³¹ Started above the Akita tofu-shop of part-time substitute teacher, Narita Chukyu, NEM was a movement that never coalesced around one authoritative leader. Akita educators such as Narita, Kato, Sasaki, Suzuki, and former Meitoku elementary school teacher, Namekawa Michio, exercised substantial influence on the movement, but the movement remained under the guidance of a couple dozen *dojin* (literally, "like-minded-persons") who collectively steered the movement's course. A broader group of "friends" of NEM also emerged, with about 180 educators being so identified in March of 1930.³² NEM was also diffuse geographically. Although

no 'Ima' wo Rekishi kara Kangaeru, 2014, Keio, University, Tokyo, pp. 185-187. 219-269.

30 Cf. Hiraoka, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

31 For a summary of the key educators of the interwar "new education" movement, cf. Yoko Yamasaki, "New education and Taisho democracy, 1900-1930s," in Tsujimoto and Yamasaki eds. *The History of Education in Japan, 1600-2000*, Routledge, London, 2017, pp. 61-68

32 Hoppo Kyoiku Henshusitu, "Warera ga Siyu (We are Friends of the Magazine)," *Northern Education*, March, 1930, pp. 64-65.

Akita remained the center of NEM activities, it quickly incorporated leading figures from neighboring Yamagata (e.g. Kokubun, Murayama), Iwate (e.g. Yoshida, Keigo Takahashi), Miyagi (e.g. Michita Suzuki, Masao Iwama), Aomori (e.g. Saitaro Mikami) and Hokkaido (e.g. Bunsuke Kimura, Akito Sakamoto). The humble socio-economic background of leading NEM educators also made it more difficult for organizational power to concentrate in the hands of one or two members. With few exceptions, most NEM educator could not afford education beyond local prefectural normal schools.³³ Adding insult to injury, Akita prefecture—cash-strapped and impoverished in the best of time—had one of highest rates of teacher salary delinquency throughout the Depression. In one August 1933 survey, for example, almost 40% of the prefecture’s elementary schools had not paid teacher salaries.³⁴

Moreover, the bulk of the “new country teachers” who made up the NEM (and, indeed most of the DLW movement in general) tended to be young teachers in their 20s who entered the profession around the start of the Great Depression. As the DLW leader Tadayoshi Sasaoka noted, this new generation of teachers were professionally frustrated and on the “lowest rung” of the Japanese education establishment. With such “unrealized aspirations,” these recent normal school graduates tended to be more iconoclastic and eager to find community with colleagues with new teaching ideas.³⁵ Sakamoto himself, noted that NEM and the articles of the

33 Kokubun and Sasaki, arguably the two most influential writers of the movement were respectively from the families of a barber and a struggling farmer/fisherman. Meanwhile Kato was forced to give up his dream of attending a Tokyo university due to a family health emergency. Murayama was unable to advance beyond higher elementary school and attained his teacher’s license on his own. Minoru Otokuni, “Kokubun Ichitaro no seikatsu tsuzurikata kyoiku no rinen (Kokubu Ichitaro’s idea of life composition education),” *Jissen Joshi Daigaku Seikatsu Kagakubu Kiyo* (Jissen Women’s University Bulletin of the Faculty of Life Studies), vol. 50, 2013, p. 53; Sasaki, *op. cit.*, p. 368; Kato, *op. cit.*, 8; Toshitaro Murayama, *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata to Kyoshi no Sigoto* (Daily Life Writing and the Work of the Teacher), Taro Murayama ed., 2004, Kiri Shobo, Tokyo, p. 2.

34 Kawaji, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 380. These figures are themselves from Shushiro Kato’s, *Akita no Hoppo Kyoikushi*, Akitaken Kyoshokuin Kumiai, Akita, 1964, p. 166.

35 Kaoru Yokosuka “Showa Shoki seikatsu Tsuzurikata Undo no Kessei (The formation of the Daily Life Movement in the early Showa period).” *Miyagi Kyoiku Daigaku Kiyo* (Research Bulletin of Miyagi Education University), vol. 24, 1990, pp. 31-33. Yokosuka

organizational magazine, *Northern Education*, remained his “only compass” in the face of such hardships, while Yoshida sought to cheer up “older brother” Sakamoto by praising “the depths of his good intentions” and assuring him that things would get better.³⁶ NEM teachers also created a network of county-level “research associations” that facilitated new horizontal relationships and professional contacts. Sakamoto and Yoshida worked only 20-30 miles away from each other – literally on opposite sides of the Waga mountain range in Senboku and Kitakami – but as teachers in different prefectures, they inhabited separate worlds beholden to different hierarchies in Akita city and Morioka.³⁷ Recently published correspondence of Narita with other leading NEM figures such as Sasaki, Kato and Kokubun highlight the importance NEM leadership placed on actively introducing Tohoku teachers to one and other. The historian Naoto Tsuchiya has likewise traced the efforts of Kato to build up the NEM movement by actively engaging with local teacher research associations in Tohoku throughout the mid to late 1930s. Between 1934-1935, Kato corresponded with both Yoshida and Sakamoto, and most likely met with both at least once between 1935 and 1939.³⁸

As a result of these grass-roots efforts, NEM eventually organized Tohoku elementary school teachers to an unprecedented degree. With Narita’s tofu-shop proceeds, NEM *dojin* operated an independent publishing company which published a pedagogy journal, *Northern Education*, and a children’s literary magazine, *Northern Composition Review*. At their height, these journals enjoyed circulations in the thousands. NEM similarly, organized regional

is in turn quoting from Tadayoshi Sasaoka, “Tsururikatakai ni okeru tomen no mondai (The pressing problems in the world of composition education),” *Jissen Kokugo Kyoiku* (The Practice of National Language Education), September, 1934.

³⁶ Sakamoto, *op. cit.* p. 20; Yoshida, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

³⁷ Tsuchiya, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

³⁸ Cf. Chukyu Narita, *Tegami de tsuzuru hoppo kyoiku no rekishi* (A History of Northern Education through Correspondence), edited by Toda Kinichi et al.. Kyoiku Shiryo Shuppankai, Tokyo, 1999; .Tsuchiya, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-134.

conferences such as those for the NJNLEA, each achieving attendance rates in the several of hundreds.³⁹ All combined, NEM and other “Northern”-styled groups in northern Honshu and Hokkaido emerged as the largest regional sub-strain of the prewar DLW with a total number of active participants likely in the low to mid-thousands.⁴⁰

What did NEM’s collaborative educational approach look like in practice? Through practitioner research meetings and myriad journal articles, NEM teachers articulated a distinctly reflective approach to education. In Kokubun’s attempt to create a “class that does not need lies,” for example, he instructed students in “the means of studying for life,” through “detailed writing tasks” of daily life that also conveyed “methods of properly valuing oneself.”⁴¹ Elsewhere, teachers such as Iwate’s Yoshida, emphasized writing activities as a way for students to develop a “warm collective empathy,” that would help students develop “life skills” able to cope with practical issues of their communities. In the case of Kato’s classrooms, lessons often concluded with students commenting upon the content of classmate’s work and reflecting upon what they had learned from each other. Teachers saw such peer advice and feedback as central and constitutive of the learning process itself. In the case of Masayuki Suzuki, this reflective prac-

39 Circulation figures for NEM periodicals fluctuated over the course of their lifespan, so any estimate must remain tentative. According to Saburo Imai’s study of the Northern Education Publishing company, the teaching magazine, *Northern Education’s* circulation ranged from between 500-1800 copies. The company also published *Northern Composition Review (Hoppo Bunsen)* which reproduced exemplary student work taught by the NEM method. The *Review* saw circulations hover around 3000. Saburo Imai, “Hoppo Kyoikusha no kyoiku undo,” *Kyoikugaku Zasshi*, 16 (1980), p. 2. According to Kato, the 1935 meetings centered around the formation of the NJNLEA ranged from between 300-500 across Akita, Iwate and Miyagi. Kato, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-82.

40 E.g. Among the many independent NEM-like organizations in Iwate, Yamagata, Miyagi, Fukushima and Hokkaido, the last one, the Hokkaido Writing Education Alliance was likely the largest. It published a journal, *Hokkaido Bunsen*, that had a print size as high as 20,000 copies. Ebihara, *op. cit.*, p. 526. In contrast, Satsuki Hiraoka has noted that *Kanshou Bunsen*, a student composition magazine printed by the Tokyo-based DLW leader, Sasaoka Tadayoshi, only reached about 5000 elementary school teachers throughout the country. Hiraoka, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

41 Ichitaro Kokubun, *op cit*, 1935, pp. 30, 33.

tice even extended beyond school hours as students were encouraged to organize into after-school study clubs to work together on writing assignments.⁴² In the postwar period, Muchaku further emphasized self-reflection by encouraging regular journal writing asking students to relate their daily lives to different aspects of community, family and themselves. As the research of Kitagawa and Kitagawa noted in 2007, student journalizing (and teacher's supportive comments meant to catalyze self-reflection) have come to be the defining activity to the DLW movement seven decades later.⁴³ Indeed, this emphasis eventually spurred NEM teachers to adopt similar reflective practice in their own right. Beginning in the 1930s, NEM educators began compiling "practitioner records" (*jissen kiroku*) –detailed recordings of classroom happenings in narrative form. According to Murayama, such a tool helped teachers better grasp the actual phenomenon happening in their classes and in so doing, generate "fresh education ideas" to help student learning even further. Eventually, these innovations became incorporated into official teaching practice when the Ministry of Education endorsed the approach in 1940. In concrete ways, NEM's professional community helped facilitate the later spread the spread of better-known postwar practitioner networks such as the "Lesson Study" movement.⁴⁴

42 Yoshida, *op. cit.* pp. 20; Kawaji, *op. cit.* 2004, pp. 8-10; Satoru Kodajima, "'Hopppo Kyoikusha' dojin Suzuki Masayuki no jissen to seikatsu ni tuite no kosai: senzen ni okeru 'tokubetu katudo' no jissen to site (The practice of the Northern Education leader Suzuki Masayuki and an inquiry into 'life education:' the practice of 'special activities' in the prewar)" *Meisei Daigaku Kenkyu Kiyō* (Meisei University Research Bulletin), vol. 12, 2004, pp. 176-177.

43E.g. Sato Tosaburo, "Sumiyaki nikki (Journal of Charcoal-making)" Seikyo Muchaku ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 183-212; Mary Kitagawa and Chisato Kitagawa, "Core Values of Progressive Education: *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata* and Whole Language," *International Journal of Progressive Education*, Vol. 3 (2), 2007, pp. 52-57.

44 Toshitaro Murayama, *Murayama Toshitaro Chosakushu*, vol. 2, Hyakuai Shuppan, Tokyo, 1967, p. 119. Although the direct link between the practice of "practitioner records" and the Ministry's endorsement was Fumiko Hirano, who was not an NEM teacher per se, she worked closely with NEM leaders such as Kokubun. As Nakauchi points out, she also expanded upon the ideas earlier articulated by Murayama. Toshio Nakauchi, "1930 nendai no chiho kyoiku genba ni kessei saretā kyoikugaku hoho ishiki ni tsuite: Hopppo kyoikusha dojin no baai (Regarding the Consciousness of education methods formed in rural contexts during the 1930s: The case of Leaders of the Northern Education Organization)," *Kyoikugaku Kenkyu*, vol. 40 (4), December 1973, pp. 341. In identify-

AIU could thus use the legacy of NEM to solidify its own efforts in collaborative, reflective teaching practice. In contrast to AIU's initial years, where the founding president advocated American-styled, top-down approaches to education management,⁴⁵ the last decade has seen the University increasingly adopt more collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. As seen through the evolution of the University's Faculty Development (FD) program, AIU has come to emphasize the importance of shared teaching practice not unlike that of NEM's prewar education "research" associations. Through regular, voluntary FD sessions, directed and guided by a faculty-run committee, the University has created a self-initiating, grass-roots culture of professionalism.⁴⁶ AIU's horizontal networks have also recently facilitated the cross-pollination of curricular ideas and learning innovation. Whereas AIU initially encouraged a "repetitive," almost Pavlovian, approach to language pedagogy – as embodied by the first President's advocacy of the Suzuki Violin Method as a model for English conversation practice – under the current President, Norihiko Suzuki, AIU has adopted a diverse range of reflective-learning pedagogies, including the self-access approaches of the Language Development and Intercultural Studies Center (LDIC) and the Academic Achievement Center (AAC), flipped classroom formats, and problem-centered, PBL curricula.⁴⁷ This heightened emphasis on practitioner

ing the origins of the Lesson Study movement, Hisaki Toyoda notes the early classroom research practices of NEM supporters in Miyagi prefecture. Cf. Hisaki Toyoda, "Origins of Lesson Study and Post-war Education," in National Association for the Study of Educational Methods ed., *Lesson Study in Japan*, Keisuisha, 2011, pp. 16-18.

45 Nakajima, *op. cit.* 2012, p. 184. As Nakajima explained, his approach was not a "dictatorship," but rather similar to the process of American institutions' where decision-making authority was concentrated within the hands of the President and the Chair of Trustees. He also noted the ways AIU benefitted from the lack of intransigent Faculty Senates (*kyojukai*) who often undercut reforms in other Japanese universities. Nakajima, *op. cit.*, 2010, 81.

46 Japan University Accreditation Association, *Kokusai Kyoyo Daigaku ni taisuru Daigaku Hyoka (Ninsho Hyoka) Kekka* (Results of accreditation visit to AIU), 2015, p. 3. Accessible at: https://www.juaa.or.jp/updata/evaluation_results/553/20160323_721436.pdf

47 Nakajima, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104; Japan University Accreditation Association, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6, 10; AIU, "Top Global University Project (Type B) Akita International University: Project Summary," pp. 2-3, 5, 7 Accessible at: <https://tgu.mext.go.jp/en/universities/>

cooperation and reflection has led AIU faculty to reimagine the liberal arts with the imminent implementation of the new curriculum in 2021. Through reorganizing University academic programs, faculty will now be able to leverage their academic expertise and teaching strengths in more collaborative, interdisciplinary ways.⁴⁸

Critical Thinking and Life Guidance

Finally, NEM's "life guidance" approach articulated educational goals that prioritized student critical thinking and self-mastery. Although NEM and AIU both invoked these ideas in their respective educational missions, the specific meanings of these terms differ in important ways. Nakajima, for example, saw critical thinking primarily in terms of seeing an issue from multiple perspectives. Rather than an act of philosophical skepticism per se, "critical thinking" was first and foremost the pragmatic ability to solve problems in a diverse, globalized society. It was an extension of another goal of AIU's original mission: the development of global human resources (*gurobaru jinzai*). As he explained:

In order to respond appropriately to borderless social problems, it is important for (students) to select from a broad range of basic education classes in order to understand (the problem) from a diverse range of perspectives. In other words, through a wide-range of viewpoints, one can think critically ("Critical Thinking") and through this, one can gain the ability to adapt and the ability to find the best answer for any situation. AIU students are often praised by corporate employers for their ability to see things from multiple perspectives.⁴⁹

In this sense, Nakajima was drawing upon a liberal arts tradition

aiu/pdf/chosho.pdf

48AIU, *Shin Karikyuramu Gaiyo* (New Curriculum Leaflet), 2019, pp. 1-2. Accessible at: https://web.aiu.ac.jp/wp/wp-content/themes/aiu/doc/about/brochure/new_curriculum_leaflet.pdf

49Nakajima *op. cit.* 2012, 75

as old as Cicero. As the historian Bruce Kimball has argued, liberal arts education has always been driven by conflicting visions over what it should prioritize. On the one hand, to Roman republicans such as Cicero, the *artes liberales* should be a practical, “oratorical” approach that focused on the proficiency of communication and the cultivation of effective leaders. On the other hand, Greek iconoclasts such as Socrates, valorized the *paideia* tradition, specifically through its ability to develop within students a rigorous logical and ethical reasoning that could interrogate first assumptions.⁵⁰

NEM’s “life guidance” approach to education was similar to the latter tradition of Socratic critical philosophy. This was no accident. NEM leader’s most direct exposure to the liberal arts traditions was not with American higher education per se, but through a Platonic tradition updated and reworked through the 19th century hermeneutic philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey. As the above exchange over *romanten-ism* highlights, rank and file NEM educators were quite familiar with the German education concept of *bildung*. Leading NEM thinkers such as Ko Sasaki, Michio Namekawa and Shushiro Kato eagerly engaged the ideas of early German *bildung* theorists such as Hegel, Herbart and Pestalozzi, who in turn updated the *artes liberales* into the more philosophically rigorous form of the “human sciences.” *Geisteswissenschaften*, and the corresponding educational approach of *Geisteswissenschaftliche pädagogik*. Besides the works of the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, NEM teachers explored the ideas of Dilthey’s intellectual descendants, such as Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson and Benedetto Croce throughout the 1930s.⁵¹

50 Bruce Kimball ed., *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History*, University Press of America, Lanham MD, 2010, pp. 9-11. Consistent with Cicero’s pragmatic, “leadership” focused liberal arts, Nakajima placed particular importance on developing students’ leadership skills and ability to communicate more effectively. Nakajima, *op. cit.* 2012, p. 189; Nakajima, *op. cit.* 2010, p. 71).

51 For a broader treatment on the reworking of German ideas of *bildung* into early 20th century *Geisteswissenschaftliche pädagogik*, cf. Rebekka Horlacher, *The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung: A Comparative Cultural History*, Routledge, London: Routledge, 2016. For NEM writings on Benedetto Croce, cf. Michio Namekawa, “Keis-hoteki Tsuzurikata Kyoikuron -II (Formalistic Composition Education Theory: Part II)” *Hoppo Kyoiku* (Northern Education), no. 2, April 1930, pp. 37-44; for examples discuss-

What did NEM's philosophical approach to education look like? Through their innovative application of Diltheyan concepts, Akita teacher-philosophers articulated an education program of rigorous, moral reasoning. Specifically, NEM educators built upon contemporary German *Geisteswissenschaftliche* pedagogy to cultivate within students' an active "apprehension" (*Verstehen*, translated as *rikai*) of the world around them. Drawing upon the German ontological dualities of *Sein* ("to be") and *Sollen* ("ought to be"), Ko Sasaki and Namekawa Michio, grounded the process of education as a morally informed act. In order to effectively "apprehend" the "living nature of existence," one first had to be able to rigorously reason through the way the world "ought" to be. "Truth" itself became dynamically and collaboratively created, as written expression was not simply an act of recording reality *per se*, but itself a recreation of a shared reality shaped by agreed-upon ethical lines. As such, NEM's emphasis on writing, though communicative in a literal sense, paradoxically reconceived it as a hermeneutical tool for actively "reading" reality. As Namekawa emphasized in his 1934 work on applying Diltheyan hermeneutics to Japanese language teaching, "To truly apprehend existence, it is by grasping the possibility of the unity of "being" with "ought to being." ...As Dilthey explains, apprehending (*verstehen*) is the act of re-creation, or ... an act of sympathetic creation. Expressed words are therefore not externalized symbols of ideas but rather the final form of those ideas' (shared) development"⁵² Unlike Nakajima, for example, NEM's ideas of language mastery was less about improving one's skill of persuasion and more about developing the ability to more sharply understand the world.

ing Henri Bergson, cf. Namekawa, "Keishoteki Tsuzurikata Kyoikuron -III (Formalistic Composition Education Theory: Part III)" *Hoppo Kyoiku* (Northern Education), no. 3, May 1930, pp. 23-29; for an essay touching upon Heideggerian ontology, cf. Shushiro Kato, "Seikatsu tsuzurikata no genjitsu no mondai II: Seikatsu ni okeru jidosei to sono tsuzurikatasei (The problems with reality and daily life writing -Part II: Childishness in life and its compositionality)," *Hoppo Kyoiku* (Northern Education), no. 11, May 1933, pp. 31-36.

⁵² Michio Namekawa, *Kokugo Kyoiku no Jissenteki Kotiku: Hyogen-Keisho-Kaishaku (Constructive National Language Education Practice: Expression-Form-Hermeneutics)*, Yubun Shoin, Tokyo, 1934, pp. 42-43.

Elsewhere, Namekawa explicitly took these Diltheyan ideas farther than his German contemporaries by reworking this holistic, sympathetic morality into a critical pedagogy. As he argued in 1930, by blending “strict analysis” with a “critical eye,” students could embark on a genuine course of “life research” that could “rigorously interrogate ideas,” see through “banal life ideas,” and lay the ground-work for addressing the “eternal issue(s) for the human race.” As he argued:

Whatever the era, problems with survival, problems with sustaining/creating life are an eternal issue for the human race. In that sense, I must say that writing education renders a great service by rooting learning in these eternal issues.... But at the same time, we cannot propagate empty, banal life ideas through blind actions and careless attitudes. It is here that a critical eye, strict analysis and interrogation of life must also be added.... In order to rigorously interrogate ideas and content of life, we must therefore place emphasis on life research⁵³

In practical terms, NEM emphasis on cultivating students’ critical, autonomous, subjectivity also led them to a pedagogy much more about self-mastery than is often associated with prewar Japanese classrooms. As noted above, NEM teachers were less interested in adopting a needlessly theoretical education approach (i.e. the “desktop humanism” of Sakamoto), and instead sought to encourage students to look critically at life on their own terms. NEM teachers adopted a range of innovative composition activities that developed student self-awareness and self-mastery. To develop student self-confidence and skills of written expression, for example, Kokubun, developed a “please-teach-me” lesson approach. In this activity, students were asked to write their own “lesson plan,”

53 Namekawa, *op. cit.*, April, 1930, pp. 39-40). For a more discussion of the impact of Dilthey and hermeneutics on NEM, cf. Patrick Shorb, “The Significance of ‘Seikatsu Tsuzurikata’ in a Global Age: Contextualizing an Educational Discourse of Liberation,” “Intentional Observations” and De-centering,” *Education Studies in Japan: International Yearbook*, vol. 14, 2020.

wherein they taught their fellow students a skill or competency (e.g. how to make medicine to deal with chapped and severely dry skin) relevant to daily life.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, the Akita elementary school teacher, Suzuki Masayuki had his students write about participating in their families' work day. Suzuki noted the example of a student who described the "hard" experience working at his family's fish-monger shop, emphasizing the ways the assignment provided students with an understanding of their families' life situation better than any textbook lesson ever could. As Suzuki elsewhere reasoned, by placing students in the same "life course" as other members of their family, they would learn the crucial lesson that the goal of one's life is "not to make things easy," but rather to "become cognizant of being a member of the (community), ... to then fully understand the structure and environment of one's life, and correspondingly adjust one's approach to it."⁵⁵

Moreover, NEM teachers focus on student's life foundations inevitably lead to a focus on of encouraging subjectively aware, independent lives. In contrast to the explicitly Anglo-American "progressive" approaches to education that emphasized the importance of cultivating "objective" analytic skills in student writing, NEM countered with phenomenological arguments that "real" facts were ultimately meaningless if there was no subjective author able to organize those "facts" into broader meaning. To Murayama, any objectivist approach that "pitted subjective reality against objective reality, had to be discarded.... 'consciousness' – and the reality of practicing daily life – had to be a composite reality of subjective and objective; only then could reality and expression be accurately realized." As Yoko Kitaoka has further noted, Murayama's ultimate justification of a subjectivist approach lay on practical grounds: a pedantically "scientificist stance" (*kagaku-sei no hakitigae*), was counter-productive because it led students to adopt a "passive attitude towards investigating" the world.⁵⁶

54 Kawaji, *op. cit.*, 2004, pp. 6-7.

55 Kodajima, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-175; Masayuki Suzuki, *op. cit.*, 117-118.

56 Murayama Toshitaro, "Jidoshi ni okeru 'genjitsu' no ginmi (Closely examining 'reality' in children's poems)" *Tsuzurikata Seikatsu* (Composition Life), August, 1933, p. 24.

Beyond combatting “passivity,” NEM also emphasized the development of student subjectivity because it was the most direct way to cultivate student’s “will” and determination. As Sasaki argued, developing student’s subjectivity through writing helped clarify life choices and prioritized the things most important to them. As an example, he highlighted an essay written by a student detailing the experience of having her life aspirations denied by her father. Recounting the conversation with her father, the daughter could not yet convey the significance of what lay behind those words. As the student summed up in her essay:

‘I don’t want to be a farmer!’ That is what I said (to my father). But what I wanted to say is that, despite having no money, I can help this family. I really wanted to say, ‘Let me go to mid-wife school.’ That was all that was in my heart. Will I only end up being a farmer for the rest of my life? To say that I hate being a farmer might have been impertinent; what I wished to have said was that I am always dreaming of finding a suitable job for me that will help this family and not cost additional money....

On the one hand, Sasaki still doubted whether the daughter had ultimately confronted the full reality of her feelings. As he said, she had still not seemed to “grasp the inevitable realities” and “heavy moment of tragedy... where the unease and grave contradictions of contemporary humanity” becomes apparent. At the same time, he still recognized that the honesty of her writings had at least brought her closer to discovering the blind spots of her reality. As he concluded, teachers’ meticulous practice of “life guidance” remained essential to helping students develop a “reality without lies” that “instilled thought processes that enabled them to urgently participate in society.”⁵⁷

This article was written under a pen-name, “Katsu Toshio.” Cf. Kitaoka, “Seikatsu Tsuzurikata Kyoiku ni okeru riarizumu,” p. 87. Kitaoka’s discussion draws extensively from Toshitaro Murayama, op. cit., 1967, pp. 84-110.

57Ko Sasaki, “Riarizumu tsuzurikata kyoikuron -III (An Education Theory of Composition Realism -Part III)”, *Hoppo Kyoiku*, (Northern Education), vol. 15, May, 1935, p. 40-42.

As impressive as some aspects of NEM education approach might have been, these approaches could admittedly be fraught with contradictions. NEM teachers' stated goal of cultivating student independence notwithstanding, the actual way that NEM teachers chose to interact with students often remained unnervingly directive. In contrast to contemporary, American-inspired, "New Education" adherents who spent significant care developing "child-centered" classroom environments that respected and were premised on student-initiated behavior, NEM teachers conceived of their relationship to students as one of "guidance" (*sido*) with all its lingering power asymmetry's intact. As the above NJNLEA "plan" emphasized, it was ultimate the teachers' duty to enter the "muddy waters" to rescue the "exposed" children; not as it were, to facilitate student's escape from said waters on their own.

Nonetheless, NEM's critical, philosophical approach to education could be a useful complement to AIU's existing commitment to international liberal arts. In its original formulation, AIU's international liberal arts education was about developing "deep human resources:" as Nakajima explicitly argued, an emphasis on "superior language ability and broad-based liberal arts would be an inextricable part of developing an elite capable of competing at a world-class level and who would help Japan survive in the 21st century knowledge-based society."⁵⁸ As successful as this vision of pragmatic, communication-centered approach to education has been over the institution's first 15 years, it arguably could be enriched by NEM's moral-philosophical approach. With the current crises in the environment, public health, economic inequality, and worldwide socio-political disenfranchisement, 21st century AIU graduates could likewise benefit from NEM's emphasis on students reclaiming their own "life foundations," and critically interrogating the first assumptions of the status quo.

Lastly, incorporating NEM's philosophical approach to education would also consolidate recent developments at AIU. The previous

⁵⁸ Nakajima, 2010, 32, 79.

two sections have already mentioned how the PBL program highlights AIU's increasing commitment to community engagement; it is also a curricular approach that also cultivates rigorous, skeptical thinking and student self-mastery. The 2021 curriculum reform, with its new specializations in sustainability, organizational behavior, and the relationship between humanity and artificial intelligence, could also be said to provide new avenues to explore moral-philosophical questions.⁵⁹ President Suzuki's emphasis Theme-based housing and the University's more general commitment to helping students discover their individual "self" (*ko*), as opposed to simply satisfying the needs of individual personality (*kosei*), likewise suggests AIU's increasing emphasis on student self-discovery and self-mastery.⁶⁰

Towards an "Akita International Liberal Arts University"

AIU should consider actively embracing the legacy of NEM. Many of the characteristics that first brought AIU wide national attention – its English-only curriculum, its mandatory one-year study abroad program, its commitment to leadership training and the centralized nature of its management structure – have been copied, emulated or expanded upon by rival "international liberal arts" programs. AIU's continued success in the annual Times Higher Education ranking for Japanese universities will only insure this trend continues.⁶¹ Moreover, so long as Akita remains a passive part of AIU's identity as a generic peaceful, natural *chiho*, it is likely that AIU's location will become an increasing liability. With Akita's predicted demographic decline, "peaceful" and "natural" could just as easily devolve into "boring" and "inconve-

⁵⁹AIU, *op. cit.*, 2019, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Norihiko Suzuki, *Naze Kokusai Kyoyo Daigaku ha Sugoi no ka: Toppu ga Kataru Sekai Hyojun no Daigaku Kyoikuron*, PHP Shinsho, 2016, Chapter 2.

⁶¹ For recent example of AIU's continued success in globally recognized rankings, cf. Times Higher Education, *Japan University Rankings 2019*. AIU ranked 10th among all Japanese Universities. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/rankings/japan-university/2019>

nient.” Conversely, by using Akita’s own educational traditions as touchstone, the University would free itself from the endless cycle of mimesis and reaction that has dogged Japanese educational interactions with the outside world in the past.⁶² Just as NEM’s selective, considered embrace of 20th century *Geisteswissenschaftliche* thinkers enabled a more creative and innovative education practice, so too could AIU use its Akita-based heritage to allow for a more generative process born from a discerning, worldly engagement. Practically speaking, incorporating NEM into AIU’s international liberal arts model makes sense because the University is already evolving in NEM-like directions. The success of AIU’s PBL program, its grass-roots approach to faculty development, its collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to curricular revision and President Suzuki’s continuing emphasis on the education of the “self,” all underscore the ways that the University’s initial goal of developing “global human resources” could just be one part of a larger AIU educational vision.

AIU is rightfully regarded as one of Japan’s leading liberal arts university; it could or perhaps should become a uniquely “Akita” liberal arts university. By exploring the prefecture’s rich tradition of critical pedagogy, collaborative professionalism and communal engagement, the University could strengthen the nature of its liberal arts mission moving forward. As the challenges of the world become too big for one company, one organization or one nation to overcome, paradoxically, a commitment to community-centered action, individual ethics and collaborated reasoning will only grow more acute. As Kimball has noted, no one vision of liberal arts can remain transcendent. It is a constant evolution of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. By combining NEM’s Akita-based “life guidance” with the Nakajima’s “international liberal arts,” AIU could build a long-term future on the twin pillars of the idealistic and pragmatic. Time will only tell whether the wisdom of Steve Jobs and Inazo Nitobe or Wilhelm Dilthey and Sasaki Ko will res-

62 E.g. Keita Takayama, “Predicaments of ‘Particularity’ and ‘Universality’ in Studies of Japanese Education.” in Antonia Darder et. al. eds. *International Critical Pedagogy Reader (1st Edition)*, Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 143-150.

onate more with future students. Nonetheless, in combining these two educational paradigms, AIU would be endowed with a philosophical balance capable of responding to whatever challenges await the institution in the coming decades and centuries.