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Edited by Julia Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker

Rethinking Japanese Feminisms

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Rethinking Japanese Feminisms proposes to reconsider the meanings of feminism in the context of Japanese modernity and postmodernity. Originating from the international conference held in 2013, where Vera Mackie, Barbara Molony, and Ueno Chizuko were featured as keynote speakers, the volume contains fourteen essays contributed by its participants, a group of scholars hailing from the US and Japan whose disciplinary backgrounds range from history to literature to anthropology. Intending to complicate existing understandings of feminism in Japan, the volume focuses on four topical areas—activism and activists, education and employment, literature and the arts, and geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Retracing the varied and sometimes surprising pathways taken by workers, activists, artists, thinkers, and scholars, the volume provides a heterogeneous picture of “Japanese feminisms.”

Part I: Rethinking Activism and Activists poses a question, “which activists

and which movements should we consider ‘feminist’?” (p. 13) To answer this question, the essays in this segment shed light on four instances of feminist articulations, namely Yamakawa Kikue and her activism at the intersection of gender and class in the prewar years, the Mothers Congress and its engagement with peace activism in the early postwar years, the role and place of lesbianism in the women’s movement in the 1970s, and gender backlash in the twenty-first century.

Following Part I, Part II: Rethinking Education and Employment reconsiders the nature of women’s labor and education so as to further extend the notion of feminism. Focusing on those conventionally excluded from the category of “feminists,” the essays in this section shed light on the educational philosophy of Koizumi Ikuko in prewar Japan, and acts of transgression pursued by female practitioners of ikebana and female workers at *ryokan* (traditional inns) in postwar Japan.

The volume’s intent to unsettle the no-

tion of “feminism,” already evident in Part II, becomes even more conspicuous in Part III: Rethinking Literature and the Arts. The essays in this segment illuminate diverse forms of literary and artistic expressions, as exemplified by the visual art of Takebatake Kashō in Taisho era, the literary work of Sono Ayako and Ariyoshi Sawako in the early postwar decades, and the blockbuster novels of Kirino Natsuo in the contemporary context.

Finally Part IV: Rethinking Boundaries analyzes various binaries involving sexuality, gender, race-nation, and so on that have historically resulted in the construction of the Other. The essays in this section retrace intellectual ties between Yamakawa Kikue and Edward Carpenter, problems of (anti)imperialism in feminist mobilization in the 1970s, Korean women’s redress movement for “comfort women,” and Takemura Kazuko and her engagement with queer subjectivities. Highlighting multitudes of border-crossings in feminist activism as well as scholarship, these essays call attention to the significance of “transnational” in feminist discourses and practices within and beyond Japan.

Following these fourteen essays, Kano Ayako, one of the editors of the volume, provides concluding remarks by responding to a question, “[W]hy is there a need to rethink Japanese feminisms? Why now? And how?” (p. 267). While reflecting on

the imperial nature of Japanese modernity and its impact on feminism, she also references the rise of neo-conservatism and neoliberalism, whose tides have been accelerated rather than decelerated as a result of the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in 2011 and whose gendered manifestation is seen in Prime Minister Abe’s promotion of women under the banner of “Womanomics.” Critical (re) examination of feminisms would provide important insights and strategies in negotiating with this and other dynamics emerging in Japan, Kano seems to suggest.

Notwithstanding Kano’s call for re-historicizing and de-territorializing Japanese feminisms, the volume tends to reproduce the bounded notions of “Japan” and “feminism.” With the absence of critical reflections on feminisms’ relations to the marginalized—indigenous populations in Hokkaido and Okinawa and overseas immigrants in Hawaii, North and South Americas, and Southeast Asia among them—the borders the volume intends to interrogate are inadvertently reinstated. Other studies—*Gender in Modern East Asia: An Integrated History* edited by Barbara Molony, Janet Theiss, and Hyaeweol Choi¹ and *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique*, edited by Michele Mason and Helen Lee²—are full of suggestions about how to decenter Japan in critical gender analysis. As Kano alludes

1 Barbara Molony, Janet Theiss, Hyaeweol Choi, eds., *Gender in Modern East Asia: An Integrated Studies* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2016).

2 Michele Mason and Helen Lee eds., *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

to the significance of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism, moreover, one wishes to learn more about how seismic shifts triggered by the economic downturn in the 1990s and the catastrophic event in 2011 have been informing feminist articulations in Japan. Elaboration on this matter seems especially necessary, as she tries to theorize the context of “now” so as to frame

the publication of this volume as not only timely but urgent.

Overall, the volume sparks a series of critical reflections on gender, race, sexuality, nation, and empire, compelling its readers to situate “feminisms” within the larger historical and geopolitical terrains that would exceed the conventional notion of “Japan.”

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