

## Special Feature

# COVID-19 and Belonging in the Place of Japanese Studies

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Many students and researchers, including some from my university, have suffered from Japan's travel ban, which for nearly two years (even with some periods of relaxation), kept many with foreign passports from entering the country. This made Japan the object of criticism for its seemingly illogical and xenophobic policies, being the only G7 nation to institute such comprehensive restrictions. The boat is still out on whether Japanese policy has led some to lose interest in studying Japan, but it is likely one will see the effects in delayed or abandoned research by scholars and doctoral students. At the same time, COVID-19 and such travel bans have forced us to interrogate the relation between Japan studies and place and location. Long situated under the rubric of area studies, the discipline of Japan studies is defined by a place, but the placement or location of study has often remained ambiguous. Perhaps we study Japan, but what is its proper place of study? Is placement or location essential to its study? And who gets to assume such places or is allowed in such locations? This essay will argue for the need to interrogate such questions.

Many of these issues have existed from before the pandemic. A series of roundtables, one entitled the "Death of Japanese Studies" at the Association for Asian Studies conference in 2019 and another a virtual roundtable the "'Rebirth' of Japanese Studies" in 2020, offer evidence of the serious discussions that have taken place over the future of the field.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic brought some of those issues home, especially with regard to methodology. I recall that when one of our students was unable to travel to Japan to do dissertation research—research, it is significant to note, that was on digital texts tied to GPS location protocols—I had to offer some potential, already established alternatives. Some fields in Asian studies, particularly of certain periods and texts, have for instance a long history of not requiring a trip to Asia because the texts, either because they have been rendered canonical or because they have been acquired (sometimes as the result of imperial aggression), are readily available outside the region. Depending on the topic, one

could write a dissertation on Japan without ever stepping outside of one's North American academic library or archive. My discussion with the student ultimately focused on the possibility of rendering the dissertation more theory centered. My suggestion referenced the supposed universality of theory, which enabled scholarship without the particularity of place. But I was also aware that theory has long been pursued so that individual texts—especially those from outside the so-called West—are mere illustrations of theory, appropriated into the perspective of theory without complicating theory's locality (i.e., its Eurocentrism and the fact it is particular, not universal).<sup>2</sup> We know the ideological foundations of area studies, which were largely formed during the Cold War not only to serve the purposes of Pax Americana, providing knowledge in order to command spheres of influence, but also to distinguish the West from the Rest.<sup>3</sup> In most universities, American studies is not area studies, American film is not included in national cinema studies; they are the universal against the particular defined precisely by area. Area studies was in part founded and defined through rendering its places as absent of or separate from theory. It is no wonder that the place of theory in area studies has then remained a fraught, if not existential, issue.

Academia today, however, appears less interested in area studies, in part because place takes on different valences under neoliberalism. Data driven methods in the social sciences have come to assert that places such as Japan or China can be known without mastering the language or even traveling to the country. As Manan Ahmed Asif puts it, "The phenomenological space previously occupied by the anthropologist, philologist and the area-specialist is now occupied by data and computer scientists" (but not, he adds, by fundamentally altering the relationship between academia and military power).<sup>4</sup> Some are worried that departments in economics or sociology are not replacing their Japan or China specialists because of the underlying assumption that scholars of America can perfectly know Japan and China as long as they possess the data. Their's is not a critique of area studies, but an assertion that the West can master the Rest without the old imperial pretense for area, asserting that in an age of flexible accumulation and transformations in the global flows of goods and capital, area matters less for neoliberal academia.

COVID-19 less created such issues than adjusted the focus. On the one hand, teachers in all disciplines had to relearn the space of the classroom. For someone in film studies like myself, the issue was not only where students were (I had to adjust class times to accommodate students in different continents), and what their internet capacities were, but where the moving image was located. Since my experience was that Zoom did not handle film clips very well, I had to place them elsewhere (e.g., in platforms like Canvas, which students would access to view the clips when I mentioned them in the lecture), meaning that even in virtual space, the lecture elements were in different places. These

new platforms did seem to open up access and opportunities. I enjoyed teaching classes with filmmakers and scholars from Japan participating through Zoom as guests. Walls and borders were crossed even as Japan or Donald Trump were effectively building them. Zoom and digital access are opening possibilities that can continue beyond the pandemic, and promise opportunities especially for institutions or scholars/students who do not have the funds to travel to or invite guests from Japan. Perhaps one benefit arising from the pandemic was a push for greater access and the opening up the archive. While as many of us know, the National Film Archive of Japan has achieved few of the results of the Korean Film Archive in making films available online, Japan-related film festivals started and then have tended to maintain a streaming program even after returning to in-person screenings.<sup>5</sup> The Hathi Trust temporality opened up their digitized holdings for library users, and even the National Diet Library is slowly expanding digital access.

On the other hand, we should not be utopian about these changes. Smooth internet access is not available for students of all economic backgrounds. Neoliberal advocates for education have long latched on to MOOCs as a means of mass distributing standardized educational content with lower labor costs. COVID-19 has only further exacerbated these existing problems, with reports of dead professors still teaching classes and universities assuming ownership of courseware even after faculty have left the institution.<sup>6</sup> Teaching is being divorced not only from the place of the classroom, but even from the bodies of instructors and students. Those in film studies must confront not only the potential loss of physical media, but also the possibility that film viewing may have to rely on streaming platforms for class viewings. Jaap Verheul argues that in

the COVID-19 lockdown, it is the pandemic content provider who determines what we are able to watch, when we are able to do so, and at what cost. . . . At a time when higher education is under pressure to evolve into a dislocated and disembodied protocol in which learning occurs online and at distance, . . . the teaching of film will be organized in terms of what will be available for streaming online.<sup>7</sup>

In many cases, the pandemic was an occasion less for recognizing the global interconnectivity of humanity than for honing technologies of media conglomeration and surveillance.

What does this mean for Japan studies? Clearly we must think with our colleagues in other fields about these issues affect not just the educational “platform” and related issues of technocapitalism and labor, but also the issue of location in a field that is supposedly defined by place. How does Japan studies relate to these changes in systems of

labor, infrastructure, communication, and geography in a postmodern age shaped by a pandemic? Many still have a vision of Japan studies founded in acquiring language skills, engaging with texts in their contexts, communicating with scholars in their locations — essentially of being in Japan at least when necessary. Even if this has had its imperial versions (e.g., the Orientalist arrogance of being able to know the Orient more than the residents do, because the European supposedly has the self-consciousness the Asian does not), it has values that could be promoted. This would involve divorcing space from the nation state and questioning the givenness and the fixity of area. Instead of abandoning area studies, Tessa Morris-Suzuki has attempted to rethink it under the rubric of “liquid area studies,” as something “brought into being only by human activity — travel, trade, and communication.”<sup>8</sup>

The traditional approach to area studies tends to see the force that constitute the area as arising out of the bedrock of shared culture. By contrast, a liquid area studies approach emphasizes how much these flows are products of contemporary economic, political, and social forces. Rather than a stable cultural commonality producing economic and political cooperation, we might argue that it is the contact created by trade, migration, and travel that leads people to seek out, rediscover, and reinterpret cultural and historical commonalities.

This can help us question what “belongs” to Japan studies. Asking about place does not mean reifying a nation called Japan, but can question the forces that reinforce place and thereby promote approaches to area that expose those forces. A Japan class should involve places beyond Japan, precisely so as “to seek out, rediscover, and reinterpret cultural and historical commonalities.”

In the COVID-19 era, however, we have to ask what happens when such movement is prevented or, in some cases, thought unnecessary. Certainly digital access is a form of communication, but how does digital liquidity differ from analog forms? How much does physical place matter in liquidity? Can we have liquid area studies if scholars, students, or workers cannot easily enter Japan, or can only do that via Zoom? These problems can relate to what some perceive as a Japan resorting to “neo-Sakoku” policies of exclusion,<sup>9</sup> but the issues can be more fundamental. The Japanese government made strong statements about who belongs in Japan by enforcing legal distinctions between bodies, between those who can and cannot travel, preventing even for instance non-citizen spouses of Japanese nationals from entering the country, a move that effectively declared that foreign nationals will never truly be members of families in Japan.

It also effectively announced that students accessing Japanese university classes on

Zoom from abroad are receiving an acceptable education. This therefore involves practical issues. We often are pressed to defend the humanities in an age of profit-centered education, but when the Japanese government is preventing students and scholars of Japan from entering the country, what is the reasoning behind arguing the need to enter Japan? Even before the pandemic, grant applications asked one to justify traveling to Japan, but what are those arguments today? Will they hold up with greater remote access to people and libraries? What will happen with the next pandemic, when we are supposedly more prepared? If there are justifications for studying Japan in Japan, but still restrictions over travel, does that mean it is best to leave Japan studies to those already there? That would not only de-liquify place, but also raise the question of who belongs in that place, or in the field of Japanese studies.

The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, among its many interventions, raised questions about belonging in Asian studies, especially over membership in the scholarly community and how Black lives can matter to Asian studies.<sup>10</sup> It is crucial to underline that some of the issues raised here are not exclusive to Japanese government policies, but involve fundamental problems of neoliberal education in an age of precarity. Specifically, these can range from the place of Japanese studies in the university (where all but a handful of languages are often ghettoized in “world languages” departments) to the place of students who do not fit the model of the white male academic. What kinds of methodologies have a place in Japanese studies? How can Japanese studies relate to places and identities that are not just Japanese, especially since many Japan related classes in North America are taken by students who are neither white nor Japanese? How does the pandemic threaten those identities, as well as the solidarities across places, by reinforcing the notion of the here and the there? Don't those threats matter to Japanese studies, even when not directly about Japan? Isn't there a place in Japanese studies for those whose chosen location is in social media, especially since the rampant nationalism on platforms like Twitter make it crucial to consider how place is constructed digitally?

Japanese studies can engage with these questions in part by relocating itself in relation to fields ranging from postmodern geography to critical race studies. That would involve questioning its own existence as a place, but it would not mean abandoning the concept. Again these issues are not necessarily new. When capitalist modernity made “all that is solid melt into air,” cinema itself was sold in Japan upon its arrival as eliminating distance, as enabling one to ride the New York subway even when one was in Osaka. And yet with the benshi and entertainment districts such as Asakusa, location and the physical bodies in space mattered to the movie experience. Or more precisely, place and location were a locus of struggle over the power commanding bodies, places, meaning, identities, and culture.<sup>11</sup> To a certain degree that is the same today. If, as Morris-Suzuki

argues, we need a liquid area studies, perhaps we also need a liquid way of thinking about place and area, which productively engages with both digital and physical spaces, and the operations of power between and upon both. Maybe it is because Japanese studies has come under threat within neoliberal technocapitalism that we need to think not only the place of Japanese studies but the place of place within it.

## Endnotes

- 1 The virtual roundtable the “‘Rebirth’ of Japanese Studies” can be accessed at Paula R. Curtis’s website: <http://prcurtis.com/events/AAS2020/>. See also Curtis’s “Embracing the Rebirth of Japanese Studies” (2020) on the AAS’s Asian Now blog: <https://www.asianstudies.org/embracing-the-rebirth-of-japanese-studies/>
- 2 For more on theory’s relation to Asia, see Naoki Sakai, “Theory and Asian Humanity: On the Question of Humanitas and Anthropos,” *Postcolonial Studies* 13. 4 (2010): 441-464.
- 3 See Naoki Sakai, “From Area Studies toward Transnational Studies,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2010): 265-274.
- 4 Manan Ahmed Asif, “Technologies of Power – From Area Studies to Data Sciences,” *Spheres Journal for Digital Cultures* 5, 20 November 2019, <https://spheres-journal.org/contribution/technologies-of-power-from-area-studies-to-data-sciences/>
- 5 For example, such Japan-centered film festivals as Nippon Connection, the Far East Film Festival, and Japan Cuts have continued with streaming sections of some films, while institutions such as the Japan Foundation have developed more film streaming events.
- 6 Tamara Kneese, “How a Dead Professor Is Teaching a University Art History Class,” *Slate*, 27 January 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2021/01/dead-professor-teaching-online-class.html>.
- 7 Jaap Verheul, “Opening the Vault: Streaming the Film Library in the Age of Pandemic Content,” *Pandemic Media* (Meson Press, 2020): <https://pandemicmedia.meson.press/chapters/time-temporality/opening-the-vault-streaming-the-film-library-in-the-age-of-pandemic-content/>
- 8 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Liquid Area Atudies: Northeast Asia in Motion as Viewed from Mount Geumgang” *Positions* 27.1 (2019): 217.
- 9 Robert Dujarric, “Japan Is Only Harming Itself by Keeping Its Borders Shut,” *Nikkei Asia*, 27 January 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-is-only-harming-itself-by-keeping-its-borders-shut>
- 10 See the transcript of the 22 July 2020 online panel “Asian Studies and Black Lives Matter” and the additional resources on the Association for Asian Studies website: <https://www.asianstudies.org/jobs-professional-resources/aas-digital-dialogues/asian-studies-and-black-lives-matter/>
- 11 See Aaron Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation, and Spectatorship, 1895-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).