

Book Reviews

Imagined Families, Lived Families: Culture and Kinship in Contemporary Japan. Akiko Hashimoto and John W. Traphagan, eds. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. pp. 178 ISBN978-0-7914-7578-2 (paperback)

The editors of *Imagined Families, Lived Families*, Akiko Hashimoto and John W. Traphagan, have both published several important books on aging in Japan, most notably, *The Gift of Generations: Japanese and American Perspectives on Aging and the Social Contract* (Hashimoto, 1996), and *Taming Oblivion: Aging Bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan* (Traphagan, 2000). So although this volume brings together work on the family and generations in a broad sense, it never strays far from the importance of the “low fertility, aging society” trend that has characterized much of the work on social demographic change in Japan and increasingly, the rest of Asia (see Takenaka, this issue).

While the book’s cover illustration features four anime-style caricatures of wayward Japanese youth gazing somewhat menacingly at the reader against a modern high-rise cityscape, two silhouettes of elderly figures hang ghostly at the periphery, visible, yet obscured, a poignant image of the “family” as it is figured in a changed society. In their introduction, the editors write, “our primary interest is in understanding ‘the family’ as a dynamic and continually changing social unit that does not simply exist, but is imagined or conceptualized and reconceptualized in the minds of individual people and in public discourse” (p. 10). The chapters follow this aim, exploring the myriad forms of relationality between youths, adults and elders that have emerged in post-war Japan, not only as they circulate as representations in cultural

‘texts’ (comics, anime, films), but also in lived experiences and national rhetorics of intergenerational (dis)connection.

The book is divided into two sections: “Imagined Families” (Hashimoto, Napier, McDonald) and “Lived Families” (Steinhoff, Tamanoi, Long). Rather than summing up the contribution of each chapter in detail, I will try to look at each section as a whole, since there is significant cohesion and conversation going on between them (certainly one of the strengths of this volume).

The three chapters that compose the section on “Imagined Families” all agree that popular media representations of the family in some ways parallel or reflect the experiences of consumers, and in other ways work to shape or open a space to rethink those experiences. Like the serialized family comics that Hashimoto describes, Japanese people see themselves in these representations, but are allowed to enjoy the punchline that plays on the everyday worries and failures to smoothly negotiate complicated family relationships and personal desires. This is ‘the family as comedy’ in the Aristotelian sense of revealing the ridiculous in the mundane efforts to establish a sense of normalcy and harmony.

Napier’s chapter on Japanese anime, which begins by detailing a scene on robotic eldercare from Kitakubo Hiroyuki’s 1991 animated film *Roujin Z*, ventures into somewhat less quotidian comedies, to explore a broader range of fantasy and imaginations of the family. Napier’s discussion of anime clearly displays a mastery of the genre, its many layered stories, its psychological implications, its social commentary. Like McDonald’s chapter that follows, Napier also takes time to develop a few key filmmakers and their work to draw out themes of ‘reconfiguration’

introduced by Hashimoto. McDonald, (who passed away shortly before the book was published and to whom the book is dedicated) focuses more on the care of elders with memory loss, introducing a new perspective on this topic by looking at the work of two female filmmakers. While the chapter is titled ‘The Agony of Eldercare,’ it could be equally called the ‘redemption’ of eldercare, as the films and the filmmakers themselves find ways to turn pain and conflict into moving moments of raw humanity so often left out of the social science literature on care but immediately recognizable to caregivers in both family and institutional settings.

Taken together, the chapters in “Imagined Families” repeat a few key themes of modern Japanese culture and kinship. Most obvious is the importance of changing gender roles, and especially the role of women in the family. Secondly, and closely related to the first, is the push-pull of conservatism and innovation. All of these chapters underline the desire to reconstitute “the family” in some sense, drawing on an always partial sense of traditional values and cultural models of kinship. However, this conservatism is constantly producing the grounds for change, as actors (the fictional characters, the artists and directors that create them, and the public that consumes them) weigh personal desires, dreams, traumatic dislocations, identities, affiliations and moments both painful and hopeful.

The second half, “Lived Families” is just as strong and diverse as the first. Steinhoff’s chapter is thrillingly original and illuminating, braiding together different cases of “family crisis” occurring over and between generations. As she follows the trajectories of life-courses punctuated by crisis, Steinhoff pulls together an analysis that is as

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much political as it is psychological, and where connections and disconnections between family members are a profoundly shaped by both. Tamanoi similarly looks across Japanese history and political discourse to examine changing concepts and interpretations of ethnic identity, immigration and otherness that threaten nation-based tropes of the family. Long (see this issue) has, arguably, the strongest contribution to the book, providing detailed ethnographic accounts of older adults and their families and caregivers to illustrate the reconfigurations and responses to changes in contemporary Japan. While the other five chapters do provide some anecdotes from fieldwork based research, they are much more focused on evaluating and critiquing discursive realms that do not reach the everyday voices of individuals. Long's chapter goes far in filling this gap for the more traditionally minded anthropologist.

Long's focus on ethnography gives clear examples of ways caregivers are sometimes "borrowed" from "non-normative categories of kin," as well as the tension generated within kin networks as the burdens of caregiving are shared and negotiated among family (p. 140). In this way, Long chapter shows most clearly the importance of the old anthropological category of kinship, even as it underlines how the conceptual content of the family and the desires and affects of individuals that produce families exceeds this category. All of the other authors in the volume express this same sentiment in different ways, As relationships are reconfigured

within and against kinship idioms, new imaginative spaces emerge that bring forth important revaluations of vitality itself.

Imagined Families is not a merely an update on the state of the family in Japan (there are many books and edited volumes that might be more suited to this), nor is it interested in looking at the aging population as something that can be understood distinct from its historical and generational contexts. Rather, it approaches these topics with a keen critical perspective that never disappears into the sometimes obscure language of cultural theory. By taking kinship as a central concept, the authors stay rooted in the pains and pleasures of relatedness in its various forms. Not only is this slim volume accessible and interesting, but it also succeeds in balancing the discussion between artistic creations and social and political discourse, engaging with a variety of mediums and perspectives, all of which have a place at the table. As such, *Imagined Families* serves as a model for other books on aging, generations, and the life course in anthropology and should be a welcome addition to courses that examine these themes.

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Glimpses Into My Own Black Box: An Exercise in Self-Deconstruction. By George W. Stocking, Jr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. pp. 232. ISBN 978-0-299-24984-7. paperback.

"The ice-cold flame of the passion for seeking the truth for truth's sake must be kept burning, and can be kept alive only if we continue to seek the truth for truth's sake"

—Franz Boas¹

Autobiographies are not straightforward. For one thing, their truths, whether reflective or testimonial, are partial and personal. Stocking's recent book is not a simple autobiography; in fact it is a different kind of species altogether. Although Stocking flippantly dismisses this book as a kind of self-indulgent 'biographical' monograph (p.7), it is much more. In fact, Stocking subtitles *Glimpses Into My Own Black Box* as 'An Exercise in Self-Deconstruction', and he is both the writer and its weighty reader. So the question then arises, is this simply a narrative exercise whereby anthropology's preeminent intellectual historian in his efforts to stave off boredom and the encroachment of death upon his shrinking island, attempts to make sense of his past in the specious present? Or is this exercise an act of deconstruction, where Stocking becomes the historian and evaluator of his life, and in doing so opens up an interstitial space between his own autopoiesis and the personality of history itself.



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Potential readers (perhaps as onlookers) will have to make up their own minds, but this reviewer sees Stocking's latest book, the 12th and final volume in the *History of Anthropology* series, as an earnest self-reflective composition. Of course there are many ways to read Stocking's account. On the one hand, there is the perspective of someone who is grappling with aging and posterity. On the other, this book can be viewed as a self-critique of an historian of anthropology whose life, taken in full as a human story, is an unfolding fieldwork open to further revelations. Even though there are plenty of biographical vignettes (Stocking calls them revelatory juicy bits p. 74), these 'events' cannot be read or historicized as construed texts. Stocking shows through his analysis that biographical vignettes and recollections empower, but also reveal the imperfections of memory. The issue with historical consciousness is that events are subject, if we are 'truthful', to multiple contextualizations.

In writing about the genre of autobiography, Alison Donnell likens autobiography and for our purposes here, self-writing, as, "[...] a restless and unmade bed; a site on which discursive, intellectual and political practices can be remade [...] a place for fun, desire and deep worry to be expressed".² *Glimpses into My Own Black Box* is Stocking's attempt to remain restless, and to rethink how the development of ideas he was so much a part of (and helped to shape) resonated inside and outside of the academy. In this way, Stocking stays faithful to the craft of intersecting anthropology

and history for the sake of an uneasy and enlightened rapprochement.

AAQ readers will want to read his book, but be warned, this is not an exercise for the light-hearted. Younger readers will be forced to make an imaginary leap into the world of old age, and to grapple with the ethics and complexity of recollection, especially when other people's lives and representations are at stake. Older readers might temper their engagement with a dose of empathy, but they will be forced to confront their own potential legacies, and the challenge (if they take it upon themselves) to question and unsettle their unfolding histories that can never cohere psychoanalytically into a meaningful and straightforward narrative.

Glimpses is divided into three sections. Earlier drafts of the first two sections were already being worked on before 1999. The first section, which is the longest, is entitled "Autobiographical Recollections" and "[...] is a selective narrative account of the life events that shaped [Stocking's] work as an historian" (p.7). We come to learn about Stocking's family and upbringing. Furthermore, we are given a first-person account of someone who dedicated a portion of his early adult life (seven years) to the American working-class cause. Stocking's experience with the unions and his work in various industrial activities, however, could no longer sustain the narrative and promise of radical change. Like many of the Old Left, Stocking was disillusioned by the Khrushchev

revelations, and he eventually returned to his "liberal academic patrimony" (p.68). In addition to understanding how Stocking's upbringing and working years as a Communist sympathizer helped to shape his ideas about social groups, race and history, the reader also gets a strong sense about how his relationship with his parents was formative and complicated. His parent's ideals, and the Zeitgeist they were more or less tangential to, functioned as a touchstone. In one of the book's most moving passages, we get a sense of where Stocking's resilience comes from. Like a rewritten Ingmar Bergman movie, Stocking's visit to his mother's deathbed reveals the following: "[...] I leaned close to her face, I thought I heard her say that she wanted to end the suffering, but when she heard me suggest this, she responded in a perfectly clear voice: 'Are you crazy?'—which I took as an affirmation of life, rather than a deathbed conversion" (p.58). Stocking also writes about his mother's influence in the following way: "I remember my mother's Kulturkampf of the 1930s in positive terms as a lasting enrichment of my own life—although in some respects a superficial and somewhat uneven one" (p.55).

"Historiographical Reflections" follows up this section with a "[...] retrospective analytic interpretation of major methodological and substantive themes in the work shaped by that life" (p.7). The point here is how an historian of anthropology interprets the ideas and texts of anthropologists in an ineluctable light; one that eschews



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the inertia of facts and causal authority, but draws enlightenment from an arduous bottom-up reading and contextualizing of multiple motives, factors and relativist positions. In this section, Stocking describes his move back to academia and how working as a laborer inspired his bottom-up approach to history as a kind of inductive interpretation. There is much in this section that shows how Stocking grappled with various tensions, one of them being the “[...] struggle between yearnings for a platonic ideal of categorical ordering and the deeply rooted countervailing forces [...] of its disarray” (p. 146). For Stocking, the challenge to an anthropologist’s thinking is that their texts may not fully evoke underlying intentions and even relevant thinking processes. We are told that given the unconscious nature of thought and reflection, and the evidential gaps in source materials, the historian of anthropology “[...] must write around or across in a cautiously qualified but responsibly suggestive way” (p. 150). By revisiting his methodological take on conceptualization and “honest groping” (p. 146), Stocking treats us to an exploration of why and how historiographical orientations get taken up.

“Octogenarian Afterthoughts: ‘Fragments Shored Against My Ruin’” is the shortest section in the book and will most likely interest readers who want a glimpse into how an intellectual comes to grips with personal loss, change, and optimism. This section was written more recently and reveals Stocking’s personal experience with loss and decay from a phenomenological point of view. Anxiety, hypochondria, depression,

and a certain unbearable lightness of being come to haunt this section, making it the most personal and fragmentary of the three. In the end, Stocking ends the book with a short epilogue in which he comes full circle. Instead of closing the black box, we are left with Stocking’s worries about outwitting Zeno’s race, and the finality of an abyss after life.

Glimpses is a book that showcases Stocking’s contribution to the history of anthropology, by revealing that what has influenced him (and what he has influenced), is neither structural nor overdetermined. In the end, this piece of work will endure, because what is being personalized here is history. In other words, how do our own histories run alongside and interpenetrate the history of the world and ideas. This review has now run its course, and we are faced with the beginning epigraph. Boas maintained an idealistic notion of science, and even though he was committed to a universalistic conception of rational knowledge, understanding the cultural and historical conditions of social life and social scientific knowledge was at the center of that flame. It wasn’t so much what science could do for us technologically that was important to Boas, but rather by investigating the givenness of social structure, we could bring ourselves closer to a moment of conscious freedom.

In a similar way, Stocking’s book represents an attempt to render such a project emotionally and historically liberating, at least for one individual. After reading this book for a second time, I was left wondering what

other black boxes are out there that require a disciplined and ice-cold stare?³

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NOTES

¹ F. Boas, *Race and democratic society* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1945), 1.

² A. Allison, “When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*” in *Women’s Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Ed. Pauline Polkey (London: Macmillan, 1999), 124.

³ I would like to thank Professor Ira Bashkow for comments on an earlier draft. All shortcomings in this piece are entirely my own.

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