Further Trends in American Literature Studies in Japan: Scholarship Published in English
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I entered graduate school in the United States the same year that Jane Tompkins’s Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction was published. I had intended to specialize in eighteenth-century British literature, but electrified by Tompkins’s devastating combination of post-structuralist insights and feminist politics, I quickly moved over to the American literature camp, where I have made my home ever since.

It was a heady time to be a student of American literature: along with Tompkins, feminist scholars such as Annette Kolodny and Cathy Davidson were calling for a large-scale revision of the American literary canon in terms of sexual and racial inclusiveness. Along with “the Greats”: Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman, we were reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Wide, Wide World, Charlotte Temple, captivity narratives, slave narratives, Cane, and of course Their Eyes Were Watching God. My dissertation topic evolved from my experience of teaching Alice Walker’s The Color Purple to Princeton undergraduates, who were, with one exception, all white. Thus, in the course of one graduate career, I moved from philology to social process, and finally to critical self-consciousness.

I arrived in Japan just after the publication of The Columbia Literary History of the United States, whose frank and unhesitating acceptance of a multicultural view of American literature excited, but also discomfited many readers. As an editorial assistant to Emory Elliott, the editor in chief, I had experienced the full force of the different controversies that broke out both before and after publication. However, in Japan I felt as if I had suddenly emerged into the calm place at the center of the storm. The first issue of Studies in American Literature that I received as a new member of the American Literature Society of Japan contained articles on Hawthorne, Melville, Norris, Roth, and two poets, Stevens and Williams. Similar to the March, 1989 issue of American Literature (the last issue produced before the arrival of Cathy Davison on the board of editors) it contained articles
written by male and female scholars on the work of exclusively white male authors.

At that time I observed some general differences between American and Japanese scholarship in the field of American literature that still hold true today. One is a Japanese preference for philology over politics. This preference manifests itself in a devotion to the written text: there are, as far as I know, no articles in either Studies in American Literature (SAL) or The Journal of the American Literature Society of Japan (JALSJ) on film. Poetry, which lends itself to a formal rather than a social critique, receives a significant amount of attention from Japanese scholars. For example, almost half of the articles in the inaugural issue of the English-language Journal of the American Literature Society of Japan are on poetry, compared to no articles on poetry published in the first two volumes of American Literature for 2005. In both poetry and prose studies, there is a marked preference for "difficult" authors, such as Stevens, Faulkner, Melville, and Pynchon. This tendency is understandable in view of the fact that historical research often requires traveling to specific locales and archives. As one of my colleagues recently told me, "if it is a matter of textual analysis, Japanese scholars can do that as well, and maybe even better, than scholars working in the United States." Although this condition of having to make a virtue out of necessity is disappearing with research opportunities increasing and as more and more Japanese students do graduate work in the United States, the tradition in Japan for close reading (now abetted by poststructuralist and postmodern literary theory) remains strong.

This is not to say that literary study in Japan has not been affected by social processes. My initial feeling of having entered a time slip was illusory: the expansion of the American literary canon has in fact proceeded at only a slightly less rapid pace in Japan than in the United States. Within a few years, Studies in American Literature was publishing articles influenced not only by feminism and poststructuralism, but also new historicism and multiculturalism. There has, I soon discovered, long been significant interest in African American literature among Japanese scholars. The next volume of SAL (28, 1991) contained an essay on Jean Toomer and articles on

There is evidence of long-established and emerging specialization among Japanese scholars of American literature. Jewish-American writers such as Roth, Singer, Bellow, Malamud, and especially Auster, have long received more critical attention in Japan than in the United States. In the past fifteen years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of articles published about Asian American literature, especially works by Japanese-American authors, in both the fields of American literature and American studies in Japan. The Japan Asian-American Literature Society (AALA), which has been in existence for more than fifteen years, published an anthology in Japanese, Asian American Literature: Threading Past, Present and Future in 2001. Volume 35 of Studies in American Literature included Masami Usui’s essay, “A Conflict with Tsunami in Juliet S. Kono’s Poetry,” while Volume 37 contained Gayle K. Sato’s “Cultural Recuperation in Garret Hongo’s The River of Heaven.”

There is no doubt that multicultural and postcolonial criticism has been as liberating for Japanese scholars as it has been for its practitioners elsewhere. A measure of critical self-confidence can be seen in the way in which Japanese American literature scholars are now also boldly juxtaposing works of American and Japanese writers in a manner previously limited only to departments of Comparative Literature. Masahiko Abe’s Japanese-language monograph, Modernity and the Literary Strategy of Boredom: Wallace Stevens, Oe Kenzaburo, and Avant-garde Writers (2001), discusses writers coming from completely different milieu in terms of an original and surprising point of comparison. In Volume 2 of JALSJ, Keiko Miyajima compares “places of experience” in Henry James, William James, and Kitaro Nishida.

Until fairly recently however, evidence of the influence of postcolonial criticism has largely been confined to the bibliographies of works by Japa-
nese scholars, not to be seen in the bodies of the works themselves. Takayuki Tatsumi’s article in the January, 2004 edition of PMLA, “Literary History on the Road: Transatlantic Crossings and Transpacific Crossovers,” calls for readings of canonical and non-canonical texts “displacing the existing geopolitics and denaturalizing the nationality of literature” exposing its “geopolitical hybridization” (100, 101). His reading of Moby Dick, encompassing many different genres, time periods, languages, and media offers a thrilling example of what this kind of criticism will be like. As he points out, there is now a long enough history of interactions and border crossings between Japan and the United States to provide a fertile field for literary study. Many readers, including myself, eagerly await his forthcoming book, Full Metal Apache (2006).

If I were to venture a prediction about the future direction of American literature studies in Japan, as I promised in my title, it would be this: up until this point, Japanese scholars have tended to write as disembodied, nationless beings, seemingly unaware of the great interest that the rest of the world has in Japan. Reading many works written by Japanese scholars, one gets the feeling that the author is masquerading as an American graduate student or professor, consciously excluding all clues that would identify him or her as “Japanese.” There may even be a measure of confusion on the part of the scholar about who he or she is. Take for example, the concluding paragraph of the review of Tatsumi’s Japanese-language American Sodom (2001) published in the first issue of JALSJ:

Thus, American Sodom will convince readers that the generation that we believe passed away still constitutes part of our present, and that a radical reinterpretation of our contemporary literature will refresh our memory of American literary history. (158, italics mine)

The first “our” seems to indicate a common present shared by all inhabitants of the globe, but then the second usage of “our” (“our contemporary literature”) implies either that the writer is an American, or that literature has suddenly and unquestioningly become the province of all inhabitants of
the globe. If the reviewer is Japanese, then the question arises, if American literature is “our” literature, then what about Japanese literature? Who is the “we” here?

As critics have repeatedly pointed out, in writing about a postcolonial, geopolitically hybrid world, researchers must give an account of his or her own stance in his or her own time. In Japan, however, only the beginnings of this process can be seen. For example, Etsuko Taketani, in *U.S. Women Writers and the Discourses of Colonialism, 1825–1861* (2003) (reviewed in this issue), constructs a model or “grammar” of psychological colonialism that is more relevant to the US-Japanese historical situation than it is to any of the locations that she discusses. However, except for one short scene of ekphrasis, where she describes the compelling image of a western woman (whom she identifies as “American” without giving a reason) on the frontispiece of Fukuzawa Yukichi’s *Sekai Kuni Zukushi* [World Geography], she never even mentions Japan (42). Yet it is so clearly Japan, after all, and not Macao, Burma, or Liberia that was “colonized” by the US without having been a “formal” colony. Giving such an account would require Japanese scholars to provide a frank discussion of attitudes, opinions, and histories that had previously been kept private, or at least produced only for domestic, Japanese-language consumption. While this process will undoubtedly be risky and painful, I look forward to this next phase of Japanese scholarship in American literature.

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