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Teaching Diversity in Okinawa

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“Ibunka-Rikai” or “Inter-Cultural Understanding” is a required course for second-year students majoring in English Languages and Cultures at the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, Japan. This class does not usually have a diversified audience in terms of race, ethnicity, class, sex, or age. So far, I have offered this course three times since 2014, and the class has always been primarily composed of Japanese students—mainly of local Okinawan descent and heterosexual—who are eager to master the English language.

When I started teaching at the University of the Ryukyus, such teaching environments were quite new to me; before entering my current position, I had not had any teaching experience at the university level in Japan. I was trained as an educator while I was a Ph.D. student at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo (UB). There, I offered courses related to diversity issues including Asian American literature, which is my specialty. Buffalo is the second largest city in New York State. The suburb areas of Buffalo are populated predominantly by white middle-class people of mostly older generations; the downtown area has younger residents, college students, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and new immigrants or refugees from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Local people are the dominant population at UB; however, as the largest university of the SUNY system, UB attracts students from all over New York State, including New York City, as well as from outside the state. As an Asian female adjunct instructor who did not possess American citizenship, I faced various challenges including some students’ suspicions over my ability to teach in English and the legitimacy of my offering of courses related to *American* diversity issues. However, overall I enjoyed navigating a classroom

composed of students with different backgrounds. Thus, the radical change I faced in my classroom at the University of the Ryukyus was a new challenge to me: how to teach diversity issues to an audience who are raised in a society where to remain similar to other people has been so valued.

In Japan, diversity issues have recently been discussed more, and the significance of acknowledging people's various differences—both visible and invisible—has been emphasized. In fact, social events such as the annual Tokyo Rainbow Pride festival have been held with an aim to provide more social recognition for sexual minorities. In 2015, the government of Shibuya Ward in Tokyo took a radical step to pass an ordinance to issue "partnership certificates" for same-sex couples, allowing them some of the rights of married heterosexual couples. Naha, the capital city in Okinawa where I am living, in a similar manner, started to issue partnership certificates in 2016. The absence of women in power—such as the absence of women occupying executive positions of large corporations and female full-time professors—was once the norm. For instance, while I was a graduate student at Meiji University in the late 1990s, the English Department hired its first female assistant professor, who was Japanese American and who had received her Ph.D. from Brown University. Until then, full-time faculty positions were dominated by men. After her hiring, it took several more years before the department hired a Japanese female professor. Nowadays, including women in such socially influential positions demonstrates crucial evidence of the democratization and liberalism of institutions. Furthermore, in recent years, the Japanese Government has issued several ordinances to protect the welfare and rights of the disabled. At the University of the Ryukyus, a bureau to support students with disabilities was established in 2016. Effort is being put forth to create campus environments to better accommodate the needs of disabled students.

As shown by the brief list of examples I provided above, diversity issues vary and demand constant effort to promote people's attention in multiple fields. Developing courses in higher education for teaching diversity issues is one crucial tactic for creating a space in which students and instructors can openly discuss and learn from each other. Yet, unlike in the U.S., my students share mostly homogeneous backgrounds and identities and live as the

majority in Okinawan communities. Thus, the method of challenging their natural sense of differentiating themselves from the Other must be contrived.

My method for teaching the Inter-Cultural Understanding course at the University of the Ryukyus is to encourage my students to imagine themselves in the role of the Other or people who are marginalized by a particular society. Using this method, I can avoid misleading my students into believing that my class is just a guided tour of other cultures, which operates as a safeguard against and neutralizes various power relationships involved in the production of cultures. For instance, simply introducing music, food, and clothes of a certain culture often ends up masking the fact that in every culture there exists a structure of power that determines the majority and minority, and those who exist at the center and those who are marginalized. Thus, instead of focusing on culture primarily, I use race issues, which are among the most ignored differences in Japan, as the major parameter for making my students understand how their positions in one society can be radically shifted in another.

Throughout the semester, I use reading and visual materials that deal with the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class in U.S. society. I choose the social setting of the U.S. because it is the most familiar place for me to discuss diversity. Furthermore, in U.S. society, various differences are more visible than in Japan. On the first day of class, I ask my students how they define themselves. They usually answer that they are Japanese, and that they are female or male. Then, I ask them if they ever have been made to feel conscious of their race. In the past, mixed-race students answered yes, and other students answered never. Through that brief discussion on the first day, I introduce my students to the invisibility or transparency of the race of the dominant group in Japan.

The opening discussion with my students is extended to the following weeks' reading and visual materials. Especially, an excerpt from Michael Omi and Howard Winant's seminal writing, *Racial Formation in the United States*, helps my students more carefully consider the definition of race, which they have never thought about. The major issues that I usually focus on in this reading are how the notion of race has been defined from various perspectives, such as religious perspectives, biological determinism; and the view that race

is a product of social and cultural constructs, and thus racial difference can be defined in different ways depending on the society (Omi and Winant 3-13). The majority of my students have never considered how the borderlines between one race and another can be shifted if they move to a different society. Through the course of my discussion with my students, I ask them to imagine that if they are in the U.S., how they can be racially defined. In their text, Omi and Winant discuss the significant moment when racial consciousness is born. They discuss how the racial identity of “White” was created by encounters with racial others. In a very similar manner, my students imagine how they see other racial groups, and what they think about their social positions as “Asians” in U.S. society—which they have never imagined. They have mostly defined themselves as Japanese or male/female, and thus have never imagined that they could be more largely lumped together with other people who have Asian ancestry.

With the excerpt from Omi and Winant’s text, I use the introduction of *Orientalism* by Edward Said. This crucial text is very useful for introducing how hegemonic power contributes to creating the Other and justifies dominance over them. The content of this reading is very difficult for my second-year students and I have noticed that many students are not familiar with the theoretical jargon. Therefore, I use various visual images, which were produced to represent “the Orient,” to facilitate my students’ understanding. I show copies of several paintings by “Orientalist” painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix, in which students observe repeated images of people in the paintings—mostly women, whose races are ambiguous, with loose clothes and luxurious jewelry. They are lying on couches or beds and/or smoking hookah. They have dark skinned—probably African—servants, and exotic animals not of European origin, such as huge snakes, peafowls, or elephants. I ask my students to form small groups of four to five and discuss what messages they can receive from those images of “the Orient” painted in the pictures. Students usually notice that the people who are placed at the center of the canvasses are enjoying themselves and relaxing. In other words, these people are not presented as diligent. I also ask the students who the intended audience of these paintings was, and how the students reached their assumptions. They conjecture that the paintings

target Western viewers because the paintings evoke feelings of desire to reach and possess “the Orient,” which is represented with figures of seductive women in sensuous clothes. By lying on couches or beds, these women look not only passive and controllable but also inviting and welcoming to the (white male) viewers. The dark-skinned servants, exotic animals, and luxurious furniture, and the ornaments in the paintings also invite the viewers to possess them. By analyzing the paintings, my students capture what Said wants to explain using the dichotomy of “the Orient” and “the Occident” as the means of creating dominance of “the Orient” through various power networks. Said’s article also eliminates my students’ notion that education and art are independent from politics and power. I ask my students consider why the English language, which has long been a requirement in Japanese education, has become such a dominant language in the world. My students consider that learning English has been included in their educational curriculum as the extension of the context of colonialism. Although Said’s writing focuses on the Middle East, his theory applies to the Other/minorities inside the U.S. and thus works well as preparation for the next reading.

Gene Luen Yang’s graphic novel *American Born Chinese* is interesting material through which my students can consider how they as Asians can be treated in U.S. society. In Yang’s text, racial differences are meticulously depicted. Although racial and ethnic heritage sometimes cannot be visually grasped, Yang’s graphic expressions remind my students that people attempt to discern racial differences visually. Graphic expressions have been used to create racial stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans since the late 19th century. The extremely polarized images of Asians and Asian Americans are widespread problematic cultural iconography in U.S. society. The violent, calculating, strange image of “the Yellow Peril” that is typically represented by the character of Dr. Fu Manchu, or the cold, heartless, manipulative, and hyper-sexualized “Dragon Lady” on the one hand, and the docile, model minority nerd, or the obedient and sacrificial Madam Butterfly on the other. Yang challenges these stereotypes by providing alternative representations of racial differences using both visual and narrative tactics.

American Born Chinese comprises three independent storylines that at the end converge

beautifully into one. The first story is of the legendary Monkey King, a famous Chinese folktale with which my students are familiar. The second is a story about a high school student named Danny who possesses physical features and personality that the majority of American young people aspire toward: white, masculine, tall, athletic, and blond. Yet, he has been tormented by a troublemaker: his cousin called Chin-Kee whose numerous visits from China have caused embarrassment for him and forced him to transfer schools three times. The last story is about a Chinese American boy named Jin Wang, who has a strong desire to be accepted in American mainstream society.

Yang creates the character Chin-Kee to represent an assemblage of Asian American stereotypes. He has mustard yellow skin, buckteeth, slanted eyes, and a queue haircut (i.e., a long braid of hair). He wears a purple kung fu suit, and of course cannot differentiate the “r” and “l” pronunciation. He also embodies the Yellow Peril that brings disorder to American society; he lecherously harasses white women, he urinates in unfinished drinks, and he eats cats. Furthermore, he is a model Asian minority who gets perfect academic grades and correctly answers any question asked by teachers at Danny’s school. By comparing Chin-Kee with the Chinese American boy Jin in the last story, Yang emphasizes the difference between the unrealistic monstrous Asian American stereotypes and Yang’s own alternative representation of Asian Americans, which does not conform to the stereotypes.

Yang also depicts the typical problems that Asian American youths encounter. While I was teaching at UB, I often heard complaints from Asian American students that even though they were born in the U.S., people assumed that they were foreign born. Furthermore, the varieties of Asian ethnic backgrounds and ancestral origins are often ignored and represented by the most dominant group, Chinese. Representative of these presumptions that frustrate Asian American youths is Yang’s depiction of the day the American-born Chinese American boy Jin and Taiwanese immigrant Wei-Chen transfer to their school. On the day of Jin’s arrival at Mayflower Elementary School, his homeroom teacher reveals her carelessness and ignorance; she does not remember his name or where he comes from. Jin moves from San Francisco, and yet the teacher introduces him as being from China. Her answer to an insulting and racist question asked by a white student Timmy,

if Jin and his family eat dogs, also reveals her own racial prejudice: “I’m sure Jin doesn’t do that. Jin’s family probably stopped that sort of thing as soon as they came to the United States!” (Yang 31). Her answer demonstrates her belief that through immigration Asian people can be modernized and civilized, and thus implies that she believes their countries are backward and primitive. Furthermore, her answer indicates that even after Jin informs her that he is from San Francisco and not an immigrant, she still associates Jin with foreignness and lumps Asian Americans together without acknowledging differences among them. The very similar introduction is repeated on Wei-Chen’s first day of class. His homeroom teacher introduces Wei-Chen as coming from China, although he is actually from Taiwan. Here, Yang shows the readers his criticism toward the American majority’s indifference toward the differences existing inside the group of Asian Americans and their assumption that all Asians look like same.

Jin’s attitude toward “Asianness” and other Asian American students reveals his rejection of his Asian heritage. Once his non-Asian classmates bully him over the Asian foods that he brings for lunch, he starts to bring sandwiches instead. He hates the “Asianness” that Wei-Chen evokes by speaking Chinese to him and forces Wei-Chen to speak English. While he, Wei-Chen, and a Japanese American girl named Suzy become friends, Jin maintains his desire to be with the popular white students.

Jin’s romantic feelings toward a white girl named Amelia can also be interpreted as his desire for assimilation. In Asian American male authors’ works, such as Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* and Korean American writer Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, white women are often depicted as the embodiment of America itself. In these stories, male characters can gain membership to American mainstream society through their relationship with white women. Jin’s relationship with Amelia does not work out in the end, although Amelia does not possess any racial prejudice toward Jin. Her friend, one of the most popular male students, with blond hair and blue eyes, intervenes in their relationship. He tells Jin to stop asking her out, implying that Jin’s racial difference makes him unsuitable for Amelia. Jin fails to fight back and obediently follows the other boy’s words.

Later, the story reveals that white high school boy Danny is actually Jin himself, who had been magically transformed into a white boy after Jin and Wei-Chen had fought over Jin's misbehavior toward Suzy. Although she is now Wei-Chen's girlfriend, Jin suddenly kisses her while she is telling him a story about her old friend who had mistreated her. Jin repeats to Wei-Chen what he had been told by Amelia's friend: "Maybe I just don't think you're right for her, all right? Maybe I don't think you're worthy of her. Maybe I think she can do better than an F.O.B like you" (Young 191). Here, Jin despises Wei-Chen, who is an immigrant (F.O.B. stands for "fresh off the boat"). Thus, Jin demonstrates that he believes Wei-Chen is "more Asian." In other words, Jin, by projecting his hatred toward his own Asianness onto Wei-Chen, hopes to receive full-fledged cultural citizenship in American society.

Yang's depiction of Jin's physical transformation into white boy Danny visually demonstrates his desire to assimilate. Chin-Kee, however, is the embodiment of all the stereotypes that Jin wants to deny. At the end, it is revealed that the Monkey King transformed himself into Chin-Kee. After one of his sons, who had been transformed into Wei-Chen, stopped contacting him after fighting with Jin, the Monkey King started visiting Danny / Jin. Finally, Jin meets Wei-Chen at a Chinese American bakery, which is a place Jin would not previously visit, and apologizes to renew their friendship.

Yang's graphic novel has characters who are similar in age to most of my students, thus helping my students to put themselves in their shoes. While they share similar adolescent anxieties, they find that being in the U.S. adds racial issues to negotiate, which most of them do not have to face in Japan. Most of my students are in the racial majority in Japan, and thus they usually do not realize how racial differences can affect their social position. Furthermore, my students realize the tremendous impacts on their psyche brought by particular socio-cultural meanings attached to a certain racial group in a particular society. To wrap up my teaching on Yang's text, I ask my students to compare Yang's representation of race in his graphic novel with a Japanese manga's method of depicting characters. In most Japanese manga, racial differences are not emphasized. I encourage my students to consider why it is possible for Japanese manga writers to make racial differences

ambiguous.

Many of my students cannot answer that last question. However, I believe the purpose of teaching diversity is not to find a single correct answer, but to motivate my students to consider their own identity and differences more critically. I want them to imagine how their social position can be radically changed if they are placed in a different society. In their daily lives in Okinawa, my students are the majority in the local society, and yet Okinawa itself has been oppressed and marginalized in the larger Japanese society, and has been a place where various people encounter. Therefore, engaging with diversity issues in Okinawa not only promotes understanding the Other but also is crucial for understanding our own positions in larger socio-historical context.

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要旨

英語文化専攻の必修科目『異文化理解』を担当する中で、どのようにダイバーシティ教育に取り組んできたのかをレポートする。教材の選定と使用例、学生に提示したディスカッションのトピック、授業の展開方法、学生の反応を紹介し、琉球大学でダイバーシティに関する授業を提供する意義について論ずる。