Book review essay

Visionary apprehensions: rethinking “premedieval Japan” in terms of a *postmedieval* sinoscape

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The narrative of ethnic, geographic, and linguistic isomorphism—the notion that a Japanese people speaking a Japanese language live in the Japanese islands—is strong, deeply political, and heavily naturalized. But ultimately, it is a carefully crafted fiction. Ki no Tsurayuki (872–945 CE), poet and co-compiler of the state-sponsored poetry anthology the *Kokinshū*, provides a classic formulation in the opening phrase of his critical introduction to the 905 CE anthology: ‘*Yamato uta wa, hito no kokoro o tane toshite, yorozu no koto no ha to zo narerikeru*’ (‘Yamato poetry is that which takes the human heart as its seed, growing into the leaves of ten thousand words’).¹ ‘Yamato’ poetry (or song, the word is the same) arises organically from the seed that is the Yamato heart; extend the metaphor and you have Yamato soil. Substitute ‘Japan(ese)’

1 My translation. A searchable version of the anthology is available at <http://jti.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/kinshu/kikokin.html>. Accessed 16 August 2021.

for ‘Yamato’ and you have a handy formula for modern ethnic nationalism that ignores the continuing presence of indigenous peoples (such as the Ainu), marginalizes the literary production of minorities (such as Zainichi ‘resident Koreans’ and Okinawan authors), and represses the foundational role and vibrant legacy of Sinitic writing on the archipelago.

2 For a helpful overview of the continuing allure, see Doak (2001).

While the fiction of ethnic nationalism has been alluring to many, I am interested in asking different questions.² What might a postmedieval re-envisioning of the textual basis of “Japan” look like? And how does recent scholarship in the field of Japanese studies begin to move us in this direction? In this review essay, I pair aspects of Walter Mignolo’s decolonial thought with notions of visionary fiction fashioned by Walida Imarisha and adrienne maree brown in order to put pressure on the ideas of Japan and Japanese literature. I think through the ways in which attending to the material text, and to matters pertaining to textual sociology, have opened new avenues of thought in postmedieval Japanese studies, revealing the premodern archipelago to be a quite heterogenous (ethnically, linguistically, culturally, erotically) locale, rather than the imagined nativist precursor to a contemporary, homogenous nation-state. It may seem a long way from decolonial thought to visionary fiction to the writing practices of ancient Japan to a postmedieval envisioning, and yet, as I hope to show below, each of these comprise repertoires of world-making gesture.

At its most fine-grained level, this review essay examines five scholarly monographs: David Lurie’s *Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing* (2011), Torquil Duthie’s *Man’yōshū and the Imperial Imagination in Early Japan* (2014), Bryan D. Lowe’s *Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan* (2017), Brian Steininger’s *Chinese Literary Forms in Heian Japan: Poetics and Practice* (2017), and Reginald Jackson’s *Textures of Mourning: Calligraphy, Mortality, and the Tale of Genji Scrolls* (2018). These works open a number of important avenues of intellectual pursuit. For the field of Japanese studies, they point to the deep histories and cultural textures of the Sinograph, call for phenomenological attention to matters of hand and calligraphy, and diagnose the need for continued close valuation of Sinitic writing in the Japanese archipelago. Surveying them collectively, I want to provoke by suggesting, with Lurie, that an unsettling and re-visioning of language and script in East Asia ‘invites us to imagine a world history of writing less centered on the alphabet’ (Lurie, 2011, 12). By uncoupling the phonograph from teleologies of comparative civilization, we can only imagine what postmedieval worlds might then be possible.

As we approach these works, some basic dates may be useful for non-specialists. A somewhat fuzzy cultural term, ‘Yamato’ refers loosely to the third to eighth centuries CE and references what would become the dominant political group on the main island. Most scholars divide Japanese history into periods based upon the location of the main capital, for instance: Heian, now known as

the city of Kyoto (794–1185 CE). Approaching the modern era, toponymic naming patterns shift to imperial reign names, such as Meiji (1868–1912 CE). Employment of large Western temporal divisions is much more haphazard. One loose schema might see ‘ancient’ used to refer roughly to pre-eighth century, ‘classical’ to the eighth to twelfth centuries, ‘medieval’ to the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, ‘early modern’ to the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, ‘modern’ to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and ‘contemporary’ to everything thereafter, though the demarcation between ‘classical’ and ‘medieval’ is heavily debated. As their titles indicate, Lurie, Duthie, and Lowe’s works all focus on the ‘early’ or ‘ancient’ period (roughly, pre-eighth century CE) while Steininger and Jackson’s situate themselves in the Heian (roughly the eighth through twelfth centuries CE). The textual fantasies which these authors study, and reimagine, stretch into the present.

To unravel the tight weave that braids human hearts, poetic seeds, and the leaves of ‘Yamato’ words, we must begin with a history of early writing in the Japanese archipelago. Careful and incremental in its scholarship, David Lurie’s (2011) monograph *Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing* proposes an exciting sea change regarding perceptions of the Japanese language. Over the last decade, his central arguments have had a ripple effect on the field, both via direct influence (Lurie was the dissertation advisor for another of the authors whose work I examine here, Duthie) and by means of a more incremental swell, a sort of tidal pull toward reconsidering the graphic qualities of Japanese writing and its porosity with the Sinograph. While those interested in East Asia and global histories of writing will find much of interest in all chapters of the book, Chapters 4 and 7 provide the conceptual backbone of Lurie’s argument.

The central claim of Lurie’s book has to do with what he calls ‘overcoming the bilingual fallacy’ (323). He writes:

Considerations of premodern Japanese cultural and literary history have long been dominated by a central opposition between “foreign” Chinese elements and “native” Japanese elements. In its particular application to writing – literary and otherwise – this opposition takes the form of what can be termed the *bilingual fallacy*: the notion that Japanese culture was divided into spheres of Chinese and Japanese texts, marked by clear linguistic and graphic contrasts (323).

The key to overcoming this fallacy lies in understanding the epistemic labor and world-making properties of *kundoku* (‘reading by glossing’ 訓読), which is a set of reading and writing practices enabling nominally ‘Chinese’ writing to be read (vocalized) in or as ‘Japanese’. (Similar techniques existed for those who wished to vocalize or compose in a range of other East Asian, Inner Asian, and Southeast Asian languages including Korean, Vietnamese, Tangut, Kitan, and Jurchen). Once one learns the logographs, accommodates these to the word

order of the desired language, and adds any needed grammatical elements (verb tenses or grammatical particles, for instance), it is possible to read ‘Chinese’ writing aloud in languages that are not Chinese. For instance, the opening of *The Analects* of Confucius: 學而時習之, can be read out in modern Mandarin (*Xue er shi xi zhi*), in literary Japanese (*Manabite toki ni kore wo narafu* 學びて時に之を習ふ), in modern English (To learn and at regular intervals to practice that [which one has learned]), or a host of other languages.³ Crucially, it is also possible to work in the other direction. For instance, one can compose ‘Japanese’ texts in ‘Chinese’ and have them be read aloud in ‘Korean’.

This idea - that, with *kundoku*, a text may hold both more than two and less than two languages within it—is somewhat mind-blowing. As Lurie puts it, ‘Grasping the significance of *kundoku*... means abandoning the assumption that particular texts are necessarily written in one and only one language. I am not denying that there were real differences among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean *spoken* languages. Rather, I am insisting that *texts* were potentially unaffected by such linguistic differences’ (204). What we have been calling ‘Chinese’ (with scare quotes) is really a ‘multi-lingual package’ that arrived in the Japanese archipelago in the sixth century CE ‘already pre-adapted to both Sinitic and non-Sinitic environments’ (203). This package was highly portable, readily adaptable, and only nominally Sinitic. Indeed, while its operations are complex, its persistence across millennia and its spread across the Asian continent speak to its adaptability and make sense, if one gives up the notion that logographs are inherently inferior to phonographs. The Sinograph is a fantastic language technology which is not, in fact, wedded to ‘Chinese’.

There are several important implications to Lurie’s arguments. First and foremost, Lurie’s account debunks easy nativist reimaginings which would see in ancient Yamato the sanctified origins of a modern Japanese ethnopolity.⁴ In addition, given that ‘the bilingual fallacy has encouraged a sequestering of women within an oral, purely native linguistic space,’ taking Lurie’s insights seriously would also allow us to reevaluate the literary productivity of women in premodern Japan, following up on ‘the many signs of female involvement with Chinese-style writings’ (330).⁵ To understand how the Japanese writing system was formed requires attending to power and the politics of legibility. Torquil Duthie and Bryan Lowe’s work, which I review below, takes us deeper into these realms in examinations of the Japanese court and state-related Buddhist institutions. Moreover, unthinking a bilingual fallacy enables the rejection of Western colonial mental mapping onto East Asian pasts (which apprehend the emergence of a more phonographic literature in the tenth century as an obvious improvement), allowing us to see Sino-Japanese literature as a central component of Japanese artistic production up to the present.⁶ Brian Steininger’s work provides one recent example of attention to Sino-Japanese literary production. Finally, and most broadly, Lurie’s arguments force us to ‘confront the mythic

3 For a detailed exposition of *kundoku* in general, and this phrase in particular, see Lurie (2011, 170–180).

4 For a deeper analysis of Japanese nativism and its connections to regimes of literacy, see Burns (2003).

5 For more on conflations of gender and genre in Japanese letters, see Yoda (2004) and Kawashima (2001).

6 For one study in this vein, see Fraleigh (2016).

power and efficiency of alphabetic writing' (353), recognizing the fecundity of graphs, in which 'complexity, ambiguity, and difficulty are all concepts of potential utility' (356) rather than markers of un-civilization. Attending to the graphic qualities of literary texts becomes crucial, as Reginald Jackson's study, examined below, illustrates.⁷ My treatment of the remaining four books focuses on the ways in which they expand or draw out implications of Lurie's arguments.

7 See also LaMarre (2000).

When is the 'Age of Empire' and where are its geographical loci? Can an empire be understood both as premodern and as postcolonial? Put differently, what would an examination of a premodern (and non-European) imperial imagination reveal about the textures, politics, poetics, spaces, and bodies of imperial reach? Taking many of Lurie's insights as a foundation on which to build, Torquil Duthie's *Man'yōshū and the Imperial Imagination in Early Japan* retheorizes the literary production of the eighth century Yamato court, not as linguistic artifact, but as an active tool of cultural shaping. As such, we might read Duthie's monograph as a dilation of material taken up in Chapter 6 of Lurie's study (which explores the writing practices of the *Man'yōshū* poetry anthology), though Duthie's work is much richer than this deceptively simple description would suggest.

Duthie's study focuses on the *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Myriad Ages 万葉集), the earliest extant written poetry collection from the Japanese archipelago, reading it as a political document oriented toward representing the Yamato court as an imperial state. Duthie argues that, like 'their classical and contemporary exemplars, the Han and Tang dynasties, Yamato courtiers envisioned themselves as inhabiting a central metropolitan capital ruling over an expansive realm containing peoples that exhibited diverse forms of appearance, custom, and speech' (1). This was, as Duthie shows, an aspirational fiction. It was also a genre of self-presentation that was legible across the Sinic empires of the continent and the eastern borders of these empires in north-east and south-east Asia (present day Japan, Vietnam, and the Koreas). His central insight is that 'all of the extant texts produced by the Yamato court'—including its poetry—'are expressions of this imperial imagination' (2), while each text manufactures its own 'distinct form of fantasy' (4).

Duthie's study illustrates how agents in and around the Yamato court leveraged genres and formal features from the Sinoscript sphere in order to craft a narrative of Yamato as a self-consciously fictitious imperial order. Duthie's argument is that, if the Sinoscript was flexible and portable, so was the 'ideal of Sinitic imperial rule that permeated Sinitic texts,' the result being that 'while the Sinic empires represented themselves as the center of a world surrounded by tributary and barbarian states, other non-Sinitic East Asian states adopted the same ideals and idioms of government to represent themselves in their dealings with each other' (22–23). One of Duthie's most incisive insights, then, is that we should not think of ancient and medieval East Asia as 'politically and culturally

centered on an entity called “China” but, rather, on the portable ‘ideals of Sinic sovereignty’ that circulated with Sinoscript and its texts (55).

Seen in this light, it becomes clear that political entities on the Japanese archipelago (as elsewhere in the region) have been imagining themselves as imperial realms for well over a millennium, and doing so self-consciously, aware of the fact that these imaginations are fictitious. This is an argument that Duthie suggests in his chapter on ‘The National Imaginings of Early Japan’. He opens,

Although the Yamato court never ruled over an area large and diverse enough to be considered a “real” empire, its adoption of Sinic ideals of universal government was not just an empty fantasy but a staging ground for actual state building that had very real effects on its development. Moreover, the legacy of this imperial imagination, preserved in mythologies, histories, poetry anthologies, legal codes, and institutions, played a central part in the shaping of state politics and culture throughout Japanese history (57).

In other words, twentieth century Imperial Japanese functionaries did not misread ancient texts, misapprehending in them faulty claims to a sacred sovereign and a national body (*kokutai* 国体・國體). Instead, they accurately seized on an ancient fiction, leveraging it as such toward violently expansive imperial ends which, sizeable enough to be regarded as ‘real’ or not, surely felt real enough, no doubt, whether to the refugee scribes of the eighth century or to colonized subjects under more modern regimes.⁸

Though Duthie does not pursue this line of thought, it is worth pointing out that this imaginative work was not strictly rhetorical in nature, but was part and parcel of regional biopolitics. As Duthie is careful to point out, ‘rather than Yamato unilaterally imagining itself as an imperial state, it is likely that the states on the Korean peninsula at times encouraged it and provided it with the scribal expertise to represent itself as a powerful “great land” in order to create at least the appearance of a counterbalance to the Sui’ (45). Literary fashionings involve, among other things, trafficking in human bodies—and not just scribal refugees and their descendants. We might note, for instance, that the *Man’yōshū* includes, among other items, a poem by Fujiwara no Kamatari ‘in celebration of Tenchi presenting him with the gift of an *uneme* (imperial tribute maiden) called Yasumiko’ (190).

I am concerned about the fungibility of gendered bodies operating in the margins of this commentary. What does it mean to translate (in the sense of ‘to move from one place to another’) a human woman’s body? and to then celebrate that act of translation in a public poem to one’s sovereign? Or, to take another example, consider that the *Nihon shoki*’s account of interstate diplomacy in the late seventh century includes mention of a Paekche general who ‘sent tribute of more than one hundred Tang prisoners to the Yamato court with a request for military aid and for the return of a Paekche prince who had been resident at the

8 There is much that could be said here regarding Okinawan writing and—to a lesser extent because more fully subjugated—Ainu writing. See Bhowmik (2008), Strong (2011). For a treatment of these concerns in the Edo period, see Howell (2005).

Yamato court' (47–48) as something of a royal hostage. That is to say: a military official from the Korean peninsula bartered with the Yamato court, sending them prisoners of war from the (Chinese) continent. In return, he hoped to free a member of his own court's royal family and to induce the Yamato to fight alongside him against what he perceived as Tang invaders. Everyone here is holding one another hostage in some way, across borders (of language, geography, and politics) that are porous and interpenetrating. One wonders how our understandings of the Japanophone literary production of Korean imperial subjects in the twentieth century might change if we begin to see the micropolitics of violence that position authors such as Yi Kwang-su (1892–1950), Ch'oe Chae-sŏ (fl. 1940s), Kim Sa-ryang (1914–1950) and others as rhyming with the eighth century Paekche prince.⁹ Yi, Ch'oe, and Kim were all 'Korean' authors during a time when Korea had been annexed by an Imperial Japan (1910–1945). They composed across languages that were highly politicized by awards committees and publications outlets, and they have been variously claimed by, or excluded from, canons of modern national literatures. That is to say: there are durable imperial fantasies underlying and informing more recent, national fabrications and it will prove impossible, I think, to unpack the latter without grappling adequately with the former.

9 See Workman (2015), and Yu (2018).

To be fair, these modern fabulations are not Duthie's concerns. His focus is on attempting to understand the Yamato court's fantasies about itself. As he points out, the *kokutai* (which he translates literally, as the 'shape of the state,' 59) sculpted by the *Man'yōshū* is that of a 'classical imperial realm, in which poetry serves as a vehicle for the cultural sensibility of the court to spread throughout the provinces and create a universal world of civilized feeling centered on the sovereign and the imperial court' (162). The later chapters of his study sift through the textual evidence and propose a 'politics of the first person' constructed and employed to give 'expression to the imperial court as a collective "we"' (389). This expression, it must be noted, took place in what Duthie calls a 'literate form of speech that had been radically transformed by Sinoxenic vocabulary' (212). This is what, I think, we must call a creole, a point to which I will return in the conclusion. As Duthie notes earlier in his study, 'the Sinicization of Buddhism (漢譯)—that is, not the translation of Buddhism into "Chinese", but its translation into Sinic imperial ideology—transformed the nature of the Sinic imperial imagination, by providing it with both an ideological and linguistic outside' (34).

As with Lurie and Duthie, Bryan D. Lowe focuses his monograph on textual practice on the ancient Japanese archipelago. But he does it from the ground up with a particular focus not on poetry but on Buddhist writings. In *Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan*, Lowe traces a history of 'ritualized writing' in ancient Japan as a complex sociological network which 'shaped the human and heavenly order, ... structured communities and instilled identities, ... [and] provided opportunities for individuals to

engage in religious practice and achieve this - and other - worldly goals' (3). Much previous scholarship has viewed Buddhism largely as a tool of the state and has emphasized 'the regulation and exploitation of religion by the state, particularly for apotropaic and ideological purposes' (211): thus the term 'state Buddhism' (*kokka Bukkyō* 国家仏教, 15). By contrast, Lowe's study illuminates the 'fluidity of boundaries between "state" and "popular"' (212), providing a wealth of evidence for the porosity of these conceptual borders.

Lowe constructs his argument in three distinct sections. Section one 'Ritual Practices' lays the historical groundwork for ritualized writing in Buddhist East Asia to provide an overview of ritual practices associated with Buddhist sutra copying. Sections two ('Organizations') and three ('Microhistories') build on this foundation, opening into important new material drawn from Lowe's deep archival work in the Shōsōin collection. Rather than pursue a top-down model (state Buddhism), Lowe's study builds from the ground up, introducing a range of individual actors—nonroyal aristocrats, mid-level officials, nameless fellowship members, obscure provincial monks, harried proofreaders, and female preparators—thereby showing us how ritualized writing 'structured norms for kings and scribes alike' and arguing persuasively that 'agency was a matter neither solely of resistance [to] nor of control [by]' the state (19).

Lowe's study is an important corrective to Lurie's and Duthie's, for it grounds abstract templates (such as imperial imagination) into historical bodies (the scribes and copyists who inked the pages). Other scholarship skirts questions concerning conditions of labor, the heterogeneity of premodern scribal culture, or the trafficking in human bodies that underwrote imperial textual imaginings. By contrast, Lowe's study, as a microhistory, begins to mount a promising response. If my treatment of it here is short it is only because my hope is that scholars interested in the worlds of medieval textuality and the embodied beings who created those texts will find the time to read the whole of Lowe's book. It offers fascinating insights into, among other things, the ways in which the textual activities of eighth century sovereigns oriented not only toward creating notional, abstract realms of dominion, but at managing the effects of sorcery, black magic (*sadō* 左道), and curses (192) while scribes articulated concerns with salary, patronage, and sickness, among other things.

Thus far, our re-evaluation of writing practices on the ancient Japanese archipelago yields three important upshots. First: inherited paradigms of a native, vernacular, Japanese literature operating in clear distinction from a foreign, imported, Chinese literature fundamentally misunderstand the multilingual potentials of Sinitic writing. Second: polities on the Japanese archipelago have leveraged writing specifically as a tool of imperial imagination since the beginning of the historical record. Third: in order to unthink and rethink cultural practices of writing on the Japanese archipelago, we will need to attend to the specific bodies doing the writing and the micropolitical conditions in which they labored. With these approaches in hand, we can now move into the

tenth and eleventh centuries. These centuries have often been regarded as the zenith of the classical Heian period (794–1185 CE) when, according to traditional accounts, a vernacular Japanese script (*kana*, abbreviated Sinographs used as phonetic transcription) and attendant literature burst forth, vanquishing foreign, Chinese models and norms. As Brian Steininger points out in *Chinese Literary Forms in Heian Japan: Poetics and Practice*, however, ‘*kana* writing was still a relatively circumscribed practice: “writing” was more commonly identified with the written idiom’ of Sinographs, apprehended and manipulated through *kundoku* reading practices (1). Composition in literary Sinitic thus reappears as the dominant mode of inscription throughout most of Japanese history. Rather than a binary or antagonistic relationship between Sinitic and the vernacular, Steininger follows Lurie in stressing the capacities of *kundoku* glossing to enunciate literary script in a variety of languages and linguistic registers. If, conceptually, Steininger’s approach founds itself on Lurie’s model, methodologically, he follows an approach closer to Lowe’s, examining ‘the “horizontal” networks of the mid-Heian literary quotidian: the day-to-day exchanges, performances, missives, commissions, banquets, and games that made up the lived practice of classical literary culture’ (1–2). Usefully, Steininger also interrogates those features of literary prose that *kundoku* cannot accommodate, for instance, rhyme and tonal prosody.

Steininger’s study comprises five chapters which move from the macro—to the micro—level of analysis. Chapters 1 and 2 look at ‘the social life of writing, situating literary composition within its attendant interpersonal relationships, goals, and venues’ (13). Chapter 3 describes the formal features of ‘patterned writing’ (*bunshō* 文章), limning the structural features of Sinitic composition and the aesthetic standards by which compositions were judged. Chapter 4 describes how Heian courtiers were trained in the mechanics of literary production, circulation, and reception in a state-sponsored institute of higher education (the Daigakuryō or ‘State Academy’, 大学寮), while the final chapter examines practices of literary recitation, in which courtiers were called upon to read passages aloud in either (or both) Sinitic pronunciation and in literary Japanese (*kundoku*). Ultimately, Steininger’s study ‘reconsiders the continuum between works “written in Chinese” and the vernacular literary tradition by demonstrating that the division between the two was a calculated and fragile conceit with specific social origins’ (17). This conceit was tied, as Duthie has shown, to imperial imaginations and the production of prestige.

Whereas Duthie’s study focuses on the outward projection of power (the Yamato state’s attempts to frame itself as an imperial center vis-à-vis polities on the continent and the Korean peninsula), Steininger’s study tends to more local matters within the Yamato capital at Heian. On the one hand, he shows the ways in which literary governance functioned to discipline more local bodies and, specifically, to ‘disenfranchise lower officialdom’ (18), emptying out the bottom ranks of the bureaucracy and creating a culture of desperation around

attaining a lucrative, if temporary, post amongst the *zuryō* (custodial governors 受領). And, on the other, he attends to the ways in which these disenfranchised bureaucrats leveraged communal literary performance, not only as a genre of complaint or consolation, but of political maneuvering and statesmanship, attempting to forge affective relations that might enable reentry to, or at least continued relation with, the higher ranks and the material resources at their disposal. In short, Steininger examines ‘literary composition within its broader praxis of client sponsorship, material remuneration, and ceremonial production’ (48), allowing him to get at some of the power structures in which ‘the expertise of trained scholars was valorized, but only in the context of subordinate relationships of service’ (61) and practices of group composition turned ‘occasional verse into an implicit test, in which the poet’s knowledge and wit [were] judged by the banquet’s host’ (109).

If one of the take-homes from Steininger’s study is the reminder that Sinographs and Sinitic literature were still not foreign, but were in fact deeply intertwined with and inseparable from vernacular forms, another intriguing avenue of extension would involve unthinking other old binaries, such as the one which notionally divides male, Sinitic, public discourse from female, vernacular, private narration. To be sure, women were not admitted as students to the State Academy, but in his chapter on ‘Glosses and Primers: Heian Education and Literacy’ Steininger examines the variety of textbooks used by male students at the academy. He shows that the types of glossing and commentaries on which male students depended circulated widely throughout the Heian nobility and would surely have informed ‘the educational background of the ladies-in-waiting who produced celebrated works such as the *Tale of Genji* and the *Pillow Book*’ (125).

This line of thought opens intriguing possibilities for reading these women-authored works, not as a separate sort of cloistered literature, but as positioned within a larger mainstream of literary production. If, over the Heian period, professors’ social roles were redefined ‘away from work in the academy and larger public rituals..., toward smaller ceremonies centered on the person of the emperor and commissioned service for the upper nobility’ (162), predominant modes of male social textuality begin to rhyme with women’s production of narratives in literary salons within the imperial household. Linguistic, literary, and political competences are multimodal, with people (regardless of gender or putative language of composition) self-consciously taking up certain registers, scripts, and forms to fashion and perform identity and to maneuver complex social terrain.

Calligraphy provided one of the crucial tools that Heian courtiers leveraged, in their attempts to manage this social terrain. Indeed, one of the insights afforded by David Lurie’s revisioning of the history of writing in the Japanese archipelago pertains to calligraphy, metonymically referred to as ‘the hand’ (*te* 手). He argues that ‘Heian discussions of written styles conceptualize them in

graphic terms (*mana* versus *kana*, and so on) rather than linguistic ones.... The meaningful category of difference among texts in this period—and for a long time afterward—is not linguistic but rather graphic or stylistic’ (328). This insight forces a reevaluation of the presumed gendered and linguistic nature of the classical corpus of putatively vernacular literature composed by women in service to the imperial court. This corpus must be read as wholly entangled with the broader landscape of literary production. More to the point, we must attend closely and wholly to matters of the hand and to practices of calligraphy. Reginald Jackson’s *Textures of Mourning: Calligraphy, Mortality, and the Tale of Genji Scrolls* represents a powerful move in this direction.

As with the other works in this review, Jackson’s bridges premodern and modern. In his case, he examines the eleventh century longform narrative *The Tale of Genji*, composed by the lady-in-waiting known as Murasaki Shikibu, placing this into conversation with the late twelfth century *Illustrated Handscrolls of the Tale of Genji* (which plucked the most dramatic scenes from the *Tale*, pairing calligraphic renderings of those scenes with illustrated panels), and the Gotō Museum’s (Tokyo, 2005–2006) exhibit and reanimation of the *Resurrected Genji Scrolls* (which largely omitted treatment of the calligraphic sections of the scrolls in favor of a focus on the illustrated panels). In attending to the ‘performative topography’ of the illustrated scrolls, Jackson shows how ‘public contests of artistic skill threatened and redrew factional boundaries,’ their practices ‘characterized by degrees of micropolitical violence that saturated’ quotidian existence for those at the court (6, 7).

Jackson’s larger project has to do with understanding literature and literary production as a mode of working through loss: of life, of autonomy, of political stability, and social position. As he puts it, ‘my arguments hinge on rethinking textual materiality in terms of embodied, often spectacular, labor: the book makes a strong case for reconceptualizing text’—and particularly calligraphy—‘as performance’ (17). In this sense, he proposes to read calligraphic performance in terms of ‘political dispossession’, considering ‘the relation between the tenuous status of cultural workers like Murasaki Shikibu, a member of the middle rank, or *zuryō* (the most important of the lesser classes), and the larger genealogical context of the historical “Genji”, or Minamoto clan’ (29). Jackson’s study thus makes clear some of the continuities between ‘Japanese’ and ‘Chinese’ composition, male and female precarity, politics and leisure, violence and pleasure in the Heian social sphere, limning the ‘micropolitical implications of artistic gestures’ (78).

One of Jackson’s most powerful accomplishments is that, finally, his is a scholarship that attends to the conditions of labor, its power imbalances and political asymmetries, its gendered and classed violence. His visual analyses of the ‘Kashiwagi’ tracts (in Chapter 3) and the ‘Minori’ tracts (in Chapters 4 and 5) are beautiful, necessary, and haunting. Grounding himself in the observation that in the ‘late-Heian economy of continual textual surrogation... the written

“character body” (*jitai* [字体]) stands in for the written body that produces it,’ he works through the implications this has for acts of reading, calligraphic performance, and visual consumption (100). Ultimately, he theorizes the *Genji Scroll’s* calligraphic tracts as ‘a territory of exposure in which the operations of violence might be mapped and theorized’ (150). In his final chapters, Jackson shows how the excision of the calligraphic tracts speaks to the fragility of contemporary Japanese nationalism and its post-bubble needs to ‘expedite a sense of ethnic solidarity’ (267).

Turning to a postmedieval Sinoscape

Thinking in terms of a postmedieval Sinoscape (rather than a pre-medieval Japan) points out the need for greater attention to the micropolitics of exclusion and inclusion, a future of study that, I hope, will read against the dominant grains of presentist nationalisms and toward a more nuanced texture and open-endedness of the past. In his now-classic definition of decolonial thought as an attempt to think ‘beyond a Eurocentric critique of modernity’ and toward a notion of transmodernity—a modernity which is ‘not strictly European but is planetary’—Walter Dignolo evinces a concern with limning the premodern political, economic, and cultural conditions enabling the contemporary dominance of the global north (Dignolo, 2002, 57). His reckoning centers on the fact that European modernity unfolded ‘in the sixteenth century with capitalism and the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit,’ raising the question: how wed is decolonial thought to Atlantic geopolitics? (How) might we engage decolonial methods from points of view oriented to the Pacific or the Indian Ocean? In diagnosing the ‘coloniality of power,’ Dignolo grounds his method in a style of ‘border thinking’ (71) that seeks to evade the colonial bind according to which any non-European-derived system of knowledge is either ‘so similar to Western [insert noun] that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears’ or is ‘so different that its credentials to genuine [insert noun] will always be in doubt’ (70).

In this review essay, I have been interested in thinking through, with, and around Dignolo’s decolonial gestures, using them to unsettle and reapproach the question of reading and writing in the premodern Japanese archipelago. As the subtitle to this essay indicates, the move here is to seize upon the conceptual ambitions of the ‘postmedieval’ to trouble productively ideas of a premedieval Japan. That is to say: the period of time usually identified in historical chronology as ‘medieval’ is highly unstable, shifting by several centuries depending on the scholar and the field.¹⁰ Thus, the ‘medieval,’ is itself a textually-constructed fantasy of early modern nation anachronistically cast back in time. In attempting to unthink the premedieval, it may help to pair it with the postmedieval, understood as a conceptual move that challenges the stable notion

10 For a brief discussion of this malleability, see Eubanks (2011, 13–15).

of medieval as historical chronology.¹¹ In this sense, we should think toward a *postmedieval* Sinoscapes: an area which has and continues to be shaped by forms of ‘Chinese’ writing which we might apprehend, as this journal’s manifesto has it, through ‘theoretically driven scholarship... characterized by conceptual adventure, stylistic experiment, political urgency, or surprising encounter’.¹²

In attempting this revisionary work, I am equally inspired and provoked by the work of Walida Imarisha and adrienne maree brown on the power and politics of visionary fiction. Imarisha notes:

Visionary fiction is a term I developed to help talk about fantastical writing that helps us imagine new just worlds. Visionary fiction encompasses science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, alternative timelines, and more. It is a fantastic literature that helps us to understand existing power dynamics and helps us imagine paths to creating more just future. Part of the reason I wanted to create this term was to be able to talk about science fiction (and the other genres mentioned) and be able to differentiate from mainstream science fiction which so often just replicated the power inequalities of this world and grafts them onto the future.¹³

Imarisha might have included mytho-histories and imperial fictions in her list of genres, for these also comprise ‘alternate timelines’ articulated in the service of building unseen worlds, though these fictions are thrust at the past rather than into the future. And yet, we should be attentive to the power imbalances and the political asymmetries of these visions, not only in the moment of their sculpting but in the prevalence and prevailing winds of their futuristic uptake. While, as brown writes, ‘changing the world willfully is science fictional behavior,’ not all such scripting is liberatory and the future has the way of colonizing its past.¹⁴

Witness Tokugawa (1600–1868 CE) nativism (*kokugaku* 国学), that school of eighteenth-century thought whose scholars ‘engaged in the study of Japan’s earliest literary and mytho-historical sources,’ finding therein, they argued, a depiction of ‘Japan’s earliest ages in idealized and near-paradisiac terms’ and concluding that ‘the beatific qualities of those times were terminated as a result of the contaminating effect of foreign modes of thought into Japan’ (Nosco, 1990, 7–8). In his essay *Kuzubana*, scholar Moto’ori Norinaga (1730–1801) proposed that these beatific qualities were heritable, possessed by all Japanese at birth, though they needed to be revitalized through communion with the textual remains of pure (and purely mythic) pasts (Norinaga, 1942, 147). Peter Nosco is correct in calling these ‘racialist assumptions’ (8). And those assumptions should bother us. Witness their eruption in 20th century imperial era claims to Japanese superiority and to the lingering disease of postwar Nihonjinron (‘discourse on Japaneseness’ 日本人論) which continues to fuel ethnic nationalism into twenty-first century Japan.

In the spirit of visionary apprehensions of a postmedieval Sinoscapes, I would like to center one specific upshot: the possibilities of Japanese as creole. John

11 I would like to thank an anonymous peer reviewer for providing much of the phrasing around ‘medieval,’ ‘premedieval,’ and ‘postmedieval’ in this paragraph.

12 <https://www.palgrave.com/us/journal/41280>.

13 <http://externatingangel.com/eap-the-magazine/what-is-visionary-fiction-an-interview-with-walidah-imarisha/>.

14 <http://adrienne-mareebrown.net/tag/sciencefiction>. Accessed 10 January 2021.

Whittier Treat has asserted the ‘widespread and significant creolization of not only language but realms of public discourse and culture’ during the Occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952 noting that the ‘hybrid (*zasshūteki* 雑種の) nature of Japanese history and thought has been recognized for centuries... going back to initial contacts with the Asian continent’ (Treat, 2018, 150). Hybridization, however, is for Treat but a ‘preliminary step in the evolution of a creolized culture,’ insofar as creolity ‘presses for the transformation of traditions, customs, and habits of an existing society,’ calling into question any sense of ‘origin’ (171). Creolization involves violence and rupture of the sort that Treat locates in the multi-decade period of imperialism and war that stretched across the first half of the twentieth century, which brought Japan (and the Japanese language) into violent contestation with Korean, Taiwanese, and Manchurian, not to mention Okinawan and Micronesian languages and peoples. But there is no reason to think that such violence, linguistic and martial, are the sole purview of modernity. Technologies of writing—along with weaving, brewing, metalwork, and horsemanship—developed along with articulations of royal power in the ancient period. Further, the adaptation of Chinese characters to inscribe Japanese (and other non-Sinitic languages) ‘emerged from within the writing system rather than being imposed on it from outside’ (Lurie, 334). Thus, any sort of phonographic Japanese writing system was born of a *kundoku* creole.

A corollary of conceptualizing Japanese as a creole *from the moment of its first writing*: reenvisioning the formation of Japanese written language demands that we reconsider and attend to the heterogeneity of premodern culture on the archipelago, not in some sort of ‘paeon to a premodern paradise of difference’ (Lurie, 209), but with regard to the real power plays and knowledge transfers that took place between people from different points of geographic origin at moments shaped by both macro-levels of violence and the micro-politics of aggression. After all, the pivotal dates in Lurie’s study are the coup of 645 CE and the Jinshin War of 672 CE, which consolidated political power, inaugurated an efflorescence of writing, and gave rise to the ‘country name Japan (Nihon or Nippon 日本) itself’ (128–129). As Lurie points out, these ‘mid-seventh century efforts to establish writing-based administration were made possible by immigrant scribes and their descendants’ (126) along with ‘literate refugees from Paekche (and, after Silla’s final victory in 668, from Koguryō) and Tang prisoners’ (127). What conditions of labor applied to the working of these waves of scribes and refugees? Where and how did they live? What kinds of violence will we need to learn to see in order to tell these stories? Following visionary fiction’s premise—that working with histories of violence enables the imagining of more equitable and pleasurable futures—it is possible to imagine that reckoning with Japanese as a creole might provide different methods for approaching the larger corpus of Japanophone writing, such as that produced in the modern and contemporary periods by ‘resident Koreans’ (Zainichi), Okinawan authors, erstwhile Taiwanese and Korean colonial subjects, Brazilian

Nikkei, and Japanese-American authors, among others.¹⁵ That is a scholarly future that I would be excited to imagine and, in imagining, begin to build.

15 For some provocative work in this direction, see Leong (2015), Workman (2011), and Rivas (2015).

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