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Comments

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Response to Shigemi Inaga's Commentary

Ayako Kano

I thank the editors for the opportunity to respond to Professor Inaga's commentary. I believe only a few points need to be made.

1) On the appellation "anti-feminist art historian":

Inaga states that he is "both honored and perplexed" to be described an "anti-feminist art historian." I invite the readers to examine his extensive publication record to see if my characterization is accurate.¹ I am willing to suspend judgment on this point until I myself have examined his work in full. An admittedly cursory look at his major publications (those that were available to me as of November 2007) has not led me to believe that revising this characterization is warranted.²

I do believe that while labels such as "feminist" and "anti-feminist" are useful in articulating positions in a debate (and thus I stand by my use of "anti-feminist" to characterize Inaga's position), these labels may ultimately be discarded if the debate is to move on to a discussion of particular claims. Rather than trying to define "feminism" and trying to decide who has the right to claim being a "feminist," it would be more fruitful if we could discuss the validity of particular claims put forward by particular people, and I write my response in that spirit.

2) On alternative histories and objectivity:

Of the three points arising from my alleged mistranslation of Inaga's passage in his review of Chino Kaori's talk, the following point seems crucial.

Inaga states that in his review he "pointed out Chino's misleadingly 'positivist' claim to the 'correct' historical understanding that she still naively presupposed in contradiction to the theoretical apparatus she upheld." He also states that the "myth of neutrality and objectivity . . . has been repeatedly contested in the last half century of

epistemological discussions” and that “Chino should have at least been aware of this Popperian notion of refutability.” He also says that “My criticism of Chino was that she be more fundamental and coherent in her statements.”

If I understand him correctly, Inaga is claiming that Chino was incoherent because she seemed to advocate two contradictory positions: on the one hand, she was adhering to a post-structuralist, post-positivist, post-Orientalist framework that radically questions the myth of neutrality and objectivity; on the other hand, she was making a “positivist” claim to “correct” historical understanding. It may well be that Chino was conflicted about this issue—I believe it has been a difficult dilemma for many researchers and teachers. We may want to radically question the myth of neutrality and objectivity, yet also want to offer in our research, writing, and teaching a better alternative to existing historical understanding.

One solution to this dilemma would be to say, “We are going to tell alternative stories, which are just going to be more interesting stories, but we will not argue that they are better, more accurate, more correct stories.” This would be a postmodernist position.

Another solution would be to say, “We are going to tell alternative stories, and these are going to be *better* stories because they include more people’s perspectives and are more likely to help achieve goals of solidarity and community that are important to us, though we will not argue that they are more accurate, more correct stories.” This would be a pragmatist position, with Richard Rorty perhaps being its best known advocate. A pragmatist argument would claim that the political goal of “solidarity” is more important than that of “objectivity.”³ As a feminist I find myself wanting to agree with this claim; as a scholar I find myself uneasy with it.

The third solution, one which I have found useful in thinking of a way beyond this impasse, is one that says, “We are going to tell alternative stories, and even though we acknowledge that every story is told from a biased and partial perspective and that the positivist belief in neutrality and objectivity is untenable, we are going to argue that it is possible to move toward better, more accurate, and more correct stories, through a process of including more people in the telling, of gathering more information, and of correcting errors.” This is a post-positivist realist position.⁴

A comprehensive examination of this position is beyond the scope of this response, but I offer it as a plausible and coherent alternative to the postmodernist or the pragmatist positions. And at least in the part of the speech cited in my article, Chino seems close to advocating this position.⁵ Suffice it to say that the relationship between politics and academics is one fraught with tension, and we should remember that feminist scholars such as Chino Kaori (and Wakakuwa Midori as well) struggled with this tension. In Inaga’s “empty pedantry” (his words, not mine) I do not sense a willingness to understand and share in this struggle. This is why I believe I am not mistaken in characterizing him as “anti-feminist,” though I remain open to the possibility of correction.

3) On the binary opposition between “male” and “female”:

In objecting to my footnote referring to the “reverse discrimination of men,” Inaga states: “The alternative and binary opposition between ‘male’ and ‘female’ tends to repress other possible categories that are made invisible by the very alternative (as trans-sexuality, homosexuality, and queer studies have typically, if not exhaustively shown). This preemptive exclusion of the virtual third party from consideration clearly reveals Kano’s dichotomized thinking.”

I would agree with Inaga’s claim that the binary opposition between “male” and “female” can repress other possible categories, but I would also note the following about the politics of making this claim.

I share Inaga’s frustration that the term “*yokuatsu*” is easily distorted in translation, and I apologize if he meant “repression” rather than “oppression.” As I have written elsewhere, the polysemy of the term “*yokuatsu*” is sometimes abused in Japanese scholarship in order to dismiss legal, political, and economic “oppression” as a product of “repression” in the sexual, psychological, or psychoanalytical sense.⁶ But I would argue that “oppression” is the issue here, not “repression.” I believe this to be the reason we need to be careful when wielding binary oppositions like “male” and “female”: not because it “represses” (in Inaga’s terminology) other possible categories, but because there are structures of “oppression,” i.e., discrimination, exclusion, and violence, which impact those who fail to fit neatly into the binary categories of “male” and “female.”

It is interesting that someone who scolds feminist scholars for excluding such members of the “virtual third party” does not seem to engage in scholarship that includes the “virtual third party.” Again, if I am mistaken on this point, and have missed Inaga’s contribution to LGBTQ Studies, I will stand corrected. While I am not suggesting that in order to point out a theoretical blind-spot one has to have published a book addressing that blind-spot, it does seem rather unfair to accuse others of “dichotomized thinking” without having shown in one’s own work how one might choose to go beyond it. Meanwhile, many feminist scholars, including members of the Image & Gender Research Association, have indeed engaged in research that precisely seek to go beyond “dichotomized thinking” on this point.⁷

As for my own “dichotomized thinking,” my work has been driven by the desire to challenge *both* the heteronormative *and* masculinist status quo, and while questioning the synchronic and diachronic stability of the category “woman” has been part of this effort, I would nonetheless make the following claim: the “liberation of women” is a worthy project in a world where being categorized as “woman” has meant discrimination and exclusion, however complicated this project must be made through attention to other possible categories including, but not limited to, class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and sexuality.

(*En passant*, for Inaga to quibble with Chino’s term “*iseiai dansei*” as a translation for “heterosexual male” is simply beside the point. Granted, “homosocial and masculinist”

and its Japanese equivalent may have suited Chinos' purposes better, but her point was not about love, or even sex, but about the larger structures and mechanisms of hegemonic masculinity, and a sympathetic, non-anti-feminist reading of her work would have acknowledged the same.)

4) On what remains to be done:

Chino would have been the first to agree with Inaga's statement that "feminist contestation against male domination is not free of the power mechanisms of jurisdiction." Her own work is a testament to her struggle, and her questioning of the categories of "women," "Japan," and "art," as well as her intervention in the textbook controversy, and her critical engagement with Japan's colonialist history, are further evidence that she went beyond "mere sexual difference" (*takaga seibetsu*, in the terminology used in the debates) in her efforts to interrogate these power mechanisms of jurisdiction. Together with Wakakuwa Midori, the first generation of feminist art historians in Japan have opened a door and have indeed made the field seem less stifling to a new group of students. Whether the rest of us can do more in our lifetime remains to be seen.

(December 7, 2007)

Notes

1. http://www.nichibun.ac.jp/research/faculty/staff1/inaga02_e.html

2. Inaga Shigemi, *Kaiga no tōhō: orientarizumu kara japonizumu e* (The Orient of Painting: Orientalism to Japonisme) (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 1999); Inaga Shigemi, *Kaiga no tasogare: Édouard Manet botsugo no tōsō* (Le Crépuscule de la peinture: la lutte posthume d'Édouard Manet) (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 1997); Inaga Shigemi, ed., *Ibunka rikai no rinri ni mukete* (Towards an Ethics of Cross-Cultural Understanding) (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2001).

3. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, eds. John Rajchman, and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 3-19.

4. See for example Satya P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 1-31. See also his *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García, eds., *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

5. "There is no such thing as academic scholarship that is neutral and does not take a position. Each and every one of us must begin our studies from positions that are biased by the values of the age or the place in which we live. However, we have the ability to make contacts and learn from others, understand our own biases, and thus gradually correct our

own scholarship." Chino Kaori, "Bijutsukan, bijutsushigaku no ryōiki ni miru jendā ronsō: 1997-1998" (Gender Debates as Seen in the Realms of Museums and Art History: 1997-1998), in Kumakura Takaaki and Chino Kaori, eds., *Onna? Nihon? bi?: arata na jendā hihyō ni mukete* (Women? Japan? Beauty?: Toward a New Gender Criticism) (Tokyo: Keiō Gijyū Daigaku Shuppankai, 1999): 117-54. The quote is from p. 125.

6. Ayako Kano, "Towards a Critique of Transhistorical Femininity," in *Gendering Modern Japanese History*, eds. Barbara Molony and Kathleen Uno (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2005): 520-54.

7. Image & Gender Research Association website; <http://www.geocities.co.jp/CollegeLife-Library/9287/past.html>