Japanese-American Ethnicity in Hawaii and the Possibilities of Autoethnography: A Comment on Numazaki

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Numazaki's essay (2014) reflects honestly upon his experience of encountering Japanese-Americans in Hawaii some thirty years ago when he was in his late twenties. The experience prompted him to consider for the first time the possibility that he could belong to a community of people who shared similar practices, and the positive feelings he experienced led him to question anthropological theories of ethnicity that were popular at that time. The essay was of personal interest to me because I grew up in Hawaii in the 1970s and early 1980s as a Japanese-American, and in my young adulthood, lived on the mainland United States and a regional city in Japan, places that appear in the essay as having shaped Numazaki's experiences as a young adult. While Numazaki writes about Honolulu in the 1980s after having lived in Sendai, Japan, and Buffalo and East Lansing in the United States, I spent my formative years in Honolulu – although I was born in Los Angeles. The cultural mixing and prevalence of Japanese American cultural habits that was surprising to Numazaki in Honolulu seemed natural to me growing up there. While I am a "native" of Honolulu, my professional life as an anthropologist has focused on the anthropology of Japan and East Asia. I read the essay as a native reading about one's home society. As such, Numazaki's descriptions of Honolulu society provoked old feelings of naive (and unearned) pride in the accomplishments of Japanese Americans in Hawaii as well as frustrations with the limits of Japanese-American society and Hawaii. But as an anthropologist, like Numazaki, I find my feelings to be a useful entry point to reviewing questions of identity and ethnicity in Hawaii.

Numazaki's main conclusion (2014) is that he felt an unexpected sense of connection to Hawaii which he thinks may have been an "ethnic" experience.

This sense of connection emerged from everyday experiences such as secretaries being able to easily spell and remember his name, meeting people who were familiar with his hometown, mixing of Japanese and American food cultures, appreciating Japanese popular culture from a Hawaii perspective, and discovering commonalities in the foods that he and Japanese Americans ate, and in the celebration of familiar holidays and festivals.

The irony, of course, is that he finds a sense of connection or the possibility of connection in a place in which he was a complete newcomer, rather than to the places where he was in fact a native such as Sendai or the mainland United States where he had spent time in his childhood. The sense of connection to Hawaii stands in relation to his sense of disconnection to his hometown, Sendai, and his realization that in East Lansing, Michigan, he was considered a foreigner. He concludes ambivalently, stating: "I do [think the connection I felt was ethnicity] because I felt connected only to Japanese Americans and not others. I do not because my sense of connection was effectively and affectively one sided" (2014: 53).

He proceeds to argue that what he experienced was an "imagined commonality", or "the unseen whole of commonality extrapolated from a little commonality actually seen in daily life" (2014: 55). This belief in commonality gave rise to the related belief that he could belong to a community made up of such people (2014: 55). He believed that he could belong based on what he saw of the daily behaviors and practices of Japanese Americans, and also because he was never criticized or made to feel excluded by that community as he had experienced in Sendai and in cities in the continental United States.

After one year in Honolulu, Numazaki left for Taiwan and was never able to know whether he could have belonged to the community of Japanese-Americans in Hawaii. He writes, "the sense of connectedness was a one-sided love affair on my part. I have no idea if the collectivity reciprocated my identification with it or my affection for it...I thought I was 'belongable' but I do not know [whether] that sense was shared by any Japanese American I had interacted with" (2014: 54). I believe that Numazaki's interpretation that he

possessed "belongability" to the Japanese American community in Honolulu was essentially correct for the following reason. In the 1980s Japanese-Americans were consolidating power as a dominant ethnic group in the islands; the historical moment was the outcome of a century-long process. Since arriving in the islands as sugar cane plantation workers in the mid-1880s through the end of World War II, Japanese Americans were excluded from full participation in society on the basis of race (Okamura 2014: 3-4). However, in the quarter century after World War II, local Japanese and other nonwhite groups challenged white (haole) domination through labor union activism and by electing political leaders from their own ethnic communities (Okamura 2014: 3-4). By the end of the twelve-year term of Japanese-American Governor, George Ariyoshi, in 1986, Japanese Americans (primarily men) were heavily involved in leadership in politics, education, banking, law and other professional fields. The sense of celebration of Japanese culture in daily life that Numazaki experienced had come after decades of hard fought political struggles against racism for full participation, acceptance, and leadership in Hawaii society. Thus by the 1980s, ethnicity accompanied by fluency in English and masculinity had become the dominant principles by which power and privilege was exercised in Hawaii. Yano (2006: 42) discusses language as a marker of prestige and assimilation for Japanese Americans and its gendered implications. As an English speaking, educated male who was familiar with Japanese and American cultural practices, Numazaki possessed the required characteristics to fit into the dominant class.

Numazaki's surprise that secretaries or bank clerks in Hawaii did not ask how to spell his name occurs in the context of the rise of Japanese-American political and social domination. Knowing how to spell Japanese-American names had become part of the cultural knowledge necessary for work among the (predominantly female) white-collar service classes of secretaries and clerks in Honolulu in the 1980s. Having one's Japanese American name spelled correctly without being asked was part of the privileges and rights of becoming a dominant social and political ethnic group.

In other words, what he experienced was not the openness of Hawaiian

society in general, but the willingness of Hawaii residents and the Japanese-American community to accept a person of his particular composition of features (male, standard English speaking, Asian physical features, Japanese surname, Japanese cultural fluency) as a member of a dominant professional class of Japanese-Americans. In Hawaii, the ascendancy of Japanese Americans to power and cultural domination based on ethnicity also served as a barrier for other ethnicities to obtain the same status. Starting in the 1950s, as Chinese and Japanese Americans in Hawaii obtained increasing economic and political power, they began to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups such as Native Hawaiians, Portuguese Americans and Filipino Americans (Okamura 2014: 3-4). Okamura argues: "ethnicity continued, like race, to be an exclusionary and subordinating barrier for Native Hawaiians, Filipino Americans, and other minorities, who did not enjoy the same economic and political advancement to the same extent as had Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and initially Korean Americans (2014: 3-4). Familiarity with Japanese American cultural practices including food and cultural references serve as markers of cultural assimilation and acceptance into class-based institutions in Hawaii.

That being said, having only just arrived in Honolulu, Numazaki occupied a marginal position, and marginality, as many autoethnographers (Reed-Danahay 1997: 4; Boylorn and Orbe 2014: 18) have pointed out, provides fertile ground for exploring taken-for-granted normative categories, and helps to deconstruct simple binaries of insider/outsider status. From their peripheral positions, autoethnographers may demonstrate the multiple and shifting positions that characterize our lives in a globalized age (Reed-Danahay 1997: 4; Boylorn and Orbe 2014: 18). If he had stayed in Honolulu, Numazaki may have conducted an autoethnographical project that explored the boundaries, criteria, and nature of Japanese American ethnicity in Hawaii.

Writers on the peripheries of Japanese and American societies have been inspired by their experiences to review the nature of self and society in Japan. Kondo, a Japanese-American, explored the Japanese sense of self (1990)

based on her experience of becoming embedded in the social life of the Tokyo neighborhood in which she did her fieldwork, and she described her attraction and resistance to the process in which she along with her Japanese collaborators were creating a "Japanese" self that increasingly "belonged" to Japanese society (1990; 23). Lebra, who identifies herself as "irreversibly Japanese," (2004) also discusses her multiple marginal position in relation to the United States, Japan, and to the field of anthropology given her training in sociology. These marginal positions gave rise to her "enduring interest in self" (2004, x). In contrast to Kondo and Lebra's discussion of self in Japanese society, however, Numazaki's discussion of ethnicity suggests a process that involves choice; Numazaki did not feel compelled to become a member although he felt membership to be attractive. Kondo and Lebra suggest that selfhood construction was compulsory project for them in Japan, and Kondo's method of escaping the formation of a "Japanese self" was to return to the United States. Although Kondo and Lebra did not explicitly conduct autoethnography (Kondo's work being much closer to autoethnography than that of Lebra), a comparison of their work with Numazaki's essay raises interesting questions, and suggests that a comparative or collaborative autoethnographic approach would prove highly useful in understanding self-hood experiences and multiple marginalities.

Numazaki's dissatisfaction with theories of ethnicity popular in the 1980s that consisted of a debate between ethnicity as a primordial, unchanging aspect of human existence, or as a strategically manipulable category (Jenkins 2008) foreshadows the demise of this debate and the rise of theories which investigate the constructed and particularistic nature of ethnicity. I read Numazaki's essay as confirmation that our experience in an autoethnographic style should be given more weight and recognition as a means to evaluate theories. Certainly our feelings and experiences play an important role in how we view theories, but rarely do we acknowledge the role of such feelings in our writing.

Finally, Numazaki points to the emotional appeal and positive feelings generated by the feeling of belonging to an ethnic group. I think of cultural critic

Norma Field's admission of being moved to tears when sighting a Japanese runner in New York's Central Park, and with no flag to wave, cheered the runner in Japanese. At the same time, she felt deeply uncomfortable when an American businessman donned a rising sun pin on his lapel at a Japanese department store (1993: 276). This positive appeal of ethnicity and nationalism and the ambivalence it generates is not easily addressed in academic writing, and Numazaki's essay reminds us that this is a frontier that may be productively explored through autoethnographic methods.

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