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On the Possibility and Complexity of Imagined Commonality: A Comment on Numazaki

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Dr. Numazaki’s article “Imagined Commonality: Rethinking “Ethnicity” through Personal Experience in Hawaii” (Numazaki 2014) introduced the idea of “imagined commonality” and showed possibilities toward the cosmopolitan society. His attempt at “auto-anthropology” (Numazaki 2013) is worth evaluating in the sense that it could shed a light on minority’s internal mindset with longitudinal perspective. In sociolinguistics¹, there are some studies on author’s own identity (e.g. Lee & Simon-Maeda 2006; Ogulnick 1998) or longitudinal studies on minorities’ identity (e.g. Shao-Kobayashi & Dixon 2012), but it is clearly a new attempt to combine these two aspects.

In this commentary, I will first briefly summarize Dr. Numazaki’s contribution from socio-/ethno-linguistics view, then describe my own experience in Hawaii. Finally, I will make a comment and add my interpretation on the scope of imagining the commonality, and then pose a question on its process.

As a main issue of his article, Dr. Numazaki defines “imagined commonalities” as “the unseen whole of commonality extrapolated from a little commonality actually seen in daily life”, and this “a little commonality” is equal to “trivial habits in daily living” in Ruth Benedict’s sense (Numazaki 2014: 55). I appreciate this view, since this succeeded in exploring minority’s internal mindset, or the mechanism of how one identifies themselves as a member of a certain “ethnic” group. In socio- and ethno-linguistics, there has been a plenty of studies concerning minority’s identities, especially those of returnees’ and

¹ Due to my interest and career, I will make commentary from the socio-/ethno-linguistics standpoint.
immigrants’. The complexity of identification has been also discussed using the concepts of “investment” (Norton 2000, 2008; Norton-Peirce 1995), which is defined as “the socially and historically constructed relationship of [language] learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton 2008: 47), “Ideal Self” (Dörnyei 2010), which refers to “the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess (i.e. representation of hopes, aspirations or wishes)” (Dörnyei 2010: 78), or imagined communities, but investigating how one relates the reality in front of them with their “imagined communities” is, to my knowledge, yet to be done. As Dr. Numazaki himself points out, this seems to have a potential to explain how “imagined communities” are formed from individual imagined commonalities. In this sense, his new practice has its value and I believe this is one of the fruits of auto-anthropology.

In terms with of “ethnic” experience, however, I must say Dr. Numazaki and I had completely different feelings. I was a student of Dr. Numazaki from 2009 to 2012 at Tohoku University, and then moved to Hawaii as a graduate student of University of Hawaii at Manoa from 2012 to 2014. I was also an East-West Center fellow from 2013 to 2014. It therefore seems to me that his and my life experiences are similar in a way, though my “ethnic” experience was completely different from his, as I will describe below. What triggered him to imagine commonalities – such as bento, a Japanese singer, or New Year’s greetings – did not have the same effect on me, or they even merely emphasized the differences between Japan and Hawaii.

Take my bento experience for example: during my stay in Hawaii, I usually cooked breakfast and dinner by myself. This is not only because I simply liked cooking, but also there were many Japanese supermarkets in Hawaii, where I could buy goods I was familiar in Japan such as Japanese-brand soy-source, mirin, natto, shio-kara, etc. As for lunch, I often used a school cafeteria or catering car on campus due to short lunch break, including the bento stand – or more strictly, a small shop that also sells bento along with sandwiches, salads, cookies, smoothies, and so forth. Usually there was only one kind of
bento a day, and apparently none of them seemed to consider *irodori* that could whet my appetite. A bento I bought one day had only (cold) *kara-age* and sausage on cold rice, and was sold with Pepsi. The rice was dried without sweet flavor that I was used to. My reaction was to eat a bit, take a picture and send it to my friend in Japan to show “how different it is”, and close the lid with disappointment.

Another time I ordered a bowl whose name was “Ahi kajiki poke bowl with tobiko”, which contains several Japanese words (*kajiki*/marlin, and *tobiko* or *tobikko*/flying fish roe), Hawaiian words (*ahi*/yellow fine tuna or bigeye tuna, and *poke’/to slice or cut), and English words (*bowl* and *with* in its name. It did surprise me to see low-frequency Japanese words such as kajiki or tobiko in Hawaii, but did not spur any imagination or connection with Hawaii but just made me re-realize that I was in Hawaii, a multilingual and multicultural society.

Yet another experience of my disconnection with Hawaii was about Japanese-Americans. I was affiliated with East-West Center from 2013-2014 as a fellow. My fellowship program was founded by Japanese-Americans. One day in January 2014, I was invited to *shinnenkai* hosted by the founders and their relatives. There were various “Japanese” new-year foods such as black beans or sushi that had the taste I was used to in Japan, but I could not feel comfortable...
at all being there. There were too many factors that made me feel everything “foreign”: Everyone except me seemed familiar with each other; everyone spoke English way better than mine (of course they were native speakers of English!); I was not used to prayers before the party; and no one said “akemashite omedeto gozaimasu” but “Happy New Year” hugging each other. To put it simply, everything I saw and hear made me feel that, again, I was in Hawaii, and that Japanese-Americans and Japanese were very different.

One can argue that my feeling in shinnenkai was inevitable considering Dr. Numazaki’s and my own life histories: He spent his childhood in the U.S. whereas I spent in Japan; or he felt ethnoperipheralism in Japan and East Lansing whereas I had never felt that way. Then does that mean I felt connection to the Japanese in Hawaii? The answer is yes and no, since I did feel connection to Japanese people, but only graduate students in my university. I had never felt affection toward Japanese tourists on the Waikiki beach or Kalakaua street, wearing colorful aloha shirts and sunglasses, and holding shopping bags from gorgeous brand shops like Gucci or Louis Viton. I was also trying to differentiate myself from undergraduate students or English school students in Hawaii. My pride as a graduate student at the University of Hawaii, and my past of studying really hard to get in there, always tried to detach myself from “them”. In other words, I could only share my feelings with “people like me”, who studied English hard and had a great passion in education and academia, and that included not only Japanese but any foreign students who had struggled in the past and struggled with me at that time.

The two totally different “ethnic” experiences between Dr. Numazaki and me in Hawaii illustrate the complex nature of imagined commonality. I will argue this issue from two different aspects: the range of the scope of imagination and the process of imagination. The former will rather be a comment, whereas the latter will be a question to Dr. Numazaki.

First, as for the range of the scope, Dr. Numazaki admits that his scope of imagination is limited and says that may have to do with his life history (pp. 56-57). Just as the two different experiences of his and mine suggest, I agree
with his view and suppose one’s “scope” is a complex product of one’s life history including education or parenting, social status, the effect of the politics or mass media, and so forth. Two totally different life histories between Dr. Numazaki and me resulted in two contrastive scopes – one with Japanese-Americans while the other with the foreign exchange students. I also think that what triggers one to imagine the commonality – say, “stimulator” – is also determined by one’s life history etc.: That is to say, despite the huge year-gap, I am sure that Dr. Numazaki would feel more connection to Hawaii than me if he were on the island now, and it is vice versa. I also feel that this “limitation” of a scope is strongly related to the nationalistic statement: Dr. Numazaki, whether consciously or unconsciously, did not extend his “scope” to a Chinese young man at a restaurant or Okinawans, but (overgeneralized) ethnic or nationalistic statement seems to come into existence once one extends their imagination scope to a certain range while incorporating different people from different groups. When one’s life history, education, parenting, politics, mass media etc. “blur” the limitation of the scope, ethnic or nationalistic statement seems to come into existence.

Related to the issue above, my second comment is on the process of imagination. To put it simply, imagining the commonality is a process of generalization from the real commonality seen by a person. It is man’s powerful ability of imagination, but because of its power, this could also ignore diversity within a group. It has a danger to slip into another cultural determinism, just as imagined community has the same danger. So here comes my question: Did everything Dr. Numazaki saw, heard, and experienced trigger him to imagine the commonality? I came up with this question when Dr. Numazaki seemingly naively believes that he “did not stand out” in Hawaii (p. 58) while he does admit that his feeling of connection was “effectively and affectively one-sided” (p. 53). Obviously, it is hard to assume that every “trivial habit” was the same between him and Hawaii-born Japanese Americans, and thus it is probable that he actually “stood out” among them. In other words, he might have imagined commonalities from the real commonalities on the one hand, while (consciously
or unconsciously) ignore the trivial differences – or uncommonalities – between him and Japanese-Americans in Hawaii on the other. Then what kind of differences did he ignore and why? Further, why could he feel he “did not stand out” among a particular group of Japanese-Americans even though his feeling was not socially tested? To me, it seems that one feels more connection from certain commonalities than others, which are also determined by their life histories, and arouse so strong connection that one falls into overgeneralization. I feel this complex process of imagining commonality needs to be investigated by all researchers interested in ethnicity or identity, regardless of the field.

In this commentary, I have described how Dr. Numazaki could explore the new possibility in the area of ethnicity, while how complex the notion is using my own experience in Hawaii. Even though we had totally different ethnic experiences in different ages, I do admit that I also overgeneralized “other Japanese tourists” in Hawaii by imagining the uncommonalities, which supports his concept as well in another way. It seems the idea of imagined commonality has plenty of room for further investigation, but it also has a potential for ethnicity and identity study to move one step further in the future.

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