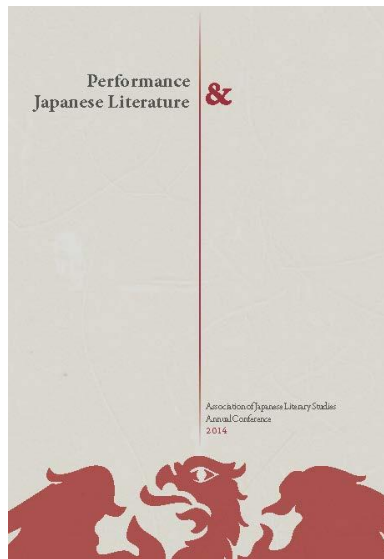


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*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese  
Literary Studies* 15 (2014): 195–202.



*PAJLS* 15:

*Performance and Japanese Literature.*

Ed. Michael Bourdaghs, Hoyt Long, and Reginald Jackson

## From Deconstructing Genji to Deep Ecology: Remembering Richard Okada

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To the end, Richard Okada remained a controversial figure in the field of Japanese literary studies. In the short space allotted me, I would like to trace the arc of that controversy as he worked relentlessly to bring new meaning and relevance to a field that, like all fields, looked to its past to maintain its standing. In challenging institutional conservatism, Richard would pay dearly. But I am sure that he would have had it no other way. In this, and many other ways, Richard and his mentor Masao Miyoshi remain closely associated—from the way that I met them at UC Berkeley, to how they ended their careers making planetary wellbeing their primary concern. But it is in the way they differed that urges me to think about them and with them, to help extend their legacies in some distinctive but linked way. Let me weave in my personal association with Richard to help illustrate his meaning to our field, and then engage briefly his last published work to consider how he helped move us into new avenues of humanistic inquiry.

I am only a few years younger than Richard, but because I had worked for ten years after college, he was near the end of his graduate student years at Berkeley when I first met him in early 1980. While checking out Ph.D. programs, Masao, who was still at Berkeley, strongly urged me to speak with Richard about his awful experiences as a graduate student; both urged me to enroll instead at The University of Chicago where Masao would join Harry Harootunian, Tetsuo Najita, Bill Sibley and others as a visiting professor for several years. Richard, I learned, was involved in what can accurately be called epochal and heroic disagreements with his department advisors who were steadfastly opposed to letting theory inform his reading of Heian literature. What we would come to refer to as critical theory had started to leave its mark in anthropology, philosophy, and literature departments, with only a trace of interest evident in East Asia fields. At the same time, it is important to note that as late as the early 1980s, race and gender played decisive and determining roles in articulating what was a distinct hierarchy of positions in Japanese studies in the United States. Very few people of color taught so-called content courses—history, religion, political science or literature—while almost exclusively Japanese women were appointed as lecturers to teach language courses (a practice that remains to this day). Richard's struggles in his department at what was then called Oriental Languages cannot be divorced from such longstanding postwar institutionalized realities that shaped Japan studies.

In a rather draconian step Richard was forbidden by his department advisors to continue studying with Masao (a professor in the English department). They would withhold their signatures and consent for a thesis ‘contaminated’ by critical theory, and he faced many other acts designed to impede his progress at every turn. Adding a few years to completion of his degree, their punitive measures extended beyond graduation. Employment opportunities were far better then compared to now, but he was made to languish at a prep school for many years until he would finally secure tenure track employment at a university. In ways only he would know, Richard paid heavily for his principled stand and perhaps his ethnicity.

What I admired most about Richard was the way he talked: he always listened seriously to what you had to say, fully engaged, and then he would show in an utterly artless and transparent way his engagement with your ideas. Very few people give others their due, implicit validation like that. What we might have called back then this dialogic intellectual process was notable in another way, being practiced at a time when the rise of critical theory in the humanities in the late 1980s was marked by the weakening of disciplinary boundaries, the concomitant turn toward the commodification of scholarship, and the claiming of private ownership of ideas. This elevated sense of ideas as private property became pronounced, ironically, as critical theory helped us see that intellectual labor, like most other forms of work, resulted from collective ‘intertextual’ processes of thinking and meaning production. The steadfast refusal of humanists to pursue solitary work—singularly different from most other academic disciplines—also testifies to this reality. The irony accompanying academic practice and the rise of theory was refreshingly absent in Richard.

In 1988, together with Ted Fowler, we planned and held a workshop at Duke called “New Strategies in Japanese Narrativity,” and in 1992 he asked me if I might join him at Princeton. I took the step of giving a talk there, but my wife Ellen, back then an epidemiologist, said that a few years earlier she had conducted an on-site inspection and study of a highly contaminated superfund site not far from the Princeton campus, and that if I got an offer, I would be moving there alone, so that was that. Ellen has since moved to northern California to work, leaving me in southern California in a relationship that our friends jokingly call bi-polar, while with Richard, our bi-coastal relationship meant we would meet in Tokyo more than anywhere else. There we talked often, mostly about books, critical theory, and Japanese academics, but there was no question about what excited him most: the birth of his son. In the ensuing years, as we continued to overlap in Tokyo, nothing matched his impassioned energy and sense of wonder than when he was recounting the development of Kai.

For someone I had become close to both personally and professionally, I look back with sadness that 2004 was the last time I spent time with Richard

(though we continued to email each other for a few years). As part of a special conference “Imminent Questions” honoring Masao Miyoshi in New York, I was on a panel Richard chaired titled “Ecology/Planet.” The specifics of the presentations or discussion that took place during our panel elude me now, though I know it was an important issue for him, as we discussed mounting another panel on the issue for the 2005 AAS. What I remember most from that venue is eating with him at the New York City branch of the noodle restaurant Omen, and thinking how much better their noodles tasted than the ones at the main Kyoto establishment.

I came across Richard’s essay on *monogatari* (tales) and the planet only recently, in preparation for this conference, and perhaps because it was originally a *talk*, I could feel the resonance of his words, which he typically uttered softly, thoughtfully, and with conviction. Written in Japanese, “Chikyu/wakusei bungaku to shite no monogatari no kanosei to yukue” (The Possibility and Prospects for ‘*Monogatari*’ as Planetary Literature), he delivered this paper as keynote speaker at an event titled “Japanese Literature in World Literature: Past and Future of *Monogatari*.”<sup>1</sup> It was held in Tokyo on Oct 11-12, 2008, at the National Institute of Japanese Literature, National Institute for the Humanities.

In a work that urges us to abandon the ways we have been accustomed to reading Heian-era tales, Richard begins by reflecting back on his years as an advanced graduate student, when his closest advisor (not the ones who never forgave him for his love of theory, but rather, Masao) had urged him to abandon his study of the classics; it is telling that Richard provides a direct quote: “Isn’t it about time you leave texts like *Genji* behind and replace them with modern and contemporary works? . . . You ought to take those works on ancient times and burn them” (2). A few lines later, the time shifting to the present, Richard expresses a defiance stubbornly held all these years in spite of the admonition of his close mentor: “I’d like to make clear that I [continue to] have an interest in reading both literary works and theory” (2). “Theory,” he continues, “is neither within nor exterior [to literature], “but rather is that which makes reading both possible and impossible” (2). This is the Richard with literature and theory firmly in his grasp that I had met in 1980, and it would serve as his moral-intellectual compass for the rest of his career.

Richard shared with Masao a career-long orientation of critique directed at entrenched authority, centralized power, and capital accumulation. Generally wary of theoretical dispersion into affirmations of identity politics and cultural studies, Miyoshi would emphatically reaffirm a Marxian inclusiveness in his later years. In his introductory remarks to Masao’s “Turn

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Okada, “The Possibility and Prospects for ‘*Monogatari*’ as Planetary Literature” (Japanese title: Chikyū/wakusei bungaku to shite no monogatari no kanōsei to yukue), The 32nd Proceedings of the National Institute of Japanese Literature, National Institute for the Humanities, March 31, 2009.

to the Planet: Literature and Diversity, Ecology and Totality,” Eric Cazdyn would reference this inclination as “changes that now prioritize a rethinking of totality over the celebration of difference.”<sup>2</sup> Richard, by contrast, in his last published piece on ecology and literature, exhorts us to embrace an ecologically rooted call for diversity, the multiple, and variance, in glorious mimicry of lessons brought to us from the planet. Taking his cue from nature where its health and vigor are keyed by its biodiversity, he urges us to stop reproducing the tired practice of conferring a singular, unitary meaning on the *Tale of Genji* wherein text and nation become congruent. “No matter which section of *The Tale of Genji* one looks at, we can see displacement at work, a text that demands a dynamic reciprocal approach [*sōgoteki*] that consistently refuses the familiar ways of reading it as a unified work” (相互的に捉えなければならなくなっていると思います *Sōgoteki ni toraenakereba naranaku natteiru to omoimasu*).<sup>3</sup> For Richard, difference, alterity, incommensurability, key his work of radical reclamation of the classics, but as his last essay demonstrates, it is not so much a formal exercise as a functional one: discerning and then negotiating those differences opens up the text to a radical other that lies outside the text and beyond the culture-nation-state nexus that authorizes earlier critical practice.

Note that he does not relegate standard approaches to closed readings of texts. What had become standard approaches were also relational but in a static relation with a classical text fixed in metonymical relation to Japan, with one affirming the meaningfulness of the other in a tautology. Not surprisingly, Richard promotes a relational thinking that refuses the logic of a single authority (such as the State). Instead, he turns to relations and connections of indirection. Enlisting the work of Gregory Bateson, Werner Hamacher, and Felix Guattari he urges us to discover hitherto unseen or unexplored ‘interconnectivity’ [連結性 *renketsusei*] and ‘transversal’ relations [横断的 *ōdan-teki*] to bring *The Tale of Genji* in line with the planet. In his English language abstract, Richard begins with this large question: “What is the problem facing humanity today?” Richard then transverses the question via what has come to be known as deep ecology that puts the bios first: “Before answering that question,” he continues, “I feel that we have to alter the question. The reason is that the question conceals a valorization of ‘humanity.’ If we are to include all living things on our planet, the subject in this case must be ‘the planet’ rather than ‘humanity’” (225).

Perhaps similar to the way that critical theory brought the reader into the framework of literary criticism, Richard brings the planet into close reading of a text. Not ecology as background or context, but rather as theory, a way to read. When characters and human subjects are displaced by the planet, our concern shifts to a system of meaningful connections—waterways, plants, ecosystems, species. In literature those relationships could only be thought of

<sup>2</sup> Masao Miyoshi, *Trespasses: Selected Writings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 243.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Okada, “Turn to the Planet,” 11.

as a context for the human subject. Sticking close to its disciplinary sign as the study of humans, critical theory spawned the multiplication of the subject, critiquing it, decentering it, multiplying it, displacing it, ever mindful of its ‘differences,’ but never daring to reflect on this sameness. Richard’s essay urges us to displace the search for a singular subject altogether by focusing instead on processes of reciprocal meaningfulness that governs a text like *Genji monogatari*, just as a complex system of reciprocal relations link organisms and their living environments. If Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* helped discredit the exceptionalism of humans, it is as if the humanities have been on a religious mission to revalorize the human subject. Richard’s effort intervenes to stop that reproductive loop, much as deep ecology decentered humans in a much needed defamiliarization of anthropocentric hubris.

### **From The Whole And Back To The Planetary (Individual) Subject**

From Richard’s transversal of subjects, I would like to suggest ‘transversal thinking’ (in the term used in his paper, 横断的思考 *ōdan-teki shikō*)<sup>4</sup> that involves a kind of return. It was in character for Richard to start with a literary text like *Genji* and subject it to a reading that would link it to an interrogation of, in this case, ecology and the planet; a direct link would not mediate these two, so he urges us to enlist a transversal thinking. But many others of course have affirmed the earth’s current plight more directly and materially.

What I am wondering is how we might move from the affirmation of ‘large subjects,’ be it pollution, global warming, or the extinction of animals, i.e., those vexing and important ecological subjects that Richard brought into focus, and then to let such planetary concerns be turned back to the register of the individual—not the individual human subject (again and again in a loop of infinite return in which we have remained stuck) but individual *non*-human subjects. Let me put it symptomatically: critical theorists often lament the disappearance of animals from the planet (I should note, while ignoring the steep rise in domesticated animals raised and used for human ‘production’ and consumption) in works that attest to the swift rise of animal studies, arguably the ‘hottest’ topic cutting across academic disciplines today.<sup>5</sup> That theorists almost invariably gesture in alarm at the extinction of a species, while remaining utterly unconcerned about the individual animals belonging to those endangered species is a ‘blindness’ endemic in academic works and in deep ecology alike. The blindness is considerable, given that we raise (the preferred industry-promoted word is ‘produce’) animals in unprecedented numbers by intensive and cruel factory farming methods—10 billion a year by

<sup>4</sup> Richard Okada, “Turn to the Planet,” 7.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Akira Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

2011 figures.<sup>6</sup> The late eco-feminist Marti Kheel puts it this way:

[T]he dominant philosophy in the field of nature ethics, as well as the environmental movement more generally, is holism . . . . Holists typically care about ‘species,’ ‘the ecosystem,’ or ‘the biotic community’ over and above [I would add, to the utter disregard of] individual beings. Many see no contradiction in killing wolves in order to save ‘the wolf’ . . . .”<sup>7</sup>

The masking functions of holisms might have an analogue in the selective optic evident in a phenomenon I encountered while teaching a class on the atomic bombs and nuclear reactors. For many years during and even beyond the seven-year U.S. Occupation of Japan, GHQ (General Headquarters) would allow only aerial or bird’s-eye views of the damage wrought by bombing while prohibiting ground-level photos of individual bodies. The GHQ censors knew, of course, how abstraction of destruction and carnage kept at a distance would be far less moving and provocative than individual and ground-level perspectives. As a nation, we still avoid looking at the effects of the atomic bombs on individuals whether in photos or in confrontation with *hibakusha*, victims of direct bomb radiation, while permitting philosophical reflection, if at all, in conceptually ‘holistic’ ways. (Today our ongoing policies of killing people with drones and ‘smart’ missiles count on a similar occlusion by the veil of holism that they simply destroy terrorists and hence protect us.)

Richard called upon transversal connections to help envisage links hitherto not possible, in this instance having us shift from the monologic text and the human subject to something more inclusive, the planet, where he asks us to radically rethink our habit of considering ecology, the planet, and nature solely as context, background, always supplemental to the human subject. To employ another analogy, consider the transition from the logic of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ that instated humans at the top holding dominion over all other creatures, until its displacement by Charles Darwin, whose *Origins* would forward instead a complex network of faunal relations governed by a logic of simultaneity, interdependence, and ongoing specific adaptations that effectively displaced hierarchy in conceiving the animal kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Transposed to Richard’s call for engaging literary texts like *The Tale of Genji* in a different register, his exhortation more specifically calls for an interrogation of the very

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<sup>6</sup> “Latest USDA slaughter reports (for 2011) show that just under 10 billion land animals were killed; aquatic animals killed are not provided, but estimates 13 billion finfishes died for US consumption in 2010. Nearly one billion animals never make it to slaughter, dying lingering deaths from disease, injury, starvation, suffocation, maceration, and other atrocities.” (FARM)

<sup>7</sup> Marti Kheel, *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (CITY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 2.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Gregory Golley, *When Our Eyes No Longer See: Realism, Science, and Ecology in Japanese Literary Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 220-221.

subject of humanistic inquiry—the singular human (and in this instance, characters) differentiated from all the rest and maintained as supremely and singularly worthy of understanding in the world. If we are to take seriously this overlap of deconstruction with Darwinian-deep-ecological relativism, it requires not simply the dispersal of subjects, the pluralization of subjects, or even the substitution of, say, systems for subjects, but rather the rethinking of subjectivity—as always coterminous to the human. Richard not only hinted but explicitly stated this in his paper, clearly recognizing the significance of seriously engaging the logic shared in varying measure by deep ecology, Darwin, and deconstruction, as a prelude to acknowledging and affirming non-human subjectivity. Kheel's critique of ecological holisms is similarly an intervention designed to bring urgency and meaning to animals who might be victimized as much by 'well meaning' species-concerns as by those who see nothing wrong with treating animals as things for human use.

Only *via* the mediation of these large 'system-like' subjects like the bios or the planet, can we effectively advocate for individual subjectivities that are not fixed in the human. Such mediated transversal thinking is required to displace the human subject with a pig living out its attenuated life of forced engorgement in a barbaric farrowing crate where they can only stand without turning around, a dolphin confined to small quarters and training regimens that bear no relation to their seafaring natures and accordingly go mad or live a third of their natural lifespan in the ocean, a puppy mill dog and its subjection to continual impregnation, a similarly perpetually-pregnant dairy cow that will become 'spent' in two years, or a monkey subjected to cruel and unnecessary experiments for all those drugs being advertised and the endless parade of shampoos and cosmetics tweaked for improvements. Even when our complicity in such consumption of factory farmed animals annually produces more greenhouse gases than fossil-fuel consumed for transportation,<sup>9</sup> it is not likely that these conditions, widely known these days, will lead the majority of humans to alter their behavior, no more than the humanities, with claims to serve as the ethical compass for secular society, is likely to yield to such radical species inclusiveness in the foreseeable future. But this seems like a useful step in helping us restore the 'meaning' evacuated from larger phenomena like endangered species, fur-fashion deliberately mislabeled as faux, global warming, greenhouse gases that we so glibly choose to ignore, or to engage with urgency that which we consign to abstract horrors.

The humanities have been under assault for some time as finance capitalism imposes its logic on higher education converted to measurable instrumentalities. All the more urgent under these demands for standardization, for those of us who practice humanistic inquiry, a higher standard is surely demanded—i.e., new ways of formulating subjecthood

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<sup>9</sup> A 2009 UN report states that a sustainable future "would only be possible with a worldwide diet change, away from animal products" (<http://www.farmusa.org/images/PCDEnviro11FB.jpg>).



used to engage the complex ecology of not just human social relations but of all relations that constitute the planet in ways that demand new visions, connections, and revolutionary transversals. After all, to paraphrase the words of Georges Clemenceau, who famously noted that “war is too important to be left to the generals,” the planet and all its life forms are too important to be left to the avaricious will of corporations, economists, and politicians.