

Pivoting on the Imagery:  
Life Stories and Identity Narratives of Japanese Women in Hawai'i

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to reconstruct the lives, experiences and identities of Japanese women specifically in the women's own terms. In order to depart from the scholarly dilemma, seen among existing ethnographic studies, to pivot on the stereotypical images intended to undermine, it analyzes the original interview data, exploring the life stories and identity narratives of thirty Japanese women currently living in Hawai'i. Applying the theory of performative identity and the method of self-reflexive ethnography, the analysis inquires: Are the women entrapped within what has been projected as "the Japanese woman"—be it the domestic ideology of "good wife, wise mother" or the Orientalist stereotype of "Madame Butterfly"—or in what alternative ways do they live the imagery? By paying attention to the multiplicity and complexity of their narratives, this thesis highlights the women's agency to negotiate and subvert, if not fully abolish, "the Japanese woman," a shifting and ambivalent pivot.

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## Introduction:

### Demystifying “the Japanese Woman”

The stereotype of the quiescent, docile and submissive “Madame Butterfly” has long constituted a focal point of discussions about Japanese women. Much intellectual and popular writing has grappled with a recurring theme: To what extent do women in contemporary Japan differ from the classic, tragic heroine? For example, some point to the women who have taken unconventional paths—corporate executives, entrepreneurs, high government officials, and artists—while discovering remaining sexism in Japanese institutions that may hinder their progress. Still some name women’s earnest involvements in consumption—from the Hello Kitty fad to international tourism—to find them in the enmeshing structure of capitalism that goes hand in hand with gender-based division of labor. Others simply look at the everyday lives of Japanese women and find pervasive gender segregation and oppression in education, employment, and media representation.<sup>\*1</sup> It seems barely possible, commentators often lament, for these contemporary butterflies to organize more overt and effective movements to break down the gender hierarchies in their society. Although they may seem changed, they are ultimately passive victims just as imagined: Japanese women do confirm the image of “*the Japanese woman*.”

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<sup>\*1</sup> These perspectives are well exemplified in *Newsweek*’s special edition issued in 2000; “Rising Daughters: In a Changing Japan, Women Take the Lead” (4/3/2000). It features “revolutions” of younger Japanese women—their fashion, career and consumption—in a somewhat sarcastic way. *Hiragana Times*, a bilingual magazine in Japan also issued an extra edition, *What Japanese Women are Really Like* (Kimura and Yamana 1999), providing a historical account of Japanese women (“From Yamatonadeshiko to Yellow Cab”) along with a documentary of contemporary Japanese women that introduces their miserable failures in building career and/or family.

As such, “the Japanese woman” is a pivot on which any discourse of Japanese women relies and centers. Whether for or against the image, one employs it as a point of reference, making it surface recurrently and thus never questioning it. An opponent of the butterfly myth may emphasize how significantly Japanese women have changed in this postmodern era, only to leave it intact that Japanese women in the past indeed were self-sacrificing wives and mothers. Moreover, the “progress” and “liberation” of Japanese women are assessed principally by measuring women’s distance from the classic image. Consequently, “the Japanese woman” as a pivot never gets destabilized. How is it possible to step outside this vicious circle? Taking this question as a starting point, this thesis explores the dynamic relation between the social imagery of “the Japanese woman” and the experiences, lives and identities of individual Japanese women.

## ON REPRESENTATION

Some scholars have touched upon the issue of representation politics behind the social imagery, asking a fundamental question: Who has the power to define what Japanese women are like? Commenting on biased portrayals of Japan and Japanese women in the U.S. media, Chizuko Ueno points out the problem of

Orientalism, summarizing and developing Edward Said’s original argument:

“Orientalism” refers to a specific gaze which views “the East” as an exotic, mysterious, unintelligent, and underdeveloped “other.” What is often misunderstood is that “orientalism” isn’t an attribute of “the East,” but rather part of the self-consciousness of “the West” trying to hold up its own supremacy. . . . The notion of “orientalism,” therefore, is closely connected with issues of gender. Because the subjects casting such a gaze are exclusively male, there is a tendency to feminize the other. And male subjectivity is established through the female “other” (Ueno 1998: 71).

Ueno makes it clear that the stereotype does not necessarily refer to actual characteristics of Japanese women;

rather, it derives from the power structure in which Japanese women are relegated to the voiceless Other. Similarly, Yumiko Shimazu observes “a surprising continuity of how Western orientalists have depicted typical Japanese women for a hundred years” (Shimazu 1996: 361), looking into literary works and contemporary media articles. Japanese women are consistently clad in kimono, looking gentle and graceful, deprived of their own voices. Shimazu concludes, based on Said’s conceptualization as well, that the stereotype of Japanese women is a “power fantasy of the Western male” (p.360). Traise Yamamoto, in her study on Japanese-American women writers, discusses “the feminization of Japan” through analyzing representations of Japanese women in films such as *Teashouse of the August Moon* and *Sayonara*. She then identifies the manifold Otherness ascribed to Japanese women. “The Japanese woman—and more crucially, the Japanese woman’s body—is inscribed as the pleasurable site of racial and sexual difference that can be appropriated and mastered” (1999: 21-22). In Karen Kelsky’s words, Japanese women are turned into “the latest hot commodity” (2001: 18), which, once again, the Western males are to dominate and appropriate.

Such representation prevails not only in popular but also in academic discourses. Yoshi Kuzume analyzes American intellectual writings since 1860 that exemplify the pervasive nature of the Orientalist framework (Kuzume 1990). Importantly, Kuzume does not regard these scholarly writings as mirroring pictures of reality, arguing, “The differences in the stereotypes that evolved were a reflection of images that American scholars held, rather than a direct reflection of the changes in status of the Japanese women” (p.41). Japanese women, therefore, are at the mercy of the gaze that objectifies them; they are vulgar and promiscuous from the

Victorian point of view, victims of sexual oppression for missionaries, and strong and autonomous in the eyes of American feminist revisionists.

Furthermore, the representation politics does not exist exclusively in the West but has critical bearings on the Japanese domestic politics as well. Chizuko Ueno speaks of “reversed orientalism” that features the Japanese themselves advocating the uniqueness of Japan—including women’s distinct beauty and loyalty (Ueno 1998: 71-2). According to Ueno, such arguments may challenge the notion of Western supremacy but maintain that there lies an absolute difference between “the West” and “the East.” That is, they can easily fall into essentialist thinking. Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1998) provides a critical insight here in her historical analysis of how Japanese national identity has been constructed. She scrutinizes the simultaneous process in which the unified “Japan” juxtaposed itself with the external other—“the West”—and excluded its internal others—Okinawan, Ainu, Korean and Chinese descendants—to secure the homogeneity myth. She further argues that such reversed or internalized Orientalism has continuously defined and redefined Japaneseness in a highly gendered way. “The concept of woman as source of continuity, and man as agent of change, became a particularly enduring leitmotiv in evolving notions of nationhood” (p.113). While masculinity was associated with industrial and militaristic progression, femininity embodied the untainted tradition, that is, the authentic Japaneseness. Examining the representation of rural women through modern and contemporary Japanese history, Mariko Tamanoi (1998) documents this metaphorical link between Japanese women and tradition. She illustrates a variety of nationalist representations of rural women that range from pathetic deviance in need of reformation to the symbol of authentic Japanese values such as endurance, loyalty, and hard work. Tamanoi claims that all of

these images exemplify “the subordination of ‘rural women’ to national identity” (p.20). At this juncture, the *ryousai kenbo*, or “good wife, wise mother,” ideology enters the picture. The representation of Japanese women as submissive wives and devoted mothers was first created in the Meiji modernization project and has yet to lose its relevance in contemporary Japanese society. The highly idealized, and indeed essentialized, idea of femininity urges individual women to comply with the gender hierarchy that prevails in every sphere of their lives. Women are required to contribute to society *within* their households, supporting and reproducing Japanese citizens able to contribute to the nation. In this sense, both the Orientalist imagery of *Madame Butterfly* and the domestic ideology of *ryousai kenbo* function in similar ways; they mold Japanese women into “the Japanese woman” despite all the internal diversities among them.

## ON REALITY

All these critiques of representation politics expose the underlying political interests. Given that the idealized imagery of “the Japanese woman,” construed mutually within and without Japan, does not reflect essential features of those who are represented, the validity of the stereotype is no longer an issue. A subsequent question is: How do Japanese women enact such a power-laden identity in their everyday lives? Gail Bernstein’s anthology, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* is a prominent historical work, the premise of which is that “we cannot always assume that official teachings concerning gender were reflected in social reality. . . . What women did (and what they got away with) was very different from socially prescribed norms, which usually were observed, if at all, by the small minority of women in the upper classes” (Bernstein 1991: 4). The book

contains chapters whose depictions of Japanese women largely differ from the stereotypical images; women as a vital work force, women participating and protesting in modern industries, and “New Woman.” It also analyzes the official discourses that surrounded women’s lives. “Japanese women have never been without clear role models. Put another way, they have never been left alone” (p.14). In sum, the book vividly portrays tensions between the dominant ideology and lived experiences, what Sandra Buckley calls the “reality gap” (1993). Kathleen Uno (1993) too develops this theme, observing that the “good wife, wise mother” ideology is by no means a static entity; its connotation has varied throughout pre- and post-war Japan. Moreover, the ideology has been utilized not only by the state and private companies, but also by Japanese women themselves. “Often activated by their own new interpretations of *ryousai kenbo* [good wife, wise mother], women on countless occasions organized at the local, regional, and national levels to express their views on matters of public policy” (Uno 1993: 303). These historical studies effectively expose the constructed nature of “the Japanese woman,” retrieving the agency of Japanese women in their actual lives.

Sociologists and anthropologists approach this issue through ethnographic research. With methods like participant observation and in-depth interviews, researchers pay attention to the existing diversity among Japanese women, such as generational, regional, educational and economic factors and focus on specific groups rather than attempting an overall characterization. The focus of ethnographic studies ranges from “exceptional”—political, professional and international—Japanese women (Pharr 1981; Creighton 1996; Ma 1996; Diggs 1998; Renshaw 1999; Kelsky 2001) to the “conventional” housewives and office ladies (Bernstein 1983; McLendon 1983; Lebra 1984; Imamura 1987; Kondo 1990; Hendry 1993; Roberts 1994; Long 1996;

Mori 1996; Painter 1996; Ogasawara 1998; LeBlanc 1999; Rosenberger 2001). Such varying portrayals are of noteworthy importance for they directly challenge the homogenized image. Like the historical studies cited above, ethnographies reveal multiple forces that actually affect Japanese women. In *An Anthropologist in Japan*, Joy Hendry discusses the benefit of ethnography as follows:

There are often clear differences between what people say they do and what they actually do, and both differ again from what they say people ought to do. Given time, an anthropologist can identify all three levels, and these may be significant in themselves. The ideals people hold, even if they don't live by them, form an important element of any society, and people who consciously reject the ideals of their society may be amongst its most interesting members (Hendry 1999: ix).

It is this depth and complexity of actual lives through which ethnographers aim to refute the stereotypical images and to provide more vivid and "realistic" pictures of Japanese women.

However, reality does not exist beyond the dominant framework on which our conception of Japanese women relies. Mariko Tamanai in the work cited above (1998) touches upon this issue. She distinguishes two different types of historical accounts, contending that the official discourse on rural women, what she calls "History," suppresses the women's own voices, "histories." She conducts her fieldwork in Nagano, meets elderly women, listens to their life stories and finds that "histories" are not an independent entity that merely supplements "History." She argues, "The women who come to the group meetings in Nagano have their living histories. Yet, inevitably, they must chart their living histories in relation to History. Those moments I find most valuable are the ones in which they realize they cannot do so" (Tamanai 1998: 205). This is to say, the women's narratives do not reside outside the framework provided by the official discourse. Their "experience" and "reality" need to be accounted with the existing vocabulary, which is derived from the very dominant

structure that has rendered them voiceless, for in feminist historian Joan Scott's terms, "Without meaning, there is no experience; without processes of signification there is no meaning" (1999: 38). However, this does not mean that self-accounts of Japanese women always comply with the dominant representation of "the Japanese woman." As Tamanoi found among her research subjects, there are "valuable moments" when the lived experiences slip out of the culturally sanctioned frame. This is where Scott locates "agency":

Within these [powerful] processes and structures [of signification], there is room for a concept of human agency as the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of relationships, a society within certain limits and with language—conceptual language, that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric intervention and imagination (Scott 1999: 42).

It is necessary, therefore, to see to ambivalence involved in the women's self-narrated reality, instead of locating them completely within or without the language of the dominant.

Given such a complex nature of "the Japanese woman," this thesis first examines ethnographic research on Japanese women, whose "realistic" portrayals enable to further the issue of representation. What "realities" do those academic works represent? Do ethnographies convey neutral truth? Are researchers a transparent medium of reality? Aiming to shed light on these questions, the first chapter focuses on the approaches as much as findings of each work. It argues that the representation of Japanese women unavoidably calls for "the Japanese woman"; even academic discourses pivot on the stereotype. It then proposes an alternative direction of inquiry, suggesting the possibility of subverting the dominant framework from within. The subsequent chapters are devoted to analyzing my original interview data that explore how Japanese women tackle with the dominant force that circumscribe their lives. Are they confined and entrapped within "the Japanese woman," or in what alternative ways do they pivot on the imagery? While the second chapter explores

the common predicament, struggles and strategies and focuses on *what* interviewees have to say about their lives, the third chapter inquires into *how* the women narrate their identities. Both are meant to illuminate their agency to negotiate and subvert, if not fully abolish, what has projected on them, “the Japanese woman.”

## ON VULNERABILITY

Representation is a political act. Descriptions of Japanese women inevitably pivot on “the Japanese woman” no matter what the writer’s objective may be. It follows that here too my depiction of Japanese women is by no means a neutral attempt. In what politics, then, will this study engage? In what way is my argument going to pivot on “the Japanese woman”?

First and foremost, the thirty interviewees, whose stories are to be discussed below, are certainly not typical of the more than sixty-five million Japanese women (Soumuchou 2004).<sup>\*2</sup> In order to capture their identity narratives *as Japanese women*, I focus on those who have left their home country and live in a foreign environment. Living abroad, a Japanese woman finds herself identified as Japanese more often and thus becomes more conscious of that identity than she would be living at home. Women who have never left Japan would find it difficult to articulate their experiences and identities as “Japanese” because in their domestic settings they tend to identify more with generational, occupational or other attributes rather than nationality. The interviewees, by reason of their initiative to go abroad, tend to possess more educational and cultural capital, not to

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<sup>\*2</sup>Note that this official number of female Japanese population presented by Japanese government could vary depending on who are counted as “Japanese” and “woman”; both are not *a priori* categories and entail politics of inclusion and exclusion discussed earlier.

mention foreign language skills. In that sense, they can be said to be exceptional. At the same time, the sample includes only those who have no quarrel with their identification as Japanese women. For example, there are no Korean or Chinese descendants, who may refuse to identify themselves as “Japanese.” Nor does the sample encompass much diversity in terms of class, region and sexual orientation; most of the women come from middle-class families in large cities in Honshu, Mainland Japan, and are heterosexual. Therefore, in this thesis I am dealing with a very specific group of Japanese women that are both exceptional and mainstream.

Given the limitation of my research sample, I am not providing a general picture of numerous international Japanese women.<sup>\*3</sup> My interviewees are all current residents of Hawai‘i, a foreign environment that may differ significantly from, for example, continental U.S. or Europe. With fourteen to fifteen thousand Japanese residents in Honolulu (Gaimushou 2004a), more than two million tourists coming from Japan every year (Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, State of Hawai‘i 1999-2002), and a long history of Japanese immigrants since 1868, compared to other Western destinations, Hawai‘i offers a culture in which Japanese women experience relatively less segregation and alienation. One interviewee explains, “It certainly is an ideally friendly place for an experiment abroad.” Also, the interviewees consist largely of students, whose ventures abroad might not be as hard as those who make their own living. In addition, the narrow range of my pool became evident when two women chose not to participate in my research. One said, “Not everyone wants to talk about her life. It can be full of unhappy things that you might not even imagine.” The other said she

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<sup>\*3</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces that as of 2003, 467,184 Japanese women live overseas. This number includes both long-term (for more than three months) residents and permanent residents outside Japan (Gaimushou 2004a). The number of passports issued for Japanese women in 2003 is 1,379,966 (Gaimushou 2004b).

felt uncomfortable having her story disclosed in a thesis although I promised to protect her privacy. There was no way for me to insist on their cooperation. These instances made me realize another limitation of my interview data; the thirty interviewees include only the ones who were willing to share their experiences with me and that some of them also might have kept “unhappy things” unmentioned.

Therefore, it is not valid to elicit a general pattern of international experiences of Japanese women based on such sampling, though I try to provide some sketch of the commonalities of my interviewees. Instead, my main focus is on *how* the women speak of themselves and the ways in which they craft their lives, experiences and identities in an interview setting. How do they reflect on their experiences in Japan and in Hawai‘i? How do they frame their life stories? Which elements are emphasized and which are avoided? What vocabulary do they use? I illustrate the manners in which my interviewees represent their own lives in accordance with the dominant discourse of “the Japanese woman,” replicating and subverting it simultaneously.

Life stories and identity narratives were not at all easy to obtain, however. Facing an interviewer without any set format of questions, some interviewees sat uneasily and asked a question that I feared they would: “What exactly is this research about?” Of course, I started my interviews explaining that I was interested in what kind of experiences the interviewees went through both in Japan and abroad, but this short introduction proved to be insufficient for some interviewees; they needed a more specific context in which to locate their stories. Therefore, concealing my objective from them and staying neutral as a researcher appeared neither appropriate nor possible. I told them that I had read many English books on Japanese women, most of which seemed to say that Japanese women are somewhat victimized. I had started to wonder, I told them, how these claims were true.

I asked them to tell me their experiences so that I could compare the prevailing discourses and the women's own voices. This introduction seemed to make my interviewees feel more comfortable talking about their personal experiences in Japan and in Hawai'i, including all the "trivial things (*doudemo ii koto*)," the vivid nature of which I found most illuminating.

Another unwanted but frequent question that I encountered was "What about yourself?" My status as a female graduate student from Japan made me vulnerable to the situation where I was asked the same questions back: Why had I come to Hawai'i; which school was I from; what working experiences had I had; how did I like Hawai'i; did I have a (non-Japanese) boyfriend; what was I going to do after finishing school in Hawai'i; and what type of Japanese woman was I? I could have answered in a more "neutral" way than I did, that is, in ambiguous words that would reveal little about myself; however, such a response would have kept my interviewees from disclosing more about themselves. Instead, I tried to give them as much information about myself as they did about themselves. When asked, I stated my personal opinions and narrated my experiences. I told them that I came to Hawai'i to conduct extensive research for my future dissertation; that I was from University of Tokyo; that I had never had a full-time job in Japan; that I liked Hawai'i a lot but felt it hard to blend more in to local communities; that I had a Japanese, non-Japanese or no boyfriend (depending on the situation at the time); that I was going back to Tokyo to continue my doctorate in sociology; and that I honestly did not know what type of Japanese woman I was although some people had said that I looked atypical, a comment that initiated my interest in this research. To my pleasure, my responses elicited the interviewees' curiosity and led to informal and candid conversations, on which many commented in the end, "That was fun."

Through questions such as “What do you want to know?” and “How about yourself?” I encountered what Ruth Behar calls “the central dilemma of witnessing.” “As a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand?” (Behar 1996: 2) My decision was to step out of the academic fortress of objectivity, expose my own stories and have them recorded as well. When transcribing the interview data, I heard myself relating to the interviewees and their associating with me, a dialogue that contained contradictions and twists, which, my later analysis will show, are most “realistic.”

At the same time, I possessed a certain “ethnographic authority” with “a privileged eye, a voyeuristic eye, an all-powerful eye” (Behar 1996: 21) that identified each interviewee exclusively and continuously as a *Japanese woman*. It was I, the researcher, who brought up this political category and imposed it on the interviewees; otherwise, their identity in front of me could have been different. In later analysis, much attention is given to how this powerful gaze of mine was rejected and questioned. I was, in Behar’s words, a “vulnerable observer,” whose framework had to be modified throughout interactions in the research field. However, the Japanese women I talked to were by no means vulnerable butterflies. They—and I, collaborating—crafted stories based on our lived experiences, demystifying “the Japanese woman.”

## Chapter 1

### Image, Reality and Beyond: Framework and Methodology

Sociologists and anthropologists have carried out ethnographic research on multiple topics and with varying approaches to challenge the stereotypical image of “the Japanese woman.” Yuko Ogasawara (1998) recalls bewildering encounters with “a preconception of Japanese women as gentle, shy, and obedient” (p. 1). “I was confused. Are Japanese women oppressed, or not? Are they powerless or powerful? The questions guiding my research thus emerged” (p. 2). Other scholars similarly state that their studies derive from frustration at such biased images. The consequent observations are watchful and insightful, revealing “realistic” portions of lives of women in Japan.

It is crucial, however, to note that the positionality of the researchers—who they are and what perspective they hold—inevitably influences what type of information they encounter in their research fields. Ken Plummer (1983), a sociologist of symbolic interactionism, names possible sources of bias in collecting life histories; a researcher’s attributes (age, gender, class, race, etc.), demeanor (dress, speech, body language, etc.), personality (anxiety, need for approval, hostility, warmth, etc.), attitudes (religion, politics, general assumptions), and scientific role (theory, expectation, etc.) all may affect their research outcomes (p.103). In addition, Plummer discusses the “contamination” brought about by a researcher to data, saying, “It is a common practice for a sociologist to impose his or her own scheme upon the gathered data” (p.113). Given such notions, an ethnographer cannot be neutral. In what ways, then, do ethnographers—mostly non-Japanese, female

intellectuals—represent the lives of Japanese women, that is, of the Other? Departing from a naïve assumption that an absolute reality awaits ethnographers, at issue now is the analysis of intricate dynamics within an ethnography: How, from what position, and for what purpose does an ethnographer compose her/his version of reality?

With the above question as a focal point, this chapter analyzes the accumulated body of ethnographic research on contemporary Japanese women. It starts by examining the research that explores the relatively unconventional Japanese women, those in political, professional and international realms. Subsequently, it turns to the studies that focus on those who are considered traditional Japanese women: geisha, housewives and office ladies. Finally, focusing on more self-reflexive ethnographies, it discusses how the interactions between Japanese women and the researchers affect research outcomes. Through critically examining what the ethnographers have found in their fields—and *how*—this chapter proposes an alternative framework that goes beyond the presumed dichotomy of image and reality.

#### 1. Incomplete Progression: “Exceptional” Japanese Women

In order to call into question the stereotypical notions of Japanese women—being constrained and oppressed within the domestic sphere—it is effective to highlight the women who are not. This section examines the academic discourses that focus on phenomena that diverge from the normative life course of Japanese women. To what degree and in what ways do scholars say Japanese women have made progress from the

traditional gender role?

## POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

Susan Pharr (1981), in her earlier research conducted in the 1970s, features Japanese women in political activities. These women, whom Pharr classifies into the categories of “Neotraditionalists,” “New Women” and “Radical Egalitarians” according to their political viewpoints, exemplify the “role redefinition” of women in Japan. Looking into individual women’s lives and experiences, Pharr names elements that contributed to their involvements in politics. Among those are a permissive family atmosphere, an explicitly or implicitly encouraging mother and an outstanding role model. At the same time, Pharr is attentive to the obstacles and limitations entailed in the women’s political activities. Pharr reveals, first, that Neotraditionalists, whose presence in politics seems to contradict their conservative orientation, engage in the activities solely for their significant others, i.e., fathers, brothers, boyfriends and husbands. Politics is an extension of their deference. Also, New Women do not fully commit themselves to political activities, giving priority to their domestic responsibility and seeking permission from their husbands. Even Radical Egalitarians, whose political views Pharr finds most articulate and consistent, show dependence on their family and compliance with gender hierarchies within their sects. In addition, younger, single women of all these categories are aware of being in danger of risking their marital potential. Therefore, Pharr observes, some women carry out “role compartmentalization,” concealing their political side when necessary. Through these findings, Pharr casts reservations about the potential of political women in Japan. She emphasizes the exceptional features of their life courses, but highlights remaining

Japanese-woman-ness in their value. By doing so, Pharr argues that their political involvement is made possible principally by external elements and is constantly undermined by their own internalized values. Pharr thus places an ambivalent evaluation on the political Japanese women.

“When the topic of Japanese women in management is broached, it evokes the automatic, almost predictable response,” says Jean Renshaw (1999): “Are there any?” (p. 4). Her work specifies the underlying assumption of these common responses; women in Japanese companies, expected to serve as clerical workers for a few years until they get married and have children, are hardly candidates for potential executive positions. However, Renshaw encounters a substantial number of successful Japanese women managers in both public and private sectors.<sup>\*1</sup> Her interview research reveals that these women managers are not absent but concealed—“hidden behind the *shoji* screens” (p. 139). According to Renshaw, whereas American women tend to confront the “glass ceiling,” which is more risky to break through than paper screens, Japanese women move up more easily and silently, “sheltered by the screen of invisibility” (ibid.). According to Renshaw, this strategy of women managers derives from Japanese culture in which unambiguous belonging and homogeneity are the norm in groups. Since women managers are the ones who threaten both premises, they try not to stand out in their work circumstances. As a result, Renshaw concludes, “Revolution is not the traditional choice for Japanese women. . . . Many see their choices as complying, leaving quiet anger and repressed hostility, or fighting the system, with the last the most unlikely” (p. 249-50). Although her analysis elucidates the social mechanism that obscures the

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<sup>\*1</sup> By a statistical analysis, Patricia Steinhoff and Kazuko Tanaka (1993) demonstrate that more women managers are seen in public sectors than private companies and in small and medium-sized enterprises than large corporations. They thus contest the common tendency that focuses on large, private companies and thus overlooks these important facts.

existence of professionally successful women, Renshaw in the end seems to reaffirm the classic image of reserved Japanese women.

A similar argument is carried out in Millie Creighton's study (1996), in which she analyzes Japanese department stores as a "counter culture," an emerging site that "allows women as retailers and as shoppers to view themselves across the counters, in alternate role possibilities" (p. 193). Through interviewing female workers, however, Creighton finds a striking ambivalence. Although department stores and other industries have started to attach more importance to the women managers' innovative perspectives, Creighton laments that Japanese women themselves are still unmotivated to pursue their careers. In fact, "the presence of large numbers of unmarried managerial women served not to inspire these young women to further their career goals, but to confirm their belief that successes in the job market conflicts with success in the marriage market" (p. 215). Like Pharr and Renshaw, Creighton encounters few ambitious remarks from Japanese women and explains the finding in terms of the Japanese ideal of femininity. That is, although active in unconventional circumstances, the Japanese women are said to be Japanese-woman-like after all.

## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN

Another prominent sphere for changing Japanese women is international realms. Traveling and studying abroad, working in foreign-affiliated companies, and having personal involvement with non-Japanese men are said to be occasions for Japanese women to experience liberation from confining Japanese society. For Karen Ma (1996), those new niches are the focal points from which she tries to revise the "Madamme Butterfly"

myth. Women in Japan, according to Ma, turn to international relationships as a way of resolving their predicaments: “The willful flirtation of Japanese women with things foreign and with socially unacceptable behavior is their way to engage in an indirect discourse with Japanese men—they are expressing their frustration and dissatisfaction with the place assigned to females in Japanese society” (p. 70). Their quest for a gentle, respectful and romantic Western mate is met by the “*yamato nadeshiko* (old-fashioned girls of Japan)” image that their lovers-to-be possess. This “mutual attraction” is, however, deemed ill-fated in serious relationships including marriage. Through several case studies, Ma emphasizes the independence and assertiveness of international Japanese women.

Interestingly, Nancy Diggs (1998) depicts another “modern butterfly.” Diggs first confronts the same stereotype, saying that “the image of the kimono-clad wife, delicate, obedient, and doll-like, is the one many Americans still hold of the typical Japanese woman” (p. 2). Her contention is that there is no more Cho-Cho-san in the contemporary Japanese society; yet, Diggs maintains that Japanese women are “steel butterflies” in that they hold strength to overcome difficulties both in Japan and America. Based on the interviews with Japanese women in the United States, Diggs argues that these women experience a great deal of freedom and liberation because “living in Japan means living with constant people pressure, physical, mental, and emotional. Having to always be aware of others’ opinions can be stifling” (p. 125). Therefore, “being in America is a time of freedom and a temporary escape from burdens at home” (p. 128). Her contention appears to relate to Merry White’s study (1988) on returnee families that suffer the “crisis of return” in Japan. White’s analysis centers on the conceptions of Japanese society in which “*yappari*,” a person’s predictability, is most critical (p. 26). Experiences

abroad are considered to make the internationals unpredictable; therefore, “the [returnee] Japanese mother proves her willingness to resume her role, like the rest of the family, by being ultra-Japanese” (p. 111). Such “stifling” situations are the ones that Diggs’ “steel butterflies” may foresee.

Both Ma and Diggs attempt to rework the butterfly myth in a rather problematic way. In addition to their persistent usage of the “butterfly” image, a typically Orientalist labeling of Japanese women, they apparently take for granted the cultural binary of Japan and America/West, depicting Japanese women moving from the former to the latter as if the process were always straightforward and desirable. As a result, their arguments seem to reaffirm the stereotypical notions of the two societies, as exemplified well in Diggs’ conclusion: “Japan is a homogeneous society, one that relies on long-term relations and that doesn’t welcome outsiders. America, on the other hand, is an immigrant society, more open to newcomers. Being outspoken in America is a virtue; understatement is the rule in Japan” (Diggs 1998: 152). The “butterfly” is depicted to be floating within such a rigidly dichotomized world.

In this regard, a more provocative insight is offered in Karen Kelsky’s study (2001) on “internationalist” Japanese women. Kelsky does not presume the binary notion of “backward, feudal Japan” and “liberated, egalitarian West.” Her penetrating analysis reveals the historical and political processes in which the dichotomy is constructed along with a romanticized vision of Japanese women. Therefore, for Kelsky, the internationalist Japanese women’s investment in foreign realms—traveling, studying and working abroad—is a politically mediated one:

Japanese women’s efforts to include themselves in the class of transnational technocrat through a painstakingly acquired decontextualized cultural knowledge are not entirely

successful; they are continually being put back in “their place” by continuing racial and gender hierarchies that serve to marginalize them even (or especially) in the international venues they idealize (Kelsky 2001: 18).

Kelsky is thus more attentive to the risky nature of Japanese women’s ventures in which they mold themselves into what is fantasized and commodified in the international world. She further argues that “some Japanese women may appropriate this fetishized image of themselves to their own ends” (p. 174). Or, other talented, skillful Japanese women may eventually attain a hybrid and flexible self that is bound neither by Japanese nor Western values. However, Kelsky is not optimistic about any of the strategies that her research subjects display. Observing “the contradictions and impasses of internationalism as a potential feminist social movement” (p. 223), she emphasizes how internationalist Japanese women are entrapped within the chauvinist politics that relentlessly exoticize, eroticize and fetishize them.

Kelsky’s incisive framework entails problems as well. In support of her strong argument, she cites a wide variety of sources from media discourses to interview data, without considering their different qualities. Furthermore, she interprets each source in a rather definitive way, excluding other possibilities. Such an approach leads her to judge the women she encounters; in fact, her assumptions appear to irritate her research subjects at times.<sup>\*2</sup> Her consistent assertion about the racist and sexist hierarchies in which Japanese women are positioned—though absolutely true—seems to keep her from grasping fully what the women have to say about

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<sup>\*2</sup> For example, Kelsky cites an occasion in which a Japanese woman objected to her academic presentation, saying, “How can you claim that race has anything to do with my relationship? I love X because he is X, not because he is white!” (Kelsky 2001: 146). She also recalls a conversation with one of her prospective interviewees who exploded in anger, saying, “I don’t want to be an object of your study! Those are very sad questions you’re asking. Very sad!!” Kelsky’s response, “I think it might be valuable to ask why some Japanese women might seem to prefer the West over Japan” was confronted by the remark, “So you’re going to make some general theory about it?” (p. 237).

their own experiences.

As shown above, the progression of Japanese women tends to be depicted in highly ambivalent ways. The scholars acclaim women's liberation from traditional, "domestic" terrains, only to identify remaining oppression in the end. However, these ethnographic realities do not touch upon the ultimate issue: To whom and on what grounds are Japanese women's attempts "ambivalent"? That is, who is entitled to define and evaluate the "change" and "liberation"? At very least, the analysis above suggests that it is not Japanese women themselves.

## 2. Constrained Autonomy: "Conventional" Japanese Women

This section turns to the ethnographies that focus on categories of more conventional Japanese women. Scholars of Japan have long looked into their curious existence: Why is it that many women in Japan do not aspire to break down the ideology of "good wife, wise mother"? As early as the 1940s, Ruth Benedict discussed that Japanese housewives possessed a high degree of freedom and respect, carrying the family purse and holding child discipline solely in their hands (Benedict 1946). Similarly, Suzanne Vogel (1979) recognizes a great deal of autonomy, freedom and emotional independence that "professional housewives" in Japan possess and their American counterparts lack (Vogel 1979). Sumiko Iwao (1993) reiterates the contention, saying, "The role of the woman in the home is valued and her self-esteem is high because the management of the family has always been considered central to stability and prosperity in Japanese society" (p. 3-4). The argument below starts from

this common notion that Japanese women hold more autonomy and freedom than they appear to. Through examining ethnographic research on geisha, housewives and office ladies, all of which represent the most traditional femininity of Japan, the analysis explores what such “realities” imply.

## GEISHA, HOSTESSES AND HOUSEWIVES

“Although geisha can hardly be labeled feminists,” contends Liza Dalby in *Geisha*, “ironically they are among the few Japanese women who have managed to attain economic self-sufficiency and positions of authority and influence on their own merits” (Dalby 1983: xiv). Experiencing the real geisha life herself—the author actually worked as the very first non-Japanese geisha in Kyoto—Dalby challenges a common misunderstanding that geisha are similar to prostitutes or bar hostesses. She finds that “the geisha’s style thus is purely feminine, yet it lacks the qualities of meekness and subservience so often thought to be basic to Japanese womanhood” (p.174). Their devotion to art, professional consciousness and skillful command of banquet rooms are a few traits that distinguish geisha from other Japanese women.

Though insightful, Dalby’s study is controversial when she upholds geisha culture without examining the larger context in which it resides. The entertainment world does not exist in a vacuum; it is tightly linked to political and economic relations in Japan. As Anne Allison (1994) penetratingly observes in hostess bars, while working as a hostess herself, it is through playful flirtations with female entertainers—including insulting, ignoring and criticizing them and their bodies—that the “corporate warriors” construct their masculine identity. “Totemically and ritualistically, women working in the nightlife serve the men’s groups and the bonding they

entail. In the process, the woman becomes a construct, a type, a symbol” (p.167). Therefore, “it should not be forgotten that men are created as a construct of Man as much as women are created as a construct of Woman” (p.181). Allison further highlights the connection between the mutual construction of gender and motherhood in Japan. Bar hostesses indulge men in the way that mothers are supposed to do, reaffirming the gender norm of “good wife, wise mother.” Allison thus points toward the power dynamics that surround both “real” and “surrogate” mothers, portraying bar hostesses, who may appear to be “deviant” women, as actors of idealized Japanese-woman-ness. Despite many differences between the two, Dalby’s geisha performs a similar symbolic function to that of Allison’s bar hostesses.

Another problem in Dalby’s study arises when she juxtaposes geisha vis-à-vis Japanese housewives, in absolute favor of the former. Dalby presumes that Japanese housewives, whose husbands geisha amuse, are passive and submissive, and as a geisha Ichigiku, she even entertains this idea with her clientele.<sup>\*3</sup> While capturing the complexity of the geisha world and refuting its classic image, Dalby leaves unquestioned, and even reinforces, the conventional stereotype of submissive and boring Japanese housewives.

On the contrary, ethnographies of Japanese housewives find those “ordinary” Japanese women to be as powerful and active as Dalby claims geisha to be. Although some studies concentrate on the “good wife, wise mother” ideology that persistently runs through Japanese housewives’ life courses,<sup>\*4</sup> as early as in the mid-1980s, Takie Lebra (1984) discusses “domestic patriarchy,” which features the wife holding complete control over the

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<sup>\*3</sup> She recalls, “‘Japanese wives are generally uninteresting,’ [a Japanese professor] had said. ‘They are so confined to the home that they can’t talk about anything. We have real need in Japan for women who can interact with men socially.’ ‘That’s why there are geisha in Japan,’ I reminded him” (Dalby 1983: 141).

<sup>\*4</sup> See Allison 1996 and Long 1996, for example.

household responsibilities. She argues that the husband's childlike dependency "gives the wife leverage to wield power by making her services indispensable" (p. 134). In addition, their autonomous lives include a wider range of social activities. Anne Imamura's ethnography (1987) elucidates this aspect through her intensive fieldwork in a suburban city near Tokyo in the 1970s. Imamura draws attention to the fact that the housewives engage in cultural, social and political activities within the strict boundary of domestic role. "Whether in political activity or tea ceremony, the housewife defined her involvement as a way to make her a better housewife and would abandon it immediately if there were any possibility of conflict with her housewife role" (p. 129). Barbara Mori's study (1996) on tea ceremony, *chado*, as a leisure activity similarly shows that both married and single women are attracted to the traditional art for its compatibility with their pursuit of ideal femininity. "In the eyes of their friends and neighbors, *chado* was identified with depth of character, spirituality, grace, beauty, accomplishment, creativity, erudition, and culture. *Chado* gave them more in status in the eyes of their friends than, say, playing tennis or other sports" (p. 125).

Joy Hendry (1993) too points out that professional housewives prioritize matters directly related to their house and family while participating in PTA, Japanese classic art classes, cultural events and consumer activities. Hendry is attentive to the social system—namely, the Japanese employment custom that requires full-time homemakers to provide everyday necessities for its corporate warriors—that sanctions and encourages the status of the professional housewife. Therefore, a housewife "is regarded as playing a vital role in several ways . . . and it seems that this is a role many women are, for the time being, happy to play" (p. 239). "It must, however be remembered," continues Hendry, "that women who are able to play these roles are usually of a social class

which is higher than average” (p.239-40).

Indeed, a full-time, professional housewife who devotes herself to social activities while fulfilling her domestic role is by no means a typical married woman in Japan. As Hendry points out, class is a significant determining factor. Glenda Roberts (1994) contests Imamura’s and other scholars’ argument that housewives enjoy their public activities because they are a means of self-realization. For her research subjects, blue-collar part-time workers in a lingerie factory, “the economy had a great deal to do with their refusal to quit—they, too, wanted to be homeowners and to give college educations to their children, go on trips, wear nice clothes, and eat out on occasion, as did their better-off neighbors and the ideal families on television, in the movies, and in countless advertisements” (p. 70). Roberts’ observation indicates that women choose to work not necessarily from their personal interests but also for the welfare of their families. She also reveals that the social norm of “good wife, wise mother,” combined with the women’s everyday concerns, make it difficult for them to organize and protest against unfavorable work customs. Instead, the women are required to manage the nearly impossible double-burden of home and work because “the woman who cannot clearly separate home and work will not be successful at either, and may be the object of criticism from family and/or coworkers” (p. 166). Ultimately, their economic activities—just like upper-middle-class professional housewives’ social activities—appear tightly connected to their household duties.

By now it is clear that the existing academic discourses depict Japanese housewives as not completely free or autonomous. Revealing their active lives on the one hand, researchers simultaneously underscore the women’s tendency to assume the “good wife, wise mother” role on the other. Therefore, as Imamura concludes,

it is difficult to develop these activities into “solidarity-producing institutions outside the family” (Imamura 1984: 146). It seems that the researchers provocatively challenge the stereotype only to retreat into the traditional image of Japanese women.

## OFFICE LADIES

An intriguing parallel can be found in the studies of Japanese female office workers or office ladies (hereafter OLs). It has been widely acknowledged that Japanese OLs, to whom the role of “office flowers” is attributed, engage in clerical work with minimal career prospects and that their responsibilities consist of assisting their male colleagues doing tasks such as typing and photocopying and of assuming “feminine” tasks including serving tea and cleaning the office. OLs are expected to leave after marriage, to be succeeded by younger, less-paid female labor. Harsh though their situation may seem, according to Iwao Sumiko, OLs comply with the system. Iwao states, “Women seemed to affirm (and many still do affirm) the separation, considering themselves to be short-term, non-career workers who therefore do not need to take equal responsibility with male employees” (Iwao 1993: 156).

In the words of James McLendon (1983), work for young women is either “a way station on the route to marriage” or, if one fails to take that path, “a blind alley” (p.156). Conducting a participant observation in a large trading company, he finds women’s career building centers on their marriage plans. While younger single women learn and perform only “women’s work,” i.e., the role of a housewife in the office, older single women are ridiculed as *obahan*, a disparaging way of saying *obasan* (middle-aged women). In contrast to these

“discouraged workers,” married female workers show more confidence and receive greater acceptance.

Therefore, even the “blind alley” takes on a different appearance depending on whether one is “successfully” married or not. McLendon further asserts, “This pattern is not unique to Yama [a trading company]; it is found in almost every Japanese company” (p.178). He then mentions some changes in the female work pattern and employment system in Japan but concludes in the end that “these changes are likely to occur slowly” (p.179).

The depictions of OLs such as Iwao’s and McLendon’s, namely those that are likely to reinforce stereotypical images of Japanese women inclined toward “good wife, wise mother,” must be read with caution. In addition to the studies of changing Japanese workingwomen by Jean Renshaw and Millie Creighton discussed above, some other fieldwork in Japanese workplaces has tried to challenge such images. For example, Susan Pharr (1984) provides an intriguing case study of a “tea-pourers’ rebellion,” an event in which a group of female workers started to refuse to provide tea for their male colleagues at a city office. Applying the sociological theory of social conflict, Pharr observes five distinctive stages of the rebellion: the female workers became aware of their frustration, manifested their contest, institutionalized their action, escalated and deescalated their confrontation, and terminated their conflict. In fact, her analysis of the rebellion, based on the interviews with the participants, reveal that it resulted in “a partial success” (p. 233). Pharr further argues that “from the standpoint of the present analysis, the revolt of the tea pourers must be seen as a failed rebellion. . . . In the end, this rebellion failed to spark widespread social change” (p. 233). That is, despite its mobilization of female workers and direct confrontation with the male managers, the rebellion did not completely break down the unequal gender relation at the workplace. Obviously, Pharr focuses on what the rebellion brought about, rather than how the negotiation

took place. Not paying much attention to the internal dynamics of the rebellion,<sup>\*5</sup> Pharr's sociological viewpoint simply defines the collective action as a "failure."

Although not describing a collective rebellion, Andrew Painter (1996) and Yuko Ogasawara (1998) shed light on more subtle resistance in everyday contexts. Painter, whose fieldwork was carried out in a Japanese television station called ZTV, observes intricate gender relations among the employees. Contrary to general impressions, he explains that successful career women dress less professionally (slacks, jeans and windbreakers) and try not to stand out in their work environment. They look like ordinary female employees and their career building is regarded as exceptional; therefore, the women managers do not appear to undermine the gender hierarchy significantly. On the other hand, female temporary employees are found to be more defiant. "Although the temporary female workers were among the lowest in status at ZTV—or perhaps because of this organizational reality—they managed to make the work enjoyable by creating their own alternative perspective on the company and the people who worked there" (p. 53). Neither subservient nor quiescent, the women mock their superiors, create a playful atmosphere and "parody the hierarchies at ZTV" (p. 53). This "curious leverage a weaker party comes to hold against the dominant" is the focal point of Ogasawara's study on office ladies in a Tokyo bank (Ogasawara 1999: 158). Observing the relationships between OLS and their male coworkers, in which the "office wives" take advantage by gossiping, boycotting and the like, Ogasawara vividly reveals the

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<sup>\*5</sup> Though stated briefly in Pharr's account, the rebellion seems to entail highly complex relations within the organization. For example, the two leaders, a male and a female, recount the revolt in different manners. While the male leader "preferred to portray it as a conflict with larger aims" and "appeared embarrassed to hear it referred to as a 'tea-pourers' rebellion," the female leader strictly defined it "as a struggle centering primarily on the women's tea-pouring duties" (p. 225). Moreover, the latter is described as "a most reluctant leader, fearful of criticism from the men in her section" (p.225).

irony that it is the OLs' underprivileged location in the employment and career system that enables their unrestrained acts. Both Painter and Ogasawara call those actions "resistance" and draw attention to the function of "weapons of the weak"<sup>\*6</sup> in Japanese work places.

However, both researchers retain a negative tone in assessing their findings. In fact, Painter mentions the "resistance" rather briefly in his article, adding, "however, the overarching hierarchical structures of the television industry work to ensure that the play and flexibility does not go too far" (Painter 1996: 54).<sup>\*7</sup>

Ogasawara is more critical about her fellow OLs' resistance. She considers it problematic that those OLs who act freely without career concerns do harm to the minority OLs who actually seek career advancement, for the former enhances the stereotypical image of female workers being irresponsible and unreliable. She argues, "the irony for defiant OLs is that their acts often serve to reinforce traditional gender relations. . . . In making claims on men, OLs act out the traditional gender roles" (Ogasawara 1999: 162).

In short, the scholars seem to argue that the Japanese workingwomen resist their underprivileged condition, only to be accommodated. Whether a tea-pourers' rebellion or OLs' resistance, an influential collective action is deemed unattainable. A reason may be, according to Ogasawara, that there are frictions among female workers due to their differences in age, education and tenure. The diversity of Japanese women, an initial focus of the ethnographers, is now considered something that hinders the women's solidarity. Overall,

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<sup>\*6</sup> Ogasawara principally employs this framework proposed by James Scott.

<sup>\*7</sup> Painter's argument goes on to discuss the contents of the TV programs that the station produces and underscores their stereotypical gender depictions. Over all, his argument may give an impression that the Japanese TV station is imbued with conservative gender norms, and that Japanese women are ultimately victimized.

the reexaminations of conventional categories of Japanese women reveal some active and autonomous aspects of their lives but seem to maintain that they are still entrapped within the traditional gender norms.

### 3. Interactions and Negotiations: “Subversive” Japanese Women

The ethnographies of both exceptional and conventional Japanese women are of critical importance for the insights that none of the categories of Japanese women is “the Japanese woman” perfectly. However, it is equally noteworthy that many scholars find Japanese women captured in the power structure, where they are deprived of agency; they are changing but entrapped, resisting but accommodated. Are these paradoxes the ultimate “realities” of Japanese women? Before drawing a hasty conclusion, it is necessary to examine the researchers’ preoccupations that blind them to some other important considerations. This section summarizes some pitfalls of the previous frameworks and then turns to a more self-reflexive type of ethnography.

#### PROBLEMATIC IMPOSITION OF ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK

A critical issue arises when scholarly investigation centers on culture-based explanations. Some ethnographic data are analyzed based on the almost cliché-like view of Japan—a society in which homogeneity, uniformity, group orientation, interdependency (*amae*) and vertical structure prevail. However, when examined closely, such Japanologist terminology does not explain much. It only circulates the particularized picture of Japanese society, implying that Japanese women are restrained and complicit *because they are Japanese women*.

Notably, since the late 1980s, scholars have launched a radical critique against the popularized writings on “Japaneseness,” or *nihonjinron*. Befu Harumi (1987) regards the considerable amount of discussion on the uniqueness of Japanese culture as “ideology” and defines it as “a genre that compares Japan with Europe and America, explores their differences, and identifies the uniqueness of Japanese culture solely in that way” (p. 138). Sugimoto Yoshio (1996) similarly disputes the prevailing discourses on Japanese culture, which he calls “myth,” pointing out its ethnocentric and assimilating tendency. Anne Allison (1994) also provides an incisive analysis on how *nihonjinron* works to legitimize corporate drinking, saying, “Factors of history, economic interest, political motivation, and practical consequences are often overlooked, reducing the complexities of an institutional phenomenon to the essence of a culture” (p. 82-3). Without such caution, ethnographers become the ones that presume the national/cultural boundary and emphasize, exaggerate, or even create the differences—a process that Edward Said called Orientalism and Brian Moeran redefines as “Japanism” (Moeran 1990: 1). Daniel Ben-Ami problematizes this tendency of cultural essentialism in his article, “Is Japan Different?”:

The problem does not arise from the recognition of difference between societies, which is a truism, but from the implicit assumption that these differences reflect the innate characteristics of different people. Few writers today would be so crass as to pose such arguments in biological or explicitly racial terms. Instead, the discussion is framed in terms of cultural difference (Ben-Ami 1997: 9).

The second issue concerns how ethnographers interpret the “realities” that they encountered in their research fields. The tendency observed above is that Japanese women’s actions, behaviors and experiences are assessed mainly by the scholars’ academic and political viewpoints, that is, whether or not they challenge the status quo—no matter what the aspiration of the women themselves. Political activists, female managers, internationalist women, housewives and office ladies are all deemed somehow complicit because they do not

entirely disrupt the existing structure. At the same time, the women's self-accounts are often made light of, especially when they diverge from a scholarly presumption. An example can be seen in Liza Dalby's ethnography, in which the researcher's emphasis on geisha's skillfulness and self-sufficiency seems to hinder her from reflecting more on a remark made by her fellow geisha; "Why are you studying geisha? . . . Geisha are no different from anybody else" (Dalby 1983: 141). Dalby only casts doubt on her insistence, saying, "This very evening she had danced an acrobatic folk dance, nibbled snacks from the tips of [a customer's] chopsticks, and drunk herself silly. What 'ordinary' Japanese woman ever does such things?" (*ibid*). Consequently, the clear-cut boundary between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" Japanese women is left unquestioned, despite the fellow geisha's attempt to challenge such a dichotomy. Anne Allison (1994), though provocatively exposing the connection between Japanese corporate culture and nightlife in hostess bars, does not seem to pay much attention to the women working in bars. The hostesses are regarded as "a construct, a type, a symbol" (p.167), a commodity to be purchased for construction of their customers' masculine identity. Therefore, Allison does not attribute much significance to the women's narratives in her analysis. Such scholarly gazes seem to focus only on the power structure and neglect the actual individuals.

In addition, scholarly evaluations at times include overt disappointment and frustration when the ethnographers find the women not pronouncing explicit criticism or not undertaking direct actions. It is crucial to ask: Whose aspiration is it to obliterate the conventional gender system? Are the women to be blamed when they are tied to practical concerns of their everyday lives? Above all, what entitles a scholar to disregard such entangled everyday situations and to prioritize their own political agenda? Without scrutinizing these questions,

ethnographies may only contribute to the reproduction of the dominant discourse—that Japanese women are confined within their culturally unique society—whose Orientalist framework is perpetuated throughout.

## VULNERABLE OBSERVERS

At this juncture, it is necessary to return to the fact that ethnographers are situated in the interaction dynamics of their research fields. Although some scholars claim that they are able to switch back and forth between the positions of insider and outsider, in actual fields they may not always be able to lock themselves in a vacuum of academic objectivity. Consequentially, unavoidable personal involvement occurs, bringing about deeper insights. An illuminating example is *The Women of Suye Mura* (Smith and Wiswell 1982), an ethnographic work on a rural village of the 1930s. Co-author Robert Smith accounts that it is informal, candid and intimate interactions between Ella Wiswell and her neighbors in Suye that unveiled the women's pleasure in traveling, tobacco, drink and sex.<sup>\*8</sup> The consequent ethnography differs from her late husband John Embree's, which largely depended exclusively on his external observations.

Takie Lebra argues that the information gathered in the field is a product of interaction between a researcher and her respondents (1984: 25). Her analysis thus encompasses multiple dynamics involved in each woman's narrative. "Women do play roles and occupy status as defined parts of the social structure, but it is necessary to go beyond this social structure framework and see how women link or separate their role

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<sup>\*8</sup> Kawamura Nozomu (1987), who translated the book into Japanese, makes a similar comment, adding, "The Suye Mura, the people and the women portrayed here are, needless to say, the ones that resided in the subjective mind of Mrs. Embree [Wiswell], rather than an objective entity that existed in 1935" (p. 553).

requirement and self-fulfillment” (p. 3). Lebra does not regard women’s words and actions simply as a reflection of their internalized cultural norm; rather, she offers an insight into the manipulative self-presentations of the research subjects.

In this regard, Dorinne Kondo (1990) provides a most provocative contribution in her study of a small, downtown confectionary shop where she conducts participant observation while working as a part-timer. There, her identity as a Japanese-American, female anthropologist undergoes a crisis while she interacts with neighbors, male artisans and other female part-timers. The experience highlights that identity does not lie statically in one’s psyche but is constructed and reconstructed in relation to the others with whom s/he interacts. Importantly, the process is neither straightforward nor neutral. “Identity is not a fixed ‘thing,’ it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and the open-ended, power-laden enactments of those meanings in everyday situation” (p. 24). It is illuminating to see how Kondo’s perspective finds her fellow female part-time workers. At first sight, these women are similar to those in other ethnographies: they put home and family before work; they do not aspire to improve their working conditions; and in a daily work situation, they perform the role of surrogate mothers, a culturally sanctioned form of presenting their gender. One may conclude that these women are also accommodated within the cultural ideal of femininity. However, according to Kondo, these interpersonal performances are of a more contingent nature.

A woman at any given moment may feel most comfortable, most accepted, and most integrated into the workplace as she enacts certain familiar, culturally appropriate meanings of gender. At the same time, she at some level surely knows that she is thereby ensuring her exclusion. In such a situation, words like “resistance” and “accommodation” truly seem inadequate, for apparent resistance is constantly mitigated by collusion and compromise at different levels of consciousness, just as accommodation may have unexpectedly subversive

effects. For it is precisely by enacting their conventional gendered identities that women also refuse to accept their structural marginality and make themselves central figures at the workplace (Kondo 1990: 299).

In other words, Japanese women are always embedded in a social matrix, from which they strategically present themselves to others, including to a researcher. Their acts may appear Japanese-woman-like, yet they can take on multiple, even subversive, meanings, if examined carefully.

Kondo's argument presses the issue of ethnographer's positionality. Kondo vividly demonstrates that she was involved in her research subjects' realities to the extent that her fortress of academic objectivity did not hold anymore. Writing about her research subjects entails exposing herself, a participant who collaborates to craft the reality. In this sense, Kondo is what Ruth Behar calls a "vulnerable observer." Behar explains, "Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake" (Behar 1996: 14). A vulnerable observer declares who writes, from where and for what purpose, a distinctively important process when an ethnographic reality is represented.

Gail Bernstein (1983) is another ethnographer who faces her own vulnerability during her research. She recalls her research subjects' extremely unfriendly and shy attitudes before her identity in the community was defined as "*sensei* (teacher)." Bernstein says, "My idea of being a participant-observer, I soon realized with chagrin, had been hopelessly naïve. The objects of my study were themselves observing me, and rather than slipping silently into the environment like the proverbial fly on the wall, I found myself the center of attention wherever I went" (Bernstein 1983: 31). After the initial struggle, Bernstein finds Haruko, her main subject and host-family mother, sharing a significant amount of personal matters with her, offering most complex, almost

contradictory impressions. While Haruko defines herself as “a typical Japanese farm woman,” Bernstein discovers the woman’s unique characteristics that do not fit the stereotype. Moreover, Haruko exhibits a keen aspiration to become “just a housewife,” in opposition to an American academic’s presumption. For Haruko and other rural women, “the idea of women’s liberation, if it means anything at all, means freedom from the economic uncertainties and physical drudgery of farming, more time to spend cooking, cleaning, and sewing” (p. 168). Notably, such unforeseen findings derive from reciprocal self-revelation between the researcher and her subjects.

In-depth involvement in the field tends to elicit such contradictory attitudes and opinions of Japanese women, to which the earlier ethnographies have not paid sufficient attention. Robin LeBlanc (1999) finds it vital to take these inconsistencies into consideration. “People do contradict themselves. They can be fully committed to several contradictory positions at the same time. They may need to be. Finding out why may be the most important work of any researcher” (p. 22). Looking into political movements initiated by housewives in Japan, LeBlanc becomes aware of the significance that the women attach to their “regular housewife” identity, despite the negative connotation that the label evokes in the political world. Unlike other scholars who may regard such insistence on performing the role of a housewife as something that undermines the women’s consciousness and solidarity, LeBlanc sees through to the underlying strategic motivation, saying:

We should not assume that many Japanese women uncritically view [their public activities] as an extension of their housewife role because they are unaware of the restrictive aspects of the identity. Instead, . . . the real question about the housewife identity is why women who are coolly rational about its down sides continue to use it. The answer lies in the fact that “housewife” is a useful label for the very women who chafe under its negative dimensions. Especially in their interactions beyond the home as representative of the family, women use

'housewife' to make short-cut references to their commitments and expertise, to the quality of their contributions to a truly human life (LeBlanc 1999: 32).

Though puzzled by the incoherent self-presentations of her research subjects, LeBlanc neither tries to explain them in cultural terms nor leaps to the hasty conclusion that Japanese women have internalized the "good wife, wise mother" ideology. Instead, she exposes the dynamic processes in which Japanese women employ a sanctioned category to present themselves in a strategic way, subverting the meaning of "housewife" in return.

Finally, an equally important work is done by Nancy Rosenberger (2001), in which the anthropologist attentively and astutely examines the relationship between Japanese women and the public discourses of femininity in Japan. Her extensive fieldwork since the 1970s is based on the premise that "people always negotiate with the forces that shape them" (p. 4). Sharing both public and private settings with her research subjects, Rosenberger notes the discrepancy between their two personas. Whereas some ethnographers may be content with the well-organized front-stage behaviors only, Rosenberger finds these manipulative performances most illuminating.

Front stage personas and backstage personalities may differ—contending, complementing, subverting, and overlapping with each other. These women learned their gender performances well, investing themselves heavily in their stage characters and making them part of themselves. Yet they were aware actors, judging and discriminating as they made choices and measured their actions in relation to other actors or in relation to their positions on a multilayered stage (Rosenberger 2001: 60).

Crucially, such interpersonal processes—what Dorinne Kondo calls 'crafting each other'—involves the researcher as a participant. Thus, Rosenberger departs from the position of a neutral, objective outsider who interprets the women's lives for her own sake. She is also a vulnerable observer whose reactions, including surprise and confusion, are stated as a possible interpretation, the vivid and dynamic nature of which makes this

type of ethnography appear even more “realistic.”

The ethnographies overviewed in this section offer an alternative way of studying Japanese women. Paying attention to the interaction dynamics, the scholars highlight the multiple elements that constitute their ethnographic findings, making their own presence visible and vulnerable. Most importantly, this perspective sheds light on how Japanese women narrate their lives and identities, and by doing so, reconstructs the reality in accordance with the actual lived experiences, instead of academic interests. In this way, Japanese women do not appear thoroughly autonomous or resistant; however, neither do they seem only entrapped. They perform “the Japanese woman” in highly contingent—both complicit and subversive—ways.

#### 4. Toward Identity Narratives: Framework and Methodology

These self-reflective and narrative-oriented ethnographies make it possible to depart from a dichotomy of image versus reality. They reveal that it is not such a straightforward task to refute a stereotype through depicting reality, for the two are crucially intertwined. In fact, Japanese women do perform “the Japanese woman” while living in the midst of cultural norms of femininity. Refusing it entirely may not always be a possible option for them. Concerning practical matters such as their physical conditions, financial situations, family and other social relationships, they may comply with the gender stereotypes that are imposed on them. Nevertheless, the women may utilize, manipulate and negotiate the prescriptions, subtly yet powerfully subverting them. Therefore, one can no longer assume a reality that exists independent of stereotype—Japanese

women live the image in their realities.

#### BECOMING A JAPANESE WOMAN, DOING “THE JAPANESE WOMAN”

A theoretical and methodological elaboration is in order. First and foremost, Japanese women do not exist *per se*. One *becomes* a Japanese woman in a specific context that requires her to do so. Moreover, that identity is not a blank label but is filled with cultural, social and political meanings. Therefore, social interaction is a focal site where Japanese women confront and negotiate their identities as Japanese women.

Ethnomethodology, which focuses on “the common sense knowledge” held among social actors in interaction settings (Garfinkel 1967), provides an insight here. According to Erving Goffman, social actors carry out a smooth and stable interaction by referring to social codes of actions and by saving the faces of those who are present. Their self-presentations, namely, the projections of their ideal and favorable selves, are therefore carefully planned and managed so that they do not disturb the flow of interactions (1959). Such interactions, Goffman emphasizes, are the sanctified “ritual” in the contemporary secular society (1967). By cautiously observing the ceremonial rules, the actors collaborate to achieve a successful encounter. Therefore, “social life is an uncluttered, orderly thing because the person voluntarily stays away from the places and topics and times where he [*sic*] is not wanted and where he [*sic*] might be disparaged for going” (Goffman 1967: 43). As such, interactions are prone to center on the existing preconceptions—“the Japanese woman” for example—for the actors tend to avoid dissonant occurrences. Individual Japanese women, therefore, conduct their acts in accordance with “the Japanese woman” meeting the others’ expectations and successfully managing their self-images. Put another

way, Japanese women pivot on “the Japanese woman” in social interactions.

While such ethnomethodological approaches as Goffman’s may appear somewhat deterministic, assuming all social actors follow the single code in a univocal way, Nancy Rosenberger astutely argues, “Self attains form through relating to others, . . . *by relating in a variety of ways*. It is in this multiplicity of relationships that meaning and power emerge” (Rosenberger 1992: 4, emphasis mine). Social interaction is, indeed, a multiple, complex and power-laden process. The ethnomethodologists’ argument that social interactions principally center on “common sense knowledge” and follow the codes of “interaction rituals” fail to recognize that such processes sustain not only the flow of actions but also the social hierarchies that constrain the actors. As described earlier, “the Japanese woman” derives from highly hierarchical and dichotomized relations of Occident/Orient and male/female. Therefore, an interaction should be regarded as a site of dominance in which a certain participant is more likely to be made into the Other, as much as a peacefully achieved joint action.

Scholarship has revealed the political nature of Japanese national identity, or Japaneseness. For example, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) draws the historical process in which rice, originally a “foreign” crop, comes to symbolize Japan’s homogeneity and uniqueness, i.e., identity. At the same time, she argues that “rice has been simultaneously univocal and multivocal; it represents the Japanese self while that self undergoes various historical changes” (p.129). As such, “the Japanese self” is no longer an essential entity but a historical and political invention. Marilyn Ivy (1995), who analyzes contemporary consumerism in Japan that features a commodified nostalgia, makes it clear that the process is intensified in the midst of globalization. Other scholars also indicate that certain genres of popular culture such as women’s magazines (Moeran 1995), Takarazuka Revue

(Robertson 1998) and *enka* (Yano 2002) constitute rich repositories of invented and reinvented Japaneseness.

Given that discourses of “the Japanese” are so ubiquitous and that they entail significant gender connotations

(Morris-Suzuki 1998; Tamanoi 1998), the dominant discourse of “the Japanese woman” surrounds individual

Japanese women in a fundamental manner.

Is it possible at all, then, to negotiate such enmeshing power relations? The re-conceptualization of gender identity by Judith Butler, in the influential book *Gender Trouble*, is insightful about this matter. In line with the Foucaultian genealogy, Butler refutes the idea of identity that exists a priori: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result” (Butler 1990: 23). That is, it is the language, only through which social actors can perceive and articulate themselves, that precedes identities. This radical reversal of cause and effect leads to the notion that gender is performative—i.e., not “being” but “becoming” and “doing.” Most importantly, Butler argues that this performative nature of gender generates occasions of subversion.

The very complexity of the discursive map that constructs gender appears to hold out the promise of an inadvertent and generative convergence of these discursive and regulatory structures. If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing. (Butler 1990:43)

An action owes its meaning to the dominant signification system; however, the system requires that enactment

for its own legitimization and continuation. Therefore, “as an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to

intervention and resignification” (*ibid.*). Most crucial is the exploration of the very occasions in which

institutionalized meanings are destabilized by parody, exaggeration or even failure in doing “the Japanese

woman.”

Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1998) points to such multiple and fluid natures of identification, saying that the connotations of identity as “Japanese” vary to a significant degree from person to person; and even within a person, I would add. It can be a simple matter of legal residence for some or a strong sense of belonging for others. It may mean attachment to the history, traditional arts, language, natural scenery, or all or none of these.

Just as ‘culture’ is not a *thing* which societies carry within them intact through time, but only an endless and fractured process of the reworking of multiple traditions, so ‘identity’ is not a *thing* which individuals carry with them through life, like a scar on the soul. Instead, it is something that we make in the present moment out of an interweaving of our cultural resources, as we talk to others, listen, write, or read the final pages of a book (Morris-Suzuki 1998: 208, original emphases).

As such, narrating one’s identity as a Japanese woman is not mere retrospection of her life or reflection of her inner thought but an occasion in which conflicting dynamics occur and are negotiated. It may not be possible to escape the dominant framework of “the Japanese woman” but it is possible to subvert it from within.

## ACTIVE INTERVIEW

I conducted my interview research based on the theoretical framework above. The interviewees included thirty women from Japan who had lived in Hawai‘i from one to five years.<sup>\*9</sup> This criterion was necessary because if they had lived only in Japan, they would have found it difficult to speak of themselves as *Japanese* women, and if they had lived abroad for too short or long a period, their identity as a Japanese woman would not have been so salient. By focusing on individuals who are most likely to find themselves “becoming”

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<sup>\*9</sup>This research has been approved by the Department of Health and Human Services at the University of Hawai‘i (CHS #12403) and I obtained an oral consent from each interviewee. All of the interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms in this thesis. To protect their privacy, I have also changed some details about them.

a Japanese woman in everyday situations, the interview research made it possible to discuss the identity dynamics described above in a detailed way. Also, the interviewees all had full-time work experiences in Japan. In order to explore how Japanese women reflect on Japanese society, I included only *shakaijin*, or “society people”—those who had had a social status to enter the “real world” in Japan.

Other than those criteria, the interview sample is diverse. As detailed in the Appendix 1, the interviewees range in age from 26 to 48, with the majority of twenty-three interviewees in their 30s. Although they are from many different areas of Japan, most of them are from big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Nagoya. Their occupations in Japan include various kinds of office work, teaching, nursing and performing as a musician. Twenty of the total thirty interviewees are students in Hawai‘i, but there are also office workers, accountants, nurses, entrepreneurs and homemakers. Eight graduated from junior college and seventeen from four-year universities in Japan, while about one third are currently pursuing their graduate degrees in Hawai‘i. Seventeen interviewees have had previous experiences abroad, mostly in the continental U.S., an exposure that allows them to describe the uniqueness of Hawai‘i.

Each interview was conducted in an informal setting that encouraged an open, candid atmosphere. I met all the interviewees through personal connections—through acquaintances, friends and other interviewees as the research progressed. I exchanged brief e-mails and/or phone calls with each interviewee before her interview. Each interview was carried out in the Japanese language and started with an opening sentence, “I have been interested in how international Japanese women, like you, experience their lives in Japan and in Hawai‘i.” The following interviews, each of which lasted at least an hour, were conducted in a semi-structured method; the

interviewer began with a few basic questions and the interviewee initiated the rest of the conversation. Some interviewees spontaneously started to recount their past experiences while others needed more prompts. The only questions I asked to all of the interviewees were as follows but not necessarily in this order: What type of work experience they had had in Japan; what brought them to Hawai'i; how they liked their lives in Hawai'i; what their future plans were; and what they thought Japanese women were like and how they themselves fit the image. I tried to perform the role of an active listener, showing my interest, surprise and puzzlement, participating in the construction of each identity narrative.

Therefore, the interview research and analysis here are qualitative, aimed not at drawing a general pattern of the thirty interviewees but at highlighting the diversity among them. A major focus is given to how narratives are crafted, i.e., in what ways, with what vocabulary, and from what perspective an interviewee gives shape to her life. At the same time, I agree with Jody Miller and Barry Glassner (1997), who oppose the radical social constructionist assertion that there exists no knowledge "out there." "While the interview itself is a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained" (P. 100). Similarly, James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium propose to strike a balance between the *whats* and *hows* of interviews, that is, between "apprehending *what* is substantively asked and conveyed" and "understanding *how* the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview" (1997: 114). Their consequent method of "active interviewing," which regards an interview as a social drama with a developing plot—whose contents and procedures are equally vital—is the one I employed in my research. Active involvement of the interviewer not only creates an animated atmosphere but also leads to a keener sensitivity to

what an interviewee has to say. Holstein and Gubrium say, “The objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined by predetermined agendas” (p.123).

The subsequent analysis therefore addresses a twofold question: *what* do Japanese women experience abroad and *how* do they describe their subjective realities? Having observed that even academic discourses pivot on the dominant conception of “the Japanese woman,” I assume that Japanese women inevitably encounter a similar dilemma. Yet, through shedding light on multiple implications of their narratives, I demonstrate that Japanese women negotiate and subvert the loaded identity—pivoting on the stereotype in alternative ways.

## Chapter 2

### Ambivalent Stories: Analysis of Experiences of Japanese Women

The thirty women's life stories involved common elements, i.e., their departure from Japan and their residence in Hawai'i. What type of experiences did the women go through in Japan, especially at work? How do they feel about their decision to live abroad? What are the advantages and disadvantages they experience in Hawai'i? From their current point of view, how do they reflect on Japanese society and evaluate their lives in Hawai'i? A common presumption would be that these women suffered the oppressive gender structure in Japan, became frustrated and left home. They then liberate themselves overseas, encountering new values and experiencing freedom. As a result, their view of Japan is unfavorable whereas their foreign destination is regarded as ideal. That is, Japanese women abroad embody a linear trajectory from oppression to liberation.<sup>\*1</sup> This chapter reexamines such prevailing assumptions held about international Japanese women. By exploring their experiences both in Japan and in Hawai'i, I try to shed light on multiple experiences articulated in their own terms. They may indeed involve stories of oppression and liberation, but when examined more carefully, may not necessarily converge on the linear trajectory.

#### 1. Oppression and Agency: Work in Japan

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<sup>\*1</sup>The studies by Karen Ma (1996) and Nancy Diggs (1998), introduced earlier, exemplify such a view.

As discussed in the earlier chapter, the working lives of women in Japan are rarely portrayed positively. It has been emphasized that the “good wife, wise mother” ideology constantly confines women and undermines their progress. However, the stories of thirty interviewees seem to surpass the homogenized picture of confined and discouraged office ladies. Although they might not be representative of all the working women in Japan, the diversity of their occupations and experiences indicates a wide range of their coping strategies with “the Japanese woman.” This section examines how the interviewees struggled with gender stereotypes in Japanese domestic settings.

#### (NOT) ENCOUNTERING OPPRESSION

The narratives by the interviewees with specialized qualifications are the most outstanding. Former nurses, Kazue and Shinobu, say they possessed a high degree of autonomy at work while Hana, working as a Japanese instructor to non-natives, experienced “nothing like the harsh situation of OL.” As a musician, Yuko also says she encountered hardly any gender discrimination; rather, seniority determined a person’s status. Michi reflects on her freelance translator years as “the most ambitious, brave and confident time” of her life when she did not have to consider her structural position. She recounts, “Once on a subway, I talked to a middle-aged man in a shirt with the logo of the company I had worked for before, just to tell him that I liked the company.” Excitedly she continues, “It turned out, then, that he was a general manager of the sales department in the company. He gave me another job right away, and after a week, I was in New Zealand! If I had been working for a big company, it would never have happened.” Such professional skills allow the women to find and

occupy their niches, entitling them to pride and mobility: "I know I can find a job any time anywhere. As a nurse, I have never had a problem in job hunting," Shinobu explains.

Some others regard themselves as "fortunate" to have experienced no severe work situations as women. The fashion industry in which Wakako worked and the travel industry in which Iyo, Saki, Taeko and Yoriko worked have the reputation of being "more woman-friendly." So are semi-governmental organizations, according to Madoka and Shoko. For Erika, it was her Master's degree earned in America that helped her receive "all the special treatments as a woman" in a real estate agency. Former English teachers at public schools, Midori and Mika, say that their work situations were ideal for women compared to jobs in large companies. Mika explains, "We could take a three-year maternity leave. Would it be possible at private institutions? It could be theoretically, but you would have the hardest time to return to the former position. It's easy for teachers because we are assigned to different schools every once in a while anyway." Midori, looking back on her hard work, expresses a sense of accomplishment: "It's totally different from OLs. I had so much responsibility on my sole shoulders from the early period of my teaching career." However, another high school English teacher, Chikako, speaks of a different type of experience: "I had to learn how to deal with the senior male teachers, to whom I was only a little girl. You would never make yourself heard in formal meetings. You always have to start from an informal and indirect, backstage negotiation." Therefore, schools, whose culture could resemble those of large private corporations, may situate women in an OL-like situation from time to time.

Women in foreign affiliated companies, which also require a high degree of expertise, reflect on their employment in a similar way. Reiko emphasizes that the German company she worked for temporarily offered

the most desirable work condition of all the six jobs she has had, saying, “All I had to care about was my assignments. No human relations or anything else came into play. I really liked their European style. It suited me best.” Mika worked in foreign journalism before becoming a teacher: “It was more about meritocracy. Gender did not matter there.” Yet, according to Risa, not all women in foreign affiliated companies are treated equal to men. “I would say I was a half-OL there. Though they often sent me to Tokyo and Hong Kong on assignments and paid me well, I served coffee and ran errands for my male colleagues. I had to deal with some overtly sexual comments too. You know, there are still Japanese men in a prestigious foreign-affiliated company like mine.”

Confrontation with sexist Japanese men is a frequent topic brought up by career women. Kaori, a graphic designer; Keiko, a financial adviser; and Seiko an overseas sales person of heavy machinery; all experienced occasions in which their gender became an obstacle for their careers. They found themselves neglected and not taken seriously despite their hard work. Their experiences relate to the work situations of self-claimed “typical” OLs such as Ayumi, Fumika, Hiroe, Kiyoko, Maki, Nami and Yoriko, all of whom recall their routine work that consisted of repetitive and simple tasks such as answering the phone, photocopying and typing along with serving tea for their colleagues and guests. “It was only young women who wore uniforms, served tea and cleaned the kitchen. What was more bothering was that they called us ‘girls,’ ignoring our individual differences,” Maki recounts. Moreover, these women encountered overt and covert sexual harassment. Their subordinate positions made it difficult for them to challenge the men’s behavior. Hiroe bursts out, “You would never know what it is like if you were only looking from outside. There was sexual harassment, of course. Some men tried to touch my body utilizing their higher status. It happened often, as a matter of fact.” Yoriko, reflecting

on her experience at an academic organization where she had to work with “very conservative old scholars,” says, “They knew that they were important for the organization. So, they thought whatever they wanted was accepted. They used us girls as they wished, and even wanted us to accompany them for drinks after work. It was hard to turn them down, and those outings were never pleasant, you know, including sexual harassment and things like that.” As such, women were not expected to pursue their career but to get married and leave the company. Marriage pressure was also a commonly discussed topic.

Interestingly, for other former OLs, it was relationships with other—mostly older—women that discouraged them even more. Both Shoko and Risa recount the harsh treatments they received from their seniors. While Risa “almost cried at the rude words that those *otsubone-san* [a ridiculing term for older, long-term OLs who virtually control the office] said to me,” Shoko was put in a more difficult situation as a female career-track employee. “I was situated in a lawless zone where nobody knew what to do with me, a young, career-track woman just out of college.” She continues bitterly, “Older, general-track women were obviously jealous and nasty to me. Their demands were inconsistent, and if I failed to fulfill a task, I was yelled at, ‘You can’t even complete such a simple task? What kind of career woman are you going to be?’” Reiko speaks of more implicit pressure that she felt from other female workers: “I did the women’s jobs not because of my male colleagues’ eyes but of my female seniors’. Without a good relationship with your seniors, you would never survive in a Japanese company.” She discloses her true feelings that she suppressed to sustain the relationship, saying, “I was shocked to see my seniors helping men with their food and drink at a company banquet. I screamed in my mind, ‘Please don’t.’ If my senior served food for men, they would automatically think, ‘Why

not Reiko too?” Kazue and Iyo, though not OLs themselves, express frustration as well saying that their senior women did not provide them with a good role model. Iyo explains, “The women who established a high status in my former company did not appear attractive to me at all. I thought they suppressed their femininity, turning into a man. I of course liked my job and worked hard, but never wanted to be like those women. That is another reason why I quit on top of my marriage.”

These descriptions of Japanese women’s work experiences may seem to confirm what has already been acknowledged. Cultural capitals such as specialized skills and high education may exempt some women from conventional gender discrimination. Yet, they are only exceptions and Japanese women are largely confined within “the Japanese woman,” which demands them to perform “feminine” tasks and not to transgress the boundary. Such oppressive structures and customs of Japanese workplaces have already drawn much attention. However, it is necessary to shift the focus to the women themselves who live and negotiate such oppression daily: How do women grapple with the oppression and how do they put their struggles into words?

#### NEGOTIATING A WAY WITHIN

As a matter of fact, the former “typical” OLs are rather positive about their past experiences. Hiroe, who earnestly tells her experiences of sexual harassment, later exhibits her work life in Japan in a brightest manner: “Well, it took me a while to get accustomed to such awful customs, but I soon started to enjoy my OL life.” She had three hundred *douki*, or peer workers who entered the company in the same year, including one hundred women, with whom she socialized vigorously. She recounts, “We always went out drinking and

eating, traveled often, and danced crazy at discos. It couldn't be helped that we were stuck in the office from nine to five, so we tried to make the best of our after-work hours and weekends. That was so much fun." Similarly, Shoko looks back onto her "financially stable" years as an OL, saying, "You have your own money, which is an attraction. It doesn't have to be much, but a stable income along with abundant time makes your life so enjoyable." Others such as Ayumi, Fumika, Kiyoko and Nami, express that they performed mundane "feminine" tasks taking them for granted. "A feminist might be mad at me, but serving tea didn't bother me so much at that time," as Ayumi recalls. Although their acts maintain the gender inequality at work and in society, this negative result is balanced by their unexpectedly positive experiences as working women. The interviewees often emphasize other—and indeed brighter—sides of their lives in Japan, implying that oppression occupies only a part of their experiences.

At the same time, OLs do not merely retreat into consumerism; they also negotiate their everyday work situations. Yoriko, who suffered from persistent pseudo work-related invitations after work, at last complained to her female boss, asking her to warn the offending man. He became furious but stopped asking her out. Asked, "Was it difficult to speak to him directly?" Yoriko replies, "I thought so and went to my boss. But I should have confronted him directly myself." When her junior colleague got herself in the same situation and she turned the man down straightforwardly, Yoriko realized that "I could have done the same; I should have done the same." When a business acquaintance of Risa's asked her to become his mistress, she "rationally, yet sweetly explained that I was not a type of women who got involved with a married man." She continues, "Such things happened to me more than a few times, but I was always polite. I ate the most expensive sushi, drank the best sake, laughed at

their indecent proposals and told them good night.” Women may also bond and share their frustration as Hiroe said of her one hundred woman peers. Maki also recounts, “We hated our uniform. Our prefecture office had a women’s association where we discussed it a lot.” She continues, “Though, that was all we could do. We could not have our voice heard much. When we returned to our individual offices, we were back into ‘yes, yes’ girls.” Unlike scholars who may label such situations as subordination, Maki claims the agency of women: “It does not mean that we female clerical workers were only subjugated. We rather learned to let it go. If you make a big deal at every single mistreatment, you can never finish anything.” She confidently continues, “So we gradually created ways to manage things efficiently. We might smile on the surface, but had hidden emotions underneath, including anger that’s awaiting to explode.” This relates to what Kiyoko has to say about her experience in a company “that had a long history and inevitably a sort of conservative, sexist culture”: “I hardly felt frustrated, though. Neither did other women in my office. There was one guy who always told us to do things bluntly, and we reacted in the same way back to him. But otherwise, when asked politely, I didn’t mind meeting their expectations.” Kiyoko and her fellow OLs did not make “a big deal at every single mistreatment” either, but seem to have sent their male colleagues a message that as OLs they could never be exploited.

Former career women in the male-centered world convey stories of more intense struggles. Iyo says that her requests for sales visits were frequently turned down because she was a woman. When accompanying a tour that she conducted, the male customers treated her as if she were their hostess. However, Iyo is hardly despondent in recounting these occasions: “I didn’t mind adjusting my behavior for them. All I wanted was a good sales record. If my clients wanted a man to come visit them, I would ask my male colleague to accompany

me. If they enjoyed drinking with me at one bar after another, fine. I put up with it and became a successful sales woman.” Seiko also brightly describes the way in which she managed to subvert the image held among her male colleagues in a machinery export company. “Of course, they couldn’t understand me at first. But after working with them everyday in the factory, with oil all over my clothes, I could have them think, ‘Oh, this woman is different.’ After that, everything went smoothly and successfully.” Keiko speaks of a similar effect that her gender had at work. She first explains, “For Japanese women, the ceiling is made not of glass but of concrete, that is, it’s totally blocked. The business world is so much male-dominated that there is little room for women. Women are women no matter what.” However, she says she never resented it: “I always thought that I could maximize my being a woman under such a circumstance. It certainly takes a woman longer to be acknowledged in business, but once established, she stands out far better than a man.” By telling these stories, the interviewees express a strong sense of accomplishment and confidence, turning the oppressive structures and customs in Japanese workplaces into mere backgrounds of their success stories.

These stories by both office ladies and career women urge us to shift the focus from the oppression they experience to the negotiation they carry out. Let us reflect on how Jean Renshaw (1999), in her study on woman managers in Japan, used the metaphor of the “*shoji* screen,” behind which successful career women climb the ladder without causing much disturbance. While both OLs and career women in my research seem to show similar compliance, I would argue that their everyday acts may result in an impact which penetrates the screen made of light wood and paper. Indeed, the *shoji* screen may well be fragile and might not be able to hide the tension outside it. Thus, however ineffective the women’s “resistance” may seem from a scholar’s perspective,

the women's everyday acts, conducted in ways available to them, may actually result in subtle subversions, such as transformation of their male colleagues' behavior.<sup>\*2</sup> At the very least, the tone with which interviewees narrate their work experiences is by no means pessimistic. They rather proudly exhibit their survival and accomplishment, forcing their listener to doubt any presuppositions about victimized working women in Japan.

In contrast, some professional women show ambivalence when speaking of their unconventional careers. Although their work lives do not include sexist oppression, certain professions such as nurses, language instructors, translators and even musicians, as the respective interviewees lament, do not satisfy the women to perfection. A nurse, according to Shinobu, often possesses little time to step outside the hospital and thus can be ignorant of the actual world. For her, the nurses' devotion, from which their occupational pride derives, is restraining. Other professionals often mention the hard work that keeps them from pursuing their hobbies or personal relationships, complaints that contrast with the cheerful life stories of former O.Ls.

The intention of this section, however, is not to suggest that O.Ls are more privileged or contented than professionals, nor to claim that working women in Japan are either completely constrained or autonomous.

While this analysis confirms the findings of existing scholarship, i.e., the persistent gender stereotype in Japanese society, it sheds light on another significant aspect, namely, the women's negotiation skills. When O.Ls brightly say that they enjoyed their work lives, when career women recount that they utilized sexist conventions, and

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<sup>\*2</sup>Yuko Ogasawara's study (1998), as mentioned in the previous chapter, contains a similar finding although it is based mainly on her participant observation rather than the women's self-accounts. Her conclusion therefore does not offer an optimistic evaluation on the women's "resistance."

when professionals express insecurity and fatigue, certain questions surface: Who, indeed, are the oppressed, and what are the standards to measure and define the oppression?

## 2. Determination and Contingency: Departure

This section treats the interviewees' decision to leave Japan for Hawai'i. Karen Ma (1996) and Nancy Diggs (1998) observe international women's dissatisfaction with "backward, feudal Japan" and their aspiration for the "progressive, egalitarian West." Karen Kelsky (2001) penetrates the power politics behind the desire: "Women's desires for the Occident are embedded in, indeed constituted by, power relations between Japan and the West" (p. 10). It is often presumed that Japanese women with international aspirations and experiences pursue these aims in a consistently determined way. However, it is also necessary to pay attention to a prevalent inconsistency in the pursuit of these dreams and to capture the depth and complexity of their decision.

### *AKOGARE* AND REALIZATION

Though not so prevalent among the thirty Japanese women in Hawai'i, some interviewees express *akogare*—a sense of admiration, aspiration and desire—for the West when asked to elaborate how they decided to leave Japan. Some state that early exposures to American culture constituted their initial drive. Michi spent every summer at an American school; Norie had an English tutor from the age of eleven; and Hana corresponded with a friend who moved to Pittsburgh. Kazue, growing up in Kyushu in the 60s, recalls a picture

of John F. Kennedy's funeral that inspired her: "It was my first realization that there was a world beyond my hometown, a place called America, where people of different skin color spoke a different language. Since then, my dream destination had always been America."

However, their *akogare*-driven ventures did not unfold so straightforwardly. Despite her most passionate aspiration to live in America, it took Kazue twenty years to realize the dream. She expresses, "I waited and waited for this opportunity to come here as a graduate student. It did take long, twenty years indeed, but once things started to work out, everything went in the same direction and here I am in Hawai'i." For Risa, the realization of her dream to study abroad was complicated. She also held *akogare* while working in foreign journalism as "a half OL," and finally quit the job to enter an American university. A few months later in the U.S., however, she realized that she was pregnant: "I did not have the confidence to juggle my study and a child at that young age. Abortion was absolutely not an option for me. I came back to Japan and got married, but there was an intense conflict inside myself all the time. 'Why am I here folding laundry, doing dishes and watching TV?'" Her second chance arrived when her husband decided to pursue an MBA in Hawai'i. After he finished, Risa chased the long-held dream of her own: "I knew that it was the last chance for me. I spoke with my husband, who saw all the conflicts that I went through, and we decided our life this way. He is in Japan and I am with my children in Hawai'i, raising them and going to school." Reflecting on her life's turns and twists, Risa summarizes, "Of course, I never planned my life this way. I wish it were more organized and orderly. But that's life. I am doing what I almost gave up once. And I could have my children, to whom I have never regretted giving birth."

Unlike Kazue and Risa, who held on to their dreams for years, some other interviewees recount that their moves to Hawai'i were an idea that reemerged long after their initial *akogare* vanished. Nami gave up on her dream to study abroad once because, "I thought my life in Japan was good enough. It didn't seem bad to live an enjoyable OL life in Japan. My mother had knee surgery around that time, and it was also a reason that kept me in Japan." She then got married and had a child, becoming "a typical full-time housewife in Japan in the most ultimate sense." However, she decided to come to Hawai'i when her daughter turned out to have asthma and needed a cleaner environment than Tokyo. She says, "I preferred Hawai'i to some countryside in Japan. The air is much cleaner, my daughter can learn English and I can also study in an American university. I know, it's such a precarious life planning, but my daughter and I moved here by ourselves and started a new life." She thus lives a notably unconventional life, that which she calls "*kozure ryuugaku*," or studying abroad accompanying a child, while her husband lives in Tokyo and supports them. Yet, Nami narrates her life story in a modest, understated way, repeating, "I really don't have a strong will or strong intentions. My life is just precarious and disorganized. It's so embarrassing to tell you such a story." She does not like my calling her decision amazing or courageous, saying that she envies those who have consistent goals in their lives. For Nami, therefore, her extraordinary style of living is only a result of the *iikagenna*, or random, choices that she has made. Presented in this way, Nami's life appears to be neither that of a "good wife, wise mother" or of a devoted internationalist.

Many other women also describe their departures from Japan—which could be presented as dramatic and adventurous as Kazue's and Risa's—in unexpectedly composed ways. Shinobu, a nurse in Hawai'i, keeps

emphasizing that it was “simply out of curiosity” that her life unfolded the way it did. Chikako, Hiroe, Shoko and Wakako all recount that they decided to leave Japan for a break from their job. They all deny that the frustration at work as a woman brought them to Hawai‘i. For example, Wakako says, “It’s ironic, but I lost interest in my work when I got promoted to a managerial position. What I liked about it was the closeness to the products. It was boring for me to stay away from the production site and just to direct people. So I decided to go back to school, thinking, ‘All right, then, let’s give it a break.’”

She also stresses the principle of her life, “*nagare ni makasete*,” or getting along with the flow, refusing to be regarded as a determined internationalist with an explicit intention.

It does not necessarily mean, however, that these women’s lives are utterly precarious and free-floating. Their varying degrees of *akogare* and its realization are dependent on the resources that each interviewee possesses. Early exposures to foreign cultures indicate a certain level of economic and cultural capital, and their mobility is largely contingent on the education they received. Nami’s sudden decision to live a separate life from her husband is made possible by their financial security, and Wakako’s return to school would not have been a likely option without an advanced degree from a Japanese university. Therefore, it is all the more interesting that, despite all the privileges that they have, the women did not mold their life stories into what is commonly thought of as successful international Japanese women. Rather, they claim that their international ventures did not come from bitter experiences they had in Japan, and emphasize that they came to Hawai‘i *nantonaka*, without explicit intentions. As such, they seem to present themselves to be different from the stereotypical internationalists that are driven blindly by their naïve *akogare* dream.

## NECESSITY AND CONTINGENCY

For other interviewees, *akogare* had nothing to do with their move to Hawai‘i. Professionals, especially English teachers/instructors Ai, Ayumi, Chikako and Mika along with Hana, a Japanese instructor, pronounce that they are oriented primarily toward advancing their career. Yuko, for example, considers her career abroad as “a natural course for a classical musician.” They are, therefore, not inclined toward moving overseas permanently; Ayumi, Chikako and Mika are all determined to go back home to utilize their experiences in Hawai‘i. Graduate students Madoka and Reiko, who worked for several years after graduation, say that Japanese graduate schools did not offer an option for them: “Practically, it was impossible. Japanese graduate schools expect only those who are freshly from undergraduate programs and do not provide institutional help for people like us. A school in Hawai‘i sounded more accessible in fact,” Madoka recounts.

Another significant element was marriage and family. Fumika, Saki and Seiko accompanied their husbands, who, respectively, was assigned to the Hawai‘i branch of his company, started his MBA, and decided to live abroad after his retirement. Marriage to an American brought Asako Iyo, Keiko Midori and Taeko to Hawai‘i while unanticipated international marriage keeps Ai, the former aspiring English instructor, in Hawai‘i. Although these interviewees may seem less strong-minded than the career-oriented professionals, they also try to make the most of their time overseas. Fumika, Saki and Seiko started to go to school to pursue their long-forgotten interests. Ai and Iyo enjoy juggling child rearing, working and studying, and Keiko and Taeko have

found it relatively easier for them to get a job in Hawai‘i with their previous experiences, qualifications and permanent residency.

As a matter of fact, their narratives provide an intriguing contrast to the prevailing image of international marriage. Whereas both popular and academic writings focus on those women who single-mindedly aspire for a Western mate—who is supposedly more romantic, gentle and respectful than Japanese men—none of the interviewees married to Americans say that they had such a preference or expectation. They, graduate students Ai and Midori in particular, express their gratitude for their husbands’ understanding and support but emphasize that they do not deem their national and cultural differences significant. Keiko, a financial expert who lived in New York for several years, says marrying an American at the age of twenty-five was the last thing she had imagined doing. She even left her job to live with her husband when she realized that “materialism was not an answer for my life.” She says, “Work is work. It’s not the main theme of my life. I could sell fruits on the street and be very happy. No need for a well-paying job, a nice apartment or fancy clothes. I realized that it was more important for me to lead a happy life with my husband.” On her international marriage, she comments, “It’s natural that two different people have two different styles of living. We have conflicts and try to resolve them but without falling into a culture-based discussion.” She jokingly explains, “If our problems were due to the fact that he is American and I am Japanese, it would follow that all American marriages are successful, right?” Similarly, Taeko, in her life with her husband from the countryside in continental U.S., encounters numerous differences, which she tries not to take too seriously. “It’s about how we grew up. He has been like that for thirty years and cannot change overnight.” Yet, she adds, “It should be absolutely easier to get married to a Japanese person, live

in Japan and establish a family there. At least for me.” As such, the interviewees did not hold naïve *akogare* for international relationships nor do they idealize them.

What is as striking is that some other interviewees comment on international marriage in a negative tone. Hiroe, Shinobu and Wakako refer to their Japanese acquaintances that went through unsuccessful relationships with their non-Japanese husbands, stressing that cultural differences are hard to overcome on a daily basis. At the same time, seven of the seventeen single interviewees have non-Japanese boyfriends, including the skeptical Hiroe and Wakako. They stress that it is not their race or nationality that attracted them although Maki regards it as comforting that she does not have to deal with complicated in-law issues with her American boyfriend. Others say they would prefer someone who has also experienced different cultures as they have, no matter what his nationality may be. Overall, the interviewees, both single and married, seem not to fit the common picture of Japanese women anticipating contentment in international relationships.

It has been clear that neither an escape from the oppression in Japan nor a search for a Western mate is a prevailing theme of the interviewees’ departures from Japan. Rather, their life stories involved more contingencies. Kaori offers yet another case. She says she did not want to be in Japan any longer and “ran away from it, leaving everything behind.” However, Kaori “hated and hated Japan” not because of the frustration she had at work. “I don’t know if I should tell this to you. It could change the whole analysis of yours. Are you sure you want to hear this?” She jokingly discloses, “I broke up with my fiancé. I was miserable and everyone around me felt uncomfortable. It’s such a trivial reason, but I wanted to escape from the harsh reality no matter what.” She recounts, when asked, “What made you think that going abroad was a desirable path?”: “Nothing. It’s just an

escape from the harsh reality. When I got engaged, I thought it was time for me to establish a good balance in my life and quit the job that I had been so attached to. I lost the job and the marriage. Where else could I have gone?" Kaori's venture from Japan to New Zealand and then to Fiji and Hawai'i does not seem to imply the trajectory from oppression to liberation. Yoriko similarly says, "In fact, my decision to move to Hawai'i had little to do with my work. I wanted to change my life after I broke up with someone whom I wanted to marry. I sure didn't like sexual discrimination and all that, but I left the organization not because of it." This is to say, interviewees' stories about their departures center not only on their aspirations for the foreign but also on more practical and emotional factors. Only a few mention strong and constant desire to live in the West, and even fewer name oppression in Japan as a motivating element. Certainly, it is not that the interviewees experienced no such things; they might have held strong *akogare* for the West and disliked Japanese society as did the internationalist women in other studies. However, the interviewees presented their lives in personalized ways, emphasizing their individual economic, educational and family backgrounds, along with specific private events, as opposed to abstract critiques on culture and society.

### 3. Liberation and Difficulties: Life in Hawai'i

"I love it in Hawai'i and would prefer living here for good, if possible. The environment is wonderful and the lifestyle suits me. It's not too big, just the ideal size to enjoy my life," says Madoka. Interviewees seem to share a favorable response to Hawai'i by and large. Some are more specific, pointing out that Hawai'i's

multiculturalism that does not view Japanese as minorities. Norie comments, “Compared to the Mainland, Hawai‘i is a far easier place for Japanese women. Many people here are interested in Japan and have been to Japan. They know the culture. It helps us lead a comfortable life.” To what extent is Hawai‘i a “paradise” for Japanese women? It may seem that they enjoy benefits of the “American dream” where their race, nationality, gender and age do not preclude their self-realization. Moreover, Hawai‘i seems to make it even easier for Japanese women to adapt to the new circumstance with its rich cultural flavors of Japan. Do Japanese women, then, liberate themselves fully in this embracing culture?

#### DIFFICULTIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In fact, the women’s narratives give a firm negation to this optimistic assumption. To begin with, there are a number of practical reasons why Japanese women find themselves disadvantaged, rather than liberated, in a foreign environment. Eighteen of the total thirty interviewees say language casts a significant burden although overhearing a Japanese conversation is not at all a surprising experience in Hawai‘i. Iyo, married to a Japan-born American national and working at a Japanese company in Hawai‘i, nonetheless says, “It’s difficult to cope without a certain level of English here. Since I don’t speak English very well, small things in everyday life can be troublesome.” For students such as Chikako, Erika, Reiko, Shinobu, Shoko and Yoriko, not being proficient in English causes problems in the classroom, especially in “American school culture where speaking up is the principal value,” according to Erika. Chikako resonates, “They think you are stupid when you keep quiet. I am definitely one of the stupid Japanese girls in that sense. Well, I’m not saying I am smart, but our silence is due to

the language difficulty. We have a lot to say in our mind, but the language barrier keeps us from putting it into words.” Even Saki, who believed that language was not an obstacle for heart-to-heart communications, says, “I realized that I needed to be able to express myself verbally in order to know people better and to have them know me better.” It came home to her when a Caucasian couple ignored and avoided her at a party. “It gave me a shudder,” Saki recounts. “In Japan, I would never be someone who gets a conversation terminated in such a forceful way. That was when I learned how vital English is to live a fun life here.” Interestingly, it is those interviewees who have longer experiences abroad and higher levels of language skill that insist, “language is only a superficial problem. What matters is always heart,” as Keiko puts it.

Work in Hawai‘i appears to be an equally antagonizing issue for interviewees. Both Asako and Yoriko, who were searching for a job at the time of the interviews, lament their lack of work experience in Hawai‘i. Hiroe and Seiko expect it to be difficult to find a job in Hawai‘i as a non-citizen. Yuko, the professional musician, struggles to extend her contract, being aware of the double burden of her language and visa problems. She adds, “I’m fed up with this contract culture. It’s all about written agreement. They take care of nothing else. That is why negotiation is so critical here. My payment depends on how competent I am at putting my claims forward.” While obtaining a visa is a concern for Japanese women trying to work in Hawai‘i, those who are married to Americans find jobs without a problem. They all say that their situation is beneficial because companies prefer those who do not need visa sponsorship. However, work in Hawai‘i does not seem ideal even for them, considering the low pay they receive and the cultural differences they encounter. Taeko, working in a travel agency, is unsatisfied with her American colleagues’ attitudes toward work, leaving the office with tasks

unfinished and handling business without much consideration. She also complains, “Do you know how hard it is to make ends meet in Hawai‘i? Everything is so expensive. That is why all women, including us Japanese wives, work outside the home. It’s not about women’s liberation but financial reasons that keep us away from home. I find the life in Japan more relaxing.” Nami, a university student and a mother, mentions similar situations referring to other Japanese mothers who need to work: “They changed my impression of working women in America. They are not working for their self-actualization but simply for money. I don’t know if it’s Hawai‘i particularly, but they work on shifts at restaurants and video shops. They don’t seem to enjoy their jobs too much.” Norie, working as a sales assistant, witnessed what she calls “the universal tendency of sexism” in a Waikiki hotel. “My boss said to one of my female colleagues who asked for a promotion, ‘Your husband is also working. Why bother to make such an effort at work as a woman?’ This sort of atmosphere made all the female employees work even harder than the men.” She concludes, “Women would never be acknowledged otherwise. It’s just the same as in Japan.” The interviewees are eager to share with me these practical issues in their lives, revealing their underprivileged position as non-natives and non-citizens—or as *gaijin*, foreigners, as some put it. They question the myth of “liberating America.”

On the contrary, quite a few interviewees seem to lead a *nihon mitaina*, or Japan-like, life in Hawai‘i. For example, Kiyoko represents the Japanese women working in Hawai‘i interacting solely with Japanese people. “The wedding company where I worked was in Waikiki, and both employees and customers there were Japanese. In that sense, I have experienced only ‘Japanese’ work places throughout my life.” Students enjoy opportunities to interact with non-Japanese at school, but many prefer to socialize with other Japanese

students, “with whom I feel the most comfortable after all,” according to Shinobu. However, it is not that they were inclined toward the Japanese community from the beginning. Erika, Chikako and Maki bitterly recall their initial efforts “to make as many local friends as possible.” They remember these experiences as *muri shūteru*, or unnatural and forceful acts. Maki says, “The first thing I noticed in Hawai‘i was that there were too many Japanese. It made me try hard to socialize with the native speakers and local people. I forced myself not to speak Japanese.” However, the effort did not last long: “After all, it was other Japanese people who could understand me best, to whom I could express myself best. We have no language barrier and share the same situation as international students. I now think it natural to be with other Japanese people.” In contrast, those who are proficient in English, like Kaori and Michi, engage in a wide variety of local circles through their hobbies. Iyo, Seiko and Taeko, who all own condominiums in Honolulu, say that their communal interactions are superficial if any. Mothers—Asako, Fumika, Kiyoko, Nami and Risa—join social networks through their children. Both Nami and Risa, mothers of school-age children, participate in volunteer activities and enjoy interacting with local parents, while Kiyoko says she naturally gathers with other Japanese mothers when she goes out in her neighborhood. Overall, Hawai‘i provides some Japanese women with a “comfortable” environment in which they rarely feel isolated.

This living environment, which some interviewees call “Japan in America,” involves a different set of problems. Whereas Ayumi, who was homesick when she first moved to Hawai‘i, found her consolation in other Japanese women, some other interviewees find the social ties with other Japanese troublesome. When asked about her problems in Hawai‘i, Seiko immediately begins to talk about *otsukiai*, or social relations, from

Japan: “Both my husband and I have a lot of social ties from school, workplace and family, so even here we host at least one group a month from Japan.” Problems arise with the wives of her husband’s former colleagues. “I talk with them, but they live in a totally different world. It’s kind of boring.” *Otsukiai* with other Japanese women is a headache for Japanese mothers in Hawai‘i. Fumika, a mother of two sons, has gone through a harsh situation at her son’s soccer club, where she sees “the most typical Japanese society in Hawai‘i.” Fumika furiously says, “Everything there makes me angry. Once in the club, because I said something in protest to a leader mom, my son couldn’t take lessons. I just said something that I believed was fair and have gotten myself into this kind of trouble.” Risa has also experienced a conformist atmosphere among Japanese mothers and says she prefers American mothers’ individualism. Saki refers to her fellow students in a cultural class, whom she calls *nihon no danchi zuma*, Japanese wives in apartment complexes, connoting their exclusive attitudes: “Everyone in the circle is supposed to act together.” As such, Japanese women may not be fully liberated from Japanese society; they are rather embedded in social networks just as firmly as they are in Japan. All these problems abroad, from learning second language to *otsukiai* with other Japanese, undermine the dream-like pictures of international Japanese women. Notably, it is these practical issues of everyday lives, not liberation from a confining Japanese culture, that the interviewees pronounced most eagerly.

## STEREOTYPE AND STRATEGIES

Yet another, and most crucial, issue for the interviewees is stereotypical images projected on Japanese women. The interview setting, in which they are primarily identified as Japanese women, immediately evoked

the disturbance that some interviewees felt in other situations, although there are eight interviewees who had no such experiences. When asked, “What do you think Japanese women are like?” Hana says, “I think Japanese women are said to be meek and subservient. But I don’t think it is an image made in Japan. I suppose Americans, or some other foreigners, created it.” However, she says she cannot think of any specific occasion in which she came across such preconception directly. Other than such cases, the majority of twenty-two interviewees recall instances in which they encountered stereotypes.

Among many different images attributed to Japanese women, a prominent one appears to be that of “yellow cab,” a sexually loose Japanese woman seeking a Western lover.<sup>\*3</sup> While not denying the existence of such women from Japan, Erika complains that she should not be looked upon in this way. She recalls her encounter with a local taxi driver: “What is annoying was that once he knew I was from Japan, he simply thought I was also a loose girl. He started listening to music on the radio as if we had been for a drive, and after all he gave me his phone number. I thought, ‘What is this supposed to mean?’” She continues furiously, “Once he hears she is a Japanese girl, the assumption is that she can’t say ‘no.’” Shoko, often mistaken as a tourist, has had Waikiki gigolos approach her at a bar. “They are obviously one of those gigolos who want Japanese women for money and sex. They are persistent to an unbearable degree. My friend and I pretended that we didn’t understand English, but they didn’t leave and even started to speak in broken, crude Japanese.” Shoko and her friend suddenly started speaking in English to turn them down. Responding to my comment, “So you knocked them

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<sup>\*3</sup> “Yellow cab,” originally the title of reportage by Ieda Shoko, became a popular label in the early 1990s to refer to Japanese women actively engaged in sexual relationships with Western men. For more information and analysis, see Kelsky 2001.

down,” she says, “Well, we did manage to have them leave, but I wonder how effective it was. They were drunk and didn’t take our objection seriously. But we were left terribly disturbed, with a bitter feeling, ‘Why should we put up with such a thing only because we are Japanese girls?’” Yoriko and Wakako mention American male students on campus who come up to them and try to communicate with them in Japanese: “It bothers me to imagine that they think I also like them, Caucasian men, because I am a woman from Japan,” Yoriko says. Yoriko’s antagonism intensifies when her boyfriend, a local born, also expects her to be “Japanese-woman-like.” She says, “I think they have the preconception that Japanese women are caring, that Japanese women like cooking and cleaning for their men. I feel the pressure to perform as a subservient Japanese woman.”

Although not directly imposed on them, the misrepresented images of Japanese women affect the interviewees. A Chinese friend of Shinobu’s once assumed that she was in Hawai’i to find an American boyfriend. “There might be women like that, and I don’t deny that Japanese women have a weakness for Caucasians. But not everyone. Not me. It made me sad to hear such prejudice.” She also thought it unbelievable when she heard her lecturer mention an old-fashioned image of a Japanese hospital where nurses stand up and bow when a doctor comes in. Ai says she felt offended when a professor said that Japanese women were oppressed and confined and that he felt sorry for them: “Who does he think he is when he pities us Japanese women?” she says. Madoka and Fumika have encountered similar images at parties. “I was just collecting garbage after a barbecue,” recounts Madoka, “when a friend of mine came to me and told me not to put myself into the role of a slave. I was shocked. We all ate and drank, so why not clean it up for others as well? To me it

was natural, or even something of virtue. But for him, it was like, ‘Oh, this poor Japanese girl doesn’t know what she is doing.’”

Another commonly disputed image is the *otonashii*, the quiet, shy and reserved Japanese woman. For some, it is simply the language barrier that keeps them from expressing themselves more actively while others say they deliberately hold themselves back. Yoriko recalls her American acquaintance who advised her to be more aggressive and to “come out of her shell.” She says, “His words hurt me because I don’t think I am as shy as he sees me. He might have said that out of kindness because I am one of the girls from Japan, but it is such a biased miscalculation.” Other interviewees such as Erika, Chikako, Hiroe and Yuko all say that they learned the importance of asserting themselves in America, but they simultaneously make efforts to control the assertive attitudes. Chikako and Erika, both graduate students, criticize American students who in class “talk about whatever nonsense comes to their mind”: “I learned that I have to express what I have in my mind here. If I am quiet, I would be nothing. But at the same time, I do so wisely and strategically. If I am too assertive, I would be just as ineffective,” Erika says. Hiroe and Yuko have once had to put up with unfavorable conditions due to their reserved personalities, to learn to assert themselves when necessary. Yuko finds her quiet personality—“even quieter than an average Japanese woman”—disadvantageous in claiming her demands when discussing her work conditions, but says, “I make a claim when, only when, it comes to a critical situation. I try to be logical and rational so that they will hear me.”

Other interviewees, especially those with higher levels of proficiency in English, exhibit more long-term tactics. Keiko, declaring, “I believe in meritocracy,” tells a story of her American trainer at work treating her

with disrespect. 'I thought, 'Fair enough.' I don't want to judge his prejudice, but I learned that there are people like that. I didn't really say anything directly to him. Rather, I had him understand how competent I was gradually while we worked together.'" She proudly says, "I can speak to him on an equal basis now, showing my assertive personality when necessary." Norie concurs when she speaks of a sense of alienation that she felt in interacting with her husbands' American friends: "I do speak English, but they ask me questions through my husband. America is an embracing country? No, not at all." She continues, "With such a handicap, it takes me longer to have people know me better. I need to be patient and express myself wisely. I made lots of friends this way." It is notable that the interviewees exhibit their strategies to confront stereotypes in international situations as well. Just as they tried to negotiate a way within the male-dominated work environments in Japan, the women grapple with the biased images by various means in Hawai'i; they directly turn down those who approach them for money and sex, speak back to those who misunderstand what Japanese women are like, or show their assertive sides when necessary.

Intriguingly, in addition to the intentional resistance shown above, there are accidental instances when Japanese women defy stereotypical images. Chikako recounts, "Once at a party, I was talking to an American friend of mine. We weren't communicating well with each other because of my poor English. We were obviously bored, and I suddenly said to him, an artist, just jokingly, 'You know what, someone said your artwork sucks.'" She continues, "He burst out laughing. We hadn't been so close until then. But he apparently changed his attitude after that. He used to treat me like a cute, quiet Japanese girl, but he now thinks I'm a comedian or something like that." While direct and consistent confrontation is an option contingent on a woman's proficiency

in English, social status and personality, everyday struggles such as Chikako's might bring about unanticipated disturbance to stereotypical notions. Although it is hard to determine how effective each strategy is, such a wide range of coping strategies is of noteworthy importance.

It should be made clear by now that the sense of liberation and enlightenment in the West, observed in previous studies on international Japanese women, is only a small segment of what the women undergo in reality. Rather, the interviewees' stories feature the practical difficulties such as legal status, cultural difference, communication and prejudice. At the same time, one of the particularities of Hawai'i includes the women's somewhat segregated life in which they interact mainly with other Japanese people, speak Japanese and sustain a Japanese life style. Their consequent behavior pattern is considered as *otonashii*, a quality that many Japanese women refuse and try to break through.

#### 4. From Oppression to Liberation?

The lives of thirty international Japanese women overviewed above defy the commonly presumed trajectory from oppression to liberation. This section looks further into the ambivalence that the interviewees show toward the supposedly "oppressive Japan" and "liberating Hawai'i/America."

### AMBIVALENT LIBERATION

In fact, liberation is not utterly absent in the women's stories. Reiko, a furious ex-OL, criticizes Japanese society for its chauvinism and vertical structure, that is, its "backwardness." Therefore, leaving Japan was an enlightening experience for her. "The actual stepping out opened my eyes. Now I see more clearly what is wrong about Japanese society." Risa also says that she changed to a great extent after living in Hawai'i. "I had never doubted the old-fashioned values that my parents imposed on me. Now that I have experienced a new culture, met different types of people and also gotten married and had children, my view is very different." Erika, a graduate from a private boarding school, says that America was the first place where she experienced independence: "I got an apartment for myself, negotiated all the arrangements and started to pay my bills. I found it such a hassle, but it made me depend on myself. Being a girl here is no excuse." She adds, "Plus, nobody knows my background. Nobody expects me to do the same as others do. That was such a liberation." Nine interviewees express a similar sense of freedom and comfort, or *raku*. Chikako, a former teacher at a public high school, says her life in Hawai'i is so much more *raku* than in Japan, where she always had to mind her clothing, make-up, hair style and weight; other interviewees concur. In Norie's words: "Here, it's more about what you have in your mind. As long as you have your opinions, people will accept you even when you are in a T-shirt with a hole in it. Coming from where everyone looked exactly the same, I felt it liberating." Maki and Ayumi, from the countryside in Shikoku and Kyushu respectively, say that they enjoy the anonymity in their present life. Ayumi feared that her neighbors would be watching her every move: "Being single at my age is an embarrassment in my hometown. It's so blunt. They would say, 'You are not married yet? Do you want me to match you with someone?' It pressured me so much that I always felt that I had to get married as soon as

possible.” After a year in Hawai‘i, she feels, “I don’t have to rush. I can proudly say to the people in my hometown that a prospective husband for me is not in that small, conservative place.” Yet, Ayumi adds that it was also “those stylish and sophisticated Japanese women from cities” who brought her such enlightenment.

However, this sense of liberation, comfort and *raku* does not mean that the Japanese women idealize their lives abroad. Chikako, Ayumi and even Reiko all plan to go back to Japan after a few years in Hawai‘i due to the everyday difficulties and limited job opportunities in a foreign country. Norie, exempted from the problems by her marriage to an American, still says, “I like the open atmosphere here but I am Japanese ultimately. America is a welcoming country, but only to some extent. Given that, I prefer Japan. I feel more comfortable in Japan.” Liberation from ageism and sexism, to which fourteen interviewees refer, may not be an attraction strong enough to keep these Japanese women overseas. “After all, it’s best to live in a place where you were born and raised,” Kiyoko says.

In contrast to the common assumption that international Japanese women find Western culture more desirable than their own, some interviewees are even critical and frustrated about what they find in the West. Shinobu and Wakako say they find it difficult to understand what their American friends really mean by their words, and Chikako and Erika do not like that people who speak louder and longer are evaluated higher—“Here, what counts is only quantity, not quality, of what people are saying,” Erika says. Hiroe says that she came to value Japanese culture after their experiences abroad. “I always get frustrated here, thinking, ‘Why don’t they understand?’ In Japan, you don’t have to say everything. There is a gray zone where things are kept unsaid and still understood. I miss it.” Ai concurs, “People here need to learn to put up with things a little more. I don’t think

it is always good to have a clear opinion and be very particular about everything. Things can't always be black and white. I prefer the Japanese way of having gray zones. I like it when Japanese people respect others' opinions that way."

While the comments just cited presume a dichotomized view of Japanese and Western/American cultures, indeed deploying clichés of *nihonjinron*, some others exhibit more ambivalent assessments towards both. Midori reflects upon her schoolteacher years in the countryside in Japan, saying, "It was very stifling, especially when I was dating my present husband, a Caucasian. Everyone knows what others are doing, so we had to keep our relationship a secret." "Therefore," she continues, "moving here made me feel much freer. People mind only their own business, so we do whatever we feel like doing." Yet Midori is not perfectly satisfied with this freer feeling because "everything is your responsibility here. No one protects you, not even the government. You have to rely on yourself however hard it is. I find it too much. That's why I can't really tell which I prefer, Japan or here." Maki is similarly uncertain: "I like it here for sure. People don't care about the fact that I am in my thirties and still going to school. I am alone, without any bothersome social ties." "However," she continues, "it means at the same time that I don't really belong here. I miss the strong sense of belonging that I had in Japan. So, I'm ambivalent. When I go back to Japan, I find the social network a pain, but miss it so much here, thinking 'Who am I?'"

Fumika's story provides another intriguing case that opposes the general assumption of liberation abroad. She moved to Hawai'i when her husband got an international job assignment. She describes her "great liberation in Hawai'i from the ordinary-kindergarten-mother days in Japan" in an utterly negative manner: "I am

getting more and more aggressive, expressing my complaints about various issues in various places. And am I happy? No, it makes me more and more frustrated. It does not make me happy, as a matter of fact.” She started to have more arguments with her husband, who thinks “Hawai‘i made his wife crazy,” as well as other Japanese mothers in her community. Furnika eventually saw a therapist, who advised her to stop trying to be a good wife and wise mother. She says, “It may sound like a fantastic idea, but that attempt puts me into more serious trouble. People around me counterattack my liberated and independent attitudes that go against the “good wife, wise mother” image. What is worse, I have to deal with them on a daily basis. In a way, I regret my enlightenment.” Her and other interviewees’ stories above suggest that liberation may accompany a sense of non-belonging, insecurity and/or more conflict. Some may turn back to Japanese values that they feel more accustomed to while others remain ambivalent towards both. Their words, as exemplified above, also demonstrate the women’s skepticism towards the Orientalist myth. Having experienced both domestic and international realms, the interviewees now seem to search for an alternative framework. Such ambivalence, expressed by those Japanese women who seemingly enjoy pursuing their international careers and relationships, points toward the complexity involved in the interviewees’ self-presentations and identities as Japanese women. The third chapter will deal with the complexities of identity, as felt by these Japanese women.

## WHOSE STORY?

The words of the thirty interviewees—pronounced frankly and plainly—invite a fundamental question: Whose story is it that Japanese women are oppressed, desire outward ventures, and set themselves free

abroad? What generates this particular gaze that focuses only on a small group of Japanese women who cherish and pursue their *akogare*? Undoubtedly, it has to do with Orientalism that constantly seeks to establish a power relation between the Occident and the Orient. Taisei Yamamoto argues that the symbol of “the Japanese woman” has long functioned to sustain the unequal relationship. “One way in which cultural access has been figured is through the Japanese women as the sign of an oppressive culture whose domination of the female is both cause and consequence of its archaic backwardness” (1999: 24). That is, the oppressed and pitiable Japanese woman has been a useful symbol of the feudalistic and backward, i.e., inferior, Japanese culture. According to Karen Kelsky, such power discourse of “the Japanese woman” is so prevalent that Japanese women themselves deploy it to articulate their life stories. By doing so, Kelsky contends, that those internationalist Japanese women willingly mold themselves into what has been expected of “the Japanese woman.” In this sense, Japanese women circulate the imagery of “the Japanese woman,” perpetuating the underlying Orientalism.

However, such a judgment fails to understand that international Japanese women craft multiple and complex versions of stories that at times violate the Orientalist framework. For some women from subordinate positions in Japan, their experiences back home are something that grounds their pride and identity, whereas the professionals feel certain insecurities in their lives. Some women say that they prefer their lives in Japan, and others express difficulties and the resulting fatigue that they experience in a foreign realm. Some criticize the biased preconceptions of Japanese women they encounter, while others reject the idealized image of the

egalitarian Western society. All in all, through these stories, the interviewees seem to reject the stereotypical image imposed on international Japanese women intentionally or unintentionally.

There are more explicitly skeptical comments on the idea of liberation abroad. Hana, whose *akogare* for “free and liberating America” faded as she lived there, says, “It is true that in America I don’t have to worry about how people look at me and I don’t care what others do either. It is nice compared to the confining atmosphere in Japan.” However, she exhibits her further insight: “I suspect that it is because I am not an authentic member of this society. It has nothing to do with American or Japanese culture, I assume, but with my status as a foreigner. I have sent some of my students to Japan from here, and they seem freed in Japan, although some may say it is a confining culture.” Seiko, similarly starting to doubt the general image of liberating America, adds another perspective, saying, “If you look only at the social equality such as job opportunities and career prospects, America provides women with a much better situation than Japan does. But our life involves a lot more things, including marriage, family and individual hobbies.” She concludes, “In that sense, I don’t think America offers more chances for people whose concentrations are not on work.” With such insights, along with the diverse and complex stories described above, it is not meaningful to attempt a single picture of internationalist Japanese women. Rather, it is important to question why the generalization of “oppressed” and “liberated” Japanese women has been so prevalent. It does appear that Japanese women, as demonstrated above, do not share the same story.

As I listened to all these life stories, my perception of international Japanese women was constantly destabilized. The interviewees told strongly varying stories, expressing ambivalence along with occasional

contradictory comments, thereby precluding any generalization or characterization. It is critical, however, to note that their stories are indeed *crafted*, meaning that they may involve some manipulation and fabrication. As the women have undergone far more than what can be told in single interviews, we should bear in mind that it is only a one possible version of stories that I obtained in each interview. Their life stories could well have taken on a different appearance in a different context. Mika says at the end of her interview, “I would have told you something different if we did this in Japan. I wonder what my story would be like in a different setting.” Therefore, it is necessary to inquire into the implication of these crafted testimonies. The next chapter explores how the women present their lives and selves, that is, how they *become* Japanese women in the interview settings.

## Chapter 3

### Pivoting Narratives: Analysis of the Identities of Japanese Women

This chapter turns to the manners in which Japanese women narrate their identities as Japanese women.

Sociologists associate identity with self-presentation in social interactions. Erving Goffman is most attentive to the process in which actors try to project and manage the most favorable images of themselves in interaction settings. He argues that such “impression management” can be highly strategic:

Instead of allowing an impression of their activity to arise as an incidental by-product of their activity, they can reorient their frame of reference and devote their efforts to the creation of desired impressions. . . . It is always possible to manipulate the impression that the observer uses as a substitute for reality because a sign for the presence of a thing, not being that thing, can be employed in the absence of it (Goffman 1959: 250-1).

Although this self can be utterly fictitious, it may obtain a solid sense of subjective reality that exists temporarily in a particular setting: a Japanese woman could perform a very “Japanese-woman-like” self, an *otonashii*, quiet and docile, character for example, in front of her non-Japanese acquaintances who expect her to be so. This social self construes a certain part of one’s identity, or the sense of who s/he is. Takie Lebra specifies Goffman’s argument in the Japanese context. She points out that the “presentational self” constitutes a major part of social life in Japan, saying, “Self here consists of continuous reflexivity between performance by self and sanctions by the audience” (1992: 106). She further argues that, in Japan, strategic self-presentation extends beyond the immediate interaction settings. It is *seken*, “the world of audience,” or something close to the generalized other, that the performance is addressed to. Notably, *seken* may also restrict the individual’s actions; a Japanese woman might suppress her assertive personality when she feels that *seken* requires her to do so. In this sense, the internalized

gaze of *seken* is a force that urges each woman to fulfill the prescription of “the Japanese woman.” Therefore, the process of crafting selves is more of contingent negotiation than of complete autonomy, as Nancy Rosenberger summarizes.

People [are] grounded in meanings beyond themselves, meanings that shift in relation to other people, close and far, to nature, wild and tamed, and to the political economy, past and future. People continually create themselves and are created in terms of the multiple pictures that people weave with others and their environment as they move through life (Rosenberger 1992: 14).

As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, some scholarship has shed light on such social aspects of one’s self and identity. The studies by Dorinne Kondo (1990) and Nancy Rosenberger (2001) are of particular importance in this regard for their insights into the interactional construction of self and identity. At the same time, they all are attentive to the powerful discourses that circumscribe the process. Yet, unlike Karen Kelsky, who deems internationalist Japanese women’s attempt to step outside the power structure unfeasible, they look into more subtle, even accidental subversions that the women bring about from their given positions. This phenomenon relates to what Judith Butler theorizes as “agency.”

In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency,” then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation of the repetition. If the rules governing domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated (Butler 1999: 181).

Agency in this sense clearly differs from autonomy or subjectivity. Butler locates it *within* the dominant structure, which establishes a compulsive form of gender. When asked to speak of their identities as Japanese women, the interviewees will attempt to give shape to their lives in accordance with the dominant discourse of “the Japanese

woman.” By doing so, they seem to fall into “the orbit of the compulsion to repeat.” Yet, it is only from this position that they may bring about “necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated.” Such contingency, multiplicity and subversive implications of identity narratives are what the following analysis aims at.

### 1. Linear Stories, Twisted Narratives: How Life is Presented

How do interviewees give shape to their lives that contain more than what can be mentioned in an-hour-long meetings? The interview setting makes salient certain elements of their lives, that is, their work experiences in Japan, decisions to leave home and lives in Hawai‘i, and even these common events bear significant complexity and ambivalence as shown in the previous chapter. It is through displaying such multiplicity, I would argue, that the Japanese women implicitly convey that they do not fully commit themselves to “the Japanese woman.” This section looks at the narratives as a whole, not by parts, to show that they do not always have an orderly appearance.

#### TWISTING JAPANESE-WOMAN-NESS

A few interviewees exhibit their lives in a highly dramatic way, narrating a somewhat developmental story. Ayumi, who was about to leave Hawai‘i at the time of the interview, takes the opportunity to summarize her experiences in a new environment. Her story starts from a serious homesick period that she went through in

the beginning. Being not so proficient in English, she had a hard time adapting to an American work environment, where “everyone spoke only in English, which made them look scary to me.” Her colleagues’ straightforward communication styles and individualistic attitudes enhanced her alienation, she says. “In the beginning, the depression got worse and worse day-by-day. I hung in there. I sought accomplishment in the project that I was in charge of. I now recall positively the time when I felt like giving up and going back to Japan at any moment. I am satisfied that I overcame that feeling.” Recall also that she is from a small town in Kyushu, “a very conservative and confining place where everyone is watching you.” In Ayumi’s story, both Japan and America are locations that challenge her, and her story centers on how she overcame difficulty in each setting. As a result, it is her self-image as an “*otonashii*-looking, but yet persevering Japanese woman” that is presented and sustained in the narrative. Kazue similarly crafts a dramatic life story that starts from her childhood when she first had *akogare* for America. Referring to the fact that she had to wait for twenty years to study abroad, she explains, “I was driven solely by my ambition to contribute to a better relationship between Japan and America as a woman, as a cosmopolitan Japanese woman.” Numerous events in her life, including her failure to become a flight attendant, her first experience of studying in Hawai‘i for a summer and her encounters in an international women’s club in Tokyo, embellish her success story. They support the self-image of “a cosmopolitan Japanese woman” that Kazue aims to project.

An interesting case is Michi, who first and foremost calls her life course “far from that of a stereotypical Japanese woman.” She went through a unique schooling, going back and forth between Japanese and American schools in Tokyo and transferring from a private to a public high school. She decided not to apply for college and

instead went to New Zealand, where she studied English. Coming back, she started to work, starting from a flier-distributor on streets to a hotel management secretary, and then to a computer expert while doing freelance translations occasionally. She now studies in Hawai'i to fulfill her new dream of earning a Bachelor's degree. After speaking for over an hour and a half about her unconventional life course, she changes her tone suddenly, saying, "I'm different from other Japanese women, aren't I? But don't get me wrong. My basic ideas are very, very Japanese." She continues elaborating her Japanese-woman-ness: "For example, I am not self-centered. I always consider what others want rather than insisting my preference. I believe Japanese women have beautiful hearts. They are gentle and kind. So am I, I would say. I am not so individualistic as American women." She then refers to how her friends and acquaintances see her as a Japanese woman. "There are people who say I am not Japanese-woman-like. Especially those who have a secure job in Japan say, 'Michi is all westernized after all.'" "But," she emphasizes, "my friends who know me better say that I am very Japanese-woman-like because, for example, I never have my boyfriend cook for me and I always try to take good care of him. I'm very conservative in a relationship." Michi thus depicts herself as a traditional type of Japanese woman, who is kind, gentle and caring, thereby undermining her initial appearance as an extraordinary internationalist. The highly selective and deliberate way in which she crafts her identity is notable; she carefully chooses only positive connotations of both "atypical" and "traditional" Japanese-woman-ness to establish a complex self-image. I will discuss such manners of crafting identities in greater detail in the next section.

Many other interviewees show such twist when they speak of how they see themselves as Japanese women. Iyo, Keiko and Kiyoko, all career women both in Japan and in Hawai'i, say they identify primarily with

“Japanese-woman-ness” despite their international experiences. In particular, Kiyoko is aware of her contradiction; she graduated from an American high school and community college and married an American; however, she feels most attached to Japanese culture, always wanting to go back home. She currently enjoys her temporary status as a full-time housewife, which she sees both challenging and fulfilling. Norie, married to an American scholar, calls herself “a critical wife, never a docile Japanese type.” She possesses a high educational background herself and is proud of her competency; however, at the same time she is appreciative of her husband’s “ladies-first attitudes.” She says, “You may think it’s anti-feminist of me, but as a woman I expect him to protect me. That is why I like to consider myself as a feminine Japanese woman—considerate, kind and yet tough in mind.” Seiko, a former overseas sales person, proudly recounts her effort at work to undermine the sexist preconceptions imposed on her and says she does not feel comfortable among “boring full-time Japanese housewives” who visit her in Hawai‘i. However, when asked, “Does that mean that you think you are different from other Japanese women?” she pauses for seconds and remarks, “No. I came to feel that I am Japanese more often after I came to Hawai‘i. After all, I cannot get rid of my Japanese-woman-ness.” She explains that it is due to her sense of belonging and familiarity with the culture. Yet, towards the end of the interview, she shows another twist when asked to comment on the general images of Japanese women: “Well, it doesn’t matter to me since I am not very Japanese-woman-like.”

While linear stories that feature oppression, liberation and progression presume and perpetuate the Orientalist discourse of international Japanese women, the twisting narratives shown above subvert such a clear-cut picture. They indicate that international Japanese women do not necessarily experience a developmental

transformation of their identities, but may possess and present different or even opposing characteristics from time to time. Their narratives, containing contradictions and paradoxes, challenge the assumption that they hold a univocal identity as Japanese women.

## ON THE FUTURE

The interviewees' thoughts about their future reveal additional complexity. Like Michi, other interviewees such as Hana, Hiroe, Mika, Shinobu and Shoko express their aspiration for "happy marriage," which may sound very Japanese-woman-like, despite their unconventional accomplishments overseas. Shoko, a former career-track banker now studying in Hawai'i on a prestigious scholarship program, frankly says, "I want to get married to become a full-time housewife." Responding to my remark that it sounds surprising that an educated and experienced woman like her would like to stay home for her husband, she laughs, "No, no, that will never happen. I won't stay home or wait for my husband. I will be active, traveling around, going out for lunch and tea, engaging in cultural activities. You shouldn't underestimate the housewife culture." She also says, "My aspiration for a housewife life is just similar to my former dream of studying abroad. I want to get married just as I wanted to study abroad. Trying something new is always a theme of my life. It could be work, it could be America and it could be marriage." Shoko may appear to be complicit with "the Japanese woman" on the surface; she puts on perfect make-up, nice dresses and high-brand accessories every day and says that she wants to get married as soon as possible. However, her words and the way in which they are pronounced defy the impression. She criticizes my misjudgment on housewife culture and states her aspiration for marriage in a

different from the “good wife, wise mother” ideology. Her narrative indicates her potential of more turns and twists in her future, going back and forth between conventional and unconventional Japanese-woman-ness. She may get married only to keep her life dramatic and unsettled.

While some professionals and career women are determined to stay in their present occupations, others—especially students—have only vague ideas of what and where their future work will be. Considering their legal status as non-residents who need visa sponsorship, all the six interviewees that plan to graduate and work within a few years are reluctant to look for employment in Hawai‘i or any other foreign location. They also mention that they expect challenging cultural differences at work; that they may not feel very comfortable in an American work culture where assertiveness and independence are principally valued. Although a few underwent internship at companies in Hawai‘i and found them “not so different from Japanese workplaces,” as Yoriko says, notions of cultural differences are still prevalent and make the women hesitant to commit to their future overseas.

At the same time, six interviewees that plan to look for a job in Japan say that opportunities in Japan are limited due to their gender, age and experience abroad, an experience that might make them overqualified. Readjustment to Japanese culture is another problem. They expect a great deal of tension upon their return to Japan, where they are regarded to be “like *gaijin*,” too assertive and straightforward. This stigma of *gaikoku gaeri*, or returnees from overseas, concerns Kaori: “I am getting more and more annoying for Japanese people, those who prefer an indirect and soft style of communication.” This is because: “I’m in Hawai‘i, which is a part of America after all, so we are told to be more direct and straightforward. It certainly is not a good behavior in Japan

though American people call it rational.” This comment relates to Merry White’s study (1988) on Japanese families that face the “crisis of return.” She observes returnee fathers, mothers and children back in Japanese institutions, that is, workplace, community and school respectively, who struggle with the “difference” they have come to take on abroad. White’s argument goes further to examine the Japanese social value that prioritizes harmony and homogeneity. Under such a climate, White observes, those with international experiences are regarded as a threat. James Valentine’s observation (1990) of “the marginals” in Japan, including those who have had foreign contacts, shows a slightly different view. Refuting a tragic view of those who are thought to be “contaminated,” Valentine argues, “some marginals may actively choose their marginal situation, may embrace their marginal status, or at least play upon it, individually or in groups, for their own advantage or to attempt wider social change” (p.48). Yet, as Valentine himself implicitly admits, strategies such as passing and establishing support groups may only segregate and isolate those marginals, never subverting the existing norms of harmony and homogeneity.

The cases of international Japanese women in the twenty-first century seem relatively easier than those of White’s and Valentine’s samples thanks to the rapid globalization and changes in Japanese society. Some interviewees are explicitly proud of their “difference” and willing to stay in the margin of Japanese society to challenge its conformist tendency. A subsequent question is: In what ways do they stay marginal? While Mika, a high school English teacher, says that her experiences in Hawai‘i will do only good to her career, Chikako, another English teacher, is not as optimistic. When asked, “Do you expect any problems on return?” she vigorously starts, “Yes, this is what I wanted to talk about more than anything else.” She says, “When I go back, I

know they will feel uncomfortable with me, a returnee from America, supposedly too proud of herself and aggressive. Whatever I say will be interpreted as something that comes from a returnee, and plus, from a woman.” She then exhibits her strategy to readjust to the Japanese environment: “I will keep quiet in the beginning. This is how I normally negotiate things at work. I will wait for a while, just working diligently, concealing my personal opinions. I will reserve myself. It’s only after I establish a stable position in the organization that I start to express myself.” Asked, “Doesn’t it cause you a conflict?” she cheerfully says, “It will, but my reservation won’t go on forever. It’s a strategy to live in Japan. It can’t be helped. After a while, when they acknowledge my presence, that is when I start to speak for myself. I won’t be reserved any longer then.” Fumika, being aware that she is becoming “one of those returnees who irritate Japanese people by expressing their opinions too strongly,” exhibits a similar plan for her return: “I will perform like a good Japanese wife once again. I don’t want to disgust people around me, so I will interact with my families, neighbors and friends in a Japanese way. I will never criticize people or assert myself as I do here, and I will try to listen rather than to speak. I won’t show off my experiences in Hawai‘i.” From a scholarly viewpoint, such adjustments may appear only complicit. However, it is unavoidable for the interviewees to take into consideration all the practical concerns that their lives involve—their job responsibilities and social relations, for example. They certainly may not always be able to express their true selves as they wish; yet, in their narratives, Chikako asserts her calculated intention and Fumika emphasizes her ability to fit back into Japanese society, to exhibit their agency to negotiate those harsh situations back home. Although it is not clear whether they will follow through on their attitudes as they state them here, such scenarios of strategies are a certain reflection of their identities.

Some other interviewees show similar belief in themselves by asserting their adjustability. Madoka expects to encounter certain tension when she returns to Japan and seeks employment: “It sure is a hassle to practice honorific language and to be sensitive towards others once again. It will take a while for me to readjust, and I feel it a waste of time.” However, when asked about her future plans, she says, “It doesn’t matter where I will settle down if I can get a type of job that attracts me. I am looking for a job in Japan too.” Responding to my puzzled remark that it sounds contradictory because she anticipates “hassle” at a Japanese workplace, she recounts, “Because it bores me to live in one place for a long time. I would rather go through the readjustment than be stuck in one place.” Seiko too regards a settled life as undesirable, saying, “I enjoy being different from others, so I always try to exclude myself from a given community. Neither Osaka nor Hawai‘i feels too familiar to me. That is my life.” She continues, “I did not choose to stay home or continue work, but have done many different things, moving from one place to another. I never feel comfortable to be stuck in one place. How boring it would be!” As shown above, Seiko evaluates her life in Japan and in Hawai‘i in both negative and positive ways. Although it is as puzzling as Madoka’s comment, her ambivalence makes sense considering that her priority is to live a shifting and stimulating life instead of being “stuck” at one point. The assumption of a linear life course, therefore, would collapse in the face of such dynamic narratives.

Such twists and contradictions in the women’s narratives, though prominent in my interview data, do not always receive sufficient attention. Popular representation of international Japanese women focuses mainly on oppression and liberation, as if their lives were always linear and straightforward. Academic discourses tend to dissect the stories into social elements, i.e., their family as well as regional, educational and economic

backgrounds. However, as shown above, the stories involve numerous unanticipated incidents and practical concerns, on which the women themselves are eager to elaborate. They craft their narratives, sometimes in neatly organized ways and at other times in highly jumbled ways, creating and managing a certain impression of themselves as Japanese women. In what ways, then, do they formulate themselves as Japanese women through these narratives? What type of Japanese woman do they project? With what vocabulary and framework? The next section inquires into these essential questions.

## 2. Multiple Identifications: Traditional, Exceptional and Hybrid

Identification occurs in both intra- and inter- personal levels. It is certainly an individual who perceives and performs a particular identity, but the process is deeply embedded in social contexts in which others interfere with her/his “becoming.” Of interest is that the individual and others may have different ideas of who s/he is. While Goffman and other ethnomethodologists have paid much attention to how such conflicts are resolved, I focus on the conflict and discrepancy that occur in the “becoming” processes.

Looking at how interviewees refer to each other provides a vivid illustration of such discrepancy. Speaking of “the common type of international Japanese women,” from which she says she differs, Madoka thinks of her friend. “You might want to interview her. She is the type of woman who likes it here and is very critical about Japanese society.” I was then introduced to Kaori, who in fact insists, “It’s not that I hate Japan or I don’t want to go back there.” Kaori enjoys using her language and social skills to blend into a local community

but is conscious of her status as *gaijin*, or a foreigner, in Hawai'i as well: "I have a full range of rights as a citizen in Japan whereas I have to accept the marginalized position as a non-citizen here. It still frustrates me." She spoke for traditional Japanese women as well, throwing a critical gaze at biased preconceptions among her American acquaintances. Given Madoka's description of Kaori, I was confused; she did not appear to be as typical as an international Japanese woman as Madoka said she was. While Madoka differentiated herself from the stereotypical internationalist referring to Kaori, Kaori also destabilized my impression revealing her ambivalence and rejection of the internationalist label. Kaori then introduced me to Reiko, "a milder woman" than herself, whom I found more resentful about Japanese society. Unlike Kaori, Reiko is more consistent in expressing her anger and frustration and detaches herself completely from Japan, which makes a sharp contrast to many other interviewees' ambivalent attitudes. The three women illustrate how the images can differ between what one says about herself and what others say about her. How they negotiate such discrepancy and tension constitutes a critical part of identity narratives.

On another occasion, Saki introduced me to Asako, referring to her as "the representative of graceful and considerate *yamatonadeshiko* [traditional Japanese woman]." She said Asako would make a good comparison with herself, a "rational and frank, atypical Japanese woman." However, Asako, a graduate from an international school in Tokyo, does not feel so attached to her identity as a Japanese woman: "Some like Saki-san say I'm very Japanese, but others say I'm different. I don't know, I like the frankness of Western people but I also respect the considerate behaviors of Japanese women. I've never taken it seriously how much of me is Japanese and how much is not. I'm both, that's it." Asako then points out some Japanese-woman-like features of Saki and

me, concluding, “I always come to think, what is Japanese-woman-ness after all?” Many other identity narratives touch upon the same point that Asako makes about Japanese-woman-ness. The interviewees talk about their own and other women’s Japanese-woman-ness as if it were some observable entity; however, from time to time, their narratives reveal that it can take on multiple, even contradictory, meanings. In other words, all interviewees successfully presented themselves as Japanese women, that is, they became a Japanese woman, as the interview setting required, but in highly varying ways.

#### THE BINARY TRAP

The multiple identity construction processes featured a bifurcated framework. When I start the interviews emphasizing that I am interested in the experiences of Japanese women, two different expressions of modesty are commonly observed; some say their lives were too mundane to be relevant for my study and others say they are too exceptional as a Japanese woman so that their stories might not be representative. The two poles of “typical/traditional” and “atypical/exceptional” recur throughout my interview research. The interviewees utilize this axis not only when they refer to others, but also when they talk about themselves. Let us examine these “typical” and “exceptional” Japanese women first.

The typical type includes Hiroe, Nami and Shoko, who reflect on their lives in Japan as a housewife or an OL in a positive light. As discussed earlier, their life stories highlight their free time after work and the material affluence they enjoyed despite their subordinate social statuses. Other interviewees who may appear more “exceptional” in their experiences and backgrounds, such as Asako, Erika, Kiyoko, Mika, Midori and Taeko,

speak of their attachment to Japanese traditional culture and arts when referring to their Japanese-woman-ness. Kiyoko, who left Japan at the age of sixteen and married an American, declares, “I am such a typical Japanese woman although I came to America in an early period of my life.” She elaborates, “I follow what others do, have little opinion of my own and prioritize cooperation and harmony. I’m strongly Japanese. That is why, I think, I did not mind doing women’s tasks when I started to work in a Japanese company.” For Erika, Japanese-woman-like behaviors are “natural, almost biological things that have been internalized while I grew up.” She regards herself as a “traditional” Japanese woman though not “typical.” Chikako and Shinobu speak of dependence, or *amae*, to which they attribute their typical Japanese-woman-ness. While Shinobu, who read a book on *amae* and regrets her typical, dependent Japaneseness, Chikako says she strategically performs a dependent self that gets help easily. Notably, these women tend to say that they are typical and/or traditional only to the degree that their identities reflect positive connotations. As mentioned above in Michi’s case, the women tend to craft themselves in selective ways so that others—especially their listener/interviewer—obtain a favorable impression of them.

On the other hand, interviewees like Kaori, Kazue, Hana, Michi, Saki and Seiko call themselves primarily atypical and exceptional. They had other people point out their straightforward, assertive, out-going and individualistic personalities that make them different from ordinary Japanese women. Saki proudly reflects, “A local friend of mine likes my outgoing character. He doesn’t even mind my broken, nonsense English because I am entertaining enough. I was glad to hear that.” Kaori says that many people say she is “local-like” due to her dark skin and bigger physique along with a talkative and assertive personality that she acquired in Hawai’i. However, Kaori calls herself “an annoying returnee Japanese.” Clearly, not all self-claimed “exceptional”

women are positive about the ways they are different. Hana, a Japanese instructor, says that she lacks the skill to establish a Japanese type of human relationship because of her self-centered personality. “I wish I could care more about others instead of about myself. I sometimes envy those other Japanese women who are good at that.” Similarly, Norie speaks of her “lack” of Japanese-woman-like features such as thoughtfulness and gentleness, criticizing “the American value that encourages us just to be strong and aggressive.”

Taken together, these “typical” and “exceptional” identity narratives suggest an intriguing reversal of the commonly held image of international Japanese women. In fact, the interviewees denigrate the “exceptional” features such as individualism and assertiveness, while evaluating positively the traditional Japanese-woman-ness. When Kiyoko exhibits her other-oriented personality and Hana covets Japanese indirect and harmonious social skills, the traditional Japanese-woman-ness stands as the ideal. This appears even more so when Kaori, who successfully attained a “local-like” character after her painstaking efforts, names herself “annoying” and Erika with extraordinary international experiences and education says her Japanese-woman-ness is “almost biological.” Furthermore, such narratives seem to subscribe to a dichotomized view of Japan and West, which I examined earlier. Japanologist terminology, represented by harmony and *amae*, emerges occasionally to describe their ideas of Japaneseness, and stereotypical adjectives such as quiet, reserved and graceful surface when they talk about Japanese women. That is, the identity narratives circulate the ready-made vocabulary of Japaneseness and Japanese-woman-ness only to sustain the Orientalist framework. Some interviewees even say, “Japan and America are just different,” without elaborating further—an attitude that could be problematized as cultural essentialism. Centering on the “typical or exceptional” axis, the identity narratives seem only to reinforce “the

Japanese woman' discourse.

## SUBVERTING THE DYCHOTOMY

Another group of interviewees expresses a different type of identification, detaching themselves from the "typical or exceptional" axis. For example, Kazue stresses her "international" self, locating herself on neither end. "Ultimately, I do not like those who seek typical Japanese-women-ness, being subordinate, docile, etc. I want to be international and cosmopolitan. I certainly keep my identity as a Japanese, but I would call myself a woman with an international sense." She continues swinging back and forth, saying, "It's a globalizing era. I was born in Japan and should learn what Japanese culture and tradition are like, but at the same time, I should learn American values to be international. I want to know both." She concludes, "I will hold on to my identity as a Japanese woman, but I don't overemphasize that. That's who I would like to be." Norie and Keiko also speak of the idea of "global citizen," which their religion <sup>\*1</sup> upholds. Norie recalls a dialogue with her former colleague who asked her how Japanese she was. "It occurred to me at that time that I am not a representative Japanese woman, nor am I completely Americanized. I then answered that I am a believer of [her religion]. It connotes that I am beyond any existing racial or ethnic category."

However, such notions of "international" or "transnational" identity may not be as neutral as they may seem. As a matter of fact, Kazue, Norie and Keiko nevertheless assume the cultural dichotomy when describing their lives. When Kazue contrasts "American women who are very educated and sophisticated, with strong

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\*1 The name of their religion is kept confidential upon the interviewees' request.

social skills” with “Japanese women with a vulgar, old-fashioned sense of presenting themselves in public,” the ideal “international self” indicates only her preference to being seen like an American woman. Keiko recurrently insists that she is against race- or culture-based ways of thinking, but speaks of various “cultural” differences, generalizing her observation of a Japanese financial firm as “the Japanese culture.” Ultimately, the identification with such a third category—“international,” “cosmopolitan” or “transnational”—seems to leave the dichotomy intact, only to situate these Japanese women in a segregated niche.

Karen Kelsky (2001) too argues that international Japanese women’s assertion of a cosmopolitan self is problematic, considering its naïve celebration of Orientalism, that is, a view that constructs the West as liberating and thus superior. She then discusses another form of identification, what she calls “hybrid identity,” which consists of shifting and ambivalent attitudes toward both Japan and the West: “[The Japanese women] moved lightly across different identifications, choosing their self-representations strategically, almost in self-defense, forestalling circumscription. The West was not external to their identity and Japan was not internal; identifications with both were contingent and above all pragmatic exercises in hybridity” (p.217). Kelsky’s feminist viewpoint does not regard the construction of the hybrid identities to be very effective. She argues that the women are focused on achieving an ideal status solely on a personal level and therefore do not disturb the existing hierarchies—both racial and gender, inside and outside Japan. And yet, such “a form of oppositional practice at least on an individual level” (p.224) should be taken more seriously. As Kelsky herself comments, any individual practice—be it a speech, an action or a choice of life course—is embedded in a social context, onto which it can bring back a certain effect. Japanese women may narrate their lives and identities in terms that are provided by

the dominant discourse, whether upholding or devaluing Japan and the West, but always with the potential turbulences. Though not analyzed extensively in Kelsky's study, it is vital to note that "social practices that are dependent on a fluid, almost infinitely mutable circulation of images and mutually imbricated desires of the Other, also yield *unintended and unanticipated effects*" (p.225, emphasis mine).

Such hybrid and fluid identities are, in fact, more evident in my interview research than rather static "traditional," "exceptional" or "international" self-presentations. Many interviewees show inconsistencies and contradictions in describing themselves as Japanese women, shifting from one position to another. Even those "exceptional" Japanese women such as Kaori, Michi, and Saki express their commitment to Japanese-woman-ness, thereby complicating their self-images. On the contrary, the "typical" Japanese women including Hiroe, Nami, Taeko and others do live unconventional, "exceptional" lives considering the fact that they study and work abroad, leaving their home country behind. At the very least, my own conception of Japanese-woman-ness is constantly challenged by these unsettling narratives, which never comply with the ready-made categories. My attempt of building a systematic typology was proven unfeasible; Japanese women present themselves as "typical," "exceptional," "international," or all or none of the above.

For example, some interviewees seem to possess both Japanese and American/Western selves, refusing to connect fully to either. While Asako, Kiyoko and Midori, all married to Americans, easily put themselves in a zone of two cultures, Seiko and Shinobu keep speaking of their Japaneseness and non-Japaneseness, making contradictory comments. They both strongly cherish their own Japanese-woman-like sensibility and reservation, only to turn it over later, as Seiko utters, "I wonder if I am a right person for you to interview. I'm too much of an

atypical Japanese woman.” Another group of interviewees call themselves “in-between.” Iyo traces her departure from “the very typical Japanese woman who followed what others did,” to add later, “I’m in some fuzzy location. I am neither too much Japanese-woman-like nor completely Westernized. I still know how to appreciate Japanese virtues.” Madoka resonates, “I am somewhere in between. Not perfectly Japanese or completely non-Japanese. That’s the only way I can conceive of myself.” Although these narratives too tend to employ clichéd discourses of Japaneseness and Japanese-woman-ness, their fluid identifications reject any rigid boundaries. If an individual claims to occupy two different identities—typical *and* exceptional—the two may not be as exclusive to each other as may be commonly assumed. The Japanese women’s narratives thus shed light on the very arbitrary nature of social categories and the meanings attached to them, though the speakers themselves might not intend to do so.

Such “unintended effects” are also seen when the interviewees speak of their flexibility in different living environments. While Maki insists that only her superficial appearance, including clothes and make-up, differ in America versus Japan, some others claim a more fundamental fluidity of their identities. For example, Ai shows an ambiguous identification, replying to my question about whether or not she differs from ordinary Japanese women. “Well, I suppose so. I am no longer eligible to represent Japanese women in Japan. However, it is not that I do not think of myself as a Japanese woman any longer.” She elaborates, “What’s interesting is that I change all of a sudden. I am a very typical Japanese woman at one point while I become very much American-like at other times. I think it all depends on the people with whom I speak.” Risa also seems to hold multiple selves that become salient and latent according to the situation: “Since my son has both American and Japanese

friends, it is necessary for me to adjust myself to the style that each kid's family has. People naturally have different value systems, so what's required is flexibility.”

Although the interviewees above seem proud of their self-management competency and speak of successful occurrences in their lives, including their good socializing skills to get along with others, to obtain a job in a competitive market or to establish a comfortable and confident sense of oneself, some others express the agony that is entailed in the process. Recall Fumika who suffers a severe psychological stress after her feeling liberated in Hawai'i, and Chikako, who regrets that she changed herself in her new life. Chikako says, “For those who are around me now, I am a cute, smiley Japanese girl, which implies that I look stupid. That would never be an image of me in Japan, but that is how I acted intentionally since I came here in order to be accepted. I created an identity far removed from my real self in Japan.” Such pressures and conflicts indicate that not all Japanese women enjoy their flexible and hybrid identities. Nonetheless, neither Fumika nor Chikako is a pitiful Japanese woman who struggles to fit into an environment only to constrain herself. They in fact seem to refuse to be looked upon as such when they cheerfully restate their efforts later in the interviews. Now in her second year in Hawai'i, Chikako says she has decided to put forth her real self, someone who always tries to make people laugh. Also, as mentioned earlier, she plans to “act another self” that differs from her real one when returning to the high school where she had taught, stressing that it is only a strategic performance. She supervises all these manipulative selves, never utterly at the mercy of the forces around her. Fumika in the end of the interview rejects the impression that she is a depressed overseas housewife, saying, “It's enough for me to have only a few people know the real me. Others may say I'm shy or quiet and do not know who I really am, including my husband to

whom I have long given a wrong impression, but it's all right." She is fully conscious of her own issues: "I know all of my psychological problems are due to the pretences that I forced on myself. Can I get rid them after living like this for forty years? It's a part of my personality, and that's fine." She even adds positively, "It can be fun and fulfilling when people say they like the self that I created. I feel attached to my product, and that is me at that moment. I would say that the sense of accomplishment makes me alive." The interviewees are strongly conscious of their self-performances, and they attribute positive meanings to the efforts, claiming that it is a part of their ability and personality. Their resulting Japanese-woman-ness is shown to be neither inherent nor static, but only a product of their strategic and manipulative performances.

This ability to manipulate and negotiate relates to the notion of performative identity. Through these narrations, the interviewees construct their identities as Japanese women, moving on the axis between "typical" and "exceptional," settling on the third category of "international," or distancing from any position claiming their flexibility. Identity therefore is an effect of these narratives, *not vice versa*. Notably, as discussed above, their identity construction is never free from powerful discourse that essentializes "the Japanese woman." Some speak of their Japanese-woman-ness as though it were an entity that resides in their psyches while others utilize the vocabulary matter-of-factly. It is inevitable that the interviews pivot on the existing framework, never to obliterate "the Japanese woman." Yet, some interviewees suddenly change their tones, showing contradictions and inconsistencies, puzzling and confusing their listener. This is when the existing format fails to accommodate spontaneous narratives that emerge in social interactions. A self-claimed typical Japanese woman may make up her mind and leave her family behind to study abroad. An exceptional looking Japanese woman may assert that

she can also be very traditional and conservative. A bilingual Japanese woman married to an American may be outgoing in some setting and reserved in another. A cute, smiley Japanese girl starts expressing a more active, entertaining self. Are they Japanese-woman-like or not? Are they typical or atypical? By provoking these questions, the women's narratives reveal that the dominant bipolar framework is at fault. Their shifting self-presentations and the resulting multiple identities do pivot on "the Japanese woman," but at the same time expose the arbitrary and unsteady nature of the hinge.

### 3. Japanese Women and "the Japanese Woman"

One of the basic questions at interviews—"What do you think Japanese women are like?"—provokes numerous responses, indicating diverse meanings and values that the interviewees attach to Japanese-women-ness. Many interviewees mention actual individuals around them to account for their ideas of what Japanese women are like while some others show more complex attitudes. This section turns to the manners in which these thirty Japanese women comment on Japanese-women-ness and examines how the narratives resonate with and oppose to "the Japanese woman."

#### REFERENCE TO OTHER JAPANESE WOMEN

Based on the fact that these women are talented and experienced internationals, it may seem safe to assume that they have contempt for "ordinary" women in Japan. Ai, Hiroe, Shinobu and Yoriko are irritated at

their friends back home who only covet their international lives and do not initiate any change. At the same time, they are proud of the courageous ventures that they actually carried out. However, other interviewees, including the professionals and academics like Hana, Kaori, Kazue and Miika, toward whom other women may feel envious, say they are envious of those who live a settled life in a domestic setting. Hana recalls her friends who are her age and full-time housewives raising children, saying, "My envy comes from the fact that they have gone through all the things that ordinary Japanese girls do. They graduate from college, work as an OL, get married and have children, never questioning whether it is right or wrong. They do not have to pioneer anything." She continues, "I'm sure they have their own problems and difficulties, but their lives looks safer and more promising than mine. It never occurs to me that my life is better than theirs." Kaori observes that the envy is mutual. "They say they wish they were as free as I am as a student. But I covet the stability that they have. I spend many sleepless nights and still have to keep reading till I go bald! I envy their stress-free life." It does not mean that the interviewees now aspire to lead a "good wife, wise mother" life, but as Kazue puts, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

Encountering concerns and difficulties of their unconventional lives, the most exceptional Japanese women may re-evaluate a style of living that they left behind. Instead of devaluing them as old-fashioned, other interviewees say they appreciate what older generations of women did to support their families and respect what contemporary full-time housewives engage in, in and out of their households. In this sense, international Japanese women do not discard or disregard the traditional Japanese-woman-ness; rather, they seem to have found an alternative meaning of it. A good example is Keiko, a bilingual financial expert with an advanced

degree from Japan and several years of experiences in New York, who suddenly decided to resign from her established career and move to Hawai'i with her husband. She speaks for the role of housewife and criticizes those women who single-mindedly pursue their careers. Referring to her friend who "seemingly exemplifies a successful Japanese woman overseas by becoming a CPA and getting a job in a prestigious financial firm," Keiko says, "people may find her life ideal, but she herself does not look happy at all, always rushing, stressed out and unsatisfied. I used to be like her, but realized earlier the importance of psychological, non-material satisfaction."

Some other interviewees are similarly critical about international Japanese women who are "too much," like the one to whom Keiko refers. Iyo speaks of her Japanese colleagues at her present workplace in Hawai'i in a hostile tone. "My office here is full of those Japanese women who look Japanese but never are Japanese in mind. They are very independent and assertive. I don't think they ever feel the pressure to go along with the others." Comparing herself to them, she says, "I am far from them in a good sense. I will never be like that. I am still Japanese-woman-like in that I try to be considerate and cooperative." Iyo says it can be disadvantageous that she does not assert herself, but "decent people, including our boss, are fond of such natures." She bursts out, "It's even embarrassing, you know, to hear a Japanese person mixing English words in Japanese sentences. I would never go to that extreme." Chikako, Erika and Saki are bothered by the "wannabe" Japanese women who try to present themselves in exaggerated Western ways by speaking with big gestures or in slang. Wakako says that she does not sympathize with other Japanese women of her age in Hawai'i who are eager to complain about Japanese society. "These women shocked me. They are obviously very unhappy about their

earlier years in Japan. They keep saying they hate Japan and say they want to get married in Hawai'i. I never understand that." "What is more frustrating is," Wakako continues, "these women are considered as the representative of us Japanese women. A professor of mine once wanted to confirm with me that Japanese women come here to get married to haoles and have hapa kids. I tried to say, 'No!' I'm not like that, at least." Notably, by differentiating themselves from such caricaturized internationalists, the women claim that they themselves possess more competent, flexible or balanced selves.

Karen Kelsky also speaks of the ways in which internationalists refer to other Japanese women:

"Women I met in Japan who had worked abroad confirmed the sacrifices they had made, and constantly drew contrasts between themselves and other Japanese women, who they claimed, were interested only in 'taking it easy'" (2001: 109). While some interviewees seem to confirm this observation, it is equally significant that others draw similar contrasts in an opposite manner, expressing their envy towards those who are non-internationalists. Still others even disparage other internationalists whose values are too much slanted toward the West. These women may deploy the typical Japanese-woman-ness in an attempt to support their self-images as women who can freely shift between two values and know how to appreciate both. Once again, their identification does not imply a straightforward trajectory from Japaneseness to non-Japaneseness, but rather consists of a complex, constantly shifting, mixture of the two.

#### QUESTIONING "THE JAPANESE WOMAN"

Identity narratives based on the "typical or exceptional" paradigm can subvert the very axis on which

they pivot. In addition to the contradictions and inconsistencies that their narratives entail, the interviewees demonstrate multiple—almost divergent—interpretations of Japanese-woman-ness of their own. Many express their attachment to traditional virtues of Japanese women such as grace, reservation and thoughtfulness, while others contend that Japanese women are independent, free and strong in a different way from their Western/American counterparts. Risa, who holds such an interpretation, claims, “Japanese women are calculating and thus reliable. They make the most of what is available to them, get along well with the flow, and yet hold on to themselves firmly.” Seiko observes, “In Japan, women don’t mind what their husbands have to say about purchasing, for example, a big piece of furniture. American wives are dependent in that respect. Japanese women are actually very strong, despite their meek appearance.” Ai and Kaori, having encountered professors who say they pity victimized Japanese women, oppose the stereotype by accounting for the particular social status that Japanese women occupy. “We deliberately take a subordinate role to take advantage of it. Are we oppressed? Nonsense. It’s exasperating to be looked on in such an arrogant way. It is frustrating that they do not seem to understand the capability that we Japanese women possess,” Kaori bursts out. Hana similarly criticizes biased images of Japanese women, saying: “I personally think Japanese women are by no means fragile but very tough mentally. Endurance is a part of the toughness. It is by this tough spirit, I would say, that Japanese women have long put up with the patriarchal family system.”

For some, performing a typical Japanese woman is a strategy to meet their ends. Maki self-critically says, “Japanese women are smart enough to know that their endurance appeals to those around them. They put up with a lot and sacrifice themselves, knowing that the virtuous appearance will help them pursue their primary

goal in the end.” She adopts this strategy herself, “letting people, including my [American] boyfriend, glimpse my severe discipline and endurance from time to time. That’s how I get it all eventually.” Chikako displays her *amae* tactic that made her the most popular female teacher at her former workplace in Japan: “It makes things so easy if you only know how to show your dependence on your superiors. They take good care of you, and cherish you. It’s easy to work through a chauvinistic environment, as a matter of fact.” Although their superficial performances may look complicit with “the Japanese woman,” the interviewees utilize the idealized imagery to subvert its meanings. A Japanese woman may look quiet and graceful, only in certain settings. She may present herself in a most subservient and complying way, cautiously calculating its effects. The interviewees sometimes make fun of those who cannot see through their disguised appearance of “the Japanese woman,” revealing its fictitious nature. No interviewees refuse to be called a Japanese woman, that is, they accept the identity, but create their own versions of it within the given framework.

Other interviewees destabilize “the Japanese woman” by commenting on it in more skeptical ways. Interviewees such as Kazue, Kiyoko, Saki and Taeko say that the situation for Japanese women has changed so drastically in the past few decades that it is no longer possible to make a general statement about it. In some interviews, women respond to the question, “What do you think Japanese women are like?” by asking me to clarify what group of Japanese women is in question; young or old, working or staying home, in city or in countryside, and international or domestic. I try not to answer directly but asked back again, “Do you think they are different from one group to another?” to encourage the interviewees to elaborate on the point. It is agreed upon, during our collaborative inquiry, that Japanese women are just as diverse as any other racial, national and

gender category. Madoka, for example, points out that my question is a tricky one: “I could talk about the women around me, those I know in Hawai‘i and in Tokyo, but they are only a part of a large picture. I know nobody beyond my and my mother’s generations. The whole category of Japanese women are just diverse and very hard to generalize, I think.” Asako simply refuses to answer the question, saying it is too difficult to think of a singular Japanese-woman-ness. Mika concurs, “I can easily talk about the common image of Japanese women, you know, being *otonashii* and the like, but I would rather not repeat the cliché.” After a pause, she continues, “It’s very hard because there is a wide range from active housewives to vigorous career women. There are many types of Japanese women. That’s all I can say.” Saki, during her enthusiastic narration, repetitively inserts, “But I don’t know if my case can be called average.” She reflects later, “I have no idea what an average Japanese woman is like, or if it is possible at all to think of such a thing in this era.”

An intriguing case is Nami, who starts casting doubt on her own perception of Japanese women. She first states, “From an objective viewpoint, I would say a Japanese housewife is a very traditional woman, serving meals for her husband and children, preparing nice lunch boxes, cleaning the house, going grocery shopping every day and sacrificing her own time for family. That’s the general picture.” However, she continues after a pause, “Well, having said that, I just realized that I know nobody like that myself. There are a couple of women who looked like typical Japanese housewives, but after I got to know them better, the impressions changed.” She starts to wonder: “What brings me such an image? I seriously have never seen anyone like that.” In these instances, the interviewees start questioning the identity that I imposed on them, and expose the fallacy of the dominant framework. They even demystify the taken-for-granted notion that there is an essential entity called

Japanese-woman-ness. Crucially, it is their practical experiences and the resulting insights, not ideological or intellectual thoughts, that bring about such subversions. Narrating an identity thus involves both referring to “the Japanese woman” and questioning “the Japanese woman.”

#### 4. Stereotype, Identity and Performance: A Methodological Reflection

These multiple and complex identity narratives urge some methodological reflection. In the first chapter, I pointed out that even ethnographic studies, which aim to provide realistic portrayals of Japanese women beyond stereotypes, may also reinforce the dominant discourse of “the Japanese woman.” A scholarly dilemma between generalized characterization and individual diversity became evident. To break through this dilemma, I turned to self-reflexive ethnographies. While works by Gail Bernstein (1983), Takie Lebra (1984) and Ella Wiswell and Robert Smith (1982) demonstrate how the researchers’ personal involvements in their research fields enabled their vivid depictions of Japanese women, Dorinne Kondo (1990), Robin LeBlanc (1999) and Nancy Rosenberger (2001) more explicitly shed light on the processes in which ethnographic realities are constructed between the researcher and her research subjects. Their consequent representations of Japanese women highlight not only their common features but also multiplicity and diversity among the women, and more importantly, contradiction and inconsistency within individual women. At issue was to construct another version of reality that encompasses the varying ways in which Japanese women live the norm of “the Japanese woman.” It is critical in this process for a researcher to step out of the academic fortress and open herself to the

interaction dynamics in the field. My presence as a “vulnerable observer” (Behar 1996) is pertinent to this study.

## INTERVIEW AS INTERACTION

What interactions exactly took place between the thirty interviewees and this researcher? As mentioned in the introduction, my attempt to stay neutral and objective as a researcher/interviewer was proved to be as “hopelessly naïve” as Gail Bernstein found hers in her field (1983: 31). In fact, my status as a graduate student from the University of Tokyo was a first obstacle. Many interviewees wanted to know my background as much as I wanted to know theirs. Once they found out that I was a Todai graduate, they started to back off, saying that they might not be able to say something intelligent or that their stories might not be of sufficient importance. Shoko, a former career-track woman at a prestigious bank and later a clerical worker at a non-profit organization, is such an example.

Shoko: I’m intimidated. Feel free to tell me if you find my talk useless for your research. I don’t think I can be of much help to such a great scholar.

Aya: Don’t say that. You have a scholarship to study here too. You too might do something like this in the future.

Shoko: That will never happen. I am not such a serious international student as you. How long is your thesis going to be?

Aya: About one hundred pages? I don’t know.

Shoko: See, I have never written anything that long. I’m still struggling with a ten-page writing assignment. I wonder how you can handle such difficult and complicated things like sociology. I mean, I do enjoy my life here a lot, but I’m not so into my study. I should have chosen a different major. Now I’m more interested in doing an MBA or other practical kinds of things. I’m not very academic. I’m not as smart as you. Can I ask you something? What do you find so interesting about such difficult, complicated things?

Aya: That’s a good question. I don’t know. It’s not that I am smart or really into academia. I just want to hear what other Japanese women go through. I’ve never had a full-time

job and this is my first time abroad. I suppose there is a lot more in Japanese women's lives other than what I saw myself. Listening to these stories attracts me. That's what's interesting to me.

Shoko: You've never worked in Japan? I can tell you things, like, how mean the senior women at my bank were and how nice all the middle-aged men at the NPO were.

Aya: Really? Was it like that where you worked?

Shoko: Oh, yes. And you don't know how stable and enjoyable an OL life can be. You have your own money, which is an attraction. It doesn't have to be much, but a stable income along with abundant time makes your life so enjoyable. I loved it having my own cozy place, inviting friends and pursuing my hobbies.

Aya: I see. These are the things I wanted to know. How Japanese women reflect on their lives back home.

Shoko: All these trivial things? That I enjoyed being an OL rather than being a career woman? And that I want to get married to become a full-time housewife?

Aya: Do you? With such an amazing background? You have no qualms about the idea of staying home, waiting for your husband after experiencing different types of jobs and also a life overseas?

Shoko: No, no, that will never happen. I won't stay home or wait for my husband. I will be active, traveling around, going out for lunch and tea, engaging in cultural activities. You shouldn't underestimate the housewife culture. I have been close to many full-time housewives of my mom's age and learned the depth of their world. It's actually far richer than you think.

At first, Shoko seems to be searching a proper context in which to situate her experiences. Once finding that her stories of "trivial things" intrigued me, she earnestly started to articulate her work experiences in Japan and her aspiration to become a housewife. Her resulting story is not only informative but also very subversive in that she presents herself in a way that is irreducible to any ready-made categories. She emphasizes that she is neither a victimized ex-OL nor a determined internationalist. She further detaches herself from the "good wife, wise mother" model, when she criticizes my judgment.

With Yuko, a professional musician, the interview unfolded in a highly interactive way, namely, with me as an interviewer speaking of myself to a substantial degree.

Aya: Can I ask you about your future plan?

Yuko: I'm not sure what to do next. I really don't know. Sorry. How about you? Are you determined to stay here?

Aya: No, as a matter of fact. I am going back to Tokyo, to finish my doctoral degree.

Yuko: That's right. I'm so jealous. You have an M.A. from the University of Tokyo too? And you have a scholarship here? That's amazing. You sure are someone above the clouds for me.

Aya: I don't think so. I wish I were doing some sort of art, like you as a professional musician. I'm not so determined as an academic, in fact.

Yuko: But you've decided to go back to Japan. Is that because you prefer Japan to America?

Aya: Not really. I don't think I have such a preference. I'm returning to Japan because my boyfriend lives in Tokyo.

Yuko: Really? Is he Japanese? That's surprising. I thought you would be dating a foreigner.

Aya: Well, I don't think I have a strong preference in that matter as well.

Yuko: That's because you speak English so fluently. You seem perfectly fine and comfortable in American culture.

Aya: But communication is critical for me too. I don't think I can be with someone who doesn't understand the Japanese language at all. What do you think?

Yuko: I'm not seeing anyone at this moment, but I came to prefer a Japanese man these years. After all, I can feel most relaxed with Japanese especially because I don't speak English as well as you. I want to feel safe and comfortable in my relationship. No such tension that I have at work.

Aya: I understand.

Yuko: Do you? Well, going back to my future plan, I might actually go back to Japan too, though I have been applying for some positions in other foreign places. If I could build my career in America, that would be great as a musician. But I know it's really hard. So I wouldn't mind my returning to Japan with this experience abroad. Look at my age. I think I should decide within the next two or three years. I am in a transition period now. My age still concerns me, but after this struggle, nothing will threaten me any more. I will be one of those women that do not care what others think of them. There's part of me that doesn't want to be like that, so I'm trying to hold onto my possibility of settling down.

Aya: Do you want to settle down? That surprises me.

Yuko: Because I am so exhausted in such a competitive world. Sometimes I feel like getting married and becoming a housewife, having my husband support me. Though, I don't think I can be like that forever.

Aya: You becoming a housewife? That's hard to imagine.

Yuko: So is you dating a Japanese! But I don't know how it is possible in reality. I'm sure I

will be a lazy housewife, not the standard one. And soon again, I will feel like playing music.

In the excerpt above, I speak of private matters to defy the impression that Yuko had about me. We express envy towards each other, opening up more intimate conversation. It is my refusing Yuko's labeling of "amazing Today scholar" and juxtaposing myself to her that provide her with comfort to talk about her ambivalence as a professional musician. Her subsequent narration on her future undermines her initial image of an ambitious and successful internationalist, and yet does not allow relegating her to the traditional Japanese-woman-ness when she mentions her potential of going back to her career. Such complexity would not have been discovered without our reciprocal self-revelations and the resulting rapport.

In contrast to intimidated interviewees like Shoko and Yuko, Kaori, a Ph. D student herself, burst out her anti-feminist feelings when I first told her that my research field involved women's studies. Her words in fact offered me a good starting point for our conversation.

Kaori: First and foremost, I don't like feminist theories. I don't think they are applicable to our everyday realities. They are for the scholars to judge others' lives and make themselves look smart. I hope your thesis is not going to say, "Japanese women are oppressed and exploited."

Aya: Actually, I also have a similar quarrel with feminists, and that is why I am doing this research. I would like to hear what Japanese women like you have to say about Japanese women.

Kaori: Well, there's a part of me that agrees with what has been said about Japanese women. I have worked in a Japanese company where a space for women to raise their voice is extremely limited. I had a hard time to make myself acknowledged as a graphic designer and went through all the hardship as a woman. I experienced it myself, and yet would like to say that it is not the whole picture. It's tempting and easy for outsiders to say that Japanese women are all oppressed, but I do not agree. Women take advantage within such a situation.

Kaori goes on elaborating her own interpretation of what Japanese women are really like. She then narrates her

personal history, including her work experiences in Japan and the broken engagement that she jokingly reveals, saying “I don’t know if I should tell this to you. It could change the whole analysis of yours. Are you sure you want to hear this?” Her concluding remark in the interview is even more suggestive: “I’m glad that you are not a very strong feminist type of scholar. If you were, I would never tell you such private things. I would just say, ‘I left Japan because it is such a sexist country.’” Her words indicate that she could have presented herself as a stereotypical internationalist. Among the multiple possibilities of her self-presentations, what I encountered was, as shown in the earlier analysis, Kaori as an out-going and local-like, yet marginalized *gaijin*, Japanese woman.

#### RECIPROCAL SELF-PRESENTATION

Crucially, it was not only me who carried out strategic self-presentations in the interviews. While I performed as a friendly and enthusiastic listener—presenting myself as another international Japanese woman rather than a scholar—the interviewees also “became” the Japanese women that they would want to project. Like Shoko and Kaori above who implicitly cautioned me not to take them lightly, other interviewees frequently opposed my scholarly presumption and challenged my framework that might otherwise label them in opposition to their self-perceptions. Note in the excerpts below how the interviewees manipulate the impressions that I had toward them. Hiroe, an ex-OL, flips over the first impression of hers as a frustrated OL by disclosing a dramatic part of her life course.

Hiroe: I think I was a very typical type of OL. The gender hierarchy was so visible at my company. The old-fashioned tendency was still prevailing, so we girls were told, ‘Serve tea!’ ‘Xerox this!’ and ‘Go get such and such!’ Promotion is only for men, not for us OLs.

Aya: I've never worked in a big company. I assume women undergo harsh situations.

Hiroe: You would never know what it is like if you were only looking from outside. There was sexual harassment, of course. Some men tried to touch my body utilizing their higher status. It happened often, as a matter of fact. Women are expected to get married and quit the job. That is the norm. I was an abnormal case because I worked into my thirties and then quit saying that I was going to study in Hawai'i. They thought I was crazy.

Aya: Women are expected to get married at a younger age. That's the marriage pressure, I suppose.

Hiroe: Yes. It's such a pressure. Well, our situation was slightly better, compared to banks. My section actually had a lot of single women. I wasn't the oldest. There are women in their forties and fifties. It's not like some bank where girls are replaced every three years. In that sense, my company was a comfortable place to work at.

Aya: Comfortable?

Hiroe: Well, it took me a while to get accustomed to such awful customs, but I soon started to enjoy my OL life. At first, I was furious at every mistreatment, like when I had to serve tea for the men, but other women were doing the same thing and people kept telling me that's what it is. What helped me was that I had had three hundred *douki* [peer workers who entered the company in the same year,] including one hundred women. We always went out drinking and eating, traveled often, and danced crazy at discos. It couldn't be helped that we were stuck in the office from nine to five, so we tried to make the best of our after-work hours and weekends. That was so much fun. When some guy did some sort of sexual harassment to me, I always ran to my peer girls, or wrote e-mails to them to release my complaints. We then made fun of these guys, making up all the funny stories and ridiculing them.

Aya: But you could not tell them to stop directly.

Hiroe: No, it's impossible. Women here would sue the guys right away, but the atmosphere in my company kept us from carrying out such direct confrontations. You can't really express your anger inside the office. That is why our night outings were important. We all released our frustration and got refreshed.

Aya: I see. Does the frustration have anything to do with your decision to come here?

Hiroe: No, no. I made the best of my being an OL. I enjoyed it, ironically. But after doing the same routine work for ten years, I felt like changing my life radically. There are women who feel that way earlier, maybe after three to four years, but I felt comfortable and kept the status quo for that long. My income was stable too. It takes courage to leave the stable life for something new.

Aya: What made you decide to do something new?

Hiroe: Hmm. . . Not that I hated my work, for sure. I could have worked in the company

longer. I guess it started when my boyfriend at that time was transferred to Kyushu. I wanted to do something while we were apart. You know what I did? I started to go to a radio DJ school at night.

Aya: How interesting.

Hiroe: Well, it was only out of curiosity, but my experience there changed my life. I was the only OL there while other students all had very unusual experiences. I was shocked to learn how boring I was. I had nothing to talk about. It made me wonder what significance my life could have after all. I gave up on the stable OL life then, and started to expand my world. I traveled alone a lot, came to Hawai'i for a short-term language program, started to learn ukulele and finally moved here to go to a beauty school. I'm glad that I did all that because it makes me somehow interesting as a person.

Hiroe initially calls herself a typical OL, but refuses being labeled merely as an oppressed victim, emphasizing her OL life was "so much fun." She then cautiously chooses the way to present her life so that I would not impose the "from oppression to liberation" model. I do not disturb the flow of her talk, intently following her seemingly incompatible self-presentations.

Yoriko, an accountant who was just graduated and searching a job at the time of the interview, also presents a mixed type of self. She has a petite physique and soft voice, always listening to others attentively and smiling.

Yoriko: I guess you can tell from my appearance, but many people, including my American boyfriend expect me to be nice and caring. I am looked upon as a typical Japanese woman that can't say no. I am just walking and talking naturally, but people call me very Japanese-woman-like.

Aya: How do you feel about that?

Yoriko: I think it is disadvantageous that I look that way. I think I am stubborn and tough, but on the surface, I look quiet, and maybe meek. It sure doesn't do any good to my job-hunting when people judge me only from how I look. One of my American acquaintances actually told me that I was too shy and quiet and advised me to come out of my shell. His words hurt me because I don't think I am as shy as he sees me. He might have said that out of kindness because I am one of the girls from Japan, but it is such a biased miscalculation.

Aya: I too should try not to misrepresent you in my thesis, then.

Yoriko: Well, it's not that I am just strong. I like the idea of being tough and strong at the core.

It's different from being pushy and assertive all the time. I value the ability to interact with others in a soft manner. I aspire to be someone who has both qualities. You would be surprised to see how demanding and rude I am when I'm with my boyfriend. Or at class presentations, I try to put forth my strong and articulate self. That's what I did at my former work in Japan. I don't like to be taken advantage of.

Her narrative allows a glimpse into the backstage of seemingly shy and quiet Japanese women; they may hold hidden toughness that surfaces upon necessity. By challenging the impression that I may share with other people who miscalculate her, Yoriko asserts a manifold—neither only shy and quiet nor only strong and pushy—identity.

While Hiroe and Yoriko seem to refuse the labeling of “typical” Japanese woman, interviewees below confused my impression of them as “exceptional” Japanese women. Iyo, a successful sales woman in the travel industry, both in Japan and in Hawai'i, refuses being looked upon solely as such.

Aya: Are you going to keep working?

Iyo: I think so, in some way or another. But I don't have a strong identity as a career woman. I used to have one when I was working in Japan. My boyfriend at that time pointed out that I was so *katayotteru* [slanted, not well-balanced]. I was living for nothing but work. I sacrificed a lot of personal relationships and also my individual personality. I lost sight of what I really was. It's after I came here when I realized that it was not a healthy way of living.

Aya: What part of living in Hawai'i made you realize that, do you think?

Iyo: Well, it's more about my child than Hawai'i. She changed everything. Now I know what my life is for. It was such a dramatic realization.

Aya: I see. But you are not going to be a stay-home mom?

Iyo: No. I can't terminate my ties to the outer world. It would be too scary. I would be *katayotteru* again as a mother. If I keep working, I can see many different people from different backgrounds, just like you. People like you help me check my balance.

Aya: In that sense, I am totally out of balance. I have only been in school. It's refreshing for me too to come outside the classroom and meet people like you.

Iyo: Do you know who are most *katayotteru*? Japanese women in my workplace. My office is full of those Japanese women who look Japanese but never are Japanese in mind. They are very independent and assertive. I don't think they ever feel the pressure

to go along with the others. That was me when I was a frantic career woman.

Aya: But you are different now.

Iyo: Oh yes, I am far from them in a good sense. I will never be like that. I am still Japanese-woman-like in that I try to be considerate and cooperative. It can actually be disadvantageous if I hold back too much, but decent people including our boss are fond of such natures. It's even embarrassing, you know, to hear a Japanese person mixing English words in Japanese sentences. I would never go to that extreme.

Iyo thus constructs her identity by mixing different types of Japanese-woman-ness in a "balanced" way. She is determined to stay on her career but her life no longer centers only on work. She wants to be connected to the outer world, but would never lose a good balance as a Japanese woman. Recall also Michi, who contrasted her unconventional life and conservative personality, Seiko, who kept swinging between her identities as Japanese-woman-like and non-Japanese-woman-like, and Wakako, who differentiated herself from single-minded internationalists from Japan. The thirty Japanese women's self-presentations are indeed multiple, and at the same time, they can be complex and even inconsistent *within* each interviewee.

It now appears that an interview is a site at which interviewer and interviewee carry out reciprocal self-presentations. This bears an appearance of "strategic interaction," as named by Erving Goffman (1969), which may entail utterly fictitious fabrication of selves. As a matter of fact, the truth of the life stories and identity narratives that I obtained in my research cannot be conclusively determined. An interviewee who proudly exhibited her resistance in the Japanese workplace could have been in reality just a subservient OL. A woman contemptuous of stereotypical internationalists may have also exhibited strong *akogare* at an earlier stage. Women's negotiations to break through the stereotypical images of Japanese women may not be as effective as they claim. The complex selves they projected may be a fabricated presentation only in front of me. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that I only heard what I wanted to hear. This may be the case with any social

interaction, as ethnomethodologists argue, due to the “common sense knowledge” and “interaction ritual,” codes that require the actors to comply with the flow.

However, as shown above, a smooth flow of neatly organized performances is not the only feature of the interviews. At times, the Japanese women disturbed my framework, ignoring, ridiculing or criticizing single-dimensional assumptions that a scholar may hold. They also exhibited significant incoherence by suddenly shifting their tones, showing turns and twists and adding apparently contradictory remarks. As I listened to their narration, I was no longer a researcher with powerful eyes. Having my gaze constantly challenged and destabilized, I positioned myself on an equal basis in relation to the women and paid keen attention to their words, to encounter their agency. The interview data, therefore, are the product of such dynamic interactions, while the analyses are the product of our collaborative inquiries.

## Conclusion

### A Shifting and Ambivalent Pivot

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, the social imagery of “the Japanese woman” is a pivot on which any discourse of Japanese women centers. It cannot be overemphasized that the stereotype is more than mere false representation; it is a political apparatus that casts diverse populations of Japanese women on a univocal canvas. Popular and intellectual writing, along with ethnographic research, is not fully devoid of this dominant framework and presents a fundamental paradox inherent in the politics of “the Japanese woman.” Though one may be determined to describe the realities that transcend stereotypes, one often arrives at a static and generalized portrayal reinforcing the very stereotypical notions one intended to undermine. In this thesis, my intent is to depart from this dilemma.

#### “AT ONCE EMPTY AND OVERFLOWING CATEGORY”

Instead of examining the stereotype itself, I shifted my focus to Japanese women themselves, whose lives, experiences and identities are embedded within the enmeshing power of Orientalism and sexism. A focal question is: Are these women only entrapped in the imagery, or in what alternative ways do they pivot on “the Japanese woman”? The theory of performative identity is of crucial importance here. Japanese women are not Japanese women per se. They “do” and “become” the identity upon necessity and in accordance with the dominant prescription of “the Japanese woman.” In what ways and with what consequences, then, do Japanese women perform the power-laden identity? The interview research with thirty Japanese women in Hawai‘i

aimed to shed light on this essential question.

The second chapter examined the ways in which the women encounter and confront—“do”—the norms and roles ascribed to their gender. In Japanese domestic settings, “the Japanese woman” appears in the form of *ryousai kenbo*. Reflecting upon their work experiences back home, both career women and clerical workers mentioned hardship and limitations cast on women, although some with professional skills escaped such confinement. In international settings, in addition to everyday problems, varying stereotypes from the docile and submissive “Madame Butterfly” to the sexually loose “yellow cab” agonized Japanese women. Interviewees complained that they were called shy despite their efforts to blend into a foreign environment, felt offended when Japanese women were misrepresented and misunderstood, and were disgusted when men approached them for sex. However, the interviewees also proved that they were not merely victimized. Their experiences encompassed various coping strategies, proudly and brightly recounted by the interviewees. On the one hand, the women would comply with pressures upon them and meet the expectations held of Japanese women, by serving tea for their male colleagues, refraining from asserting their opinions, or giving up on participating in the local community abroad. On the other hand, it was evident that they did manage to negotiate their roles in their everyday lives, making the most of the options available to them. They would express their competence gradually, send implicit messages back to their male colleagues, challenge preconceptions by exhibiting different aspects of their personality, or utilize the biased images to their own ends. These stories illuminate that the women’s negotiation involves not only complicit performance but also mimicry, parody and even failure of “doing.” While the imagery manipulates the women’s lives, the women also manipulate its

meanings in subtle yet powerful ways.

The third chapter turned to the identity narratives, exploring the way in which “the Japanese woman” interferes with the women’s self-perception and self-presentation. The interview setting required each interviewee to present herself primarily as a Japanese woman; they were asked to articulate and enact—“become”—the identity. At first sight, their identifications featured the binary axis between the “typical” Japanese woman, quiet, reserved, graceful and traditional, and the “exceptional” Japanese woman, out-going, assertive and independent. I argued that identifications with such categories are rather problematic for they are likely to circulate and reinforce the stereotypical either-or notion: Japanese women are indeed acquiescent and conservative, or else they represent exceptions from the norm. However, a further analysis revealed that identity narratives are neither consistent nor straightforward. The interviewees crafted their identities in selective and careful ways to strike complex self-images that cannot be reduced to the either-or binary. Some shifted between seeing themselves as “typical” and “exceptional”; others claimed both attributes. Some spoke of their remaining traditional features while leading unconventional lives. Some saw themselves in a “no man’s land” between traditional Japanese-woman-ness and the Westernized personality. Some expressed uncertainty of the meaning of Japanese-woman-ness. Through such narrations, the women presented their highly hybrid identities that defy the binary axis. While their narratives still include the dominant discourse of “the Japanese woman,” multiple and complex ways of identification—or ways of “becoming” a Japanese woman—indicate that identity is not univocal, solid or consistent. In sum, in order to articulate their identities, Japanese women do pivot on “the Japanese woman,” only to find the very hinge shifting and fluid. This thesis aimed to capture these critical

incidents of destabilization.

“The Japanese woman,” therefore, is what Joan Scott calls an “at once empty and overflowing category”: “Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions” (1999: 49). In the beginning of this thesis, I argued that the imagery of “the Japanese woman” is a political invention that reflects no essential or inherent feature that distinguishes Japanese women from other social groups. “The Japanese woman” in this sense is an empty category. Yet, as demonstrated, numerous agents, including intellectuals, academics and Japanese women themselves, take the category for granted and deploy it to their respective ends. The pragmatics featured, for example, a scholar who criticized her research subjects for their conservative Japanese-woman-ness and an international Japanese woman who attempted to distance herself from the stereotypical images. In sum, a Japanese woman can be a subservient butterfly, an ambitious internationalist or a fragmented identity. “The Japanese woman” is thus an overflowing category to which no univocal definition applies.

The finding carries an important theoretical implication. A social category and imagery, such as “the Japanese woman,” is not a totally controlling entity. Despite its dominant and persistent nature, it owes its existence to the performance by social actors. Most crucially, the performance does not necessarily reproduce the dominant form; “doing” and “becoming” can take on multiple—both complicit and subversive—forms. While proving the confining power of the social imagery, this study also illuminated the space in which social actors confront, utilize and manipulate the prescription. “The Japanese woman” is thus an on-going construction, a

work in constant and contingent progress.

## SUBJECTIVE AND SUBVERSIVE REALITIES

This study has its grounding in the women's own words. Put another way, here the portrayal of Japanese women is based on the subjective realities of the thirty interviewees, articulated in collaboration with this researcher. In conclusion, let me specify what this picture implies of Japanese women, as reconstructed in their own terms.

This study questioned prevailing images of Japanese women. A prominent example is the common presumption of international Japanese women moving from an oppressive Japanese culture to the liberating Western culture. In their own introspection, none of the Japanese women saw themselves as objects of a linear trajectory. Instead of presenting themselves simply as victims in Japan, some interviewees explained and stressed their strategies to deal with the oppression and others demonstrated how they overcame the impact of discrimination by creating an enjoyable life for themselves. Many interviewees expressed that they left Japan simply for a change in their lives or without any explicit intention. They thereby defied the Orientalist gaze that focuses solely on their experiences of oppression in Japan and their resulting aspiration for a life in the West. Furthermore, their lives in Hawai'i included not only liberation but also numerous difficulties and problems. Considering such issues as a language barrier, insecure legal status, cultural differences and prejudices, their foreign residence yielded burdens as well as freedom. As a result, many women came to express ambivalence toward both Japan and America/Hawai'i. Some found that their initial *akogare* vanished while others were

more skeptical and critical about the myth of the egalitarian West. By exhibiting such feelings and insights, the interviewees refuted the stereotype of being *akogare*-driven Japanese women overseas.

Importantly, in the manner in which these Japanese women recount their own lives, this study made it clear that they differ in their perspective from views generally held by scholars. As shown in the first chapter, when dealing with this issue, some scholars give priority to their own political and academic agendas and thus tend to make hasty judgments about the lives of Japanese women, ignoring the alternative meanings and values that the Japanese women themselves attach to their experiences. In the women's own narrations, such terms as "oppression" and "liberation" take on a meaning different from the one generally implied by scholars writing on this issue. "Oppression" may appear as the background that dramatizes their success, while "liberation" becomes a myth hiding the reality of disillusionment and skepticism expressed by Japanese women. Some interviewees were eager to elaborate on facts and incidents impacting their lives that do not receive much attention by scholarship which focuses on "oppression" and "liberation": Recall Risa's unexpected pregnancy that made her give up on her first study abroad; Kaori's broken engagement that left her miserable and uncomfortable and resulted in her decision to move overseas; and Hiroe's curiosity in something new during the long-distance relationship with her boyfriend, which eventually led her to a new career abroad. Still others expressed feelings in opposition to widely held stereotypes about Japanese women: For example, Shoko, a former OL, brightly reflected on her carefree OL years; Hana, a teacher of Japanese to foreigners, envied "ordinary" Japanese women who do not carry the burden of pioneering a career abroad; and Wakako, a former successful working woman, attempted to distance herself from the label of an internationalist. Others exhibited ambivalent and complex

identifications that do not allow a researcher to reduce them to one position: Seiko exhibited her Japanese-woman-ness and non-Japanese-woman-ness alternately; Ai was proud of her adjustability to differentiate her performance according to a given situation; and Yoriko crafted an intricate self that is tough but not pushy, tender but not meek.

These narratives add another dimension to the “reality” of Japanese women. Previous studies on Japanese women, based on intensive and extensive participant observation, provide vivid portrayals in which the women are not only subjugated; they also hold freedom and exercise power in domestic spheres and conduct subtle resistance in male-dominated workplaces. While the researchers capture how Japanese women conduct their everyday lives and present themselves in specific settings, this study introduces yet another, unprecedented depth of lived experiences of Japanese women: Anne Imamura’s housewives may also distance themselves from the “good wife, wise mother” model, as Nami and Shoko carefully crafted themselves in front of me; Yuko Ogasawara’s OLs may possess similar “anger that awaits to explode” that Maki, a former OL at a city office, emphasized; and Karen Kelsky’s internationalist Japanese women may secretly feel fatigue and anxiety in dealing with their unconventional careers as Yuko, the musician, disclosed. Such findings may not hold much relevance in scholarly frameworks; yet, they construe an essential part of the women’s own version of reality.

More crucially, it is through these subjective realities that we recognize the women’s agency. In addition to their manipulative usage of the roles of “the Japanese woman,” the women also express their opposition toward the dominant discourse. Some explicitly mentioned their frustration at stereotypical notions that exist both in Japan and abroad, and others exhibited their strategies to subvert such notions from within. Some tried to

refuse and avoid the social category imposed on them and others started to question what Japanese-woman-ness is, or even whether there is such a thing. The women's words, when examined carefully, throw a critical gaze back to those who dominate and manipulate them. The powerful gazers involve not only chauvinist Japanese men and Orientalist non-Japanese; the women's objection can also be at researchers, including this writer, who may observe, evaluate and judge their lives.

This thesis is devoted to represent a "reality" that we—the thirty-one Japanese women—constructed jointly. I do not claim that this represents the authentic or ultimate depiction of Japanese women; nor do I propose that this is the only appropriate method to study Japanese women. Rather, through the women's gripping and illuminating stories, I aimed to highlight the manifold ways in which Japanese women live the social imagery and perform their identities, deploying and subverting "the Japanese woman"—a shifting and ambivalent pivot.

## Appendix: Profiles of the Interviewees

NAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS <sup>1</sup>	RESIDENCE IN JAPAN	EDUCATION <sup>2</sup>	OCCUPATION IN JAPAN	DURATION IN HAWAII	OCCUPATION IN HAWAII <sup>3</sup>
Nami	35	M (Japanese)	Tokyo	JC	Clerical work, homemaker	2.5	US
Ai	35	M (American)	Kumamoto	JC	English instructor	4.5	GS
Hiroe	36	S	Niigata, Tokyo	JC	Clerical worker in steel industry	2.5	CCS
Midori	30	M (American)	Fukui, Kyoto	BA	English teacher at junior high school	2	GS
Asako	26	M (American)	Tokyo	BA	Part-time work, homemaker	2.5	Homemaker
Kazue	48	S	Oita, Tokyo	MS	Nurse, nursing instructor	4.5	GS
Hana	32	S	Kanagawa	MA	Japanese instructor	1	GS
Madoka	29	S	Saitama	BA	Office worker in NPO	3.5	GS
Keiko	35	M (American)	Tokyo	BA	Office worker in finance	1	Accountant
Shinobu	37	S	Osaka	VS	Nurse	3	Nurse

<sup>1</sup> M = married (nationality of husband), S = single

<sup>2</sup> VS = vocational school, JC = junior college in Japan, CC = community college abroad, BA = bachelor's degree, MA/MS/MM = Master's degree in Art/Science/Music

<sup>3</sup> CCS = community college student, US = undergraduate student, GS = graduate student

NAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS <sup>4</sup>	RESIDENCE IN JAPAN	EDUCATION <sup>5</sup>	OCCUPATION IN JAPAN	DURATION IN HAWAII	OCCUPATION IN HAWAII <sup>6</sup>
Taeko	38	M (American)	Chiba	BA	Office worker in travel industry	2	Travel agency
Seiko	46	M (Japanese)	Osaka	JC	Oversea sales at machinery export company	4	US
Fumika	40	M (Japanese)	Osaka	JC	Clerical work, homemaker	4	US
Kaori	38	S	Osaka	MA	Designer	5	GS
Risa	39	M (Japanese)	Kyoto	JC	Sales administrative assistant in journalism	4.5	US
Yoriko	30	S	Hiroshima, Tokyo	BA	Travel agency, academic foundation	1	GS
Saki	33	M (Japanese)	Niigata, Tokyo	VS	Diving instructor	1.5	Entrepreneur
Michi	28	S	Tokyo	CC	Secretary, web designer, freelance interpreter	2	US
Kiyoko	31	M (American)	Tokyo	CC	Auto CAD operator	3	Wedding company
Reiko	33	S	Saitama	BA	Office worker, temp staff	3	GS

<sup>4</sup> M = married (nationality of husband), S = single

<sup>5</sup> VS = vocational school, JC = junior college in Japan, CC = community college abroad, BA = bachelor's degree, MA/MS/MM = Master's degree in Art/Science/Music

<sup>6</sup> CCS = community college student, US = undergraduate student, GS = graduate student

NAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS <sup>7</sup>	RESIDENCE IN JAPAN	EDUCATION <sup>8</sup>	OCCUPATION IN JAPAN	DURATION IN HAWAII	OCCUPATION IN HAWAII <sup>9</sup>
Norie	35	M (American)	Tokyo	BA	Counselor	4.5	Hotel, counselor
Maki	35	S	Kagawa	JC	Public official (city office)	1	US
Chikako	36	S	Osaka	BA	English teacher at high school	1	GS
Erika	32	S	Aomori	BA	Office worker in real estate	1	GS
Iyo	35	M (American)	Kanagawa	BA	Travel agency	3	Travel agency
Wakako	35	S	Shizuoka, Kobe	BA	Production management in fashion industry	2	US
Yuko	30	S	Kanagawa	MM	Musician	2	Musician
Mika	32	S	Aichi	BA	Translator, English teacher at high school	1	GS
Shoko	28	S	Nara	BA	Office worker in Bank and in NGO	1	GS
Ayumi	35	S	Kumamoto	JC	Secretary, English instructor	1	Intern at NPO

<sup>7</sup> M = married (nationality of husband), S = single

<sup>8</sup> VS = vocational school, JC = junior college in Japan, CC = community college abroad, BA = bachelor's degree, MA/MS/MM = Master's degree in Art/Science/Music

<sup>9</sup> CCS = community college student, US = undergraduate student, GS = graduate student

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