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## CONCLUSION: REVISING 'US AND THEM'

'Life does not mean that same thing to them and us ... What we feel is the difference, the gulf, the distance between us and them.'<sup>1</sup> This response to Japan's periodic but insistent criticism of the Immigration Restriction Act was printed in 1919 in Brisbane's evening newspaper the *Telegraph*. Some habits of mind die hard. Over the decades of Australia's evolving relationship with Japan since the Meiji period, it seems that photographers have often been intent on inscribing—and reinscribing—this entrenched sense of difference and distance. Yet, as this work has sought to reveal, the vast body of snapshots, lanternslides, art, news, military and governmental photographs through which Australian impressions of Japan have been imaged, conveys a diversity of perspectives, as well as conflicting and sometimes transgressive desires, anxieties and ambitions.

Now, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the old simplistic dichotomy of 'us and them'—and the ideology that supports and perpetuates it—is both unproductive and redundant. Contemporary currents of the trans-Pacific photographic encounter lead to more fluid and sceptical modes of representation. In this context, it is worth noting the work of Mayu Kanamori, a Japanese photographer, poet and playwright long resident in Australia. Tokyo-born and Sydney-based, Kanamori's transnational photographic dialogue involves interrogating her own place in histories of the Japanese people in Australia and questioning persistent clichés. Kanamori has completed several projects on these subjects since she emigrated in 1981, including

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1 'Japan's Protest against Race Prejudice', *Telegraph*, 24 March 1919, 6.



Figure 7.1. Mayu Kanamori, *Untitled* from *You've Mistaken Me for a Butterfly*, 2017–18. © Mayu Kanamori 2017.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7.2. Mayu Kanamori, *Untitled* from *You've Mistaken Me for a Butterfly*, 2017–18. © Mayu Kanamori 2017.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

her photojournalism in the mid-1990s and her play about a Broome photographer *Yasukichi Murakami—Through a Distant Lens* (2014). Photographs feature prominently in Kanamori's performance work *You've Mistaken Me for a Butterfly* (2017) (see Figures 7.1 and 7.2). As its title suggests, *You've Mistaken Me for a Butterfly* examines Western clichés of Japanese femininity, perhaps the most predominant of all the delimiting stereotypes that have saddled the country over the years.

Taken in the Goldfields-Esperance region of Western Australia, Kanamori's photographs are a long way from the images of eye-catching, butterfly-like geisha that have long captivated Anglo-Australians. There is a sense of melancholy in the dilapidated interiors, their browned peeling wallpaper and the red dirt paths marked with footprints of someone no longer present. A small brown moth flutters in one interior window—where it is likely to be mistaken by many viewers for a butterfly—while rusted industrial equipment stands idle outside. These photographs are fragments of a narrative that cannot quite be grasped. Kanamori places herself within this narrative as both its subject and author, photographing her reflection in a mirror in the old building with her camera held firmly in her hands.

The spoken word component of Kanamori's performance describes how she was led to the Western Australia goldfields by the story of a young woman named Okin.<sup>2</sup> In the 1890s, Okin lived in the town of Malcolm, 30 km north of a gold mine named Butterfly. There are no buildings left in Malcolm today, so Kanamori visualises her response to Okin's story elsewhere in the area. These goldfields became home to many Japanese in this period. Where camps and towns were established, prostitutes soon followed, working in brothels that frequently operated under the guise of laundries or boarding houses.<sup>3</sup> Frequently known as *karayuki-san* (literally 'those who go to China'), these travelling women were often poor and illiterate daughters of farmers and rural labourers. Many were tricked or kidnapped into prostitution and forced to work for extended periods to pay off the 'debts' incurred from their journey and board. Some *karayuki-san* saved their earnings, later using the funds to launch their own businesses, and several established lasting relationships with

2 Mayu Kanamori and Vera Mackie, 'You've Mistaken Me for a Butterfly', *Japanese Studies* 37, no. 3 (2017): 387–94.

3 It has been argued that most of the Japanese women counted in the 1901 Australian census worked as prostitutes. See Yuriko Nagata, 'Gendering Australia-Japan Relations: Prostitutes and the Japanese Diaspora in Australia', *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 11 (March 2003).

local businessmen. While the presence of these Japanese women in Australia has attracted the attention of several historians, very little is known about them as individuals with their own experiences, thoughts and perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

Kanamori first came across Okin in the archive of the eminent historian of Australian–Japanese relations, D.C.S. Sissons. Handwritten notes described Okin as the victim of a violent crime.<sup>5</sup> In July 1898, three men forced themselves into a house where Okin was staying. Two of them raped her while the third stood guard. A Japanese man named Enaba who lived with Okin tried unsuccessfully to help her, so he ran to fetch the local police constable who was able to apprehend, arrest and charge the men. At the subsequent trial, Okin’s testimony that she was a laundress was challenged by the defence, who sought to establish that she was a prostitute and her home was a brothel. The accused asserted that they were paying customers of the brothel and that a dispute erupted about money. It was her word against theirs. Kanamori’s performance quotes the crown solicitor’s request to the jury in which he argued for Okin’s right to justice:

It is of great importance in all countries, especially in a country like this, where women were practically alone in outlying, far away parts, that the chastity of women be cherished and protected in the highest degree. No matter what their colour, race, creed or reputation.<sup>6</sup>

The jury could not agree initially, but the men were ultimately acquitted. Yet, Kanamori reminds us that fundamental questions remain unanswered about Okin. Was she a laundress or was she lying? Was Enaba her pimp or saviour?

These mysteries are amplified by the persistence of stereotypes surrounding Japanese women in foreign countries. Alison Broinowski has used the term the ‘butterfly phenomenon’ to describe the Orientalist rendering of Japanese women (and by extension Japan itself) as seductive

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4 May Albertus Bain, *Full Fathom Five* (Perth: Artlook Books, 1982), 91; D.C.S. Sissons, ‘Karayuki-San: Japanese Prostitutes in Australia, 1887–1916—II’, *Historical Studies* 17, no. 69 (1977): 474–88; Nagata, ‘Gendering Australia-Japan Relations’. For an early Japanese account of karayuki-san see Morisaki Kazue, *Karayuki-San* (Tōkyō: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1976).

5 Papers of D.C.S. Sissons, 1950–2006, National Library of Australia, MS 3092.

6 *Performance—Post Memory: You’ve Mistaken Me for a Butterfly (the Second Instalment)* (Crawley, Western Australia: Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Western Australia, 25 September 2017).

but fragile and subject to the demands of the West.<sup>7</sup> The term, of course, is derived from Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904), which is about an impoverished 15-year-old Japanese girl who marries an American naval officer and eventually commits suicide after being abandoned by him and being forced to give up her child. The gender politics of *Madame Butterfly* and its geo-cultural overtones have been heavily critiqued in recent years. 'In Western eyes', Dorinne Kondo argued:

Japanese women are meant to sacrifice, and Butterfly sacrifices her 'husband', her religion, her people, her son, and ultimately her very life ... the predictable happens: West wins over East, Man over Woman, White over Asian.<sup>8</sup>

Kanamori is aware that this dualistic mode of critique is problematic because it reinforces the position of Japanese women as victims—'they' remain passive and silent while 'we' assert scholarly authority. The ways that such stereotypes affected the experiences of actual Japanese women remain obscured, as do the nuances and variability of representations of Japanese women over time. This history and its critique left Kanamori in a bind—how could she escape the enduring logic of 'us' and 'them'? In the end, Kanamori resisted narrating yet another story about the rescue of a vulnerable, victimised butterfly by the Australian policeman or, indeed, enacting a subsequent rescue of Okin from historical obscurity. Her open-ended narratives and photographs of empty buildings reflect her resistance to easy answers, while her use of the first person in the title *You've Mistaken Me for a Butterfly* implies the lingering legacy of the hegemony of foreign representations of the Japanese on her own experience and identity.

Central to Kanamori's work, and to this book more broadly, is the question, 'what do photographs do?' Photographs are understood not simply as representations of things that exist independently in the 'real' world. They are also material objects, a means of communication, a way of constructing meaning and disseminating ideas both locally and internationally. The photographs discussed in these pages highlight that, while much of the way that nations relate to one another happens at a distance among strangers, these international relationships also

7 Alison Broinowski, 'The Butterfly Phenomenon', *The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia* 1, no. 3 (1992): 10.

8 Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theatre* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 34–35.

affect familial and personal connections closer to home. Whether in government documents, commercial environments, family albums, or newspapers and galleries, photographs have been used to both boost official international relations and cement interpersonal bonds.

Moreover, these public and private photographic relationships often sit in conflict. In Australia, Japan has been variously positioned as an innocent child, potential invader, refined artist, despised enemy, beneficial trading partner and, finally (and albeit ambivalently), good friend and partner. Friendships and productive working relationships can flourish during periods of diplomatic dispute and political suspicion, just as clichés about racial difference may be used to express professional or personal admiration. As Kanamori suggests in her work, limiting critical analysis to cultural stereotypes risks reinforcing the racism that they articulate and perpetuate. This is especially important in today's Australia, where some are lamenting the impending loss of a national homogeneity that was always illusory. Australian–Japanese photographic relations highlight how national identities and histories are the products of encounters with foreign nations, individuals and cultures, rather than simply inwardly focused myths of imagined isolation and particularity. Understanding the significance of those encounters demands sensitivity to patterns of change and continuity in intercultural relations; it involves looking at and around the apparent similarities in images and their subjects—beyond that which can be read at a glance—to consider the changing role that photographs and photographic practices play in political, cultural and social life.

This interpretive task also recognises how the history of the Australia–Japan relationship, including but not limited to its visual traditions, continues to affect how intercultural relations are negotiated, formed and understood today. Although several contemporary artists who respond to this history are not interested in the popular clichés of picturesque Japan that have long pervaded photographic representations of the country, they do acknowledge how this history of representation shapes perception. Kanamori's self-reflexive approach considers the impact of this history on her own practice and sense of place in Australia, while Häggblom, Köller, Sleeth and Hewitt examine how stereotypes of Japanese difference have an impact on some very challenging issues such as suicide, natural disaster and globalising economies. These cross-cultural projects are driven by tension and complexity—by the desire to ask questions of the past and present rather than to propose neat

resolutions. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ ultimately become impossible categories in this work, which also problematises the camera’s power to seemingly separate the past from the present.

As the Australia–Japan relationship continues to evolve in both Asia-Pacific and global contexts, photographs and photographic practices will keep playing a significant role in the ‘complex cultural flows and connections’ that bind the two nations.<sup>9</sup> Maintaining a respectful, inclusive partnership involves balancing a range of perspectives and interests, and photography will remain a potent, if problematic, register of those interests. ‘Picturing’ Japan was always a selective and contingent endeavour; Japan itself has always in a sense remained out of view, close by but somewhere else. That Australians seem increasingly relaxed in this knowledge suggests a kind of ironic representational breakthrough. It reflects, further, a more assured view of the way they see the world itself and their own place in it.

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9 Koichi Iwabuchi, ‘Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of “International Cultural Exchange”’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 430.

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