

An Interview with Gerry Yokota

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Introduction

Dr. Gerry Yokota is a Professor of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies at the Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University. She takes a cognitive linguistic approach to the creative use of metaphor in intercultural communication, especially the representation of gender and the representation of Japan to the English-speaking world. She has taught at the Department of English and Program in Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies since 1989. Her early research focused on the classical canon of Noh, the traditional drama of Japan, and has since covered representations of gender, noncanonical play revivals, and new Noh, particularly new works by women.

On December 7th, 2019, Otemae University invited Dr. Gerry Yokota to speak at their symposium “Multicultural Japan: Effective Methodologies for Teaching Language and Culture to Japanese University Students.” The conference was held to mark the conclusion of a five-year research project that evaluated English language pedagogy and culturally familiar and non-familiar content used in tertiary education. The following is an interview with Daniel Tang, on behalf of the research team supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. DT stands for Daniel Tang and GY for Gerry Yokota.

Interview

DT: One of the most fascinating aspects of your speech/article was hearing about Mandela. Could you share your experiences with Mandela in Japan? What did you do? When did this take place? Why was it significant?

GY: Nelson Mandela was unconditionally released from prison on February 11, 1990, after over 27 years of incarceration. After his release, he embarked on a world tour to express his gratitude for the international support he had received personally and to ask for continuing support in the establishment of democracy in South Africa for all his people. Each country that hosted this tour established an executive committee to welcome him, and I was a member of the Japan Committee, as I had been active in the anti-apartheid movement since my graduate school days and specifically because I had experience interpreting for South African exiles (one of whom is now the South African ambassador to the UN).

Mandela came to Japan in October of that year and gave speeches in both Osaka and Tokyo. The Osaka rally was a huge event, attended by about 28,000 people, and today I still have students tell me that they heard about it from their parents. I am publishing an article in a forthcoming proceedings of the Peace as a Global Language (PGL) Conference that gives more details, based on the plenary talk I gave at PGL2014 and a public

lecture I gave at United Nations University as part of their “Mandela & I” lecture series, so I will refer readers to that publication for details. What I would most like to emphasize here is his lifelong emphasis on the power of language and art to promote peace and social justice.

He brought the Amandla Cultural Ensemble to Japan to perform on stage with him. He often visited the orphanages he founded for children who had lost their parents to AIDS and loved singing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” with them, even though he actually could not carry a tune, but the loving twinkle in his eye more than made up for it! I think people interested in the theme of this conference, Multicultural Japan, might likely be quite interested in the way he asked that the new national anthem be sung in the four main languages of the country. (I especially recommend the performance by the Soweto Gospel Choir on YouTube.) You will find the spirit that informed such political and humanitarian decisions in quotes like these.

“We slaughter one another in our words and attitudes. We slaughter one another in the stereotypes and mistrust that linger in our heads, and the words of hate we spew from our lips.” (State of the Union Address, 5 February 1999)

“It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die.” (Closing Address, 13th International AIDS Conference, Durban, 14 July 2000)

“Music and dancing make me at peace with the world and at peace with myself.” (Johnny Clegg concert, France, 1999)

DT: You mentioned your activism and how you had faculty support at that time. Given the employment situation of many university staff these days, what has been the effect of this shift towards contract employment? Could you comment in regards to activism, and perhaps, even the use of controversial metaphors/language?

GY: Times have definitely changed, and individual circumstances vary. The best thing I believe I can say with confidence in this regard is not to feel guilty if you witness injustice and are unable to speak up due to your own vulnerable position. Remember there are always other actions you can take to bend the arc of the universe towards justice, to borrow the words of Rev. King. We each have to find our own ways to plant seeds of awareness when we can, always with the hope that they will eventually bear fruit, including the nurturing of an environment of academic freedom where we do not have to live with such fears. The best way to minimize such fears is not to deny their validity, but to realistically acknowledge the reality and consider what we can do to improve the situation.

In this regard, there is one scene in the movie *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* that vividly symbolizes one of the greatest lessons I feel I learned from him, and that is that the strategic use of compromise should not be scorned as moral compromise. When Mandela was first imprisoned with his comrades from the Rivonia Trial, only one of them was issued a prison uniform including long trousers because he was Indian; the others, all black, were issued shorts. Mandela's philosophical attitude was, "We have plenty of time [his ironically humorous way of describing life imprisonment]. We start small." So he started campaigning for all prisoners to be issued the same long trousers, recognizing the symbolic effect of that subtle difference to perpetuate a divide-and-conquer strategy of preventing solidarity among the prisoners.

I think we've all experienced situations where we realize we have to pick our battles, else we end up winning a minor battle but losing the war; such personal experiences of my own have reinforced my recognition of the wisdom of this sort of activism.

DT: You mentioned that as teachers, it can sometimes be unnerving to share personal experiences (students/other teachers may think you are arrogant/boastful, for example). How/what do you recommend we do?

GY: Scholars such as Richard Elmore, of the Harvard School of Education, argue persuasively for the recognition that different students have different modes of learning, and I believe the same principle applies to modes of teaching. My system may not work for everyone, but, while I consider myself a creative person capable of flexible response to the emergence of unexpected needs in the classroom, I am basically leery of too much dependence on spontaneity.

So, for example, to prevent myself from impulsively allowing spontaneous moments in the course of a classroom discussion compel me to constantly draw connections with Nelson Mandela, I simply make note of them and then incorporate them into a one-time mini-lesson designed to fit with a particular unit of the course design. In a writing course that includes a unit on writing book and film reviews, for example, I may take a pair of reviews from different media outlets of the aforementioned Mandela movie as a model for a lesson on the basic skills of writing such a review. As long as I explicitly note the risk of implicit bias in my personal selection of materials, I believe I am conscientiously observing the principle of not using the lectern as my soapbox for ideological indoctrination; I am only attempting to include a diverse range of sources.

DT: You touched on universalism and relativism in your paper. How can we balance the two in our classes? Could you give another example (in addition to your "island" example) suitable for a classroom in Japan/ share other examples that have occurred in your classroom?

GY: You might, for example, want to try to approach your own preparatory metaphor spotting with a selection of candidate materials as an exercise in recognizing your own biases. Are you initially attracted to a particular metaphor, but then give up the idea of incorporating it because you're afraid it might be too difficult or

controversial? Are there some taboos, like the dreaded parsnips (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms and pork) that you find yourself unconsciously avoiding?

If you can identify and overcome that original flight response, you might find that the rewards are worth engaging with it. Perhaps have an explicit discussion with your students about their preferred balance of topics, encouraging them to go beyond the materialistic attraction of extrinsic rewards for quantifiable market skills such as high test scores (while not neglecting our responsibility to provide a considerable degree of instruction in such marketable skills) toward recognition of the less obvious rewards to be found in the satisfaction of intrinsic motivations to be a global citizen with equally valuable skills in communication and empathy.

Don't limit your search to examples of false universalism; look for false solidarity or false identification, any kind of false or contradictory equivalence. To give another personal example, I went through a period of wallowing in self-pity, considering myself the victim when I felt the "pure" members of my undergraduate Asian-American student association were excluding me because I was "mixed." It took me quite some time to realize it was not only an issue of purity and impurity, but my failure to recognize the fact that, in my desire to claim an Asian-American identity on the basis of my one-quarter Asian roots, I was not sufficiently acknowledging that I was three-quarters white; I was not sufficiently recognizing the privilege and responsibility that larger intersection entailed. I have not yet found a way to fit that story into a lesson, but it's in my seed stock waiting for the right time, which I am sure will come considering the growing number of mixed roots students I have in my classes. I also have many students interested in war issues, and have considered working up some of the research I have done on relations between prisoners of war and their camp guards—another potentially fraught issue in the Japanese university classroom that would clearly have to be dealt with carefully. But, rather than make the issue taboo, one might consider displacing it to Italy or Germany or Vietnam, creating an opening for students to draw their own connections.

DT: Please feel free to add anything relevant!

GY: Please allow me to repeat my three favorite mantras:

--the medium is the message;

--cynicism is not critique, it is only the opposite extreme of naiveté; and

--don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good!

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