

SSJR Virtual Roundtable at the 2022 Association of Asian Studies Conference

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Session Details

“Foul-ups, Faux pas, and Mishaps: A Roundtable on Ethnography in Japanese Religions”

March 27, 2022, 9:00-10:30 HST (Hawai'i)

Organizer & Chair:

Caleb Carter (Kyushu University)

Discussants:

Barbara Ambros (UNC Chapel Hill)

Erica Baffelli (University of Manchester)

Michael Dylan Foster (UC Davis)

Shuji Iijima (Kyushu University)

Jessica Starling (Lewis & Clark College)

Recording viewable online (for registered AAS attendees) until May 31, 2022:

<https://www.eventscribe.net/2022/AAS/agenda.asp?pfp=VirtualProgram>

Post Session Write-up

by Caleb Carter

March 31, 2022

In a lively discussion that stretched across global times zones (4am in Japan to 8pm in the UK), panelists of our SSJR roundtable shared stories—with plenty of flair, drama, and humor—that do not typically appear in the pages of final publications: fieldwork plans gone awry, disruptive personal circumstances, social faux pas, awkward moments, and all-out communication breakdowns. An underlying point highlighting these episodes was how on the one hand, fieldwork is often coupled with unpredictability, setbacks, and missteps, and on the other, how these things can enrich one's research when approached creatively.

Given added frictions and postponements resulting from the global pandemic, the panel also discussed strategies for this new era: how to reenter the field after prolonged delays, engage with interlocutors through virtual mediums, and navigate uncertainties as Covid remains with us.

Thoughtful questions came in from the audience. Bryan Lowe asked if panelists could speak to an actual failure that didn't turn into an opportunity. He also asked about issues of privilege and positionality to work in the field. Dale Andrews turned discussion to the pedagogy of fieldwork and mishaps: how does one instruct their students on overcoming difficulties; at what point should instructors intervene on behalf of their students; and how do we address these topics in formalized classroom instruction? Finally, David Quinter raised the challenge of image permissions and gaining required signatures in the field, to which panelists responded with a number of ideas.

Following the session, Shuji Iijima shared with the group this illuminating line of reflections on missteps and failures in the field of Japanese ethnography:

The early twentieth-century banker and folklorist Shibusawa Keizō (1896–1963) reflected on his fieldwork as a *History of Failings* (祭魚洞襍考, 1954).¹ One of his pupils, Miyamoto Tsuneichi (1907–1981) later offered his own account in *Damages in the Field* (調査地被害, 1972). Ankei Yūji has discussed these works (1998, 2008), including a revisit of Miyamoto's book in the edited volume, *The Annoyance of Being Surveyed: A Book to Read Before Going Out into the Field* (調査されるという迷惑—フィールドに出る前に読んでおく本, Miyamoto and Ankei 2008).² In it he recalls an incident in which the famous novelist Tatematsu Wahei (1947–2010) once ignored a resident's insistence that sacred stories she shared remain confidential, ultimately including them in his book. After that, the village set up their own local ethical review board for future visiting researchers. As a final point, Miyamoto realized in his later years that his institution held many scrolls and historical documents that he had been entrusted with from his field sites. Regretting this action, he asked the historian Amino Yoshihiko (1928–2004) to return them to the families to which they belonged (Amino 1999).³

Finally, to support scholars and instructors, the group came up with the following list of sources that fruitfully engage the theme of the session as well as some essential readings in fieldwork methods.

Approaches, Methods, and Challenges in the Field: Selected References

Ambros, Barbara. 2009. "Researching Place, Emplacing the Researcher: Reflections on the Making of a Documentary on a Pilgrimage Confraternity." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 1: 167–197.

¹ 祭魚洞襍考 (1954 年) | 渋沢 敬三 | 本 | 通販 | [Amazon](#)

² 調査されるという迷惑—フィールドに出る前に読んでおく本 | 宮本 常一, 安溪 遊地 | 本 | 通販 | [Amazon](#)

³ 古文書返却の旅—戦後史学史の一齣 (中公新書) | 網野 善彦 | 本 | 通販 | [Amazon](#)

- Foster, Michael Dylan. 2017. "The Intangible Lightness of Heritage." *Fabula: Journal of Folktale Studies* 58, issues 1–2: 105–121.
- Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." Member Voices, *Fieldsights*, June 9. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>
- Harvey, Graham. "Field Research: Participant Observation." in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Strausberg and Steven Engler, pp. 217–244. London, New York: Routledge, 2011.⁴
- Kottmann, Nora and Cornelia Reiher, eds. 2020. *Studying Japan: Handbook of Research Designs, Fieldwork and Methods*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- McLaughlin, Levi. 2010. "All Research is Fieldwork: A Practical Introduction to Studying in Japan as a Foreign Researcher." *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 8, no. 30. <https://apjif.org/-Levi-McLaughlin/3388/article.html>
- Pollard, Amy. 2009. "Field of Screams: Difficulty and Ethnographic Fieldwork." *Anthropology Matters*, October 10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22582/am.v11i2.10>
- Robertson, Jennifer. 2002. "Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on 'Positionality'." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 4: 785–92.
- Weiss, Margot. 2021. "The Interlocutor Slot: Citing, Crediting, Cotheorizing, and the Problem of Ethnographic Expertise." *American Anthropologist* 123: 948–953. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13639>
- Yamaguchi, Tomomi. 2007. "Impartial Observation and Partial Participation: Feminist Ethnography in Politically Charged Japan" *Critical Asian Studies* 34, no. 4: 583–608.
- Schell, Scott. "Conducting Fieldwork in Japanese Religions." In *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, eds. Paul L. Swanson and Clark Chilson, pp. 381–391. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2006.

Websites/blogs/podcasts:

A new approach and methodology that accommodates changing living and working conditions:

- <https://www.patchworkethnography.com/>

Trauma and Resilience in Ethnographic fieldwork:

⁴ Further reading in the same volume: Bird and Scholes, "Research Ethics," pp. 81–105; Bremborg, "Interviewing," pp. 310–322.

- https://anthrodendum.org/2019/06/18/trauma-and-resilience-in-ethnographic-fieldwork/?fbclid=IwAR2CvdScGjzc741TU6BpszYOj4ya9RUIJtCwMcueqxFMMpr-sf2_xopHv-8

When Fieldwork Breaks your Heart:

- <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/when-fieldwork-breaks-your-heart>

Writing/Power/Story: Why and How to Do Ethnography of Nonhuman Beings and Things

- <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/writing-power-story-why-and-how-to-do-ethnography-of-nonhuman-beings-and-things>
- Collection of essays essay collection edited by Carole McGranahan and Erica Weiss on “Rethinking Pseudonyms in Ethnography”:
<https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography>

Zoom chat messages from the session:

12:23:19 From Barbara Ambros—UNC Chapel Hill to Everyone:

Ambros, Barbara. Researching Place, Emplacing the Researcher: Reflections on the Making of a Documentary on a Pilgrimage Confraternity." JJRS Volume 36:1 (2009)

12:24:19 From Michael Dylan Foster (he/his) to Everyone:

Foster, MD, "The Intangible Lightness of Heritage," Fabula: Journal of Folktale Studies 58, issues 1-2 (2017): 105-121.

12:25:20 From Michael Dylan Foster (he/his) to Everyone:

Also, forthcoming: <https://iupress.org/9780253063762/we-are-all-survivors/>

12:44:41 From Bryan Lowe to Everyone:

I had two questions just to put them out there (please privilege better questions). 1) When interviewing for a job or something of that nature, you're often asked to describe some time you failed and, of course, the appropriate response is to take it and turn it into a success story. Everyone today kind of did that—the faux pas was actually an opportunity. I was curious if anyone could speak to an actual failure that didn't turn into an opportunity and instead just ended in failure.

12:45:08 From Bryan Lowe to Everyone:

2) Barbara mentioned a bit about opportunities one gets being privileged as a white foreign scholar. I was curious how people deal with that privilege in a responsible way.

12:46:19 From Barbara Ambros—UNC Chapel Hill to Everyone:

(That was Erica who mentioned being privileged.)

12:49:08 From Jessie Starling to Everyone:

Thank you, Bryan! In terms of failed fieldwork there are a lot of great stories collated in a study by Amy Pollard in a piece called "Field of screams: difficulty and ethnographic fieldwork

12:49:14 From Jessie Starling to Everyone:

https://anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/10

12:51:22 From Jessie Starling to Everyone:

In terms of privilege, I have found the work of Chika Watanabe, Gökçe Günel, and Saiba Varma on "Patchwork Ethnography" really valuable in thinking through so many issues there.

<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>

12:52:04 From Erica Baffelli (she/her) to Everyone:

I was about to mention Patchwork ethnography too

12:53:53 From Bryan Lowe to Everyone:

Thank you, Jessie (and Erica for the extra vote) and also Barbara for your verbal comments in response.

12:54:21 From Erica Baffelli (she/her) to Everyone:

This is the new PA website :<https://www.patchworkethnography.com/>

12:54:37 From Erica Baffelli (she/her) to Everyone:

Some of the conversations are very useful for reflecting on these issues too

13:13:35 From Dale Andrews to Everyone:

Questions: How do you instruct your students to overcome difficulties? To what degree would you intervene on behalf of your students if they encountered some problems in their own fieldwork/research? Have you address the topics discussed today in formalized classroom instruction?

13:23:15 From Jessie Starling to Everyone:

Barbara, how do you spell that third-party vendor that will ship overseas?

13:24:38 From Barbara Ambros—UNC Chapel Hill to Everyone:

<https://kosho.or.jp>

13:24:55 From Barbara Ambros—UNC Chapel Hill to Everyone:

Third-party buyer: <https://buyee.jp/?lang=en>

13:25:23 From Barbara Ambros—UNC Chapel Hill to Everyone:

Buyee also buys/ships stuff on Yahoo Auction

13:27:03 From Liora Sarfati to Everyone:

Thank you all!

13:28:02 From Barbara Ambros—UNC Chapel Hill to Everyone:

Fellow panelists, we should have a follow-up on this conversation!

13:29:47 From Bryan Lowe to Everyone:

Thank you everyone! This was really wonderful and helpful for me advising students with ethnographic interests.

13:29:58 From Matthew Mitchell to Everyone:

Thank you all! This was wonderful!

13:30:05 From Matthew Hayes (he/him) to Everyone:

This was excellent, thank you for this conversation!

13:30:54 From Rebecca Mendelson to Everyone:

Many thanks to all for this fascinating, informative conversation!

Session Abstract:

Open a published work and between its polished lines, you will rarely learn of the misfortunes, mishaps, and personal challenges that occurred during the preliminary stages of research: funding dilemmas, family commitments, political instabilities, and yes, pandemics, that forestalled momentum; nor will you read about the hiccups, miscommunications, and unanticipated obstacles that arose in the field. For junior scholars, such experiences can feel like devastating setbacks, yet these ‘swerves in the road’ can also generate surprising outcomes and even enrich one’s results.

In a frank conversation, five scholars of Japanese religions will share insights from their own calamities in the field. Collectively, they bring a range of experiences and backgrounds. Barbara Ambros has long used approaches such as video ethnography and multispecies research to study gender, ethnic minorities, place and space, and human-animal relationships. Erica Baffelli has conducted extensive fieldwork on so-called new religions, minority religions and their members. Michael Dylan Foster has been tracking festivals in two rural communities for two decades. Shuji Iijima has devoted his career to examining religious transformation in various social and environmental contexts in Japan and beyond. Jessica Starling spent two years with temple families in the True Pure Land tradition, and currently investigates the volunteer work of Pure Land Buddhists on behalf of recovered Hansen’s Disease patients.

What mistakes, self-inflicted mishaps, and external interruptions are woven into this work? How did issues of positionality (determined by race, gender, nationality, age, outsider status, etc.) pose foreseen and unforeseen challenges? Finally, how did they not only overcome obstacles and foul-ups but also integrate them into the research process and overall analysis?

Following brief reflections and personal experiences by each panelist, the session will then engage the audience in a lively discussion. Sponsored by the Society for the Study of Japanese Religions, and drawing on insights emerging from recent discussions around “patchwork ethnography,” this roundtable aims to support students and scholars in early career phase. We also invite scholars from all stages of research and related fields to join us for a dynamic conversation on the challenges, unexpected fruits, and serendipity of fieldwork.