

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 18.3 (Winter 2022)

Kumojima, Tomoe. *Victorian Women's Travel Writing on Meiji Japan: Hospitable Friendship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 228 pages.

Reviewed by Daniela Kato, Independent Scholar, Hokuto, Japan.

<1>There is something that feels at once inviting and remote on the cover of Tomoe Kumojima's book. At its centre is a chiaroscuro image of three women in Japanese costume and coiffure. They are sitting in an intimate circle under a full moon and the dim light of three stone lanterns. And yet their faces remain obscured and viewers can barely notice that two of them are holding hands. The only objects that stand out are a folded manuscript of sorts tucked in one of the woman's garments and a ghostly tangle of vines that run horizontally across the moon, somewhat incongruously projecting its long shadow across the said manuscript and the picture's foreground.

<2>Hospitable friendship" is not a concept one would readily associate with Victorian women's writing at challenging times of volatile geopolitical change such as those of Meiji Japan (1868-1912). Perhaps this is why Kumojima spends 50 long, laborious pages unravelling multiple layers of historical, literary and theoretical context before zooming in on her central focus and argument. The focus is on "the textual manifestations of the affective bonding between Victorian female travellers and Japanese people fostered by different gender expectations and the discord this cross-cultural affinity brings into the politicized discourse of friendship" (p. 50). The argument goes that such feminine modes of relational being through writing present "real-life examples of radical openness to others" (p. 50) across national borders, with an emphasis on the role of hosts, including interpreters, informants, friends and acquaintances. As Kumojima rightly notes, this latter aspect has as yet been little explored by previous scholarly studies on imperial travelogues by European women.

<3>It will take, however, another lengthy chapter of theoretical exposition around the concept of "hospitable friendship" – which the author derives from the high priests of French poststructuralist platitudes, Derrida, Nancy and Blanchot – before readers are finally introduced to the three women whose writings form the core of the study: Isabella Bird, Mary Crawford Fraser and Marie Stopes. We are rewarded

with generous portraits of the authors, interspersed with some persuasive analyses of their writings focused on the affective interactions they were able to sustain, though not always consistently, with their Japanese hosts.

<4>The chapter on Bird is especially rich in this regard. It delightfully conveys the multisensory quality of her affective engagements, in particular when Kumojima focuses on Bird's travels to northern Japan and her encounters with the indigenous Ainu. For example, there is a section in which the author brings the concept of "haptic aesthetic" (from Sarah Jackson) to bear on Bird's nursing of a sick Ainu woman, opening up a fresh moment of sensory communication that extends to the reader as well: "Bird and the Ainu woman communicate their fundamental being with each other through the touch, and the haptic writing further communicates with the body of the reader" (p. 95). This section builds up to a no less compelling one revolving around a 2005 fictional retelling, by Japanese novelist Nakajima Kyōko, of Bird's renowned *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* from the perspective of her male interpreter Itō. Here, through an astute, multilayered reading, Kumojima leads us to the the zenith of her thesis, by *showing* us the literary text functioning as "a hospitable space for a diverse group of women to live with their complexity and individuality, while weaving unexpected connections and affinities between them that transcend physical proximity and contemporaneity" (p. 107).

<5>And yet, it is symptomatic that this realisation should unfold from a novel inspired by Bird, and not from Bird's own Japan travelogue. This divesting of focus from travel writing itself to a tangle of other textual sources – mostly fictional accounts and private correspondence – becomes increasingly evident and somewhat distracting as Kumojima proceeds to discuss Mary Crawford Fraser and Marie Stopes in the two subsequent chapters. To my mind, such labyrinthine dispersion of textual sources gradually diminishes the cogency and affective resonance of the author's proposed conceptual framework, forcing her to hedge and wrap her arguments in convoluted formulations such as "the possibility of literature as a utopian space for female solidarity" (p. 140) and "the possibility of fruitful cultural interaction beyond geopolitical boundaries and racial differences" (p. 146).

<6>Things fillet for good in the Coda, when the author belatedly and rather perfunctorily brings in the parallel narratives of three Meiji women in Britain – Tsuda Umeko, Yasui Tetsu, and Yosano Akiko – but fails to knit them into the argumentative arc of the study. A more original, bolder cultural critic would have woven the different concepts, levels of analysis and heterogeneous quality of the narratives more seamlessly and creatively from the very outset. This would have made the book a far more compelling, fluid read that would no doubt appeal to a

much broader audience outside academia. All the same, Tomoe Kumojima's study is a valuable, informative and impeccably researched addition to existing academic scholarship on Victorian women's travel writing on Japan.