

“An Ode to her Revolt:”¹

Remembering Lee Ann Fujii

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The Dignity of Complexity: Being Human in Political Science

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The last conversations I had with Lee Ann Fujii had nothing to do with violence, research methods, or political science. Called unexpectedly to her mother’s deathbed in Seattle after a week of meetings in Washington, DC, Lee Ann was out of clean clothes and preparing to catch a hurriedly-bought flight. And so, on a chilly, drizzly grey morning in Baltimore, I left her in my apartment with a laundry card and ran off to a meeting. Returning home a few hours later, I opened the door to find Dr. Lee Ann Fujii—academic heavyweight, author of burn-it-down speeches, and potential future tenure-letter-writer—decked out in snake-print yoga pants and cheerfully folding *my* laundry as well as her own. Laughing at my abject horror, Lee Ann explained that she found folding freshly laundered clothes calming. And indeed, as our conversations turned to family dynamics surrounding acute illness, the #MeToo movement, and the intricacies of real estate acquisition, the smell of clean laundry soothingly lingered around us as rain pattered against the windows.

Though Lee Ann was never one for formality, the sheer humanness of the moment encapsulates much about her approach to her scholarship, as well as her life, in general. So much about Lee Ann’s professional existence was deadly serious—her in-depth explorations of violent performances; her commitment to ethics and ethical practices in research; her insistence that political scientists recognize and ameliorate racist and sexist structures in the discipline—that her bubbly, frank, accessible personality surprised some. Lee Ann’s intellectual genius rested within her embrace of this

apparent tension, indeed, it rested upon the complex intertwining of these seemingly incompatible traits.

Informants, Subjects, Participants, People

Lee Ann was a superb scholar of violence precisely because she embraced her own humanity and the humanity of those around her: research participants, students, mentees, colleagues. Her ability to recognize and appreciate the significance of banal human interactions gave her unparalleled insight into people’s relationships with each other and with power. Specifically, Lee Ann had an ability to *notice* (Bond, this issue) how simple moments—such as folding a mentee’s largely worn-out clothes—fed into larger, more complex relationships. In the case of the laundry, Lee Ann’s laughter resulted from both my facial expression and from the innate pleasure she took in inverting our profession’s most revered hierarchies. The effect was not simply to remind me that she was human, but that I was, too.

This acuity regarding the mundane nuances of relationships made Lee Ann uniquely equipped to engage with the complexities of mass killing and structural racism. She insisted on treating even the most elite individuals—whether a chaired professor or the former leader of a genocidal militia—as inherently *ordinary* people, and worked from that extraordinarily simple foundation to unravel why they behaved the way they did. Doing so allowed her to analytically underscore links between social relations and violence, especially by exploring the performative aspects of killing (Fujii 2017c). It also underpins the work she did to unmask the many faces of privilege in the discipline, perhaps

1 Monet, Aja. 2017. “wit.” *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

most superbly via a discussion of the disparate treatment of white and black mediocrity in the sanctified halls of academia (Fujii 2017a). In a profession that tends to study extremes and to view its members as necessarily exceptional, I continue to see Lee Ann's spotlighting of mediocrity as a turn of brilliance.

Lee Ann's scholarship impels many critical reflections on humanity, often in ways that political scientists hesitate to accommodate (let alone celebrate). I address two more here. The first involves the extent to which researchers allow their participants the dignity of complexity. In her recent volume on relational interviewing, Lee Ann recounts the story of interviewing an elderly man on Maryland's Eastern Shore who "had a reputation for being one of the biggest racists in town" (Fujii 2017b, 25). According to her contacts, "Old Timer" (as she calls him) was an important interviewee precisely because he was an elite, old, racist, white man; Lee Ann believed he might shed light on the events surrounding a lynching that occurred in 1933. Yet, during her interviews with him, Old Timer both condemned the lynching (for which he had not been present) and refused to discuss it because "[t]o this man, there was dishonor in the telling itself, especially if it meant passing on anything that was salacious or damning about those who gave him the information" (Fujii 2017b, 26). Lee Ann operated within Old Timer's parameters, challenging and stripping away her own assumptions about him as their conversations progressed over the course of four meetings. During their final interview, he confirmed the location of the lynching, a piece of information Lee Ann had long sought.

For Lee Ann, this relationship illustrated how demonstrating respect and boundaries allowed her to build a productive relationship with Old Timer. Yet the interlude also reveals the way that allowing participants' own humanity—in many ways, their ordinary-ness rather than their elite-ness or their key-actor-ness—into research interactions can provide enormous richness in data. By interacting with people *as people* Lee Ann opened new avenues to crucial data. In this way, Lee Ann's work elucidated violent processes in ways that rang true because she centered the fact that it was real people—not data points, not subjects, and not cases—who participated in lynchings, massacres, and genocide. By contrast, many other researchers might ontologically or methodologically foreclose the analytical possibilities posed by the contradictions, hesitations, or even outright dishonesty that naturally emerge over the course of researcher-participant relationships (Fujii 2010). Lee Ann protected the dignity of being human—that is,

of being fundamentally complicated—for her research participants by embracing her relationships with them as forms of data in their own right. The model her work provides is one that should inspire future violence scholars to better situate violence in the complexities of human life, rather than attempting to isolate it from other social processes.

Complexity and Complicity

The second relationship involves the extent to which researchers allow themselves to be complicit in harmful societal and disciplinary power relations. On this note, Lee Ann's contribution to the Spring 2016 issue of the Comparative Politics newsletter (Fujii 2016) is a masterclass in how scholars of color perform immeasurable intellectual and emotional labor for their white colleagues around issues of race and inequality. In it, Lee Ann walks scholars through a hypothetical scenario involving an academic who wishes to publish archival research on lynching. In the scenario, the researcher is asked to provide the journal with the violent images of lynchings that she accessed, in the interest of "transparency."

Lee Ann deftly uses this example to highlight three things that should be painfully obvious. The first is that encouraging context-less viewing of material, such as photos of white-on-black lynchings, in the interest of validating scholarly analysis, renders viewers complicit in the reproduction of spectacular violence. This is particularly straightforward when we consider that the original intent of lynchings was largely to *encourage spectatorship in the dehumanization of black bodies*. Second, to expect non-white scholars to engage with images of this sort on the same terms as white scholars may, for some, offer a false choice between participating in one's own dehumanization by engaging or accepting one's continued marginalization by refusing. Third, and most importantly, both the spectatorship and the false choices are forms of victimization that our discipline frequently replicates in other ways. Indeed, Lee Ann notes: "for those who can imagine ourselves at the end of the rope or chained to the tree, the images live inside as much as on the page" (2016, 25). This single line demands that many scholars recognize not only that *they have never had to imagine themselves at the end of that rope*, but also that *some of our colleagues have*. Scholars' experience and understanding of those images would necessarily differ as a result, and this ought to be reflected in our scholarship without reminder. Lee Ann spent far too much of her career trying to teach people the significance of this simple reality.

Lee Ann was calling attention to the harm that scholars often unwittingly commit against each other and to the people and communities they study (including after death). That powerful “*j’accuse*” moment continues to inspire both my own ongoing scholarship on the methodological and ethical challenges of research in refugee and displaced person communities and other fragile contexts (Lake and Parkinson 2017; Parkinson 2018). Along with many others, my research projects have provided solid evidence that it is ethically and scientifically problematic for the scholarly community to ignore pervasive issues, such as over-research (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013); the damage done by unskilled, irresponsible, or entitled interviewers (Foster and Minwalla 2018); and the underrecognized and sometimes exploitative labor performed by local translators and research assistants (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). These and other, related problems all reduce the quality and validity of scholarly data, along with the broader societal value of the research. Lee Ann’s example continues to remind me that in order to be better social scientists, we must also interrogate our own practices and structures, both because doing so improves our ability to contribute to knowledge, and because those practices and structures affect actual people.

Being Human

I don’t remember what Lee Ann said to me when she got on the elevator in my building back in February. Instead, the complex interplay of grief and memory allows that I only vividly recall the brand-new, pointy-toed, leopard-print, calf-haired Chelsea boots that she held out excitedly as she packed in the middle of my living room. Lee Ann’s repeated insistence that I do nice things for myself—a fancy dinner, a massage, a shopping trip—as I revised my book stands as yet another helpful reminder that respecting one’s own humanity in the process of scholarly work often makes it better.

Lee Ann taught us that the surprising tensions and unexpected juxtapositions in human existence—the mentor who does your laundry, the racist who condemns the lynching, the well-meaning scholar who is unwittingly complicit in structural violence—are essential to our understanding of political life. That comprehending the complex dynamics of political violence, racism, or any number of social processes that we study, requires us to admit that we fundamentally study *complicated humans as complicated humans ourselves*. That upholding the dignity of complexity for *all of us* is the first step in becoming better scholars and people.

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