

## Surfaces



# Introduction to Kojin Karatani's "Nationalism and Ecriture" Discussion Summary by Megan Becker-Leckrone

Jacques Derrida and Megan Becker-Leckrone

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Article abstract

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# Introduction to Kojin Karatani's "Nationalism and Écriture"[A](#)

## Discussion Summary by Megan Becker- Leckrone

Jacques Derrida

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### ABSTRACT

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### RÉSUMÉ

Dans le cadre du deuxième congrès international sur le discours humaniste, ce texte est une introduction à "Nationalisme et écriture" de Kojin Karatani, et rapporte les principaux pôles d'intérêt qui ont émergé au cours de la discussion.

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I have been deeply impressed by Karatani's rich and strong contribution to our debate. I learned a lot from it, especially from its most provocative statements, which I also understood as political insights and courageous commitments on Kojin's part. Not only in the ideological debates in his own country, but more widely (since everything taking place in Japan nowadays is a world-wide phenomenon), Kojin's analyses are also political commitments and performative statements in a universal debate around nationalisms today, a debate which, as we know, also takes the form of actual or potential wars. Now, this paper is so rich, and it crosses so many cultural fields and traditions and problematics, that I won't be able to summarize it in ten or fifteen minutes. Moreover, since everyone here has

read — or is supposed to have read — Kojin's paper, what I am going to do is only locate a series of themes or problems which could then lead to further analysis and discussion.

I could not, however, I should not, hide what had been a preliminary difficulty for me. It is, of course, an honor for me to chair this particular session, but since half of the title of the paper is in French — "*Écriture*" — and since my name comes first, at the very beginning of the paper, I did not know and I still do not know how to handle the difficulty. It is not simply a matter of shame or modesty or conventional politeness; it is something else that we have to face. What is the most general form of the problem, for me, and what is the solution I think I had to choose? The general form of the problem has to do with the fact that I agree, or at least I am in great sympathy with, if not everything in the paper, at least its general perspective and conclusions. Now, to the extent that I agree with these perspectives and conclusions, it is difficult to agree with the objections addressed to me, or to recognize my own work or my own position in the picture which is given here. I would be tempted to say that what I tried to say or to do thirty years ago has little to do with what is referred to here. This was the general form of the difficulty when I prepared this introduction. The solution I adopted is this one: in order not to overcomplicate or spoil my presentation with this kind of discussion, I am going to leave aside or omit (until the very last moment of my conclusion) anything in the paper which refers to me. And very briefly, in the conclusion of this introduction, I will say some of the reasons why it is difficult for me to recognize myself or what I said a long time ago in Kojin's references.

So I will start now: first, as the point of departure, Kojin is historically very interested in and refers to the complication of the "cultural encounters" between Japan and the West, globally speaking. Although the Meiji movement was influenced by the West in its attempt to abolish Chinese characters and to consolidate written and spoken language (that is, in a more phonetic system), he recalls and demonstrates very eloquently that what he calls phonocentrism was present already in the eighteenth-century nativist scholarship (*kogukaku*). (By the way, although I learned a lot about this nativist movement from Kojin, I would like to know a little more about the word and concept "nativism," which is for me at least a neologism, the name of a theory I would like to know better. Is it a theory or, as you say, a "scholarship"? I would like some more information on this "nativism.") Now, to the extent that this nativist theory or scholarship was phonocentric and wanted to preserve the ancient spoken language of ancient Japan, Kojin feels authorized to say that, "the problem of phonocentrism is not limited to the West." So my question here would be — but I postpone it to the conclusion — who ever said that phonocentrism is limited to the west? Not me; I said explicitly the opposite.

The second point is even more important and obviously related to the main concern of the paper, namely the close relationship between the phonocentric nativism or nativist scholarship and the development, or even the origin of nationalism, some nationalism. And the interesting and powerful gesture of Kojin here consists in generalizing this statement — that is, the Japanese phenomenon linking phonocentrism and nationalism

becomes here exemplary. In fact, the same connection between phonocentrism (or the privilege granted to phonetic writing, which is perhaps something else) and nationalism has emerged, Kojin says, "all over the world without exceptions, even if such occurrences have not always been concurrent." That is a point on which I would easily agree, although the opposite movement might also complicate the picture; that is to say, phonocentrism and phonetic writing (which are not exactly the same) producing also a movement of universalization, cosmopolitanism, which is not necessarily (and this is a point I would like to discuss with you later) incompatible with nationalism. That's a complication of the concept of nationalism: it is compatible sometimes, when it's through the scheme of exemplarity, with cosmopolitanism and internationalism and universalism. That's the most complex structure, the most tricky structure, of nationalism. It is not necessarily opposed to what one usually opposes to it. That was the second premise, I would say, of the paper.

Now third, through a very close reading of Dante and of Saussure, a reading that I cannot reconstitute here, Kojin displaces a number of presuppositions. First of all, Saussure knew that *écriture* had so penetrated spoken language that its exclusion was impossible. If Saussure insisted upon internal linguistics — that is, a linguistics of spoken language — it was not to exclude or reject the externality of writing, but in order to criticize a linguistics which had already been contaminated by the external writing which it had in fact internalized already. It had been contaminated by something it had internalized. In other words, to quote Kojin, "Saussure strictly limited the object of linguistics to spoken language not because of phonocentrism, but rather in order to unmask the deception of historical linguistics' phonocentrism." What is very interesting and necessary in this provocative interpretation, whether one agrees or disagrees with it (and I do both, I would say — I'll say this later), is the politicization of Saussure's project, at least the serious politicization of our reading of Saussure. And Kojin goes very far in this direction, since he describes the situation faced by Saussure as a situation which was overtly political. In this situation, a linguist could not possibly overlook the ideological function of linguistics itself. And Kojin at least admits that the phonocentrism of historical linguistics did not simply emerge at the same time as the idea of national language was on the rise. In fact, Kojin says, it served to reinforce that idea. So at least there might be a dissociation or, I would say, a nonsynchrony between the two phenomena, a nonsynchrony which leaves a large space for many complications and overdeterminations, because a reinforcement is not simply a cause. So the two phenomena can be dissociated; and if the reinforcement is not a determining factor, it leaves space for very complicated analysis, and very complicated political analysis. Regarding Saussure, Kojin's more specific guess, I would say, is that if Saussure was so sensitive to the political issues involved in his theoretical situation, it is perhaps because he was not a native of France but rather of Switzerland — that is, of a single nation-state, but one that was multi-racial. And Kojin even reports the rumor according to which (regarding institutions, again, while we are here discussing institutions) Saussure returned to Switzerland in order not to apply for the French citizenship, a citizenship which would have been necessary for him to rise to the rank of full professor at the Collège de France. (Things have changed slightly since then. Now they can hire some non-French professors,

at least for a certain period, as visiting professors. Things change very slowly in France, but they do change.) So, Kojin's hypothesis is that Saussure reacted in this way to French nationalism, and even to Renan's "*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*" (a famous text — I devoted a seminar a long time ago to this strange text), and to romanticist aesthetics, which are always behind such a nationalism, whether in Japan or in the West. In other words, Saussure's critique of historical linguistics would be clearly a critique of that ideological function of nationalism, of aesthetic ideology, and so on.

Fourth, after some interesting detours by Dante, Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Kojin then goes back to Japanese history, to the Japanese "brand" of phonocentrism, and he first recalls, against what he calls a "widespread and foolish misconception," that Chinese characters are not simply ideographic, but also contain a phonetic element. (I heavily stressed this point in *Of Grammatology*, that there is nothing like a pure ideographic element — I hope I am not included in the group that would support this "widespread and foolish misconception.") Japan was the only country which absorbed Chinese characters into a writing system, *écriture*, as you say. The mixture of Chinese characters with kana phonetic signs (*kanji-kana konko*) can be found as early, you say, as the eighth-century *Kojiki*. The nativist scholars believed that the kana syllabary, the purely phonetic writing, represented a purer, more authentic "spirit of Yamoto," especially in the literature written by women. Here again, the comparison with Dante is interesting. Dante justified his choice of the vernacular by saying that Latin is not the most appropriate language for love. In the same way, Kojin says, the language of poetry and prose fiction rejected Chinese words because these genders/*genres* dealt principally with love. In fact, it's a little more complicated, and I'll have to quote what Kojin says:

But the reason that the *Genji* was widely read even in its own time was not simply because it was written in the vernacular. Murasaki Shikibu was perfectly capable of reading and writing Chinese; even if she intentionally excluded Chinese words from her writing, her work nevertheless normatized the Yamoto (Japanese) language as *écriture*. That *écriture* probably has little to do with the vernacular language being spoken in Kyoto at the time. However, the *écriture* of women's court language, limited to the theme of love or the relations between the sexes, would not have currency in other areas. At that time and ever since, the mainstream of Japan's *écriture* has been the mixture of Chinese characters and the kana syllabary.

I would here open a parenthesis on the problem, precisely, of the woman, which is, I think, central to our debate (although women are not represented enough in our assembly). It is a major problem. I note in passing that when Descartes (you repeatedly mention Descartes and his use of the French language, which was revolutionary at the time) had to justify his choice, he said a number of things, among them that he wanted his work to be read by women, because knowledge of Latin was not so widely spread among women. But it's more complicated than that if we look at it politically, because at the same time he knew that the French language was used beyond France in the courts, and knew also that women in high society

could read French. So it is a complicated gesture, at the same time "pro-feminine" and, on the other hand, less neutral and innocent than that. In any case, I think the question of the mother tongue, the maternal language, and the role of the woman in these questions of nationalism should be discussed here and should be discussed more widely — I wanted just to emphasize this point in passing.

The fifth and last point: what has been recalled by Kanji was in fact distinct to describe the modern context, or the premise of the modern context, in which, for instance, Tokieda (a major figure in this context) criticized Saussure (not the authentic Saussure, the real Saussure, but a caricature, a conventional Saussure, the one which was generally accepted around that time — that is, around the second World War, in the thirties and early forties) in order to criticize the idea that Japanese is the language of the nation-state, or of the race. And one of the reasons why he did so was because he was, Kojin says, a "professor at Kyojo Imperial University in the Japanese colony of Korea" at the time. Since the Japanese empire at that time subsumed the different races and languages of Taiwan, Korea, Okinawa, and the islands, the Japanese language would have to be treated as something heterogeneous to race and nation-state.

When I read this first, I was initially tempted to think (and I am still tempted to do so, however complicated the story is) that a dividing line could be drawn between nationalism — or *linguistic* nationalism — and imperialism, so that one could be anti-nationalist, or *non-nationalist* strictly speaking, because of an imperialistic or hyper-nationalistic position. That's a paradox which we could discuss. Because of the exemplary structure of nationalism — the fact that nationalism wants to be exemplary, that is, to serve as a model for the universe — it may be at the same time universal, exemplary, *and* imperialistic. The question of imperialism here is very serious and specific; distinct from, allied with, and sometimes opposed to nationalism. That was what I was tempted to think when I read the assertion in Kojin's first sentence that Tokieda was not nationalist from the point of view of language, because he was teaching in an imperial university for imperialistic reasons. But, in fact, later in the paper, Kojin insists that Tokieda should *not* be charged with being an imperialist, since he publicly denounced the strategy which tried to enforce the use of Japanese in Korea, down to the pronunciation of family-given names.

I note so in passing, and I insist on this: the distinction between nationalism and imperialism (a distinction which is also overdetermined) is related to language and linguistics, and it should be a good place for our discussion, since Kojin refers to the fact that Tokieda "sever[ed] 'Japanese' from race and state." I would like to take the risk of a comparison; let me quote this passage:

At this point it is necessary for us to reconsider the fact that Tokieda severed "Japanese" from race and state. He wrote thus at a time when the Japanese empire was expanding from Taiwan and Korea throughout all of East Asia. "If in fact the domain of the national language and the domain of the Japanese state and the Japanese race were in perfect correspondence, then there would

be no problem whatsoever with defining the national language as that which is used by the Japanese race and but into practice in the Japanese state; but one look at the relationships between state, race and language today clearly shows that to define the national language thus is never anything more than a matter of convenience" (*The History of National Language Studies*). When Tokieda severed Japanese from race and state, he was conscious of a situation in which Japanese would spread throughout "Greater East Asia" as the dominant standard language. That in itself is a political consciousness. Of course, Tokieda was not an imperialist.

I would try here, very briefly, a comparison between Tokieda's strategy and Fichte's. Fichte also insisted that German, German-ness, and the German language, speaking *Deutsch* had nothing to do with race and even with language in the sense of linguistics. He said that to speak German had nothing to do with the ability, the competence of the linguistic subject. The man who thinks and understands my own philosophy, even if he speaks Italian or French, he speaks *Deutsch*. And similarly a German subject who speaks German perfectly, but doesn't understand Fichte's philosophy doesn't belong to our *Geschlecht*, is not *deutsch*. In a similar way, in this case, pure "Japanese" can be severed from race, nation-state, even the language, strictly speaking, and nevertheless represent a sort of hyper-nationalism or imperialist nationalism. Fichte was, in a certain way, imperialist in his assertion. When he says, for instance, that even a Frenchman or an Italian who thinks the way I do is *deutsch*, that is imperialism, not simply nationalism.

The last part of Kojin's paper is for me the most complicated, most complex, and most problematic. When he relates Tokieda to Nishida to deconstruction, there arises a series of "das" that was a problem for me, as if I were belonging to this large imperialist family of "-da" — Nishida, Tokieda, Derrida. This part should be carefully discussed. I have, of course, only indirect and thus a poor knowledge of Nishida's philosophy, although I have read or listened to a number of papers in my seminars comparing Nishida's philosophy to Heidegger's, or even to deconstruction. Since the political stakes are very high here, we must be very careful. There are, for instance, many ways of interpreting the logic of the space. The way I interpret this logic, I would claim (without being able to demonstrate anything here), is irreducible to Heidegger. And while what I am writing on the logic of the space interests some Japanese architects, it *cannot* be and is exclusively distinct so as *not* to be reappropriated by thinking of the *genus loci* or of the place of a nation. Perhaps we could address this difficult question in a more patient way during the discussion.

To conclude, I would say again that I feel all the more in agreement with your paper that I disagree with what you attribute to me. I have, for a long time, in a number of seminars on national identity and nationalism (as Hillis knows), tried to draw some political consequences of *Of Grammatology*, which was already politically critical of nationalistic ideologies associated in principle (because this is very complex) with nationalism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, and so on. But here I would like to conclude my reservations about the way you refer to me. First, I

never, never, never ever spoke of something like "Western formalism;" at the very beginning of the paper, you say, "Derrida sees phonocentrism as Western formalism dating back to Plato." At first I was surprised by this expression, because I never, never, ever said "Western formalism," or phonocentrism associated with it. Then I discovered later in the paper that this expression, in quotes this time, is Tokieda's expression. In fact, when I tried to "deconstruct" phonocentrism, I did this *in the name of* a certain formalism — not as formalism, but in the name of a certain formal necessity. I am also *against* formalism, for other reasons. But I think the formal point of view is what helped me deconstruct a certain phonocentrism. So, from that point of view, this is perhaps Tokieda's expression; it cannot be mine. I never formalized things that way.

Second, I never, ever said phonocentrism was European, or mainly European. I insisted that phonocentrism was instead a universal phenomenon, that it represented a moment, strata, layer of the history of, let's say, humanity or human culture. That's the point where I distinguish between phonocentrism and logocentrism. You never refer to logocentrism. [Logocentrism](#) is something else. Of course, there are some links between them; but logocentrism would be, in fact the Greek, "Western" if you want, philosophical form of western phonocentrism. But I really tried to make a sharp distinction between the two possibilities, the two structures.

Third, my relation to Saussure is also more complex. To say this very briefly, I never attacked Saussure's phonocentrism as a whole. In fact, it was *in the name of* Saussure, of something in Saussure, of some formalism of Saussure, I questioned some other gestures *by* Saussure; I read Saussure as a heterogeneous corpus, as a complex corpus. And of course I think that his gesture was at least two-fold and ambiguous, and my reading also tried to be two-fold and divided in itself. The fact that writing was internalized, in other words, an externality internalized, is exactly what I described as *parasitism*. And, I would totally agree with you on that point of view. And fourth, of course, I insisted the way you do that there is no pure phonetic or pure non-phonetic writing — I think we would easily agree on that.

Finally, as to the difficult question of the subject, that is, of Tokieda's subject as different from Descartes' thinking subject, but close, you say, to Nishida's "subject as emptiness" — that is too difficult for me here, although I am convinced this is the decisive, determined place for discussion. Because of that, I feel unable to address it right away. There are too many hidden premises to such a discussion. Most of these premises are, of course, problems of language and translation: what is a subject? In Descartes, for instance, there is no such thing as a "subject" as such. It is hard to find something literally called the "subject" in Descartes. So this is an enormous and difficult problem, and I am sure you are right in saying that it is an important place for a discussion of nationalism and *écriture*. But I must give up, because it is too difficult for an introduction here. So I would like to thank Kojin in our name and in my name for this superb paper. Thank you.



## Discussion summary\*

Professor Karatani began the discussion by explaining the context in which he originally wrote his paper three years ago. Both the Gulf War and the development of the European Union made him conscious of a seeming dissolution or weakening of the nation-state and led him to think about the nature of the *polis* not only prior to, but also in the wake of such a nation-state. His area of concern, he emphasized, focused on questions of nation-state in relation to empire and imperialism, to the transnational, and to the idea of the "native" — questions he hoped to explore further in the discussion today. Regarding the question of empire, Professor Karatani asserted that, despite the obviously great differences between them, the major empires of world history nevertheless display a similar structure when it comes to their treatment of the relation between center and margin, ruler and subject. In view of this similarity, we may further consider the complex role of the nation-state within these empires. Nation-states, that is to say, are born not out of nothing, but rather out of empires and initially articulated within them — at once brought into being *against* the empire and potentially subsumed by it, included *within* it. The point of this observation, Professor Karatani explained, is that it signals other urgent questions: what is coming next? What arises after the dissolution of the nation-state? Is it different from imperialism, and if it is, what will it be?

Professor Krieger followed upon these insights about the problems of nation-states, empire, and imperialism by adding to them Professor Karatani's observations regarding language's severing from race and state. He suggested that this dynamic of severing or dislocation might be relevant to discussions the group had had concerning the universalizing infusion of Anglo-American throughout many Asian countries — countries where we presumably have no direct or explicit imperial relations. What is the power of this *lingua franca* in such a situation? What kind of cultural imperialism is generated by the *lingua franca*, which is more than a merely grammatical "language"? If this is an extraordinary example of a language severed from a particular race and state, we must note that this situation exists side-by-side with nationalisms. Professor Krieger asked, "how are we to theorize this coexistence?" The broad acceptance of Anglo-American throughout the world establishes a significant cultural empire (with all the power that such an empire exhibits), yet it is an empire that has continual interaction with the active nationalisms of many nation-states.

Professor Derrida agreed with Professor Krieger that the emergence of Anglo-American as the universal language is a major problem of our time. What is rapidly coming about is that people find themselves having two languages — his or her own plus Anglo-American. To note the problem, of course, is not to resist it; it is a matter, instead, of understanding what this phenomenon is and why it is so. The first question to ask is why Anglo-American in particular demands such a victory, because it is not merely a question of demographics — Spanish and Chinese are both more widely spoken, for instance. With Anglo-American, thus, it is not that there is *first* a linguistic imperialism and *then* the imposition of forms of culture. Rather, it is the other way around: it is *because* there is power in the culture and

structure of the United States that the language has imposed itself all over the world. Professor Derrida proposed that the current resurrection of nationalism in new forms is actually a defensive reaction against American capitalism, together with a reaction against technology, tele-technology, and all things which exert the power of delocalization — the power, that is, of dissociating group or nation from place and from the practice of its idiom. He also speculated that, because this phenomenon is "absolutely original," the term "imperialism" might not suffice to describe it.

Regarding the question of nationalism's relation to internationalism, Professor Behler wondered if the discussion were not actually dealing with two different forms of internationalism, one which evolves out of the nation-state and one which comes about after the disappearance of the nation-state. Professor Derrida asked what he meant by "disappearance" and countered that, while nationalism today takes new forms, it is not in the process of disappearing. Both Professors Krieger and Karatani voiced agreement on this point, with the latter suggesting that what we see happening in Serbia as the backlash to a perceived national dissolution. Professor Derrida emphasized that this backlash, however, is effectively just as strong as any dissolution. Professor Behler restated his point: there is an internationalism built on an international type of technoscience that is basically different from an internationalism brought about by imperialism. That is to say, the economic forces which determine the world today are not bound to a single nation anymore; they are international.

Professor Iser offered that the internationalism of the European Union, for example, brings about a situation that is not quite imperialistic; rather, it allows for the emergence of "regionalism." That is, the centrality of the nation-state has faded while various regions (marked by ethnicity or tradition) have come to the foreground. Professor Karatani added that such an internationalism was similar to ancient imperialism, which allowed specific national identities to be preserved, even under the "unity" the empire demanded.

Expressing reservations about that analogy, Professor Lin pointed out that it would not be adequate to call Japan or Vietnam merely "regions" within the Chinese empire. Indeed, both nations have gone to war to make that case — glaring examples that nationalism is *not* dead. And he saw that lesson — that nationalism is not dead — as the most important element of Professor Karatani's paper. Citing the potential danger in recent assertions of nationalism, Professor Lin observed that nation and empire seem to follow a cycle that has been repeated throughout history, where nation expands to empire, matures, dies, and the returns to nation again.

Looking at the two nation-states where English is spoken as the normal language (England and the U.S.), Professor Adams argued both demonstrate a significant disillusion with national government and a profound sense of helplessness about what government can do. He proposed that both these countries were unwittingly recognizing that the nation-state is a waning thing. Professor Miller added that the recent "Republican revolution" could be seen in this regard as a hysterical attempt to reunify the country in the face of such a "waning."

Professor Miller went on to consider the role of Anglo-American throughout the world. If it were indeed the case that the "normal human condition around the world is to have a mother tongue and then, in addition, English," then someone like him would be deprived. In his case, those two languages are the same thing. Professor Derrida quickly interjected that these two were *not* the same thing. Even native speakers of English are in danger of losing their own idioms in the face of Anglo-American's pervasive universalism. Professor Miller then pointed to the profound impact internationalism has had on the structure of the university. As the federal government withdraws its support for universities, money increasingly comes from transnational corporations. This trend is radically redefining the university, and it is happening without our even knowing it.

Returning to the question of the *lingua franca*, Professor Lee cited Jameson, who speculates that the Anglo-American *lingua franca* might be a manifestation of late capitalism. Its specific role within countries around the world, however, complicates the picture. There are degrees of difference, in other words, in its impact in India, Hong Kong, mainland China. In India, for instance, English becomes a language everyone speaks to cope with fact that the country has so many local languages, whereas in Hong Kong the status of Anglo-American is much different. And practically speaking, the arrival of the *lingua franca* is a process that is more complicated than a mere "infusion" of Anglo-American culture. The issue of its "transliteration" into Asian languages, for instance, immediately gives rise to all sorts of practical questions.

The discussion turned at the end to references Professor Karatani had made in his paper to the role of "women's writing" in the development of the Japanese language. Professor Kumakura asked him if he might relate what he said about women's writing (*kana*) and the eighteenth-century nativist movement (*kogukaku*). Does he mean to imply, for instance, that the Japanese language brings together two essentially distinct elements of language, a "feminine" phonetic and a "masculine" ideographic element? Professor Karatani clarified that it was not he who called *kana* an essentially "feminine" writing, and that he would not claim that it is. Men were, of course, writing at this time, but they were writing in a classical Chinese we can no longer read. Today, the only classical literature that can be read is that which was written in *kana* (because it was purely phonetic), which happened to have been written by women.

Professor Birus was also interested in the relation between gender difference and language in classical Japanese literature, pointing out that the *Genji* is a very special case in world literature, and not just because it is a classical text written by a woman. He noted that women have had a role in the history of world literature, generally designating them to deal with the articulation of feelings (expressions of suffering in Greek literature, for instance). But with the *Genji*, we get an authoritative, accepted prescription of what a gentleman should be written by a woman; this seems a curious place for a woman's text to hold in such a male-dominated society. Professor Birus asked how it is to be understood that a woman provided the standard for subsequent male writers in a male-centered Japanese culture. By way of closing more than concluding, Professor Karatani responded by pointing to

the complicated historical background of ancient Japan (and implied its distinction from China), noting that up until the thirteenth or fourteenth century, the social structure of Japan was "matriarchal," so to speak, and that it is too simple merely to see the *Genji* as an anomalous expression of authority within a purely "patriarchal" society.

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## **NOTE**

[A](#)Transcription prepared by Megan Becker-Leckrone