



Engagement Loops: Life, Art, Ethnography

BY: JENNIFER ROBERTSON

August 3, 2026



Volume 24

[*Ed. Note: This article is part of a special section entitled “Japan-Adjacent: In Praise of Creative Expression within Japan’s Shadow,” edited by Laura Hein.*]

I have never felt compelled to write about my personal life in my academic work, and this essay marks the first time I have written about my artwork in

conjunction with my scholarship. An opportunity to do so emerged with a new feature of this journal, in which scholars are invited to ruminate on how their scholarship informed their artistic work and vice versa. After some deliberation, I swallowed hard and took on this challenge! I weave reflections on the circumstances of my childhood in Japan and my early exposure to studio art, and later, my interest in photomontage and modernist literary genres, in tracing the development of my intellectual commitments and ethnographic methods. For the purposes of this experimental essay, I focus only on my paper collages.^[1]

This is not by any stretch an autobiographical essay. Rather, I share some relevant backstories about my childhood in Kodaira, then a town, now city, in suburban Tokyo, to provide an overarching view of the connections between my academic scholarship and artmaking. Then and now, my fiduciary responsibility as an ethnographer is to local residents and interlocutors and their everyday lives and livelihoods, not mine. What I wrote in the introduction to my edited volume, *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, is relevant here:

[C]onfidence and effectiveness in exercising one's authorial "voice" ought not to lie in phenotype or genealogical claims or to a childhood in Japan, but in the assiduous fieldwork and archival research necessary to generate historically resonant, thick descriptions and subtly evocative interpretations of people's lives in all their messy complexity. However, as someone raised in Japan, I would be the last person to dismiss the advantages to an ethnographer of the profound familiarity that long-term residence and socializing (and socialization) in a place can afford. In my experience, though, such familiarity is most effectively conveyed not by superficial claims to "insider" status and, by extension, to arcane insights, but in the thoughtful choice of ethnographic subject and the caliber,

subtlety and resilience of research undertaken to elucidate it
(Robertson 2008 [2005]: 11).

My three self-authored books were all crafted in the spirit of montage as a technique that accounts for and highlights salient subjects and local practices that are not always recognized as highly significant and are often overlooked or left self-evident. I made my use of this technique especially visible in *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. My book is about Japan's all-female revue theatre which had been dismissed as silly by many scholars of the predominately all-male Noh, Bunraku, and Kabuki theatres. Takarazuka was conceived as an avant garde theatre epitomizing the performance efficacy of montage in the sense of combining disparate images and scenarios in quick succession. This performance technique generates a tension between the dominant story or message and more subversive, subtextual interpretations of a given performance (Robertson 2001: 116-117). I also summarize my montage method in *Robo Sapiens Japonicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation* as a

reticulate aesthetics that is non-hierarchical (or noncanonical), eclectic, genre crossing, discipline-crossing, and pursued, eyes wide open, with great curiosity about manifold things... The coherence of my story comes from the interlaced elements and not via the superimposition of a particular theoretical edifice" (Robertson 2018: 31-32).

My first book, *Native and Newcomer: Making and Remaking a Japanese City*, an ethnography and history of the making of Kodaira City in Tokyo Metropolitan Prefecture, was published in 1991 (2nd ed. 1994). I lived in Japan from the age of four until my mid-teens, for nearly a decade in Kodaira followed by two years in nearby Kichijoji, a neighborhood in Musashino City. Our Kodaira home was a one-story Western-style house with a large Ōya stone^[2] fireplace and cork floors. It was situated on several acres of land that

included a chestnut orchard, a large “lawn” area, dry field farmland, and a Japanese-style house rented to a local farm family. There were only a few other houses along our long gravel road, at one end of which was a *tatami* mat maker and his wife who raised chickens. One of my weekly tasks was to go and buy eggs from her. About a decade after we moved there (from Detroit, where I was born) our home and the others were razed and the fields covered in asphalt. The Gakuen-higashi-machi neighborhood, east of the Seibu Tamako line, quickly became a mosaic of generic concrete high-rise apartments and prefab houses. Only my *yōchien* (kindergarten) and the nearby Kodaira garrison of the Self-Defense Forces remain today where they were in my childhood. As a primary school student, I would walk nearly a mile home from the bus stop along a wide, tree-lined gravel road past the base and wave back at the soldier standing at attention in a sentry box in front of the Kodaira Ground Self-Defense Force Base (*chūtonchi*). We relocated to suburban Kichijōji and settled into the roomy ground floor of a two-story wooden duplex that used to be a sewing machine factory.^[3] The duplex included a large grassy yard and a bamboo orchard in back. It was torn down sometime in the late 1980s and replaced with a large family home; our old neighborhood near Seikei University remains quite affluent.

That I sited my doctoral research in Kodaira was not directly related to my childhood there. Before commencing my doctoral studies, I had spent three years in Tokyo as a visiting scholar (funded by various grants and sundry jobs) at Gakushuin University’s Research Institute for Oriental Cultures (Tōyō bunka kenkyūjō), where I was introduced to a project on the traditional technologies detailed in Edo-period farm manuals (*nōsho*) (Robertson 1984a, 1984b). This sparked my interest in researching for my dissertation, the past and present of early village-building and later city-planning in the Musashino area. After several rejections, I finally met a landlord willing to rent an apartment to an American graduate student which happened to be in Kodaira. As I recount in *Native and Newcomer*, I could not have landed in a better

place to explore the project and process of *furusato-zukuri* (hometown-making), the symbolic core of my dissertation and later book.

Like most graduate students, I was exposed to a very broad spectrum of anthropological “theory”^[4] before heading to the field, and was fortunate that, in the 1980s, feminist anthropology (together with, but different from, the “anthropology of girls and women”) was represented in departmental and area studies curricula. Feminism and reflexivity were especially ascendant at that time and overlap in their engaged attention to one’s unconscious biases and to the consequential dynamics of the sex-gender system.^[5] I understand reflexivity as a critical awareness of one’s preconceived assumptions about and behavior in given social settings, and as such, a necessary competency to be cultivated by scholars. It is not a confession of one’s trials and tribulations in the field. This is why reflexive ethnographic techniques and practices are so important to learn and experiment with in pre-candidacy practicums—*before* embarking on doctoral fieldwork.

As a teacher-mentor, I have encouraged students to experiment with artmaking as a way of understanding and engaging with process—the interactive, energized space between A and B, without the expectation of a correct or final answer. Critique is a cornerstone of art education and training and provides a dynamic process of engagement that is productively understood as a type of apprenticeship and is indispensable for skill development. Critique also encourages and enables “apprentice artists” to find and hone their own “voice”—and to develop an appreciation for constructive feedback—or a “thicker skin”—all essential to overcoming expressive timidity and to experience comfort in exercising one’s voice. These are all good reasons for offering pre-candidacy fieldwork practicums—and to encourage a course in some genre of artmaking.

Very recently, while sorting through boxes of my late parents’ personal effects, I found some letters my mother wrote to my father in late 1956, when I was

almost four years old. They had just decided to move from Detroit, where their parents had immigrated from Poland and Canada, to Tokyo. My father had flown to Japan three months ahead of my mother, me and my younger brother Daniel. We followed from Fort Mason, San Francisco, by sea on a naval ship, the U.S.S. General Hugh J. Gaffey. It was a harrowing trip punctuated by a tropical storm that violently rocked the ship and our sensitive stomachs. Among other details in my mother's lengthy and quite literary letters to my father were descriptions of my budding dexterity in using scissors to cut and paste different shapes of colored paper—collages!

Upon his arrival in Tokyo, my father found a rental house in rural Kodaira. The main house was connected to a Japanese-style bungalow via an open but roofed corridor. My artist parents used the bungalow as a studio which, several years later, was featured in a photograph of our “family of artists” in the anglophone *Mainichi* daily newspaper (Fig. 1) with the caption, “Everyone paints in the Robertson family.” The article was published in conjunction with the “Japanese-American Friendship Exhibition” at the Takashimaya Department Store in Tokyo, in which my parents' paintings would be on display.



Fig. 1: Robertson Studio, Kodaira. *Mainichi English Newspaper*, 17 April 1959. Article not included. I superimposed a crisper and much more readable b/w still photograph from the photo shoot at the studio onto the grainy one in the *Mainichi*. Photograph from author's archive. Click on image to expand.

Contrary to the photograph in the *Mainichi*, the four of us did not paint together as a family group although I spent considerable time in the studio as my parents encouraged me to experiment artistically with diverse art supplies and media. My brother and I often accompanied them on visits to the studios of Japanese artists (printmakers, painters, sculptors, ceramicists), many of whom became close family friends. Their extensive collaboration with woodblock printmakers generated a book on contemporary Japanese printmaking.^[6]

Growing up in Kodaira meant that I essentially lived in two very different and essentially separate worlds: home and school. My two younger sisters, Sarah and Edith, were born during our last two years there. Shortly after our arrival in Kodaira, our care was overseen by a patient Japanese woman,^[7] essentially our “nanny.” I often spent the night at her small wooden home in a nearby postwar tract housing development along with her extended family. I visited her and her family in that same house several times during my two years of doctoral fieldwork in Kodaira.

Although I had attended a nearby Japanese kindergarten, I had to take a bus to my American elementary and junior high schools (Green Park and Tachikawa, respectively) that enrolled children of American civilians and military families alike. Evenings and weekends were reserved for visiting and playing with Japanese neighbor kids my age. We—some girls and mostly boys—were a rowdy bunch. We rode bicycles made to sound like motorcycles by fixing playing cards to the spokes with clothespins; we staged rock and stick fights; we collected lizards and stag beetles; we played “World War Two” by dividing into Americans and Nazis—never Imperial Army soldiers!—without regard to our ethnicity or nationality. I was far from a typical “American girl,” yet when I was in the sixth grade, I was chosen to represent Green Park elementary school in an NHK children’s program *Wanpaku kishadayori* (News from mischievous kid reporters), probably because I spoke Japanese (Fig. 2). Indicative of my atypicality was my compromise to wear a black headband instead of my usual beanie which was nixed by the director. Off camera, I removed the ubiquitous beanie only at bathtime and bedtime. Then as now, my ears are very sensitive to breezes!

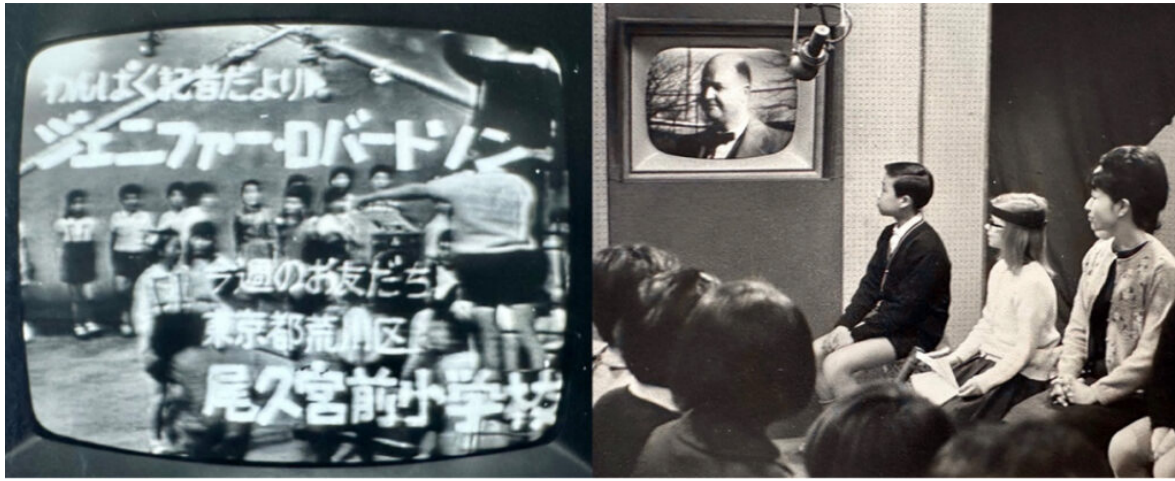


Fig. 2: Joined photographs of my appearance on the NHK program, *Wanpaku kisha dayori*, which aired once a week between 1963 and 1965. My school (the principal is shown on the TV screen on the right) was compared in a quiz show format to Ogumiyamae elementary school in Arakawa Ward, Tokyo. I was not invited to converse with my peers on the program but rather had to read from a script in Japanese that I am holding. Photographs from author's archive. Click on image to expand.

My childhood world was essentially gender neutral. That I had to wear skirts to school was, as I remember feeling, experienced by me as a place- and event-based “uniform.” After school, I switched to trousers. It wasn’t until high school in Santa Barbara, California, that I became incensed about the sexist dress code together with the tacit need for girls to wear different “outfits” every day of the week. Luckily for me, the irksome code was lifted when I was in eleventh grade and could wear comfortable tee-shirts and blue jeans to class! Long story short, I have continued my independence from received sex and gender roles, and as I grow older, am ever more comfortable in my “otrovertness”.^[8]

As a child in Kodaira, one of my favorite solitary activities, in addition to reading—I especially loved perusing the volumes of our *World Book Encyclopedia* and reading biographies and detective stories—was to watch our neighbors at work: the *tatami* mat maker; the farmers in the dry fields;

the *ishi yakiimo* (baked sweet potato) seller pulling his heavy cart while advertising his goods in a singsong chant; the *tofu* seller tooting his trademark *rappa* (small bugle); the cobbler; our neighbor the sculptor whose college-age sons were my adopted older brothers. Ethnographic research was clearly in the cards for me from an early age!

In Kodaira, we children were largely unsupervised and set our own rules of engagement; we felt safe outdoors, even after dark. Most of my American friends from school lived on one of the several military bases in the Tokyo area and we rarely met for play dates outside of school, and never together with my Japanese friends. Our social worlds did not coincide. Communication was mostly face-to-face as we did not have a telephone—outgoing calls were made at a nearby tobacco shop. We finally acquired a telephone when we moved to the Kichijōji neighborhood in Musashino City east of Kodaira. There, my parents bought our first B/W television set in 1964 so that we could watch the Tokyo Olympics at home! Up until then, most of my television viewing had been at my nanny's and neighborhood friends' homes. Today, the ubiquity of social media platforms is, in my view, a disrupter and inhibitor of truly genderless, innovative, and creative thinking and play, including arts and crafts.

Having grown up in a community of artists, I had the dreamy idea of becoming a professional printmaker. Instead, I majored in the history of art (with a specialty in Asian art) at Cornell University with a more pragmatic plan of becoming a Japanese-art conservator. A close family friend, the late Abe Yūji who founded the Yōseido Gallery—the preeminent print gallery in Tokyo's Ginza district now run by his daughter—offered to recommend me to a conservation center for cultural properties in Kyoto. However, I had become more interested in the social production of art and wrote an Honor's Thesis on premodern *Ōtsu-e* (*Ōtsu* pictures). *Ōtsu-e* were folkish stenciled paintings appropriated by both the Tokugawa shogunate and Shingaku (Heartmind Learning) sermonizers for propaganda purposes.^[9] I ultimately

switched to anthropology for graduate studies where my interest broadened to visual anthropology, visual literacy, and the importance of images in the production of everyday life and places of work and habitation.

I was keen to conduct ethno-historical research in the Tokyo suburbs on pre-modern land reclamation and affective placemaking from 1983-1985. My second-floor apartment in a three-story, six-unit ferro-concrete building was on the western side of the Seibu Tamako Line in Gakuen-nishi-machi, across the tracks from the eastern district of my childhood, which by then was a densely populated web of prefab houses high-rise apartments. I wrote my dissertation in my Kodaira apartment in between field and archival work. I saw no point in separating these activities and have always counseled my graduate students to write up in the field where they are immersed in local happenings and sensory experiences that will help to shape and structure their narrative. After a stretch of writing, I treated myself to reading novels.

John Dos Passos' monumental trilogy, *U.S.A.* (1937) was especially important to me as I crafted my dissertation. I was fascinated with his vivid visual narratives that drew from modernist collage constructions and cinematic montages, and I sought to craft my chapters in a similar non-linear manner. In *U.S.A.*, newsreel clips and newspaper headlines were layered to form the shifting topography in which the lives, work, aspirations and failures of twelve protagonists intersected in a collective account about social and political upheaval, and economic collapse, in the United States and Europe. I wanted to draft an ethnography that, instead of proceeding from one chapter on a unified topic to another, looped forwards and backwards from and within chapter to chapter. I felt that this method of composition could better capture the fluxing and intersecting relationships animating Kodaira's making and remaking over the past centuries and in the 1980s. Like montage, it was a method that, in my mind, brought both narrative suppleness and cohesiveness to seemingly discontinuous and unconnected phenomena, people, and

events. I also employed a montage method in crafting in my succeeding ethnographies, *Takarazuka* and *Robo Sapiens Japanicus*.

In addition to Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans: Being A History of a Family's Progress* (1925), provided me with lessons on crafting complex portraits of people and places in contrast to reified ideal types. An avid reader of Stein in college, I had read *The Making of Americans* years earlier but only realized the ethnographic methodological potential of her novel while crafting my doctoral thesis. Significantly, Dos Passos' montage-like construction of people and places in *U.S.A.* was influenced by Gertrude Stein, whom he knew and respected. Stein's prose is deeply prosodic; she was attentive to the visual and aural properties of language and paid attention to pitch, intonation, stress, rhythm and loudness, nuances, interjections, and other non-grammatical elements of language. The orality of her unpunctuated repeating prose demands to be read out loud thereby turning reading into an active mode of interlocution and meaning-making as each reader's spoken rendition supplies punctuation and therefore emphasis and nuance. In other words, a living reader's shifting locutions parallel those of Stein's fictional persons: both "the reader" and "the read" are speakers who repeat themselves a little differently with each retelling, thereby shifting the terms and emphasis of a story.

Stein scrutinized her real and imaginary subjects as they navigated and negotiated multiple interpersonal encounters in multiple sensory settings, until, over time, there emerged for her a repeating pattern to their words and actions. Her literary portraits of individuals, and even groups of individuals, were "condensations" or distilled essences of the patterns of their "repeatings," which she referred to as their bottom natures or innermost temperaments. Stein's looping patterns of repeatings underscores my pedagogical position that ethnographers must make an effort to observe their interlocutors, whether in archival data or in the flesh, in at least several different situations and different settings over time lest their essential,

prosodic natures be reduced to a one-dimensional, top-down description of monotones or a recitation of linear statistical data. It is the pattern of repeating that must be recognized and appreciated to fully represent them.

In the introduction of *Native and Newcomer*, I recognize Stein as a consummate ethnographer.^[10] I contrast her process of “condensing” a subject’s repeatings to illuminate their multi-dimensionality, with the subtractive method of “ideal typing” proposed by Robert Nisbet in his book, *Sociology as an Art Form* (1977). Nisbet likens ideal typing to sculpting, whereby sculptors chip away at a block of marble to expose the figure within.

[Nisbet’s] method involves a priori knowledge of both the presence and exact form of the ideal-type figure trapped inside: “the object, whether structure or personage, [is] stripped, so to speak, of all that is merely superficial and ephemeral, with only what is central and unifying left” (Nisbet 1977:71). Contrarily, the wholeness of Stein’s subjects bespeaks the acquisitive—as opposed to reductive—nature of her mode of portraiture. She did not presume to know beforehand what was superficial and what was central. These are arbitrary criteria not isolable in any one individual or group (Robertson 1994 [1991]: 1-2).

Stein’s prose was also ekphrastic in the sense that she translated her visual imagination into written language. As a technique, ekphrasis is, in my view, central to the crafting of a conscientious ethnography in the sense of communicating sensory experiences and information from the populated lived environment via a common written language. One of my collages illustrates, ironically, the process of ekphrasis (Fig. 3). A person’s head in profile faces left in front of a forest and its reflection in a misted lake. Half of the face consists of thick bands of the oil colors used by a plein air artist in

painting a landscape. The other half of the face consists of books in which the artist's painted landscape is “re-imaged” in a textual language—ekphrasis.



Fig. 3: Art Historian (paper collage, 2015, 11" x 7.5"). Click on image to expand.

While simultaneously engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, archival research and writing my thesis, I continued a practice since my undergraduate years of making art—whether a sketch, a monoprint, an oil or watercolor painting, or a paper collage—whenever the urge struck. It wasn't until a couple of decades later, however, that I made artmaking a regular commitment, joined various art associations, and participated in juried exhibitions. My late father's Kodaira-era oil paintings were strongly influenced by surrealism and Dadaism. I thus became familiar early on with the collage and montage artwork of John Heartfield (1891-1968), Hana Höch (1889-1978), Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971), and Kurt Schwitters (1847-1948), among other avant-garde artists whose social circles overlapped with those of Dos Passos and Stein.^[11] Later, while conducting archival research for *Takarazuka*, focusing on Japanese social transformations in the militarized first half of the twentieth century, I perused and photographed countless avant-garde photomontages published in *Shashin Shūhō* (Photograph Weekly, 1938-45) and *FRONT* (1942-45), two of the most widely read propaganda magazines in Japan.

As I alluded to earlier, the process of crafting collages and photomontages, regardless of motive—whether for merely compositional effect or to underscore a political message, or both—involves placing unrelated images and disconnected events to generate an awareness of meanings that diverge from or question or subvert or even highlight the status quo. Ethnography, like fiction and artwork, can benefit from the new perspectives and dimensions generated by montage methodology. However, unlike writers and artists who can go where their imagination and skills take them, ethnographers cannot forget their fiduciary responsibility to the diverse people whose lives and work they seek, and are entrusted, to represent. What montage practice allows and enables is for an ethnographer to pay close attention to the welter of means by which their interlocutors make sense of the manifold experiences they remember and recount. Doing ethnography does not provide a mandate to make sense of and for people; it is, rather, in my view, a conscientious narrative that aims to make sense of sense being made. People are always “making sense” whether or not the sense of their sense-making is initially grokked by an ethnographer!

Ethnographers can frame their research to represent the realities of minority groups and underacknowledged organizations, but that research bears a fiduciary responsibility to others. This type of framing is different from how an artist can exercise authorial and artistic liberties in creating work that expresses and amplifies minority positions and progressive voices calling for freedom from vulgar demagogues and their maniacal barbarism. Some of my latest collages address and call out egregious civil rights violations and environmental destruction (Figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7). They carry a more direct and limited message than some of my other collages. “Cryo-Detention: ICE” (Fig. 4) visually represents the “freezing” of civil rights and humanitarian principles by the cauldron of racism and impersonal machinery of authoritarianism—even more on display since January 2025.



Fig. 4: “Cryo-Detention: ICE” (paper collage, 2024, 9.5” x 7.5”). Click on image to expand.

“Breaking News” (Fig. 5) represents how I and many of us feel like reacting—with a primal scream of frustration—to the daily news of wanton carnage and desperate refugees alternating with the smug gloating of billionaire tech-bros who want to leave the very planet they are ravaging.



Fig. 5: “Breaking News” (paper collage, 2026, 7.75” x 14”). Click on image to expand.

“Bat out of Hell” (Fig. 6) is an idiom referring to something moving very quickly away from an origin point often out of fear or anger. My collage “Bat Into Hell: Extinction Series” alludes to the sudden and scary spread of

wildfires accompanying climate change and how they hellishly engulf and destroy everything in their unpredictable path. Is there a safe exit?



Fig. 6: “Bat Into Hell: Extinction Series” (paper collage, 2023, 8.5” x 12.5”).

Click on image to expand.

In Japan, the Fukushima Dai’ichi nuclear reactor meltdown following the destructive mega earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, was largely a consequence of hubristic negligence by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and government regulators, who had long touted the safety of nuclear reactors and the security of backup generators. In “After Fukushima” (Fig. 7), I resort to an acerbic visual humor in depicting the unforeseen “forever effects” of radiation poisoning.

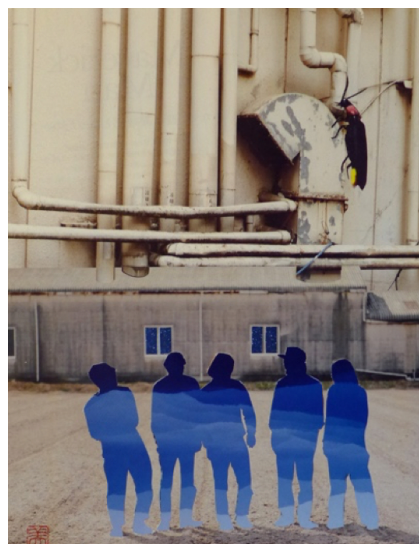


Fig. 7: “After Fukushima” (paper collage, 2018, 9.5” x 6.5”). Click on image to expand.

Other social issues central to my academic work that I explore in some of my collages include the politics of “face” and identity. Japanese references and images figure in “Which Way to Face?” (Fig. 8), which was inspired by culture- and



Fig. 8: “Which Way to Face?” (paper collage, 2022, 10” x 9.5”). Click on image to expand.

convention-crossing practices in Meiji Japan (1868-1912) when modernization included experiments with fashion. Elite men, beginning with the emperor, cut their topknots and wore suits and military uniforms, while elite women, including the empress, were obliged to “face” to both the “East” (Japan) and the “West” (Euro-America) depending on the occasion or event. Official business called for dresses, domestic affairs for kimono. “Face” here serves as a triple entendre alluding to visage, ethnic identity, and to daily negotiations of cosmetic and sartorial boundaries. In short, this collage is broadly symbolic of the visual politics of contested appearance and identities in and far beyond Meiji Japan.

I should emphasize at this juncture that I do not at all have these themes and current-event associations worked out before I begin composing a new

collage, and some of my pieces are more open to interpretation than others. I am not (always) seeking to make an editorial or academic statement in pictorial form! Rather, while leafing through my extensive collection of images, I play with interesting juxtapositions and combinations of colors and content, and gradually the shape of a “story” emerges. At some point in this process, a title comes to mind, and the piece is finished when it comes together for me on all registers. Almost all my collages are framed in a rectangular format, although their actual edges when I am creating them exceed that strict format. It is the frame—the mat—that defines the final presentation of a collage. But even within a rectangular frame, images can overlap and pierce others and can appear to extend outside of the frame to create a sense of movement and spatial depth.

The basic resemblance of my collages to ethnographic fieldwork is that in crafting an ethnography, a pattern and story emerge while engaged in the process of assembling a wide range of sources, from sensory and ephemeral data, and repeated interviews and conversations, to multiple newspapers and archived resources. Collage is a type of artmaking that travels, and I craft collages while on extended research trips to Japan. Japanese magazines with colorful photographs and advertisements printed on glossy high-grade paper provide a rich source of material. This is one of the ways in which I can combine ethnography with art making, as both the collage materials available and my immersion in the Japanese social scene inspire novel themes and perspectives.

Some of my collages reference traditional Japanese art and contemporary popular culture, and I often need to include a translation when I submit pieces to exhibitions. Two examples are “101st View of Mt. Fuji” (Fig. 9) and “Stir Fry: Iron Chef Series” (Fig. 10). Inspired by Hokusai’s “100 Views of Mt. Fuji,” I offer a novel 101st





Fig. 9: “101st View of Mt. Fuji” (paper collage, 2024, 10.75” x 7”). Click on image to expand.

view that compresses time and place, spanning the 1840s to the present day. The Japanese magazines I get most of my images from often include woodblock prints, traditional architecture, and photographs of Mt. Fuji. For this collage, I riffled through magazines in search of old and new street scenes with receding vistas and seamlessly melded them with careful cutting and pasting. I added a recent photograph of Mt. Fuji, along with a zeppelin—for compositional balance and implied movement, a novel counterpoint to the full moon and a touch of midcentury modernity—and inserted pedestrians representing premodern and postmodern Japanese denizens. A mini-skirted schoolgirl stands center left among kimono-clad shoppers. She in turn is in the line of sight of a girl in a hooded jacket seated lower right, whose larger size also puts her at some distance from the bustling street scene she appears to be contemplating. Perhaps she represents the viewer, and is she herself on view?

Quite a few of my collages feature *shōjo*, which refers to girls and young (single) women who are both revered and feared as trendsetters who challenge and break social and conventions, especially those codified as

sanctioned femininity.^[12] The word was coined in the Meiji period to denote females between puberty and marriage; in premodern Japan, these two events, one biological, one social, generally coincided. With industrialization and urbanization, the advent of employment opportunities for girls and young women effectively separated sexual and social maturity. In “Stir Fry” (Fig. 10) an anonymized chef at the Shiseido Parlour in Tokyo is cooking up a dish of “*shōjo* pasta”! Shiseido, a 150-year-old cosmetics company, one of the largest in the world, not only employed *shōjo* from “good” families, but also cultivated a brand reputation for crossing Japanese aesthetics with Euro-American cosmeceuticals. The trendy thrill-seeking *shōjo* turn the stern senior chef’s attempt to make carbonara into an exciting carnival ride.



Fig. 10: “Stir Fry: Iron Chef Series” (paper collage, 2013, 11.5” x 8.5”). Click on image to expand.

Although I wasn’t consciously intending to do so when I crafted “Stir Fry,” I later realized that one of the plausible readings of this collage could be a representation of saucy *shōjo* resistance in contrast to the passive *shōjo* victims in Aida Makoto’s “Blender” (2001). Aida, *l’enfant terrible* of contemporary art, has critiqued the sexual objectification of *shōjo* in ways that, in my view, match the violence of the sex crimes he critiques. “Blender,” his creepy photorealistic culinary-themed acrylic painting features a blender crammed with the naked bodies of *shōjo* being pureed into a bloody slurry.^[13]

The modish and gleeful girls in “Stir Fry” actively resist being mixed like pancetta into the classic dish and propel themselves out of the pan with each toss by the chef. Of course, maybe, as a student once remarked after viewing this collage, “it’s a funny image that must have been fun to make”! And it was!

“*Shōjo*’s Last Laugh” (Fig. 11) is another girl-themed collage that includes a robot—robots are key subjects of my most recent scholarship and appear in some of my collages. Images of robots are particularly plentiful in the Japanese hobby magazines that I regularly mine for collage material. A *shōjo* in a trademark miniskirt seems to be



Fig. 11: “*Shōjo*’s Last Laugh” (paper collage, 2024, 15.25” x 8”). Click on image to expand.

pointing and laughing at salient national(ist) symbols (flag, Shintō shrine). Or is something else—visible or not—amusing her? Was she piloting the parked Gundam robot, or is the robot about to demolish the shrine? Or was it dispatched by “authorities” to capture her? The collage also plays with linear/temporal perspective. A *randoseru* (official backpack of elementary school students) lies on autumn leaves and looms larger than the girl; it would easily fit on the back of Gundam! What’s it doing there anyway? These

questions and elements invite viewers to become storytellers. One of my own interpretations of this collage is a radical one that places the laughing *shōjo* at the pivotal center of conservative forces (techno-weapon, school, shrine). The torque of her twisting body could send those forces spinning away!

My childhood and long residence in Japan, engagement with art and artists, and academic research and travel have inspired topics, themes, and raw materials for collage-making: *shōjo*, the sex-gender system, historical events, nostalgia, robots and eugenics among other subjects appear in my artwork. That said, as I underscored earlier, my paper collages are not intentional, much less rigorous, academic exercises. Even if some collages can be read as commentaries on current or historical events, they are in the end products of my imagination in a way that grounded scholarship cannot be. Conversely, collage/montage, the crafted image itself as opposed to the method of crafting, also figures in my academic work, mainly in the form of PowerPoint images. I spend a lot of time designing the visual narratives that accompany my lectures. Not all, but a good many of the PowerPoint images I craft visually clarify key concepts and relationships. Like all images they are not self-evident and work in dialogue with, and are referenced in, my lectures. An oral presentation with projected pictures thus amounts to a performative collage or montage. As a final point, my approach to my more academic work aims to communicate my reflexive engagement with a subject or topic not through a confessional display, or as a theoretical exercise, but as artistry in concert with a commitment to ethnography as an experimental *and* fiducially responsible professional craft.^[14]

Acknowledgements: Warm thank you to Celeste Brusati for her editorial suggestions and to Laura Hein for her insightful comments on earlier drafts, and for giving me an opportunity to write this experimental narrative. Thank you as well to Tristan Grunow for his helpful comments.

References

Dos Passos, John (1937). *U.S.A.* New York: Modern Library.

Kaminski, Rami (2025). *The Gift of Not Belonging: How Outsiders Thrive in a World of Joiners*. Boston: Little, Brown, Spark.

Nisbet, Robert (1977). *Sociology as an Art Form*. London: Oxford University Press.

Robertson, Jennifer (1979). "Rooting the Pine: Shingaku Methods of Organization," *Monumenta Nipponica* 34(3):311-332.

Robertson, Jennifer (1984a). "Japanese Farm Manuals: A Literature of Discovery," *Peasant Studies* 11(2):169-194.

Robertson, Jennifer (1984b). "Sexy Rice: Plant Gender, Farm Manuals, and Grass-Roots Nativism," *Monumenta Nipponica* 39(3):233-260.

Robertson, Jennifer (1994 [1991]). *Native and Newcomer: Making and Remaking a Japanese City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Robertson, Jennifer (1999 [1998]). *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Japanese edition, Tokyo: Gendai Shokan (2000).

Robertson, Jennifer (2008 [2005]). "Introduction: Putting and Keeping Japan in Anthropology," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, pp. 3-16. Jennifer Robertson, ed. Waltham, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Robertson, Jennifer (2018). *Robo Sapiens Japonicus: Robots, Gender, Family and the Japanese Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Korean

edition, Seoul: Nulmin Books Publisher (2025).

Stein, Gertrude (1966 [1925]). *The Making of Americans*. New York: Something Else Press.

Notes

[1] My academic work can be accessed at <https://professorjenniferrobertson.com/> and my artwork at <https://biwahamistudio.com/>. I should note from the outset that “collage” and “montage” are often used interchangeably, and I have used “collage” in this essay mainly because it is a more familiar term. However, there are nuanced differences between the two that are worth pointing out in the context of this essay. Briefly, in collage, the elements are equal and independent, whereas the elements of a montage are only relatively independent units that when juxtaposed and integrated with others, generate a synthesis or Gestalt. When necessary, I distinguish the two terms and, I follow convention in referring to my “scissors and paste” creations as collages.

[2] A porous igneous rock used in Japan for interior and exterior architectural purposes.

[3] The family of the late University of San Diego history professor Alvin Coox lived for about a year on the second floor.

[4] “Theory” in anthropology should not be confused with “theory” in physics, which is evidence-based, well-tested, falsifiable, and stable until the accumulation of compelling new evidence, initially perceived as anomalies, sets in motion a paradigm shift—a “new normal” in effect. In contrast, the culturally embedded and gendered human practices explored and documented in ethnographic research are inherently multivocal, subjective, interpretive, context dependent, and only tentatively generalizable.

Anthropologists need to be careful not to impose *a priori* or to reify “theories” (that is, hypotheses) lest they be reduced to “formulaic explanations.”

[5] Briefly, the sex-gender system refers to the dominant alignment of biological sex—or variations of anatomical, chromosomal, endocrinal characteristics that define the internally diverse categories of “female” and “male”—with socio-culturally attributed, prescribed, and performed roles premised on one’s biological sex. Received gender norms can be embraced or rejected, and gender performances can be individually crafted and fluidly orchestrated. Sexuality is most efficiently described as a domain of desire and erotic pleasure quite complex and far more varied and inventive than conveyed by the nineteenth-century European terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual.” Sexuality is certainly more complex than simply an urge to procreate.

[6] Robertson, Ronald (1965). *Contemporary Printmaking in Japan* (Tokyo: Crown Publishers).

[7] I am not mentioning her name intentionally.

[8] As Rami Kaminski defines it, “An ‘otrovert’ embodies the personality trait of non-belonging: remaining an eternal outsider in a communal world. Unlike those with relational disorders, otroverts are empathetic and friendly, yet struggle to truly belong in social groups, despite no apparent behavioral distinctions from well-adjusted individuals” (2025: 15). Kaminski is a psychiatrist and his definition doesn’t quite fit my own definition of living the life of an outlier, that is, as someone who has friends and acquaintances across a broad spectrum of groups without belonging, or trying to belong, to those groups. In my experience, my otrovert position both protected me from peer pressures and gave me courage to reject cronyism (especially rampant in

universities), but it also made me a convenient “other” or scapegoat on occasion when the petty politicians of academia needed one.

[9] Otsu-e features in an article I subsequently published (Robertson 1979).

[10] I even titled my 1985 dissertation *The Making of Kodaira: Being an Ethnography of a Japanese City's Progress* (Cornell University)!

[11] These artists are well represented in biographies and catalogues of their work. I was especially interested in their use of montage as a method of socio-political critique, and, especially in the case of Höch, ethnographic exploration. My late mother's early oil paintings tended toward impasto cityscapes.

[12] *Shōjo* also figure significantly in my book on Takarazuka and other publications.

[13] I am not including an image here of Aida's disturbing painting. It may be viewed on the website of the exhibition I attended in 2012:

<https://www.mori.art.museum/english/contents/aidamakoto/artist/index.html>.

[14] If anyone is interested in perusing my PowerPoints, I can offer for perusal several uploaded videos of talks on my academic website (<https://professorjenniferrobertson.com/>) and also LinkedIn site (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennifer-robertson-69564663/>).

Share with a colleague:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jennifer Robertson is Professor Emerita of Anthropology and the History of Art at the University of Michigan. She is also an affiliate member of Tokyo College, University of Tokyo (Institutes for Advanced Studies) and an Affiliate Professor of Anthropology and Japan Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA. Robertson has resided in Seattle since the fall of 2019.

ABOUT

[About](#)[Browse Archive](#)[Course Readers](#)[Submissions](#)

CONNECT

[Support Us](#)[Subscribe](#)

COPYRIGHT © 2024 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.