Seth Jacobowitz


*Writing technology in Meiji Japan* addresses tremendously difficult texts, texts that were written precisely when the linguistic and script reforms were taking place. Jacobowitz displays great erudition in describing the chaos from which the national language arose, while also being mindful of the simultaneous discursive movements toward nationalization and standardization that produced a decisive rupture in the Meiji period. The book consists of many short, concise chapters, a necessary structure that Jacobowitz needs to employ as he takes up a variety of topics and writers. He addresses many writers who are relatively unknown, especially those in the early Meiji period, while tackling well-known writers such as Natsume Sōseki and Masaoka Shiki who were active at the turn of the century. The book is made up of four parts: ‘Discourse networks of Meiji Japan’, ‘Scripting national language’, ‘Writing things down just as they are’, and ‘Limits of realism’, each with two or three chapters. Surveying the various linguistic reforms and standardization processes that occurred in tandem, Jacobowitz has clearly conducted an impressive range of archival work.

There are many things taking place in this book, and it is not always easy to see the overarching framework that links together the many archival findings that this book offers. The gist of the argument, however, appears to be this: the history of modern Japanese literature has consistently effaced the importance of ‘shorthand’. Shorthand here isn’t simply shorthand, as it metaphorically refers to a constellation of visual forms that appeared in the early Meiji period that makes possible what Jacobowitz calls ‘transcriptive realism’. What he seeks to do, therefore, is to provide a revisionist narrative by focusing on the technologies of writing, in all their renderings. This includes not only shorthand, but postal systems, the telegraph, photography, etc., that were instrumental in producing a rupture in how Meiji Japan and beyond conceptualized the world. These technologies of writing further engaged with the standardization of ‘time, space, and language’, thus generating, as it were, the imagined national community of Japan.

There is an interesting tension in the book. On the one hand, Jacobowitz claims the following: ‘This book in no way presumes the inevitability of the unified style or its role as the vehicle of realism in modern Japanese literature. Rather, it investigates a wide spectrum of debates and experiments that did not necessarily win the day, but nevertheless had lasting reverberations, and
sometimes cascading effects, in the Meiji episteme’ (11). On the other hand, despite the desire to highlight the somewhat chaotic space in which varying political and social agendas intersected in the rise of ‘realism’, the book is full of ‘clean’ statements such as the following: ‘A new investment in the transparency of phonetic scripts arose in the Meiji period as language reformers sought to mend the fragmented polity into a single, cohesive people (kokumin) united by common national language (kokugo) and scripts (kokuji).’

The tension, I believe, is directly linked to the limitation of Benedict Anderson’s model, a model to which Jacobowitz is clearly indebted. Anderson theorized the ideological formation of the nation-state in which the production of ‘national language’ played a significant part. It features a teleological narrative that posits the imagined nation as the putative telos, which produces an inverted narrative that posits the nation as the entity that inspired the movement that created it. In such a paradigm, the urge to nationalize is deemed the primary cause of change; the formulaic discussions that seemingly trace the nation-building process often end up as self-fulfilling prophecies.

This explains one of the main problems that appear in the book: Jacobowitz never quite elucidates how specifically the varying ‘technologies’ engage with one another. He spends page after page providing empirical evidence of the development of these technologies and the many language reforms that occur alongside them. Indeed, they are all ‘technologies’ that were mobilized to produce the nation. Yet the fundamental relationship between them is left undeveloped. It is almost as if there is a metaphorical link between them—‘technology’ being the operative metaphor—but the nature of that metaphor itself is never clarified. There are many sentences like: ‘Meiji Japan witnessed an array of national, imperial, and international standardization movements—temporal, spatial, and linguistic—in tandem with the new media technologies that increasingly redrew the boundaries of daily life across the globe. It likewise presided over the creation of a national postal service that regulated the sending and receiving of all written messages, including those conveyed via telegraph; national language and script reforms, including experimental phonetic scripts such as shorthand notations; and new categories of literary realism that culminate in the modern novel’ (9). Yet how these different realms of reform specifically intersected with one another, generating decisive perceptual shifts, is never fully developed. It is uncritically assumed that they do. However, when the ‘nation’ is yet to be formed as such, the telos that is the nation cannot be assumed; many reforms and policies were implemented in a more trial-and-error mode, one that is recognized by Jacobowitz himself as he acknowledges that there was ‘a wide spectrum of debates and