

Crossings: A Tribute to My Best Academic Friend

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On February 28th, Lee Ann Fujii texted me happy birthday wishes, which arrived as I prepared to deliver a keynote lecture at the University of Hamburg the following evening. She knew from previous conversations that I was anxious about the talk. She reminded me of my expertise, reassuring me that I would be fine. But she also did not let me off the hook. If I felt underprepared, she gently admonished, then I needed to have a chat with myself about why, and then strive to not let it happen again.

Lee Ann's advice and support in that moment typified our long friendship. She listened carefully, sifted out the key thoughts in what I told her, and returned them to me with a new sheen. Sometimes they sparkled, reflecting unqualified enthusiasm and excitement about my accomplishments, personal or professional. Other times—perhaps most times—they had something more like the patina of coins long in circulation. Familiar, valuable, useful, but not shiny. She gave me the tough criticisms I needed to hear to sharpen my skills, to be a person who took up the space necessary to do original research, to teach passionately, to be a good friend, to advocate for myself and others. Our friendship encompassed a set of characteristics I have found nowhere else. Although she was my confidante, she was also my peer mentor; my first-round reviewer; my intellectual partner in interdisciplinary thought and practice about political violence and its perpetrators; my career coach; my reality checker; my friend.

Academic Friendships: An Appreciation

Many friendships exemplify these qualities. Checking in with each other, caring about each other's important moments, catching up on life—these are all elements of close friendships. My friendship with Lee Ann encompassed much more, because our research interests were so similar, because we were both women of color, and because we occupied similar spaces in academic hierarchies.

We had talked on the phone the day before her text. This call had been distinctly different from the many others we'd had over the years. In that moment, Lee Ann was experiencing profound shock and grief. Her mother had passed away just hours before we connected

on the phone. With both of us sitting in hotel rooms separated by nine time zones, she expressed her sadness, her relief that she'd gotten to see her mother before her passing, her gratitude to her brothers in attending to their mother's needs in her last few years of declining health. I let her steer the conversation, offering paltry words of condolence, wishing I could do more. I listened.

Our friendship, built on mutual trust and admiration, operated on multiple levels. Even in the midst of her grief, in the shock of her mother's passing, Lee Ann insisted on hearing about my upcoming keynote. She helped me process my insecurities, showing excitement for my work as she always had. Having heard each other talk about our academic challenges, frustrations, and triumphs, Lee Ann had the right words to encourage me to *be* the expert in the room.

I fully expected that we would pick up where we left off in our next conversation. But this was our last. Lee Ann died suddenly just two days later.

Lee Ann's death left a void. How could this woman—so vibrant, so health-conscious and careful, with still so much work to do—be gone so suddenly? We first met in 2003 at an orientation conference for Fulbright Fellowship winners. I was on my way to Tanzania for dissertation research, and she was headed to Rwanda for hers. She introduced herself to me at an opening session, and we immediately became friends. We shared an irreverent sense of humor, and our interpersonal qualities complemented each other—she was outgoing and effervescent, I am reserved and hesitant to initiate conversations with strangers. Our friendship was multilayered and rich. She was the first person I called when I faced a professional or personal challenge. Our friendship, which had weathered so much time and distance, is irreplaceable.

We never wrote anything together, but we should have. Our shared research interests connected us across disciplinary differences. We both studied the incomprehensible—how people took active steps to participation in genocide and mass killing, the social histories of perpetrators, and the performative and gendered aspects of what she termed extra-lethal violence. I mined archival sources for evidence to access a more distant past. Lee Ann's research drew primarily

on oral interviews. But despite our different approaches, we were both fascinated with the relationship between violence and power in different contexts and registers, past and present. Neither of us saw disciplinary boundaries as obstacles. Rather, we valued different forms of knowledge production for the distinctive qualities they could bring to the study of violence in different times and places. We talked about collaborating all the time, mostly in jest. But we both knew that our methodological and interpretive perspectives would be sharpened by simply learning from each other—how to read archival sources against and with the grain, how to hear an interviewee’s points of emphasis and hesitation, and how to convey these complexities in clear prose. I wish we had written something together.

Disciplined Crossings

Lee Ann often joked with me about being a “wannabe” historian. In fact, she *was* one. Her work was infused with historical texture that complemented her formidable skills as a social scientist. At the time of her death, she was on the cusp of completing a complex new book that sought to merge the disciplinary sensibilities of political science, anthropology, and history to reveal the common threads between occurrences of political violence across time and place. She chose three distinct sites—Rwanda, Bosnia, and 1930s Eastern Shore, Maryland—stretching well beyond the scope of her path-breaking and influential first book, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (2009).

Her credentials as a historian, and her appreciation of historical thinking as a fruitful method, manifested most clearly in her work on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. She conducted original historical research using archives, old newspapers, and oral testimonies to explore several early-1930s lynchings in the region, not simply as part of US history, but through the wider lens of political violence and its performativity in different contexts across time and space. To guide her historical journey, she sought out a local historian as a consultant, incorporating her into the project, and into her network. By studying a US-based case alongside Bosnia and Rwanda, Lee Ann’s comparative work took aim at American exceptionalism, refusing to let us point to other places as examples of racialized terror and violence. It was—it is—right here in our own backyard.

Lee Ann was tireless in her dedication to understanding how such horrors could occur, and committed to expanding her discipline’s tools for investigating and interpreting them. She placed her

Rwanda research within a global context to help her better discern how patterns of violence shared certain characteristics, while also diverging from each other. She viewed historical thinking as essential to building this context, and to identifying these patterns. She had spent the better part of a decade conducting interviews, visiting archives, and analyzing secondary literatures well outside political science. She did so in order to understand these seemingly disparate cases on their own terms, as well as within larger frameworks.

Lee Ann’s background in theater mixed with her political and historical approaches, sensitizing her to how people spoke, what they said, what they didn’t or couldn’t say with words. Lee Ann’s interpretive skills consequently made the most of different kinds of sources. She recognized not only the words spoken or written, but the gestures accompanying the words, the silences between—or in place of—the words. Her analyses of how perpetrators of political violence come to commit such acts always foregrounded the situational, the contextual, and the capacity for people to be many things at once. She sought out historians as interlocutors, and she questioned the boundaries of her discipline. She did so in order to emphasize what was human about the exercise of political power through violence, whether face-to-face or from a distance.

Through her many research trips, her method remained rooted in a firm ethical position: she would not violate her informants’ trust, she would not prod them to speak beyond their limits, and she would give as much interpretive weight to the silences in the exchanges as she did to the words she recorded. She studied the worst manifestations of human violence, but she always wrote about them with deep care and sensitivity. She felt so strongly about the ethics of fieldwork methodologies that she wrote a book on interviewing, offering a relational approach for others to emulate as they embarked on the daunting task of oral research. The fact that this slim volume has already become a staple for scholars undertaking oral research across the disciplines speaks to its practical message—an interview should be a conversation, not an interrogation. It belongs to both the interviewer and the interviewee. It must rest on an ethical foundation. Her uncompromising stance on this is one of her lasting gifts to the profession.

The Magic of Empathy

Upon learning of her death, jarred into recognition of all I had lost, I turned to Facebook to express my grief and dismay:

“I am heartbroken. It is incomprehensible to me that my dear friend Lee Ann Fujii is not here anymore. I will miss her so very much. She had so many plans. And because of her, I know that I must carry on with mine.”

And this is what she would wish for me. That I keep researching and writing, that I listen to my sources with care and discernment, that I be bold in the conclusions I draw after doing so. And that I bring those same skills to my teaching and everyday interactions with friends, family, and colleagues. Lee Ann was a fearless scholar, a brilliant mentor, and the best kind of friend one could want—supportive, reliable, and honest.

I gave an early draft of this piece to a friend, an anthropologist with five decades of fieldwork experience.

She recognized immediately, without knowing Lee Ann or her work, all that we have lost with her passing. She noted that Lee Ann’s singularity as a scholar, mentor, and friend, was rooted in a finely tuned sense of empathy. This informed her methods, her mentorship, and her scholarly writing. Of all that I learned from Lee Ann in our nearly fifteen-year friendship, this was the abiding lesson she taught me: without empathy, we will miss untold insights, opportunities to be intellectually fearless, and chances to enrich ourselves through friendships. I am a better historian for having learned these lessons from Lee Ann Fujii. I will always be grateful for having had the privilege of knowing her as a friend and colleague.

References

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2009. *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.