

# Remembering Lee Ann Fujii's Creativity and Courage

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I first met Lee Ann in 2006 when she was, or was about to become, a newly minted Ph.D. I did not initially realize she was so early in her career because Lee Ann was comfortable in her skin, a peer who engaged with my co-author Dvora Yanow and me in ways that made us remember her. (As I recall, Dvora and I had lunch with her in the food court at Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia.) Later I learned that Lee Ann was not your typical graduate student, having had a previous career in theater. Given that background, at APSA 2007, Lee Ann led the first Interpretation and Method (IMM) Conference Group workshop—Interpret This!—in an improv exercise, “Yes, *and*.” Participants were arrayed in a line and we had to pass a phrase through the line, building on it in this positive way—rather than a reactively-defensive, “Yes, *but*.” The point of the exercise was to learn affirmative engagement and flexibility for field research interactions. There was much laughter, as with Lee Ann leading, a workshop never felt stodgy!

Lee Ann understood context as crucial evidence for social science research. This emphasis was partially due to her professional trajectory. Lee Ann's career path can be contrasted to my own entry into academia. I progressed straight through from high school to college to graduate school, a pattern I now think appropriate to only some disciplines, say chemistry or perhaps art. On reflection, I think this trajectory can be disadvantageous to social scientists who should be bringing life experiences to our research agendas as a way of building strong, on-the-ground connections to the worlds we seek to understand. From that perspective, it now seems obvious that Lee Ann's theatre background was the foundation of her incredible creativity. That creativity was evident in the ways in which she conceptualized her research projects. It also formed the scaffolding for her work in the field: both literally in her interviewing and, also, in her deeply methodological understandings of what goes on “out there.” Lee Ann repeatedly demonstrated that research is about so much more than formal data generation; it includes, as well, the many contextual clues we pick up by being in the field (meta data, accidental data). One of her legacies is that Lee Ann taught us to *recognize* those

contextual clues as evidence that can be valuable for our research projects in their own right.

2010. “Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence.” *Journal of Peace Research* 47 (2): 231–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309353097>.
2015. “Five Stories of Accidental Ethnography: Turning Unplanned Moments in the Field into Data.” *Qualitative Research* 15 (4): 525–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114548945>.
2018. *Interviewing for Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. New York: Routledge.

My memory of Lee Ann leading improv, especially the group's laughter and learning, contrasts starkly with Lee Ann's research focus. She conducted fieldwork in challenging locations tackling topics that some prefer not to think about—genocide, lynching. She pursued these topics with persistence and passion. As she recounted in her interviewing book, she also made mistakes along the way. Indeed, her willingness to admit her mistakes *in print* speaks to her courage; it is one of her qualities that made her a model for graduate students in particular but, also, more senior scholars.

Lee Ann took that human flaw and turned it upside down by declaring, “mistakes are gifts.” Such a reconceptualization is a strong rejoinder to the contemporary political science preoccupation with *a priori* research-design perfection that implies researchers can work it all out ahead of time. Lee Ann knew from her field work experiences that mistakes will be made. Rather than ignoring, concealing, or denying them, she emphasized the research journey and the ways we could use mistakes to reflect on ourselves and our work. Lee Ann reminded us that if we can see our mistakes in a new light, we will gain the courage to learn and to persist in our work. Rather than “Yes, *but*” as an excuse, responding to mistakes with “Yes, *and*” can even open avenues for the new theorizing as her work impressively demonstrated.

2009. *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Forthcoming. *Show Time: The Logic and Power of Violent Display*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

I mourn Lee Ann's premature loss because she worked so hard to make academia a better place. That sounds like a cliché, but I mean it in a very specific way; Lee Ann was not a Pollyanna, but someone who was clear-eyed in the ways that she challenged the status quo. She wanted political science scholarship to matter and, in her last years, as the discipline obsessed about replicability, she demanded that we see the world around us, not only by studying the victims and perpetrators of violence, but also by recognizing the ossified hierarchies of race and gender in the discipline that have stifled our capacities to *see* the social world. Dismantling these hierarchies has become an ever more urgent task—one that I can hear Lee Ann pushing us all to continue in her name and memory.

2016. "The Dark Side of DA-RT." *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26 (1): 25–27.
2018. APSA Roundtable I, Democratic Implications of a Mostly White Discipline I: Recruitment and Hiring; organized before her death.
2018. APSA Roundtable II, Democratic Implications of a Mostly White Discipline II: Teaching and Research; organized before her death

Despite the topics that Lee Ann studied, and her frustrations with academia, she never lost her sense of humor and her smile. Along with her scholarship and activism, Lee Ann's laugh and her smile is what I will miss most.