

BOOK REVIEW

Hokkaido Dairy Farm: Cosmopolitics of Otherness and Security on the Frontiers of Japan

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In the opening of *Hokkaido Dairy Farm*, Paul Hansen declares that his text deals with both a place (Northern Tokachi in Hokkaido) and topic (dairy farming) that have been marginal in academic and popular discourse about Japan (5) – a marginality, at first glance, seeming to emerge from this place and industry's geographical distance from Japan's population centers (3, 12–15). Playing with the well-worn trope of the ethnographer's arrival to the field, Hansen notes that the area encompassing his primary fieldsite of the pseudonymous “Grand Hopes” farm – the town of “Gensan” in Northern Tokachi, Hokkaido – is hardly “a stereotypical Japanese landscape” (1). Indeed, he specifies that it is “a unique and particular location in the context of Japan” (2), and that life in the town of Gensan is both “similar...but not quite the same” (222) as hegemonic conceptions of Japanese society.

At first, seemingly in spite of the Otherness conferred by a snowy landscape, automobile-dependent living, and the incompatibility of the (increasingly industrialized) dairy farm with rural nostalgia for terraced rice paddies in the *furusato* (hometowns) of yesteryear (47), *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* looks to the concomitant ubiquity of milk in today's Japan and its symbolic foreignness as offering a dilemma: the inability of dominant framings of Japan and Japaneseness to accommodate the experiences of many people (26). Key, for Hansen, is that while geographically and ideologically peripheral vis-à-vis Japan's main island, Honshu, Hokkaido is hardly peripheral to the economy or national projects of security – now or yesterday (11–12).

While a frontier, Hansen observes, Gensan and Grand Hopes offers a window into how industrialization reshapes local identities (5), and most primarily for his analysis, how, in contemporary Japan, the local, communal, and national management of difference encounters individual searches for meaning and security.

In *Hokkaido Dairy Farm*, the attraction of rural dairy farming as an escape from urban monotony is read alongside the national need for foreign labor as well as the decline of single-family farms (22, 207–208, 210). Through the itinerant staff of Grand Hopes, like the “Tokyo Cowboy” (who lasts 2 months, gripping a sizeable chunk of it) or Haru (who diligently sticks out a whole year before returning to her family's farm, reduced to tears by her boss many times), Hansen locates Northern Tokachi's – and the Japanese whole dairy industry's – Otherness as being shaped by, and enabling, individual and national searches for security (182). Hansen carefully attends to how the Otherness assigned to and proliferating in the dairy industry is made possible by national Japanese policies of food security and national self-sufficiency (29–31, 47). This markedly productive dialectic tension between Northern Tokachi/dairy farming with ideologies of Japaneseness leads Hansen to conclude that “any notion of a ‘unified and unique’ Japan needs to be abandoned from the start to recognize that this region and topic fit extraordinarily poorly with many popular, and even academic, presumptions about rural Japan...” (5)

Hokkaido Dairy Farm is an important work not only for the study of Hokkaido and rural Japan, but general understanding of what micro- and meso-level (read: individual and community; 3, 15) possibilities are engendered by macro-level, or national, Japanese projects seeking to establish economic and national security via Othered frontiers (4). Frontiers figure doubly in Hansen's ethnography: it is Northern Tokachi which serves as "a macro geopolitical" frontier (36), and the bodies of cows (or "stock" in parlance of the industrialized corporate farm; 245) and dairy farmers that serve as "a buffer, and receptor, to the outside world," in individual, community, and national pursuits (2, 264). Hansen contends that Northern Tokachi and its dairy industry are an embodiment of hegemonic understandings of Japaneseness, while, simultaneously, dairy farming and life in Northern Tokachi defy ideological presumptions of what Japan is.

Hansen's central argument sprouts out of this acute dilemma: the possibilities of self-fulfillment and living otherwise through dairy farming, outside the mainstream of Japanese society, are both enabled by and reproduce more centralized and hegemonic national-level projects that continue to marginalize this very dairy industry. All of this, Hansen specifies, occurs amidst a history of continued, inextricably bound technological and social shifts in dairy farming areas (9; esp. 23) – now becoming particularly acute with neoliberalization, the twilight of mixed family farms, and outward migration from Northern Tokachi (10). None of these shifts, Hansen notes, can be disentangled from how centralized government agencies seek multiple, sometimes conflicting, paths toward macro-level national security (15). For instance, Hansen describes the entire Grand Hopes operation as pursuing future economic security by merging family farms (and thus partially resolving the issue of finding successors), but haunted by the protectionist economic measures of the central government meant to insulate small, unproductive family farms from larger corporations (22–23, 269–270).

While at first glance, then, *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* seems an addition to studies of "unfamiliar" or "forgotten" sites and groups of Japan, Hansen converses with thinkers from Franz Boas and his epistemology of difference (132–133) to Foucault's conceptualization of "heterotopia" (55–56), in order to ground a different ethnographic approach. In Chapter Seven (Dairy Farms: Being, Becoming, and Making), Hansen critiques approaches that take Otherness as manifest in proliferating group identities that stand juxtaposed to a hegemonic *ware ware nihonjin* ("us Japanese") (133–134, 138; see also 25–28). Rather than taking "dairy worker" as a class of individuals who share a common experience or are produced as class by macro-level social forces, Hansen opts to consider them an emergent assemblage (134). Instead of a class or identity, he writes, "these groupings [in Gensan] were malleable, constantly negotiated and interpreted, and contingent upon a variety of factors seen and unseen" (201).

Hansen's discussion of Otherness throughout *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* helps advance both ethnographic and theoretical conversations on the politics of difference and diversity in Japan. Namely, Hansen's ethnography challenges scholars to consider how categories of the "excluded" do not emerge from a clearly delimited macro-level causality – instead, these groups and their internal heterogeneity are shaped by individuals' "thinking and choosing" rather than the "usual collective or socially constructed subjectivities utilized to describe human belonging and motives such as ethnicity, social status, or gender" (22).

Building on this amorphous relation between the hegemonic and marginal, Hansen unfolds his ethnography sketching out a seeming paradox: the inability to imagine the corporate, industrialized dairy farm as emblematic of contemporary Japan (2), and yet, this genus of farm and the people toiling there are "at the core of current Japanese material and political culture" (26). To unravel this multi-layered puzzle, Hansen notes irony of labeling dairy products as *yōshoku* (Western food) despite their ubiquity in Japan. Against this seeming paradox, Hansen articulates the book's focus on, "these farmers and laborers from the periphery of Japan... who are at the center of its daily consumptive culture" (27) but are unable to be reconciled with ideas of Japaneseness espoused by, "narratives that are popularly promoted in media, education, or government policy" (ibid).

Owing to his extensive fieldwork and intricate knowledge of the region's history, Hansen is able to depict the ways Northern Tokachi has changed, and how its particularity is both shaped by, and a part of, wider transformations in Japan. Hansen moves seamlessly between depicting local dilemmas, such

as the gradual disappearance of mixed family farms amidst their inability to compete with corporate farms and global prices, and explaining for readers how these connect to wider issues, such as the neo-liberalization of agricultural and food policy. Whether it is showing the contingencies that animates the daily labor on the dairy farm – such as workers starting to brawl or becoming mentally unwell – or how pastoral ideals motivate disaffected urbanites to try a life in Gensan, Hansen uses a combination of thick ethnography and careful, patient theorization to compellingly depict how the causes underlying how Gensan's transformation are coupled to national and international processes.

The history of Hokkaido, and its dairy industry especially, lead Hansen to forcefully argue for situating Hokkaido within a wider history of settler colonialism and its attendant agricultural projects (20, 36). Hansen argues that in closely following the individuals who come to labor on dairy farms like Grand Hopes (as well as the people who built these farms), we are able to grasp how “the majority of Hokkaido's dairy farmers are undeniably Japanese all the while being outside popular essentialist,” ideas of what Japaneseness is (27). Hansen specifies that it is in looking beyond hegemonic narratives of Hokkaido's quintessential Japaneseness that we find, amidst its continuing “similar, but...” status, the experiences of people and the agriculture industry mirror other settler colonial states (55–56). Here, Hansen's advocacy for an ethnographic approach that eschews categorization bears much theoretical fruit: he convincingly shows how a slow and deliberate portrait of the actors at hand enables a more thoroughgoing analysis of their transnational and historical precedent, providing deeper and more penetrating insight.

Dairy farming – and the locations that enable the domestic industry – are thus simultaneously marginal and integral to Japan's security. For Hansen, this has two prominent implications.

First, Hansen holds that categories such as “Japanese” or even “dairy worker” cannot accurately grasp both the Otherness assigned and embodied by those who do not mesh with hegemonic discourses of Japaneseness. Highlighting how culturally and genetically essentialist conceptualizations of Japaneseness, deeply influenced by *nihonjinron* literature (50), maintain a palpable sociological imprint on common understandings of self in Japan (136), Hansen details the many ways farmers' identity is incompatible with how “Japanese” is defined, and leads to a sense of economic and ontological insecurity (32). In Chapter Twelve (Assembling Communities: Two Genders and One Religion), Hansen illustrates how individuals in Gensan maintain simultaneous embeddedness, yet divergence from, hegemonic gender and religion norms in Japan. He argues that this “similar, but...” typifies how dairy farmers and workers' sense of self, “while clearly remaining of Japan stand out as identities and ideologies that both secure people and make them feel secure as ‘Others’ within a long-marginalized place and industry that continues to change influenced by Japanese trends” (221).

Yet, these searches for security are not wholly determined by or reducible to group identities such as “dairy worker.” So, a second key point that emerges from the Hokkaido dairy industry's simultaneous integral and marginal place in Japan concerns questions of causality. Hansen argues that the causative role of dairy workers' individual agencies can be misapprehended when their labor is seen through a group or class identity. Hansen carefully notes that there is no need to oppose an approach to dairy workers, or any form of Otherness, as either social or individual in nature. Offering a conceptualization of “assemblages of individuation” (134), Hansen writes,

...[T]here is a danger in immediately linking young dairy farmers' lives with other forms of social scientific research on organization or agriculture in Japan, notably the epic discourse surrounding rice agriculture within *nihonjinron* or an overly fragmented identity politics. Research on Japan has, in general, tended to focus on such social structures, the cooperative, the communal, the familial, the traditional or its social inversion, the mirror opposite, one group fighting for distinction among others (150).

In contrast to “the cooperative, the communal...,” Hansen writes, “Individual jobs [on Grand Hopes] were nearly always determined through the day-to-day, even moment-to-moment, needs of the farm

and contingency, being at a particular place at (depending on the task) the right or wrong time” (ibid). *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* thus makes an example out of the un-exemplary, un-normalizable nature of dairy workers at Grand Hopes: while their jobs and self-pursuits are profoundly shaped by social forces, they do not form a cohesive group, and their own trajectories as dairy workers are more indebted to their individual affects, experiences, and motivations than any common glue (201–202). This, Hansen argues, is their exemplary nature: ethnography should move away from using group identity as an explanation of the agencies and histories animating social action (21–22).

This marginality of an industry which is simultaneously an integral part of Japan’s food security is central in Hansen’s postulation of a triad of concerns (frontiers, Otherness, and security) which are articulated in the dairy industry, the lives of its workers, and the very history of Hokkaido’s colonization. The marginality of the dairy industry on a macro-level, coupled with its place in national economic and security concerns – and their individual repercussions (e.g., debt for improving farms and productivity, the reliance on foreign technology) – lead Hansen to suggest an inextricable linkage of how various forms of Otherness are embodied and produced in Japan, with searches for security at macro, meso, and micro levels.

Via lush and captivating ethnographic vignettes, Hansen sketches out how maintaining the fluidity of milk and other streams – blood, excrement, etc. – is hardly just a metaphor for neoliberal capitalism, but a reality. Sketching out how the high-tech milking parlor determines the workers’ and cows’ movements, Hansen brilliantly illustrates how the very tenor of the workday and the alienation it produces is owed to rhythms set by the machinery. This machinery, he argues, shows how individuation via pre-determined categories and typologies neither encounters nor produces homogeneity, but spurs specific social connections and reactions that need to be studied. To wit, he writes of the farm,

It is a deeply integrated assemblage; happenings at one end of the farm, while perhaps seemingly isolated due to location, impact the output or tempo in other areas of the operation. Beings, equipment, and information must flow about the various workplaces within the farm without restriction...Akin to a living body, prolonged stasis equates with dysfunction or death. Things must keep flowing to survive. Milk is a highly perishable, organic liquid and the fiscal liquidity of the business depends upon getting it out the doors to flows outside the farm in ceaseless, though hopefully predictable, daily cycles (152–153).

In his intricate detailing of bovine and human experiences with the BouMatic Daytona rotary milking parlor, Hansen demonstrates that the quest for an economic and food security in Japan is enabled by technologies and processes of abstraction and discipline (113, 248–249).

Hansen also uses his central motif – the triad of Otherness, frontier, and security – to linger with a cast of characters that rotates as frequently as the rotary milk parlor he so thoroughly details. As *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* moves from the macro and meso levels of its opening chapters, Hansen utilizes close ethnographic depictions of various individuals laboring at Grand Hopes to illustrate his larger argument: it is always specific Otherness that is encountered on the frontiers of contemporary Japan. For instance, in Chapters Eight and Nine (“From Teat to Tot: Following the Flows” and “Producing and Pumping,” respectively), Hansen adopts the ethnographic equivalent of a cinematic character study, burrowing into people like “Between-san.” Hansen writes of how Between-san’s relative autonomy and the perpetual contingency of his position went hand-in-hand, both speaking to larger concerns in the farm – as well as highlighting the irreducible individuality of Between-san (170–173).

Part and parcel of this close focus on individual agency is a theoretical discussion of how to methodologically study and ethnographically represent such agency without misconstruing it via ready-made analytics and categories (183). Running throughout *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* is an intrepid negotiation of how to best represent the multiplex of human and nonhuman agencies manifest in a rich, longitudinal set of ethnographic data. In Chapter One (“A Conceptual Scaffolding”), Hansen writes,

I submit that social sciences such as anthropology have, in the main, tended to focus on groups and structures in favor of the analysis of individuals, their inimitable interactions, and their individual interpretations (21).

Drawing on the work of ethnographers such as Michael Jackson and Paul Stoller, Hansen uses thick ethnographic description to portray people in their contradictions, incomprehensibility, and full selves – including in their conflicts with the ethnographer. Rather than making the text's main point cryptic or opaque, this style of writing elegantly proves the very point Hansen is arguing: that on the dairy farm, individual agency is often the driver.

This ethnographic critique of effacing agency through explaining social action by way of group identities is much needed in the study of Japan, where many books still speak not only of “the” Japanese, but also of minority groups and migrants who are (explicitly or implicitly) said to operate according to their identities. While it is certainly *part* of Hansen's contention that the atypicality and peripheral nature of Northern Tokachi enable certain agencies that contravene normative ideas about individuals in contemporary Japan, Hansen is clear that Otherness is constantly being negotiated in Gensan, without any class or repertoire of practices taking shape (110, 182). He writes,

In starkest terms, the claim being made herein is that in Tokachi's dairy industry the thinking and choosing, particularly embodied individual agent, human or nonhuman...often plays a central role over and above the usual collective or socially constructed subjectivities utilized to describe human belonging and motives such as ethnicity, social status, or gender (22).

In this manner, Hansen's work forcefully argues against typologies not simply for a question of representational ethics or poetics, but as requisite for understanding the causality and effect of social action (202).

Hokkaido Dairy Farm foregrounds this incompatibility of the dairy workers at Grand Hopes farm with well-worn treatments of Japan as a conformist, socio-centric culture to offer much more than a novel case study of demographically and economically challenged “post-modern” Japan (4, 29). Pivotaly, Hansen contends that simply trading a scholarly approach to Japan that reads social relations as “determinative” (133) of individual action, for a view that today's Japan is, “...unsettled, fragmented, and often dysfunctional” (138) merely proposes neatly bounded outsider groups as a foil to a hegemonic Japanese-ness.

Yet, what makes *Hokkaido Dairy Farm's* intervention into the ethnographic study of Japan so innovative is how delicately Hansen brings together a critique of using organizational structure, tradition, and group identity to understand the motivations and meaning of individuals in Japan, with an expert dissection of how individual agency interacts with other social forces. Hansen explains,

To say that practices form a “community” of learning amid an ever-shifting roster of dairy farm workers exaggerates the social elements of mimetic knowledge over the self-determining nature of the individual workers. Most dairy workers are not long-term employees and they seldom relate to each other at work let alone outside of it. In this sense, they are not participating in a “social practice” beyond a short instructive encounter that usually (though not always) was followed by an individual's honing of methods and skills in relative isolation. Moreover, the majority of workers simply did not care about perfecting these particular skills (147–148).

Hansen's point here and elsewhere in *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* is both simple and novel within the ethnographic study of Japan: that individuals are simultaneously situated within webs of meaning and social structures beyond their awareness and making, and yet, their agency and choices exercise far more power over these meso- and macro-level concerns than often thought (202–204). Much like Bakhtin, whom Hansen frequently deploys to discuss the tension between individual and group, ethnographic and abstract views, Hansen finds the reproduction of the social immanent in

individual agency. He is staking out an ethnographic approach that socially situated actors whose possibilities are in dialogue with and conditioned by wider factors are nonetheless making decisions that shift the course of their community, and do not result from a vague group identity and its normativity.

Hansen rightly notes that the above view of agency and structure does hold for everywhere and all times in Japan; instead, he highlights the possibility of a more determinative group identity in other spaces and times as proving that overriding claims about Japanese society should be done away with. His point is precisely that as hegemonic as homogeneity is made to be, as wide and crushing as tradition's girth is claimed, this same Japan makes possible heterotopias like Grand Hopes. For Hansen, the centrality of such heterotopias in the study of contemporary Japan is not their neat and ready contradiction of a larger group identity (e.g., Japanese; see 134–138, 150), but how something like milk farming feeds, quite literally, national pursuits of economic and food security (32), while being rendered “outside” ideologies of Japaneseness (27). Indeed, Hansen strikingly illustrates that the town of Gensan and Grand Hopes farm hardly imagine themselves as contrasting normative Japaneseness. Instead, with vignettes like a manager jumping into the breakroom and saying he needed a “Japanese (*nihonjin*)” worker to come for a task presumably only a Japanese person could do, Hansen shows the pull of a normative Japanese identity while depicting how fraught claiming such an identity is.

Hokkaido Dairy Farm's array of theoretical interlocutors is as vast and varied as the shifting and sundry cast of characters that Hansen's fieldwork encounters in the Grand Hopes dairy farm. Central to Hansen's deployment of a range of concepts beyond anthropology's disciplinary confines – and devised far afield of Japan Studies, in many cases – is his telegraphed interest, on the one hand, in simultaneously broaching the *particularity* of the ethnographic material at hand. On the other, Chapter Two (Toward Modernity: The Forming and Reforming of a Northern Frontier) voices a commitment to reading Northern Tokachi and its dairy industry in relation to global histories of settler colonialism, environmental transformation, and perhaps most foundationally, understanding how human and nonhuman agencies are entangled at multiple levels. Whether it is the stubbornness of cows, the laziness of humans, or the behind-the-scenes role of bacteria (29), Hansen utilizes work in and beyond the Japanese context to untangle how various actors and social forces produce the specificity of Grand Hopes.

Beyond grappling with how a productive dialectic of the general and particular, *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* is particularly notable for the breadth and depth of theory that Hansen engages beyond the Japanese context and discipline of anthropology. Hansen reflexively sets up his engagement of multiple disciplines and a wide-ranging constellation of theorists as an explicit critique of how Japan is siloed, disciplinarily and ideologically, from other contexts. Building on the work of others like Hankins, Liu-Farrer, Shimabuku, and others, *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* approaches pernicious and ubiquitous presence of *nihonjinron* and its echoes as a palpable and significant force in contemporary understandings of self, including the views of his ethnographic informants (47–50, 135–136). Hansen signals he has little interest in providing yet further evidence that ideas of a hypostasized, transhistorical, and unified Japanese subject are mired in theoretical malfeasance and evidentiary gaps; rather, *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* takes such discourse as consequential both in ethnography research and writing.

Drawing on concepts and approaches associated with the reflexive turn in anthropology (5–6, 153, 158), Hansen treats the ethnographic and sociological impact of widespread debates and voluminous tomes about Japanese homogeneity and uniqueness as not simply a matter of ideology, but reflected and reproduced by scholarship that analyzes Japanese society apart from its global interconnections and parallels. Thus, Hansen's mobilization of theory from thinkers as diverse as Bakhtin to Jean-Luc Nancy to Watsuji Tetsuro serves as both argument and proof of concept for an ethnographic approach to contemporary Japan that seeks to understand a causal *how* through its interconnections and parallels, as well as particularities, in light of human experience *en toto*.

Hokkaido Dairy Farm is a profoundly enjoyable ethnographic read, and a compelling theoretical intervention into both Japan Studies and anthropological theory. This book would be well-placed

in any seminar examining contemporary Japan, or any course looking to the management of difference, multiculturalism, and postmodernity in Asia and beyond. *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* would also be an ideal text for any instructor in and beyond Asian or Japanese Studies seeking a chapter or text that can guide both undergraduate and graduate students in grasping the lasting impact of anthropology's "reflexive turn." As noted above, Hansen's ethnographic vignettes and organization of this book are both evocative and vivid, but especially compelling is his discussion of why he has composed and organized the text in such a manner. *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* opens up a new set of questions and theoretical conversations on scholarship of Japan, colonial history, and rural studies, and is sure to be welcomed by all these fields.