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Urespa ("Growing Together"): the remaking of Ainu-Wajin relations in Japan through an innovative social venture

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Urespa, meaning "to grow together" in the Ainu language, is a social venture founded at Sapporo University in 2010. The Urespa club brings Indigenous Ainu and Wajin (i.e. non-Ainu) students together in a curriculum-based environment to co-learn the Ainu language and Ainu cultural practice. The initiative's aim is to restory the conventional narrative of Otherness in Japan by creating a transformative space or "micropublic" in which students can work collaboratively across ethnic difference. In this paper, we argue that Urespa succeeds in effecting an inclusive social setting for both Ainu and Wajin students through the design and implementation of a process which promotes and, recursively, is shaped by, a transcultural form of social encounter. The challenge this makes to the promotion of multicultural programming within Japan in recent decades is important although not without controversy.

Keywords: Ainu; Japan; ethnic relations; critical pedagogy; indigeneity

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Asian Anthropology

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Introduction

In 2010, Honda Yuko[1], then vice-president of Sapporo University, founded a non-profit social club called *Urespa*. Although it was, and remains, a relatively small-scale venture, the establishment of the Urespa club in affiliation with the university set in motion a bold and innovative interventionist project. Urespa, meaning "to grow together" in the native language of the Indigenous Ainu people of Japan, brings Indigenous Ainu and Wajin (ethnic Japanese)[2] students together in a curriculum-based environment to co-learn the Ainu language and Ainu cultural practices[3]. In doing so, it provides a new space of interdependence that challenges, at the same time as it reworks, normalized expectations of inter-ethnic encounters in the public sphere. The general aim of Urespa is to create a transformative space in which Ainu students can flourish alongside Wajin. To achieve this, the venture structures a kind of "micropublic," to use Amin's (2002) terminology, that changes the values of individual students through extended interpersonal contact and the co-learning of Ainu cultural practices.[4] Indeed, as Honda (2013) explains, the aim of the group over the long term is to scale up and effect a fairer and more inclusive society in Japan for both Ainu and Wajin people.

From the perspective of the anthropology of Japan, the everyday realities of Ainu-Wajin relations has generated little sustained interest and have mostly been overlooked in favor of political analysis of the contemporary situation of Ainu within the Japanese nation-state (Lie 2001; Siddle 2002; cf. Peng, Ricketts & Imamura 1974). It was only in 2008 that the Japanese government formally recognized the Ainu people

as Indigenous "to the northern Japanese archipelago and its environs" (Advisory Council for Future Ainu Policy 2009, 1), a momentous decision that – notwithstanding criticism of its actual significance (Stevens 2014, 2008) – marked a distinct departure from over one hundred years of governmental assimilationist policy and thinking. Indeed, as we write this in 2018, it is the 150th anniversary of the colonization of Hokkaido, an important chapter in the historical process of racialization and colonial dispossession of Ainu lifeways by the Japanese state (*Hokkaido Shimbun* 17 July 2018; Hokkaido 150 years Business Executive Committee Secretariat 2019). Rather than reproduce a description of that history here, we encourage readers to explore for themselves writings on Ainu history (e.g. Howell 2004, 2005; Morris-Suzuki 1994; Oguma 2002; Siddle 1996; Strong 2011; Sugawara 1968; Walker 2001; Watson 2014a), particularly Ainu efforts during the twentieth century to self-organize and re-establish ethnic pride as an Indigenous people seeking self-determination over Ainu affairs at local and national levels (for example, see Hatozawa 1972; lewallen 2016; Nishiura 1997; Sasaki 1973; Sunazawa 1989; Ukaji 2003; Yūki 1980, 1997).

Set against the backdrop of important changes to the national government's Ainu policy prior to but also since 2008 (see Stevens 2014; Uzawa and Ding-Everson 2017; Uzawa 2019),[5] it is a fact that the Ainu continue to have to negotiate the lingering suspicion within majority society of (collective) Ainu claims to an Indigenous heritage. A prominent and public instance of this questioning of Ainu existence – and an event that several Urespa students spoke about during the research for this article – occurred just a couple of years after Urespa was founded. In

2014, two councillors from Hokkaido, Kaneko Yasuyuki and Onodera Masaru, used social media to attack the national government's recognition of the Ainu as Indigenous to Northern Japan. Kaneko, a parliamentarian in the Sapporo City legislature, tweeted that the Ainu people "no longer exist now" and went on to complain that Ainu individuals claiming welfare or public monies for cultural activities based on their ethnic difference were abusing taxpayers' funds and should be stopped. His tweet triggered a rash of anti-Ainu cyber-rhetoric and displays of racism. A couple of months later, Onodera, a Hokkaido prefectural legislator, stepped into the debate on Twitter to declare that Ainu-specific programs should either be re-evaluated or revoked (see lewallen 2015).

Some six weeks after his first tweet, Kaneko was expelled by his political party, having already been censured by senior political figures.[6] Indeed, the fact that both politicians lost their seats soon after, in the 2015 general election, was an outcome that civic coalition groups interpreted as an important victory. Although the fate of these two politicians at the ballot box may have provided some hope for Ainu and their supporters, the way in which the episode played out shone a light on the troubling breadth of quiet support for Kaneko's main premise that equated Ainu claims to Indigeneity with an illegitimate challenge to the political sovereignty of the Japanese people.

For Ainu, the xenophobic nature of this "hate speech" event, as anti-racist campaigners and Ainu activists labelled it, returned attention to the difficulties minority-identified individuals face in negotiating the deep divisions of difference within Japanese society (Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008a). Notwithstanding the perception of progress at the

level of public policy, the event underscored for activists the importance of continuing efforts to resist the still-dominant public image in Japanese society of Ainu as a bygone or extinct race (*horobiyuku minzoku*), inferior and other to the modern nation-state (Siddle 1996). It also highlighted the anxieties that Ainu, both young and old, can experience in identifying as Ainu in everyday life. After all, what it means to identify as Ainu in twenty-first century Japan can often be challenging and emotionally fraught, especially given that individuals are raised speaking Japanese and socialized and educated within the Japanese school system. Although cultural and linguistic revitalization movements play important roles within Ainu communities across Hokkaido and elsewhere (see Watson 2014a, 2014b) one cannot overstate the impact that the history of colonization has had on Ainu life.

Our ambition in this report is to examine the actions of the Urespa group, and in response to the Kaneko episode, to ask to what extent this initiative succeeds in creating a meaningful space of social transformation. More specifically, in situating this case study in relation to the work on how difference is discussed and managed in multiethnic liberal societies (Valentine 2008; Amin 2002; Wilson 2013), we wish to think through what this analysis has to offer an Indigenous context of reconciliation within Japan and, through dialogue with some of the group's Ainu and Wajin participants, assess the extent to which Urespa is achieving "meaningful contact" across social differences (Valentine 2008).

On Authorship and Structure

Before continuing, we wish to clarify the authorship of this report. The lead author, Kanako Uzawa, is an Ainu woman from the village of Nibutani in Hokkaido. Having mostly grown up in Tokyo, she has personally experienced the difficulties of negotiating a sense of Ainu and yet also Wajin selfhood. As the granddaughter of a widely respected Ainu leader and activist, she identifies with the need for the Ainu to gain, through education, the social and political capital to succeed in society and to self-mobilize and flourish as Ainu. Uzawa is now a PhD candidate at the UiT Arctic University in Norway.

The second author, Mark Watson, is an anthropologist at a Canadian university. He undertook research for several years with the Ainu movement in Tokyo in the early 2000s (Watson 2014a, 2014b, 2010). While his main research interests encompass Indigenous urban mobilities and self-organization, he is an action researcher inspired by the capacity of human inquiry to transform individual understandings of social relations.

The research for this paper derives primarily from doctoral fieldwork conducted with the Urespa group in 2016 by Uzawa. She conducted participant observation and completed semi-structured interviews with 21 individual students (9 female and 12 male), 13 of whom identified predominately as Ainu, and 2 Urespa employees (1 female and 1 male). After Uzawa finished her fieldwork, she analyzed, coded, and translated the interviews using conventional content analysis. Uzawa then contacted Watson in order to discuss ideas about the significance of Urespa from both comparative and theoretical perspectives. The authors' attentions in those discussions moved on to

examining how the encounter between self and the other that Amin (2002), among others (see Mayblin et al 2015; Valentine 2008; Wilson 2013), refers to as the foundational dynamic for meaningful social change, is, in the context of Urespa, as much to do with what happens *within* individuals as between them. This topic, which we refer to as self-creation, is something to which we will return.

We divide this paper into four sections. First, we provide a brief history of the Urespa project's structure, aims, and ambition. Secondly, Uzawa highlights the voices of Urespa participants (both Ainu and Wajin) to explore how Urespa enables its participants to negotiate social differences through Ainu cultural practices and the creation of shared understandings. Uzawa also highlights what consequences this process has for the individuals involved. In the third section, Watson identifies and critically engages with three ways that the Urespa model promotes a transcultural model of social encounter. In conclusion, we think through how Urespa bridges socio-cultural difference by drawing on the literature discussing "the encounter" in urban diversity.

The Foundations of Urespa

As mentioned above, the Urespa club was properly established in 2010, but to understand the context of its development we have to go back to Honda Yuko's first involvement with the Ainu community in 1983. It was in that year that Honda graduated from university and made the decision to move to the predominately Ainu community of Nibutani in south-western Hokkaido, having been inspired by the Ainu language movement. She joined the movement as a staff member of a private Ainu language class, a project led by the Ainu leader, and later parliamentarian, Kayano

Shigeru. Within four years, the language class gained a positive reputation and received prefectural government support to become the Biratori-Nibutani Ainu Language Class (Honda 2013, 126). The language classroom became a key hub of action-oriented learning and community development for the growing Ainu-language revitalization movement. Honda describes the effect of being in Nibutani at that time, and how she perceived the educational opportunities for Ainu students, in the following way:

> From my time in Nibutani, I was hoping that children could go to universities. It was painful to see some children dropping out of school halfway through their studies. It seemed that some parents who were in financial difficulty thought there was no reason to send their children to universities; it was better that children got a job to support their family. (Interview, 2016)

The limitations of educational opportunities for Ainu children as Honda understood them are still borne out in present-day statistics. According to the most recent Survey of Hokkaido Ainu Living Conditions conducted by the Hokkaido Government (Department of Hokkaido Environment & Lifestyle 2017, 7), only 33.3% of Ainu-identified youth continue into further education after high school, a statistic that is significantly lower than the 45.8% for Wajin youth.[7] Faced with the fact that 47.8% of Ainu start working straight after high school, while for Wajin students this figure is only 22.2%, the expectation within Ainu households that youth should gain employment as soon as possible can be seen as an obstacle to social mobility while also being reflective of

the challenges associated with the lower socio-economic circumstances that Ainu families face.

In an interview with Uzawa, Honda described how this formative experience in Nibutani stayed with her. Before her appointment as an assistant professor of Ainu Culture and Language at Sapporo University in 2005, she had already approached different academics to ask if they could draw on their resources to help the situation, but nothing happened. Then, in 2009, the year following her election as vice-president of Sapporo University, Honda decided to use her leverage to enact the change that she had wanted to see, and so initiated the Urespa venture.

The 'Urespa Club' Model

The Urespa club was formally established within Sapporo University in April 2010. In 2013 Urespa became a non-profit organization, allowing its employees to administer its own operations and financial management external to the university. At the time of this writing, the Urespa group rents office space from Sapporo University as well as other rooms to conduct its activities. Irrespective of this independent administrative status, Urespa remains an integral part of the university structure and is, in fact, one of four curriculum-based "action programs" that Sapporo University promotes as part of its strategic plan to provide experience-based learning opportunities for students.[8]

From the very beginning, Honda proposed three core principles for the Urespa venture. The first is its annual quota system of six entry scholarships on average for Ainu students. Honda's proposal for this Ainu-specific program gained official approval from the university in May 2009. Before being passed, however, Honda had to respond to a

number of lengthy and at times heated discussions criticizing its reasoning (Honda 2013, 129–130). A major point of concern was that it discriminated unfairly against Wajin students based on the fact that those students face the same financial pressures as Ainu, especially in times of economic recession, and are also sometimes forced to leave the university for these reasons (Honda 2013, 129). In response, Honda was adamant that the day-to-day operation of the Urespa club would be fully inclusive of Wajin students. Indeed, in interviews for this research, Wajin students did not raise any concerns with the quota system, on the contrary, some spoke reflexively and at times very movingly about their acknowledged ignorance of Ainu life and history and how this motivated them to explore the Urespa program; some expressed their deep curiosity about Ainu culture as their reason for joining; then others simply talked about not wanting to miss out on the unique opportunity of learning Ainu culture alongside Ainu students in a university setting. Further, Honda argued that securing an Ainu quota system was not about providing welfare assistance to a vulnerable population, but rather a vital strategy for ensuring Ainu participation in the venture. The overarching aim of Urespa was about creating a new kind of practical, multiethnic community training model that would benefit all students and wider society in the long term (Honda 2013, 129; Honda 2016).

The terms of the scholarship are, in fact, quite modest. They cover the tuition for the duration of the student's degree (that is, an annual fee of ￥770,000 [approx. US$6,950]), and the Sapporo University mandatory entry fee of ￥200,000 (approx. US$1,800) (Honda 2013, 128). To qualify for this scholarship, a student must identify as Ainu by meeting one of the two following criteria: (1) be recognized as an Ainu

person either by the Ainu Association of Hokkaido (the major Ainu organization in Japan) or by a locally established Ainu cultural organization (of which there are many in cities and villages across Hokkaido and in the capital region of Tokyo); or (2) be recognized as Ainu in the national family registration system (Okada Yuki, personal communication, 2018). Ainu-identified students must also meet a high-school grade standard; if this standard is not met, then an eligible student is asked to write an essay stating their motivation to join Urespa and their future goals (Honda 2016). To retain their scholarship status, students are expected to maintain a good level of study of Ainu-related subjects and to attend all Urespa activities.

The Urespa model's second principle is its "company system." This invites private companies and individuals to become "Urespa company members" of the club via payment of a membership fee. This system encourages company representatives to participate in Urespa activities, meet students face to face, and provide opportunities for mutual learning.[9] As most Ainu report that they are not able to make reference to their heritage for fear of discrimination when they are looking for employment, Honda has spoken of this "company system" as an important initiative (Honda 2013, 130).

The final principle of Urespa is the movement itself. This refers to the broad intention to help create a bi-cultural environment in which not only Ainu, but anyone who is interested in Ainu culture is encouraged to participate in club activities. It also aims to have the students share their experiences with the general public in settings outside the university environment (Honda 2013, 128). A main example of this is the Urespa Festa, an annual theatrical production and a capstone event of the

student's academic year that the Urespa group performs in front of a public audience.

As a non-profit organization, the club holds monthly meetings and an annual assembly where the organizers report on ongoing activities and the financial status of the club. In terms of its social and academic operations, Urespa is a co-operative, meaning that regardless of ethnic affiliation, students are expected to take full responsibility for the planning and arrangement of all group activities by working together. As Uzawa witnessed over the course of her fieldwork with the Urespa club, this responsibility is taken seriously by all students. In spite of or perhaps because of this dynamic, the peer-driven expectations of such work can often be the source of intra-group tensions. If such problems do arise, then students are ultimately left to resolve them themselves. The kind of work that students do as part of Urespa includes the arrangement of twice-weekly study groups with a focus on Ainu history, language, art, storytelling, songs, dance, or any other related topics that students think relevant.[10] Students are also expected to take responsibility for a range of other group functions or "sub-committee" work. These include updating the Urespa website and related social media profiles; organizing an annual Urespa publication; daily cleaning of the Urespa office space; fulfilment of public relations and the invitation of guest lecturers to speak to the group; and the holding of a monthly general meeting to update each other on the work of the sub-committees and to discuss the challenges individuals may be facing within the club. Additionally, there is a half-hour weekly timeslot dedicated to Ainu performance, often in preparation for any upcoming public performances or for the annual Urespa Festa.

Growing within, growing together: individual reflections on the urespa club

The emphasis that the Urespa project places on group-centric organization and decision-making reflects its foundational commitment to co-learning. Indeed, it can be characterized as a profoundly collaborative project in as much as it realizes a process in which individuals negotiate their differences and "grow together" (to use the language of Urespa) to redefine themselves as a group. However, to move beyond this rather superficial analysis, the point we want to make and develop below is that when listening to the Urespa participants discuss their own experiences, we realize that Urespa only works at a group level because of the work of self-reflection that individual participants exercise. Furthermore, this interrogation of difference is experienced differently by Ainu participants. Contrary to how Wajin students process their involvement in the Urespa club, Ainu students are more likely to recast the oppositional self-other (Ainu-Wajin) binary as a processual and existential relation generative of their sense of self – i.e. Ainu but also Wajin. Therefore, while the progressive vision of Urespa challenges the social norms it seeks to change by refusing to put Ainu and Wajin in hierarchical relation to each other, it nevertheless highlights without necessarily helping to resolve the complex interrelation between cosmopolitanism and indigeneity, the transcultural and the traditional that Ainu youth find themselves negotiating on a daily basis.

Below, Uzawa presents brief conversational snaphots of five students, 3 Ainu and 2 Wajin.[11] Attentive to the limitations of space, this conversational style seeks to integrate the voices of the participants with

interpretation of the main points raised in the interviews. We will then use and analyze those points in the subsequent section.

Taro[12]

Taro is a young Ainu man around 20 years old who also identifies with his Wajin heritage and upbringing in Hokkaido. Although he is one of the youngest students in the Urespa club, his strong demeanor and personality is often something that other students draw inspiration from, especially when looking to lighten each other's mood or encourage each other after a long day. Taro is enthusiastic about learning and using the Ainu language and takes every chance he can during Urespa classes and events to practice with others. This pride in the language reflects a strong and positive attitude about Ainu culture that he recognizes not all Ainu share: "Maybe it's because I don't have any experience of being discriminated against," he says in an interview, "but I have no inferiority of being Ainu." Yet Taro readily admits the limits of everyday life, saying he knows to be careful about what he says and to whom. He talks about how little people understand the Ainu –in public, he explains, the old, prejudiced stereotypes about the Ainu continue to circulate, "of us living with bears or as hunter-gatherers living in houses made of marsh reeds." But it isn't just in public that he is careful with his words, explaining that even in more intimate social settings such as with friends in the Urespa club, "there are things I find it difficult to say, or choose not to say."

Coming from a family that identifies with its Ainu heritage, Taro is somewhat different from other Ainu students in Urespa. The realities of living in a Wajin society mean that for the majority of Ainu it is quite rare to have the chance to grow up with Ainu culture. That said, and in spite of

the pride he currently expresses, his Urespa experience has been an important learning opportunity for him. Before joining Urespa, he says, he considered himself as much Wajin as Ainu; indeed, his decision to enter Urespa was not so much because of his Ainu identity than his affinity for his father and grandfather's efforts to keep the culture alive. When the time came to think about a university exam, he explains, "I suddenly came to think that Ainu culture may disappear," stating how sad he felt knowing how much his family had done to try to change the situation. He heard about Urespa "as a place for Ainu to come together," so he decided to apply. But as he became more involved in the club, he realized that something started to change within him. The move to the city from his rural Hokkaido community did not really affect him, he says, but when he began his Urespa activities, "my thinking changed a lot." He continues:

> Thoughts I had before have changed. I did not think I would ever become someone who inherits Ainu culture….. we have a *Cise* (Ainu house) behind our main house at home, and there are *Cisekor kamuy* (guardians of the house) and several *Sintoko* (treasure containers used for ceremonial purposes). When I went back home this summer, I noticed them for the first time, though they must have been there all these years. There were many *Sintoko* there. My thinking about Ainu has changed; I feel I am on the Ainu side now. (Interview, 2016)

For Taro, the communal design and feel of the Urespa club is something that he likes, finding it "stimulating to study with others…I get envious,

or something triggers me when I see others doing their best." As for his own ambitions, Taro is not shy to discuss his intention to become "a cultural messenger" who can communicate Ainu affairs to the public at large: "I want Urespa to become a club that impresses people," he explains, "It would be great if each [student] becomes knowledgeble and influential [in their area]." (Interview, 2016)

Aiko

Aiko is a Wajin student. She chose to enter Urespa based on studies she had undertaken abroad. Having learned about the politics of nationality and ethnicity on those exchange programs, she began to think more deeply about ethnic diversity within Japan and her ignorance of it. Getting involved in Urespa, she began to appreciate what she describes as the club's "really rare attempt in today's society" to relate and collaborate across differences, and Honda's creation of a special environment where the Ainu and Wajin can learn as equals. "One Urespa student told me," she says, "that there was no one close by who could transmit Ainu culture to them. I do not have anything traditional in my daily life, so I envied them for that. I wanted them to take care of that kind of connection."

Aiko takes a proactive approach to her participation in Urespa. She thinks about her lack of knowledge about Ainu culture and connections to local regions as potentially something positive, saying "since I am new to all this, I can look at things differently and more objectively. That is something others [i.e. Ainu] cannot do, coming with ideas that others do not have." Aiko is honest about her feelings and openly wonders if she herself has an Ainu ancestor based on the long history of the colonization of Hokkaido. Because of Urespa, she expresses her strong feelings for Ainu culture, stating her admiration for "Ainu

[who] are proud of themselves" and how Urespa has influenced her: "taking part in such a process has gradually changed my thoughts and views." She goes on to say: "I can concentrate more when I wear Ainu robes and *matanpusi*.[13] It straightens me up. It feels different from when I studied another subject. I did not think I would study this so hard. When we [the Urepsa club members] all danced together this spring during a yearly Urespa general assembly, it felt different. I thought it is great to dance among both female and male groups. It feels so great. It gives me a sense of being part of something. I think it is a good idea that Urespa students continue learning Ainu dances and songs. Music and dance are important within culture." (Interview, 2016)

Fugo

Fugo is an Ainu man from Hokkaido who also identifies with his Wajin heritage. In his interview, he describes how he knew about his Ainu heritage but did not think much about it until high school. A turning point for Fugo was when he heard Kaneko's hate speech and started to realize its impact. He describes that moment as one of deep reflection: "I felt sad," he says, "and thought who is going to do something about this if we, who carry Ainu blood, do not? I thought hard about how I can be of help." So, he decided to enter Urespa. "I do not think I would have entered the Urespa club if it were not for Kaneko's words."

Fugo is an Urespa scholarship student. He is now more interested in reading Ainu-related books, and talks about how supportive it feels to have friends with which to share ideas about Ainu culture. Urespa has provided him with an opportunity to learn about his heritage that previously he didn't have access to. "For some students," he says, "they

were close to Ainu culture, but for me, everything is fresh and impressive. In general, there are no places [like Urespa] where we can learn the Ainu language and practice culture from people who know about the culture."

However, when discussing the hate speech episode, Fugo also admits to a lingering sense of anxiety within himself and his parents. This is further complicated by the fact that as a scholarship recipient, he has to publicly identify as Ainu. He confesses that this means he is careful what he says to people in public about his Ainu activities, fearing the kinds of prejudice people might harbor privately about the Ainu. His father's generation, he says, "was a generation that meant being Ainu was to be discriminated against," and "my mother has warned me to be careful here in the city because of this, knowing my father's painful experiences and feelings about the past." Fugo describes how he deals with such negative judgment by focusing back on his cultural practice. "I try my best not to make any mistakes" he remarks; the sense of solidarity and achievement that Urespa inspires is important for Fugo.

Kazuko

Kazuko is a young Wajin woman. She readily admits that she had no exposure to Ainu culture or people growing up, so the Urespa experience is completely new for her. Although Kazuko is from Hokkaido, her first experience of learning about the Ainu was Honda's introductory class in Ainu culture and history. Urespa has been a steep but, on reflection, positive learning curve for her, she says, and it has quickly made her realize how little people in her hometown know about Ainu. This is unfortunate, she says, but she finds hope in the fact that change is occurring. She explains how recently "there have been more stories on

TV about Ainu," and the fact that her own parents have started to express their interest in Ainu issues shows the positive impact that her participation in the Urespa club can have on others.

When discussing the issue of social difference, Kazuko speaks about it differently than the Ainu students above. She says she does not feel or see any "boundaries" between Ainu and Wajin but, without elaborating, acknowledges that she has found it difficult: "I do not dislike being [in the club], but sometimes it is hard. It takes some time to get used to being there." That said, she has worked at her Urespa activities and taken her responsibilities seriously. Her role in the Urespa Festa she found particularly challenging, but also rewarding. Without any Ainu language training, she learned to sing songs in Ainu with other female students and also learned some of the theatre performance text in Ainu as well. She appreciates the opportunities that Urespa has provided her: "There is so much that I get to experience for the first time, like the Ainu language, foraging *pekanpe,*[14], joining Ainu food-making events. It excites me." At the same time, though, she worries about making mistakes in her cultural practices. This has affected her everyday life: "The amount of time I get to sleep has been reduced. It was extremely challenging to do both Urespa Festa and school activities. I fell asleep in my classes. I do not have much time to myself anymore to do what I like to do." (Interview, 2016)

Gorou

Gorou is an Ainu man from eastern Hokkaido, a place that he feels strongly connected to. From the age of three, he participated in an Ainu cultural group in his hometown, learning traditional dance and song. Yet

he finds it difficult to articulate his identity, saying he identifies as both
Ainu and Wajin. "I grew up in a Wajin environment," he says, but "I want
to build up my Ainu identity from now on." Like many high school
graduates, Gorou struggled with what he wanted to do after school, but at
the university's Open House he listened to Honda's personal story and
ambition for the Urespa venture and thought it would be good to join the
club.

　　　　Gorou describes himself as "happy and thankful" for a place such
as Urespa. It is a "special place," he says, where one can go to university
and learn Ainu culture at the same time. He greatly appreciates
connecting with the Ainu community networks that stretch across
Hokkaido. This is something he gets from fieldtrips that the Urespa club
goes on, visiting Ainu groups in different regions. What challenges Gorou
the most is finding a way to navigate his cultural learning of Ainu culture.
Ainu cultural practice is locally situated, meaning that styles of dance,
song and crafts differ from one region to another and are all central to the
patchwork formation of a "national" sense of Ainu collectivity. As he is
proud of where he comes from, it is important for him to be accepted by
his community, communicating in his interview his uncertainty "about
what people in my hometown would think if I perform dances from
different areas. It is confusing for myself, and I worry that I might forget
my dances from my hometown."

Urespa and the remaking of Ainu-Wajin relations
Reflecting on these excerpts of interviews with the students above, but
also on other interviews with Urespa participants conducted as part of
Uzawa's doctoral research, it is evident and somewhat inevitable that no

one person provides a definitive description of Urespa. All students openly discuss the contingency of their situations, which necessarily feeds back in to each individual's partial and tentative ability to comprehend the Urespa process. In general, an important feature of these conversations are the interactions and exchanges across ethnic boundaries that individuals describe both in terms of their internal lives and in reference to the activities of the Urespa club. Boundaries around identifications are maintained, of course – i.e. all students reference Ainu as an identity "other" to Wajin; however, the rigid duality of those identities dissolve when people talk about what it is they actually do and how it is they understand their experience of the Urespa process. In Urespa, Ainu and Wajin identities are remade; the openness to difference that the club promotes encourages students to resist reproducing the idea of cultural fixity or naturalized otherness. Instead, we glimpse the emergence of a new conversation about difference animated by the language of connection, possibility and self-creation that is made all the more poignant and immediate for the memories, anxieties and other emotions that break through to the surface as individuals talk. Essentially, the students move our understanding of identity away from notions of property (something that one "has") to a contingent process of personal discovery and what we term "creative relationality."

To listen carefully to the participants, we argue that the various forms of personal and social transformation that take place within the Urespa club rely on a process that promotes and, recursively, is shaped by, a *trans*cultural form of social encounter. This transcultural encounter is as much about change *within* individuals as it is about change between cultural persons. It challenges the picture of multiculturalism based on the

tolerance of bounded ethnic groups. It does this by being open to the historical contingency of individual circumstances, allowing students the opportunity to explore their own journeys, multiple identifications, and border crossings. Through this lens, we see the Urespa venture itself as transformative of the story of Otherness in Japan. To further explain this, Watson returns to the student interviews and considers – but also critically engages with – three ways that the Urespa club model works through and across difference.

Challenging the ethnic binary: transculturalism and the internal praxis of culture

All the students that Uzawa interviewed above spoke about Urespa changing their perspective or understanding in some way. Gorou appreciates the deeper connections he is able to foster with Ainu communities and peers across Hokkaido. Aiko feels empowered. Kazuko senses that her involvement in the club is not only changing her understanding of Ainu life, but her parents' opinion as well. Fugo gains a new sense of pride and self-worth in identifying with his Ainu heritage. Taro's story is particularly intriguing, as he speaks about returning home and seeing things anew and, for the first time, it appears, appreciating the familial and personal significance of the material Ainu culture with which he grew up.

Each participant, in their own way, opens up about the prospect of change in positive terms. This is not to shy away from the anxiety and discomfort that change also brings and which Kazuko speaks to without elaborating on, but there is an evident shift occurring here that Uzawa also sensed during fieldwork. For the Ainu students, anxiety over

identifying publicly as Ainu remains an issue, but, as Fugo puts it, in distinction from his parents' generation, being Ainu today does not automatically equate with being discriminated against. Today there are different ways of making and remaking one's Ainu identity, meaning that for the Ainu students, their ethnic heritage offers a new form of identification that they can engage or disengage with on their own terms (Maher 2005, 88). Indeed, this rationale echoes Taro's decision to pursue the Urespa opportunity based on respect for his father's family commitment to Ainu cultural practice more than his own identification with the ethnic Ainu cause.

However, within the space of Urespa, this value of self-creation also freely allows the Wajin students to navigate across boundaries of Ainu identification, a journey which prompts Aiko to wonder out loud if she has any past Ainu relation and Kazuko to question any boundary between Ainu and Wajin. Inevitably, this is the double-bind of Urespa and other projects that in their own ways privilege the values of inclusion and multiplicity. By moving away from the main issues of economic inequality, social injustice and colonization that the Ainu political movement during the twentieth century had fought hard to demonstrate was the principal context of Ainu-state relations (see Siddle 1996), Urespa's reframing of Ainu-Wajin issues as an encounter between individuals could be interpreted as reducing important structural questions about the reproduction of institutionalized discrimination and social marginalization to questions of "who am I?" Consequently, ideas of Ainu identity that once constituted a pathway to political action now change, and individual identification itself becomes the focal point of political action (cf. Bourne 1999:136 cited in Cho 2013:86).

Is this a fair critique? Exactly what model of change does Urespa aspire to effect? Urespa neither dictates what should happen nor does it advocate an Indigenous rights-based agenda. For Honda herself, the goal of the club has always been grounded in interpersonal relations. Its central ambition is to establish the conditions for Ainu and Wajin youth to interact and generate personal learning through experiences of collaborative practice. Therefore the club employs the language of social change but in reference to pedagogical ideas of possibility rather than any fixed ideology of structural reform. By intervening at the micro-level of social relations Urespa seeks to achieve change by allowing individuals to engage each other as friends and peers. This is a form of *trans*cultural exchange that goes beyond passive respect and tolerance of difference to effect a new kind of vocabulary mobilized around concepts of solidarity, togetherness and social hope.

That said, we see in the interviews how the Ainu students comprehend their experience of Otherness differently from the Wajin students. Fugo, Gorou and Taro all speak of how they continually negotiate and position themselves in the interstices between their Ainu and Wajin lives. This emotional labor is couched within the context of Urespa and its rationale to provide both them and the Wajin students with the opportunity to value and explore the complex and situational manuevers of Ainu life. Still, this gets at the very heart of Urespa's idea to bring students together to transform the static politics of multicultural difference into an innovative strategy of transcultural engagement. In this new language of (non-directed) possibility, Ainu culture becomes a positive form of praxis internal to oneself and others (Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008b, 9).

Networks over structures

If we take Urespa as the formation of a kind of "micropublic" (Amin 2002), what kind of model of society is it producing? In the interviews, Gorou speaks about his appreciation for connecting with different Ainu groups across Hokkaido through Urespa. Similarly, Taro speaks about his intention of becoming a "cultural messenger" of Ainu culture out in public and is excited by the capacity of Urespa to generate a cohort of Ainu cultural ambassadors. The opportunities for solidarity between participants that Urespa creates are productive of a new kind of networked setting that attaches positive value on shared knowledge and cultural pride. Indeed, in this spirit, Kazuko and Aiko both describe their commitment to help Ainu students connect with their heritage and each other. Consequently, the stigma historically and publicly attached to Ainu identity is diminished and replaced with new forms of cultural affirmation. Thus, Gorou values Urespa as an opportunity to explore and consciously strengthen his Ainu identity. Fugo, on the other hand, talks about his focus on "not making mistakes" when it comes to cultural practice – an attitude to knowing as formative of a position of authority that helps him to move beyond the sense of inferiority his father and others of his generations experienced.

Drawing on both Uzawa's extended discussions with Honda and the student comments above, the Urespa model refuses to put Ainu and Wajin in hierarchical relation to each other. Urespa provides a counterpoint (a "safe space") to the either/or dichotomy of ethnic politics (i.e. Ainu or Wajin) that pervades the essentialization of difference in Japan. Self-creation is emphasized over ascription. Culture, as a static, monolithic entity, is critiqued in practice in favor of plurality and the

possibility of multiple identifications. This is a new image of Japanese society, one no longer based on normative structures fixed by the language of center, power, and vertical hierarchies, but animated by shifting networks that connect and reconnect, inspire and expand (Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu 2008c, 313).

Therefore the kind of mircopublic that the Urespa students experience is open and co-operative. The club's structure solidifies new ideas and purposefully refashions the future of inter-ethnic relations in Japan (and with it our understanding of past and present). Most importantly, the edges of individual worlds where conflict and misunderstanding can arise are not framed as sites of friction anymore but regarded as moments for mutual learning and collaboration. Thus when Taro talks about being motivated by watching other (Wajin and Ainu) students do their best, or when Kazuko alludes to the difficulties of getting used to Urespa, or Aiko, as a Wajin student, speaks about what she thinks she can bring to Ainu learning, we are learning about the emphasis that Urespa places on people adjusting to each other, adapting, and re-positioning themselves. All of these reflections foster a sense of growing together within a new context of transcultural praxis. Moreover it emphasizes Urespa's focus on networking and the facilitation of change through connection and the critique it offers of the fixity of identity structures.

Creative relationality and the remaking of difference
In Urespa, whether it is a dance performance, Ainu language lesson, or throat singing to an old song, the act of learning becomes key to the strengthening of the participants' sense of integrity – of who it is they feel

they are and are comfortable being, in spite of public opinion. For these reasons, we regard Urespa's use of Ainu cultural heritage as a transcultural practice of "creative relationality." As the setting for group activities, Urespa establishes the conditions for the kind of transformative change that remakes Ainu-Wajin relations but without seeking to direct that change. This means that by leaving it up to the judgment and responsibility of the students, the cultural learning that occurs becomes not an end in itself, but rather the mechanism of sharing experiences together in that learning – hence, the meaning of Urespa, "growing together."

Of course and in returning to the critique of individualism mentioned above, to what extent Urespa can scale up and effect difference at a societal level depends on its capacity to link the micro to the macro. Although the interviewees did not reflect on this directly, we propose that the club's use of creative relationality as the primary means of networking within the Urespa group establishes the possibility for broader social change based on changes that individuals experience in the process of their participation.

How does linking individuals to the social work in this context? To talk about personal integrity is apt here, particularly in the way that Calhoun (1995) chooses to talk about integrity as a kind of "standing for something." What Calhoun explains is how she recognizes that people can report feeling transformed in their experiences of self-improvement but, she contends, this sense of personal betterment is a *social*, not an individual virtue. What she means by this is that an individual's sense of achievement or accomplishment is only truly meaningful when one sees oneself as part of an evaluating community. In this regard, the struggles

that all the students express in finding their way through the Urespa experience are significant not because of the attention it draws to them trying to connect with something within themselves (although this is important), but because of how their struggles open up through relations with other participants, family members and society. In other words, the co-learning activities of the Urespa model promote an insurgent and experimental melding of the personal with the social. This affects how the participants, and also the people with whom they interact through public activities and performances such as the annual Urespa Fest, think about society moving forward. It also draws attention back to Honda's insistence in the formation of Urespa to incorporate a "company system" into its structure. Providing students the opportunity to connect with employers in this way is about professional and career development but more than that, it is about fostering long-term relationships with corporate partners in an effort to change the stigma around the (un)employability of Ainu and the prejudiced stereotypes which inform those ideas.

Concluding thoughts: restorying Otherness in Japan

The Urespa club is more than just a university-based curricular activity. In looking at its activities and formation from the point of view of social change and critical pedagogy, it is, we argue, an intervention in the conventional story of Otherness in Japan, a story that for too long has been based on indivisible boundaries between Ainu and Wajin identities. The new story of Otherness that Urespa constructs purposefully moves beyond essentialisms to privilege the personal and heterogeneous complexities of identification in contemporary Japan. In its co-learning activities, Ainu culture is a practice as opposed to a reified object of

intangible heritage and as such it is there to be engaged in together as a form of encounter that promotes the self-examination of roots and routes (Murphy-Shigematsu 2002; Willis and Murphy Shigematsu 2008a).

After all, Urespa is an organized form of social encounter that brings individual students together to work towards crafting an atmosphere of mutual responsibility and creative relationality in which they can navigate and narrate their own personal journeys. At the foundation of Urespa is a model of social inclusion and co-learning that puts a strong emphasis on learning through the act of doing. However, that the act of doing is focused almost exclusively on Ainu cultural practice – without reference to its complex political or historical context of Japanese colonization of Ainu lifeways – is not without its critics. Still, at the same time, and as Urespa demonstrates, change is nevertheless possible and mutually feasible if individuals are open to the often-difficult and deeply personal journey of transformation. So then, does Urespa work? If so, what can it contribute to the future?

In recent years, the value of social encounters in transforming the liberal values of "pluralism" and "diversity" into lived experience has been picked up in important ways by a number of scholars (see Valentine 2008; Wilson 2013). On the one hand, it is generally understood that contact between two strangers can rarely, if ever, be enough to scale up into a wider movement for transformative change beyond those shared moments (Valentine 2008, 332); on the other hand, however, if particular types of space are purposefully mobilized in concert with meaningful forms of interpersonal engagement, then perhaps participants can foster new attachments to social relations and forge new understandings of the historical and political contexts in which social encounters occur. This

can help establish the conditions for broader shifts in attitudes and actions (Mayblin et al. 2015).

Amin (2002), for example, in his work on the potential for intercultural dialogue and action following racialized urban disturbances, articulates an impassioned argument for the utility of "micropublics" in transgressing the normativity of habitual encounters. Amin contends that bringing people from different backgrounds together in a new context for a common activity can productively disrupt individual behaviors by creating new attachments to social relations (2002, 970). Those micropublics, in other words, provide moments of cultural destabilization, "offering individuals," as he explains, "the chance to break out of fixed relations and fixed notions and, through this, learn to become different through new patterns of social interaction" (2002, 970).

Valentine has taken up a more critical standpoint on the issue by taking to task the assumption that interpersonal contact necessarily translates into respect (2008, 325). In contrast, she seeks to identify what contributes to "meaningful contact"; that is, "contact that actually changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment and into a more general respect for – rather than merely tolerance of – others" (Valentine 2008, 325). For Valentine, how to bridge the gap between the public and private self to effect transformative change is far from straightforward. Nevertheless, it is, she argues, the crux of the problem.

For Honda Yuko, the Urespa club's commitment to Ainu cultural practice as a medium for transcultural exchange underscores the social value of putting in place a process for individuals to change their understanding of themselves and others in an effort to "grow together." In this, Urespa is an interesting case study of the "encounter" for the

emphasis it places on change being as much internal as intersubjective but without fetishizing the (ethnic) boundaries between individuals. If change is the "language of possibility" (Cho 2013) then the new story Urespa tells of Otherness in Japan is one of social hope and a future of mutual co-existence which respects the distinction between Wajin and Ainu but without assuming that either identity represents a fixed or immutable future.

- Conflict of interests

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1   According to Japanese naming convention, family name is placed first.
2   Following the precedent set by other authors in Ainu research (e.g. Siddle 1996, lewallen 2016, Watson 2014a), we employ the term Wajin in this article to refer to the ethnic Japanese or non-Ainu in order to clarify the point that having Japanese citizenship does not define one's ethnicity.
3   For Urespa, the term Ainu cultural practice refers to a range of performative activities such as dance, craftwork, storytelling and song and to the learning of traditional Ainu knowledge about flora and fauna and other aspects of Ainu ecosystems. Also incorporated into Urespa's approach to Ainu culture are different levels of Ainu language learning and an introduction to the philosophical and religious aspects informing Ainu life.
4   Amin (2002) refers to "micropublics" as those ordinary or prosaic spaces of organized group activity, such as sports or music clubs, communal gardens or drama groups that foster cultural exchange and interpersonal transformation.
5   The Japanese government enacted the new Ainu law on 19 April 2019. The Ainu are henceforth to be legally recognized as an *Indigenous people* in Japan for the first time, with the objective of enabling Ainu people to live with pride and dignity in a

society wherein each individual co-exists in an environment of respect. The prohibition of discrimination against Ainu individuals is also a feature of the law (*The Japan Times*, 19 April 2019; Uzawa 2019).

6   These included the national government's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Suga Yoshihide, and Mayor of Sapporo, Ueda Fumio.

7   According to the Survey of Hokkaido Ainu Living Conditions (2017), there are three main criteria for defining Ainu: 1) individuals who come from families or communities with Ainu bloodlines; 2) those who self-identify as Ainu; 3) non-Ainu who have married into or been adopted into an Ainu family. However, individuals who may have familial or communal connections with Ainu bloodlines but who do not identify as Ainu are not counted as Ainu in the survey (Department of Hokkaido Environment and Lifestyle, 2017, p.1).

8   For more information on these "action programs," see https://www.sapporo-u.ac.jp/department/action-program.html (last accessed 15 April 2019)

9   As of 2018 there are 30 Urespa company members (Sapporo University Urespa Club 2018).

10   While Urespa provides a focus on cultural practice it is important to recognize the existence of Ainu cultural groups and the role that they have played in the Ainu cultural revitalization movement. In Hokkaido, there are currently 18 regional cultural preservation and performance groups in operation (see the website of the Agency for Cultural Affairs & National Institute of Informatics) and although each group defines its own membership criteria, activities are generally open to both Ainu and Wajin individuals. There are also other initiatives in Hokkaido such as the *bunka ninaite* (Culture Bearer) program led by curators at the Ainu Museum in Shiraoi. This is a three-year program for Ainu youth who want to learn about Ainu culture and develop their Ainu language skills (see lewallen 2016, 214). Finally, there is a vibrant Ainu cultural movement in the capital region with at least four separate groups that meet and put on public performances (also see Watson 2014a).

11   All names attached to interviewees are pseudonyms.

12   Uzawa has made some adjustments to this empirical data to protect the student's identity.

13   This is the Ainu name for a decorative headband.

14   This means 'water chestnuts' in the Ainu language.

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