

**WGS Joint M.A. Commencement Address  
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**Weaving Lives: Reflections on Aesthetics, Labor and Women's Solidarity**



As we celebrate these wonderful Master's graduates in Women's and Gender Studies, I find myself reflecting as an anthropologist on the origins and resonances of women's solidarity. There is of course a general tendency by feminist anthropologists, when we think in universalistic, cross cultural mode, to ascribe women's unity to common experiences rooted in biology or social organization – to the actual or potential experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and child rearing – or to the structural features of the elementary family and the domestic sphere. All of these factors are significant to be sure, although in many instances they also contribute to a fracturing of solidarity among women, in this society and thousands of others around the world.

Yet today, reflecting on the accomplishments of these distinguished women, I'd like to call our attention to a more subtle array of practices that help to constitute profound experiences of collective union among women. I am fascinated by the complex integration of aesthetic and spiritual orientations, geared towards quests for esoteric knowledge, embedded in experiences of everyday physical labor.

I first became aware of these intersections many years ago, when working for the Design Center Philippines, helping to set up weaving cooperatives among indigenous women in northern Luzon. Many factors consistently militate against local Kalinga and Ifugao women experiencing general solidarity based on gender—including the institution of bride service, in which a husband's work for the bride's parents-in-law tends towards the reproduction of generational hierarchies between women. Yet in varied forms of weaving and textile art, women rediscover profound forms of solidarity that cut across the generational divisions that have been prescribed by social structure. In the complex traditional patterns (often named for a particular weaver), women summon up and to some extent rediscover the techniques and skills of their foremothers. They do this not because indigenous weaving rests solely on rote memorization and repetition (and indeed a weaver gains fame for acknowledging but improvising upon earlier patterns). Weavers tap into, as it were, a pervasive generative matrix, a complex creative cultural repertoire of structure and potentiality, that can only be fully accessed once the weaver enters, through the labor process, into a state of concentrated, dedicated attentiveness.

This phenomenon, of disciplined labor leading to generational inter-connectedness, was especially pronounced in the community of women among whom I did my first anthropological fieldwork, at a Shinto Shrine in northeastern Japan. In many instances, women are drawn, or driven, to the mountain, through profound tensions with their women kinfolk, including their mothers-in-law or their own parents, or by profound

obligations to the souls of earlier generations. Yet on the mountain, as they labor each morning to craft beautiful offerings to the divinities, and climb the sacred mountain with deepening concentration and grace, they discover profound affinities with their foremothers. As my dearest friend and informant, Keiko, told me, after years of engaging in ascetic labor on the mountainscape, the mountain is “my mother’s garden” (*kasan no niwa*). The metaphor is rich with significance: like a garden, the mountain is in a profound sense created and re-created through the dedicated work of generations of women, who each come to sense traces of one another as they tangibly and sensuously interact with its rocks, water, soils and flora.

Conceived of as a great womb, the mountain “gives birth” to successive generations of women who rediscover their own affinities to one another through concentrated, aesthetic work and ascetic discipline. Honoring the divinities, they climb the mountain and pray, clean, and cook in the shrine—and paint “offering paintings” that document stories of the shrine’s founding by a woman. All these actions, they insist, are modeled on the gods themselves--whose own creative work is manifest in the cleansing flows of water, the massiveness of the mountain itself, and the soothing glow of sunlight.

I have recently been puzzling over a rather more tragic instance of women’s solidarity constituted through aesthetic labor. For six decades, a group of surviving women known as the *Nadeshikokai* (or “white mountain aster group”) have met annually in a small town in southern Kyûshû, Japan. Here as teenage girls they were conscripted by the Japanese Imperial Army to serve as cooks and “honorary sisters” to the young male pilots destined to die in the battle of Okinawa as members of the Special Attack Forces, known in the West as *kamikaze*. The girls knew the pilots sometimes only for a day or two, at most for a few weeks, before they received orders to depart on their final missions of no return. The young women’s primary orientation, then and now (in continuing acts of memorialization), was towards comforting the psyches and souls of the male pilots themselves. This they did, among many other ways, through creating small mascot dolls given as gifts to the pilots to take with them on their final flights so they “wouldn’t be lonely”. These objects, made of wartime scraps of cloth, were imbued with the spirit of their makers, so that, as many women told me, they could “be with” the young men in their planes.

Yet while these dolls were made manifestly for the male pilots, to link the girls to the young men, the process of fabricating these artifacts constituted powerful modes of solidarity among women. Mothers and daughters often made such dolls together, and to this day many women report that the surviving dolls are imbued with powerful memories of their own mothers, as well as recollections of their sisters who did not survive the war and its calamities. It remains a bit of a puzzle just how these women understood their actions—as working along with the Japanese military state, or resisting it in some important way—all of which leaves me with a poignant sense of the ways in which women sometimes are able to act “in between” the coerciveness of world historical forces to reach out to each other, and to those most directly subjected to such senseless destruction.

Finally, this year, I've had the privilege, along with many students in Women's and Gender Studies, of exploring another form of women's solidarity constituted through material labor. At Prospect Hill Terrace, Waltham's largest public housing development, we've had the remarkable experience of working with women tenants on all manner of projects; we've planted flower and vegetable gardens, cleaned up the grounds, and worked to restore the basketball court for the children. Out of this hard work came the most valuable and ineffable of products, a deepening sense of unity and common purpose, exemplified by the new Prospect Hill Tenants Association, now led entirely by women—from Guatemala, Puerto Rico and Haiti. In December of this year the Tenants' Association achieved its first victory, the creation of a new Community Learning Center. I am proud that Women's and Gender Studies undergraduates and graduate students have played the leading role in creating collaborative enrichment programs at the Center this past semester, in projects ranging from after-school tutoring, to teenage empowerment, to helping the resident women develop their own leadership potential.

I like to think that these women at Prospect Hill, in their own struggles, have connected with a long and proud history of working women's solidarity in Waltham dating back to the 1820, when the factory women of this city, working at the Boston Manufacturing Company's textile mill on mechanical looms forged their own solidarity and staged the first industrial strike in American history against unfair wage reductions.

I like to think as well that in our common work in Women's and Gender Studies, all of us, students, staff and faculty, have labored to weave together a comparable tapestry that binds the generations, knotting together past, present and future. In our shared inquiries, our impassioned arguments, and our moments of quiet reflection, we all find ourselves bound in subtle and emergent ways to our foremothers and to generations of scholars and activists yet to come.

Today, we celebrate our graduates, and in so doing we celebrate the diverse traditions of thought and critical engagement that bind us together, and through which we continue to weave our lives and our intertwined fortunes. Congratulations to you all!