Reclaiming the Universal: Intercultural Subjectivity in the Life and Work of Endo Shusaku

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In an attempt to question the ascendancy of today’s relativism, this essay asks two different but interrelated questions: (1) Does the celebration of cultural differences guarantee the disappearance of ethnocentric universalism? (2) Is it possible to envision a universalism that is not ethnocentric? Answering the first question negatively and the second question affirmatively, this essay analyzes the life and work of the Japanese Catholic writer Endo Shusaku 遠藤周作 (1923–96), with particular attention to his Chinmoku 沈黙 (Silence), a novel that explores intercultural subjectivity in the context of Japan's encounter with the Christian West in the seventeenth century. It further elaborates the notion of the “common,” whereby people of various backgrounds enter into a commonality that enables them to communicate and act together from the shared perspective of the oppressed even as they articulate and maintain their differences.

Problematizing Relativism

Politicians, the media, and educators posit the decline of racism by citing civil rights movements, the end of apartheid, and the inauguration of President Barack Obama. In place of race/racism, what is foregrounded today is “culture”—and by implication, the idea of “cultural difference”—as a new organizing principle of social interactions. Cultural diversity is celebrated on college campuses, cultural festivals flourish in local cities, and intercultural training programs of various kinds are introduced in multinational corporations (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009, 3–4), hospitals (Altshuler, Sussman, and Kachur 2003), court systems (Justice Center 1997), police forces (Leenen 2002), and even militaries (Dansby and Landis 1996). As Hardt and Negri (2000, 190–95) diagnose, the idea of racial hierarchy—once claimed, in the age of modern colonialism, as a universal truth immutable across time and space—seems to be rapidly disappearing, at least on the surface, as it is replaced by a relativism that accepts and promotes, in the name of culture, the full spectrum of human difference.
Sometimes defined simply “as the denial or negation of universalism” (Jackson 2006, 137), relativism—“the view that standards and beliefs are context-sensitive and thus mutable” (Jackson 2006, 139)—or variants such as multiculturalism, pluralism, and diversity discourses, can be seen as a “semi-official credo” of our time, to use an expression of American philosopher Richard Bernstein (2006, 4).

The ascendency of relativism in the West begs a number of critical questions. First, how do we account for an obvious contradiction in which contemporary Western relativism, which by definition rejects the universal, is claimed as a universal paradigm for social action? From what metatheoretical or ideological perspective, exactly, is this relativism advocated? Does the celebration of cultural differences guarantee the disappearance of ethnocentric universalism? A second set of questions complements the first set: If relativism does not promise the end of ethnocentrism, what is an alternative? Are universalisms necessarily ethnocentric? Is it possible to envision a universalism that is not ethnocentric?

This essay explores these questions by placing the basic tenets of contemporary Western relativism in critical conversation with the life and work of Endo Shusaku 遠藤周作 (1923–96), a Japanese Catholic “who has attained widely-recognized status as a world-class writer” (Rimer 1993, 59). This essay particularly focuses on his 1966 novel Chinmoku 沈黙 (Silence), which appeared in English translation in 1969. Based on actual events, the novel explores issues of intercultural subjectivity in the context of Japan’s encounter with the Christian West in the seventeenth century.

I begin by considering the first set of questions above regarding the metatheoretical or ideological position of contemporary Western relativism. I note that in spite of deploying what can be seen as a progressive, anti-ethnocentric, and anti-racist position, contemporary relativism still maintains a strong principle of social segregation in the name of “cultural difference.” Borrowing from an anthropological insight of James Clifford, who stated that historically speaking, a pluralist definition of culture has “emerged as a liberal alternative to racist classifications of human diversity” (1988, 234), contemporary Western relativism may share with ethnocentrism a certain totalizing aspiration to observe, classify, and catalogue “differences,” this time *cultural* rather than *racial*. In other words, my suspicion is that the celebration of cultural differences may not necessarily mean the disappearance of the West’s ethnocentric universalism. Rather, it may signal the perpetuation of ethnocentrism in a different guise and under new historical circumstances.

For instance, the discourse of “tolerance” often betrays a disguised form of ethnocentrism, a desire—or an “anxiety” (Bernstein 2006, 4)—on the West’s part to preserve itself as the locus of the universal.
Lyotard expresses this desire/anxiety by asking “can we [the West] continue today to organize the multitude of events that come to us from the world . . . by subsuming them beneath the idea of a universal humanity?” (1989, 314). Responding to this question, Richard Rorty argues that our Western bourgeois liberal culture “is a form of life which is constantly extending pseudopods and adapting itself to what it encounters. Its sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity” (1991, 204; emphasis added). Asianists have also contributed to the relativist discourse of tolerance. For instance, Richard Wilson (1991), for the purpose of “[r]econciling universalism and relativism” (53), examines how the universal/Western concept of political culture can coexist with variations of political culture manifested in China. I, for one, remain skeptical of these liberal relativist gestures centering on “tolerance,” “reconciliation,” and “coexistence” (for other examples, see Bennett 1998; Martin and Nakayama 2008), as they start from and stay within—and therefore perpetuate—the universal-relative (i.e., West-rest) binary as the a priori framework of analysis, thereby reauthorizing the West as a universal norm on the one hand and prohibiting universalisms of the rest on the other. This is to say that relativism can be mobilized forever to contain the “rest” within what Hardt and Negri call Empire, “a decentered and deterriotizing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers” (2000, xii; emphasis original).

The second set of questions becomes crucial here. That is, if Western relativism does not promise the end of ethnocentric universalism, what alternative exists? Endo, as discussed below, responded to this question in the 1960s, ahead of his time, by foregrounding the perspective of the oppressed class that is excluded from the relativist vision. This strategy, on the one hand, enabled him to move beyond the liberal relativist vision of tolerating and/or celebrating cultural differences and to radicalize this relativism to such an extent that it includes everybody and thus becomes universal. On the other hand, the inclusion of the perspective of the oppressed also enabled him to highlight the way in which the universalist aspiration for salvation and liberation is radically grounded in the specificities of local experiences; in so doing, he was able to show that the universal can be open to many different local articulations and thus remain non-ethnocentric. In short, Endo crisscrossed these two movements—one from relativism to radical universalism and the other from universalism to radical relativism—in order to reclaim the universal without becoming ethnocentric. Silence acutely embodies this new universal. Representatives of premodern Japan and the Christian West, while remaining different, find a common ground that enables them to communicate and cooperate from the shared perspective as the oppressed.
Following Hardt and Negri’s theorization, I designate this new universal the “common.” Hardt and Negri (e.g., 2004, xiii–xvi; 2009, viii) define the common as an aggregate of affects, codes, knowledge, images, information, languages, and relationships that are produced and shared by heterogeneous social subjects in “new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters” (2004, xiii). This essay proposes “faith” as an integral part of the common. The idea of the common reveals new theoretical space for intercultural subjectivity—at once irreducibly heterogeneous and immensely uniting—beyond contemporary Western relativism by showing how the radically relativist act of accepting differences can produce and accentuate the universal.

A Life of Endo Shusaku

This section highlights one specific aspect of Endo’s life and work, that is, his struggles, triggered by his contact with Christianity, to resolve the tension between things Japanese/particular and things Western/universal. For other important threads of his life and work (his childhood days in Dalian 大連, Manchuria; his experience during the war; his illness, editing work, involvement with an amateur theater company in postwar Japan, etc.), the reader is advised to consult Van C. Gessel’s insightful biographical overview (1997). Some readers may find this section—and the next section explaining the historical context of Silence—somewhat superfluous; I ask for patience, however, as these discussions help clarify Endo’s attempt to transcend the universal-relative binary and provide an alternative. My account below is based on Kojima Yōsuke’s Chronological history of Endo Shusaku (Endo Shusaku: nenpu 遠藤周作・年譜).

In 1933, ten-year-old Endo’s parents were divorced. With his mother and older brother, Endo returned from Dalian to Japan. In 1935, he was baptized a Catholic under the influence of his mother, who became a devoted Christian to heal the pain of her divorce and abandonment by her husband. However, as Endo (2007, 71) states in his autobiographical short story Hahanaru mono 母なるもの (The Maternal), “To be quite honest, I had no true religious faith whatsoever. Although I attended church at my mother’s insistence, I merely cupped my hands together and made as if to prey while inwardly my mind roamed over empty landscapes. I recalled scenes from the many movies I [had] seen . . . and I even thought about the photographs of naked women [my friend] had shown me one day.” He continues, “The words of the priest, the stories in the Bible, the Crucifix—they all seemed like intangible happenings from a past that had had nothing to do with us” (Endo 2007, 72). Endo’s intercultural life, then, began with a bifurcation: relativist acceptance of and adaptation to a
Recallimng the Universal cultural difference represented by Christianity on the one hand and ethnocentric denial of this cultural difference on the other.

Elsewhere, Endo explains his difficulty relating to Christianity—and, by extension, to the West—by invoking the metaphor of an “ill-fitting Western suit” (dabudabu no sebiro たぶたぶの背広) that had been imposed on him (e.g., Endo 1988, 5–6, 25–30; see also Burkman 1994, 100; Gessel 1997, 42). And yet, throughout his youth, Endo remained clothed in this suit because of mother love: “I contained an impulse [to scream that I do not want to go to church anymore] because it would have been unbearable to hurt my mother” (Endo 1975, 143). In his teens, Endo ambivalently considered Christianity—the teaching of the Father imposed by his mother—to be at once intimate and foreign, Japanese and Western, maternal and paternal.

In his early adulthood, between 1943 and 1948, Endo endured many complications. Refusing to attend medical school, he was disinherited by his father. He delved into modern French Catholic writings as a student of the Department of French Literature at Keio University. There he continued to wear his “ill-fitting suit,” caught up in the dilemma of being equally unable to embrace or abandon Christianity (Endo 1988, 5). After graduating from Keio, he became one of the first Japanese students to study in France during the postwar period. Between 1950 and 1953, he pursued graduate work at the University of Lyons, exploring the works of Bernanos, Mauriac, and other French Catholic writers (Burkman 1994, 101; Gessel 1997, 43). As elaborated in Aden made アデンまで (To Aden), Aoi chīsana budō 青い小さな葡萄 (Small Blue Grapes), Ryūgaku 留学 (Study Abroad), Gakusei 学生 (Students), and other autobiographical novels and short stories, his ambivalence toward Christianity and the West intensified while in France, owing to the blunt racial discrimination and cultural alienation he experienced as a foreign student from the defeated Oriental nation of Japan. In the midst of this struggle—in 1953, shortly after he returned to Japan—his mother passed away. His mother’s death apparently brought his ambivalence about Christianity/the West to a crisis and forced a resolution. In Endo’s own words, upon his mother’s death, “I felt even more strongly that I would not give up, but would hold onto Christianity until I could discover a Christianity that fit my body as a Japanese” (Izutsu and Endo 1986, 21). In other words, “My faith, if one could call it a faith, is tied to my attachment to my mother” (Endo 1975, 131).

Recalling Freud’s Oedipus complex, which addresses the son’s desire to marry his mother and kill his father (e.g., Freud 1966, 408–20), Endo resolved the tension between the familiar (mother, Japan) and the unfamiliar (father, the West) by reinforcing his ties to Japan in the image of mother while at the same time remaking Christianity/Father from within. In the process, he retailed the ill-fitting suit to make “Jesus
understandable in terms of the religious psychology of my non-Christian countrymen and thus to demonstrate that Jesus is not alien to their religious sensibilities” (Endo 1978, 1). In particular, Endo emphasized what he called the maternal aspects of Christian love: “I came to the conclusion that the religion that suits the Japanese is a ‘maternal religion’ which forgives, consoles, and embraces human beings, not a ‘paternal religion’ characterized by vengeance and punishment” (Izutsu and Endo 1986, 21; on maternal religion see also Gessel 1989 and 1997, 43; Kasai 2002; Shin 2009, 181–204). Unlike contemporary relativism, which, in its celebration of cultural differences, obscures the universal as a manifestation of ethnocentrism, Endo attempted to confront and resolve the tension between Japan/particular and the West/universal in his search for what J. Thomas Rimer calls “human democracy” (1993, 64), with a maternal Christ as mediator. Silence dramatically expresses the democratic potential of a maternal Christ in reference to the protagonist’s apostasy, as discussed below.

Shimizu Tadashi, like other critics, is skeptical of this move. He writes, “It is true that Endo continued to wear all his life an ‘ill-fitting suit’ (Christianity) imposed one-sidedly by his mother. However, the fact that he continued to wear this ‘suit’ means that he took care of his mother all his life; it is not a proof that he was a Christian” (2004). Similarly, Kasuya Kōichi, from a theological point of view, states that Silence appears to “not only acknowledge apostasy, but even praise it” (2002, 42). Catholic critic Yanaihara Isaku also notes that the protagonist of Silence—and by implication, Endo himself—does not seem to possess faith to begin with (2002, 36). Criticisms against Silence mounted and the book was banned in some churches (Kojima, n.d.). Criticism was raised outside Japan as well. Rumor has it that Endo was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, but the arguable element of apostasy was apparently too unorthodox for some members of the Selection Committee (Nakamura 1998, 189).

By dismissing Endo’s works as heretical, however, we may reinforce the Eurocentric dichotomy between the Western/universal/Christian and Japanese/relative/heretical. I would argue that Endo’s reinterpretation of Christianity, while not without problems, nonetheless opens up a new theoretical space of intercultural subjectivity in which the relation between universal and relative can be investigated. I will elaborate on this new subjectivity by addressing what the contemporary relativist paradigm of culture tends to leave unexamined: the common.

**Silence: The Historical Context**

Christianity has deep historical roots in Nagasaki and in the adjacent region of western Kyushu, including the Amakusa Peninsula, the Goto
Recalling the Universal Archipelago, Hirado Island, and Shimabara Peninsula. In 1550, Francis Xavier (1506–52), a founding member of the Society of Jesus, visited Hirado to sow the Gospel seed (Gonoi 1990, 39–40). In 1580, Lord Omura Sumitada 大村純忠 (1533–87) donated Nagasaki to the Society of Jesus. It remained Jesuit territory until 1587, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–98) brought it under direct control (Elison 1973, 92–106). Furthermore, Shimabara and Amakusa gave refuge to the Jesuit seminary, printing house, and missionaries, even during Hideyoshi’s persecution of Christians between 1587 and 1597 (Boxer 1951, 375–76). During the Tokugawa government’s suppression of Christianity beginning in 1614, and the cruel persecutions beginning in the mid-1620s, some Japanese Christians, mostly peasants, in and around Nagasaki maintained their communities of faith by going underground with the help of European priests who remained in hiding (Boxer 1951, 328–61). However, Tokugawa officials, apprehensive that Christianity might disrupt the consolidation and stability of their power, tried every possible means to sever the tie between Japanese Christians and European missionaries. In 1632, the Portuguese Padre Christovão Ferreira (ca. 1580–1652), the aged head of the Jesuit mission in Japan, apostatized in Nagasaki after enduring six hours of torture called anazuri 穴吊り, or hanging in the pit. As Charles Boxer explains, “The victim was tightly bound around the body as high as the breast . . . and then hung head downwards from a gallows into a pit which usually contained excreta and other filth, the top of the pit being level with his knees. In order to give the blood some vent, the forehead was lightly slashed with a knife” (1951, 353). Set in Nagasaki and its vicinity, Silence begins with news of Ferreira’s apostasy reaching the Church and being received as “a humiliating defeat for the faith itself and for the whole of Europe” (Endo 1969, 26).

The fictional protagonist of Silence is the Portuguese priest Sebastian Rodrigues. Modeled on the Italian missionary Giuseppe Chiara (1602–85) (Saeki 1981, 251–52), Rodrigues and a fictional companion, Francisco Garrpe, go ashore at a fishing village called Tomogi near Nagasaki. Their mission is to discover why/whether their former teacher, Ferreira, has recanted his faith and to support crypto-Christian communities in the Nagasaki area. While Chiara attempted to enter Japan in 1643 (Boxer 1951, 391, 447), Endo crafted the narrative of Silence against the background of the 1637–38 Shimabara-Amakusa Insurrection, a revolt of 25,000 Christian peasants long oppressed by the heavy taxation of the local lord (Gonoi 1990, 218–24). The Tokugawa government brutally crushed the revolt and then implemented an all-out seclusion policy in 1639, while maintaining trade and diplomatic relationships with China, Holland, and Korea on a limited scale. In the process, the Tokugawa government also intensified its efforts to hunt down crypto-Christsians across Japan, with Grand Inquisitor Inoue

This historical anti-Christian persecution is the context of Silence. The lack of information about Chiara following his apostasy enabled Endo to construct a narrative about the Japanese encounter with the Christian West in a manner that reveals “a truth transcending the original fact” (Williams 1999, 107). The truthfulness of the narrative is enhanced by the presence of Kichijiro—a personification of Endo himself (Burkman 1994, 101)—who is depicted as a despicable weakling wearing “an ill-fitting suit” of Christianity. A wretched fisherman-cum-peasant, Kichijiro had been adrift on the sea and rescued by a Portuguese ship bound for Macao, where he sojourned and encountered the Society of Jesus. He joins Rodrigues and Garrpe as they journey in a Chinese junk from Macao to his native village near Nagasaki. He agrees to guide Rodrigues and Garrpe in exchange for the opportunity to return home.

The Common in Silence

The destitute villagers of Tomogi “worked like horses and cattle; and like horses and cattle they…died” due to the exceedingly harsh tribute imposed by the magistrate of Nagasaki (61; in this section and the next, all citations refer to Endo 1969 unless otherwise noted). Secretly, they are Christians, and they enthusiastically receive Rodrigues and Garrpe. Hiding in a hut, the priests baptize adults and children, hear numerous confessions, hold masses, recite prayers, and perform other pastoral duties (79), which makes Rodrigues feel that “my life [is] of value and that it [is] accomplishing something” (82). In the height of religious euphoria, however, this intercultural subject also shows signs of ethnocentric hubris, which reflects the power of the “enlightened” West over the “heathen” Orientals. Specifically, Rodrigues denies cultural differences by imposing his faith, his way of life, and his race as the standard by which villagers are evaluated. Earlier in his missionary activities, for instance, Rodrigues reflects: “Truth to tell in spite of myself I cannot help laughing when I hear the mumbling Portuguese and Latin words in the mouths of these ignorant peasants. . . . Not only are their names difficult to remember, but their faces all look the same” (62); “The crumbling farm house that I use for a chapel is jammed tight with their bodies, and so they confess their sins, their mouths close to my ear and emitting a stench that almost makes me vomit” (77); “I suppose it is not a bad thing that the Japanese Christians should reverence such things [a small crucifix, medal, or holy picture]; but somehow their whole attitude [of reverencing material things] makes me uneasy. I keep asking myself if there is not some error in their outlook” (81).
Meanwhile, Rodrigues' condescending attitude goes hand in hand with the Catholic/“universal” doctrine of salvation for all people across time and space. For instance, in his debate with a Japanese official, who, speaking from the relativist position, says, “Father, we are not disputing about the right and wrong of your doctrine. In Spain and Portugal and such countries it may be true. The reason we have outlawed Christianity in Japan is that, after deep and earnest consideration, we find its teaching of no value for the Japan of today,” Rodrigues replies: “According to our way of thinking, truth is universal” (178).

When the guide Kichijiro, a sly, dirty drunken Judas, hands Rodrigues to the Tokugawa authorities in exchange for money, Rodrigues mobilizes a whole gamut of strategies that are both ethnocentric and universalist. Indeed, he responds by denying Kichijiro with a mutter in his heart, “What thou dost do quickly” (166). More generally, he upholds the binary of superior and righteous Self/West and inferior and heathen Other/Japan (185–89) and highlights the universal with the notion of love (189).

The silence of God, however, continuously challenges Rodrigues, eventually shaking the foundation of his ethnocentric-universalist faith. Before Rodrigues is arrested, Ichizo and Mokichi, Christian peasants from Tomogi, are executed by water punishment: “Two trees, made into the form of a cross, were set at the water’s edge. Ichizo and Mokichi were fastened to them. When it was night and the tide came in, their bodies would be immersed in the sea up to the chin. They would not die at once, but after two or even three days of utter physical and mental exhaustion they would cease to breath” (100–101). After his arrest, Rodrigues witnesses Garrpe and three Japanese Christians, including Monica, who earlier shared cucumbers with the hungry Rodrigues (136), being led to the Nagasaki shore for execution. Officials roll the Japanese in mats, put them on the boat, and row out into the shoals while leaving Garrpe on the shore. An official pushes the peasants one by one out of the boat, and Garrpe desperately plunges into the sea to try to rescue them: “Just like a puppet the figure of straw fell into the sea and disappeared from sight. Then with dramatic speed the next went under. Finally, Monica was swallowed up by the sea. Only the head of Garrpe, like a piece of wood from a shipwrecked boat, floated for some time on the water until the waves from the boat covered it over” (217). God has no response to these and other cruelties.

In the midst of such Christian suffering, Rodrigues repeatedly questions why God, like the sea that engulfed the Japanese peasants and Garrpe, remains silent. Unable to find an answer, his faith wavers: “From the deepest core of [his] being yet another voice made itself heard in a whisper. Supposing God does not exist . . .” (117). He refuses to consent to this thought, but the fact remains that he “had come to this country to lay down his life for other men, but instead of that the Japanese were laying
down their lives one by one for him” (215). What is he to do? After weeks of self-questioning, during which time the Tokugawa officials force him to witness numerous tortures and executions, the arrested priest becomes exhausted and sinks into an abyss of despair.

Rodrigues’ ethical dilemma is this: If he champions his earlier position—“According to our way of thinking, truth is universal”—Rodrigues effectively reinforces the Tokugawa regime’s continued oppression and torture of Japanese Christians. Allowing such cruelty to continue hardly seems Christian. But abandoning the doctrine of universal truth denies the teachings of Jesus, the Church, and everything he has lived for, as well as nullifies the faith of the Japanese who, believing in their own salvation, have accepted martyrdom. This is not Christian either. The problem is, of course, that Rodrigues must choose one way or another. Does he, after all, need to accept the wisdom of contemporary relativism, which suggests that he should escape his predicament by abandoning universalism to embrace the cultural difference of Japan? Against this relativist argument, however, Silence provides an alternative possibility of intercultural subjectivity in the realm of the common. First, Rodrigues challenges a relativist vision of celebrating/tolerating cultural differences by embracing those who are excluded from such a vision, that is, by seeking salvation for all people. Second, this radical inclusion of the oppressed anchors his universalist aspiration—salvation for all people—in the specificities of local experiences. Faith will be constructed at the crossroads of these two movements—one from relativism to radical universalism (chapter 7) and the other from universalism to radical relativism (chapter 8).

In chapter 7, in the midst of Rodrigues’ existential crisis, the Tokugawa authorities arrange a meeting between Rodrigues and his former teacher, Ferreira. Rodrigues finds that Grand Inquisitor Inoue has given Ferreira, clad in Japanese clothes, a Japanese identity. Ferreia—in truth and in Silence—received not only the name of an executed Japanese man named Sawano Chuan 沢野忠庵 but also his wife and children. Following the will of the Tokugawa authorities, Ferreira, who has been writing Kengiroku 顕偽録 (Deceit Disclosed),¹ a book denouncing Christianity, now pronounces the relativist doctrine in order to convince Rodrigues of the meaninglessness of missionary activities in Japan: “The God these Japanese believed was not the God of Christian teaching” (237); the Japanese “twisted and changed our God and began to create something different” (239); “It’s not because of any prohibition nor because of persecution that Christianity has perished. There’s something in this country that completely stifles the growth of Christianity” (243–44).

Rodrigues, confused, exhausted, and hopeless, is about to give in, when he realizes that his former teacher foregrounds Japanese cultural difference, that is, the absence of Christianity in Japan, only by deliberately avoiding
the truly Christian deeds of the poor Japanese martyrs who were stronger than himself—peasants who protected priests and fellow Christians at the risk of their own lives, who refused to recant their faith even when Tokugawa officials offered huge sums of money, and who offered themselves as a sacrifice to actualize the ideal of Christianity. In effect, not unlike a contemporary relativist, Ferreira insists on cultural differences while ignoring the experiences of the oppressed. Realizing this, Rodrigues rejects Ferreira’s relativist logic. In opposition to this logic, he expands the horizon of salvation to include everybody, revealing the realm of the universal.

A contemporary Western relativist may argue that it is ethically wrong for an outsider to propagate foreign religious teachings among an indigenous people in the attempt to change their ways of life. However, this argument denies the entire history of Christianity. In fact, in the historical context of first century Palestine, Jesus was an “outsider” from within—in that he renewed, radicalized, and fulfilled the Law, including the teaching of love (Leviticus 19:18, 19:34) from the perspective of the oppressed and challenged Temple authorities who had been collaborating with the Roman imperial system of domination (Borg 2006, 225–60; Nelson-Pallmeyer 2001, 193–214). Precisely because his teachings were “foreign” to this system, Jesus was executed. But his teachings proliferated, transforming the lives of destitute local people as well as the entire history of Western civilization and beyond.

Furthermore, the argument that it is wrong to propagate foreign religious teachings fails to recognize the agency of the oppressed, who actively appropriate “foreign” teachings to express and actualize their own desire for salvation. Perhaps these Japanese peasants “distort” the teachings of Christianity as Ferreira suggests, but there is no guarantee that the West has not itself distorted the teachings of Christ (Nelson-Pallmeyer 2001, vii–xvi). In other words, Rodrigues discovers that these peasants are not hyphenated Japanese-Christians; they are “Christians” in their universal aspirations. In this way, at the end of chapter 7, Rodrigues affiliates himself with these poor Japanese peasants, not as a matter of respect for “cultural difference,” but as a reaffirmation of his connection with a universal, albeit somewhat abstract, Church.

In chapter 8, the thread that has connected Rodrigues and the Japanese Christians leads Rodrigues to apostasy, wherein the universal is grounded in the specific, local experiences of the oppressed. Due to his refusal to recant, Rodrigues is transferred to a wooden cell. Sitting on the wet floor, breathing in the foul stench of urine, he anticipates the notorious “hanging in the pit,” Inoue’s most effective means of forcing recantations. While awaiting this torture, Rodrigues hears the guard snoring: “Yes, and that on this, the most important night of his whole life, he should be disturbed by
such a vile and discordant noise—this realization suddenly filled him with rage. He felt that his life was simply trifled with” (262). He beats on the wall with anger and draws a Tokugawa interpreter. To Rodrigues’ complaint about the snoring, the interpreter responds incredulously: “You think that is snoring . . . that is . . . .” He turns to Ferreira, whose presence Rodrigues had not detected. Ferreira completes the chilling revelation: “That’s not snoring. That is the moaning of Christians hanging in the pit” (263). Ferreira now assumes the task of persuading Rodrigues to recant.

Having told the devastated Rodrigues about the anazuri that Ferreira himself underwent, Ferreira vehemently pronounces: “The reason I apostatized . . . are you ready? Listen! I was put in here and heard the voices of those people for whom God did nothing. God did not do a single thing. I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing” (265–66). No longer able to withstand Ferreira’s assertion, Rodrigues surrenders himself, agreeing to relinquish his faith by carrying out a symbolic act of fumie踏み絵, or icon trampling. This is to say, he must tread on a tablet bearing an image of Christ. A devout Christian—a universalist—might argue that Rodrigues is going to betray the courage and fortitude of the Japanese martyrs who died believing in salvation for all people. This is a strong argument with which I concur, but only insofar as one can advance the same objective and somewhat detached argument in a similar situation involving one’s own family member. Rodrigues cannot go this far. He sees the peasants as members of his own family, as it were, to whom he is connected through shared faith. The same thread that ties Rodrigues and Japanese Christians and upholds his faith in chapter 7 now leads him to apostasy:

The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot aches! And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: “Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross.” The priest placed his foot on the fumie. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew. (271)

The profound irony here is that God—the forgiving, loving, and embracing God, a “maternal” Christ who consoles and salvages the weak like Rodrigues—breaks silence for the first time precisely when Rodrigues recants and strips himself of his status as a Catholic priest. Earlier, trying to bolster the faith of Japanese Christians, Rodrigues simply followed the authority of the Church. In the process, he reinforced the binary of righteous Self and heathen Other in his ethnocentric-universalistic hubris,
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obscuring the realm of the common/God. Later in chapter 7, he tentatively resolves the tension between universalism and relativism by radicalizing the latter to attain the former. In so doing, Rodrigues reaffirms his association with the righteous Church. Now in the act of *fumie*, he himself decides, acts, and thinks independently, outside the Church, and attempts to redefine the absolute in the specific local and historical context of Japan. In this moment of border-crossing, Rodrigues’ universalistic worldview is not so much abandoned as directly grafted onto relativism, and in the process, the common—in the context of this essay, faith—is generated in the field of neither the Western/universal nor the Japanese/particular but between and beyond them. Put differently, faith emerges in an open, heterogeneous space of collaboration between the European priest and the Japanese peasants, in a manner that allows us to catch a glimpse of “the possibility that, while remaining different, we discover the commonality [faith] that enables us to communicate and act together” (Hardt and Negri 2004, xiii).

It should be added that the discovery, or really production, of the common does not settle the tension between universal and relative once and for all. Faith as a form of the common remains an ambiguous possibility that can vanish the very moment it is actualized, and vice versa. In a way that supports my interpretation, on the one hand, *Silence* shows that Rodrigues—just like Giuseppe Chiara, who in actuality lived until 1685—spent the remaining forty years of his life as a Japanese. Indeed, Chiara (in truth) and Rodrigues (in *Silence*) took the name of a dead Japanese man—Okada San’uemon 岡田三右衛門—and Okada’s widow as his own wife, in accordance with the command of Grand Inquisitor Inoue. On the other hand, Endo grants Rodrigues a soliloquy at the end of the book that suggests the apostate’s continuing faith. He says, “my Lord is different from the God that is preached in the churches” (276) and “Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him” (298).

**The Multiplicity of Intercultural Subjectivity**

Other characters in *Silence* illustrate diverse forms of intercultural subjectivity. Ferreira first denies Japanese cultural differences by engaging in universalist missionary activities for the salvation of all, and then embraces the Japanese way of life as prescribed by Tokugawa authorities. In so doing, Ferreira necessarily obtains a bicultural worldview, wherein he critiques one frame of culture, Christianity, from the perspective of another, Tokugawa Japan, thereby replacing the ethnocentric-universalist point of view with the relativist-pluralist one without integrating them. Meanwhile, Grand Inquisitor Inoue takes an opposite approach, moving from the
relativist position of accepting Christianity to the ethnocentric position of denying Christianity. Indeed, as it is revealed in *Silence* (201) and empirically supported by Elison (1973, 192), Inoue had converted to Christianity when he was young. He later rejected the Gospel in accordance with the Tokugawa seclusion policy. Japanese peasants such as Ichizo, Mokichi, and Monica wholeheartedly embrace Christianity, the universal, from their particular position as the oppressed. Finally, Kichijiro, a personification of Endo himself, accepts Christianity in spite of, or precisely because of, his act of denial, cowardice, and betrayal. Toward the end of *Silence* (296–98), Kichijiro seeks out Rodrigues, now living as a Japanese, in order to confess his sins. The barrier that once blocked communication between Rodrigues, representing the righteous West, and Kichijiro, representing the heathen Orient, is finally broken; they are united in their weakness, contributing to an open, inclusive, and heterogeneous space of dialogue across differences, the common, in yet another way.

The multiple forms of intercultural subjectivity among the characters in *Silence* do not mean that intercultural subjectivity is chaotic. Indeed, these characters illustrate a broader general theme—the possibility of remaining different yet discovering and producing a common ground—from diverse perspectives and positions.

**Conclusion: Reclaiming the Universal**

Questioning the validity of contemporary Western relativism, this essay has attempted to reclaim the universal by asking two different but interrelated questions: (1) Does the celebration of cultural differences guarantee the disappearance of ethnocentric universalism? (2) Is it possible to envision a universalism that is not ethnocentric? Analyzing the life and work of Endo Shusaku, I have answered the first question negatively by radicalizing relativism to include all people, and the second question affirmatively by highlighting the ways in which the universal is radically grounded in specific local contexts of Japan. Faith is revealed at the interface of these two answers (or movements)—one from relativism to radical universalism and the other from universalism to radical relativism—in Japan’s engagement with the common, i.e., at once premodern Japan’s involvement in the common, a modern Japanese writer Endo Shusaku’s commitment to the common, and my own postmodern engagement with the common. Thus traversing different temporalities, this essay highlights the universal from the perspective of an East Asia/Japanese cultural critique beyond and against the idea of “cultural differences.”

While this essay has highlighted Japanese experiences, this does not preclude other manifestations of the common. The common, in other
Recalling the Universal words, can take diverse and specific local forms. Take, for example, the experiences of Chicanas in white-collar jobs, as discussed by Denise Segura (1997). These women adopted the relativist mindset by accepting and adapting to the mainstream—white, male, English-speaking—American culture to get and keep a job, while at the same time acquiring the universalist consciousness of justice and equality by defending their gender, race, and culture against the host society when it comes to sexual harassment and job discrimination. Mahatma Gandhi—as Timothy Jackson suggests (2006, 140–47)—also revealed the common in the interface of universal and relative when he confronted a despairing Hindu man who had killed a Muslim child in revenge for the killing of his own son by the Muslims. Gandhi told this Hindu man that a common humanity—the universal—was still achievable by adopting Muslim child whose parents had been killed and raising this child as his own, that is, by committing to a relativist act of accepting a difference. These and other examples, like Japan’s encounter with the Christian West, challenge the contemporary relativist paradigm which, in its rejection of the universal, fails to recognize the global desires of the oppressed. These are locally conditioned and thus relative, but are universal in scope, that is, the desires to participate in the shared project of equality, emancipation, and justice beyond the notion of cultural differences. Even William Johnston, translator of Silence, seems to be missing, or at least underplaying, such global desires when he states that “the very popularity of Mr. Endo’s novel would seem to proclaim a Japan . . . looking for that form of Christianity that will suit its national character” (1969, 17). In this and other related operations, contemporary Western relativism tends to create and recreate liberal subjectivities that are pluralist in their acceptance and tolerance of cultural differences but are in actuality often exclusive of the downtrodden who do not fit into this relativist vision.

My approach has been different. In light of an East Asian cultural critique, this essay has called for radical reconsideration of the relationship between universal and relative by exploring the life and work of Endo Shusaku—with special attention to his Chinmoku 沈黙 (Silence). In so doing, it has articulated the conditions of the common, whereby social subjects from Japan and the West, while remaining different, traverse racial boundaries, rework class lines, break down religious doctrines, and exceed the limits imposed by the relativist vision of celebrating/tolerating cultural differences in order to communicate and act together from the shared perspective of the oppressed.

Note

1Ferreira’s book has been republished in a modern edition. See Ferreira 1973.
References


