Why did Contemporary Sociology, an official journal of the American Sociological Association, ask me to review these two books on Japan edited and written by anthropologists? This question sounds trivial and even irrelevant at first. However, when the question’s three overlapping registers—why Japan, why anthropology, and why me (a Japanese sociologist trained in the United States)—are recognized, they should prompt readers of Contemporary Sociology to reexamine the relationship between disciplines and area studies, on the one hand, and the relationship between sociologists and publics, on the other. In fact, I suggest that this reexamination be an urgent task in an increasingly global world, where linguistic and institutional barriers that safely separated the observing-self from the observed-other are breaking down, as many anthropologists have already pointed out.

The first register ("Why Japan?") appears to be relatively straightforward. Both books present Japan still reeling from the triple disaster of March 2011—the earthquake, tsunami, and the nuclear accident—whose consequences reverberated far beyond the island country. Contemporary Japan therefore offers fertile ground for examining how people, organizations, and institutions cope with profound structural disruptions and ruptures caused by large-scale disasters. The nuclear accident, in particular, raised critical questions, both empirically and normatively, about the roles of science and technology in society and the relationship between experts and citizens in policymaking. Put another way, the case studies of contemporary Japan have the potential to help sociologists advance a theory of structural transformations, disaster research, and the sociology of science and technology, among others. In this sense, these two books on contemporary Japan should deserve attention even from those who do not study the country.

This straightforward explanation, however, is incompatible with the second register ("Why anthropology?") because neither of the two books advances theory. Chapters in Japan Copes with Calamity, for example, collectively offer what one of its editors David Slater calls an "urgent ethnography" by painstakingly documenting everyday lives of disaster victims and empathically conveying the urgency of their struggles. As a result, engagement with existing theories in the social sciences, which is not "urgent" for people in Japan, falls outside the scope of the book. In contrast, Precarious Japan by Anne Allison does engage with theories of neoliberal globalization, flexible citizenship, precarity, and so on. However, her book merely uses contemporary Japan as a case to illustrate how these theories work and therefore falls short of pushing the frontiers of theoretical thinking. Thus, the two books, edited and written by anthropologists, do not meet the expectations that sociologists typically hold for case studies, as reflected in the aforesaid explanation of the first register: case studies are understood as most productive when they use rich empirical details to propose a new theory.

Then, why did Contemporary Sociology choose to review the two anthropological books that make no theoretical contribution? This is indeed puzzling because the majority...
of readers are U.S.-based sociologists who are unlikely to care about non-American cases unless they advance theory (or methodology). A possible answer for this ironic question is troubling: the journal had to pick the two books because no sociological work was available in English on this important topic of how people in Japan coped with the triple disaster. To be sure, there are some English-language journal articles on the topic published by Japanese sociologists, but I do not think that the preference for journal articles among sociologists alone can explain the non-existence of sociological books worthy of being reviewed in Contemporary Sociology. In fact, this troubling phenomenon seems to be anchored in specific institutional configurations of disciplines and area studies.

To begin with, since disciplines are organized around sets of particular theoretical (or methodological) problems, as Andrew Abbott, Charles Ragin, and other methodologists point out, they normally focus on cases that are relevant to disciplinary debates. Thus, when sociologists submit papers on non-American cases to U.S.-based sociology journals, they often receive reviews demanding better justifications of their case selections in terms of existing sociological literature, even though papers on American cases are typically not subjected to the same degree of scrutiny. The asymmetry is understandable because readers of U.S.-based journals are mostly Americans interested in American issues and, even in the so-called age of globalization, professional activities of sociologists (and other social scientists) revolve around national associations. This asymmetry, however, seems to create intellectually detrimental consequences.

First of all, the disciplinary focus tends to turn studies of non-American cases into mere instruments for advancing theory. When I review papers and applications for U.S.-based journals and fellowships, I regularly see authors and applicants offering rigorous justifications for studying non-American cases. From the disciplinary perspective, their case selections are skillfully justified. And yet, their justifications are so disciplinary that I cannot but wonder, “Why do they have to go all the way to non-American countries (e.g., Malawi) to answer these disciplinary questions?” because they could easily examine the same questions by collecting data inside the United States. Thus, the aforesaid asymmetry can be reversed and rephrased as follows: what is the point for U.S.-based sociologists to study non-American cases if their primary purpose were merely to contribute to disciplinary debates?

Here, area studies might help sociologists better appreciate the significance of research on non-American cases in their own light by looking beyond disciplinary constraints. Both Japan Copes with Calamity and Precarious Japan are essentially area-studies books, albeit to different degrees, and they describe everyday practices in the economy, families, neighborhoods, and other arenas of contemporary Japan. While the former provides detailed descriptions of the immediate aftermath of the triple disaster, the latter helps place these descriptions within the wider structural transformations of Japanese society since the 1990s. In contrast with typical sociological work dissecting non-American cases with analytical categories, area-studies books like these are often able to construct empirically rich narratives that vividly convey the atmosphere and texture of social life. Thus, the asymmetry between disciplines and area studies cuts both ways: disciplines are good at advancing theoretical debates, whereas area studies are good at documenting empirical complexities of cases at hand.

In principle, the respective strengths of disciplines and area studies do not have to be mutually exclusive. However, in practice, they often are, as exemplified by the ways in which the two books try to deal with anthropological theories and ethnographic descriptions. On the one hand, Japan Copes with Calamity, in a way, represents a deliberate refusal to engage in disciplinary debates. On the other hand, Japan Copes with Calamity, in a way, represents a deliberate refusal to engage in disciplinary debates. Even though chapters in the edited volume do refer to theoretical debates in anthropology, they give priority to “thick descriptions.” This seems to have something to do with biographies of the contributors: some of them are Japanese citizens, others are foreigners who have lived or worked in Japan for many years, and all of them have strong ties with people in Japan, socially and...
professionally. Take, for example, two of the editors, Tom Gill and David Slater. Both of them are college professors in Tokyo. They lived, and continue to live, the “calamity” that hit Japan. The majority of their colleagues and audiences are also Japanese citizens, as evinced by the fact that the Japanese-language edition of the book was published earlier than the English-language edition. When anthropologists live among “natives,” they are likely to hesitate to impose theoretical interpretations on the latter’s own words, concerns, and actions. This is partly because such imposition violates the sense of solidarity that the anthropologists feel toward natives and partly because natives can easily talk back to them and question empirical accuracy of jargon-laden explanations.

On the other hand, Allison’s Precarious Japan can be said to be a failed attempt to combine the strengths of disciplines and area studies. From the very beginning, the book does not hesitate to impose theoretical interpretations on everyday lives in contemporary Japan by making extensive references to Judith Butler, Gaston Bachelard, and other social and cultural theorists. But, as mentioned above, the book fails to advance the frontiers of theoretical thinking not only because it merely invokes theories instead of systematically applying them to the Japanese case, but also because it does not deeply engage with empirical realities of contemporary Japan. Overall, the book offers very thin descriptions of Japanese people’s lives, for Allison collected data mostly from her “hit-and-run” interactions and interviews in Japan, and from parts of Japanese-language books, newspapers, and movies that were translated into English. In fact, throughout the book, ordinary Japanese citizens remain nameless (e.g., “a young woman in her twenties told me,” “I asked several Japanese people”), and only prominent Japanese intellectuals and activists, as well as Allison’s educated Japanese friends, appear with names and are allowed to express their views in detail. This is an unfortunate example of what an anthropologist ends up producing when she can always fly back to the United States and write about Japan while keeping a safe distance.

Why are “natives” not talking back to Allison? One obvious reason is a language barrier. The majority of Japanese professors received their graduate training in Japan, and they teach and write in Japanese. As a result, even if they did manage to read Precarious Japan, they are unlikely to write a book review in English. Another reason is an institutional barrier. Since Allison is based in the United States, opinions among scholars in Japan do not affect her reputation among her U.S.-based colleagues. This institutional separation between American and Japanese academic communities creates incentives for U.S.-based anthropologists not to cultivate intellectually meaningful ties with Japanese scholars. In turn, Japanese scholars can remain indifferent to Allison’s work because it has little impact on intellectual debates taking place inside Japan. (Ordinary Japanese citizens, too, can simply ignore the book because it is irrelevant to their daily lives.) Given the linguistic and institutional barriers discouraging collaboration between foreign and native anthropologists, the possibility of combining the strengths of the discipline and area studies (theoretical rigor and empirical richness) gets lost.

This is where the third register (“Why me?”) comes in. Although Contemporary Sociology happened to ask me to review Allison’s book, there are other “natives” who were trained in North America, Europe, or Australia and are therefore capable of talking back. As a growing number of students in Japan as well as in other countries go to the “West” to earn doctoral degrees, the linguistic and institutional barriers that previously provided “Western” scholars with a “luxury” (being able to ignore critical reactions from natives) are beginning to break down. This also presents a new opportunity for foreign and native scholars to engage in dialogue across national borders and collectively produce research that draws on strengths of both disciplines and area studies.

Nonetheless, this breakdown of the barriers seems to be uneven in terms of geographical areas and disciplines. Indian historians and literary critics, for example, have been more effective than their Japanese
counterparts in talking back to “Western” scholars partly because they are far more fluent in English. At the same time, Japanese scholars in the humanities seem to have greater presence in Western academic communities than those in the social sciences because the humanities are generally more open to area studies. In fact, many of the U.S.-based sociologists studying Japan (including those who were born and raised in Japan) lack the ability to combine respective strengths of the discipline and Japanese studies, as well as to engage with both Japan- and U.S.-based sociologists, because their research is often constrained to speak exclusively to disciplinary debates inside the United States. Above all, the majority of Japan sociologists, including myself, lack the ability to speak to Japanese citizens who, I believe, should be one of their most important audiences. In this respect, the critique that I raised against Precarious Japan is in effect a self-critique.

Moreover, the contrast between Japan Copes with Calamity and Precarious Japan can, and should, prompt U.S.-based sociologists to reflect on their own relationships with “publics” that are often missing from the formulation and dissemination of sociological research. U.S.-based sociologists, whether studying non-American or American cases, confront the similar institutional barrier separating them from objects of their research (e.g., American citizens). Americans that U.S.-based sociologists study rarely talk back because much of sociological research, driven by disciplinary debates, has little bearing on their lives. This seeming irrelevance of sociology in public life is one of the motivations behind “public sociology” advocated by Michael Burawoy and endorsed, albeit with modifications and critiques, by Craig Calhoun, Patricia Hill Collins, and many other sociologists. Collectively, they have raised hard questions: for whom and for what purposes should sociologists write, how can the discipline be transformed to increase its public engagement, and what is the “public,” anyway?

Here, I suggest that a primary task of public sociology, and public social science more generally, is not to offer “truths” to guide publics to formulate efficacious policies, but to provide publics with descriptions of their activities, so that they can become more reflexive in trying to move toward more democratic and effective governance of their collective lives. In this respect, Japan Copes with Calamity serves as an example of public social science, notwithstanding its theoretical weakness, because it stays close to urgent concerns among Japanese citizens and illuminates various problems and challenges in responding to the triple disaster. Moreover, Japan Copes with Calamity, together with Precarious Japan, forcefully illustrate that “publics” are ultimately transnational, encompassing scholars, students, and citizens of multiple nationalities. It is crucial to recognize this transnational nature of publics in the contemporary world, where academic communities are beginning to traverse not only national borders, but also all sorts of problems, ranging from economic inequalities to ecological crises, are increasingly global.

Thus, in the eyes of a Japanese sociologist trained in the United States, the two anthropological books bring together the two related, but often disconnected, debates on disciplines and area studies and on sociologists and publics. To deepen this critical self-reflection in the transnational context, rather than to advance theory in the American disciplinary context, the two books on contemporary Japan, coping with the triple disaster, deserve to be taken seriously by readers of Contemporary Sociology.