

Literature and Culture Workshop II: Summary Report

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In the afternoon session of the Literature and Culture Section, Professor Senaha Eijun presented his paper on Barack Obama's autobiography. The name of Barack Obama, I suppose, was the most frequently mentioned one during the plenary session of the NASSS 2008. Obama was mentioned frequently not only because he was the potential candidate for the coming presidential election in the U. S., but also because much attention was paid to his symbolic significance as a figure seemingly representing the multi-cultural, multi-racial, or rather post-racial hybrid self.

In his paper entitled "Barack Obama and His-Story: Paradox of Hybridity and Masculinity in His Autoandrogamy," Professor Senaha read Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* in terms of literary conventions of autobiography, and discussed such issues as the representation of racial and cultural hybridity, the problem of self-portraiture of a victimized subject, and the paradoxical attitudes toward race and gender revealed in this autobiographical text. Professor Senaha singled out the narrative of "traumatic" experience in Obama's life story: the narrative of his coming across several articles in a collection of *Life* magazines at the U. S. Embassy in Indonesia, or the narrative representation of a wounded self awakening to racial inequality. If, as Professor Senaha argued, autobiography can become the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, articulating through one person's experience what may be representative of a particular marginalized group, it then becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition. Obama's *Dreams from My Father* is, as Professor Senaha put it, "a story of race and inheritance for everyone who feels unprivileged." Yet this kind of politicization of the subject, or the claim to speak for others, is always problematic and can elide further difference under an assumed representation. The autobiographical self is constructed, or created, through an exclusionary process. In this autobiographical text, the protagonist's self-image of alienated minority is constituted through invocation of his virtually absent father, while his reliance on his mother is negated. Professor Senaha thus read this autobiography as a story of a man whose life reveals a "paradox" or contradiction between his attitudes to race and gender: that is, between a "postmodern" hybridity and a belief in the myth of "masculinity." Obama, as Professor Senaha put it, "starts the journey as a postmodern bildungsroman hero

of hybridity, but by the end settles for a relatively simple identity: that of his parental heritage. As a result, his autoandrogyny, a life writing of a man about himself and by himself represents a familiar story of a man who is trapped by the myth of masculinity.”

Professor Nitta Keiko responded to Professor Senaha’s presentation on the “timely” topic with her paper which she herself defined “untimely.” Her response contained provocative arguments which, I believe, could have opened up our discussion in the afternoon session. Professor Nitta turned our attention to the “foreignness” of Obama’s text, referring to Sakai Naoki’s concept of “heterolingual address” with which Professor Rey Chow started her plenary lecture. Responding “responsibly” to the “element of the genuinely foreign/alien” (Chow) in the midst of Obama’s autobiographical narrative, Professor Nitta presented her “dissenting interpretation.” She paid attention, for example, to the contrast between the stances Obama takes to his mother and father, and argued thus: “If a racially informed sense of alienation, rather than conservative faith in patriarchal lineage motivates him to detach from his mother, while to yearn for his father blindly, there seems to be no ‘paradox’ or contradiction between his attitudes to race and gender.” Furthermore, she questioned Professor Senaha’s use of the term of “postmodern.” The autobiographically constructed social self in this text is conventional enough: a person who is “critical of racial unfairness while uncritical of gender unfairness reciprocally crystallizes a rather conventional male minority figure.” If an autobiography such as Obama’s looks postmodern, it is not because this text testifies something like a “postmodern hybridity,” but because we value hybridity as something to “substantiate our responsibility for otherness.” Professor Nitta concluded her response by asserting the necessity of “untimely” questioning: Instead of affirming a “postmodern hybrid hero” like Obama, we are required to question any representation of hybridity because “an innocent academic endorsement of this particular individual’s hybridity, if unintentionally, accept and serve the ongoing hegemonic function of multicultural Americanism.”

Professor Rey Chow made favorable comments on the two presentations. She appreciated the unique possibility of literary approach to the autobiographical text of a political figure, and, referring to Frantz Fanon, implied that the issue of masculinity is inextricable from that of race and class. Then followed the session of questions and answers, during which a fruitful discussion was expected to take place concerning those issues Professor Nitta made in the form of response to Professor Senaha’s argument: the question of identity politics, contemporary modes of self-expression, the problems of American Studies, and especially the concept of masculinity. Active exchanges were made between the panelists and the floor, but the discussion was somewhat “out of joint.” Time left for discussion was not sufficient to deal with such questions; however, I was mainly responsible as a moderator for the disarrangement.