

Response to Senaha Eijun: Reading Hybridity at a Time Out of Joint

NITTA KEIKO

RIKKYO UNIVERSITY

The purpose of this response will eventually be to validate the function of “heterolingual address”—to which Professor Rey Chow’s plenary lecture has turned our attention—in an autobiography, because the genre is widely relied upon as a primary source in the field of American Studies. The paper of Professor Senaha Eijun is about an autobiography of one famous American: Presidential candidate Barack Obama. This individual’s life story itself is colorful enough and I think I have enjoyed how Professor Senaha has unpacked its significance. My task is, however, perhaps to open a discussion on ways in which this narrative piece affects our notion of either the U. S., American Studies, contemporary modes of self-expression, or autobiography as a genre. Why do we read Obama’s personal narrative? Is there any good in examining certain generic conventions in his text? If so, is this because he is one of the typical celebrities in his own way representing today’s multicultural, transnational, and hybridized human connection? Or even rather, is Obama’s autobiography important because his fantasizing his virtually absent biological father illustrates the tenacity of an “essentialist” faith in masculinity? Are we shocked by such a “paradox” found even in the life of a “postmodern hero”? Is this a suggested way to read his autobiography?

I hope that Professor Senaha and maybe others attending this session will later show me the merits of Obama’s self-narration. My greater interest is, nonetheless, in intervening in the given commentary on the text in question rather than being persuaded. In so doing, I may be able to keep my sight on the “foreignness” of this text that resists a hegemony working in itself under a specific historical condition. This is, in other words, an attempt to search for my place in the community of the text’s addressees, who are no way expected to have a consensus on how to read it, but just be there as the text’s responsive as well as responsible destinations. If one, including Obama, aspires to control the accounts of her/his own selfhood by “disassembl[ing] the monolithic categories that have culturally identified [her/him]” by authoring an autobiography (Senaha 2), what I am inclined to recuperate here is a meaning in excess of such an autonomic authorial enterprise.

As Professor Chow has accurately reminded us of, Sakai Naoki’s concept of “heterolingual address”—together with Jacques Derrida’s original theory of

address—indicates a message that is not predestined to form a successful communication on the side of the addresser. A response to an address does not occur within the scope of authorial calculation, even though a self-reflective author as Sakai can refine her/his awareness of exchangeability with a never homogenized community of addressees and thus the necessity of translation immanent in all enunciations. The way of my reception of Obama's text should, therefore, sound something close to misunderstanding or inappreciation of his idiosyncratic position, in contrast with that of Professor Senaha, a seemingly great exponent of his sentiments. Yet, I do not intend to read in such a way purposely in order to satisfy a self-interested ambition for buttressing a "unique" readerly position. Instead, an "element of the genuinely foreign/alien" left also in the midst of Obama's narrative might have informed the following dissentious interpretation of mine (Chow 19).

What strikes me the most about Obama's story through the mediation of Professor Senaha is the centrality of fabricated images of racial hierarchy in his life that has become a powerful force of creating his minority self-image. In the anecdote of his coming across several articles in a collection of *Life* magazines, those that signify racial unfairness worldwide, he is said to have experienced what Professor Senaha calls trauma. While his mother's entire struggle for egalitarian education proved in vain, the discourse on race as inscribed in photo-documents plunged him into a "new found fear." This is the fear of knowing possibilities that he belongs to the same class of people as the photos represent, and his Caucasian mother's attempt to protect him from the racially coded view of the world turns out to be a hypocrisy. It is certain that his wounded awakening of racial inequality signifies a perverted effect of discriminatory ideology on an individual's mind-set. A still more important aspect of this episode is, however, that this autobiographical protagonist almost sacrifices his own particular background, including a particular knowledge of the world he has learned in his multiracial family, to a stereotypical understanding of the self. Even though living spontaneously such a standardized story of victimization and survival would be useful for him to establish his sense of self in terms of minority citizen's collectivity, his preference of the mass-mediated discourse to experience discloses the inability to designate him a hybrid or unique individual. His identity politics actually relinquishes a certain part of his hybridity and uniqueness.

The nature of this confrontation is actually momentous enough to anticipate, if partly, Professor Senaha's conclusion; that is, in Obama's autobiography, we will find "his essentialist stance toward gender that he inherits from his father: 'It's in the blood'" (13). I am not sure if Obama's inattentiveness to the misogynistic as well as abusive aspect of his biological father's has been the matter of heredity (I hope not); however, this certainly seems to be connected with his inequable attitude to gender. Despite the impossibility of generalizing such a reaction to all events in his life, this at least may explain his quick mistrust of his mother. After the incident in the reading room at the U. S. Embassy, he starts distancing himself

from his mother. For many readers, it should be hard to understand why a few photographs of non-white ethnic people—no matter how strong a trace of suffering they may express—so suddenly can shutter his reliance on his mother. Yet the extremity of this behavior matches logically his partiality for his biological father that is a riddle even for his Kenyan siblings. This attitude is, however, not a mere demonstration of his posture *vis-à-vis* women. The contrast between the stances Obama takes to his mother and father at once hints that race is so decisive as gender as a factor that determines the most obstinate part of his identity. 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.

Professor Senaha has read this autobiography as a story of a man whose life splits into two contradictory ideological as well as empirical phases, namely, a “postmodern hybridity” and a “[belief] in the tradition of manhood” (3, 12). Yet, is such a formulation possible? As I have just verified, Obama in a sense neglects his own racially and culturally hybrid existence by participating in the visual images of minority race that a U. S. popular magazine has distributed. Furthermore, what Professor Senaha means by the term “postmodern” remains unclear throughout his paper. Is Obama’s arbitrariness in selecting where to belong by taking advantage of his diverse backgrounds postmodern? Well, probably, but that is nothing new as a literary strategy; a variety of precursory schemes for controlling self-portrayals may be located in the long history of autobiographies, including slave narratives and passing narratives of African Americans. Furthermore, regarding Obama’s affinity for his father, there is no explanation of which sort of “traditional manhood” the father has represented. We have learned how strongly he respects his biological father; however, is this sentiment automatically equal to the faith in a “tradition of manhood”? Anyway, it seems to me that no paradox really works in this text’s narrative structure. Obama’s social consciousness critical of racial unfairness while uncritical of gender unfairness reciprocally crystallizes a rather conventional male minority figure, who establishes himself by acquiring a rigid racial foothold and dignity desired to be attached to a man.

Conventional indeed; yet why to some, such an autobiography as Obama’s looks differential and postmodern? That happens, I guess, when one invests too much a symbolic significance in multicultural as well as minority attributes of an individual on a visible and formalistic level. We value a hybrid condition, because we expect its capacity to undermine an assumption of something essential and categorically right, to risk our self-contented vantage point on a chance to get a tolerance to more complicated situations or double binds, and ultimately to substantiate our responsibility for otherness. However, otherness does not automatically stem from the mixed parentage. Obama in this autobiography actually testifies to his inclination to isolate a single background as the

retroactively found basis of his identity: African Americanness. He speaks for the minority position of African Americans, but that cannot entail an imagination for otherness unless his narration exceeds his own story of self-searching journey. A sort of hybridity Obama represents, therefore, seems not to be something like a “postmodern hybridity.” When he attempts to reach the sense of collectivity by simulating the racial oppression, disqualifying his mother for her limitation said to come from whiteness, and generously overlooking weaknesses in his father’s personality, he displays an almost fundamental version of racial principle.

Evaluation of such a story as Obama’s within the discipline of American Studies, hence, requires a studious attentiveness. We cannot irresponsibly celebrate him as a “postmodern hero” while slighting his particular identitarian propensity, under the specific politico-historical context in 2008. Insofar as he won both popular and official recognition as a potent Presidential candidate, his physical hybridity and multicultural heritage have already been tactically superimposed on an ambiguous silhouette of America in a would-be present and future.¹ A social vision based on multiplicity itself is excellent; however, multiplicity without a consideration of otherness cannot help but end up with authenticating a sufficiency of self. I do not intend to confine the worth of Obama’s mode of self-expression merely to that level; nor do I try to assess his qualification as a politician by this argument. I am, instead, intending to keep in mind an ironic likelihood that the multicultural complacency turns to be another version of American exceptionalism. Accordingly, an innocent academic endorsement of this particular individual’s hybridity may, if unintentionally, accept and serve the ongoing hegemonic function of multicultural Americanism.

In the current history, let us remember the fact that 9.11 took place not before but after multiculturalism had been institutionalized in the U. S. After the popularization of multiculturalism, such an astonishing statement was made: “Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber” (G. W. Bush). We no longer can attribute this naïveté simply to the personal fault of the present President. We also cannot take the nature of this statement in terms of paradox or irony. Ignorance of the reason why others hate the U. S. seems to me to be a typical symptom of post-multicultural America. That is to say, this saying exposes a condition in which American discourses on diversity and hybridity have formed autoimmunity to difference. If one believes that an element of difference is original property of its own, it will lack a proper susceptibility to difference that should be brought by the Other. A righteous affirmation of Obama’s hybridity is, thus, with the trend of fetishizing his African Americanness as a specific backdrop, can result in consolidating immunity from the imagined multicultural inside to the antibody that the fantasy of auto-diversity can produce. As a “postcolonial informant,” according to Gayatri Spivak’s definition, Obama is in a strict sense not a purveyor of otherness, but an authority who can endorse American diversity from the inside.

However, this sort of interpretation cannot escape an anxiety—in this paper I

may have articulated something incorrect, at least politically incorrect. As a student specialized in African American literature, I may not single out and criticize Obama's personal imagination, self-expression and self-fantasy; he should probably be a tolerable Presidential candidate, and cultural conservatives can appropriate a critique of multiculturalism. This direction of thoughts is, nevertheless, required because presenting an untimely idea of this sort is an approach to respond to heterolingual address of any one cultural, social and literary text. In his brilliant contemplation on the autobiography and translation, Jacques Derrida confirms that "by definition, [the address] cannot let itself be heard or understood in the present: it is untimely, different, and anachronistic" (19). In the present world in which multiculturalism and postcolonialism have been agreed to be common senses by general estimate, questioning a representation of hybridity sounds certainly untimely. Yet without such reconsideration, a certain way of assuming hybrid America can serve the hegemonic interests of American Studies. The basis of untimely response is the necessity to check a route through which the very anti-hegemonic concept turns to be a means of hegemonic self-achievement. In order for a vital critical attempt—especially of humanities—to envision a future beyond the historical necessity, we have to invent such a potential time out of joint.

Notes

1. The term "ambiguous silhouette" is coined by Harry D. Harootunian to indicate American Japanologists' attempt to undertake their researches on the basis of a vision of Japan presupposed in accordance with Japan's national interest.

Works Cited

- Chow, Rey. "American Studies in Japan; Japan in American Studies: Challenges of the Heterolingual Address." A plenary lecture presented at the 2008 Nagoya American Studies Summer Seminar, July 25–27, 2008 (July 26, 2008).
- Derrida, Jacques. "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name." Trans. Avital Ronell. *The Ear of the Other: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Christie McDonald. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985.
- Senaha Eijun. "Barack Obama and His-Story: Paradox of Hybridity and Masculinity in His Autobiography." A section paper presented at the 2008 Nagoya American Studies Summer Seminar, July 25–27, 2008 (July 27, 2008).