

## Literature and Culture Workshop I Summary of Discussion

TAKETANI Etsuko

UNIVERSITY OF TSUKUBA

The first workshop of the Literature and Culture section at the NASSS 2010 revealed the very amorphous nature of the project that we had taken upon ourselves. It laid bare the important fact that despite our shared aim--articulated in the NASSS's annual theme, "Toward a Common Memory of Our Past"--we had perhaps no common critical framework from which to begin to address this seemingly simple matter. There was only an indistinct basis to our shared efforts. The disorientation we encountered during the workshop challenged us to examine critically the assumptions that we start with, rather than to start from the assumptions that we think we share despite our differences in theoretical orientation and disciplinary background.

Our workshop's presenter, Professor Inoue Mayumo, in his paper titled "Stones, Rocks, and Other Objects of History: Aesthetic Distributions of Memories in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Kiyota Masanobu," continued--and significantly disrupted--the template for cultural memory studies framed, if provisionally, at the plenary session that opened the seminar the previous day. Keynote speakers, among them Dr. Marianna Torgovnick, addressed "Pearl Harbor" and "Hiroshima and Nagasaki," transnational sites of memory of World War II that produce a wide gap in national perception and sentiment between the United States and Japan--a gap that still remains, as it sparked controversy and lively exchanges at the session, thus setting the tone for subsequent workshops. The discussions on "Pearl Harbor" and "Hiroshima and Nagasaki" showed that cultural memory is not a relic of the past; rather, it is a cultural phenomenon in the present, in which the past is continuously modified--or, to borrow from Dr. Torgovnick's paper, "either amplified or effaced"--even as it continues to shape the present.

While covering a range of issues germane to cultural memory studies, the central issue of Professor Inoue's paper was about unpacking paradigms of the nation and nationalism that are related to the problems of identity and language. His choice of "Korea" and "Okinawa," of Korean-born American novelist Cha's multilingual novel *Dictee* and American-occupied-Okinawan poet Kiyota's Japanese-language poetry--partly reflecting some of his own areas of interest--was significantly informed by his agenda of examining "how to remember" colonial pasts. Korea and Okinawa both underwent prewar Japanese colonization and

subsequent postwar U.S. domination, a colonial past that impinged on the formation of identity and the role of language, in particular the language of colonial power such as Japanese (and English). Korea, a peninsula and former country, was annexed to Japan in 1910 and divided in 1945 into two occupation zones under U.S. and Soviet occupation, ultimately leading to two political entities, South Korea and North Korea. Likewise, Okinawa, an archipelago and former kingdom, was incorporated into Japan in 1879 and, following World War II, was occupied by U.S. forces till 1972 when it was “reverted” to Japan.

Certainly an intriguing remapping of the geography of cultural memory in Asian American literature, Professor Inoue’s paper nonetheless created some unexpected difficulties for much of the audience, which was primarily composed of scholars of American literature. This was because of his choice of texts, Cha’s novel *Dictee*, (which only a handful in the audience had read before), and the work of the even lesser-known Okinawan poet Kiyota, which he accommodated in “Asian American literature.” However, understanding was also complicated by his paper’s occasional slide into difficult, jargon-laden prose, drawing on concepts taken from the postmodern French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* and German critic Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This created a slight lapse of thematic (if not theoretical) coherence. Professor Inoue’s overview of a trend in the discipline of Asian American literary studies was not concerned with cultural memory so much as with cultural critique, examining Asian Americanists’ identity politics from strategic essentialism (based on cultural origins) to strategic antiessentialism (based on lack thereof) and to coalitional politics (based on “common features” with other oppressed groups). The paper then proceeded to a reading of Deleuze’s “transcendental empiricism” and Benjamin’s “historical origin,” where no trace of its thematic link to cultural memory about Asia in Asian American literature was readily apparent.

On the more fundamental level, the sense of disorientation that the seminar encountered derived from the problem inherent in the concept of cultural memory itself. What is cultural memory? What does it mean to discuss cultural memory in literary studies? Professor Torgovnick, in the plenary session, was interested in the process by which cultural memory is formed; she discussed cultural memory as collective memory that is embodied in media such as film. Professor Inoue, on the other hand, was interested in cultural memory as individual acts of memory in a sociocultural context; he raised the issue of agency in cultural memory, in which the cardinal questions are: who “does” the remembering, and from what subject position(s)? Clearly, there was no unitary critical ground that all the workshop participants inhabited and shared in advance.

Professor Inoue’s paper interrogated cultural memory as collective memory, particularly national memory with its “invented tradition” that becomes part of national and personal identity. The point of departure for his paper was the failure of the nation and nationalism, which stimulated a “pedagogical” discourse that emerged in once-colonized places, like Korea and Okinawa, and contributed

to the continued oppression of some groups within the national population. This observation pointed him to his primary question: how can we otherwise remember colonial histories? Professor Inoue disavows what is notionally suspect in the nation--ground, foundation, genesis, and other related coordinates such as unity--and discredits national history that collects the population into a people with a sense of shared origins, a common past, and a collective identity in the present, thereby obscuring its internal divisions and difference. He suggested that in the memory-power nexus, a cultural or collective memory is subjected to "monopolization." In his reading of Cha's novel *Dictee*, Professor Inoue thus drew attention to discontinuity, rather than continuity, in transmitting experience. (One American graduate student in the audience also raised the issue of the role of "not understanding" in *Dictee*). In his analysis of Kiyota's poems, Professor Inoue interrogated the anticolonial nationalist memory in Okinawa that concocted a sense of rootedness in the land and a feeling of the rightful ownership of the land. Instead of land, Professor Inoue foregrounded "stones" and "rocks" --themselves a recurring motif in his own paper--as symbols encoding emotional intensity, or hunger, representing landless peasants.

Dr. Lee Yu-cheng, the workshop's commentator and a leading scholar in Asian American literature, lauded Professor Inoue's insight in revealing some of the pitfalls attendant upon the critical turn in recent Asian American literary studies. Dr. Torgovnick pointed out the challenge we currently face in literary studies because we do not all read the same texts, suggesting that under this condition, theory becomes a "common language." One American graduate student then queried Professor Inoue about the role of theory in Asian American studies.

Our workshop did not generate the active and extensive discussion that we had hoped it would. However, as indicated by the nature and extent of the comments and questions provided, our workshop significantly revealed that what is at stake is how cultural memory studies--and literary studies, for that matter--may or may not be resourced by a wide variety of theories and their associated strategies drawn from other critical practices, not as useful tools but as our "common language." In this respect, our workshop challenged the participants to examine critically the disciplinary ground that we occupy as literary critics and to explore and to critique further afield.