

Literature and Culture Workshop II: Summary of Discussion

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The second workshop of “Literature and Culture” started with Professor Miura Reiichi’s presentation on J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* as a work of “cultural biopolitics” in the age of the Cold War, which was followed by Professor Misugi’s response on the further possibility of biopolitics in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. As both professors focused on cultural politics of everyday in one way or another, we had an opportunity to work on relations between memory and history and also those between biopolitics and the politics of social formation.

Under the title of “Liberalism’s Everybody’s Revolution: Cultural Politics in *The Catcher in the Rye*,” Professor Miura argued that Holden’s rebellion against the adult world represented “the cultural politics of everyday” the purpose of which was to keep away from “the older politics of social formation and social justice” of the 1930s and 1940s. His argument started with a unique assumption that Salinger’s novel was a post-Auschwitz novel demonstrating the “trauma-like psychology of post-WWII.” Actually, as Professor Miura clarified himself in the course of his presentation, at stake for the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, whose ethnicity was half-Jewish and half-Irish American, was not the (re-)construction of Jewish identity in the wake of the Holocaust but the possibility of individuals’ revolution against conformism widespread in postwar American society. So, he concluded that Salinger’s work was a “non-racial” novel emerging out of Cold-War Liberalism, focusing on the transition from the social politics of the nation-state to the cultural biopolitics of individuals.

Professor Misugi, then, extended Professor Miura’s notion of “cultural biopolitics” further to analyze Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. As Professor Misugi argued, the novel makes good contrasts with Salinger’s story: 1) while *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared in the early 1950s when the iron curtain was drawn to divide the world into the Eastern and Western blocks, *The English Patient* is published in 1992, right after the breakdown of the walls of Berlin in 1989; 2) as Salinger tried best not to concern himself with a question of racial and ethnic identities in his novel, Ondaatje brings to the fore the racial issue in the story which is set in the closing days of World War II. Also important, according to Prof. Misugi, is that, like Holden Caulfield, Ondaatje’s heroine Hana rebels against the socio-political standard of the mid-1940s to demonstrate the possibility

that her individualist actions would make differences in the field of biopolitics.

To summarize, both professors' arguments stood on assumptions that for us living after World War II, our "personal" memories were more important than the history of official records and that our "biopolitical" inclination toward "common memories" would embody a thrust toward even more democratic society.

After the presentations, Prof. Marianna Torgovnick made comments to both professors. First, while pointing out that Holden Caulfield's narrative expressed post-WWII angst, she said that *The Catcher in the Rye* posited the naive idealism of young generations, where people were engaged in cross-cultural sympathy, apart from the world of war that was conditioned upon nationalist sentiments. About the possibility of common understanding of our cultures and memories, she argued that we were not able to reach common understanding unless we understood a variety of different understandings in the first place. Prof. Torgovnick demonstrated the idea that the world that she would idealize most was the one based upon altruism where one feels the damage caused to another group as poignantly as the damage caused to one's own group.

Then, we had a number of comments and questions from other participants. First, Prof. Inoue asked Prof. Miura to further explain the difference between our commitment to singularity and the individualism of the 1950s, in order to facilitate our understanding of the two key notions that Prof. Miura had presented, that is, those of "multitude" (from Hardt and Negri) and the "nation." Then, Prof. Nagahata drew attention to the "manner of death" in *English Patient*, referring to Walt Whitman's poem "Sleepers" where, as Prof. Nagahata pointed out, the dead body functioned as a metaphor for a democratic body with less difference. Another question was posed by Kevin Riordan about the question of "authenticity" in relation to Holden's idea of "phoniness" in Salinger's story. Then, following Prof. Robert J. McMahon's provocative statement at the plenary session about the possibility of America making apologies to Japan over the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Jessica Bardill asked about the timing of apologies that the United States might make over the nuclear atrocities that it had done to Japan. To conclude the session, Prof. Torgovnick asked all the participants whether they had had any significant experiences in the classroom where they might or might not share with their students the common understanding of memories.

Overall, focusing on the possibility of the construction of "common memories of our past," this session engendered a number of productive arguments, and the participants were encouraged to enlarge their perspective on relations between history and memory and also the difference between the social politics of the 1950s and our cultural politics today.