

July 27, 13:30~15:00: Session (II-1) Room 1-102

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“*The Factory* and its possessions”

Keywords

Australia-Japan, Australian literature, Orientalism, Postcolonial studies, Noh.

Abstract

This paper looks at Paddy O’Reilly’s first novel *The Factory* (2005) about an Australian PhD student who comes to Japan to study, and ends up joining, a commune that is involved in learning and maintaining traditional Japanese art forms. The novel self-consciously betrays an underlying desire in the protagonist – a fluent speaker of Japanese – to become Japanese or to ‘possess’ Japaneseness. This ontological possession is compared against the sexual possession of Japanese men by the Australian female protagonist, and I analyse the access to Japaneseness this is meant to garner. Given that this novel centres on the protagonist’s anthropological study, I use the word ‘possess’ to signal semantic resonance with Said’s references to Western orientalist academics and writers who attempt to ‘possess’ a feminised orient by speaking on its behalf. In this way I point out a tendency towards anthropological possession in the novel. Additionally, I look closely at the way O’Reilly weaves the Noh drama into the characterisation and formal structure of the novel. I make thematic comparisons with themes of ‘spiritual possession’ in Noh, and read this inflection of ‘possession’ into what I see as a novel that ‘plays’ with, and is self-conscious of, its orientalist representations. Constructions of white Australian subjectivity, in both the protagonist Hilda’s authorial voice and that of O’Reilly herself, ‘possesses’ the bodies of Japanese characters, but this subjectivity is exorcised symbolically at the conclusion of the novel – mirroring the exorcism that takes place in various Noh plays.

I place this discussion within the broader approaches of postcolonial, multicultural and transnational studies. The novel negotiates Australia’s relationship with Asia and enacts a process of defining clearer borders between the two in national, cultural and racial senses. I see the transnational ethic of this novel, in going ‘beyond the nation’, as a way to cement Australia’s ultimate difference to Japan, and Asia more generally, and define what Australia is and is not. The interrogation of problematic orientalist desire and attitudes in this novel takes place in the displaced space of Japan, but it is significant that this interrogation does not return to the space of Australia. Megumi Kato, in *Narrating the Other: Australian Literary Perception of Japan*, is hopeful that contemporary Australian literary representations of Japan will be characterised by

including Australia's 'outside' to its 'inside' in a national and racial sense. However, I remain skeptical of *The Factory's* ability to do this, and read the perpetuation of prescriptions of difference in the move to be more inclusive and self-critical.

STEAINS, Timothy Kazuo

Timothy Kazuo Steains is a PhD candidate in the Gender and Cultural Studies Department at the University of Sydney, Australia. His thesis focuses on representations of the Japanese in contemporary Australian literature, film and other media. He is interested in the intersections between postcolonial and critical race studies, Asian Australian and multicultural studies, and transnational studies. He is also a research assistant for the project 'Imagining Diversity' that interrogates how race is discussed in contemporary science fiction and fantasy communities. In addition, he has a sustained interest in mixed race studies, especially Asian Australian mixed race.