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Crossing the Lines: Masao Miyoshi's *Trespasses*

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Trespases: Selected Writings by Masa Miyoshi. Edited and with an introduction by Eric Cazdyn. Foreword by Fredric Jameson. Post-Contemporary Interventions Series. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. 384. \$26.95 paper.

Trespases presents a most valuable selection of critical essays from a highly significant literary critic and public intellectual: Masao Miyoshi (1928–2009). A Japanese-born scholar whose first works concentrated on English literature and then moved to Japanese studies and, finally, to broad social and academic criticism, Miyoshi was, I believe, at heart a comparatist, albeit in his own unique way. This collection gives us a fine sense of his range and his critical method. That he eschewed strict disciplinary boundaries and conventions was shaped by his life, his personal style, and his politics. These essays trace his intellectual trajectories across and between national cultures, guided by an unwavering attention to historical location and purpose.

I first met Masao Miyoshi in the late 1970s at Berkeley. It was sobering for me to read his account of those times in this volume. Yes, it was called the Oriental languages department (as Miyoshi indicates, OL for short, or, as we students called it, “Oh, Hell”) and housed in the former law-school building, Durant Hall. The student lounge was dedicated to the eminent linguist Yuan-ren Chao and his wife, the physician and later author of books on the preparation and consumption of Chinese food, Buwei Yang. The gold placard above the entrance read, “The Chaos Room.” What Miyoshi writes is perfectly true—in those days, many of us

advanced undergraduate and graduate students were hungry not only for theory but for any critical perspective that might in some way present another angle onto literary studies, especially of “the Orient.”

At that time, faculty who could provide that were few and far between, so we formed our own reading groups, bought titles from presses such as Éditions du Seuil, and read the Poétique series and the magazines *Tel Quel* and *Glyph*. This was before *Representations* was a twinkle in Stephen Greenblatt’s eye. Masao Miyoshi was not only someone who could talk to us about Marxism, historical materialism, and a demystified notion of East Asia; he also had the personal brashness and the politically active, iconoclastic stance to which many of us aspired. He was so close to our interests and sequestered right next to us in Wheeler Hall. Yet disciplinary boundaries, not to mention professional jealousies and turf wars, made it impossible for Miyoshi to be formally appointed in OL, and those who did work closely with him were, as he recounts in these pages, marked pejoratively by his antagonists as *his* students.

The title of the book is taken from a great stanza usually expunged from US campfire performances of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” (1912) (although wonderfully and conspicuously reinstated by Arlo Guthrie at

the 1994 Kennedy Center celebration of Pete Seeger):

As I went walking, I saw a
sign there,
And on the sign it said, “No
Trespassing.”
But on the other side it didn’t
say nothing.
That side was made for you
and me.

The essays illustrate the kinds of transgressive moves Miyoshi made during his long, fruitful career—across cultural, national, intellectual, academic boundaries—that established his unique style. But it would be wrong to focus solely on these invasive and disruptive actions—Miyoshi was equally attentive to locating himself, and the subjects of his investigations, in history, time, and place. There is a kind of restless energy in these essays, indicating that these trespasses both explore terrain where one does not properly belong and seek to register what kinds of knowledge are produced in these transgressive acts. As he crosses these disciplinary lines, the author constantly reflects upon his own situation and the cultural and historical location from which he speaks.

His deep concern with the ways the academy does and does not demonstrate a commitment to useful knowledge shows in each of his essays. How much do disciplines, “experts,” “authorities,” departments

aid in the production of knowledge and the training of minds, and how much do they hinder that?

Most of the time, his critiques strike me as trenchant and probing; other times, less so. Most notably, his attacks on multiculturalism and identity politics are uncharacteristically ill-informed and totally unsubstantiated. In these remarks, scattered across a number of later essays, Miyoshi tilts at mostly unnamed straw men and straw women. For example, in "Ivory Tower in Escrow" (2000), he attributes "the failure of the humanities as an agency of criticism and intervention" entirely to identity politics, which he portrays in an absurd, reductive caricature:

Rejection of universality, collectivity, reference, and agency in favor of difference, particularly, incommensurability, and structure can hardly be uniform among post-structuralists. And yet, as seen in the context of the theorists in the United States, there is an undeniable common proclivity among them to fundamentally reject such totalizing concepts as humanity, civilization, history, and justice, and such subtotalities as a region, a nation, a locality, or even any smallest group. (232)

Still, just a page later, he accuses the same people of fixating precisely

on a "totalized" notion of "small groups": "A totality is differentiated as majority and minorities, then a minority into subminorities, a subminority into sub-subminorities, and so on. Differentiation and fragmentation never stop by the sheer force of its logic" (233). He then resorts to a slippery-slope argument to make his point:

Picture the variations: aged and impoverished white lesbian women, rich Korean men who speak no English, gay middle-class Lebanese American males who are newly jobless with no families. However imaginative, sympathetic, or concerned, one is severely restricted in the ability to know and embrace others. (235)

But the real point of his criticism is that such fragmentation into special interests is a sign of the corporate takeover of the university (in the guise of liberal multiculturalism that "celebrates" difference rather than analyzing inequities). "The abstract principle of multiculturalism, an expression of liberal open-mindedness and progressive tolerance, much too often stands in for an alibi to exonerate the existing privileges, inequities, and class differences," he writes (235). "Multiculturalism works nearly as a license to abandon the welfare of the unprofitable marginals, and

concentrate on the interests of the dominant” (237).

Actually, those of us in the ethnic studies movements at Berkeley rarely spoke in those terms or acted accordingly. We persistently marched to the slogan that as long as one group was oppressed no one was free. So I frankly don’t know where he got this from—especially since he cites no actual evidence. While Miyoshi asserts that multiculturalism skips past issues of colonialism, in fact the classes I took and TA’ed for, taught by his colleague Ling-chi Wang next door in Dwinelle Hall, discussed at length the merits and demerits of an internal colonialism model to understand the structuration of minority communities.

I mention these disappointments with Miyoshi’s comments first because he had such a podium from which to speak—people cared and still do care deeply about what he said—and because he effectively cut himself off from many people who could have been strong allies. His principles were, from my perspective, entirely right, but his instincts could, and did in this instance, lead him astray. Ultimately, however, that he leapt too quickly on the critique of “grand narratives,” without seeing how this critique was used by different actors for different purposes, is less important than his alarm at a loss of common purpose. This leads me back to his interest in

both situating knowledge and mobilizing it against ignorance and injustice.

This all comes out forcefully in “Literary Elaborations” (2009), an essay written specifically for this book. It is a passionate call to arms prompted by “a convergence of crises in the deterioration of the environment both physical and social” (2). The impotence of the university to address these crises is attributed to the same kinds of alienated gestures that he bemoans in “multiculturalism.” If literary studies has been ruined by cultural studies and theory, politics by identity politics, and both of these characterized by fragmented and isolated gestures, in the academy in general we find knowledge production in disarray:

[T]he idea of authority has been replaced by that of expertise. Despite the general respect the public still seems to hold for academia and also despite our own confidence in ourselves as intellectuals, we are now experts rather than authorities. This difference is hardly trivial: an authority knows not only her/his specialty but also understands its place in the scheme of learning. An expert, on the other hand, is trained only in the field of specialization, and refuses to take even a step beyond it. (3)

That it to say, *experts* are hyper-rationalized intellectuals working on small bits of turf that they take as whole. They do not even think to “trespass” because such movement would merely be meandering. *Authorities*, conversely, see their place in a larger scheme of things, and they consider the implications of discrete knowledge for a broader formation. And it is precisely this greater sense of things, the image of a large synthesis of knowledge, that is needed to combat the immense problems besetting humankind.

Miyoshi turns to a body of knowledge and practice that to him exemplifies precisely such a global, collective response:

I see one zone of studies and criticism that might be able to claim political and economic independence, which is environmental justice studies. When all academic efforts—including environmental management and sustainability technologies—are finally reducible to consumerism under the sway of transnational capitalism, ecological protection based on universal social justice should be able stand on its own, aloof to corporate and state power altogether. By now life on the planet as endangered needs no explanation. And the planet is integral to all—rich or poor, male or female,

urban or rural, industrial or nomadic. (14)

If environmental justice is the arena that Miyoshi turned to near the end of his life, it is now time to explore how this location was in many ways predestined. For time and again in the essays that lead up to this one, we find a set of themes that all center on place, location, and situating oneself in ways that both mark a specific time and space and map a larger, global sense of humanity and its problematics.

Take, for example, this comment from “Who Decides, and Who Speaks? *Shutaisei* and the West in Postwar Japan” (1991):

My point of departure is where I am situated now: as a citizen and resident of the United States, still haunted by the memories of two past wars, and ever rankled by unceasing global crises. I try to teach, and know. My first war experience was as a Japanese subject with little knowledge of the unfolding history around me. My second, the war in Vietnam, was as a naturalized US citizen acutely aware of my earlier ignorance during what is still known in Japan as the Fifteen Years War. This time, I promised myself, I would learn and act—resist the state, if necessary. Did I? (83)

The great importance Miyoshi granted to the idea of locating oneself in history, and specifically in both national and global history, is felt throughout these essays and in different shapes and forms. For instance, in his account of a city-wide art exposition, “Art without Money: documenta X” (1998), Miyoshi describes appreciatively the 1997 exhibition in Kassel, Germany: “The parcours was thus a real itinerary and a symbolic history. It was both spatial/geographical and temporal/historical” (178). As he walks through the different exhibition spaces woven into the cityscape, he not only registers the images he sees and remarks upon the semiotics of his movement but also reflects on how he, and other observers, might be experiencing their own historicity. He attributes these effects to the particular vision and will of the planner:

[Catherine] David physically and semantically incorporated the urban environment by placing a number of exhibitions in the street and by showing many works, particularly photographs and videos, then engaged with urban life. She also challenged the frames and contours of autonomous paintings and sculpture by displaying very few of them—there were only five oil paintings shown in the entire exhibition—and

by integrating artworks into an ever-expanding intellectual discourse. (178–79)

In taking up the charge to think through and represent German history after the war, Miyoshi notes that the

exhibition was conceptual and intellectual at least as much as aesthetic and visual—although such a distinction hardly needs to be made now—each display required longer function and often required absorbing contextual information. Some works were almost like poems in the density of their references and meanings. The viewer was further slowed by videos and live art, which, of course, require time to take in. (180)

This stalling of movement, this arresting of attention, again revises the sense of the observing subject of not only the artwork but also his or her own locatedness as an observer and as an inhabitant of history.

One sees these same concerns in Miyoshi’s wonderful essay on the nineteenth-century travel diaries written by members of the first Japanese mission to the West. In “First-Person Pronouns in Japanese Diaries” (1979), he focuses on the manner in which the authors of these diaries drew on various

traditional narrative forms to try to capture this strange experience of an unknown world. On the one hand, they punctuated their entries with precision in order to ground themselves as observers: "By [the diary's] clarity, regularity, and authority, they were in a way redeemed each day from floating nameless, unlocated, and without discernible destination in a sea of what [Mircea] Eliade calls 'profane space'" (55). Yet at the same time Miyoshi notes a countermovement, which attempts to make sense of the isolated, objective notations of experience: "Works in the Japanese literary tradition of the *nikki*, too, are almost always battlegrounds between the habit of staying in step and the impulse to mold the sequential experiences into some significance" (59). According to Miyoshi, this is a "battle" because the authors

were for some reason inhibited from interpreting their unique experiences. As the trip begins, the diary begins; the travel ends, and so concludes the diary. The trip is in itself a whole meaning of the writing. (61)

As such, this ascension of "the trip" displaces the narrating voice, that which is in the West customarily associated with the individual, such that "the overwhelming majority . . . are narrated throughout

with hardly any first-person pronouns" (63). This does not mean that the accounts are then to be seen as emanating from a third-person voice. ("[T]he lack of first-person pronouns in the Japanese narrative does not by itself indicate a third person narrative" [63].) Rather, this vacillation of attribution (first- or third-person narrative) enables Miyoshi to make his chief argument—that our categorical habits prohibit us from seeing an altogether different possibility, which is that these diaries represent more the quality and nature of this particular historical experience as representable by these historical subjects. Our inability to locate a voice with our usual sets of terms reflects back on us, as well.

Nearly the same formula can be seen in another essay that reaches forward in time to the postwar years. He finds within the *I-fiction* novels of that period writers wrestling with the legacy of the war as it is present in a reinterpretation of national identity and the role of writers in expressing a new, western, subjectivity. In "Who Decides, and Who Speaks? *Shutaisei* and the West in Postwar Japan," Miyoshi reaches the conclusion that

the best way to approach this aspect of I-fiction, which might also throw light on *shutaisei*, is to read the work not as the author's moral and spiritual confession, but as a

literal recording of the composition process. . . . What is interesting here is that I-fiction can be looked at not as evidence of *shutaisei* (self-search, self-determination, self-identity) but as exactly the opposite, the public disclosure of the circumstance of the work's composition. (106)

That is to say, the literary text, like the diary of the nineteenth century, bears the traces of a deeply historical poetics located at the nexus of Japan and the West. And part of this effort to read for different things is to diagnose absence as something other than lack, but rather as an index into more important things: "For Japanese intellectuals as well as for Westerners, the job may well be to see the absence of *shutaisei* in Japanese society for what it is, and to recognize how it operates in various arenas" (108).

Similarly, the "lack" of certain narrative structures in the *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), a lack filled in by strategies of translation, is rehabilitated in Miyoshi's account in brilliant fashion. In "The Tale of Genji: Translation as Interpretation," the author first notes the ways we as readers supplement the gaps we perceive in the Japanese text: "As readers accustomed to the novel, . . . we are continually pressured by our own

expectations and biases to fit the contours of *Genji* into the shape of modern fiction" (79). Miyoshi argues instead that "Genji is not at all the novel, a modern narrative form that weaves its incidence into a plot and presents autonomous and discrete characters that supposedly refer to imagined individualities" (79). Yet such discrete units, at both the level of character and grammar, are not part of the world of Japanese classical narrative: "the point is that the reader of the original doesn't know precisely where, for instance, a quotation begins or ends, and I suspect no Heian reader really cared" (79). For Miyoshi, the comparison to be drawn is not to a reified model of the conventional western novel, but rather to a novel form that has features truly comparable to those found in *Genji*. He makes the comparison to Virginia Woolf and argues that the modernist stream of consciousness, a form created in different historical exigencies, is a better approximation of the mood and ambience found in the Japanese text. But even then he is careful not to equate the two—that would be too easy and too irresponsible.

That last statement may seem odd, coming in a review of a book entitled *Trespasses*. But what I have hoped to convey here is just how much Miyoshi's writings bear witness to his intense sense of responsibility—not to some arbitrary,

academic conventions and boundaries, but to a sense of history, culture, location, and justice. These essays thus trace his commitment, across diverse subjects, to always reading with respect, nuance, and social function in mind.

David Palumbo-Liu is Professor and Director of Comparative Literature at Stanford University. His recent publications are a co-edited volume, Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture (Duke University Press, 2011) and The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age (Duke University Press, forthcoming).