Panel 2: Japanese Literature and Film in International Contexts (October 13: 8:30 a.m. - 10:20 a.m.)

Doug Slaymaker, University of Kentucky
“Two Views from Paris: Japanese Culture in 1955”

Abstract: Katō Shūichi (1919-2008) and Mori Animasa (1911-1976) were among the first Japanese to study in France, with state support, after the war. Paris infused the rhetoric of their expression and identities. Katō was prompted by the Paris experience to articulate a Japanese culture that was “zasshu”—hybrid, composite, amalgam, mongrel. In his 1955 essay, “雑種的日本文化,” he claimed that this conception of Japanese culture came to him upon seeing the coastline of Japan from the deck of the ship on which he was returning. The idea and this set-up seems to resonate with contemporary postcolonial writing—Sartre and Césaire, for example—only Katō reiterates a culture as “pure,” and, ultimately, essentialist. Mori, in his essay of the same year, “文化の根というものについて,” goes in a diametrically opposed direction, also drawing from Parisian writing and sense of place. Katō takes Paris to talk about Japan; Mori takes Paris to talk about the development of his own identity, but ends the essay on a hopeful, prophetic note, with the hope that Japan might not be so anxious about “culture” but comfortable in its own history and identity. In this paper I will focus on the ways that Paris influenced their understandings of “culture,” a charged concept, especially in these postwar years. I will also explore the ways that “Paris” is seen in the style and diction of their writing. I will conclude by plotting the very different directions that these essays take, even though both are rooted in the same region, in similar conditions.

Joanne Quimby, Wittenberg University
“Intimacy, Language, and Place: An Analysis of Cultural Identity and Longing in Naoko Ogigami’s ‘Kamome shokudō’ and ‘Toiretto’”

Abstract: Since her directorial debut in 2003 with "Yoshino’s Barber Shop" (Bābā Yoshino), contemporary Japanese female film director Naoko Ogigami (b. 1972) has been receiving critical acclaim on the international film festival circuit. This paper will consider her films "Kamome Diner" (Kamome shokudō, 2006) and "Toilet" (Toiretto, 2010), both of which were filmed and set outside of Japan. Filmed and set in Helsinki, Finland, "Kamome Diner" features an almost entirely Japanese cast and is, with the exception of a few lines of dialogue, a Japanese-language film. In contrast, "Toilet," filmed in Toronto and set somewhere on the east coast of the United States, features a primarily Canadian cast and is primarily an English-language film. The sole exception is Japan’s Masako Motai in the role of the Japanese grandmother who does not speak English. In discussing these two contemporary "Japanese" films filmed and set outside of Japan, this paper will consider Japan’s tangible cultural products overseas—such as food and anime (not to mention Japanese toilets)—as well as less tangible issues of language, identity, and place. Approaches to intimacy, nostalgia, and longing—which both films address in differing ways—will also be addressed in this paper’s analysis of the roles of place and language in forging identities and bonds across (and within) cultures.

Jason Herlands, Oberlin College
“Abe Kazushige’s Shinsemia and the Enduring Postwar”

Abstract: This paper details how Abe Kazushige’s 2001 epic novel Shinsemia constructs a shadow history of the postwar era from the perspective of a small town in Japan’s northeastern region. Much as Carol Gluck, in “The ‘End’ of the Postwar,” identifies overlapping discourses of Japan’s “postwar,” so too is Shinsemia narrated from multiple perspectives that give varying weight to the “mythistoric” postwar, the cold war legacy, and the rise of a consumerist middle class. The text begins with an excerpt from an NHK documentary about US wheat surpluses in the 1950s and, through the depiction of a fictional family-run bakery in rural Yamagata prefecture, details how local sociopolitical events related to the postwar occupation of the town fester beneath the surface only to explode fifty years later. The US military’s demand for bread inadvertently provides social mobility to a young baker, who joins with other power-hungry opportunists to tightly control the town’s docile populace. The unraveling of this control — due to advances in surveillance technologies, through changing and enduring gender roles, and due to the boredom of the town’s young men — provides the action of the novel. Though narrated in standard Japanese, the text foregrounds local myths, familial histories, the town’s topography, and the role of its regional dialect in establishing a vaguely historical authority that contrasts with the hegemonic postwar narratives enumerated by Gluck. The town’s power brokers ensure that, however geopolitics have changed since 1945, the multiple “postwars” endure at the local level.

Oliver E. Kuehne, University of Tuebingen
“Envisioning contemporary Okinawa: Yoshimoto Banana’s and Kirino Natsuo’s depictions of Japan’s last southern colony”

Abstract: The mystification and hyper-affirmation of Okinawa and its ‘other Japanese inhabitants’ in the Okinawa-boom in (mainland) Japan (2000-2009) can be interpreted as indicators of the healing-boom that also promoted the commodity of travel as one of the ways to find relaxation and, first and foremost, iyashi (healing). Apart from being an exchangeable tropical mass tourism destination (‘temporary utopia’), Okinawas hybrid culture became labeled as ‘nostalgic’, ‘gentle’ and ‘comforting’ and even transformed to a famous spot for young Japanese dropouts (‘individual heterotopia’). Taking questions of postcolonial representation and social changes in Japan as a background, I will analyze the exemplary writings of two Japanese authors who both staged their stories on the islands of Okinawa: YOSHIMOTO Banana’s short story collection "Nankurunai" (What will be, will be), published in 2004 and KIRINO Natsuo’s novel "Metabora" (Metabola) that was serialized in the Asahi newspaper between 2005 and 2006. Both writers are acclaimed contemporary female authors who are broadly known, but aim an antithetic audience. How do both authors represent Okinawa and how do they incorporate (or, mutatis mutandis, refuse) influences of the healing boom and touristic images? The analyzes of these works will be preceded by a discussion of contemporary touristic stereotypes of the Okinawa-boom to elaborate on the multitude of contemporary collective images and narratives that are generally employed when Okinawa is depicted. The theoretical framework is based on postcolonial studies (Gayatri C. SPIVAK, Homi K. BHABHA) and postmodern theories about ‘otherness’ and travelers (Julia KRISTEVA, Zygmunt BAUMAN).