

Between History and Heritage: Forests and Mountains as a Figurative Space for Revitalizing the Past in the Works of Ōe Kenzaburō

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History and heritage transmit different things to different audiences. History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose... History is for all, heritage for ourselves alone. (Lowenthal 1998: 128–29)

Focusing on the tropes of forests and mountains in a few selected works by Ōe Kenzaburō,¹ this article examines how Ōe's literature engages with the notions of history and heritage within the wider debates over national identity in post-war Japan. Ōe often problematizes our common-sensical perception of history by introducing multiple perspectives on it both diachronically and synchronically, as in his 1967 masterpiece, *Man'en gan'nen no futtobōru* (Football in 1860; translated as *The Silent Cry*).² The protagonists in the novel, two rivaling brothers, offer widely differing views of certain events that took place in their native village in Shikoku at important historical junctures, 1860, 1945, and 1960,³ all of which, on a macro level, revolve around, and have implications for our understanding of Japan's relationship with the outside world, especially with the United States. Roughly speaking, the history-oriented, sober take in David Lowenthal's vocabulary is represented by the elder brother, Mitsusaburō, whereas the younger brother, Takashi, represents the heritage-oriented, passionate approach. Through this multifaceted take on the interpretation of the past, *The Silent Cry* exposes gaps between different levels of metarepresentation in history.

Ōe's dedication to history and to his moral obligation in order to remember is well known, as critics and Ōe himself have discussed on numerous occasions (Komori 2002; Narita 1995). Ten years old at the time of the Japanese surrender in 1945, Ōe witnessed the value system he

¹ The focus is on the forests rather than on the mountains, but it is not always easy to separate the two, because the forest is often part of the mountain landscape. This is especially true when one talks of the forest as the "abode of the dead," because the spirits of the dead are believed to reside in the nearby mountain, which is most likely forested (Satō 2008, p. 12).

² Man'en is a Japanese-era name spanning March 1860 to February 1861, and Man'en gan'nen is the first year of Man'en, namely 1860.

³ Eight years before the Meiji Restoration, peasant riots were rampant in 1860; 1945 marked the Japanese defeat in WWII; and 1960 was the year in which the anti-security treaty movement reached its peak.

was taught to believe in being shattered to pieces as he heard the presumably divine emperor declare the Japanese defeat on the radio. In the aftermath of the war, he saw adults ostensibly and promptly turning democratic and pro-American, the emperor included. This trauma seems to have taught him to distrust ready-made histories, a trauma that became a creative reservoir to tap into when he later became an author.⁴ Aware of the necessarily discursive nature of history, Ōe is adamant about scrutinizing the same historical events repeatedly in the hope of shedding new light on them. As a novelist, Ōe's method is naturally that of a fictional narrative: through his literature, he tells engaging stories of the past from highly personal and subjective perspectives, creating tension between history and heritage. Before discussing Ōe's works, I develop conceptual frameworks for the key concepts, history, heritage, and forests necessary for my analysis, as well as the underlying concerns and questions addressed within.

History and Heritage

"All culture is a struggle with oblivion," writes Jan Assmann (2006: 81). We all strive to hold onto the past because it gives us a sense of continuity and belonging, connecting us with our ancestors and fellow citizens. The past, in other words, provides us with invaluable resources for our cultural identity, be it on the individual or collective level (Assmann 2006: 87). Both history and heritage address our relationship to the past and its meaning for the present. They have, however, often been polemically pitted against each other as two disparate approaches to the past, at times serving incompatible purposes. History endeavors to be objective and rational, whereas heritage, which is more heavily reliant on memory and fantasy than facts, allows itself to be subjective and emotional. History, "distant and analytical," alienates us from the past, whereas heritage revitalizes our bond with it (Gillis 1992: 92). Seen in another manner, history "fetishizes archive-based research" (Samuel 1994: 3) and remains arcane and inaccessible for lay readers, whereas personal immediacy is a hallmark of heritage (Lowenthal 1998: 122–23).

After the 1983 publication of the seminal works by Hobsbawm and Ranger as well as Benedict Anderson, *The Invention of Tradition* and *Imagined Communities*, respectively, what might be called the "invention perspective" on the past prevailed, and the criticism of heritage as an invention, or even fabrication, followed suit. A "selective kind of tradition" at best, heritage was viewed by its critics either as a "political vehicle for national culture" or a "commoditised form of de-politicised nostalgia masquerading as tradition" (Brumann and Cox 2010: 3–4).⁵

However, the conceptual focus of heritage and history seems to have shifted in the past

⁴ See John Nathan quoting Ōe from Ōe's own memoir, "A Portrait of the Postwar Generation" (Nathan 1977, pp. xiii–xiv).

⁵ R. Samuel also writes that the heritage critics have followed suit, treating nostalgia as a contemporary equivalent of what Marxists used to call "false consciousness" and existentialists "bad faith": they are at pains to show deceptions involved in retrieval projects, and the ways in which the received version of the past is sanitized to exclude disturbing elements (Samuel 1994, p. 17).

few decades. The invention perspective has influenced our understanding of history as well, and efforts have been made by various scholars to present more nuanced views of their relationship, focusing more on their similarities and synergy. Raphael Samuel states in his *Theatres of Memory* that he subscribes to the “idea of history as an organic form of knowledge, and one whose sources are promiscuous, drawing not only on real-life experience but also memory and myth, fantasy and desire” (Samuel 1994: x), concluding that history is “an argument about the past, as well as the record of it” (1994: 430).⁶

In his article, “Whose heritage? Un-settling ‘the heritage,’ Re-imagining the Post-nation,” Stuart Hall elaborates on the discursive process through which certain materials or traditions are canonized to represent a given national culture as heritage. These materials or traditions become heritage, or rather, Heritage, because they are deemed valuable in relation to the past for a select mainstream group. Arguing that this retrospective “nation-alised and tradition-alised” notion of culture lies at the heart of heritage, Hall problematizes Heritage in Britain, where it is becoming increasingly multicultural, and emphasizes the need to rewrite it by incorporating the “margins into the centre, the outside into the inside.” He endorses Raphael Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory*, already noted as a memorable example that promotes such a democratization of heritage (Hall 1999: 7).

As noted earlier, while he distinguishes heritage and history as separate lines of practice, Lowenthal also discusses their complementarities, especially regarding the role heritage plays in enlivening history, in making history more accessible to laypersons. “Dealing with distant times and events beyond their own ken, many see history as inaccessibly alien. ... Even the most striking events fade away as they recede into the distant past. For Israelis, the Holocaust is heritage; elsewhere, the most vigilant memorialists cannot keep it from fading away into history” (Lowenthal 1998: 123). Even as he warns against the chauvinism inherent in heritage, he argues that history nevertheless requires heritage to carry conviction in order to make it “alive and kicking.”

As many critics of Lowenthal have indicated, the boundary between heritage and history might be fuzzier than he makes it out to be, and his dichotomy is, to an extent, schematic. Nevertheless, the tension between these distinct impulses is useful and illuminating, because it helps us reflect on how we remember, evaluate, and address our past, and someone else’s past. In other words, this tension touches on the fundamental difficulty we all have when engaging with someone else’s past with equal enthusiasm as with our own, which is a recurrent theme in Öe’s literature.

Avishai Margalit distinguishes between morality, which “tells us how we should regulate our thin relations (strangers),” and ethics, which “tells us how we should regulate our thick relations (parents, friends and lovers).” If I borrow his vocabulary, this tension between history and heritage reminds us of the difficulty of, but the necessary reconciling of, “morality” with

⁶ Brumann and Cox defend heritage against its critics in a similar vein. Comparing it with R. Samuel’s notion of “resurrectionism,” they attempt to appreciate how a living heritage in the process of making “involves creativity, resistance, intentionality; in a word, agency” (Brumann and Cox 2010, p. 12).

“ethics.” “Because it encompasses all humanity,” he argues that “morality is long on geography and short on memory,” whereas “ethics is typically short on geography and long on memory” (Margalit 2004: 8). The memory of the Holocaust for the Jews, the Nanking massacre for the Chinese, or of Hiroshima for the Japanese is long-lasting but elsewhere it can easily fade into history. Heritage can make memory last longer by revitalizing it, but the question is if it can do so not only for a select group of “thick relations” with special interests but for “thin relations” as well. Can a certain way of evoking collective memory, a certain way of telling stories, disrupt the distinction between “us” and “them,” and create an opportunity to “thicken” all relations? Does Ōe accomplish this? These are some questions that inform the subtext of this paper.

Pondering on this tension is especially relevant when we reflect on the heated debates over national identity in postwar Japan. A major issue in the contemporary debates over Japanese national identity concerns the question of memories regarding WWII in the broader sense, how to come to terms with its legacies, which for Ōe are related to the role of the imperial institution in modern Japan.⁷ My hypothesis regarding Ōe’s literature is as follows: It attempts to revise the mainstream version of Japanese heritage by scrutinizing certain aspects of it from the margins, thereby rewriting “the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside,” as discussed by Stuart Hall. By adding a highly personal and subjective touch to history, he creates the kind of tension between heritage and history that Lowenthal speaks of, but attempts to resolve it by employing narrative mechanisms that illuminate how these realms traverse each other in a manner that influences our perception of the past. The trope of the forest takes the center stage in these endeavors.

The Forest as an Accomplice of Heritage

We now take a closer look at the forest, the third term in my mentioned conceptual framework. The trope of forests is found not only in Ōe’s literature but also in Japanese literature and popular discourse, frequently in connection with the act of remembering. The image of the forest somehow seems to evoke memories, and this is by no means a phenomenon limited to Japan. Robert Harrison, in his discussion on the role forests have played in the post-Christian cultural imagination, argues that forests have “the psychological effect of evoking memories of the past; indeed that they become figures for memory itself. They are enveloped, as it were, in the aura of lost origins” (Harrison 1992: 157).

⁷ Philip Seaton appropriately frames the discussion of Japanese war memories as “rifts,” introducing “a seismic activity” metaphor to analyze it (Seaton 2007, p. 8). He examines the conflicting conceptual frameworks and emotions within and between the progressive and conservative groupings that surface at certain historical junctures, and concludes that the only “constants within Japanese war memories over the whole of the postwar have been their contested nature.” The Japanese have not been able to “establish a dominant cultural narrative of the conflict” (2007, p. 64), which, he argues, can account for the never-ceasing interest in war-related issues in contemporary Japan.

The forest becomes a vehicle for memories deemed worthy of remembering, but, depending on who is remembering, the object of remembrance seems to vary. Miyazaki Hayao, Kawase Naomi, and Murakami Haruki, as well as advocates of the shrine forest are some recent Japanese examples that illustrate the wide-ranging discursive use of the forest in popular imagination. As one of the most quintessential Japanese landscapes that continue to evoke nostalgia, the forest in their rendition seems to become a figurative space, transmitting their respective approaches and views of the past. However, the contours of the past projected in them differ. Ōe's forest is different from, for instance, the shrine forest (*Chinju no mori*), which has gained widespread popularity in the last decade (Breen and Teeuwen 2010: 210; Rots 2013). In other words, the past remembered in the shrine forest is a ground that belongs to the familiar national heritage of Japan that Ōe's literature attempts to problematize.

Aided by environmental and ecological concerns, the notion of the shrine forest (*Chinju no mori*) has gained popularity in recent years. Writing "shrine forest" into the search field of Amazon's Japanese website yields a list of approximately fifty books currently on sale.⁸ Some are relatively populist with titles such as *Japan the Land of the Forest*, *Weeping Shrine Forest: What Moves the Mind of the Japanese*, and *A Book to Pay Homage to the Gods of Shrine Forest*, which has a nationalistic spin. A similar discursive practice of heritage is in action, even in more academically oriented texts written by members of the Shrine Forest Society (Shasō Gakkai), a nonprofit organization that was established in 2002 to promote research on, and spread the knowledge of shrine forests. Its member list includes university professors, environmental experts, and shrine priests. Ueda Masaaki, in the preface to their 2004 anthology, for example, draws attention to evidence from selective ancient sources, *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*, 712), *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720), *Fudoki* (*Ancient Records of Culture and Geography of the Provinces of Japan*, 713), and the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, 759) to demonstrate how kami were thought to reside in forests in ancient times in order to support his theory that the love of the sacred forest by the Japanese is a long-established tradition. The implication is that Shinto was a guardian angel of the forest, the national heritage, and has taken on its stewardship through vicissitudes of time, a claim that has been questioned by recent scholars (Rots 2013).

In contrast, memories evoked in the forest landscape in the literature by Ōe and other writers such as Nakagami Kenji and Tsushima Yūko belong to what might be called a counter-national heritage. These writers use forests to deconstruct the myth of Japanese origins dating back to ancient imperial times. Forests are appropriated as a figure of memory for marginal groups who have been excluded from the master narrative of Japanese history. In many of Ōe's works, some of which I examine, the forest becomes a heritage for those who have lived on the margins of mainstream Japanese society, a symbol for Ōe's anti-imperialistic protest against Japanese national heritage.

⁸ http://www.amazon.co.jp/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?__mk_ja_JP=%83J%83%5E%83J%83i&url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=%92%C1%8E%E7%82%CC%90X (accessed October 10, 2013).

This versatility in the content of what is projected in the forest is intriguing. As Harrison indicates, “enigmas and paradoxes” seem inherent in stories regarding forests (Harrison 1992: x). Forests can stand for widely disparate things, some of which ideologically conflict with another. He continues: “In the history of Western civilization forests represent an outlying realm of opacity which has allowed that civilization to estrange itself, enchant itself, terrify itself, ironize itself, in short to project into the forest’s shadows its secret and innermost anxieties” (Harrison 1992: xi). This comment is most likely relevant for the forest in the Japanese cultural imagination.

Harrison also indicates that the forest appears as a place where “the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded.” He continues that it is a place “where perceptions become promiscuous with one another, disclosing latent dimensions of time and consciousness. In the forest the inanimate may suddenly become animals, the god turns into a beast, the outlaw stands for justice” (Harrison 1992: x). In other words, the forest as an imaginary landscape offers a haven for fantastic stories, where the commonsense perceptions of things are turned upside down, where preposterous phenomena somehow become believable. The magic aura of lost origins ascribes it a sense of authenticity, and it becomes a bearer of whatever stories one chooses to project into it. In this sense, the forest makes an ideal accomplice of heritage, because it lends credibility to whatever a person believes is worthy of remembrance, namely that person’s heritage story.

Ōe Kenzaburō’s Intertextual Time Machine and the Marvels of the Forest

As noted, my discussion of heritage and history may evoke the image of the two brothers in *The Silent Cry*, Takashi and Mitsusaburō, as their respective symbols. In relation to the turbulent eras circa 1860 and 1945, Takashi, the younger brother, is concerned with the heritage aspect of their family history in their native forest village, whereas Mitsusaburō, the older brother, is interested in determining exactly what happened, regardless of how unflattering the findings may be for the family. Together, they embark on a discursive journey into the past, attempting to ascertain if such a thing as “the truth” actually exists.

This paper, however, focuses on Ōe’s less well-known novel, *Nihyaku nen no kodomo* (*Children of Two Hundred Years*, 2006; shortened as *Children*), because it gives an opportunity to discuss Ōe’s treatment of history in many of his other novels. *Children* is an imaginative metafiction referencing Ōe’s earlier stories from the forest village of Shikoku, enabling readers to revisit them.⁹ The narrative is set in 1984, and three children of a Japanese writer who resembles Ōe spend the summer holidays in their father’s native village in Shikoku. The Ōe youngsters test the local belief/legend that the thousand-year-old oak tree in the valley allows children to travel

⁹ His earlier works referred to in *Children* are as follows: *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (*Memushiri ko’uchi*, 1958; shortened as *Nip the Buds*), and *M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest* (*M/T to mori no fushigi no monogatari*, 1986; shortened as *M/T*), which is a rewrite in a more accessible language of his earlier *The Game of Contemporaneity* (*Dōjidai gēmu*, 1979; shortened as *Contemporaneity*).

to “the other world” if they fall sleep in its hollow. This magical tree in the middle of the forest brings them to several otherworldly destinations, the most memorable of which are Ōe’s fictional worlds of the 1860s, the years of upheaval immediately before the Meiji Restoration, and the last year of WWII (Ōe 1958, 2007 [1986], respectively). Events from the 1860s and 1945, both watershed years in Japanese history, are his favorite themes that he has fictionalized from several perspectives. The oak tree in the village functions as an intertextual time machine evoking the memories of Ōe’s earlier works for the reader. The first time travel adventure brings the Ōe youngsters face to face with Meisuke, a young, legendary hero of the village who makes repeated appearances in his *M/T to mori no fushigi no monogatari* (*M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest*, 1986; shortened as *M/T*) as well as *Dōjidai gēmu* (*The Game of Contemporaneity*, 1979; shortened as *Contemporaneity*).¹⁰ When reading the Ōe children’s lively conversation with Meisuke, the reader’s imagination travels to the foundation narrative of their described native forest village, as told by Ōe’s grandmother.

In *M/T*, the narrator, who resembles Ōe, retells the oral traditions of the village, as conveyed to him by his grandmother. He begins the narrative by recalling an episode at his national school during the war, which sets the anti-imperial tone of the entire story. Told to draw the world map by his teacher in class, the narrator as a child, he recalls, drew a picture of his native forest village with Oshikome and Meisuke—the matriarch and trickster pair, *M/T*, watching over them, instead of a map of Greater East Asia with the emperor and empress, which is what his teacher had expected him to draw. Ōe was hit in the face for this defiant act. The anti-imperialist implication becomes even more obvious if one takes an intertextual excursion into *Contemporaneity*, on which *M/T* is based. In *Contemporaneity*, the narrator at the outset refers to *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*, where Izanagi and Izanami banish their deformed firstborn babies and islands, Hiruko and Awaji, before creating Japan proper, and declares his allegiance with the marginal Awaji, and his own native village bears the same name (Ōe 1994 [1979]: 55). As Michiko Wilson and Yasuko Claremont have noted, Ōe’s anti-imperial intention in the novel may also be gleaned from his comments regarding Yanagita Kunio immediately before its publication. Ōe approvingly cites Yanagita’s sympathetic interpretation of the Kunitsukami, the local gods of the earth, who have been chased away by the gods of Heaven, the Amatsukami, who later became gods of the Imperial Family. In Ōe’s words, the “gods of disobedient nation [*matsurowanu Kunitsukami*] went deep inside the forest and became demons.” He adds, “I attempted to write not a history that revolves around the Emperor, but a history that belongs to those who became demons” (Claremont 2009: 80; Wilson 1986: 105).¹¹

¹⁰ *The Game of Contemporaneity* was not well received by the ordinary reader because of its complex and difficult narrative structure and style. Ōe has openly regretted having lost readers with it, and *M/T* is considered his attempt to reach out to his readers again by writing in a more reader-friendly, accessible style (Ōe quoted in Claremont 2009, p. 81).

¹¹ Commenting on the group of people known as *yamabito* (people of the mountains) with distinct physical features, Yanagita suggests that they are descendants of the original inhabitants, the Kunitsukami, who were chased away into the forests and mountains by the Amatsukami, the ancestors of the imperial family (Yanagita 1978, pp. 172–86).

However, Yanagita's position regarding imperialist ideology contains ambivalent elements.¹² Mark Teeuwen and John Breen argue that Yanagita, even as he criticizes "top-down imperial Shinto," is not so different from the mainstream Shintoists in his belief in "the original unity of folk ritual and imperial ritual." Both express "the same concerns with fertility, life, and growth that can ultimately be traced back to the ancient Yayoi age when the arrival of rice cultivation led the foundation for Japan's culture." The only aspect that distinguishes Yanagita from the official Shinto line is his insistence that "the local customs of the people constituted the very core of [the] Japanese cultural essence," rather than the official imperial rituals of the court (Breen and Teeuwen 2010: 16). Yanagita looks "to the periphery where he assumed that ancient practices and mentalities had remained untouched by modernity" (Breen and Teeuwen 2010: 15), namely rural Japan. In other words, there is room for ambivalence in Yanagita's position regarding imperial ideology, and Ōe takes advantage of it to appropriate his folklore in his anti-establishment narrative.

The Foundation Narratives in *M/T* and *Contemporaneity*

The confrontational emphasis between the center and peripheries is toned down, and the celebratory resonance of the peripheries is more dominant in *M/T*, but the main plot of the foundation myth in *M/T* is the same as in *Contemporaneity*. The village is founded by a group of dissident samurais "in exile" led by the first legendary hero and trickster, "the one who destroys." In a river upstream deep in the forest, they use dynamite to remove a huge rock that is preventing the basin area from flourishing. After the blast, fifty days of rain follow, reinvigorating the forest and enabling them to live off the rich land. After living comfortably for over 100 years, "the one who destroys" orders the founders of the village to build "the path of the dead" at the edge of the forest. When it is finally finished, the villagers witness the founders marching along the "path of the dead" in the moonlight "until they floated in the air, slowly climbing upward and disappearing into the foggy sky" (Ōe 2007 [1986]: 106).¹³ The villagers mourn their loss, but know that "the one who destroys" will continue to give them advice at times of crisis.

Meisuke belongs to the second generation of legendary heroes and tricksters, and plays an important role in 1864—he successfully negotiates a truce between the peasants from a nearby village and the shogunate's armed forces. With the peasants' poverty not alleviated, however,

¹² Mori Kōichi argues that his study led him "only to the ancestor worship rooted in the household and to the tutelary deity worship rooted in the community" and "[n]othing that would justify the ideology of the emperor as head of a so-called 'family-state' came out of his research." He concludes that his study was "in fact critical, therefore, of the modern Japanese state insofar as it relied on such an ideology and sought to unite people under an emperor-centered State Shinto by exploiting the religious traditions of ordinary people" (Mori 1980, p. 106).

¹³ All translations from Ōe's texts in this essay are my own.

Meisuke helps them rise against the shogunate a few years later. The uprising is a partial success, but he is left in a dungeon to die. His spirit lives on in the newborn Dōji (a child deity), who becomes the hero trickster in the next historical incidence of importance in the village, “a rebellion against conscription,” under the new Meiji government. Dōji stays in contact with Meisuke by “losing consciousness to let his spirit travel to the nearby forest and receive Meisuke’s instruction” (Ōe 2007 [1986]: 256).

There is a clear influence of Yanagita Kunio’s ancestral spirit here, which is most probably among his best-known contributions. The linkage between the spirits of the dead and forests and mountains as the locus of kami has existed as a strong undercurrent in Japanese popular belief through the vicissitudes of time. It gained, however, widespread popularity in the early twentieth century only after being rearticulated by Yanagita (Satō 2008: 16). In his monograph, *Senzo no hanashi* (*About Our Ancestors*, 1945), Yanagita elaborates on several traits characterizing the Japanese common man’s religiosity. One of the most important is the sensibility that the souls of the dead remain in proximity to their village communities and do not travel far (e.g., to the Pure Land), or return to nothingness. Most typically they remain in the mountain nearby, watch over their descendants, and maintain contact by appearing in appropriate ceremonial occasions, such as the *bon* and *matsuri* festivals. However, their activities are not restricted to these occasions. The spirits of the dead are thought to travel freely to the world of the living, and communicate with them if they are “invited.” With the passing of time, the individual spirits of the dead become assimilated into the common ancestral spirit of the community, and eventually join the kami of the mountain (Satō 2008: 12). As Satō indicates, Yanagita’s thoughts were so influential that much of what we commonly believe to be the “uniquely Japanese” view of death and soul is indebted to his modern recapitulation of certain aspects of the “nativist scholarship” founded by Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane (Satō 2008: 16).

The spirits of “the one who destroys” and Meisuke communicate with the villagers when they believe they are called upon. With the passing of time, the individual spirits are assimilated into something akin to the “common ancestral spirit of the community,” and are a part of what Ōe’s mother refers to as “the marvels of the forest,” joining the kami in the nearby mountain. The mother succinctly summarizes their common religious belief as follows:

The marvels of the forest lie at the source of our life, as we are born, grow up, live and die. Those who are born in the village become spirits when they die, and fly in a circle over the village, before finally settling down at the root of a given tree up in the forest. They however fly down to the village to be reborn as human again when their time comes, and the pattern of life and death repeats itself. Our individual lives, in other words, were originally one with the marvels of the forest, but we became separated when we joined the humans in the village. It is therefore to these marvels of the forest where we were to begin with, that we feel longing and nostalgia for. (Ōe 2007 [1986]: 388–89)

Over 100 years after the village is established, the fields become less fertile, the narrative continues, and social inequality within the community becomes increasingly visible. People begin to feel the need for reform. The reform movement led by Oshikome, the legendary heroine and matriarch, takes the form of de-privatization of the land and its intensive collective cultivation. Oshikome goes so far as to burn all the houses in the village in order to destroy the social hierarchy that has taken root in it. The narrator interprets the whole reform movement as a form of *matsuri* festival, which functions as an occasion to create order out of disorder by redrawing boundaries.

The entertaining and playful aspect of the festival is symbolized by Oshikome and the youngsters “acting up and fooling around” on top of the mountain (Ōe 1994 [1979]: 183). Oshikome climbs the mountain in the middle of the rice field and lies down, shedding her clothes. By then she becomes a giant, and Oshikome’s “plump and corpulent white body in the moonlight...looked like a small white hill.” Naked youngsters with their red loincloth climb Oshikome’s body to play.

Through the rich imagery of the forest and mountain, beyond which is “the other side,” the narrative in *M/T* is an engaging portrait of the human community’s interactions with the dead spirits of their ancestors. The legendary heroes and tricksters and heroines and matriarchs mediate between the two realms, “this side” and “the other side,” occasionally with playful trickery, other times through coercion, ensuring that the villagers learn to live within their means. Excess is punished, but the tricksters provide the villagers with opportunities “to fool around” on appropriate occasions in order to liberate their otherwise suppressed energies, in a manner reminiscent of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

Secrets from the Past in *Children*

Let us return to the narrative in *Children*, and focus on other villagers gossiping about the more recent past. A villager, Shigeko, shares with others her experience in the hollow of the oak tree. Her mother tells Shigeko and her sister about a group of young boys from the reformatory in Tokyo who were evacuated in the nearby village toward the end of the war, an incidence described in Ōe’s novel, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*. When some villagers grew ill, rumors spread that these boys had brought typhus, and people deserted the village in a panic, building a barricade outside to ensure they could not escape. The boys tried to survive by stealing food from deserted farmhouses, but one of them drowned in the river. This occurrence, however, is not mentioned in the official history of the municipality after the war. Wanting to ascertain what had actually happened, Shigeko and her sister time travel to 1945 in the oak tree, and manage to catch a glimpse of the boys sauntering in the playground of the school where they were confined.

Over the course of their conversation, other small secrets are revealed: the villagers joining forces to hunt down deserters of the imperial army, abandoning a sick village girl thought to be

infected with typhus in a farmhouse, and the firing of a male teacher who camped outside the tree hollow while the two sisters slept inside, based on a groundless account of improper conduct. Thanks to the magic of the thousand-year-old oak tree, their collective memories, including unflattering details, are made “alive and kicking.” The Ōe children can relive the experience as if they had been there, and learn lessons from their forefathers’ history.

In summary, the lessons they learn concern the heritages for those at the periphery of mainstream society, which are not recorded in historical archives. They represent the voices of the marginalized: those of the descendants of Yanagita Kunio’s gods of the earth, of the matriarch and trickster pair of the mythical forest village, of the founding dissident samurais opposing the shogunate, of oppressed peasants, of rebels against conscription, of deserting soldiers of the emperor’s army, of naughty children from the reformatory, and of the ousted teacher who helps children fulfill their other-worldly dream. Together with the matriarch and trickster pair, M/T, the Ōe children, and the reader are invited to salvage the memories of small histories by excavating the tales of these forgotten people. *Children* revives heritages that are in a complex manner intertwined with the official national Heritage, but have nevertheless been repressed into the recesses of the cultural unconscious, thereby rewriting “the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside,” in Stuart Hall’s words.

Mediating between “Thick Relations” and “Thin Relations”

Numerous heritages concern the Japanese national identity, even within the mainstream: the Yayoi rice culture and the imperial tradition established within, the shrine forest, the “reverence for the forest” in the long-neglected Jōmon culture, and Yanagita Kunio’s common people including “mountain people.” Taking advantage of cracks and interstices in the mainstream heritages, Ōe rewrites the “margins into the centre, the outside into the inside.” By converting hierarchies within them, he relativizes them, and succeeds in deconstructing a certain well-established national cultural imaginary that, in turn, functions as an indirect critique of the “wrong” modern priorities that led Japan into the disastrous war. In the process of this revision, the image of the forest works effectively in this endeavor to enliven history. The forest, with its potent and vibrant image that still attracts popular attention in Japan, effectively functions as a figurative and essentialized space, revitalizing and refiguring their visions of the past.

The spirited forest is undoubtedly a discursively created heritage, an “invented tradition.” However, if it nevertheless helps transform thin relations into thicker ones, even only for a while, we cannot afford to dismiss it as false in a world otherwise riddled with tension and conflicts. This power to move others, to invite empathy, however, is both an advantage and a disadvantage. It can make thick relations even thicker, fostering parochial chauvinism among them, further increasing the distance with strangers. The only way to avoid this pitfall is to realize that the potency of an image that a heritage carries and its versatility are actually closely related. It is

precisely because it is powerful that it can stand for many things. The forest as heritage generates a sense of engagement, sometimes passion, which allows a leap of logic that binds it to diverse, logically unrelated values such as a patriotic love for Japan, the voices of the marginalized, of the traumatized and the war dead, or even global environmentalism. We must also be aware that this malleability means, in turn, that it is prone to revision and reinterpretation. To borrow Lowenthal's words again, "the past is ever being remade and retold, and heritage is not fixed but changes in response to our own needs" (Lowenthal 1998: 250). Heritage, in other words, always intervenes in history, creatively and powerfully.

It is therefore imperative to examine "how we variously affect these linked realms" of history and heritage, so that we can "learn to relish, rather than resent, our own interventions and even to tolerate those of others." As long as we stay alert against the perils of "embrac[ing] heritage *as history*," and "disguising authority as authenticity," we can learn to live with both heritage and history, reaping the fruit of their collaboration (Lowenthal 1998: 250).

In conclusion, I quote Ōe's warning regarding this linked realm between heritage and history. The narrator in *M/T*, the Ōe-like figure, qualifies his grandmother's foundation narrative as follows:

"It is a tale from the long time past, so you have to listen to it as if it all happened, even if it didn't. Got it?" My grandmother always began her tale with this warning, to which I invariably replied, "Yeah." I had a vague, indescribable fear that I might be contributing to fabricating the past by believing it all happened as I was told. ... Once saying "Yeah," to my grandmother, however, the words that came out of her mouth had a power to penetrate into my heart in such a way as to make me believe everything in them, even though the content of the tales were at times quite preposterous. (My translation; Ōe 2007 [1986]: 32–34)

The grandmother's tale regarding the marvels of the forest has the power to engage the reader and comes across as credible, even for the reader whose geography is distant from Ōe's native village in Shikoku. The reader is invited to join the grandmother (*M/T*) and Ōe's children (*Children*) in their discursive journey into the past, excavating both historical events and fictional ones, and in the process, learn to appreciate the heritage of their native village, as if it was their own.

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