



On Inheriting the Fields of International and Intercultural Communication: A Personal Reflection*

Guest post by Yoshitaka Miike

The International and Intercultural Communication Division (IICD) of the National Communication Association (NCA) was founded as a commission in 1971 and later formed as a division in 1984. I am thus the 42nd incoming chair of this flourishing division. When I think about the history of the IICD and its critical role in advocating diversity and advancing internationalization within the NCA, I feel the heavy weight of the gavel that Dr. S. Lily Mendoza at Oakland University passed to me in Washington, D.C. With an eye on the 100th Anniversary of the NCA next year, I would like to offer a personal year-end reflection on how we may inherit the fields of international and intercultural communication. More specifically, I wish to suggest that we (1) “create a community of a larger memory” of our fields (to borrow Dr. Ronald Takaki’s [1998] words), (2) clarify our theoretical ideas and practical issues without sacrificing their complexities, and (3) generate knowledge that bridges differences especially from non-U.S. and non-elite perspectives.

I. Create a Community of a Larger Memory

When I was reading Dr. Alberto González’s (2011) inspiring essay, “Listening to Our Voices: Latino/os and the Communities They Speak,” on the history of the NCA’s La Raza Caucus and Latino/a Communication Studies Division, I was reminded once again that it is imperative for us to “create a community of a larger memory” of our fields so that we know on what ground we can build and in what direction we may proceed. It is also time, and past time, to invite communal transformations through connected memories rather than isolated struggles through divided memories. Can we remember (in the literal sense of the word) and imagine ourselves within a larger memory of common and collective struggles? Who conducted the earliest studies of communication theory from Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish perspectives? Who paved the way for critical inquiries into English-language imperialism in international communication? Who first brought aging and intergenerational interactions into scholarly attention as an essential focus of intercultural communication research? Who initiated queering communication within and across cultures and exploring “thick intersectionalities”? Who made

ground-breaking endeavors to theorize the cultural communication of people with disabilities? We ought to know these pioneers and pioneering attempts not only in the United States but also in other parts of the world. As an Asiacentrist, for instance, I want to honor the legacies of Dr. Tulsi B. Saral (1928-2010) from India and Dr. Majid Tehranian (1937-2012) from Iran who passed away in recent years. It is important for us to record that Dr. Mendoza is the second Filipina NCA IICD Chair after Dr. Nobleza C. Asuncion-Landé (1932-2010).

2. Clarify Ideas and Issues without Sacrificing Complexities

I vividly remember that Dr. Everett M. Rogers and I had a huge disagreement over how to define a concept when I was a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico. He believed that a concept should be defined as “the degree to which. . .” so that it can be operationalized and measurable in postpositivist research while I argued that such a definition often deprives non-Western indigenous concepts of their linguistic and cultural richness and implications. He still insisted on the necessity of crisply clear definitions. “Otherwise,” he remarked, “we would not know exactly what we are talking about.” I would probably defend my position even today, but the more my work is read, the more I see what Dr. Rogers was trying to teach me. Recently, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2012) captured this complexity/simplicity challenge by highlighting the “riches of poor theory,” which implies the barest yet creative and doing the most with the least: “Poor theory may simply remind us that density of words is not the same thing as complexity of thought; that such density, sometimes, can obscure clarity of thought. I like Taoism because the thought carried in the deceptively simple writing is anything but simple or static. I would like to think of poor theory as the Taoism of theory” (p. 3). There is actually an old Chinese saying: “Be deep in going in; be simple in coming out” (深入浅出). As competing and conflicting theories of culture and communication continue to evolve in our fields, it behooves us to make conscious and concerted efforts to clarify our theoretical ideas and practical issues without sacrificing their complexities. Such clarity may be vital for the future of our fields given that we need interdisciplinary and integrated approaches. It will also enable us to remain engaged in, and stay relevant to, the “real world” outside the academia.

3. Generate Knowledge that Bridges Differences

Dr. Molefi Kete Asante and I wrote a dialogue piece last year (see Asante & Miike, 2013). This Afrocentric-Asiacentric dialogue afforded me another opportunity to ruminate on what kind of knowledge is available in our fields. As a reconstructionist rather than a deconstructionist, I am increasingly concerned with the intercultural field’s tendency to normalize and generalize the experiences of transnational elite individuals who are residing in the metropolitan cities of the United States. I am also uneasy with the field’s relative lack of attention to the realities of geopolitics and international relations and to the sobering aspects of everyday life, other than popular culture, in many parts of the world. Here interculturalists can learn from the fields of international and development communication. We should not forget the fact that voluntary and frequent overseas travel is still a luxury of the privileged few in the world. Cosmopolitanism itself is indeed a culture of this ruling “global” class. Are we generating knowledge that bridges differences, say, for those “world citizens” who have lived their entire lives in one country or even for those U.S. Americans

who have had only virtual contact with non-U.S. cultures? As I teach culture and communication courses to “local” students from rural Hawai‘i, students from American Samoa and Pacific Islands, and international students from Asia, Europe, and Latin America as well as U.S. students from “the mainland” at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, I am confronted with such a question. To what extent do we keep in mind non-U.S. and non-elite perspectives in producing cross-cultural and intercultural knowledge? How much do we know, for example, about the issue of Whiteness and “curry bashing” in Australia, the Kaupapa Maori movement in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the emerging vision of “the United States of Africa”?

These are my tentative, and again personal, thoughts on the fields of international and intercultural communication as the year of 2013 is coming to an end. The 2014 theme of the NCA 100th annual meeting in Chicago is “The Presence of Our Past(s),” which is exactly about inheriting the discipline of communication. Our excellent team has already been working hard toward this special convention next year. Dr. Amy N. Heuman at Texas Tech University is our unit planner. Dr. Robert Shuter at Marquette University and Arizona State University will coordinate our division’s first Honors Doctoral Seminar sponsored by Sage Publications. Dr. Jennifer Willis-Rivera at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls and Dr. Ahmet Atay at the College of Wooster diligently keep us on track and alert us to professional goings-on in our fields. And Dr. Mendoza will continue to advise us as Immediate Past Chair. So please submit your work to the IICD and help us recruit your colleagues and students to support our division. Let us make the IICD the best and largest division of the NCA together! I wish you a restful and refreshing holiday season.

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