
Tawada Yōko and Translation as Method: Deconstruction and the Question of “Post-Race”

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Tawada Yōko's work has generated a growing body of critical discourse, with which Tawada herself has maintained a dialogic relationship. In her answers to one such dialogue convened here at Ritsumeikan in 2005, Tawada responded to questions posed by the late Nishikawa Nagao, Nakagawa Shigemi, Hirata Yumi, and others, concerning the role of “destruction” in her writing.¹⁾ In a similar dialogic exchange published shortly after the publication of Tawada's 2008 novel, *Borudō no gikei*, Sakaki Atsushi, noting “the priority given to word play” in Tawada's oeuvre, associates word play with another kind of destruction in Tawada's work, destruction of the boundary between national languages, but also between words and meaning. In Tawada's works, Sakaki writes, “words from different languages appear together, separated from their meaning (p. 71).”²⁾ In an essay on Tawada and migrant literature, Marjorie Perloff similarly demonstrates how Tawada creates new poetic effects by breaking words apart.³⁾ In addition, Tawada's practice of putting words from different languages together, an aspect of translation, has also been linked to the Surrealist practice of producing a new discovery, the practice of “trouvaille.” In his analysis of such juxtapositions in the writing of Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes proposed that such literature, producing the effects of *trouvaille*, should be considered, “an open literature which is situated beyond any decipherment—and which only a formal criticism can, at a great distance, accompany.”⁴⁾

Today, I would like to “accompany” Tawada's literature, even if at a great distance, by considering translation as a formal element in her writing, that is, a compositional element or compositional practice, rather than a theme. As Walter Benjamin insisted long ago in writing about translation, there is no transparent message that passes from one language to another

without transformation. Insofar as words, and also texts, can be reproduced and repeated as sounds or writing, they are mobile. They are not owned by speakers or authors, but move through innumerable contexts where they take on different meanings. In this sense, the relation between text and context cannot be guaranteed, but is often “fixed” arbitrarily by political institutions, as many critics have discussed. However, when the text-context relationship is for this reason assumed in advance, it is also assumed that the “text does not, or cannot, pose any difficult questions,” as Thomas Lamarre argued when in 2008, he proposed that *anime* was not simply another form of film. A text is neither a *mimesis* nor a mirror linked to its context through similitude. We cannot look simply at a text's “message”—the *themes* of its meaning or story—without regard for the materiality of its language and writing. For many years, analyses of *anime* considered only the meanings of their stories, but such analyses, Lamarre complained, “demonstrated a general lack of interest in *anime*, as if it were just another text.”⁵⁾

While analysis of translation, not as a theme, but as a form in Tawada Yōko's writing might seem confined to aesthetic considerations, I will consider today how it might enable us to read Tawada even more richly, to open new perspectives on the politicality of her texts, and how they contribute to what I might call intellectual history. Here we might note that, while word-play receives great attention in critical discourse on Tawada, critics are divided on its significance. Some (like Marjorie Perloff) attribute the defamiliarizing effect of Tawada's style to the fact that the author is a migrant, or Japanese. Tawada's writing indeed might seem to prompt such a reading, through its many references to Japan, Japanese language and Japanese culture. Others, like John Kim, argue that such readings

fall for a lure. They fail to see that the text is presented as a staging, or an ironic performance of the figure of the ethnic other *as it appears in the dominant discourse*. Kim calls this performance “ethnic irony.” The reader’s gullibility in the face of stereotypes of the ethnic other is thus exposed.⁶⁾ How to *read* ethnic difference, or racial difference, in this sense emerges as a significant question for critics of Tawada’s work. But does this mean that Tawada’s writing aims to indicate a “correct” referent for the ethnic or racial sign? If translation, in her writing, constantly destabilizes the relationship between sign and referent, text and context, how could this be the case? Kim, rather, follows Leslie Adelson’s argument that Tawada’s text, instead, seeks to leave the reader with a riddle, the “riddle of referentiality.”⁷⁾

In briefly presenting my argument about translation, the riddle of referentiality, and ethnicity and race in Tawada’s writing, let me bring Tawada’s writing together with some recent work on translation and critical race theory. First, the scholar Sandro Mezzadra has written extensively on the role of translation in contemporary capitalism, with its unprecedented circulation of commodities, images, signs, and bodies on a global scale. “One of the most important tasks that confronts contemporary capitalism,” he states, is to incorporate “radically heterogeneous geographical, political, legal, social, and cultural scales into the global dimension of current accumulation circuits.” For Mezzadra, this can be seen as a process of “translation” by capital “when confronted with a plurality of other languages that have to be reduced to its code.”⁸⁾ In this regard, I would like to maintain that as an “open literature” Tawada’s texts are precisely situated “beyond decipherment,” to repeat Barthes’ words. That is, they cannot be translated according to codes.

Second, I would like to link Tawada’s writing to work on critical race theory by several scholars who have problematized the reading of race in the current era of global circulation and dislocation of images and signs. An early observation was made by feminist scholar Robin Wiegman, who has analyzed the 1997 film *Forrest Gump* for its portrayal of a new kind of “white liberal masculinity” which is completely severed,

through forgetfulness, from the history of white supremacy. Just as the film locates white supremacy in the past, an object of oblivion, it associates Forrest Gump with the Nike logo, a symbol of transnational commodity circulation, while erasing the exploitative conditions under which these commodities are made. That is, Gump, who is mobility impaired, is given a fantastic mobility through his Nike running shoes.⁹⁾ The prominence given the Nike logo in the film alludes to the receding status of the nation state vis a vis global corporate capital, as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have also observed in their book *Border As Method*.¹⁰⁾ With his Nike shoes, Gump benefits from the wealth accumulated under global capitalism, without being assigned responsibility for its exploitation or violence.

Eva Cherniavsky and Denise Ferreira da Silva have, like Wiegman, pin-pointed the late 20th and early 20th century era of global capital as a time when both transnational commodity circulation and the emergence of movements to deconstruct essentialism in literature and theory have overlapped. Given the fluidity of commodity and cultural exchange of our time, today scholars are likely to assume they have deconstructed racial essentialisms. But, according to Cherniavsky and da Silva, this assumption is based on a mistaken idea that it is *bodily difference*—the practice of reading visible bodily difference as a sign of race—that has been the basis for racial discrimination.¹¹⁾ However, recalling Hortense Spillers’ memorable observation that in the slave ship, the slave was considered *flesh* (measured in pounds and cubic feet) rather than a “whole” or unitary *body*, Cherniavsky points out that what is taken to be the *organic form* of the body itself may be constructed according to different logics of *form*. In abolitionist discourse, the state of slavery, and its violence, was defined as a state of being deprived, not so much of a body but a *soul*, therefore a state of not being “whole.” The abolitionists’ definition of bodily wholeness constructed and relied on the opposition, *not* based on visible skin or skin “color,” but on the body’s possession or lack of an “invisible” quality, interiority.

Similarly, Denise Ferreira da Silva has argued that despite the assumption of scholars like Paul Gilroy that

racial essences have been deconstructed, a notion of race as bodily difference still haunts projects like *The Black Atlantic*. Disregarding the fact that in modernity, the bodies of the “others of Europe” have *already* been inscribed as lacking interiority and the capacity for self-determination, scholars like Gilroy take “universality” as an ideal in the struggle for emancipation. That is, they mistakenly see emancipation as becoming “speaking subjects,” possessors of transparent, self-sufficient interiority. But, for da Silva, the concept of such an enlightened, modern interiority has already been premised from the start on a distinction between the West and its others, who are defined, precisely, as those who lack interiority and the capacity for self-determination. They are, as she strikingly articulates it, “nobodies.” Thus, for da Silva, like Cherniavsky, contemporary practices of racism are based, not so much on a supposedly visible bodily difference, as on the deployment of something not so easy to see: different assumptions, different logics of bodily wholeness. We need to learn to “see” differently.

I would like to suggest that Tawada Yōko’s *Borudō no gikei* uses translation, as both form and practice, to question the visibility of racial and ethnic difference. As Walter Benjamin understood, words and texts have mobility. This is because they can be repeated and read in different times and places. In each new context a different reading will be produced. Repetition and difference are therefore essential to Benjamin’s and Derrida’s theories of translation. Moreover, as Naoki Sakai has discussed, when the translator of a text uses the first person pronoun, the “I” can be repeated, but it will never refer to the translator. The translator is a “subject in transit.”¹²⁾ In the novella mentioned above, Tawada experiments with what the scholar Saitō Yumiko calls “double translation.”¹³⁾ She first published the German language novella, *Schwager in Bordeaux* in Hamburg in 2008. She published the Japanese language *Borudō no gikei* in 2009. Which is the original, which the translation?

In her writing practice, and in the formal structure of the two novellas, Tawada creates undecidable ambiguity between the role of author and translator, mother tongue or “native language” and foreign

language.

As we have seen, the process of translation in Tawada Yōko’s literature produces destruction of words, and deconstruction of the relation between words and meanings. Rather than showing that a transparent message can be smoothly translated, the text highlights moments of mistranslation and untranslatability. If, as Mezzadra holds, global capital works to “reduce a plurality of languages to its own code,” Tawada’s offers the reader a writing that cannot be decoded, a “literature beyond decipherment.”

The text *Borudō no gikei* presents many examples of spoken and written language that cannot be easily decoded. Yūna keeps a small red notebook that is like a diary, but, she says, of her notebook, “I try to record each event that happens. But since so many things are going on at the same time, rather than using sentences, I just jot down one character for every event.”¹⁴⁾ Her coworker tells her, ““It occurred to me your characters look like bar codes. The other day I was buying a train ticket online for the first time...you know how there’s a kind of symbol, a black box on the print-out? I think of them as being just like your characters. We can’t figure out what they mean, but when a conductor feeds them into a machine, the riddle of the code gets untangled.”¹⁵⁾ But when Yūna goes to the Hamburg train station to purchase her ticket for Bordeaux, the clerk and his computer produce the wrong result. This is because writing, sound, and meaning do not always agree. The station attendant “had entered the word ‘bordo’ into the computer and told her it reported ‘search results: zero.’ When he asked politely how to spell “*Bordeaux*” she leaned over the counter and, as if sharing a secret from the depths of her heart, whispered “*be o eru de e a u ikusu.*”¹⁶⁾ (Of course, in the German *Schwager in Bordeaux* the pronunciation of the alphabetic spelling is different: “bee oo err de ee aa uu iks.”) During her travels, Yūna often encounters machines that find code untranslatable. For example, she experiences difficulty entering a public swimming pool in Bordeaux. “Entry to the pool required inserting your ticket into a ticket machine, but Yūna was not sure how to get this one to read hers. Machines like this were not always manufactured for export, and

many were stalwart guardians of local modes of expression.”¹⁷⁾

The characters in *Borudō no gikei* often perform translation along borders, particularly the routes of transnational circulation of commodities. Yūna, the protagonist, is an international student living in Hamburg, who also works part-time in a shipping company. Its corporate headquarters is situated literally *au bord de l'eau*, facing the bank of the Elbe River in the port of Hamburg. From her desk, Yūna can see container ships from around the world glide down the river. The ships carry commodities, but also words written in foreign languages on their hulls.

In the past, Yūna would often see container ships going through the harbor with Chinese characters written in brush strokes on their steel flanks. How big were the brushes used by the calligraphers who wrote these gigantic characters, she wondered. Were they 5 meters long, or even longer? At some point, the number of Korean names on ships in the harbor increased. Samsung. Hyundai. Although these were written in the letters of the alphabet rather than in Chinese characters or *hangul* script, Yūna's brain automatically converted them back to characters that she would then translate into German, not as names but as words with meanings. “Look, that's the *Gegenwart* (現代) going by,” she would say.

Yūna's office mate, who cannot see the invisible characters, complains. “Why don't you stop talking about things I don't see?” To which Yūna responds, “But how can I see what someone else's eyes see?”¹⁸⁾

In this scene Yūna translates words circulated around the world by the vessels of global capital. Also along the river, corporate boundaries protrude into public space, an aspect of what Mezzadra and Neilsen call a contemporary process of primitive accumulation ongoing under transnational capital. We are told that Yūna's company has recently moved to a new office building, and “the grey concrete walls of the building extended so far out they intercepted the paths of

people strolling beside the Elbe River.” The motto “Flexibility and Mobility” hangs over the building's façade. Yūna's section chief, proud of the high aesthetic quality of the new building, tells the employees “The rising economies are tearing down their historic buildings at a barbaric rate. That's why they're becoming wealthier than we are. But we have beauty.”¹⁹⁾

Cherniavsky has written, “We now assume we have delegitimated the discourse of racial essences. However these perennially reappear as nativisms, ethno-nationalisms. And state policies of containment or removal crafted for management of the unassimilable—and invariably racialized populations.”²⁰⁾ Along the boundary of the Elbe, Yūna knows of an abandoned area where unassimilable subjects make evanescent appearances. “From time to time, a strange-looking human being would appear here and then vanish into the river. One was an emaciated-looking man sucking ravenously on the shortest-looking of cigarette stubs. That stub must still have had something left to smoke. The man was dressed in an expensive suit, but had bare feet. “ These figures are deprived of speech: “Another was a woman in a miniskirt and disagreeably high heels. Her thighs were smeared with blood. The woman's hands were completely empty; she was not even carrying a purse. She was using sign language to communicate with a small boat that had been forgotten in the river.”²¹⁾ The expanding boundaries of corporate capital can dislocate, remove, and silence human beings with a hidden violence.

Why do such processes of containment and removal that continue under global capital largely target racialized subjects? Does racism continue to re-appear after racial “essences” have been “deconstructed?” As I have said above, for Cherniavsky, the problem is that even anti-racist analysis continues to reproduce the notion of racial difference as based on bodily difference, and thus it re-inscribes the generalized norms for assimilation, and for spatial policies of containment or removal. Or, as da Silva would say, such anti-racist analysis mistakes “blackness and whiteness as the *raw material*” and not “the *products* of strategies of power.”²²⁾ Cherniavsky instead

insists that our ways of perceiving/understanding the very form (wholeness or lack of wholeness) of the body are always shaped dialectically, “in relation to alterity” (as in the case of the opposition between the enslaved and free body). Our perceptions of the body as an organic form can change, and because of this, we cannot assume any body, in and of itself, is a “self-contained” body, a body that “belongs” to an owner. Our ways of seeing the body’s forms are unstable, and can change over time. Perhaps we need to learn to “un-see.”

I would like to suggest that, in *Borudō no gikei*, translation is used as both form and practice to question the visibility of racial and ethnic difference, to confuse, subvert, or challenge the codes through which the violence of global capital’s translation processes are carried out. Passages where the text demonstrates how bodily difference can be misread can be humorous or shocking, but involve language, and confused associations between bodily difference and language difference. The ostensible reason for Yūna’s trip from Hamburg to Bordeaux is to study French, which we are told she has already tried and failed to learn twice. She arrives in Bordeaux with a pocket dictionary and text book in hand. Soon after arriving, she takes a walk in the hot, narrow alleys of the city. She comes across a small store and her attention is caught by the sight of a used comic book, a translation of Tezuka Osamu’s series “Black Jack,” in the window. Black Jack was Yūna’s first love. While lingering before the sight, she perceives a local boy who has come up beside her who is staring at the same object. Yūna “plucked up her courage and recited a sentence verbatim from her French textbook. ‘C’est un livre intéressant....’ The boy’s grey eyes, flecked with green, sparkled as he turned to face Yūna without any apparent surprise... But to Yūna’s surprise, after a few seconds, the boy responded in Japanese. “I like Black Jack, too. I’ve read the whole series.”²³⁾

However, by far the most significant occurrence of confusion of bodily and linguistic identity takes place in the city of Osaka. In this passage we learn about the motivation for Yūna’s trip to Bordeaux: she wants to study French, which she “failed to learn twice before.”

Her high school friend had discovered a notice in the local paper for French lessons offered by one “Yves S.” A fan of the French film star, Alain Delon, the friend called the number listed in the ad, and “made an appointment to meet the man who answered in a low voice speaking fluent Japanese.” Arriving at the address, Yūna’s friend rang the doorbell.

When a man answered the door, it took some time for her to realize it was Yves. Mentally unprepared for his appearance, she was at a loss for words, bowed abruptly, and began to walk back to the bus stop. “This is not the first time this has happened,” Yves called to her from behind in a voice that was exceedingly calm, even kind, given the position he was in. In those days, Yūna was as ignorant as her friend. She knew nothing about the fact that the French language had gone to Africa as an emigrant, and nothing about what it had done there. She went to the library and borrowed a few history books. She then resolved to learn French from Yves. That did not go well. The number she called was “no longer in service.” Yūna sighed. It was the first setback she was to encounter in her efforts to learn French. She found out some years later, while watching a movie, what had happened to Yves.²⁴⁾

This buried memory is one of the few clues to what drives the plot of the novella. In fact, Yūna had initially hoped to study French in Dakar, in West Africa, and only reluctantly took Bordeaux as a second choice. Her desire to learn French, and her desire to learn “what happened to the French language in Africa” are thus intertwined.

When Yūna, in *Borudō no gikei*, meets the older woman and scholar of French 18th century literature, Renee, at the beginning of the novella, she introduces herself saying “I am an actress, and I wish to perform Racine as a Noh play.” The narrator suggests Yūna’s words may be a lie or fiction, used to entice Renee into beginning a relationship with the young international student. Together with Yūna’s own depiction of herself

as an actress, these comments certainly alert us to “ethnic irony” being performed here. In her essay on *Borudō no gikei*, Saitō Yumiko discovers an important pun. If we read the word Racine in the way we read many of Tawada’s words, we will notice that “Racine” in French is a homonym of the Japanese pronunciation of the French word “La Chine,” or China. Saitō’s analysis links this word play to the role of the Chinese character as one level of translation in *Borudō no gikei*. This is persuasive, since kanji play an important role in the form of the novella. The novella is composed of small sections headed by a single kanji, and Yūna tells her friends that a kanji can be “translated (she uses the Japanese word *tokihogusu*) into a story.”²⁵⁾ Saitō notes the many levels of translation performed in *Borudō no gikei*—between German, Japanese, English, and French, but also from the Chinese characters to the narrative.²⁶⁾

However, I would like also to propose that the French word “racine” (as the common noun “root”) in *Borudō no gikei* is related to “race.” In her book, *The Translation Zone* Emily Apter depicts how Leo Spitzer, one of the founders of Comparative Literature in North America, traced the etymological history of the Latin word *ratio* (a root for the later French *racine*). The Latin *ratio*, which could mean type or idea, took on different meanings through history, but “degenerated” during the period of European fascism to denote, not an abstract, but a biological category, a species, or “race.” Apter asserts that by tracing associations of *ratio*, *razza*, *rasse*, and *racine* across Latin, Italian, German and French, Spitzer was able to expose the “ominous turn” whereby the word, or Logos, became submerged “in a biological, species-driven vision of the human.”²⁷⁾

The notion of performing “racine” or “race” in translation accords with the notions of Cherniavsky and da Silva that the “essence” of race is not bodily difference. Of course, the notion of performance can also be linked to what we see, or think we see... to the question of seeing and not seeing. In her German classes at the university, Yūna learns for the first time that the German word for photography (フォトグラフイー) is spelled “*fotografie*” instead of “*fotogravieh*.”

It seems one can make important discoveries in language classes. For example, she discovered there were small domestic animals in the backgrounds of the *fotografie* (photographs) taken by a Scottish artist. If Yūna hadn’t been misspelling the word for domestic animal (“*Vieh*”) as “*fie*,” she would never have been able to take the sound of the last syllable of *fotografie* to refer to a domestic animal. Still, without the possibility of mistaking one thing for another, a person wouldn’t be able to see anything at all.²⁸⁾

In modernity, the photograph has been the visual medium most closely linked to indexicality—it produces a faithful *mimesis* of the object. But here, through a mistranslation, something different can be discovered. Indeed, as Yūna has observed, one cannot know what someone else’s eyes see.

As Nakagawa Shigemi has pointed out in his essay, “Ein Europa Der Verführung: Über Schwager in Bordeaux,” throughout Yūna’s travels we may observe buried traces of colonial violence, but they are objects of forgetfulness: they cannot be seen.²⁹⁾ This is a question I hope to take up at another time. But, just as the body of the slave was opened, fragmented, and measured as “flesh” under colonialism, the body that is not whole, what Da Silva calls “the nobodies” continue to be exploited through the codes of ethnic and racial difference today. While pervasively disavowed, it is repeated in the practices of global decoding or translation carried out by transnational capital. I hope that I have offered a few examples today of how Tawada uses translation, as form and writing practice, to call attention to this problem.

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- 1) Tawada Yōko, “Shitsugi Ōtō,” in *Ritsumeikan Gengobunka Kenkyū*, Volume 14, No.4, March 2005: 99.
- 2) Tawada Yōko and Sasaki Atsushi, “Ichimon Ittō,” in *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to Kyōzai no Kenkyū*, Volume 54, No. 9, June 2009: 66-73.
- 3) Language in migration: Multilingualism and exophonic writing in the new poetics, in *Textual Practice* 24 (4), August 2010: 744
- 4) Roland Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” in *Critical Essays*,

- translated by Richard Howard [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972]: 243.
- 5) Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press): ix.
 - 6) John Kim, "Ethnic Irony: The Poetic Parabasis of the Promiscuous Personal Pronoun in Yōko Tawada's 'Eine Leere Flasche (A Vacuous Flask),' in *The German Quarterly* v.83, no. 3 (Summer 2010), 333-352. Kim takes the notion of staged identity from Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the literature of ethnicity in "Teaching for the Times," in *Journal of the Midwestern MLA*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Spring, 1992:14-15.
 - 7) The "riddle of referentiality" is developed by Leslie Adelson in her study, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).
 - 8) S. Mezzadra, "Living in Translation. Toward a Heterolingual Theory of the Multitude," in Richard F. Calichman and John N. Kim ed. *The Politics of Culture. Around the Work of Naoki Sakai*, London: Routledge, 2010: 121-137
 - 9) Robin Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," in *boundary 2*, Volume 26, No. 3, Fall 1999: 123-132.
 - 10) Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method: The Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013).
 - 11) Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward A Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
 - 12) Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 12-15.
 - 13) Yumiko Saitō, "Une Tentative de Double Traduction: Analyse du Voyage à Bordeaux (Schwager in Bordeaux) de Yōko Tawada," *Etudes Germaniques* 2010/3 no 259: 525-534.
 - 14) Tawada Yōko, *Borudō no gikei* (Tokyo Kōdansha, 2009): 77. All translations from the novella are mine.
 - 15) *Borudō no gikei*, 79.
 - 16) *Borudō no gikei*, p. 83-84.
 - 18) *Borudō no gikei*, 131.
 - 19) *Borudō no gikei*, 69-70.
 - 20) Cherniavsky, xii.
 - 21) *Borudō no gikei*, 128-130.
 - 22) Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 8.
 - 23) *Borudō no gikei*, 161-162.
 - 24) *Borudō no gikei*, 106-107.
 - 25) *Borudō no gikei*, 77.
 - 26) Saitō, 533-34.
 - 27) Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 27.
 - 28) *Borudō no gikei*, 57-58.
 - 29) Shigemi Nakagawa, "Ein Europa Der Verführung: Über Schwager in Bordeaux," *Etudes Germaniques* 2010/3 (No. 259), 651-663.

