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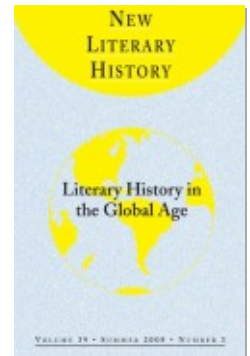
Translator, Traitor; Translator, Mourner (or, Dreaming of
Intercultural Equivalence)

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[A] process of systematic fragmentation . . . can . . . be seen in the disciplinary carve-up of the indigenous world: bones, mummies and skulls to the museums, artwork to private collectors, languages to linguistics, “customs” to anthropologists, beliefs and behaviours to psychologists. To discover how fragmented this process was one needs only to stand in a museum, a library, a bookshop, and ask where indigenous peoples are located. Fragmentation is not a phenomenon of postmodernism as many might claim. For indigenous peoples fragmentation has been the consequence of imperialism.

—Linda Tuhiwai Smith,
“Imperialism, History, Writing, and Theory”¹

Since 1900 non-Western objects have generally been classified as either primitive art *or* ethnographic specimens.

—James Clifford,
*The Predicament of Culture*²

Transacting Untimely Native Remains

OF THE NUMEROUS MEMORABLE SCENES in early twentieth-century Chinese literature, one holds a special tenacity for me, with a resonance that does not seem to diminish with the passage of time. Is it a coincidence that it happens to be a scene of mourning? This essay will be an attempt at probing this question.

Master Gao, the patriarch in Ba Jin’s classic *Jia* (*Family*, 1931), has just died.³ In keeping with age-old mourning rituals, the Gao family hosts an elaborate funeral, with a group of female mourners present at the funeral parlor, collectively performing the customary mournful wailing whenever guests arrive to pay respects to the dead. In a novel of substantial length, such a narrative detail seems rather insignificant,⁴ but what makes it remarkable is the manner in which it is described:

New Literary History, 2007, 37: 565–580

The women behind the curtains were having a hard time. Since guests kept arriving, the number of times they had to wail kept increasing too. At this point, wailing had turned into an art; it had, moreover, the function of socializing with guests. For instance, if, while the women were chatting or eating, the musicians started playing [to signal the arrival of guests], they would have to burst into a loud cry instantaneously—and the more sorrowfully, the better, of course. But most of the time they were simply shrieking as there were no tears. There had also been farces, as when signals of guests arriving and departing were confused. Mishearing “guests departing” for “guest arriving,” the women would wail for a long time only to discover that it was unnecessary; or else, not knowing that guests had come, they remained utterly quiet until the master of ceremony prompted them, whereupon they would all of a sudden explode into a wailing noise. (327; my rough translation)

Inserted in the midst of a family saga that was based on autobiographical elements and that has been viewed, in the decades since it was first published, as an allegory of China’s difficult transition into modernity (replete with melodramatic tensions and conflicts among different generations in the Gao family), this tonally derisive portrayal of mourning is, to say the least, evocative. At the simple level of the plot, the incident signals the much longed-for passing of an older era: with the death of the beloved but intransigent patriarch, who has so dominated the entire clan, including the life choices of its youngest members, there can now, perhaps, be hope for a different kind of future. This gradual drift of the story from a close-knit community mired in a privileged semifeudal past (the old China) toward what may be deemed an enlightened collective way of life—one that may not be immediately accessible but is at least constitutive of an imagining of the decades ahead—indeed characterizes Ba Jin’s entire narrative action. In this vein, the gesture of taking leave of the family (whether ideologically or physically), as personified by two of Master Gao’s grandchildren, Juemin and Juehui, ultimately brings the narrative to a meaningful close. In retrospect, we may say that Ba Jin’s fictional plot stands in effect as a political wish, a will toward a realm of potentiality that was, at the time of the novel’s writing, equated with modernization and its progressive rationality (or requisite disenchantment).

Against this idealistically plotted action, the detail of the wailing women, like the depiction of other family rituals, practices, and superstitions throughout the novel, amounts to something of an exotic ethnographic find, whereupon an age-old custom receives the spotlight not for the significance it carries in its conventional context but rather for a displaced kind of effect—that of an absurd spectacle seen with fresh eyes. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s passage cited at the beginning indicates, this fragmenting or partitioning of the indigenous culture, in this instance in the form of

an emergent object for an unsympathetic anthropological gaze, is quite typical of postimperialist systems of knowledge production. In spite—and perhaps because—of its embeddedness in Chinese cultural history, hence, this scene of ritualized mourning is consciously (re)presented and mocked as a farce. Instead of the supposed function of grieving the dead, this practice of mourning is now given a rather harsh diagnosis—as an awkward collective routine that is not only hypocritical (there are no tears, the narrator tells us) and poorly executed (the women miss or confuse the signals of guests arriving and leaving) but also indicative of a culture trapped, as it were, in a kind of premodern barbarity. All that is remaining, or so it appears from Ba Jin's narrative, is a decrepit form of socialization, discharged perfunctorily by some shrieking females. As I pointed out in an earlier analysis of the novel, this acute sensitivity to the becoming-vacant or becoming-irrelevant of longstanding cultural forms is accompanied in Ba Jin's text by an investment in a new kind of value making, one that finds in (psychic) interiorization (as opposed to external expression and the public performance of rituals) a preferable means of radical resistance and social reform.⁵ In the light of this type of value making, the women's wailing comes across as embarrassing because it seems so untimely: as the women mourn the dead in accordance with tradition and custom, tradition and custom have deteriorated into sheer noise.

The Ineluctability of Betrayal

Unlike the novelistic paradigm made familiar by a classic such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, in which the notion of alterity (that is, alterity to the progressive rationality of the narrative voice) is personified by the so-called mad woman in the attic—in which alterity is, in other words, conveniently configured in the form of the culturally exotic female outsider who is excluded from the main halls of power⁶—in the case of *Jia* this division between cultures is replaced by a division within the same culture, indeed the same family. Serving as a stand-in for the consciousness of the most rebellious characters of the Gao family, Ba Jin's third-person narrative voice, which stages the mourning women as a spectacle of nonsense, is caught up in an implicit act of (cultural) reflexivity. In such reflexivity, it is "one's own" culture, so to speak, rather than an exotic or little known other culture, that becomes the occasion for disenchantment and estrangement; it is one's own culture that takes on the otherness of the obsolete, the irrational, the barbarous, and so forth. Often accompanied by the modernist aesthetics of defamiliarization (the extreme version of which presents one's own culture as inhuman

and cannibalistic), such cultural reflexivity is symptomatic of an earlier moment of the global process of modernization. The sizeable collection of marginalized social figures from early twentieth-century Chinese fiction alone—one thinks of the lower-class servant or country characters depicted by Lu Xun's educated narrators; the abject intellectual men stranded abroad or in unfamiliar towns in Yu Dafu; or the ill, impoverished, and emotionally disoriented women in Xiao Hong, to mention just a few famous examples—provides numerous imaginary witness accounts to this process. For those who know something about this literature and its history, this is nothing new. A much less considered point, however, is that such reflexive rendering of tradition may also be compared to an act of translation.

In invoking translation at this juncture, I should quickly add that I am not adhering to the more restricted definition of the translator as a professional who carries meanings from one language into another. Instead of confining translation to the medium of words, my point is to explore a(n) (ap)proximate signification—that of an *arbiter* of values, as embedded in disparate cultural literacies or systems—under that condition James Clifford has referred to as the “pervasive postcolonial crisis of ethnographic authority.”⁷ (My exploration is thus itself a translation of the more restricted definition of translation based on the transfer of words [in the sense of an intra- or interlinguistic phenomenon]).⁸ As Clifford writes, while the postcolonial crisis of ethnographic authority has been felt most acutely by formerly hegemonic Western discourses, “the questions it raises are of global significance. Who has the authority to speak for a group's identity or authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture? . . . What narratives of development, loss, and innovation can account for the present range of local oppositional movements?”⁹ And “How do people define themselves with, over, and in spite of others? What are the changing local and world historical conditions determining these processes?”¹⁰ The advantage of a(n) (ap) proximate, rather than precise or technical, use of the term translator, then, is quite clear: it allows one to include within the parameters of translation (understood broadly as a semiotically mediated process of transaction) a consideration of such illegible things as accent, tone, texture, habit, historicity, the partially remembered, the erroneous but frequently reiterated, and ultimately, the unsaid—all of which bear on transactions of the most basic meanings but tend to elude the more positivistic or even scholarly way of handling translating (with its proper and respectable but not necessarily helpful tools such as etymologies, dictionaries, encyclopedias, libraries, and the like).¹¹

In addition, this (ap)proximate notion of the translator would readily—and appropriately—accentuate a number of important issues. First,

whereas the term “narrator” focuses attention on the act of storytelling, “translator” underscores the fact that storytelling, too, is a form of exchange,¹² an exchange that may, under certain circumstances, be further specified as a transcription of one language (or system of literacy) into another, but which does not have to be confined to such transcription exclusively. In the case of Ba Jin’s novel, for instance, we may argue that the scene of mourning is in effect presented as a type of language, or a system of literacy, that no longer makes sense. The force that renders this language/literacy dysfunctional is none other than the gaze/voice of a particular kind of translator—in this case a narrative consciousness that not only reports and transcribes the scene but, in the process of doing so, underwrites it in another code, another language/literacy, against which the original scene takes on a new kind of legibility as it is *disparaged* and *devalued* as hypocrisy, degeneracy, and pathology. The other code or language/literacy, in effect, is providing the terms for evaluating the scene, but not vice versa.

Second, whereas in East-West cultural relations emphasis tends to be placed on the effects of translating Western terms into non-Western languages, which consequently have to adjust or reform themselves in order to accommodate the Western terms (for example, English, French, or German terms being translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and so forth), Ba Jin’s scene of mourning foregrounds the effects of a reverse translation, namely, what happens when what is “Chinese”—at that time definitely not considered as a metropolitan or global language/literacy—is rendered in a different language/literacy, in this case the (narrative consciousness’s) language/literacy of modernization. From the standpoint of the language/literacy of modernization, obviously, there is no need to adjust or reform itself in accordance to this other language/literacy: instead, the latter is simply recoded as inferior and delivered as a caricature.

Third, this reverse translation demonstrates a fact that is crucial but seldom emphasized: the *inequitable temporalities* in play between the original language/literacy (the one to be translated) and the target language/literacy. Whereas in most conventional practices of translation, the original, being there first, is typically prioritized as the criterion against which the translation, which comes subsequently, must try to measure up, in Ba Jin’s narration *the original is rendered inadequate and inferior precisely through the act of translation*, through a rendering into the language/literacy that comes secondarily. In the translation undertaken by a forward-looking narrative consciousness intent on modernization, the scene of a ritualized mourning can only be discerned—made intelligible—as a manifestation of backwardness. Instead of being endowed with primacy and superiority (as the original tends to be), the ritual’s temporally precedent status is (re)cast as regression, as a lack of progress.

By bringing to the fore issues of exchange, cultural inequity, and the reversal of temporally inscribed values normally conferred on original and target languages/literacies in the process of translation, the figure of the translator thus helps sharpen the focus on problems of unevenness that are inherent to postcolonial intercultural encounters. Notwithstanding the “crisis of ethnographic authority” as mentioned by Clifford, such encounters often require that *some* languages/systems of literacy be delegitimated if not entirely dismantled, while others (usually those propelled by imperialist and capitalist successes) gain recognition as the general equivalents—indeed, as the metalanguages or metasystems—that serve as the yardsticks with which to devalue those languages that are weaker or less successful, even as they (the stronger and more successful ones) seem only to be maintaining their own legitimacy as “themselves.” Understood in these terms, the figure of the translator foreshadows the predicament faced by the native intellectual in a postcolonized situation, in which to be a mediator between cultures is, as the idiomatic expression *traduttore, traditore* would have it, to be a traitor—in particular, a traitor to one’s native culture. That is to say, if the agency of the postcolonial intellectual (native speaker, writer, thinker, educated person, professional, culture worker) is defined as the capacity to act among and across languages/literacies, such agency also places such an intellectual in the position of a cultural translator/arbitrer. The task of this cultural translator/arbitrer is not faithfulness to the original (the colonized native culture) but rather that of an explicit betrayal: the disavowal and intercepting of the original as out of sync and out of place is now deemed a *sine qua non* for the native culture’s survival. In this particular form of translation, even the original culture’s way of mourning the dead has become suspect, has to be overhauled.

In ways that undoubtedly resonate with deconstructive investigations of translation, betrayal appears to be an ineluctable reality in intercultural translation. But this is due not so much to the semiotic-cum-philosophical assertion, made famous by theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, that language is never completely identical with itself and thus always already a failure (that is, failing to reach its destination),¹³ as to the fundamental unevenness among the world statuses of different languages—the unevenness between, say, Tagalog and Spanish, Swahili and English, or Cherokee and French. In this latter context, betrayal is much less a manifestation of the nature of language (that is, language’s nonidentity with itself) than it is an injunction against those languages/literacies whose circulations have not been driven by the motors of imperialist or capitalist success. As Lydia H. Liu succinctly puts it, “In thinking about the translatability between historical languages, one cannot but consider the actual power relations that dictate the degree and

magnitude of sacrifice that one language must make in order to achieve some level of commensurability with the other.”¹⁴

One Way of “Going Native”: The Melancholy Turn

An additional intriguing aspect of Ba Jin’s text is that the translation enacted by the narrative consciousness, too, amounts to a kind of mourning. Distinct from the women’s shrieking noise, which has turned into an ethnographical object, the narrative consciousness’s mourning belongs in a kind of progressive thinking, prevalent among Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth era, which was characterized by a determination to abolish everything traditional. This proactive impulse to modernize—so as to catch up with the Western world—continues to describe much of the developing world to this day,¹⁵ and the figure of the translator thus stands, simultaneously, as a mourner, one whose betrayal of the native culture is an inevitable by-product of inequitable cultural contacts. But what makes this connection among translation, betrayal, and mourning especially thought provoking in our contemporary context, in which the aspirations and implementations of modernization are increasingly subject to critique, is the supplement of the melancholy turn.

This is, of course, a turn whose lineage is most conveniently traced to Freud. In his famous work of 1917, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud used the term “melancholia” to designate a type of grieving process that, somehow, cannot end.¹⁶ (As is well-known, Freud distinguished melancholia from “mourning,” which he considered healthy and normal because it can end.) Freud attributed this interminable pathological affect to the melancholic subject’s essentially unfinished relationship with the lost/dead loved object—so much so that the specific grief over the object’s loss is now mixed up with an entire emotional complex involving not-yet-processed negative feelings such as resentment and guilt. Since the loved one is no longer around, however, these negative feelings end up being introjected and directed against the self, leading to the classic melancholic symptom (in the grieving subject) of uncontrollable self-berating and self-devaluation, and withdrawal from the world. In her work *Gender Trouble*, the American feminist philosopher Judith Butler mobilized Freud’s argument about melancholia as a new way to think about gendered identity formation, offering the groundbreaking proposal that what is regarded as a norm, heterosexuality, is itself the result of a socially imposed sacrifice/surrender of a homosexual or bisexual capacity for loving persons of the same gender.¹⁷ According to Butler, our gendered identity—especially if we “are” heterosexual—is melancholic, for it is only by suppressing our original homo- or bisexual leanings

that we arrive at an identity that is agreeable to the rest of society; yet, like Freud's melancholic, we are forever haunted by that loss and the unfinished relationship it signifies.

Butler's astute move of melancholizing gender is infinitely enabling. Unlike Ba Jin's narrator, she allows for a second, sympathetic look at cultural phenomena that might seem queer and unacceptable to an arrogantly judgmental gaze. By zeroing in on melancholia—and thus on the inability or refusal to give up what has been lost—as the more complex emotion than straightforward mourning, Butler paves the way for other lost objects to (re)enter the postcolonial, postmodern cultural scene and (re)claim epistemic legitimacy. Following Butler's lead, Anne Anlin Cheng, for instance, took the Freudian lineage in the direction of race by arguing that racial identity formation in America, too, is fundamentally melancholic.¹⁸ By operating through notions of the mainstream (with the white person as standard ideal) and the margin (populated by nonwhite others), racialization, Cheng argues, infinitely produces “lost”—or inassimilable—racial others whose existence, nonetheless, continues to disturb and destabilize American nationality. As in Butler's analysis of heterosexuality, then, the normative, privileged white American identity is considered by Cheng as a melancholic outcome of the repression of racial heterogeneity, which remains embedded in the nation's history and memory. As Cheng writes: “While all nations have their repressed histories and traumatic atrocities, American melancholia is particularly acute because America is founded on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over.”¹⁹ In the various chapters of her book, *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng analyzes different literary and cultural texts by African American and Asian American authors to explore in depth the manifestations, ramifications, and residues of this fraught process of racialized national subject formation. The revisionary impulse of Cheng's readings (of the aftermath of American and Euro-American histories) is shared by her contemporary critics such as David L. Eng and Ranjana Khanna.²⁰

The work of each of these critics deserves a full-fledged discussion on its own, but for my purposes here it suffices to point out that the appeal of the melancholy turn lies perhaps less in the affect of unfinished grieving per se than in the theoretical potential it carries. In the terms of the present discussion about cultural translation, the melancholy turn makes it possible to hold onto the notion of a certain original condition (language, literacy, culture) while advancing the plaint that this original condition has been compromised, injured, incapacitated, interrupted, or stolen—in a word, lost. This twin rhetorical move of essentializing-cum-deconstruction, asserting paradoxically both the existence of an original and its irrevocable loss, both a lost object and its continued

spectral presence, leads to an inexhaustible theoretical productiveness. It follows that the melancholy turn typically is pursued in the form of a moral striving for justice on behalf of the original (that is, injured) native (condition): although there is no triumphing over the mainstream culture that has defeated us, it implies, and although the grounds of the original's legitimation might have been destroyed once and for all, we can at least be melancholic.²¹

Indeed, if we think of the work of contemporary "theory" (in the general sense of speculative or abstract work) as a type of translation, the position occupied by those who adopt the melancholy turn may once again be compared to that of a translator. However, unlike Ba Jin's narrator, whose translation of the original native culture casts it disparagingly in the form of noise, those who cultivate the melancholy turn are intent on *undoing* the destructive effects precisely of this type of intercultural translation. If Ba Jin's narrative actively disengages from a ritual of mourning on account of its nativeness (which has become synonymous with awkwardness and backwardness), the translation performed by those who adopt the melancholy turn consists rather in a belated and therapeutic attempt to *go native*—to restore to such a native or original condition (what has been demeaned or immolated) its unfinished life experiences (a move, incidentally, that is not entirely distinguishable from that of returning to such life experiences their proper funereal rites). In temporal terms, this attempt makes way for slow-motion rewinds of the present, revealing what might have been there at an earlier moment. The originally bisexual or homosexual person who was coerced into conforming to heterosexuality; the members of a colonized culture who were required to identify with the language and culture of the colonizer; the members of a subordinated ethnic community who had to assimilate to the dictates of mainstream America in order to survive: the losses exemplified by these "original" cases are irretrievable, but the work of theory now offers them a second-order mourning. Better still, the work of theory now makes available a kind of time and space for the acting-out of the melancholia that, according to Freud, is symptomatic of an unfinished process of grieving, itself the outcome of an incomplete relation between the self and the lost loved object. As a compensation for the betrayal inherent to the cultural translation that is modernization, that produces the native original as barbarism, the melancholy turn has brought the task of the translator up-to-date. No longer a traitor, this (re)transactor of untimely native remains now resurfaces as a faithful melancholic.

The flip side to the melancholy turn is often a reinstatement of the plurality of languages, literacies, and cultures—a kind of confounding but invigorating call to living in diversity hereafter. This ambivalence—and

profound kinship—between inconsolable grief and affirmative cultural politics is perceptively expressed by the British sociologist Paul Gilroy in the title of one of his books, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*²² Is this one reason the melancholy turn seems, at this juncture, often accompanied by a divergent kind of affect—a euphoric promotion, in disciplines such as comparative literature and cultural studies, of linguistic and/or cultural pluralism, a kind of “going native” in language and culture study? Needless to say, my point is not to undermine the vast importance of our need to know languages and learn about different cultures. It is rather to probe the implications of the particular epistemic affinity in question. If the advocacy of linguistic and cultural pluralism in our age is, to borrow from Naoki Sakai’s work on translation and subjectivity, a phenomenon that has been *co-figured* with the equally prevalent melancholy turn in contemporary theory,²³ where are we heading exactly? That is to say, if the pursuit of melancholia and the pursuit of linguistic nativism/cultural pluralism turn out to be partners entwined in the same moral economy, each providing accompaniment for the other as in a musical performance, where does it leave the problematic of intercultural translation and, with it, the postimperialist legacies of temporal inequity and global unevenness? Could linguistic nativism/cultural pluralism be the real solution to such inequity and unevenness?

The Challenge of Intercultural Equivalence

In his late work on translation, the French theorist Paul Ricoeur likewise drew on Freud’s work on mourning and melancholia to discuss the labor that is translation, but unlike many who turn to melancholia as a form of affirmative cultural redress and repair, Ricoeur argues instead for the necessity of mourning—and what needs to be mourned (that is, given up), he writes, is the ideal of the perfect translation: “the work of mourning too, applied to renouncing the very ideal of the *perfect translation*.”²⁴ In the place of the perfect translation, Ricoeur advances the notion of “*linguistic hospitality*” (23; Ricoeur’s emphasis), in the light of which equivalence, rather than complete identity, becomes the foundation of translation: “a good translation can aim only at a supposed *equivalence* that is not founded on a demonstrable *identity* of meaning. An equivalence without identity. This equivalence can only be sought, worked at, supposed” (22; Ricoeur’s emphases). As Richard Kearney comments:

Indeed, Ricoeur goes so far as to suggest that the future ethos of European politics, and eventually of world politics, should be one based upon an exchange of memories and narratives between different nations, for it is only when we

translate our own wounds into the language of strangers and retranslate the wounds of strangers into our own language that healing and reconciliation can take place.

This is ultimately what Ricoeur intends when he describes the ethics of translation as an interlinguistic hospitality. The world is made up of a plurality of human beings, cultures, tongues. Humanity exists in the plural mode. Which means that any legitimate form of universality must always—if the hermeneutic model of translation is observed—find its equivalent plurality. The creative tension between the universal and the plural ensures that the task of translation is an endless one, a work of tireless memory and mourning, of appropriation and disappropriation, of taking up and letting go, of expressing oneself and welcoming others.²⁵

Fully noting the difficulties involved in any act of translation, including the difficulty imposed by the untranslatable, Ricoeur nonetheless advocates linguistic equivalence—that is to say, comparability or commensurability—as the viable way of rethinking translation's ethos.²⁶ What is evocative about this notion of equivalence, I would like to add, is that equivalence is not exactly something ready made, like a preexisting or already-present condition, but rather something to be produced: the “true nature of equivalence,” according to Ricoeur, “is *produced* by translation rather than *presupposed* by it” (35; Ricoeur's emphases). Whether at the level of strictly linguistic or at the level of intercultural transactions, Ricoeur's suggestion implies that equivalence should be more precisely recognized as a challenge, as something to strive for rather than something that has already been securely attained. In this regard, equivalence brings to mind Johannes Fabian's well-known concept of coevalness, a sharing of time that is “not given but must be accomplished [and can be denied],”²⁷ and that is predicated less on a presumed contemporaneity of all cultures than on an ever-renewable and ongoing project of constructing such contemporaneity. Like coevalness, equivalence in this instance is not a mere assertion of temporal or spatial coexistence but a vision, one that, predictably, will be met with obstruction and sabotage at regular intervals, but that will always retain within its operating premises the fundamentals of exchange and reciprocity that underlie intercultural transactions.

I hope readers will have sensed by now that in underscoring intercultural equivalence as a challenge, my recommendation is not simply the positivistic one of additional acquisition (“Let's go pick up more languages and more knowledge about other cultures!”). Rather, in the spirit of Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's rendering of Africa in *The Heart of Darkness*, I want to suggest that the equivalence/coevalness between cultures, however dissimilar they might seem, ought to be a type of potentiality we seek to explore in language—that is, *regardless*

of the number of languages involved and even if/when there seems only one language in use. In his diagnosis of Conrad's description of blackness, Achebe puts it this way:

When a writer, while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact, is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. . . . Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.²⁸

This role of purveyor of myths is also the role of a type of intercultural translator, one who is worried, as Achebe puts it, by “the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry” between Africans and Europeans, between the River Congo and the River Thames (374). In articulating Conrad's narrative language to racial discrimination, what Achebe has foregrounded is none other than the loaded practice of value judgment—and with it, the questions of equivalence, comparability, and commensurability—in intercultural translation. Importantly, in the process of such judgment making, Achebe writes, the kind of liberalism that “touched all the best minds of [Conrad's] age in England, Europe, and America” “*almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people*” (378; my emphasis). Such equality or equivalence, however, is precisely what intercultural translation may endeavor to enunciate even as it apprehends, as it must, the undeniable existence of cultural limits and incompatibilities.²⁹

Finally, Achebe's critique of Conrad bears significance for a discussion about intercultural translation in yet another respect. Unlike many discussants of translation, Achebe is not exactly interested in the transfer of meanings from one language into another (as in the more literal sense of translation). His focus is rather on the codes of transevaluation between cultures that are implicitly set into motion even when an author is writing in a single language. By his account, intercultural translation, replete with the dictates of transevaluation, can happen just as readily within a single language (or linguistic act) as it can through an explicit transfer between different languages. To this extent, we may go so far as to say that it is precisely when Conrad juxtaposes “Africa” and “England” *monolingually* (in English) that a certain (and to Achebe, racist) pattern of differentiation and hierarchization of cultures becomes the most detectable. As in Ba Jin's treatment of the wailing women, it is a monolingual rendering/translation, burdened between the lines with a particular ethical imperative of modernization and its variety of

comparison (yet free from the distraction of the back-and-forth traffic between the technicalities of two languages, perhaps), that sheds light on some of the most serious stakes involved in intercultural as well as interlingual translation.³⁰

On being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992, Derek Walcott gave a moving speech about the people in whose name, he said, he stood. Referring to the consoling pity with which the Antilles, his homeland, have typically been regarded by travelers, Walcott offered an unyieldingly critical statement about the kind of intercultural translation that specializes in melancholia—and that, ultimately, leads to the denial of cultural equivalence and commensurability (since, by melancholia's [temporal] logic, every endeavor undertaken by the formerly colonized has to be belittled as belated, as mere imitation). Walcott's remarks seem especially perspicacious in light of our foregoing discussion. To conclude, let me cite a part of them:

These travellers carried with them the infection of their own malaise, and their prose reduced even the landscape to melancholia and self-contempt . . .

By writers even as refreshing as Graham Greene, the Caribbean is looked at with elegiac pathos, a prolonged sadness to which Lévi-Strauss has supplied an epigraph: *Tristes Tropiques*. Their *tristesse* derives from an attitude to the Caribbean dusk, to rain, to uncontrollable vegetation, to the provincial ambition of Caribbean cities where brutal replicas of modern architecture dwarf the small houses and streets. The mood is understandable, the melancholy as contagious as the fever of a sunset, like the gold fronds of diseased coconut palms, but there is something alien and ultimately wrong in the way such a sadness, even a morbidity, is described by English, French, or some of our exiled writers. It relates to a misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls.

These writers describe the ambitions of our unfinished cities, their unrealized, homiletic conclusion, but the Caribbean city may conclude just at that point where it is satisfied with its own scale, just as Caribbean culture is not evolving but already shaped. Its proportions are not to be measured by the traveler or the exile, but by its own citizenry and architecture. To be told you are not yet a city or a culture requires this response. I am not your city or your culture. There might be less of *Tristes Tropiques* after that.³¹

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NOTES

- 1 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Imperialism, History, Writing, and Theory," in *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005), 102. Smith's piece is reprinted from *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Press, 1999), 19–41.

2 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 198 (Clifford's emphasis).

3 Ba Jin, *Jia* (Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu, 1985); Pa Chin, *Family*, trans. Sidney Shapiro, intro. Olga Lang (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1972; based on the edition published by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1958).

4 For instance, the passage has been omitted in Shapiro's abridged translation, noted immediately above.

5 See Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991), 96–102.

6 The implications of this configuration are, of course, made explicit by Jean Rhys in her remarkable translation of Jane Eyre's story into the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966; repr., New York: Norton, 1982).

7 Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 8.

8 For a classic discussion of the various possible types of translation (intralinguistic translation or "rewording"; interlinguistic translation or "translation proper"; intersemiotic translation or "transmutation"), see Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 232–39.

9 Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 8.

10 Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 289.

11 Naoki Sakai makes a similar point when he proposes that we adopt "the attitude of the heterolingual address"—an address wherein "the act of inception or reception occurs as the act of translation, and translation takes place at every listening or reading." See Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, foreword by Meaghan Morris (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 9.

12 The notion of translation as exchange is highlighted in the title of a collection of erudite essays on the linguistically mediated encounters between China and the West, *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, ed. Lydia H. Liu (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1999).

13 See, for instance, de Man's and Derrida's discussions of Walter Benjamin's oft-cited essay "The Task of the Translator" in Paul de Man, "'Conclusions': Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" in *The Resistance to Theory*, foreword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986); Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," trans. Joseph F. Graham, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Graham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), and *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1988), 93–161. For my discussion of Derrida's and de Man's readings in relation to cultural production in the postcolonial, postmodern context, see part 3 of Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995).

14 Liu, "The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign," in *Tokens of Exchange*, 34–35. Despite such power relations, Liu suggests that the relationship between "dominated" and "dominator" languages in processes of translation should be viewed in terms of coauthorship; see especially 34–37 of her essay.

15 For a compelling reminder of this point, namely, that the quest for a modern life in the European sense continues to hold validity for disenfranchised peoples in places such as Africa, see Simon Gikandi, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (2001): 627–58.

16 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 152–70.

17 See especially part 1 of Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

- 18 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).
- 19 Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, 10.
- 20 See David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001); Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003). See also the anthology *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, afterword by Judith Butler (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2003).
- 21 By contrast, Paul Gilroy, in invoking the term “melancholia,” is critical of it as a form of postimperial nostalgia; see his *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005). For another critical reflection, see Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” in *Loss*, ed. Eng and Kazanjian, 458–65. Brown argues that the gesture of embracing melancholy, especially on the left, may lead to potentially conservative and self-destructive outcomes despite putatively progressive aims. For related interest, see also Slavoj Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 657–81.
- 22 Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004). Gilroy’s arguments about conviviality can also be found in his *Postcolonial Melancholia*.
- 23 See, for instance, Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 52.
- 24 Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan, intro. Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 2006), 23 (Ricoeur’s emphasis; hereafter cited in text).
- 25 Kearney, “Introduction: Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Translation,” in Ricoeur, *On Translation*, xx.
- 26 Ricoeur’s notion of equivalence should be distinguished from the notions of dynamic relevance or cognitive easefulness that are advocated by some theorists as proper ways of approaching translation. For a succinct discussion of these notions, see Lawrence Venuti, “Introduction,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 169–73. Venuti’s discussion is an excellent introduction to Derrida’s essay “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” trans. Venuti, same issue of *Critical Inquiry*, 174–200. Through a reading of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and a translation of Hegel’s terms *Aufheben* and *Aufhebung* into the French *relever* and *relève*, Derrida proposes that the “relevant” translation be thought of in terms of an elevation and replacement that preserves/seasons what it denies or destroys (thus bringing out the quality/taste of the original even better).
- 27 Johannes Fabian, “If It Is Time, Can It Be Mapped?” review of *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, by Eviatar Zerubavel, *History and Theory* 44 (February 2005): 119n13. See also Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983).
- 28 Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” in *Fictions of Empire: Complete Texts with Introduction, Historical Context, Critical Essays*, ed. John Kucich (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 375 (hereafter cited in text). Achebe’s essay was originally published in *Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature, the Arts and Public Affairs* 18 (1977): 782–94.
- 29 In this regard, I find this passage by Natalie Melas pertinent, especially if the words “comparison” and “comparatist” are (for the purposes of this discussion) replaced by “intercultural translation” and “intercultural translator”: “If culture is a limit that only appears when two entities come into contact, and a limit therefore that does not enclose cultures on the model of subjects but reciprocally marks them off as singular, then comparison as the appearing-in-common of that limit is conceivable as an act of enunciation from that limit, not from a magisterial and transcendent position beyond it. The position of such a comparatist is not separable from cultural limits and limitations.” Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 103. See also 85–90 for a helpful assessment of the debates around Achebe’s critique of Conrad as well as a shrewd analysis of Achebe’s essay.
- 30 For an exploration of the paradoxes of monolingualism, in the form of the double postulation “We only ever speak one language” and “We never speak only one language,”

see Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 7, 8, 10, and throughout. Derrida calls this double postulation “the very law of what is called translation” (10). For Derrida, the phrase “monolingualism of the other” suggests not only colonial hegemony, as is indicated in his own history with the French language as an Algerian Jew, but also a promise, in the sense of the absence of all metalanguage: “The *of* signifies not so much property as provenance: language is for the other, coming from the other, *the* coming of the other” (68; Derrida’s emphases); “it is always up to a language to summon the heterological opening that permits it to speak of something else and to address itself to the other” (69).

31 Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 75–77.