Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 18(67) No. 1 – 2025
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2025.67.18.3.15

Translation and the Borders of Contemporary Japanese Literature: Inciting Difference – **Victoria Young – 2024.**

Routledge, 142 pages

ISBN 9781032564869

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Language carries culture, meaning, and moreover "translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems" (Bassnett and Harish 1999, 2). Drawing on Bassnett and Harish's assertion, it can be inferred that translation is a daunting task for anyone to undertake; as skilled as one may be, there will always be lingering questions such as 'What changed from the original to its translated counterpart?' 'How does the story *exist* now?'.

Victoria Young's *Translation and the Borders of Contemporary Japanese Literature: Inciting Difference* is a welcomed book that attempts to answer such questions. It is an incisive intervention in the intertwined fields of translation studies, Japanese literary studies, and the more general field of world literature.

In her study, Young uses resources from critical theory, historical analysis, and close readings, in order to bring into the foreground the continuously changing Japanese literature's trans-border identity, thus offering a fresh perspective on the complexities of literature and translation.

Young graciously encompasses a range of issues from loss of identity to marginalization and marketability in this book that is structured in two introductory chapters followed by three chapters that investigate untranslated works of fiction from the perspective of translatability, and, finally, an epilogue to the study. The author situates her research within the contemporary discourse of 'world literature' and 'translation superpower', examining how the goal and the global trajectory of Japanese literature are ultimately shaped by the ongoing translation

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practices around the world. By bringing into the discussion prominent figures of Japanese literature, namely Sakiyama Tami, Yi Yang-ji, and Tawada Yōko, Young discusses the connections between multilingualism, postcolonial identities, and the commodification of translation.

In addition, *Inciting Difference*, the book's subtitle, announces the critical orientation the discourse in the book oftentimes will take. From this point of view, the author will look at translation not as a seamless bridge, but as an intrusive rupture between the original work and its translated counterpart. This is apparent even in the deeper meaning of the Japanese word for translation, '翻訳' (hon'yaku), or, in Young's words,

> Whereas the Latin etymology of the prefix *trans-* guides English speakers to imagine translation as a lateral movement that creates a bridge across spaces and borders, hon'yaku incorporates the ideogram 翻る (hirugaeru) that means *to flutter*, *to turn over*, or *to suddenly change*. (p. 11)

Chapter 1: The "trans-border" turn delves into the rise of 'trans-border literature' (ekkyō bungaku) in Japanese literary studies. Young traces its origins to Imafuku Ryūta's concept of border-crossing as a tool for decolonial critique and contrasts this with its later appropriation as a marker of globalization. In a generalized note, border-crossing refers to "the work of translation that transports literary works and facilitates their encounters with a new and increasing international readership in other languages" (p. 17). In this context, the concept was shifted by Imafuku to refer to the larger context of 'world literature', thus the creation of the term 'trans-border' as a means "to valorise the literary production of writers located outside of the canon as migrants and colonial subjects, and to forge new solidarities that are not governed by the structures of either the nation or the empire" (p. 17).

The chapter further discusses the marginalization of multilingual and diasporic authors, such as Okinawan and Zainichi writers, and examines how the term 'trans-border' has been recontextualized to reflect contemporary concerns about inclusion and diversity.

Starting with *Chapter 1* and then with purposeful insistence throughout the study, Young addresses the distinction between 'Nihon bungaku' ('Japanese literature') and the neological notion of 'Nihongo bungaku' ('literature written in Japanese') as a critical turning point regarding the way we perceive translation and, more specifically, the translation of Japanese literature.

Young critiques how the label 'Nihon bungaku' often assumes a homogeneity that excludes works by non-Japanese authors who write in Japanese, all this against

the backdrop of Kawamori's claim that "the Japanese language and its literature had to be *remade*" which actually would entail a return "to language and translation as key concerns within the *trans-border* literary studies of the present." (p. 24). The author questions whether national identity or linguistic medium should define literature, highlighting the constant tension between cultural heritage and linguistic expression. She thus illustrates the idea of authors who challenge boundaries with examples coming from the authors Tawada Yōko and Yang Yi. Tawada writes in both Japanese and German, while Yang Yi, a Chinese-born author, learned Japanese as an adult and received the Akutagawa Prize, all while writing in their non-native language.

By focusing on the act of translation, Young draws attention to how 'literature written in Japanese' can gain international recognition while simultaneously complicating its placement within Nipponic borders. If we look at works by writers such as the critically acclaimed and publicly adored Murakami Haruki, who is often considered emblematic of Japanese literature, we see that such works are shaped significantly by the process of translation and the global publishing industry.

Young discusses how inadvertently making a hierarchy and placing 'Japanese literature' above 'literature written in Japanese' marginalizes certain voices, particularly those of colonized or diasporic communities. She also explores how these distinctions affect what is deemed 'translatable' and ultimately how marketability in the context of literary works shape the perceptions of Japanese literature around the globe.

In *Chapter 2: Translating the Literary Past* Young discusses how translation has historically shaped Japanese literature's identity, particularly in the post-World War II era. The chapter explores the connection between literature, cultural remediation, and Japan's global image during the Cold War, while finely critiquing the marginalization of non-mainstream voices, such as Okinawan writers, in the narrative of postwar literary recovery. The author brings to the fore the entire timeframe of the Heisei era (Jan 8, 1989 – Apr 30, 2019), when the switch was made from Japanese literature seen as "an object of concern according to the Japan Foundation in 1988, to the subject of international celebration symbolized by *The Emissary*'s success at the National Book Awards in 2018" (p. 31) and, with that, the creation of what we call 'post disaster literature'. The disaster that deeply affected and inadvertently inspired many authors and scholars to channel their feelings into something tangible was the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that devastated Japan on the 11th of March 2011.

The ramifications of the disaster in the literary world could be, in Young's perception, split into three: material, genre-wise, and regenerating. The first refers

to two translated works of Japanese literature that were awarded at the National Book Awards, and which both allude to the tragic event in different ways. As Young puts it, in Tawada's *The Emissary,* the event is discussed "euphemistically, as in the haunting presence of some prior catastrophe" (p. 32) or head on as in Yū Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station*. The second, genre-wise, points to Kimura Saeko's publication *Shinsaigo bungaku ron: Atarashii Nihon bungaku no tame ni* (Post-disaster literature: Towards a new Japanese literature) in 2013, when the idea of 'post-disaster literature' was flagged as worthy of scholarly attention. And the third references the title of Kimura's publication, which suggests the regeneration and rejuvenation of Japanese literature.

Through close reading of two essays situated on opposing sides of the pre-/post-disaster chasm, one written by Sakiyama Tami in 2003 and the other by Murakami Haruki only three months after the 2011 tragedy, the author questions whether what Kimura coined as 'new Japanese literature' truly rejuvenated the area of literature or if, on the contrary, it marginalized other aspects of Japanese literature.

Following these first two chapters, which have laid the foundation for her findings, Young carries on her study by employing three texts as her canvas for analysis in order to show that "just because a text is not visible in the global domain does not mean that it does not exist or cannot be read" (p. 7-8). Consequently, chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with the works of Sakiyama Tami, Yi Yangi-ji, and Tawada Yoko, whereby Young challenges the idea of what a 'translatable' or, the opposite, an 'untranslatable' text entails, and whether this quality is something forced upon the literary discourse or it happens naturally.

Focusing on the works of the Okinawan writer Sakiyama Tami, in *Chapter 3: Inciting the Past / Sakiyama Tami,* Young analyzes the author's use of language as a way of disrupting conventional narratives. Sakiyama's works incorporate Okinawan dialects and wordplay, challenging the usage of standard Japanese and highlighting issues such as historical amnesia, colonialism, and cultural identity. Throughout her works, Sakiyama aims to shatter the boundaries of the often marginalized and misunderstood Okinawan literature and bring it closer to the *universal* collective (p. 50).

Young also highlights Sakiyama's concept of inciting difference - the act of writing as a form of resistance against the generalization and commodification of literature. Sakiyama's works have been criticized by scholars for not adhering to standard Japanese language ideals, and, instead, keeping Okinawan words in her texts. In response to the criticism received, Sakiyama wrote in her essay that her goal while using the Okinawan dialect was not to force "some regional identity or other" (p. 54), but instead to simply attempt "to dismantle the position of

Okinawan words that have been swept up against their will into standard-like Japanese" (p. 54).

The articulation and understanding of the past and of one's identity is a theme of interest for Sakiyama, but it is also a subject discussed in Yi Yang-ji's works. *Chapter 4: Translating the Gaps / Yi Yang-ji* deals with the works of 'zainichi' Korean writer, Yi Yang-ji, who navigates themes of identity, silence and loss. Young explores how Yi's writing addresses the gaps created by historical and cultural displacement. In Young's view, Yi's desire to reclaim what was indeed rightfully hers, namely her Korean identity, represents, in the grand scheme of things, "a more significant move to challenge the violence with which the Japanese colonial authorities transformed Koreans into loyal *imperial subjects* (kōmin)" (p. 72). By focusing on untranslated works, Young emphasizes Yi's resistance to homogenization and her challenge to readers and translators to confront the incommensurable aspects of her narratives. Yi's works showcase the same ideas Sakiyama focuses on in her perception of the loss of one's voice and therefore their identity. Also, Yi chooses to have an absent protagonist both in *Kazukime* (1983) and *Yuhi* (1988), thus creating a visible, tangible absence in the story. Young's assessment is that "silences and absences highlight the ways in which Korean voices, especially those of women, have been erased and forgotten from history." (p. 73)

Flowing from canvassing Sakiyama's discourse on Okinawan literature and Yi' works on identity and absence of a personal voice shown through absent, ghostly narrators, the following author's narrators also "subvert the transgressive image of 'trans-border' by appearing damaged, haunted, trapped, and mute" (p. 92). Tawada Yōko's translingual and transnational works become the focus of the final chapter, *Chapter 5: Beyond "Trans-Border" / Tawada Yōko*. Writing in Japanese and in German, Tawada defies categorization as either a Japanese or German writer. Tawada's works exemplify the potential to shatter linguistic and cultural boundaries while revealing the limits of global literary frameworks through the means of literature.

> By drawing a distinction between the *border* (*kyō kai*) and the *national border* (*kokkyō*), Tawada reveals the border itself to be multiple and varied, and in so doing, she makes possible an alternative scenario in which not every act of translation – in the trans-border sense – is transgressive. (p. 98)

Through careful examination of Sakiyama's linguistic hybridity, Yi's thematic silences, and Tawada's translingual narratives, Victoria Young underscores the materiality of language as a site of resistance. These writers' works defy

homogenizing impulses, foregrounding disruptions that resist easy translation into global literary frameworks.

The methodological approach in Young's work is exemplary as it synthesizes deconstruction, historical contextualization, and close textual analysis. Her treatment of Okinawan and Zainichi texts and other marginal literatures evidences a commitment to disrupting hierarchies within standard Japanese literary studies. Most importantly, the book focuses on the politics of translation as a soft power tool while also critiquing global literary markets - things that make the critical points on how cultural products get commodified in the Anglophone world.

Since the book's focus lies solely on untranslated works from the discussed authors, some might argue this is a weak point as it limits accessibility for readers unfamiliar with the Japanese language. One might read Young's study and, in turn, wish to engage in a deeper self-study of sorts. Then, one could read the works of the three authors and decide whether the points made in Young's study are valid; alternatively, one might simply want to enjoy reading the works of the three authors. While choosing untranslated works was the point of showcasing the way translation and identity are seen in the grand scheme of world literature, the analyzed works themselves are difficult to cater to global audiences.

Translation and the Borders of Contemporary Japanese Literature: Inciting Difference is a groundbreaking contribution to the fields of translation studies and Japanese literature studies. This book invites a radical rethinking of translation and its role in shaping literary canons while also masterfully achieving exactly what the author set to accomplish with her study which was "to delineate the ways in which Japanese literature itself is constructed through translation, and in the roles that translation has played in driving Japanese literary studies (…) as academic disciplines" (p. 3).

Victoria Young's work challenges readers to reconsider the power dynamics embedded in literary production of any kind and the dissemination of those productions, advocating for a more inclusive treatment in the realm of 'world literature'. This book is an essential resource for scholars of Japanese literature, translation studies, and global literary theory alike.

References

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