FORUM ON TRANSLATION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

1.

THE PREDICAMENT OF IDEAS IN CULTURE:
TRANSLATION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Rather than a simple transfer of words or texts from one language to another, on the model of the bilingual dictionary, translation has become understood as a translingual act of transcoding cultural material—a complex act of communication. Much recent work on translation in history grows out of interest in the effects of European colonialism, especially within Asian studies, where interest has been driven by the contrast between the experiences of China and Japan, which were never formally colonized, and the alternative examples of peoples without strong, centralized states—those of the Indian subcontinent and the Tagalog in the Philippines—who were colonized by European powers. This essay reviews several books published in recent years, one group of which share the general interpretation that colonial powers forced their subjects to “translate” their local language, sociality, or culture into the terms of the dominant colonial power: because the colonial power controls representation and forces its subjects to use the colonial language, it is in a position to construct the forms of indigenous and subject identity. The other books under review here are less concerned with power in colonial situations than with the fact of different languages, cultures, or practices and the work of “translating” between the two—particularly the efforts of indigenous agents to introduce European ideas and institutions to their respective peoples.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the study of translation in history has been transformed. Where it was once a metaphor for new strategies of intellectual history, it is now an object of sophisticated epistemological inquiry. Under the tutelage of linguistic and literary theory, moreover, we now understand translation in a manner quite differently from two decades ago. Translation is no longer a simple transfer of words or texts from one language to another, on the model of the bilingual dictionary, or the bridging of language differences between people. Rather than a straightforward operation performed on words, translation has become a translingual act of transcoding cultural material—a complex act of communication. In the process, translation has come to engage the fact of deep and problematic relationships among forms of writing, idiomatic uses of language, variants of “register” that alert one to markers of class and gender, and structures of

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thought that begin to give cultures their distinctive outlooks. Hence the outcome of these relationships is not necessarily a common idiom, but a series of negotiations involving untranslatability, incommensurability, and the risk of unbridgeable gaps between peoples and cultures.

It should come as no surprise that much recent work on translation in history grows out of interest in the effects of European colonialism. With the expansion of mercantilism in the sixteenth century, the literate cultures of seafaring western Europe—Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, England, and France—initiated contacts with a host of peoples around the globe, which could only grow in cultural and linguistic complexity. Whether Europeans destroyed the literary records of overseas civilizations such as the Maya, or colonized so many overseas peoples outright, or at least established trade relations, their long-term interactions made a necessity of mediating language differences: the formal study of languages and processes of translation was one set of consequences. Another important outcome of this cultural contact was to further the development of European anthropology, which of course has had significant bearing on the development of translation studies.

As it happens, the greater part of the work on translation as historical process in the past decade has been accomplished within Asian studies. Interest in the problem of translation has been driven especially by the experiences of China and Japan, which strongly contrast with so many other regions of the world. China and Japan were never formally colonized, and Chinese intelligence about European activity in Africa and south Asia—acquired by the Japanese in due course—alerted officials in China and Japan to the need for learning about “the West” in order to avoid the fate of those who had failed to retain their autonomy from Western force. Because China and Japan were centralized states with long literary, educational, and historical traditions, and because the Westerners whom they first encountered were Jesuit missionaries hoping to persuade them of the truth of Christianity, initial contacts between China and the West, and Japan and the West, immediately engaged the problem of mediating language differences through formal translation procedures. But at the same time, Asian studies has also examined the alternative examples of peoples without strong, centralized states, who were consequently colonized by European powers—in particular, those of the Indian subcontinent, with their multiple literary traditions equal to those of China and Japan, and the Tagalog in the Philippines, who lacked both a centralized state and literary tradition. This is not to imply that the peoples of Asia deserve more attention than do peoples elsewhere, or that peoples with oral traditions are inherently less interesting than those with literary traditions, but to acknowledge that Asian studies scholars have given more attention to translation in history than scholars of other regions of the world.

In fact, given the coincident rise of the postcolonial world and modernization theory in the 1950s—which sought to provide for the newly emerging states a model of development based on the Japanese experience—it is surprising that more research has not been done on translation processes with the rise of moder-
nity in postcolonial societies. As the case of Japan demonstrates, the importation and/or adaptation of Western institutions requires some understanding of the sociopolitical, scientific, and economic principles that inform industrial capitalism. The Japanese realized in the 1860s that study of the cultural and educational foundations of the West was critical for developing the institutions central to Western strength and prosperity—and which promised to safeguard Japan’s autonomy. Research on the translation of ideas and institutions should seem even more compelling with the turn of attention to globalization in the past decade, particularly in light of efforts to encourage the development of civil society in postcolonial and formerly “communist” nations as the sociopolitical foundations of a “free economy.” One motive of this essay, in other words, is to encourage scholars to consider the formative role of intercultural translation in the processes of globalization as they have intensified in the past five centuries. But my intention here is not to review in detail the wealth of writing on inter-cultural contacts, processes of colonization, and language and culture shifts. My main concern is the ways in which historians have examined translation specifically as a historical process.

This essay examines recent books that share the topic of translation as a historical problem. Some of these books address practices of colonialism and the domination of an indigenous group by a colonial power—as I noted above, colonial powers often succeeded in the absence of a strong centralized state. These include: Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (1991); Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (1992); and Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (1988). An interpretive perspective largely shared among these authors is that the colonial powers forced their subjects to “translate” their local language, sociality, or culture into the terms of the dominant colonial power. Two key concepts in this approach are representation and identity; because the colonial power controls representation and forces its subjects to use the colonial language, it is in a position to construct the forms of indigenous and subject identity. Informing this metaphorical equation between textual representations and the historical experiences of colonial subjects is a principle of mimesis—that texts mirror historical events.

But other books under review share a different approach, and are less concerned with the transgressions of power in colonial situations than with the fact of different languages, cultures, or practices and the work of “translating” between the two, whether on the part of agents in the historical past or scholars motivated to treat the translation of cultural differences. These include: Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (1995); Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (1997); Frederic C. Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (1998); and a collection of essays, *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global*
Circulations, edited by Lydia H. Liu (1999). A common interest here is the work of Chinese and Japanese to introduce European ideas to their respective peoples—with the exception of Schaffer’s work, which treats the translation and understanding of political forms in postcolonial Senegal.

In brief, all of these works afford an examination of two fundamentally different approaches to the study of translation as historical process: one, as a project forced upon a local population by a colonial power; the other, as an acknowledgment of differences between languages or groups that invites some mediation between or explanation of differences.

II. COLONIALISM AND TRANSLATION: HISTORICAL AND TEXTUAL EVENTS

The books that approach translation from a concern with colonialism share a recurring mimetic assumption borrowed from literary theory—that texts sufficiently represent the world. While it is reasonable for historians to engage literary theory—scholars of both history and literature share the close reading of texts as a key method—the risk in proceeding from an interest in mimesis is John Toews’s fear that experience might be reduced to meaning.²

Let us look at three works: Eric Cheyfitz’s The Poetics of Imperialism, Tejaswini Niranjana’s Siting Translation, and Vicente L. Rafael’s Contracting Colonialism. In Cheyfitz, to begin with, the Spanish conquest of Mexico is commensurable with Shakespeare’s play The Tempest. Because Cheyfitz assumes that everything human is discursive, Columbus is as real and as relevant as Prospero—or, more to Cheyfitz’s point, Shakespeare’s Caliban is the Carib cannibal destroyed by Columbus, and both are equivalent metaphors and signs of the violence of European imperialism.³ His assertion of the equivalence of historical and creative metaphors permits Cheyfitz to treat translation as essentially the use of figurative language, or the proposal of metaphors to interpret what is different from ourselves.⁴ In a colonial situation, he argues, the language of the weaker is always reduced to that of the more powerful, and accordingly, the translation between our culture and other cultures has typically taken place within “our

². In his well-known review of intellectual history “after the linguistic turn,” John Toews applauded the new history for moving analysis further beyond the traditional history of ideas. He noted the introduction of meaning and experience as new categories in historical analysis. However, Toews alerted readers to a potential problem that threatened to undermine the coherence of the new intellectual history: the way it was using the categories of meaning and experience. Although these new categories were not meant to “replicate the old polarities of thought and reality, consciousness and being, but would encourage an integrated concept of historical reality as meaningful experience,” Toews nonetheless concluded that the new intellectual history engaged in a new kind of reductionism, “the reduction of experience to the meanings that shape it,” accompanied by the intellectual hubris that wordmakers become makers of reality. (John Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” American Historical Review 97 [1987], 880, 906.)


⁴. See ibid., 35-38 for Cheyfitz’s explanation of translation as metaphor, and chapter 3 on “property” for an illustration of his transfiguration of historical actuality into history as open-ended possibility.
English culture”—from English colonists systematically distorting the Algonquin understanding of their ruler Powhatan—not a “king” but a *weroance*—to U. S. foreign policy in the 1980s, where President Reagan systematically distorted a variety of relations by reducing them to the figurative terms of an “East–West conflict.” The problem Cheyfitz poses, then, is how to restore a “dialogic relation of translation” and to allow the illiterate, inarticulate, or subordinated to free themselves from the confines of imperial language and to articulate their identity within their own culture or language. He turns from history to future possibility.

Tejaswini Niranjana engages in a similar argument and strategy. Although much of her book is admittedly a literary discussion of allegory as a model for history, she engages history, like Cheyfitz, in the context of colonialism and with a disposition to treat translation as a colonial device that subordinates natives to colonial powers. Her examination of William Jones in late eighteenth-century India, for example, explains how Jones interpretively translated the laws of Manu as a means of providing the Indians with a coherent set of their own laws. Where another scholar might dismiss Jones’s arrogant grandiosity and critique his work as an expression of imperial British attitudes, Niranjana instead argues that Jones’s remarks about the pagan Indians as impure, disgusting, and so on, are constitutive representations of Indians. Jones’s absurd and offensive remarks are key components of a systematic construction of the colonial Indian subject, a construction based on “symbolic domination” (a phrase borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu), a violent process that “effectively reproduce[s] the social order through a combination of recognition and misrecognition.” Colonized Indians presumably (mis)recognize themselves in Jones’s representations of Indians, and thus recolonize themselves in daily life, which provides an internal basis of colonization more powerful than outward political control and serves to maintain the asymmetric power relations characteristic of colonialism. Apparently, hapless Indians forthwith succumbed to these “authoritative versions of the Eastern self.” In any event, insofar as translation practices have informed Jones’s and his peers’ translations of Indian texts, translation becomes “a significant technology of colonial domination.”

Niranjana theorizes that translation, as a “strategy of containment,” brings into being and reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonized, who thus acquire the status of representations or “objects without history.” For her, “historicity” is “that part of the past that is still operable in the present,” and it is with no sense of irony that Niranjana splices past and present together, for her notion of “representation” deliberately elides historical time in a manner that few historians would imitate. That she understands history as the past in the present is to diverge from a historicist understanding of historiography; as R. G. Collingwood pointed out in the 1930s and E. H. Carr in the 1960s, history is the asking of questions that assist us in interpreting the past, questions that solicit the facts we

choose to interpret. While I would agree with Niranjana on certain shortcomings of much written history—the focus on origins and the embedding of events in predetermined or progressive histories—I am not optimistic about Niranjana’s hope for a “translator/historian” who will “translate (that is, disturb or displace) history rather than to interpret it (hermeneutically) or ‘read’ it (in a textualizing move).”9 Her own example of a “post-colonial” or “deconstructive” translation claims to avoid either reproducing essentialist anti-colonial narratives like nationalism or privileging Western or post-colonial intellectuals’ hegemonies. Rather than reproduce the conditions of neocolonialism, she would engage in a “political intervention in the political rewriting of the text”—to “re-write history,” if you will.10 But Niranjana’s engaging and learned analysis of previous translations of a twelfth-century South India “sacred” poem, a vacana, followed by her own critical retranslation, is precisely what one would expect from an intelligent reader and scholar: a new translation that improves upon the others by criticizing their overlays of Vedic or Christian metaphysics.11 But can we call this a “political intervention”? To leave both a proper name (Guhesvara) and a key concept (linga) “in the original” within her translation is, perhaps, to engage in the dialogic translation that she advocates—to introduce heterogeneity into the English language, and to privilege the broken pieces from which the translation is made. But that is what many conscientious translators have struggled at for centuries. To return to the anti-colonial project that informs her first two chapters—and Niranjana (as well as Cheyfitz) would shun such an integrative move, which raises suspicions of domination—I am at a loss as to imagine how her informative retranslation of this short poem will provide the authentic self-images necessary to undo the misrecognition that recolonizes the Indian masses daily.

If Cheyfitz and Niranjana proceed as though cultural worlds are sufficiently representable in texts, that historical events are textual events, and that texts can determine the meaning of historical experience, Vicente L. Rafael’s work is an important point of comparison. Although he too at times traces this mimetic and anti-historical trajectory encouraged by literary theory—when, for example, he analyzes a nineteenth-century Philippine novel for what it tells us about Tagalog life two centuries earlier—that is rare in his work.12 For Rafael is committed to the history of relations between Castilian-speaking Spaniards and Tagalog-speaking peoples in the Spanish colony of the Philippines. In particular, he analyzes Spanish attempts to convert Tagalog society to Christianity. Like Cheyfitz, however, he abstracts “translation” from acts of translation and uses the concept metaphorically; in the course of the book, Rafael asserts metaphorical identifications of translation with conversion, confession, the reciprocity of gift-giving, submission, and death. In the same way that Spaniards and Tagalogs attempted to translate between their languages, so too the Spaniards attempted to convert

10. Ibid., 167–172.
11. Ibid., 174–186.
Tagalogs to Christianity—to Rafael, both translation and conversion are substitutions of one thing for another. But as Niranjana has argued, these colonial relations are always asymmetrical—it is the Spaniards who command authority and undertake the conversion of the Tagalogs. Hence Rafael’s main thesis is that translation and conversion were both modes of action that mediated the Spaniards’ abilities to colonize Tagalog society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Rafael improves upon the textual determinism of Cheyfitz and Niranjana, for his purpose is ultimately not to critique intercultural relations in the past and to hope for some better practices that produce more authentic identities. Rather, he analyzes intercultural relations as historical events for what they can tell us about the construction of authority, hierarchy, and communication. In *Contracting Colonialism*, translation is not so much the ability to speak in a language other than one’s own than the capacity to reshape one’s thoughts and actions in accordance with accepted forms. Although translation might thus signal Tagalog submission to the conventions of Spanish social order, it is not so much a process of Tagalogs simply internalizing colonial-Christian conventions—as Niranjana argued regarding Indians internalizing Jones’s representations. Rather, Rafael is interested in how Tagalogs evaded the totalizing grip of Spanish-Christian conventions by marking differences between Tagalog and Castilian Spanish.

Rafael offers an insightful analysis of the effects of such language translation in colonial society. Based on his discussion of an early grammar created for Tagalog by Francisco Blancas de San José in 1610, *Arte y reglas de la lengua tagala*, Rafael speculates that translation work encouraged an abstract notion of language and allowed the Spaniards to separate the natives from their language. Spaniards understood that language exists independently of a community of particular hearers and speakers, so that any such community can learn different languages. Indeed, the effort to colonize becomes especially an effort to teach the colonized a new language. At the same time, Rafael asserts that translation always leads to the emergence of hierarchy. Spanish missionaries imagined a hierarchy of languages, which descended from God, such that Latin was closest to the “Word of God,” followed by Castilian Spanish, with Tagalog distant in space and purity. Because translation is embedded in social relations, translation was intimately involved in the hierarchies asserted by the Spaniards. Christian conversion and translation both involved “the sublation of all signs and speech to the sacred Sign of God, Christ.” Communion, like the conversation based in translation, establishes the hierarchy of those who administer from those who are dependent. And the confessional conversation in which the Spanish priest “counseled” the Tagalog native depended on the hierarchical mode of interrogation.

But as one might expect, Tagalog translation can work against the production of hierarchy. In 1610 a contemporary of Blancas de San José, Tomas Pinpin, a

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13. Ibid., ix-xi, 34f.
14. Ibid., 210f.
15. Ibid., 26-39, 211.
16. Ibid., 91f.
17. Ibid., 92-94, 97, 103-105.
Tagalog who worked as a printer, published a book to assist Tagalog speakers in learning Castilian, *Librong Paraaralan nang manga Tagalog nang uicang Castila*. Pinpin stressed translation less as a linguistic transaction than as useful knowledge for engaging the Spaniards, less a transaction between inferior concretizations of God’s universal language than as a “serial displacement of one’s first language by a second” and a leap back to the first, in order to alert and habituate the native Tagalogs to the interruptive effects of Castilian Spanish. Rafael argues that, in effect, Pinpin undermined the hierarchical relation between Spanish and Tagalog that the Spaniards had assumed in their claims to political and linguistic authority. Such a point is reiterated in Rafael’s discussion of confession, a ritualized interaction that reproduced a hierarchical relation between Spanish priest and Tagalog convert, but often found the latter with nothing to say.18

Rafael’s most original and powerful discussion in *Contracting Colonialism* is the problem of “untranslatability.” To Rafael, untranslatability is an indication of the purity of key terms like *Dios*, *Virgen*, and so on, which were left in Latin or Castilian forms rather than replaced with local and allegedly impure variants. Where the Spaniards assumed an inadequacy on the part of Tagalog to speak such terms of Christianity, Tagalog conceptions (what early missionaries called “superstitions”) actively interfered with key Spanish understandings—like the spirit world of the soul—by bringing an “outside” within the domain of Christianity. Rafael’s account of indigenous conceptions like *nono*, which denotes grandparents (whether living or dead), as well as spirits emanating from objects in nature (trees, rocks, rivers), is an especially instructive example of the incommensurability of Castilian and Tagalog when they met in efforts at Christian conversion.19 Since a term like “spirit” was left in the Castilian original (*Espíritu Santo*), rather than being translated into Tagalog, the untranslatable alerted Tagalog natives to the demands of their Spanish authorities, and facilitated deferring to those authorities, but at the same time preserved an outside space where the Tagalog could elude the meaning and intent of Castilian signs. Rafael would have us believe that key Tagalog terms like *nono* rendered the transcultural relations at the heart of colonization and Christian conversion inoperable. In part, he is more convincing than, say, Niranjana, because he does not claim that this interior and cultural “outside” is a space of meaningful political opposition. Rather, and somberly, it harmonizes with a Tagalog conception of reuniting with the spirits of the dead, so that the Tagalog reconceptualization (or “translation”) of Christianity served to reinvent death, and ultimately, to reconcile Tagalogs to the demands of colonial authority, which included the Christian notion of death.20

III. TRANSLATION IN THE EXPLANATION OF DIFFERENCES

If these works engaged with translation in a colonial context occasionally invite a reduction of historical experience to textual representation—and I am by no

means offhandedly dismissing the value of literary criticism—the works that specifically pursue translation in order to explain historical encounters and cultural differences have much more to offer the study of translation in history. The contrast stems from two differences in scholarly motives. In the first place, Lydia H. Liu (in *Translingual Practice*), Naoki Sakai (in *Translation and Subjectivity*), and Frederic C. Schaffer (in *Democracy in Translation*), all undertake rigorous explanations of the meaning of concepts as they were used in history; the three value specificity and process in the manner encouraged by the example of Quentin Skinner. Thus they do not engage in the metaphorical shifts that we see in Cheyfitz, Niranjana, and Rafael. Rather, Liu, Sakai, and Schaffer painstakingly specify their objects of analysis—Sakai the metaphysics of subjectivity informing Japan’s national identity; Liu the concept of “translingual” in China’s engagement with modernity; and Schaffer the multiple understandings of “democracy” informing political practice in Senegal. Because all three authors recognize the fact that concepts are contestable, their books propose a rigorous and historical analysis of the meaning of words and actions in translation.

Moreover, these three scholars—as well as the contributors to *Tokens of Exchange*—are unwilling to rest content with, in Liu’s words, “the irony that, in the very act of criticizing Western domination, one often ends up reifying the power of the dominator to a degree that the agency of non-Western cultures is reduced to a single possibility: resistance.” All three reject a simple opposition of domination and resistance in a colonial setting; rather than view colonialism as a situation that creates victims whose identification with their masters pro-


22. As Skinner had originally proposed in his critique of the abstraction of the traditional history of ideas, historians would do better to construct contexts for ideas not from their alleged meanings but from the usage of words in actual texts. Skinner proposed that we not think of ideas as responses to immediate circumstances and rest content to place texts within their social and political contexts; rather, we should try to recover the complex and entirely contingent intention of the author of a given text, which, he hoped, would yield a productive dialogue between philosophical discussion and historical evidence. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 39f. Although Skinner has been criticized for emphasizing intention, his approach is far from being a psychological or idealist attempt to get at interior motives of thinkers. Rather, he has described this intentionality precisely in terms of action: he wants to be able to describe what “authors were doing in writing” texts, in order to “see not merely what arguments they were presenting, but also what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and conventions of political debate.” Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume One: The Renaissance* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1978), xiii. See Lotte Mulligan, Judith Richards, and John Graham, “Intentions and Conventions: A Critique of Quentin Skinner’s Method for the Study of the History of Ideas,” *Political Studies* 27 (1979), 84-98; and James H. Tully’s defense of Skinner, “Review Article: The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner’s Analysis of Politics,” *British Journal of Political Science* 13 (1983), 489-509.

duces a debilitating passivity, Liu, Sakai, and Schaffer are much more interested in the motives of historical agents and the meaning of their actions—those who translate grapple creatively with their environments in attempting to construct some possibly better idiom.

Liu examines the historical context of Chinese engagements with Western linguistic, literary, and cultural forms; in particular, she questions Chinese motives in engaging national character, individualism, first-person narratives, national essence, and national literature, as well as the temporal contingency of such engagements. Indeed, the most valuable aspect of Liu’s work for the intellectual or cultural historian is her persistence in explaining what I would call the “conditions of possibility” for creating new discussions based on neologisms and novel practices. Liu explains, for example, the role of national character and its dominant category, national identity, in the context of Western imperialism, which informed Chinese attempts to define the modern nation-state. The concept of national character facilitated a number of proposals that linked race, state, and religion, but generally the force of national character was to criticize Chinese as unfit for modernity. Liu demonstrates that although the fact of translation established some relation between “national character” and the Chinese translation word guominxing, the precise meaning of the latter would be determined by Chinese users.24

Liu’s analysis of “individualism” is particularly instructive for its paradoxical range of meanings. She asks: how does the rhetoric of individualism engage notions of Chinese modernity and a universal humanism? In Chinese popular press debates over individualism from the 1900s to the 1920s, individualism was presented as an antidote to both conservative tradition and Western materialism, as well as the solution for either a revival of Confucianism or the foundation of a new socialism. To participants in the modernist and anti-traditional movements that began during Europe’s First World War, the egocentric individual provided the possibility for a break with tradition and old literary habits and, in due course, individualism encouraged the opening of new arguments both for and against national or social collectivism. The tension between a modern self and national identity persisted throughout the introduction of Chinese concepts for “individual”; Liu argues that this embedding of “individual” in notions of nation, state, and society already distinguished the idea in Chinese from Western notions of individualism. Liu insightfully concludes that regardless of liberating the individual from the family or subjecting the individual to the state, individualism “contributed to the process of inventing geren [the individual] for the goals of liberation and national revolution.”25 Where other scholars have only noted individualism as a Western ideal and asserted that Chinese had trouble understand-

24. Ibid., 48f., 60. Or, as she adds in her discussion of psychological realism, one can begin to analyze the mind “when terms like xinli [psyche] and yuwang [desire] become translatable and when translingual modes of narration begin to reconfigure what is real and what is unreal about the human mind.” Ibid., 132.
25. Ibid., 78-95.
ing it, Liu targets the concept itself to demonstrate both what it meant (its range of meanings) and what it enabled Chinese agents to think and do.²⁶

An equal rigor and capacity for nuance is evident in Schaffer’s *Democracy in Translation*. Schaffer surveys a range of descriptive and operational definitions of democracy in previous comparative work on democracy; these are familiar measurements of the practice of democracy, based on predetermined criteria like numbers of candidates and parties, degree of suffrage, and voter turnout. He then outlines his own alternative tactic of conceptual analysis for determining the meaning of democracy in Senegal, which directs him to the usage of concepts, the relation of such concepts in a semantic field of related terms, and changes in the meaning and usage of these concepts in recent decades. To Schaffer, this work is above all the problem of naming the standards implicit in usages of “democracy.”²⁷ The central terms in his analysis are provided by the pair of languages dominant in Senegal—the French word *démocratie* and the Wolof loanword *demokaraasi*—and much of the book is a careful comparison of connotations suggested by Schaffer’s informants and media reports. Where *démocratie* had been related to metaphors of youthfulness and effective social engineering and, in the 1970s, came to connote a solution to the opposition between dictatorship and inclusive government—namely, the virtue of ruling and opposition parties alternating their turns at ruling the country—*demokaraasi* was instead related to practices at the mosque: the competition among muezzins for listeners, leadership via the selection of leaders in prayer, and a respect for laws.²⁸ Schaffer concludes that “democracy” in Senegal is especially a way to talk about consensus, solidarity, and evenhanded or equal treatment—its opposite is the dishonest and deceitful behavior of “politics.”²⁹ More importantly, however, where other scholars reportedly conclude that Senegal is a quasi- or semi-democracy, he offers an evaluation that, unlike the textual substitutes for politics we find in Cheyfitz and Niranjana, may very well provide suggestions for improving democracy in Senegal: civic and French-language education, and more directly, the secret ballot and opportunities for community networking.³⁰ By deliberately focusing on the standards implicit in usages of “democracy,” Schaffer draws our attention to a principle fundamental to his and Liu’s work: namely, that we understand concepts best through acts of comparison—not the comparison of originals and translations, but the comparison of sets of concepts as they are used.

IV. THE UNTRANSLATABLE AND INCOMMENSURATE

The question, ultimately, in all of these works is the purpose and consequence of acts of comparison. All of the authors reject the idea that the comparative work


of translation produces equivalences between languages in the manner of a bilingual dictionary. As Liu persuasively argues in both *Translingual Practice* and her introduction to *Tokens of Exchange*, we should examine the motives behind attempts to establish equivalences, and take care to understand the complementarity and difference surrounding putative originals and their translations. The object of our analyses should be the process of making meaning in acts of translation and the comparisons that they inspire. The question is, however, what to do with a comparison that reveals a fundamental or unbridgeable gap between two apparent opposites. As Rafael concluded with poetic force and insight, the fundamental gap between Spanish and Tagalog understandings of the spirit world was only resolved in death—a favorite analogy in cultural criticism for pointing to the radical otherness that evades our rational understanding.

For it is not enough to stop at the point of acknowledging differences. Otherwise, as Roger Hart so clearly argues in his contribution to *Tokens of Exchange*, comparison simply contributes to the unrigorous relativism of confirming differences between or among cultures or languages. Worse, and too often, the claim that a word or practice is fundamentally untranslatable or incommensurate risks diverting attention from the social and political history deserving of analysis. As Hart demonstrates in his critique of research on the category of “existence” in sixteenth-century translations from the Chinese, the framework of incommensurability necessarily omits important historical contexts: to deny that Chinese had a concept of existence, that translators therefore could not translate “being” into Chinese, and that Chinese therefore could not understand either Christianity or Western philosophy, is to create a cultural barrier that begs the habit of relativism in the face of actual Chinese understanding of Western philosophy.

It is precisely in relation to the work of comparison and the related question of the incommensurate that Naoki Sakai’s *Translation and Subjectivity* so forcefully-

31. That said, is is perplexing that Liu includes seven appendices that list neologisms in the manner of bilingual dictionaries. While these lists are interesting and perhaps useful, they are exactly contrary to the theoretical spirit motivating Liu’s introduction and first chapters. In spite of her disclaimer that she would ignore the principle of “semantic equation” operable in most studies of neologisms, her alternative principle of “ideographic coincidence”—referring simply to the use of existing Chinese-character compounds in the translation process, independent of their meaning—relies on an arbitrariness as problematic as that of mere shifts of meaning, for both semantic equation and ideographic coincidence privilege the criterion of origins, whether originary meaning or originary usage. Does it matter, for example, if neologisms have their origins in classical sources? The problem remains: can Liu or any scholar verify that the user of a neologism did in fact read the classical text in which a neologism first figured as a “pure” word? See *Translingual Practice*, 260-262, and 265-378 for the appendices.

32. Roger Hart, “Translating the Untranslatable: From Copula to Incommensurable Worlds,” in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, ed. Lydia H. Liu (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 57-59. An example of precisely the problem that Hart outlines is the recent collection, *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); several contributors announce the impossibility of translation and the infinite regress at the heart of the process (with pithy remarks on the order of “the original is already a mistranslation of a lost original”) and then propose “cultural translation” as “performance,” which seems only to raise the same questions already posed by translation theorists as to how texts “work” in different cultural environments.
ly challenges the assumptions surrounding the current study of translation. Sakai’s analysis is based on a judicious critique of the conventional understanding of translation. In the conventional view, most linguists and scholars assume the existence of national languages fully available to all constituent nationals; a Japanese national, for example, is competent in the Japanese language, just as a Chinese national is competent in Chinese. Such a view encourages the idea of “homolingual address” between “two unities of the translating and the translated languages as if they were autonomous and closed entities.” That is, the conventional view is “homolingual” in that it imagines one language being translated into another language on the part of nationals perfectly at home in their respective languages. As an alternative, Sakai draws our attention to the problem of “heterolingual address,” the potential confusion of hybridity and multiplicity that exists from the point of view of multilingual and independent speakers, whose regional and stylistic variations (and often mutual incomprehensions) make it impossible for us to identify with any honesty or exactitude a national language of Japan, China, the U. S., or any such national place. The “English language” poetry of Ezra Pound, for example, not only includes language other than English—Latin and Greek readily come to mind—but exhibits as well an erudite register utterly opaque to the illiterate English speaker. Sakai insists that in the absence of actual homolingual collectives—the “us” or “we” that I might refer to in speaking about my putative language group—communication depends upon speakers engaging in potentially endless acts of translation or interpretation. The translator is thus that person who occupies the ambiguous positionality between the addressee, an interpreter who recognizes that the initial incommensurability between addressee and addressee is in fact a gap and thus builds a bridge of sociality for the two.

Ultimately, Sakai understands translation as a mode of address that precedes communication. He conceives of translation as “a practice producing difference out of incommensurability rather than equivalence out of difference”; in that regard, he approaches translation in a powerfully “practical” sense, to ask “what actually happens in an effort of translation?” The consequence of this approach—and likely the most difficult aspect of Sakai’s theory for scholars committed to the conventional understanding—is that Sakai gives his greatest attention to the enunciative positionality of the observer: the speech situation in which the translator works. In other words, he foregrounds the translator’s subjectivity, as a problem of identifying and negotiating the two determinations of subjectivity: the epistemic subject (the grammatical “I” of speech, or transcendental ego); and the practical subject (the human being as an active, if unrepresentable, agent).

34. Ibid., 2f., 51.
35. Ibid., 11, 14.
But as Sakai rightly points out, it is hard even to talk about translation without resorting to the conventional understanding of the practice. Hence a great deal of Sakai’s argument engages the model of “homolingual address,” only to analyze and critique it. Given that Sakai understands translation as a mode of address that precedes communication, he focuses on the schema (or logic) of configuration that precedes the act of address that is translation. This schema or logic is none other than our own world of nation-states with cultures and languages that presume an integrative self-identity. Hence the majority of Sakai’s work concerns the condition of subjectivity provided by the schema of configuration, that interiority assumed to link the speaker’s body and subjectivity to the national language and culture of the given nation-state.38

This schema of configuration, within which we all live today, is in fact the logical structure whereby a duality is engendered, the (imagined) self and the other, as an effect of the self-representation of national communities. These are historically related to the rise of the nation-state, with its creation of a national language and literature ideologized through national education and standards of literacy. Hence Sakai also describes the schema of configuration as a “regime of translation” that is grounded in idealized pairs of one and another language/culture/self. Both schema and regime have given rise to the conventional notion of translation as a bridge to exchange equal values between the two wholes.39

Hence Sakai takes especial pains to point out two important consequences of the schema of configuration. First, because the concept of a foreign language serves as a regulative idea—it serves to delimit one’s own language as an independent entity through technologies like the bilingual dictionary—the “transcendental reduction” of languages and language styles to a national language (and

38. At this point, I would take issue with Sakai’s analysis of language, which is derived most from a phenomenological treatment of the linguistic pragmatics of scholars like John Searle and J. L. Austin. Such a position might describe language as a set of speech acts originating in the body; hence Sakai emphasizes the personalization of speech, which is the occasion for his analysis of subjectivity (xvi, 27-29). That is, he foregrounds the immediate position of translator, and justifies his position by asserting that “the description of cultural difference is always correlative with an act of inscribing and instituting specific social relations that necessarily involve” the observer/translator (120).

Such a view of language, however, has two corollary axioms that do not sit well with this reviewer. In the first place, Sakai treats texts as speech acts, in a manner perhaps analogous to Quentin Skinner, but he stresses that translation becomes a passage among speech acts composed of components of multilingual texts (27-29). Second, Sakai rebukes the depersonalization of discourse—an approach that he attributes to Foucault—which has given rise to a belief in the objectivity of language and discourse (18). But this reduction of texts to speech acts, the significance of which is most salient in the positionality of the translator/interpreter, would seem to fly in the face of the historical production and reception of texts. I think we must acknowledge the historicity of written languages and grant that the production of texts and discourses has tended to be framed in terms of single languages, in Europe at least since the development of translation practices in the 1300s. As many scholars other than Foucault have pointed out, the growth of written forms of vernacular languages in the 1200s began to encourage translation habits between languages like Italian and the more common written language of the Church, Latin. While this historical background is arguably merely the beginning of the current “regime of translation” with its nation-states, the priority of texts is implicit and cannot simply be ignored.

persons to national subjects) normalizes the regime of translation. The solution Sakai proposes is to cease thinking of ourselves as identifiably Japanese or Chinese, or to cease thinking of our language as Japanese or Chinese.40 Second, the work of the translator (to construct a bridge of difference in order to link incommensurate worlds) must be contrasted with the false continuity or “suturing” of the gap provided by the schema of configuration.41 Sakai’s central chapters thus exemplify a translation practice within history, as he explicates the difference between phenomenological understandings of subjectivity (especially that of Heidegger) and Japanese attempts to translate “subjectivity” into a meaningful Japanese idiom (especially that of Watsuji Tetsurō)—which provided key conceptual foundations for the construction of a national culture and emperor system in which Japanese speakers became enmeshed. Of particular interest here are Sakai’s accounts of Watsuji’s analysis of sociality, his sacralization of the state, and the construction of “Japanese culture.”42 His work, in other words, is a profound example of the kind of historical engagement that Roger Hart insists should follow an assertion of incommensurability.

Sakai’s analysis is particularly compelling on the point to which so many of these studies of translation return: what to do about our predicament in a world that demands translation. Sakai’s indomitable refusal to succumb to received structures of power and hierarchy underlines his conviction that, ultimately, we as individuals take responsibility for the identities with which we associate ourselves. He would likely be unwilling to wait with Cheyfitz and Niranjana for the subordinated to break free of colonial language and to reconstruct new and authentic identities for themselves. They have long had the wherewithal to represent themselves. Sakai leaves us, then, in an ambiguous position. While one can laud Sakai’s critical integrity and the depth of his analysis, the political demands of reality necessitate, for example, our carrying national passports in traveling out of the country. The solitary stance of the philosopher, as he correctly positions his subjectivity, risks a certain indifference to the world’s obnoxious powers. Nonetheless, like Reinhart Koselleck’s work on “asymmetric counterconcepts,” Sakai points us back to the political world of active engagement, where people say and do things that matter to themselves and others.43

V. CONCLUSIONS

If, then, the meaning of ideas in culture must be negotiated even among those who employ the so-called “same” language, we must, in the end, engage in the comparative work of tracing the mutations that ideas undergo as they travel from

41. Sakai, Translation and Subjectivity, 45f., 56-59.
42. Ibid., 84-86, 93, 96-104, 108-113.
one setting to another if we are to understand them. They are, after all, cultural material available to any users for any number of purposes. The key scholarly intervention, as the best of the works here collectively show, is to understand how ideas—and the words that contain them—have been used.

I would return, then, to the apprehensions raised by Toews in 1987. His charge that the new intellectual history engaged in new forms of reductionism is both borne out and yet countered by these examples from the study of translation in history. Liu, Rafael, Sakai, and Schaffer have met the challenge of a more sophisticated examination of the historical activity of constructing and expressing meaning. They show clearly that the problem is to forego the old habit of semantic transparency and to pursue the construction of meaning in intercultural contexts—to compare ideas in their multiple and historical moorings.44

If this is done—as the work of Schaffer has demonstrated herein—the history of concepts promises consequences for the present. If history helps us to perceive how available concepts push us to think along certain lines, this history may enable us “to conceive of how to act on alternative and less constraining definitions of our situation.”45 For the translation of concepts into other languages extends conceptual and political structures elsewhere. Rather than treat translation metaphorically, in the deconstructionist spirit of a “play of substitutions,” it must be treated as a specific and material event in history.

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