

XCP

CROSS CULTURAL POETICS
NO. TWENTY

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Traveling in China, a friend of mine came across a portrait of baby-Krishna under a tree. Surprised to find the worship of this Hindu god in Chinese heartland, and inquiring, he was told it was a portrait of baby-Buddha.

How does it matter if they look the same, when they have different names?

In the battle for supremacy between Buddhism and Taoism in 8th century AD China, Buddhism became a boys club and needed a female figurehead. Indian male bodhisattva Avalokishwara had a sex-change operation and became the Chinese female goddess of compassion, Kuan Yin.¹

Does it matter if they look different, when they are the same?

A couple of centuries later, Kuan Yin got a new look when she met Madonna who came to China with Nestorian Christians.²

If they look so similar, how will we tell the difference?

In the case of Krishna and Buddha, there is no transformation of form. Although both tropes ultimately stand for a wise teacher, their values differ. One dances, one sits still. One is imagistic-surreal-suggestive-symbolic, and other is real-material-statement. Ardour, play, devotion and embellishment vs. tranquility, pragmaticism, detachment and austerity. The identical form is as if a shell upon two different substances, and could be considered duplicitous.

Avalokiteswara's transformation may also be seen as a spin, reducing the form to a formality, and it is startling because the change seems to occur across different cultural spaces.

If you don't read colonization into it, or don't care for equal exchange, Kuan Yin's imitation of Madonna may be less disturbing. While being less necessary, it is as natural as wearing your sister's clothes, especially if she is also a compassionate bodhisattva.

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Disney influences Manga in the 1940s. Within decades, Manga returns to the USA as a Japanese form. In Japan, 'manga' is the word for comics (rather than for a kind of comics.) Outside Japan, manga is understood as Japanese comics.

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Translating between Hebrew and Arabic = peace-treaty. Translating from Vietnamese into American = apology. Americans translating from any language into English = espionage, an effort to counter the charge that America has invaded the world more than the world has invaded America. One notices the current lack of American interest in Russian writing. Vietnamese and West European writers upstaged by the Middle East, even with discourse scraping the bottom of the barrel, as the title of this panel discussion - "Islam and Women: What is there to talk about?"³

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According to theosophist Annie Besant, India was colonized by the British because English was destined to become the global language, and was a good vehicle "to prepare the spiritualization of the world."⁴

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Laforgue in Eliot, Hartmann in Laforgue, Schopenhauer in Hartmann, Buddhism in Schopenhauer, and the Veda in Buddhism.

Tongue in tongue in tongue in tongue. Author, system alike: source, carrier, receptacle. Ultimately, every writer, a system, a culture, and all meetings, crosscultural.

Had Laforgue not carried Hartmann's book in his pocket, and had Eliot not declared his love for Laforgue's work, it would not have been as easy to see this sensibility-tree.

Roots are routes, which is easier to spot if you are British and do not pronounce route like out, like so many Americans.

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Americans are/were known for regarding trees as beauties in the wilderness. Europeans and other older settlements are/were supposed to see trees more domestically, making pets, trolls and myths of them.

Did the settlers who went to America miss the pet myths they left behind? And was there a time when even a European felt wild and grand and solitary when they met trees? What happens when an American meets a European under a tree. A fluid moment, too nuanced to record, too lively to not be slippery.

But which tree?

Are trees different? Firs, 'western' trees, tall and sharp like church spires. Indian trees, short and rounded like Indian temples. Every tree a posture, a petrification of its posture at the moment it was pronounced a tree. In the spelling, a spell?

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Joseph Brodsky: "Given the lunacy this piece deals with, it ought to be written in a language other than English. The only option available to me, however, is Russian, which is the very source of the lunacy in question. Who needs tautology?"⁵ Brodsky did not say if English-language vocabulary is not up to the mark, or if it will be corrupted by mad thoughts. Did Brodsky not care to put some lunacy into English?

For Celan: "There's nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German."

Sanskrit has no word for "have," therefore draw a conclusion. Some languages have a neuter gender, this resolves or affirms something. Nomenclature, allowance; lack of nomenclature, disallowance.

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Indians tend to pun in English because their languages are more phonetically precise: fifty-three alphabets, and an exact correspondence between an alphabet and how it sounds (unlike English, where 'a' sounds different in play, arm, any, cat, amuse, awful, and 'f' looks different in fairy, philosophy and rough). East Asians tend to parse English to get to know the parts better, as one would decipher ideograms.

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The packaging of *Good Earth Chai* has a picture of a woman with an oriental face, and wearing Thai head-dress, and a purple dress the color of

Thai orchids. She sits cross-legged, has an unexplained smile, her eyes are downcast, and she holds a cup with both hands in typical Chinese-style. Just over her shoulder, there is a gold-embossed Tibetan letter "SAH" "representing the script for earth." The text on the packaging describes *Chai* as a drink enjoyed for centuries in Tibet and India. The word *Chai* is written in calligraphy, and the predominant color scheme on the package is an earthy orange-brown. The tea and spices do not come from anywhere particular; they are "from around the world." All of this is put together in Santa Rosa, California.

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In the video, "Writing Across Borders,"⁶ produced by Oregon University, a Japanese student talks about Japanese plots and quotes a poem titled "Daughters in a String Shop," to illustrate the distinctly cultural structure. Introduction (Ki): There are two daughters at The String Shop in Osaka. Development (Sho): The oldest daughter is 16, and the youngest daughter is 14 years old. Turning Point (Ten): Japanese Samurai kill their enemies with arrows. Conclusion (Ketsu): Japanese daughters kill guys with their eyes. The video features students from different parts of the world. A student from the Middle East says that what is considered exaggeration in the USA is an expected stylistic device in the Middle East. A student from China says that plagiarism is normal in China because of communist ideas about sharing everything. The video quotes a 1966 article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural education" as the first study of its kind, where author Robert Caplan draws diagrams to represent rhetorical structures of different cultures: English as straight arrow, Semitic as zigzag, Oriental as circular, and Romance and Russian as jagged.

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The 2007 Man Asian Literary Prize for a novel written in English launches along with a controversy when founder and organizer Nury Vittachi is fired from the committee, and says: "There were no Asians or non-white faces among the judges ... when I mentioned this racial insensitivity at a meeting, they just sat silent."⁷ A few months later, Vittachi poses the problem of racial poetics: "Asian story arcs differ significantly from Western ones." He cites Mahabharata and Ramayana as examples of Asian narratives, structured like "lucky charm bracelets," as opposed to the Greek structure of story-telling. In discussions at a festival, Xuxi is said to have said about the Asian arc: "perhaps as in the tale of Buddha, a short story should just mosey along, this way and that, and then one day achieve enlightenment if it happens."⁸

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"I no longer use any motifs that would mark my work as Japanese," says Yoshimaru Takahashi, a designer in Japan. Partly "to evade stereotyping,"⁹ Takahashi dropped conventional Japanese motifs in his work and went 'deeper' into Japaneseness, and drawing from a philosophy of ambiguity, indirectness and flux, identified eight basic "notions," or "aesthetic preferences" with which to perceive time and space, and that would characterize his work: "*kekai* (bounds), *hyoumen* (surface), *fuuka* (weathering), *hada-ai* (touch), *yashu* (rusticity), *mitate* (imaginative comparison), *oboro/myou* (fuzziness/mystery), and *konzai* (mixing)."

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Poetics or posturing. Metamorphosis or camouflage. Absorption or mirroring. Transparency or display. Definition or recipe. Vision or agenda. Fulfillment or excitement. Innovate or scavenge. Stretching canvasses contain each other. Diversity, the scale of unity. All history contemporaneous. Own any. Join these dots and not those dots. *Bhagwad Gita*: The humble learned have the same attitude towards a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater.¹⁰

(Notes)

¹ Martin Palmer, Jay Ramsay and Man-Ho Kwok. *Myths and Revelations of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion*. (London: Thorsons, 1995)

² Ibid.

³ A panel at the Iowa International Writing Program, September 2005.

⁴ Annie Besant, *Avatars*. (Adyar, Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House, 2002), 135

⁵ Joseph Brodsky, "A Collector's Item," in *On Grief and Reason* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux 1995), 149.

⁶ *Writing Across Borders*. Written and directed by Wayne Robertson (Oregon State University, 2005.)

⁷ Mark McCord, "Racism Row Mars Hong Kong literary festival (Hong Kong, Feb 7, 2007 (AFP)," http://mrjam.typepad.com/diary/2007/02/racism_row_goes.html#more. (accessed 29 December 2007)

⁸ Sharon Bakar, "Asian Story Arcs Revisited," <http://thebookaholic.blogspot.com/2007/11/asian-story-arcs-revisited.html>

⁹ Yoshimaru Takahashi, in *Fuzzy Communication – Graphic Design by Yoshimaru Takahashi*, (Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2008) 22-23

¹⁰ Bhagwad Gita 5:18