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YŌKO TAWADA'S POST-APOCALYPTIC PLAYGROUND: MEMORY, MUTATIONS, AND MULTISPECIES FUTURES IN *THE EMISSARY*

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> It is still possible to speak now to those not yet dead
> Inside my stomach are entrails I have still not touched
> Someone I have not yet met consoles me for a crushing sorrow I have not yet felt
> The language I use at that moment is one I have not yet started to learn
> The poems I have not yet written are already written
> I hope that the other creatures that I cannot yet imagine
> That will inhabit the earth far into the future
> Will be far happier than us
>
> 未 or Not Yet by Yōko Tawada[1]

The disaster imaginary of Japan underwent a violent shift in March 2011, when its northeastern coast was struck by an earthquake and a tsunami, followed by a nuclear fallout in rapid succession. This triple meltdown exposed the destructive consequences that underlie the promise of "clean energy" and technological emancipation, unleashing a fresh wave of nuclear panic, aggravated by ambiguous protocols, censorship and lack of transparency from the government. It is this climate of crisis to which Yōko Tawada responds in her novel, *The Emissary*.

Despite being widely read as an eco-dystopian satire, the novel has so far been met with limited critical engagement that barely manages to capture the full breadth of its imaginative and ethical vision. Very often, the term "dystopia" invokes the image of protagonists or communities challenged by the oppressive logic of a technocratic or totalitarian state or, as in narratives of climate change, by ecological catastrophe. These narratives often dramatise a contest of values—freedom versus control, humanity versus dehumanisation—and propel the plot toward decisive, often climactic events. As Isomaa et al. note in their 2020 study, dystopian fiction "typically imagines negative futures for humankind, [each] focus[ing] on some specific aspect of the undesirable future world" (xii). Such texts may employ cautionary depictions of technological disaster, state surveillance, environmental collapse and post-disaster survival, addressing anxieties and ethical dilemmas entangled with the present and the future. *The Emissary* certainly resonates with many of these tropes—the spectre of nuclear poisoning, ecological precarity, food scarcity, and intimations of state isolationism and surveillance—which invite readings rooted in dystopian genre conventions. The politically charged climate in which Tawada was writing certainly facilitates the assumption that her project was simply to galvanise discourse and policy, which usually includes mapping complex, long-term historical processes onto a recognisable and emotionally charged "tragic frame"[2] centred around a "monocausal crisis" that must either be avoided or rehabilitated (O'Leary 385; Garrard 105).

Yet the novel, while conversant with the dystopian tradition, diverges from the genre's familiar teleological drift, where usually a binary opposition of interests resolves in a definitive narrative climax. It does more than satirise the present or warn of an imminent future; in fact, it altogether evades the proleptic function of traditional dystopian narratives by refusing to name its perpetrators and divesting significance from human action and decisive events. It inaugurates instead a "comic frame" (Garrard 107) which eschews oppositional logics and operates on the complexity of shared vulnerabilities

and relational existence. The result is a text that teeters on the threshold of dystopian fiction, drawing upon established motifs even as it reconfigures their meaning and stretches the genre's boundaries. The novel may most suitably be counted among post-apocalyptic stories that are "portray[als of] survival and new beginnings, the apocalyptic catastrophe destroying the organised society and creating a state of nature that calls for the creation of a new social contract" (xxiii). In *The Emissary*, however, the formation of the promised 'new social contract' is neither explicated nor carried through, instead left suspended on a sea of uncountable possibilities. This deliberate ambiguity is part of the novel's scheme to design what may be seen as a posthuman eco-ethical framework, enabling a "creative treatment of humanity's relationship to its environment" (Isomaa et al. xxii). This framework invites the reader to inhabit the speculative counter-vision of post-apocalyptic Japan as a productive field for re-imagining ways of entangled existence and transformative care in a post-disaster and posthuman world.

The Emissary presents a world upturned by an unspecified ecological catastrophe where children are born weak and frail, while the elderly, having gained unusual physical robustness, have lost the ability to die. The story unfolds in a series of mundane interactions, interwoven with inner reflections, forebodings, memories, and flights of the imagination filtered primarily through the lens of Yoshiro, his great-grandson, Mumei and others who are part of their mundane existence. Dan Fujiwara (2019) identifies these as features of "spherical temporality," which, in mirroring the roundness and flux of the earth, refuses a chronological reading of events and allows accidental narratives to emerge through gaps and unexpected digressions.[3] In Tawada's novels, this is often enacted through linguistic techniques including, but not limited to, word-play, language-mixing, play on accents and scripts, material translations and neologisms. Language does not work toward a teleological end but rather disorients the pattern of chronological time, which is necessary for imbuing actions with significance—what Frank Kermode observes as constituting "plot"

(45). In *The Emissary*, the very shape of the narrative precipitates around the absence-presences of dead animals, technologies and languages that haunt the post-apocalyptic landscape. Moreover, the creative process of writing itself is bound up with the possession of an earth-bound consciousness.

Yoshiro, who is a writer, finds his efforts impeded by the inability to feel "the roundness of the earth beneath his feet" (Tawada 2018: 25). Geographical restriction imposed by the ban on foreign travel translates to an impediment in creative sensibility; therefore, he must "follow [the] curve in his mind" (25) if he is to write at all. Objects, words and symbols frequently become launching points for imaginative flights, which disturb the linear causality between episodes necessary for "plot." The mundane act of buying mandarin oranges at the bakery sets off a meandering exposition of public holidays, climate change, and the economic geography of the state. This stream of reflection, effectively blending the past with the present, finally lands at a conversation with a postcard seller, where Yoshiro is forced to confront sinister suspicions about his daughter's circumstances in Okinawa: "Yoshiro felt sure something was wrong: either…her mail was being censored, or she was hiding something from him. Her postcards were frustrating, as if the most important part was covered by the back of an invisible hand, making it impossible to read" (61). Even this alarming realisation remains a suspended loose end, without any promise of further inquiry or discovery of culpability, followed only by a reflection on the obsolescence of telephones and how that has reshaped the familial relationship between father and daughter.

If the function of plot, according to Kermode, is to "humanis[e] time by giving it form" (45), *The Emissary* seems to flout this purpose in two senses: firstly, by refusing a chronological temporal frame and secondly, by adopting an alternative frame which New Material feminists call "thick time" (Neimanis & Walker 2014: 561). The flow of the novel's telling dramatises the constant intrusion of the past and the future upon the present, not just through Yoshiro's numerous mental excursions but in the abrupt temporal shift in the last few

pages of the novel, which transfers the reader several years into the future where Mumei is fifteen years old and female. Such analeptic movement draws attention to how the past and the future are not exclusive or locked into a "back then" or "out there," but are felt as overflowing, congealing and co-existent with the present. The use of the verb "felt" is intentional because "thick time" views bodies and temporal processes as co-constitutive. Within this frame, time is not organised between a beginning and an end to be given meaning by human action, but rather "a transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past" (561) implicated within bodies, both acting upon and simultaneously being acted upon by them.

Ruminating on the systematic way the trunk of a tree records its years in successive rings, Yoshiro conceives of his own body as "a disorderly pile, like the inside of a drawer no one ever bothers to straighten" (Tawada 2018: 6). For him, as for his generation of "the elderly," the stretching of time is made literal by their extended life span so that temporal anchors like "beginning," "middle" and "end" lose their moorings. Thrust into this limbo-like stasis where traditional markers of human time—finding a partner, marriage, having children and grandchildren—have lost their significance, he is inhibited from feeling not only the "roundness of the earth" (25) but also the normative flow of time. His general pessimism is characteristic of a generation daily forced to come to terms with the inefficiency and invalidity of the systems of belief, meanings and values they once took for granted; a generation of people who "unable to turn back the clock…let themselves be turned" (69). As a counter posture to Yoshiro's generational guilt and anxiety as to the future, is Mumei's unburdened consciousness, his ignorance of "what 'suffering' meant" and inability to "feel sorry for himself" (33). He exhibits, at several points, an intuitive affinity with non-human presences and even a self-acknowledged psychophysical connection with the earth, manifesting occasionally in sensations:

> This map is definitely my portrait […] The Andes Mountains curve outward then inward again, just like the bone of my right leg from my hip to my ankle…All my bones are curved. Not that I bent them, they were just like that to begin with—if this is what's called pain, it was there from the start, for no particular reason…. My neck, which connects Africa to Europe, is twisted, with swollen thyroid and swollen tonsils, screaming for help. Australia is my gut, a big bag. There's lots of food in the bag. But I can't eat any of it. (123–124)

If transcorporeal time imagines bodies as archives of history and shifting phenomena, it merits noting that radiation—the ubiquitous cause of destruction in the novel's post-apocalyptic Japan—is never directly mentioned, but only expressed in the drama of the bodies and objects affected by it. It may be possible to infer, then, that radioactive poisoning, though it has physically enfeebled Mumei's generation, has also sensitised them to alternative ways of conceiving themselves as subjects. The altered earthly bodies—whether humans, plants, or the soil—even as they become sites of destructive encounters between planetary and technological forces, are also potent with new possible ways of becoming. Rather than mere casualties of an apocalypse, they become "ecotones" (Neimanis 2012: 93) or "contact zones" (Haraway 179) between an erroneous past and possible futures. The point is not to reduce them to a mere transitional chronotope funnelling a past into a better or worse future, but rather to identify them as critters of a constantly evolving post-apocalyptic topos, dwelling in a continuous present, for it is the present which concerns Tawada; it is the *here* and *now* she fictionalises in her novelistic attempt to call for creative thinking and world-building.

The novel's narrator consistently practises a blurring of boundaries between human and non-human entities by evoking other-than-human figures to detail bodily experience. Children are frequently described in terms of bird-like fragility, and there is a tacit awareness that their genetic alterity, caused by radioactive poisoning, undermines the foundational notion of human beings as a unitary species. In this, the novel effectively utilises what Rosi Braidotti calls a "method of defamiliarization" that disconnects the subject "from familiar and

habitual patterns of identity" (19). In instances where Mumei finds himself struggling against the laws of physics, unable to move his body to his will, he engages in an imaginative drama wherein his limbs turn into independent appendages ill-equipped to perform terrestrial tasks like putting on clothes and walking on two feet:

> He wanted to take off his pajamas, but with two legs he couldn't decide which to start with, and while he was puzzling over this problem he remembered the octopus. Maybe he had eight legs, too, and it just looked like two because each one was a bundle of four, tied tightly together… There was an octopus inside him: Octopus, get out of there! … They were a mountain of cloth, with tunnels running through it. His legs were the trains, trying to get through the tunnels…There were two tunnels, so the train headed for Tokyo can go in one, while the train going in the opposite direction comes out the other… Flesh-colored steam engines slide into the tunnels. Chugga chugga choo choo. (Tawada 2018: 97)

The figure of the octopus, as Seungyeon Kim points out, is an "optic of the other" (262) through which Mumei surpasses victimhood and designs for himself an outward-bound posthuman subjectivity which constantly disorients and reorients itself through an intra-active process of reciprocal exchange with the environment and its non-human others. The wayward limbs of the octopus represent the "multilayered and multidirectional relational force" of nomadic thinking and subjectivity, as articulated by Braidotti (17–19), which opens up the subject to the consciousness of its transversal connections across human and nonhuman matter.

Braidotti traces the disidentification of the human "along axes of becoming-woman [...] becoming-animal or -earth, [where] the process of becoming earth demands a more radical break with established patterns of thought [and] can involve a sense of loss and pain, which in turn can produce fear, vulnerability and a sense of nostalgia" (20). Mumei's strange psychophysical embodiment of the earth, manifesting often in physical pain and loss of consciousness, as well as his transformations, first into a human-avian hybrid and later into a girl, are physical manifestations of this break. This posthuman break, which Mumei eases into, is for Yoshiro and the elderly, naturally, a painful and sometimes

unnerving process far more difficult to reconcile themselves to. He occasionally reacts with an anachronistic pathos but comes to acknowledge its necessity at length, as when he muses:

> "you know, the human race may be evolving in a direction no one ever imagined. I mean, maybe we're moving toward the octopus."
> "So in another hundred thousand years we'll all be octopi?"
> "Maybe so. People always thought of that as devolution, but it might just be evolution after all." (Tawada 2018: 14)

Kim's essay delineates how the kinship between Mumei and Yoshiro, who cannot even be placed "on the same page in the *Illustrated Guide to Animals*" (Tawada 2018: 101), is predicated on "an ambivalence of *self* and *other*" (262). While Kim reads this ambivalence as a pathway for transcending otherness, posthuman theory would treat this as a premise for the inter-relational process of making and re-making the self through the "optic of the other." In an instance that demonstrates such transfer of optics, Yoshiro absorbs Mumei's synesthetic association of sourness with the colour blue, so that "whenever Yoshiro saw a lemon, it seemed to him that blue was mixed in with the yellow—and that made him feel that for just a moment he had touched the raw, spinning earth" (Tawada 2018: 45). Through his grandson, whose very existence amplifies tenfold the alterity intrinsic to life, Yoshiro ultimately comes to terms with the necessary practice of spontaneous world-making *with* others than the self for survival and thriving on a damaged planet (Haraway 136; Tsing).

Yoshiro passes down forbidden knowledge in the form of extinct words, names and images; Mumei draws them anew from his imagination, weaving them into cat's cradle figures. Yoshiro "carv[es] out the road to health and life" (Tawada 2018: 32) for Mumei, tailoring customised garments and foraging for nutritious food. In turn, the child's "mysterious kind of wisdom" (36) illuminates and expands Yoshiro's jaded worldview into a more hopeful one, grounded in provisionality rather than anxious avoidance or anticipation of utopic or apocalyptic futures:

> This life with his great-grandson was about all he could manage. And for that he needed to be flexible, in mind and body, with the courage to doubt what he had believed for over a century. Sloughing off his pride like an old jacket, he'd have to go around in his shirtsleeves. If he was cold, rather than buying a new jacket it would be better to think of ways to grow a thick coat of fur like a bear's. (40–41)

The juxtaposition of "jacket" with a "coat of fur" draws attention to the contrast between human-engineered insurability against what is outside and the semi-permeability of the provisional, self-grown, thickened skin, made in direct interaction with, and as a consequence of, external phenomena. Foregoing the anxious fixation on an unforeseeable future or the guilt of the past, Yoshiro commits to "staying with the trouble" (Haraway) and moving forward with partial clarity, "[keeping] his eyes open, taking each day as it came, hoping the present won't crumble under his feet" (Tawada 2018: 29). The relationship he builds with his transgenic great-grandson is based on reciprocity and a sense of mutual responsibility and response-ability[3] grounded in the contingent aftermaths of the post-apocalypse.

The secret Emissary project, the novel's titular concern and central intrigue—insinuated through the recurring emblem of the candle with exact proportions—hints at the possibility of some discovery or remedy at the end of Mumei's anticipated journey beyond the border. However, his travel is abruptly truncated as the novel closes with him losing consciousness on the very shore from which he is supposed to set out. This characteristic denial of resolution is a deliberate and oft-used narrative strategy in Tawada's works[4] that underscores her poetics of land and water, fixity and flux, and resistance to assimilation.

Katherine Maurer, in "Translating Catastrophe," points out how disaster islands like Hiroshima and Fukushima have time and again been made into "segregated islands of meaning… function[ing] as projection screens for nationalist politics" (187). The atmosphere of suffering and mourning following 3/11 became, for the government, fertile ground for cultivating a nationalistic

sentiment of renewal and restoration predicated on an idealised myth of a past era. Critics like Tienfong Ho and Kiyoshi Abe highlight how optimistic "narratives of resilience" that surface after calamities are often stories "perpetuated to popularize a particular outcome or cause" (Ho 1), usually political and economic. Thus, latching on to an idea of a so-called "Edo Renaissance" (Maurer 187)—based on a nostalgic longing for the *sakoku* (seclusion policy) years of pre-modern Japan—the conservative right-wing government took to justifying its nuclear accelerationism and censorship by indirectly, yet conveniently, projecting the blame for the catastrophe onto the nation's opening its borders to the world. Moreover, the highly polarised socio-political environment of Japan at the time allowed the government to double down on its exclusionary policies and extreme vigilantism against foreigners. Tawada, who has been an open critic of the nation's isolationism, stages the dys/utopic island in her fiction as an enduring metaphor to respond to such post-3/11 reactionary discourses.

Tawada's Japan in *The Emissary* takes insular island thinking to extremity; its retreat into itself is enacted in successive layers of interiority, each heavily controlled by restrictions on movement and communication. Not only has it isolated itself from the world outside, but the neighbouring southern island of Okinawa has sequestered itself from the Japanese archipelago, asserting its separate identity through the self-fashioned image of a paradisiac orchard with fruit as its primary economic staple and regional emblem. Old institutions and systems of power have crumbled, but have given rise to new ones in their wake. Rules around language and expression, despite efforts to be more inclusive, end up producing an absurd alterity in the outlawing of foreign words. Yoshiro is compelled to bury his children's book as well as his ideas for a new novel for fear of unspoken laws surrounding redundant objects and off-limits places. Beneath the veneer of prosperity, the reality of Okinawa's *orchard* is that of a fruit factory operating on the tireless labour of employees "working in one all day, cut off from the outside world" (Tawada 2018: 60). Tawada's intentions in

this extravagant portrayal of neo-Edo Japan are undoubtedly satirical and serve, as in her other post-3/11 works, to "demystify the Edo period and … turn this era into something productive" (Tawada 2012: 91).

Yoshiro explains contemporary post-apocalyptic Japan's misguided plan to "solve its problem" with self-isolation using the following analogy:

> Every country has serious problems, so to keep those problems from spreading all around the world, they decided that each country should solve its own problems by itself. Remember… the Showa-Heisei Museum? All the rooms were separated by steel doors, so if a fire starts in one room it can't spread to the next one. (Tawada 2018: 42)

The analogy of fire, however, fails to account for the poisoned water surrounding the archipelago, which flows unchecked by political borders and state policy, connecting distant lands, habitats and species, both terrestrial and aquatic. In a lecture titled "Dejima" (2012), Tawada proposes a planetary model, an alternative to the island's insularity, based on the counter-motif of water, explaining that "[t]he water of the ocean holds the whole world together in one single sphere. The contaminated water does not stay in one position, and I do not mean that metaphorically" (120). Disregarding watertight binaries such as inside/outside, self/other, centre/periphery, or native/foreign, as well as any notion of fixed origin, the people of "the ocean water… of the waves… repeatedly recede but always come back," (120) though never the same as they left. Tawada's protagonists inhabit this deterritorialising watery space of flux where origins and fixed territories of belonging and identity no longer apply, and they become open to infinite possibilities of metamorphoses.

Water, however, is more than a symbol for a totalising "planetary energy" (190) or a medium for connectivity as Maurer proposes; it is also itself full of vital materiality and life, forming rich and fluid nexus zones between landmasses. Tawada's planetary model, attuned to both the symbolic and material fluidity of water, promotes a global eco-ethics that urges responsibility for a vulnerable planet beyond national or species borders. Marine bodies contaminated by the nuclide-infused wastewater around Fukushima have not

only impacted local health and livelihood but may have long-term implications on a global scale, as Xiaoqi Zhou infers:

> The ocean plays a crucial role in the biogeochemical cycles of the Earth. The discharge of radioactive elements from the Fukushima nuclear wastewater into the ocean can lead to the spread of radioactive nuclides, causing long-term unknown effects on the evolution and health of marine organisms, ultimately impacting human well-being. (Zhou 4)

The mutual imbrication of human and marine life is crystallised and given full meaning in Mumei's hybrid body; its comparisons with that of an octopus connect them in their shared alterity, while the porosity of their boundaries entangles them in the same fleshly existence. This instantiates, to use Alaimo's term, a kind of "kinship inscribed in the bones" (151) in which the body embedded in the present is imagined as stretching across vast historical narratives of co-evolution between human and aqueous species. This way, water becomes not just a metaphorical medium of transformation or dissolution of identity but also an alive and breathing habitat where immersive epistemological considerations—ways of knowing and understanding the nature of one's own fluid materiality—can give way to onto-logics of becoming and possibility (Neimanis 2017: 102). This prepares the theoretical grounds against which one must read Mumei's final drop into "the pitch-black depths of the strait"[5] (Tawada 2018: 138) in the last sentence of the novel, the strait implying a space in between or rather, an ecotone between the ancient landmasses of historical value systems epitomised in the human faces of Yoshiro and Yonatani. The fall, which undercuts a seemingly optimistic project, may be understood, alternatively, as a subconscious resistance to assimilation into an object of international scientific inquiry, and instead forge his subjecthood through an immersive mode of inquiry entirely his own, based on relational configurations with his earthly kin.

In this light, the double meaning behind the novel's Japanese title, *Kentoshi* (献灯使), acquires a new dimension. The term, which translates to "lantern

bearer," is Tawada's play on the homophone 遣唐使, referring to cultural envoys sent to Tang dynasty China between the seventh and ninth centuries. The imperial mission of cultural assimilation is spun into Mumei's role of assimilating a multispecies consciousness as an emissary of a posthuman future—one who carries not the lantern of anthropocentric enlightenment, but the flickering light of relationality and care, symbolised by "the candle two inches in diameter and four inches tall" (31, 81, 131).

The posthuman worlding of *The Emissary* proposes a venture in affirmative thinking, inviting readers to dwell in the material-semiotic muddle (Haraway 31) of the present, in which both language and matter become sites of concurrent destruction and creation, loss and possibility. The demise of technology, the extinction of animals and the strange mutations that perplex the fixity of species boundaries, instead of becoming incentives for paranoia, inspire alternative ways of storytelling, world-making and constructing subjectivity. Discarded washing machines become "capsule hotels for fish" (Tawada 2018: 8), traces of extinct animals and foreign cities persist in the nomenclature of vehicles, shoe brands and bread varieties, not as mere relics of a vanished past but as elements continually repurposed to shape and redefine the present world. Tawada's novel does not merely respond to the post-3/11 moment but offers a reparative frame of storytelling for imagining ways of ongoingness in the face of ecological threats. The novel's open-endedness is not a failure but a provocation: to view apocalypse not as an end to be avoided or a crisis to be dealt with but as a transformative playground for reimagining what it means to exist in flux, not just within but with a more-than-human world.

Endnotes

1. In *A Poem For a Book* 2015, Ed. Bei Dao et.al. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 22–23.
2. Greg Garrard, in his discussion on 'Apocalypse,' draws on Stephen O'Leary's idea of "frames of acceptance," where a "tragic frame" is based on an epochal understanding of time: "a systematic symbolic division of historical time that accords weight to actions and events in history by mediating the relationship of the past, present, and future" (Garrard 87; O'Leary 385).

3. Haraway (2016) coined this term to express a "capacity to respond" (78) to, or cultivate a "praxis of care" (105) and accountability involving shared pasts and futures with species others.
4. Some notable examples include *Wo Europa anfängt* [*Where Europe Begins*] (1991) and *Schwager in Bordeaux* [*Brother-in-law in Bordeaux*] (2008), and *Das Bad* [*The Bath*] (1989). See Julia Sowacka's "Faces of Water: Hydrontological Spaces in Yoko Tawada's Literature" in *Transpositiones* Vol. 4 (2025) for a detailed examination of the water motif in Tawada's oeuvre.
5. Dan Fujiwara (2019) notes how the loss of consciousness shapes spherical temporality in Tawada's narratives. It is this sphericality, concordant with transcorporeal time, that Mumei internalises in his final 'drop'. Seungyeon Kim (2019) furthers this point in reading this 'drop' as a transfer of the travel motif to a travel of the mind through the murky depths of memory, which has the power to imagine the past and the future in continuity with the present.

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Abstract

This article examines Yōko Tawada's novel *The Emissary* as a response to the post-3/11 ecological and nuclear crisis in Japan. It explores how the novel reimagines the post-apocalypse landscape not as a dystopian warning but as a space for provisional and interrelational world-building. The analysis examines the novel's narrative structure and thematic preoccupations within posthumanist and new materialist frameworks,

revealing its rejection of apocalyptic temporality in favour of transcorporeal time and materiality. The study also examines water as a motif for challenging contemporary isolationist post-Fukushima discourses by contextualising the novel within an alternative planetary eco-ethics based on theories of Hydrofeminism. The article demonstrates how Tawada repurposes a genre "born out of crisis" into a speculative "playground" for reparative storytelling grounded in multispecies care and ecological negotiation.