

Discovering the Modern Regime of Translation in China: Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past* and Wuhe's *Remains of Life*

Jon Solomon
University of Lyon

Abstract

This essay focuses on the salient place given to staging both the *modern regime of translation* and the *institution of literature* alongside a dramatization of *anthropological difference* in Liu Cixin's acclaimed science fiction trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (also known as *The Three Body Problem*). These are concerns that are, I would argue, not only historically central to twentieth-century Chinese literature, but also place twentieth-century Chinese literature squarely at the crux of some of the most fundamental questions about aesthetic modernity. These questions revolve around the way in which the type or the figure plays a crucial role in the construction of the nation-state.

As quintessentially modern social institutions, both the regime of translation and the institution of literature converge around *aesthetic ideology*, in which the figure and the type play a paramount role. This is not just any figure, but rather the figure of the human, configured through the logical economy of genus, species, and individual. As a kind of abstraction that is intimately woven into the fabric of everyday life (or what Marx calls a “real abstraction”), this “logical economy” is most evident in that experience of identity peculiar to modernity: being an individual who belongs to a national community within that community's membership in a larger, single species among other species. Together, these two institutions form an inherently comparative biopolitical infrastructure that I call the *apparatus of area and anthropological difference*.

A brief comparison with Wuhe's *Remains of Life* helpfully illustrates the extent to which Liu Cixin's Trilogy is invested in the

apparatus of area and anthropological difference that arises through the operation of translation, while a comparison with Mao Dun's focus on subjective formation helps to highlight the implications of Liu Cixin's attack on Chinese socialist realism. Liu's fiction should not be seen as what happens when a large developing nation with a tradition of literary talent achieves the concentration of capital and technology that might permit an ambitious space program, but as what happens when the international institution of literature develops on the basis of an historical repression of its own aesthetic ideology.

Keywords

modern regime of translation, institution of literature, realist fiction, aesthetic ideology, becoming-minor, species difference

1. The Modern Regime of Translation, the Institution of Literature, and Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past*

This essay focuses on the salient place given to staging both the modern regime of translation (Sakai 2018, Walker 2014) and the *institution of literature* (Derrida 1992; Weber 1987) alongside a dramatization of *anthropological difference* in Liu Cixin's 劉慈欣 acclaimed science fiction trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (alternately referred to in this essay as the *Trilogy*, *Remembrance*, or Liu's *Trilogy*).¹ These are concerns that are, I would argue, not only historically central to twentieth-century Chinese literature, but also place twentieth-century Chinese literature squarely at the crux of some of the most fundamental questions about aesthetic modernity. These questions revolve around the way in which the type or the figure plays a crucial role in the construction of the nation-state. While Sakai's concept of the modern regime of translation explains the role of translation in the establishment of a representational schema of linguistic difference that disciplines the individual's relation to a nationalized or ethnicized community, the Derridean concept of the institution of literature concerns the relation among different disciplinary domains (literature, criticism, and theory) in the aesthetic configuration of the nation-state. As quintessentially modern social institutions, both the regime of translation and the institution of literature converge around *aesthetic ideology* (Button 2009; Redfield 2003), in which the figure and

the type play a paramount role. This is not just any figure, but rather the figure of the human, configured through the logical economy of genus, species, and individual. As a kind of abstraction that is intimately woven into the fabric of everyday life (or what Marx calls a “real abstraction”), this “logical economy” is most evident in that experience of identity peculiar to modernity: being an individual who belongs to a national community within that community’s membership in a larger, single species among other species. Together, these two institutions form an inherently comparative biopolitical infrastructure that I call the *apparatus of area and anthropological difference*.

This broad claim, however, is not what that I will be trying to defend here. Instead, the task that I have given myself is to explore, via the doorway opened by Liu’s Trilogy, how the apparatus of area and anthropological difference, which includes both the regime of translation and the institution of literature, operates. From the outset, I am compelled to preface this effort with some general observations that will, it is hoped, assist the reader. Were I to confine my discussion to Liu Cixin’s work alone, it would be impossible to avert two critical pitfalls. First, my critique of the Trilogy might appear to pit theory against literature, as if theory were something external to it. In its attempt to ascribe autonomy to literature, this gesture ends up denying to literature its unique role as a laboratory of social imagination, or what Derrida calls its status as a “fictive institution” (1992, 36). Second, once theory is deemed “external” to literature, the way is opened to tracing its “intrusion” to a specific cartographic region, such as the West. This is an approach that could end up unwittingly reinforcing boundaries that hide from view the essentially transnational aspects of the aesthetic ideology of the nation-state.

My object of study corresponds, in other words, not to a body of fiction by a single author, but, as I have said, to an *apparatus* (Foucault 1980, 194–195; Agamben 2009). For Karen Barad, “apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices—specific material (re)configurings of the world—which come to matter” (2007, 140). The boundary-drawing practices at issue here concern the unity of language, culture, and people. Yet, as Barad’s emphasis on the processual nature of boundary-drawing (rather than the substantive nature of a boundary *per se*) suggests, the real challenge to those who would apprehend an apparatus concerns the role of subjectivity. Subjectivity, in the modern context since Descartes and Kant, points to the foundational

role of knowledge. Hence, we cannot content ourselves with a treatment of boundary-drawing practices that focuses only on socio-cultural objects, but must attend to the way in which processes of knowing are constitutive of subjective interiority. As Jason Read has explained, the term “the production of subjectivity” should be understood both as a process whose “end result” is a social subject and as a series of effects unleashed by social subjects (2010, 115).

My aim in this essay is, thus, not to offer a reading of Liu Cixin’s science fiction (which I will nevertheless produce in due course), but rather to identify and engage critically with the problematic *apparatus* mobilized and defended by his Trilogy. This is an apparatus that goes well beyond *Remembrance*. Because these practices pass through the specific domains of translation and realist fiction “in” China, no disciplinary field is more implicated than the field of Chinese modern literature and culture. As the scare quotes around the preposition “in” suggest, the type of interiority at issue cannot be ascribed to a single national formation but has a genesis that is fundamentally *inter-national* in nature. With that in mind, I have chosen to incorporate readings of the work of two other Chinese-language authors as well as a critique of area studies. Taiwanese author Wuhe’s 舞鶴 *Remains of Life* (*Yusheng* 餘生) (2000) attracts my attention for the alacrity with which it critically stages that same apparatus of anthropological difference, moving in a direction completely opposite to that of Liu Cixin’s Trilogy, while recent critical reappraisal of Mao Dun’s 茅盾 writings, the pinnacle of Chinese socialist realism, provides a counterpoint to the attack on realist fiction integral to Liu Cixin’s embrace of the apparatus of area and anthropological difference.

Clarification of one’s aims does not always exonerate one from their pitfalls and effects. Caught in the vice between the limited space of a single essay and the desire to address a comprehensive assemblage of disparate social institutions that converge in a form of aesthetic ideology, I immediately find myself implicated in the trap of totalization expressed through the Trilogy’s staging of history with a capital H. This is the history of sovereignty: not just the story of charismatic personalities, gender hierarchies, and great battles, but, as Japanese philosopher Kuniichi Uno reminds us, also the story of history as determination, destiny, and totality (2003, 8). Chinese history is no less representative of this modern tendency than any other form of national history, or of world history constructed on the implicit category of the national (Sakai 1997, 164 *passim*). In a thoughtfully-engaging collection of essays titled *Against*

History (*Han rekishiron*) devoted to the constitutive role played by the resistance to history in the colonial-imperial modernity (the age of the nation-state sovereignty), Uno considers various attempts by European, Japanese, American, and African thinkers to devise ways of discovering and defending the pure state of continuous becoming that cannot be exhaustively catalogued or appropriated by a totalizing image of history. Throughout this philosophical excursion, Uno constantly alerts readers to the dual trap of fascism (which Uno, following Emmanuel Levinas, understands as the paroxysm that results from attempting to escape history altogether) and colonialism (which Uno associates with the violence of national and civilizational history), ultimately suggesting an intrinsic connection between the two. Uno's work serves to highlight my attempt to reveal how disparate themes such as history, neoliberalism, literary representation, translation, and disciplinary divisions in the humanities are woven together in a single apparatus.

2. The Apparatus of Area and Anthropological Difference

My adamantly critical evaluation of Liu's Trilogy begins with the biopolitical subtext of sovereign history: this is the story of the way in which species difference, represented and crystallized in the modern state, becomes not just one aspect of the political, but its essential ground. The transformation of a species trait (the fact that human beings must know something in order to survive) into a distinguishing, or specialized, sign of intra-species difference, such as that between experts and laymen, brings us face to face with the two sides, or two faces, of the apparatus of anthropological difference. Externally, the face of this apparatus is characterized by the *anthropological exception*, the notion that *homo sapiens* is not only one species among many, but also an exceptional species able to intervene in its own speciation and that of other species through its unique command of tools and language. Internally, this apparatus appears under the face of *colonial difference*—the notion that certain populations or segments within the species approach more than others the heights of the anthropological exception by virtue of their superior (or more “mature”) knowledge of tools and language. For modernity, which is a bi-polar experience characterized by the opposition between the imperial and the colonial, these two faces of the apparatus of anthropological difference are invariably articulated to a nature that is supposed to be rooted in an area.

Area is thus not a natural, organic sedimentation of history, but rather constitutes a kind of biopolitical infrastructure for modern human societies that diacritically marks heterogeneous orders of discontinuity. *Area is the biopolitical milieu that corresponds to an apparatus of anthropological difference.* One of the principal ways in which this biopolitical infrastructure is naturalized into the form of an area is through the *representation of translation.* The representation of translation, according to the work of Naoki Sakai, is based on an imaginary image or figure of the systematicity of language, and its equivalence with a people, superimposed *a posteriori* on the act of translation (see Walker 2014, 36). As Sakai unearths the historicity of the modern regime of translation (which becomes, *ergo*, a regime of identification), he shows how this representation is codified through a schema of co-figuration (1997, 15). It is this schema that permits translation to be represented as a “bridge” or a “filter” between two discrete language-people unities, rather than to be recognized as a social practice of indeterminacy in the face of discontinuity in the social that precedes the identification of such unities or “banks,” to pursue the bridge metaphor.

3. Remembrance and the Modern Regime of Translation

Translation is conspicuous in Liu Cixin’s *Trilogy* precisely because of its absence. Beginning from the very first contact between *homo sapiens* and the Trisolarians, the alien “species” that initiates the series of events culminating in the annihilation of terrestrial *homo sapiens*, translation is replaced by a cybernetic model of communication. The model is truncated, however, in the sense that it does not account, as did the earliest theory of cybernetic communication, elaborated in 1948 by Claude Shannon, even for the presence of noise (Shannon 1948).² While the word “translation” (*fanyi* 翻譯) is used primarily to describe communication among humans of different nationalities and eras, the word “decode” (*yijie* 譯解) is used to describe communication with the Trisolarians. In place of translation, one finds repeated references to technologies of self-decoding encipherment that might best be described as the realization of a Leibnizian project of universal communication. Several details, largely revealed at the beginning of the second volume of the *Trilogy*, concerning the approach of the Trisolarians to “interspecies” communication, help flesh out a nominalist concept of language that obviates translation deployed by the novel. The first is biological. The Trisolarians do not have

“organs of communication,” but are able to “display” their “thoughts” “directly” via electromagnetic waves. The technics of “direct display” eliminates mediality, reducing communication to logistical message transfer. The second is prosthetic. To communicate with terrestrial humans, the Trisolarians rely on a prosthetic technology that projects their thought-enunciations directly onto the retina of recipient *homo sapiens*, enabling a mode of “interspecies” communication that is literally transparent. A third pertinent detail concerns what Michel Foucault calls a “regime of truth.” The Trisolarians cannot engage in prevarication of any kind (eventually they learn, from *homo sapiens*, the art of calculated deception). To sum up: semantic transparency and immediacy wedded to an involuntary regime of truth condensed in the imperative to communicate are the qualities that characterize the Trilogy’s staging of the scene of translation. This staging epitomizes the ideology of communication upon which the modern regime of translation is built. Effacing the essential basis of communication in failure (Servais and Servais, 2009), this ideology depicts communication as the deployment of a process of message retrieval through code-breaking. In *Remembrance*, however, there is no black box, nor indeterminacy of meaning;³ the conditions of decipherment are completely transparent. The “code” is mathematical and contains the totality of meaning. Hence, translation appears in the Trilogy principally under the utopian sign of the return of the repressed. It is precisely what does not take place when techno-science displaces the political. Instead, what literally “takes place” is the apparatus of area and anthropological difference.

Opposite the ideology of transparent communication, the Trilogy half-heartedly stages its antinomic reversal, absolute non-relation, through the figure of love and violence. At the end of the second volume, when Earth’s space fleet is about to be decimated by a small advance reconnaissance probe from the Trisolarian fleet known as “the droplet,” one of the physicists examining the probe, Yi Ding, cites Goethe’s maxim, from Book IV, Chapter Nine of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–1796): “If I love you, what business is it of yours?” (Liu 2016, 376). The Trilogy’s relation to romanticism, and to realism and modern literature, is a vastly important topic to which we will return in a moment. Suffice it to say, here, that *Remembrance* has no interest in exploring the philosophical question of non-relationality that might be summed up by the question, “Is communication ever really possible?,” opting instead to pursue a delegitimation of the question via logistical cybernetics. The encounter with

the probe, the first physical contact between two interstellar “civilizations,” is greeted by terrestrial humanity through the phantasy of communal fusion. Enamored with the formal perfection of the generically-named “droplet,” the scientific team of which Yi Ding is part falls into misrecognition: “Yes, in the cold expanse of the universe, all carbon-based life shared a common destiny...a destiny that cultivated feelings of love that transcended time and space. And now, they sensed that love in the droplet, a love that could bridge the chasm of any enmity” (Liu 2016, 378). In the Chinese text, the English word “love” corresponds to that Buddhist-inflected Chinese expression, *yuanfen* 緣分, conventionally glossed by the word “affinity,” that refers to a deep karmic connection spanning separate lives. Yet there is no room in the disenchanted world of *Remembrance* for aesthetic causality (Solomon 2019a). When the attack begins and the droplet’s predatorial mission is revealed, Goethe’s maxim is inverted: “If I destroy you, what business is it of yours?” (Liu 2016, 381). In the space of several pages, the narrative turns the problem of non-relation—a problem that has recently been developed into an elaborate critique of the politics of sovereignty by philosophers like Giorgio Agamben (1998, 23)—into a cruel affirmation of cybernetics as a necessary supplement to the dangerously ideological aspect of sovereignty. Precisely because the fusional community is finally impossible and the only legitimate model of causality is mechanistic, sovereignty ends up being displaced from the political to the logistical—the realm where efficiency becomes paramount. Transparency instead of fusion.

Not surprisingly, the elevation of transparency, an extremely ambivalent political concept, to the status of a principle of organization encounters its limits once again in a return-of-the-repressed. Looks-that-say-more-than words, eyes-that-speak-louder-than-words, and physical expressions-that-communicate-beyond-language, first introduced as strategies to avoid Trisolaran surveillance of human communication (and prolonged throughout the Trilogy’s various meditations on the meaning of love), gesture to the constitutive role of materiality and embodiment in the production of meaning. Yet in the absence of a notion of mediality, the constituent role of the body in the production of meaning via speech is effaced. With the reduction of the body to an exceptional rather than constitutive status in the speech act, the role of materiality in the production of meaning simply does not make an appearance—just as the indeterminacy of linguistic being revealed in translational practice is also a non-problem for the Trilogy. Whether using words, or gestures, or prosthetic “direct display,” the sovereign subject of communication is

depicted as being in control of what she means to say; there is no “noise” or resistance, supplement or *différance*. The reduction of sovereignty to a logistics of cybernetic command and control produces, in fact, nothing but the negation of mediality.

4. Disenchantment

Remembrance thus recalls the type of disenchantment characteristic of modernity described by Max Weber in a talk delivered in 1917 near the end of the Great War.⁴ This is a type of disenchantment characterized, according to Jason Josephson-Storm, by “epistemic overconfidence” (2017, 286) that reduces the world to a brute, mechanistic causality and strips the human world of an ethical foundation in the name of moral rationalism. *Remembrance* transforms this form of epistemic overconfidence into a technological fetish of the kind that Jodi Dean has identified as an ideological feature of contemporary “communicative capitalism” (2005). I would like to take Dean’s critique of communicative capitalism further by examining the way in which the form of disenchantment advanced by the Trilogy is defined in relation to a biopolitics of species difference, literary types, and schemas of translation. This approach will be useful to advance reflections on the role of translation in contemporary capitalism.

As a parable of the modern regime of translation, *Remembrance* presents a *history of disenchantment*, or more precisely, the notion of history as a process of disenchantment. In typical neoliberal fashion, the disenchantment in *Remembrance* is dialed in around the political. If “Neoliberalism is,” as William Davies has recently concluded in a monograph on the subject, “the *pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics*” (2014, 4), Liu’s Trilogy arrives at the same effect via history. The unidimensional presentation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) as the epitome of mass hysteria and irrationality that characterizes modern political ideology effaces the subtle complexities of the multitude of social antagonisms and experiments involved in that historical event. Instead, a notion of knowledge as technical expertise, accompanied by an unreserved endorsement of the engineer as a representative figure of hope for humanity, sets the stage for a recurrent theme: human social organization is intrinsically hard-wired to tribal factionalism, and factionalism is the hotbed of primitive irrationality. As politics is depicted as little more than a vestigial realm of the species’

primitive history, only expertise in techno-scientific knowledge can rescue history from politics.

A couple of problems might be pointed out at this stage. First, modern representations of tribalism often dissimulate other truths from political economy, as Americans today are rediscovering, about capitalist-fueled social inequality (Ferguson, Jorgensen and Chen, 2018). Such truths, or at least the questions that might lead to them, do not play a role in Liu's Trilogy. The differential relation of capital and labor to techno-science is simply not an issue for *Remembrance*. Because techno-scientific knowledge is seen as the index of evolutionary "progress," the *relationships* that constitute the machine and its deployment are regularly reified into identities that precede the relationship. Second, the notion of tribalism is juxtaposed against a corresponding notion, deployed throughout the Trilogy, of the unity or the wholeness of humankind. One can detect here a nascent theological theme, recalling the mode of literal reading of the Bible that "offered a road to redemption and a clue to the recovery of the original transparent language, itself a path back to the wholeness of humankind" (Dutton 2002, 508). Hence, the quasi-theological form of disenchantment with the political staged by the Trilogy fits, in regard to language, into the metaphysical schema identified by Naoki Sakai of "the One and the Many" (2009, 75) that governs the modern regime of translation.

In terms of language, *Remembrance* charts a course that calls to mind *Language and State: A Theory of the Progress of Civilization*, the recent work by Chinese political scientist Xing Yu, in which the unproblematic unity ascribed to the essentially indeterminate, relational, and ultimately practical entities of language, people, and culture is accomplished by projecting the representational functions of the state back onto an historical narrative about its origins in the organic unity of the nation that is itself only the product of the representational power of the state (Yu 2015). In other words, *Remembrance* is, ironically, a story about forgetting. Consigned to oblivion are the historicity of the modern regime of translation and the schema of configuration that conspire to produce the image of the nation.

It could be helpful to contextualize the Trilogy's unabashed embrace of disenchanted, forgetful history in relation to the durable climate of interest in contemporary Chinese intellectual circles for Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism (Sapio 2015). The notion of "cosmic sociology" based on the prime directive of species survival and a social Darwinist

“rule of the jungle” summarized by the “dark forest theory” of proactive aggression in Liu’s Trilogy (Lin 2016) echoes Schmitt’s startling reduction of the foundation of the political to the relation between friends and enemies. Yet even though *Remembrance* ostensibly deploys a Schmittian analytic framework, it resolutely heads in the opposite direction from that intended by Schmitt. The embrace of logistical cybernetics as a necessary remedy to the irrational aspects of sovereignty that culminates in liberalism’s supposed tendency to affirm logistics over politics was precisely the object of Schmitt’s critique. The result, in the case of *Remembrance*, is a neoliberal appropriation of Schmittianism completely denuded of any of the potential for rethinking radical democracy (Kalyvas 2008) in the face of the new forms of communicative capitalism.

5. The Modern State and Species Difference

Remembrance’s contribution to neoliberal ideology—and the reason why the repressed scene-of-translation occupies such a central role in my reading of the novel—consists in the identification of the political in its entirety with evolutionary immaturity.

By the 1700s, fossils were emerging that irrefutably demonstrated the existence of species that were then extinct. By the end of the century, George Cuvier had presented conclusive evidence supporting the idea of species extinction. Today it is thought that up to 99% of all species that ever existed on Earth are now extinct. In order to understand how the notion of species extinction has infiltrated modern thought, I am going to look, perhaps unexpectedly, to political philosophy rather than biology. The possibility of extinction was taken up in that revolutionary eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant in his 1784 essay, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” Phrased in response to Frederick the Great’s authoritarian maxim, “*Argue as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!*” Kant’s answer to the injunction that privileges power over knowledge is summed up by this declaration at the start of his short essay: “*Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity*” (1996, 58). What interests me here is the way in which the Kantian text displaces its own explicitly avowed commitments to the specifically modern narrative that “our [premodern] social and economic organization lacked rationality” (Foucault 1996, 390). This displacement is conducted on an affective level in relation to the concept of *Unmündigkeit*. Glossed

by James Schmidt, Kant's modern English translator, as "immaturity," the German term covers a semantic range that enables Kant, as Christian Schulte argues, to efface the concept of *Minderheit*, or minority in a demographic sense, which was a pressing political reality in the Prussia of Frederick the Great, and assimilate it to the notion of minority of age in a juridical sense (Schulte 2010, 226–227). This act of *semantic assimilation* hides a parallel act of *demographic assimilation*. As a social ontology of specific difference begins to infiltrate modern political philosophy, the increasing confusion between the state and the nation not only leads to the normative identification of "minority" and "majority" populations, it also leads to a *comparative inter-national framework* that instigates a confusion between minority difference and species difference. In other words, in response to Christian Parenti's recent (2016) reconstruction of the history of the modern nation-state as an environment-making (and destroying) force, I will emphasize that *the modern system of nation-state plurality is precisely the institutional location at which the speciesist and racist logic of specific difference is instantiated and incarnated*.

In the Kantian vision of "enlightenment" as the autonomy of thinking-for-oneself, the disregard for expertise revealed by Frederick the Great's injunction is implicitly associated with shame. In his brief article, the affective qualities to which Kant refers directly include laziness, cowardice, timidity, and fear. Shame, although not mentioned directly, is present as the underlying motive: the text is an attempt to influence power not through a counter-power, but rather through *shame*. Addressed to a sovereign power before the educated public of a nation (hence a public marked minimally, as Kant's contemporary Moses Mendelssohn, a Jew, was well aware, by juridical and political conventions that confused a national minority with an intellectual and juridical minority), Kant's text aims to present mundane sovereignty with its potentially greatest shame: to act in a way that is contrary to, or suppresses, the accession to a state of majority/maturity. But his text clearly does not attempt to do this from the cognitive perspective of a minority.

The intersection between the political project of enlightenment and the anthropological project of specific difference can be inferred from the passing references in Kant's text to animals and machines, the two main "others" in relation to which the modern notion of the human-as-species is formed, and each of which is seen as being an exemplary instance of minority/immaturity status (the animal because it is servile, the machine because it is not autonomous). To violate the law of progress towards the

accession to majority/maturity is a cause for virtually unforgivable shame. To put it another way, the greatest shame from a Kantian perspective would be *extinction*. But whose extinction would this be? At a moment that some scientists are describing as the sixth great mass extinction (and the first due to human causes), we can observe with no small irony—and pain—that the *shame of extinction* apparently concerns, all too often, only one's "own" species, rather than other species.

6. The Face of Anthropological Difference

The far-reaching implications of an association between shame and the comparative political category of minority/immaturity difference culminate in the role accorded to the knowledge expert. To leave the state of minority/immaturity is not only to abandon the shame that comes from reliance upon the guidance of another, it is also to desist from preventing others from realizing this form of autonomy. Hence, Kant places inestimable value on the public use of reason as the means by which progress towards autonomy is realized. The support for this public use of reason is to be found in *the figure of the scholar*. The scholar, who speaks through the written word to a national public, is contrasted to the figure of the civil servant, whose enunciative position is considered by Kant to be essentially private. The public/private dichotomy advanced by Kant concerns not the distinction between subjective interiority and public exteriority, but rather *the mediation exercised by specialists as bearers and figures of the specific difference crystallized by the modern nation-state*—a theme that will reach full fruition in Hegel's writing. In the language of the state, this is the perspective of progress that benefits "all." Yet the "all" in question is based on founding exclusions and comparative rankings. Although the species concerns humanity as a whole, because humanity-as-a-whole does not account for the inscription of specific difference within humanity, the state becomes the sole effective bearer of humanity's dual engagement with specific difference. It is within this context that Kant's presentation of the role of the national scholar makes it the figure *par excellence* of the two faces of humanity that characterize the apparatus of anthropological difference. While the state has an exemplary role as the index of specific difference, the knowledge expert is the figure that incarnates that difference. Hence, it is precisely in terms of *figuration* that we discover an essentially literary foundation to the comparative,

speciesist, and racist politics characteristic of the anthropocene. The national philosopher, who bears responsibility for exposure to shame, occupies an exemplary place within the implicit logic of specific difference established by the state. The scholar, regardless of his or her area of expertise, is always already a figure of anthropological difference.

7. At Opposite Ends of History

Perhaps the best way in which to illustrate the catastrophic consequences of this identificatory mode consists in a comparison with Wuhe's *Remains of Life*. A fictional documentary, *Remains of Life* depicts the remnants of a Taiwanese aboriginal tribe in the aftermath of the Musha Incident of 1931, an armed revolt against Japanese colonial power that ended in the decimation of the Seediq tribe. Situated at opposing ends of history, between a past—the archive of which cannot be retrieved—and a future—the archive of which will be without meaning—*Remains of Life and Remembrance* share a concern with the *temporality of specific difference* dramatically focalized around the *possibility of extinction and the figure of knowledge*.

My comparative framework is informed by the significant differences in genre, market share, forms of address—and prizes gained—that distinguish the two works: as a winner of the prestigious Hugo Award, written in an extremely accessible style aimed at a popular readership, *Remembrance* commands a network of technologically-assisted amplification exponentially larger than that accorded to *Remains of Life*, which is written in a comparatively inaccessible prose (characterized by a kind of stream-of-consciousness narrative with eccentric punctuation and extremely few periods) aimed at a more restrained, “artístico-poetic” readership. While Liu's work is written in a flamboyant way that reinforces standard narratives about political modernity and progress—a way that would lend itself easily to screen-adaptation (it was widely reported in May 2018 that Amazon's Jeff Bezos had considered buying the rights to Liu Cixin's novel for up to one billion US dollars), Wuhe's experimental documentary style, which repeatedly challenges mainstream social and political narratives as much as literary conventions, leaves little room for that kind of exponential monetization and commercial franchising.

In terms of the literary representation of extinction, *Remains of Life* and *Remembrance* are diametrically opposed. Significantly, the question of minority status in the demographic sense is completely absent in the

latter, whereas it occupies a central role in the former. The only sort of *Unmündigkeit* entertained by *Remembrance* concerns the register of technology as a fetishized index of civilizational superiority. One of the main themes hammered home by the Trilogy is to be found in the exhaustion of modern political forms and the absolute superiority of a depoliticized, technocratic approach to social organization. In Liu's Trilogy, disenchantment occurs primarily through the technological. In an expression of the cynicism of a post socialist, neoliberal era, the political is associated *tout court* with immaturity. It is thus not surprising to see the narrative fall back on the Kantian notion of the key role accorded to the figure of the knowledge specialist in the definition of species difference. This explains the importance accorded by the narrative to a caricatural representation of the Cultural Revolution extracted from 1980s "wound literature." Depicting the Cultural Revolution as a senseless assault on rationality and knowledge, personified by the intellectual and encompassed in the modern state, the narrative completely effaces every other political and social nuance of the event (for which there exists today a relatively rich scholarly literature).

Whereas the state might once have been, albeit dubiously, presented, in "classic modernity," as the ultimate protection against catastrophes of all sorts, in the disenchanting political desert of Liu Cixin's Trilogy, the only possible protection against risk, including ultimately the risk of species annihilation, is found in technological superiority and logistical perfection (thus accounting for the ultimate alien victory and the annihilation of the human species). Yet since technological development, "dual-use" by definition, is ultimately dependent, for both Trisolarians and Earthlings, on the state (or the sovereign corporation), the progression is moot.

In spite of the interstellar perspective, the novel's anthropocentrism is pronounced. Although the aliens are faced with extinction problems of their own (it is what sets them on their quest to conquer Earth), the narrative is still focused on the extinction of our species, not "theirs." The quality of species-being is never thrown into question—by exploring, for instance, what it means to share the condition of species-being (Combes 2013, 49; LaMarre in Combes 2013, 112), or by looking at the biomolecular evidence concerning non-Weismannian life forms such as extremophiles (Parisi 2007, 38), or by problematizing the ideology of communication through a deeper attention to the problems of translation (Sakai 1997) and interspecies communication (Servais and Servais 2009). To that extent, Liu Cixin's Trilogy is a parable for the

institutions of “cultural difference” that manage “alienation” in the bipolar social relations that characterize globalization in the absence of a true decolonization of both knowledge and the institutions in which it is produced and circulated.

8. Wuhe’s *Remains of Life*

These are precisely the sort of divisions that are thrown into question throughout *Remains of Life*. In addition to challenging the major narrative motifs used to “explain” the Musha Incident (principally either as the expression of traditional customs and cultural specificity or as the expression of national dignity in the face of foreign oppression), the novel also repeatedly challenges the basis of modern knowledge production (distributed into diverse institutions such as the university, documentary cinema, and the media) organized around the index of anthropological difference. Decrying the typological mentality that transforms peoples into taxonomic specimens, making individuals and communities objects for research according to a matrix of universal and particular, the novel attacks the economy of species difference that spans the entire semantic range of the English term *species*, covering the biological, the economic, and the taxonomical. Since the colonial era, the Seediq have been subjected to a steady stream of researchers, documentarists, government officials, and curiosity-seekers. The apparatus of anthropological knowledge that turns the Seediq into specimens of a universal humanity, the value of which will accrue to institutions outside the tribal community (Wuhe 2011, 123) cannot be easily dissociated from the history of *accumulation by dispossession* (Harvey 2004) as the tribe is taken through a series of forced relocations (Wuhe 2011, 109 and 119) that emblemize the transformation of an entire living milieu into commodities. Principal among these would be the commodification of people, a.k.a. labor. Pegged to the lowest level of valorization by virtue of membership in a community deemed relatively more “immature,” members of the Seediq tribe are subjected to further segmentation in the process of valorization through the assignation of gendered difference: while aboriginal men are confined to brute menial tasks such as construction work, aboriginal women, when not doing unremunerated household work, are often a source of labor for the sex industry (113). The becoming-spectacle of anthropological difference, summarized by dual ethnicization and spectacularization, which the

narrator reckons turns First Peoples into a permanent “variety show” (*zongyihua* 綜藝化; Wuhe 2011, 153), highlights the imperceptible confusion between the economic and the biological in the constitution of the modern apparatus of anthropological difference, thus bringing to view the truism that capitalism depends on social difference to distribute risk and reward, and make sense—and cents—of this distribution.

Ultimately, *Remains of Life* is intent on showing that knowledge about specific difference is first and foremost implicated in social praxis. In other words, no matter how strongly institutionalized the mechanisms of objectification may be (whether they concern the commodification of labor, the production of anthropological knowledge, or the taxonomies of difference), these processes are always already implicated in a practical relationship to others. This point recalls to mind Michel Foucault’s observation, in *The Order of Things*, that what distinguishes the modern era is not so much the process of objectification *per se*, but rather the reflexive relationship that enables us to conceive not only of Man as a species among other species, but also one that is endowed, unlike other species, with an exceptional ability to intervene through knowledge and labor in the process of speciation itself. This ultimately social aspect of the logic of specific difference provides something like a reference point or an index for social praxis. In the context of modern social relations, invariably characterized by the *coloniality of power* (Quijano 2000) and the *logic of specific difference* (Sakai 2000), this practical index is sustained, subjectively, by an affective economy of shame and the representative role accorded to the knowledgeable expert.

At a moment when the mode of colonization is shifting its focus from territory and the life forms it sustains to the entire biosphere (down to the molecular) and beyond, it is pertinent to pose the question of what colonization means in a modern context. For *Remembrance*, the answer is simple: in the fashion of neoliberal managerialism, which relies on evaluation as a means of control, there is an implicit form of civilizational evaluation with universal applicability based on exiting the irresolvable immaturity of the political and embracing the full-blown maturity of the technological. This answer belongs to the type of flawed response to the crisis of the anthropocene identified, and critiqued, by Frédéric Neyrat (2016) as *geoconstructivism* or *geoengineering*.

It is significant, in this context, that *Remains of Life* distinguishes principally between two different modes of intercommunal contact: the first, homogenization (*tonghua* 同化; Wuhe 2011, 111), a term usually

glossed as “assimilation,” brings us back to the notion of identity or sameness (*tong* 同) in the Chinese expression. It is a form of violent appropriation that aims to enforce identity. The second mode, immersion (*rongru* 融入; Wuhe 2011, 67), is based on singularity and harmonization. Using the noise of frogs at night as an example of immersion, the narrator explains that even though very loud, the cacophony does not interrupt one’s sleep. This community of cacophonous difference does not require the “pacification” of certain populations, nor the assimilation of difference to a normative model of identity (including, needless to say, a normative model of difference). Knowledge could potentially play a role in either mode of intercommunal—or interspecies—contact, yet the rejection of cultural difference and identity as explanatory models of postcolonial social relationships, combined with a critical look at the sociality of knowledge production, ultimately spells a resounding critique of the mobilization of knowledge within the apparatus of anthropological difference.

9. Rancière and the Realist Novel

In drawing an opposition between the policing of identity and the politics of difference, *Remains of Life* recalls Jacques Rancière’s theorization of the realist novel. Rancière draws a direct connection between democracy, “a specific regime of speaking whose effect is to upset any steady relationship between manners of speaking, manners of doing and manners of being” (2004a, 14), and the “limits of realism” at the heart of modern literature. The basis of this connection is not simply a robust dialogue or a plurality of dissension, but two implacably contradictory forms of politics that cannot be reconciled with each other: the “politics of literariness” and the “politics of symptomatic reading.” Whereas the latter incessantly seeks out the “real” structure hidden beneath the apparent randomness of the quotidian, the former disrupts any possibility of an exhaustive account of the adequation between words and things. Hence, a great deal of Rancière’s theorization of the realist novel is devoted to overturning the various oppositions that attempt to recuperate the relationship between the realist novel and the “reality” of a given social, historical formation within a definite, stable political valence. The novel can be no more of a simple index or cipher of politics—even when it explicitly starts with the premise of political representation—than it could lay claim to be an autonomous realm of its own, to be defended against the colonizing depredations of the political.

The problem, as Rancière sees it, is that modern literature has its foundations in the instability that arises after the link between representation and volition that had governed the use of rhetoric before the modern novel arose had been destroyed. “Meaning was no longer a relationship between one will and another. It turned out to be a relation between signs and other signs” (2004a, 17). Yet rather than take this relation “between signs and other signs” in the direction of a postmodern dissolution, Rancière’s approach invites us to problematize the notions of progress and perfectibility that lie at the heart of aesthetic exemplarity, part of what I call the apparatus of area and anthropological difference.

Against the attempts to find a resolution to the inherent instability and inconsistency that defines the modern realist novel, yet unwilling to concede the battle against aesthetic humanism’s pedagogical project, Rancière calls instead for a return to the mediations and irreconcilable contradictions on which the novel is established in the first place. From this perspective, the politics of literature is enjoined to the power of fictioning that entails the creation or imagination of a future form of community that is not invested in the logical economy of species difference. “The population of the novel is also the promise of a people to come” (Rancière 2004b, 157). Defined in the first instance by equality (for which the exemplar would be Gustav Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, whose narrative attention to an equality of perspectives thoroughly betrays its author’s bourgeois dream), this literary “people to come” escapes the logic of individual, species, and genus—even against authorial intention. “It is not the individual who is the atom of equality” (157). For Rancière, reading Deleuze’s interpretation of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the logic of species or specific difference, founded upon the ontological presupposition of individuality, is ultimately identified with the representational mode of *mimesis*. In order for there to be a basis for the representation of imitation, a certain notion of the individual who belongs to a community, which in turn belongs to a larger humanity, is required. The realist novel, in Rancière’s reading, signals a clear break with Aristotelian *mimesis* and representation. “What is opposed to *mimesis* is, in Deleuzian terms, *becomings* and *haecceities*.” (150). “*Becomings*” refers us to the relationships that *precede* identities (identities are the units, if you will, of representation, but they give us no insight into the conditions of their individuation nor the process of their errancy); “*haecceities*” refers us to the singularities that cannot be comprehended by the economy of individual, species, and genus.

10. Minor vs. Major Literature

For *Remains of Life*, the mobilization of knowledge in the mode of assimilation to the logical economy of individual, species, and genus within the apparatus of anthropological difference is precisely the core of the destructive force leading towards population extinction. The novel's critique of the logic of species difference and the coloniality of power culminates in the positive notion of alternative temporality. While temporality is a central theme in both of the novels discussed here, I will only have enough time to briefly sketch a contrast between the two.⁵ The temporality of specific difference calls our attention not just to the logical economy of individual, species, and genus through which difference has come to be identified during the modern period, but also to the *enunciative moment* in which the appeal to specific difference as an explanatory schema arises. In the face of this moment, the two works' approach is diametrically opposed. Whereas Liu's Trilogy is a pessimistic postcolonial parable about the impossibility of rescuing discontinuity in the social from the logical economy of individual, species, and genus, *Remains of Life* presents a convincing eulogy for an alternative form of difference that survives, against the paradigmatic modern forms of violence represented by the nation-state, its wars, and the camp, precisely in the motif of *preservation*. This is not the preservation of a tradition, which would amount to a defense of the very type of specific difference most closely associated with the nihilistic impulse of modernity, but rather a protection of the experience of discontinuity in the social and the cacophony of difference. It is a preservation of the ephemeral now that is both shared and fragmented. Opposed to a Kantian vision of shame, which equates that affective state with the possibility of one's own species' extinction, *Remains of Life* tries ethically to remind us of the shame associated with the elimination of discontinuity (in favor of the logical economy of specific difference). As an ethical appeal to the notion of species as an inter- and intra-species bond, in which the quality of species-being is precisely what is common, the shame of extinction calls for a new ethics of sharing the current moment's ability to choose alternate futures.

In contrast to *Remains of Life*, the genius of the Trilogy would thus lie in the clarity with which it symptomatically stages the catastrophe that results from the displacement of translation as a social practice by a notion of translation as cultural logistics. No longer a praxis of indeterminacy

in the face of discontinuity in the social, translation instead becomes an exercise in the codification of difference into taxonomies of genus and species. The moral critique of human tribalism at the core of the Trilogy becomes the pretext, like all bourgeois morality, to invoke a view of social relations that fundamentally affirms what it ostensibly rejects. The negative presentation of tribalism is at best symptomatically critical. Within the world of *Remembrance*, species difference becomes a form of irrevocable destiny and absolute alienation. The Trilogy, in other words, is a manifest rejection of the notion of minor literature developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Liu's Trilogy manifestly falls into the category of majoritarian literature, "which 'expresses' an essentialist image of humanity or identity" (García 2017, 4); Wuhe's novel, by contrast, exemplifies the post-representational language of minor literature.

To get a sense of what is at stake in Liu's Trilogy, with respect to the place of modern literature and its relation to politics and the real, it is helpful to refer to this startling passage from Jacques Rancière:

The evil done by democratic literariness has to be redeemed by the power of a writing engraved in the very flesh of things. But this fictional solution is a dead-end for literature itself. Were it taken at face value, it would mean that the writer must stop writing, must keep silent and cede the place to the engineers, who know the right way to bind men together, the right way to write without words in the flesh of things. This was not simply a fictional invention. It was the core of the utopia spelled out in the 1830s, a few years before Balzac wrote his novel, by the Saint-Simonian engineers and "priests": no more words, no more paper or literature. What is needed to bind people together is railways and canals. (2004a, 21)

It is one of the great ironies of history that where criticism has come to judge Chinese realism, particularly in the socialist realism of Mao Dun (1896–1981), as being the epitome of literature that has fallen prey to the sort of ideological reduction described above, it is in fact only in the novels of Liu Cixin that literature fully achieves ideological subordination.

11. The Legacy of Chinese Realism

In view of the Trilogy's investment in disenchantment accompanied by a return of the repressed, it could be extremely fruitful to situate

Remembrance in relation to the history of twentieth-century Chinese realism. With regard to this history and the central role played in it by figuration, I adopt the pioneering genealogy developed by Peter Button in *Configurations of the Real* (2009). This genealogy, in its abbreviated form, passes from its inauguration in Lu Xun's 鲁迅 *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記) (1918), through its revolutionary maturation in Mao Dun's *Midnight* (*Ziye* 子夜) (1932), to its rear-guard action against state appropriation in Yang Mo's 楊沫 *The Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge* 青春之歌) (1958). As Button brilliantly argues, this itinerary revolves around a sustained, self-conscious staging of *the institution of literature*, a term that Button uses, in the tradition of Samuel Weber and Jacques Derrida, to describe both the founding exclusions that constitute an institutional field of knowledge production and the generative power of fiction in the construction of modern sociality. Along the way, Button describes the manner in which the anthropological image or figure of man became the central concern of Chinese realist authors. Determined to confront the challenge of modern techno-science in its relation to domination and exploitation, writers in this tradition began, according to Button, not with the question of Chinese identity and characteristics, nor even primarily with the liberation from tradition, but rather with the problem of the human as both subject and object of scientific knowledge in a world where scientific knowledge itself is inextricably bound up with colonialism, capitalism, and war. Knowledge of the "real" that was the purported object of literary realism could never be simply a question of reflection (or perversion, based on ideological constraints) given the gargantuan difficulties associated with knowing the real under conditions of domination and exploitation, i.e., the basic social conditions of colonial-imperial modernity. To know the real under such conditions invariably requires the work of negativity in a process of subjective formation. Hence, realist writers such as Mao Dun began neither with a notion of the "real" that could only be "deciphered" via access to the correct ideology, nor with a notion of a "real" that would be culturally determined, i.e., particularistic. Only after having confronted the problem of how to deal with the self-reflexivity of modern *homo sapiens*, whose manipulation of techno-science could enable transformations in both her environment and in her own nature, could the question of a properly Chinese response to this predicament be posed. Realist literature thus became a privileged site for the exploration of modern subjectivity, a

place to examine the possibilities for the human, not capital or its alienated avatar, techno-science, to become the identity of means and ends condensed in the promise of liberation from both colonial domination and capitalist exploitation. Hence, throughout the course of this politically-engaged literary production, the institution of literature (which includes literary creation, criticism, markets, and the state) constantly played a role as a critical site of engagement and a laboratory of subjective formation.

Against this genealogy, Liu Cixin launches a self-conscious attack on realism, claiming that, “What Chinese authors are missing is imagination and broader erudition. Our literature is that of an inveterate realist tradition...” (cited in Chen 2016, 95). In that self-congratulatory spirit, the *Trilogy* turns attention to staging the other side, with respect to literature, of one of the founding oppositions of colonial-imperial modernity—the *institution of techno-science*. It is as if Liu Cixin had given himself the goal of realizing through science fiction the utopia of the purely logistical community described by Rancière: “What is needed to bind people together is railways and canals.” Instead of the steady stream of references to literature that characterize many of the classic works of modern Chinese realism, Liu’s science fiction takes the history of science as its primary point of reference. Nick Richardson comments that Liu’s “science fiction, which situates itself at the diamond end of the ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ scale (‘hard sci-fi’ has a lot of science in it, ‘soft sci-fi’ doesn’t), demonstrates a knowledge of particle physics, molecular biology, cutting-edge computer science and much more besides,” noting that, “everything is described with such scientific authority” (2018). On discussion forums and in scholarly articles in China, there is a virtual sub-industry devoted to discussing the accuracy and/or plausibility of Liu’s scientific descriptions and future technologies. In such moments, literature displaced by science-in-literature implicitly lays claim to a form of realism ultimately more real than the realist novel could ever hope to attain.

Yet as we have seen above in the reference to Goethe, literature is hardly absent from the *Trilogy*’s narrative. To that extent, Liu’s *Trilogy* superficially inscribes itself in the long tradition since May Fourth of modern Chinese literary works that stage the institution of literature (particularly the act of reading in relation to subjective transformation) within the literary work itself.⁶ None of the references to literature in *Remembrance* are as emblematic of the fundamental abandonment of a critical engagement with the institution of literature, its constitutive

exclusions and their role in subjective formation, as the story of infidelity on the part of Luo Ji in his romantic liaison with Bai Rong, an author of harlequin romance, a massively popular genre of modern Chinese fiction. In this subplot, we encounter the Trilogy's engagement with figuration. Yet rather than being the primary aesthetic site in which the relation between freedom and subjectivity (a central theme for Chinese socialist realism⁷) could be explored, it becomes instead the site for a totalizing anthropological image.

Luo Ji, the inventor of social Darwinist "cosmic sociology" based on the "dark forest theory" and whose name is homophonous with "logic," plays a dramatic role in the plot that dramatizes what Carl Schmitt would have called the sovereign exception. He also happens to have a penchant for totality. While Mr. Logic may have lacked "intense" passion in his romantic liaison with Bai Rong, he nevertheless applies himself thoroughly to "figuring" her out, having assiduously "read all of her work." In response to Luo Ji's critical opinion that her "elegant style" was "not complemented by the novels' content," Bai Rong implausibly exclaims: "You seem to have greater literary talent than me. You're not revising plot, but character, and that's the hardest thing to do. Your every revision is the masterfully minuscule brushstroke that brings figures [*xingxiang* 形象] to life. Your ability to create literary figures [*wenxue xingxiang* 文學形象] is top rate" (Liu 2016, 63). I have revised Joel Martinsen's English translation, which not only elides the admittedly difficult to convey reference to Chinese painting (*dianjing zhi bi* 點睛之筆, literally the brushstroke that paints a [human figure's] eye) that is a crucial nod toward figuration, but also removes the first instance of the technical term "literary figure," repeated twice in the passage cited above,⁸ that played a crucial role in Chinese intellectual debates throughout the twentieth century about the role of literature as a form of subjective technology. Martinsen's choice is probably justified given the extent to which English readers have generally been denied knowledge of the profound engagement with figuration in modern Chinese realism that Peter Button's work makes eminently clear: "In short, nearly all of what comprise the essential philosophemes of modern global literary eidaesthetics circulates around the modern Chinese usages of the terms *xingxiang* [形象 figure] and *dianxing* [典型 type] as they were deployed in Chinese Marxist aesthetics and criticism" (2009, 274). Back in *Remembrance*, Bai Rong underlines yet again the importance of literary figuration when Luo Ji, who has agreed to write a story for her, comes to

her for help. Bai Rong cuts to the key issue: “Your method is all wrong. You’re writing an essay, not creating a literary figure [*wenxue xingxiang* 文學形象]” (Liu 2016, 64; translation modified, credit to Joel Martinsen for rendering the technical term, “literary figure,” into English). Following Bai Rong’s advice, Luo Ji “instead imagined her entire life and every detail in it” (Liu 2016, 64). In a nod to history-with-a-capital-H, Luo Ji interprets Bai Rong’s “methodology” in terms of the *representation* of totality as opposed to the figure of singularity.

Mr. Logic’s alternate methodology can thus be read as a rejection of the subjective approach to literary figuration championed by Mao Dun. I will have more to say about this in a moment. For now let me briefly underscore that *Remembrance* constitutes an unmistakable attack on Chinese socialist realism, which, as Peter Button observes, was based on a “deeply ingrained...demand for the universal realization of concrete freedom in Chinese Marxist thought. In other words, the universality that was sought, was a fully concrete one and was furthermore elaborated precisely in opposition to the abstractions of ‘logical thought’ (*luoji siwei* 邏輯思維)” (Button 2009, 144). In a pathbreaking study, Xiaolu Jiang (Jiang 2018) dissects the temporal process of understanding reality advanced by Mao Dun’s writings that has been gravely misunderstood by commentators from C. T. Hsia and David Wang to Chen Jianhua and An Mincheng, who tend to see in Mao Dun’s literature the distortional imposition of ideology upon an impartial, artistic reflection of reality. Jiang shows that for Mao Dun, knowledge of social reality requires not a grasp of “totality” (the purview of governmentality) but precisely of its opposite—discontinuity in the social (such as class, gender, and linguistic difference). “Reality” for Mao Dun is not captured by an idea, an ideology, or a reflection (otherwise knowledge about reality would never face the limits of its own historicity), but by the active process of a subject whose knowledge of the world can only be realized—against the dominant narratives—through engagement with discontinuity in the midst of relation. Mao Dun’s emphasis on realism as an exploration of subjective formation in the face of the domination and exploitation that would otherwise make a knowledge of “reality” virtually impossible is replaced, in Liu Cixin, by a bourgeois morality that eliminates altogether the fragmented temporality of subjective formation: “Like a creator outside of time, he [Luo Ji] wove the different stages of her life together and gradually came to discover the endless pleasure of creation” (Liu 2016, 65). This is the private pleasure ascribed to the fantasy of

the autonomous individual by a “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” that projects itself upon the “totality” of history. Following this path, Luo Ji ends up leaving Bai Rong in favor of the phantasy of a perfect lover—pursuing a trajectory that I have elsewhere called “perfictioning” (Solomon 2014). In the process, the narrative effectively declares its rejection of minority literature.

12. Remembrance as Forgetting and the Disciplinary Vocation of Becoming-Majority

If the Trilogy constitutes a rejection of minor literature, the turn from literature to science would seem to portend the evolutionary superiority of becoming-majority. One of the places where literature and science meet concerns precisely the power of invention. By setting the two in opposition to each other and embracing science over literature to confront the disenchantment of the political, Liu’s Trilogy may have unwittingly repeated the metaphysical desire behind Nazism. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy argue (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990) that Nazism must be understood metaphysically as the collectively suicidal form that arises when the logic of aesthetic humanism, which seeks to isolate the power of invention in a perfectible anthropological fiction (“the image of man”), is executed by a dedicated political project. Nazism, from their perspective, should be understood as a frighteningly radical implementation of the enlightenment politics of progress and perfectibility. In Liu’s Trilogy, science is, of course, explicitly proposed as a means to escape the horrors of modern politics. Yet the confrontation with science is no less over-determined than it had been in the case of literature. The classification and differentiation of genres, disciplines, forms of knowledge, and forms of life all proceeds according to an implicit operation of translation that reinforces the problematic, and fundamentally imaginary, logical economy of individual, species, and genus. In the final analysis, both trajectories lead to the same essential difficulty in the pedagogically-oriented universe of aesthetic humanism: how to become a superior, i.e., all-conquering, colonizing species?

If a counter-reading is possible, the key may lie in defining and assessing those elements of the Trilogy that ostensibly engage with becoming-minority. Narrative elements such as ascribing the role of the main protagonist to female characters, the complex narrative disruptions

of linear temporality, and the ostensible reversal of a Eurocentric perspective (even though I do not subscribe to the notion that Eurocentrism can be avoided within the relation between the universal and the particular) will have to be measured against the Trilogy's progressive insertion in the modern regime of translation and its logical economy of individual, species, and genus. As our discussion of the Trilogy's staging of translation and literary figuration has suggested, however, *Remembrance* ultimately cannot escape its own desire-for-majority.

The final challenge presented by the novel comes, unexpectedly, from the institution of literature in its reception of Liu's work—perhaps yet another involuntary sign of the return-of-the-repressed. Significantly, the novel's troubled relationship to literature and aesthetic humanism is shared—albeit with a vastly reduced sense of self-conscious engagement—by the founding exclusions that define the discipline of modern Chinese literature and cultural studies. If the history of generic Chinese studies can be understood, as Dutton argues, as an historical progression leading from its early role at the forefront of metaphysical questions to a progressive degradation eventually culminating in the reduction of Chinese studies to a logistical machine of “descriptive and applied translational practice” (2002, 504) designed to extract value from anthropological difference while providing implicit justification for the epistemic violence of colonial science, then the field of modern Chinese literature and cultural studies is itself associated with a compromised project of becoming-majority in the field of species difference. This assessment does not mean that studies of modern Chinese culture advocate Han chauvinism. On the contrary, the trend outside China, emblemized by New Qing History's attention to borderlands and ethnic minorities, has been quite the opposite. Yet what is generally unacknowledged in the founding exclusions of the field is the normative status ascribed to ethno-national forms of community ultimately modeled on a representation of translation.

13. Symptomatic Reading and the Disavowal of Social Practice in Knowledge Production

My discussion should be raising many questions concerning the relation between literature, translation, and the disciplinary field of China studies. I feel that it is important to emphasize that Liu Cixin's attack on socialist realism combined with the ideology of transparent

communication that effaces translational practice partakes of an *apparatus* whose purchase is much larger than a work of science fiction. This observation leads me to conclude that Liu's science fiction should not be seen as what happens when a large developing nation achieves the concentration of capital and technology that might permit an ambitious space program (*pace* Richardson), but as what happens when the institution of literature develops on the basis of an historical repression of its own aesthetic ideology. Ironically, to consider the current growth in Chinese-language science fiction the result of the nation's impressive gains in the hi-tech economy is to subscribe to the kind of economic determinism explicitly rejected by Marx (but taken up by a Plekhanovian reading). Instead, my reading of the apparatus mobilized by *Remembrance* emphasizes the production of subjectivity in both senses of the term.

To clarify this issue further, it will be helpful to leave behind both Liu Cixin and Wuhe and return to Michael Dutton's excellent essay cited above. Dutton's description of the history of sinology traces an itinerary from its origins at the heart of metaphysical inquiry towards its gradual degeneration into a translation machine. Dutton is particularly sensitive to the "epistemic violence" of colonialism, which delegitimizes knowledge that does not adhere to a strict hierarchy of causal explanation supposedly dominated by modern science. As Dutton invites us to confront the "relationship between science, translation, and the epistemic violence of imperialism," he concludes: "The West, it seems, could translate anything. Through the spread of scientific method, texts, buildings, and even life itself were opened to the West's gaze. The tower of Gustave Eiffel became its Babel and the new universal message was that science could conquer all" (2002, 501). As described by Dutton, the new, modern form of China studies, essentially a translation machine born out of the demise of previous metaphysically-motivated forms of inquiry, finally became locked in around the task of deciphering "the people's way of thinking and feeling." This was a task that would be accomplished "by focusing instead on the buried processes of signification on which surfaces were laid" (520).

It is impossible not to recognize in this description the presence of what Rancière calls "the politics of symptomatic reading" that forms one of the two irreducibly opposed modes of political engagement that define modern literature. Rancière makes the strong claim that this form of symptomatic reading forms the precondition for Marx's analysis of the commodity fetish, without which it would not have been

possible (2004a, 21). In other words, just like Marx had “to borrow from ‘naïve’ literature the patterns for highlighting its naiveté and telling the truth about its illusions” (21), so too the field of modern Chinese literature is essentially indebted exclusively to one side of the ineluctable contradiction that forms the basis of modern literature. What is lost, obviously, is the “politics of literariness” that Rancière identifies as the other face of the mediations that give literature its political function. Denuded of this complementary mode of political engagement, studies of modern Chinese literature are left unable to go, to cite Rancière speaking in a different context, “into combat against the powers of representation as powers of the Father...the world of models and copies” (2004b, 159). The patriarchal, or model-majority, aspect of representation needs to be understood, I propose, in relation to the peculiar aspect of social praxis that distinguishes area studies from the normative and social sciences. Knowledge production about an area always has to contend with the relations to people in the area concerned. While philosophy, for example, never has to contend with what the citizens of the ‘Republic of Philosophy’ might have had to say, area studies are invariably implicated in such practical sociality. Needless to say, knowledge production in the discipline of philosophy is no less implicated in social relations than area studies. What is interesting is the way in which the essentially social and practical difference between the two is converted into spatial geography. Beyond the specificities of concrete knowledge, area studies must be critically understood as an institutionalized discipline governing the enunciative positions of knowledgeable bodies distributed inter-nationally and involved in the production of area-specific knowledge. As the distribution is taken to be infrastructural, area studies inevitably disavow the implicitly international comparative framework that defines them.

Dutton’s observation that the interdisciplinary nature of China studies is held together, despite a superficial appeal to territoriality, by a linguistic definition of its object is extremely pertinent. In terms of the construction of a field, China studies are dependent on the presupposition of the putative unity of language. Yet as Naoki Sakai’s (2018) work persuasively shows, such unity can only be ascribed on the basis of a representation of translation. Needless to say, even in the second decade of the third millennium of the Common Era, social relations among researchers in the international field of China studies continue to be informed by vastly asymmetric translational flows and divisions

of linguistic labor. The recognition of that aspect of China studies that is not limited to its objects, methods, and theses, but rather contends with the way it organizes social relationships around the putative unity of language, is crucial. As Sakai tirelessly points out, the series of tautologies that links language, culture, and people “is a feature of a historically specific discursive formation” (1997, 160). Hence, we must look at China studies not only as a field centered around a certain object, but also as the index of a regime of translation.

A disciplinarily sanctioned operation of *telescopic isolation*, which Sakai has elaborated under the name of the “trope of separation” (2019), is what enables China studies to constitute the subjectivity of practitioners while disavowing its investment in the scheme of sovereignty and inter-national comparison born out of the modern regime of translation. As Dutton correctly observes, “One sees the contemporary effects of this translational method in the defense mounted by area studies against ‘alien’ Western theory...[in] the argument proffered by Paul Cohen...for a China-centric approach” (2002, 532). While I do not subscribe to the facile identification of a stance towards knowledge (“theory”) with a pseudo-region, I agree that the amphibological combination of the two is largely designed to sustain the trope of separation. Most importantly, telescopic isolation enables a disavowal of the field’s essential nature as an institutional form of social practice. True, the introduction of “theory” into the field of North American China studies since the end of the 1980s has put an end to the kind of epistemological separation, exercised at the level of object, that had previously dominated the field. Yet the end of epistemological separation has not been accompanied by the end of subjective separation. The “modality of being theoretical” advanced by Sakai (2012, 75), which recognizes a “sociality of non-sense or translation,” continues to be repressed by assumptions that confuse identity with a position. From that perspective, China studies has been writing its own version of “science fiction” for decades by situating subjective formation in a vacuum akin to outer space. Thanks to Liu Cixin’s work, the field constructed through that operation may now become visible as a taxonomic space of classification that compresses and filters living bodies, i.e., relations, that are the bearers of knowledge into identity-objects, funneling them into a logical economy of individual, species, and genus—into, in other words, reified specimens that are objectified for bodies of knowledge rather than subjects of living relations.

14. Translation, a Dual Concept

Dutton correctly perceives that oriental area studies' engagement with language-learning and translation is exclusively centered on its logistical, rather than subjective, aspects:

Extraction, translation, mobility, and an ability to combine and reconfigure other elements of an existing set of knowledges formed the methodological basis... And just as scientifically based translational practices would render an exact knowledge of texts "from the origins of the world," so, too, the language of modern science, when applied to engineering works, would refashion the ground beneath our feet. (Dutton 2002, 518)

The situation that Dutton describes is precisely what Sakai has in mind with the critique of the modern regime of translation. It is best seen in the presupposition of two heterogeneous unities that translation in its logistical variant is supposed to bridge. This presupposition relies, according to Sakai, on an implicit concept of translation which it promptly effaces in order to then claim, via a quiver of beguiling metaphors (St. André 2014), that translation is an operation of bridging, filtering, orchestrating, etc.

Beyond this critique of translation, Sakai points to a different, positive aspect missed by Dutton's account. The conceptual difference internal to Sakai's understanding of translation is what leads Gavin Walker helpfully to point out that "the concept of translation is in fact a divided concept" (Walker 2014, 38). It is a name for *both* an institution that imposes various forms of normativity *and* a social practice of creating new forms. Opposed to the representational schema of translation is a practice of encountering discontinuity in the social. The problem, for which Sakai's analysis is the solution, is how to come up with an understanding of the translational situation that does not efface the fundamental experience of discontinuity that calls for translation in the first place?

China studies as described by Dutton is left with the only kind of translational disposition imaginable after the elimination of discontinuity: the politics of *conversion*. That is why the shift, detected by Dutton, from "the metaphor of Babel to that of the Pentecost" (2002, 514), becomes so decisive for the field. Dutton is quick to point out that this transformation dovetails with a nascent Schmittianism: "This desire to convert is the

very point at which ‘*faith fights errant faith*’ and this, as Carl Schmitt so clearly shows, is the most intense of all political moments. As a religious quest, ‘Europe and its other’ carries hidden within itself another potential translation: ‘friend and enemy’” (515). The metaphor of the Pentecost is precisely the form of colonial governmentality under erasure (due to the mediation of postcolonial sovereignty) that characterizes *Pax Americana*. Needless to say, the theme of conversion, ultimately dependent on translation, hardly needs to be limited to the attempt to make the other conform to the self; on the contrary, as has been the case under the particular political form of transnational hegemony exercised by *Pax Americana*’s embrace of anti-colonial, post-colonial (yet subordinate) sovereignty, conversion might more appropriately refer to the attempt to make the other conform to a normative identity of mutually-constituted cultural difference.⁹ This is the form of conversion that substitutes postcolonial yet subordinate national sovereignty for the decolonial transition to a non-colonial, non-capitalist world that might have occurred after the end of European and Japanese Imperialisms. While many commentators have understandably emphasized the culturally hegemonic aspects of postwar American leadership, exemplified by the role of Hollywood cinema, it is important to stress that the basic mode of international governance envisaged by *Pax Americana* is not homogenization, but rather the progressive codification of difference in order to facilitate and defend the geopolitics of market segmentation. Postcolonial sovereignty, based on an ideology of cultural difference assimilated to specific difference, is one of the primary tools used by *Pax Americana* to interdict the emergence of an alternative world.

15. Aesthetic Ideology and Translation

Speaking of democracy, Rancière holds that there is a non-representational “disorder[liness]” (2004a, 15) at the heart of democracy that is put into play by literature. There is an irreducible cacophony at the heart of literature of the kind celebrated by *Remains of Life*. This is an irreducible dissension that cannot be construed in terms of oppositions (between politics and art, for instance) because those oppositions are *internal* to literature, nor taken merely as a symptom of something else, for the possibility always remains, according to the politics of literariness, that literature simply means nothing and does nothing, just as much as one might extravagantly claim, as David Wang tries unsuccessfully to do, that

the “realist paradigm” deployed by Lu Xun’s literary creation *Diary of a Madman* (1918) must ultimately be held responsible for its part in opening the way toward the political violence of the Cultural Revolution (Button 2009, 61; 70–74). Hence, the field of modern Chinese literature as a disciplinary formation enjoys a certain tense proximity to realist literature even as it experiences a certain inability to comprehend the historicity of its own relation to it. If, as Rancière argues, “the inconsistency of literature is also the consequence of the philosophical ground—Romantic, idealist, German—on which it has been conceived” (2004b, 152), it is equally true that the field of modern Chinese literature, tied as it is to an historically-specific notion of the putative unity of language and its equivalence with an ethno-national people, has been formed on the same ground.

This subterranean connection explains why the disciplinary interpretation of Chinese realism, which critically engages precisely with the historicity of romanticism in relation to social relations of domination and exploitation, constitutes an *anomaly* for the construction of the field. Attached to one side of realist literature, the field is devoted—by virtue of being tethered to a disciplinary object defined by the romantic equivalence between the putative unities of language, people, and culture—to deciphering or decoding the Chinese “text” in a symptomatic reading of its reality. The *Routledge Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature* (2018) edited by Ming Dong Gu, whose chronologically arranged contents begin with a section on realism subtitled “Realism and the anatomy of Chineseness,” is indicative of the amount of intellectual labor perennially required to domesticate the anomaly presented by modern Chinese realism. Mapping living relations (“becomings” and singularities) onto a representational anatomy is precisely the operation that enables the transformation of singularly knowledgeable bodies with unknown (yet knowable) potential into bodies of knowledge. To fit Chinese socialist realism into a psychological drama between “ideological commitment” and “aesthetic dedication” is what happens when the researcher takes as his point of departure the logical economy of genus, individual, and species, rather than singularity. In the absence of the politics of literariness that would destabilize the foundational oppositions essential to the politics of symptomatic reading, the task of symptomatic reading in isolation tends to push the field of modern Chinese literature by default into a logistical form of cybernetics, concerned primarily with the transfer of meaning, control of the cipher, and disciplinary taxonomies based on given identity. This kind of China studies is essentially founded on a logistical reduction of

social phenomenon that sees the social bond either as given by the identity ascribed to the putative unity of language configured through translation, or else as the result of the elimination of literariness altogether.

Despite its title, *Remembrance* signals the erasure of the historical memory of Chinese socialist realism's engagement with the politics of aesthetic exemplarity, confirming the field of modern Chinese literature's dominant narrative. Yet as Button reminds us:

[I]n a very real sense, to decry the overtly political nature of socialist realism was in a specific way to misunderstand it. Importantly for my purposes here, that misunderstanding was the inevitable result of the failure to recognize the extent to which aesthetic ideology forms the very core of the modern concept of literature and the institution of modern (Chinese) literary studies in the West. (2009, 273)

What Button calls "aesthetic ideology" concerns the logic of aesthetic exemplarity. In my discussion above, I have concretized that logic in terms of the representational taxonomy of genus and species that serves as the cornerstone for the apparatus of area and anthropological difference. Now that North American inspired critiques of Chinese socialist realism have become more or less dominant in China, the historicity of the field and the anomaly of Chinese realism can be all but forgotten.

There is an important parallel here with the field of economics in China, which has fallen the same way (Cohn 2017). Such coincidences are not merely incidental. The analogical relation between finance and literature was at the heart of Mao Dun's classic *Midnight*. "Analogical" means not that they are structurally the same, but rather that they proceed according to similar operations of speculation, referentiality, creation, and futurity. One of the most brilliant aspects of Mao Dun's classic novel about failed bourgeois revolution, *Midnight* (1933), lies in the careful way in which the institution of literature, present throughout the novel through characters who write literature as well as those who read and respond to it, is intimately connected to the operation of speculative finance. Mao Dun conclusively demonstrates that the difference between the two is not one of kind but of degree; the two are related analogically. Both are concerned with the power of fictioning to produce certain types of community and open up, or close down, future alternatives.

The question for a realist literature opposed to capital thus becomes one of finding terms that are other than descriptive. For criticism,

the burden is thus placed on devising strategies not just equal to the recollection of the limits and mediations that inhabit the politics of literature between literariness and symptomatic or indexical reading, but also equal to the task of inventing new ways to break through the disciplinary institutions that privilege representative schemas such as the modern regime of translation and the apparatus of area and anthropological constructed through it. It is little wonder that an anomalous literary art such as Mao Dun's devoted specifically to making visible the intrinsic connection between such disparate domains has perennially been the object of concerted intellectual labor designed to disqualify its claims to intervene in subjective formation.

I am making the apparently banal claim, in other words, that there exists a fundamental connection between translation, understood as a social practice of indeterminacy in the face of discontinuity in the social, and the politics of literature. The crux of this connection concerns the problematic status of referentiality. In different ways, both realist fiction and translation lay claim to the real. What joins them together in the apparatus of area and anthropological difference is the notion that referentiality always returns to the logic of species difference.

This connection needs to be understood as an *apparatus*, meaning, once again, something that is crucial to the production of subjectivity. When Rancière associates the power of fictioning beyond the logical economy of species difference with the creation of a foreign language inside a mother tongue (2004b, 153), he provides a clue. "[C]reating another language within language" (156) is precisely the work of translation. It is crucial, however, to follow Sakai in our understanding of what "another language within language" means. It does not mean the process of configuration according to which one distinguishes two separate language unities through a representation of translation (Sakai 1997, 15 *passim*). Rather, it means developing an understanding of translation that remains faithful to the experience of incommensurability and discontinuity that call for translation in the first place. This ethical requirement means that we cannot conceptualize the discontinuity encountered in terms of "untranslatability," which only arises *after* translation has been postulated as the encounter between separate linguistic unities. This representation fails precisely because it relies on an implicit concept of translation to presuppose the very difference that it claims to negotiate or overcome.

The focus of Dutton's approach to translation focused, understandably, on a critique of what Sakai calls the representational schema of translation,

neglecting the positive, generative power of translation as a social practice of discontinuity. Shorn of this positive aspect, Dutton ultimately cannot avoid falling into the same aporetic trap of symptomatically reading the power of symptomatic reading when he rejects the translational machine of area studies in favor of an authentic orientalist otherness that could “disrupt” the homogenizing tendency of “Western” knowledge grounded in colonial epistemologies of scientific causality (Dutton 2002, 516). As much value as I find in Dutton’s critique and very much hope that others will continue to reread his text, the idea that any meaningful form of disruption could be achieved within the horizon of the apparatus of area and anthropological difference seems utterly implausible.

This is not the place to discuss the new tasks for area studies that are replacing the old area formation, but one thing is certain: they will have everything to do with translation as a form of social practice and with fields of study conceived from the point of relation rather than isolation. Such tasks, which are already well underway in all areas of the humanities including China studies, presage nothing less than a reorganization of the disciplinary divisions of the humanities beyond their basis in the apparatus of area and anthropological difference inherited from the colonial-imperial modernity. That, it seems to me, is the best way to invent alternative futures other than those offered by *Remembrance*.

16. Symptom or Subject?

Might it not be said, then, that *Remembrance* should be understood as *symptomatic* of Chinese cultural nationalism? Or perhaps, should we not understand the Trilogy as symptomatic of an apparatus that includes both “China” and the area devoted to its study? Undoubtedly, the answer to both questions is yes. Yet there is a catch. When read critically against the grain, the novel ironically presents, at the level of plot, an implicit critique of this kind of symptomatic reading, despite its own deep investment in the politics of symptomatic reading. To the extent that literary criticism tries without due precaution to subsume *Remembrance* into an anthropologically-coded category such as a specifically *Chinese* mode of a universal genre (science fiction), it risks falling into the final trap laid by the novel: extinction is the only answer to a species irrevocably alienated in the fiction of the type, absolute species difference.

It is for this reason that I feel compelled to note the distance that separates the argument I am constructing here from that of Nick

Richardson's assessment of Liu's politics in his review of Liu's fiction for the *London Review of Books*: "Inferring a novelist's political position from their work is always problematic," warns Richardson, "but politics is one of the central preoccupations of the *Three-Body* [Remembrance] Trilogy, and its ideological underpinning complements contemporary neoreactionary thinking" (2018). To begin with, I would assert that the politics of Liu's Trilogy cannot be contained by the term "neoreactionary." Rather, Liu's Trilogy should be seen as partaking in the *politics of engineering* (which straddles both *geoengineering* and population or *bioinformatic engineering*) that sustains modern biopower in various different political forms from left to right. I am especially wary of strategies that try to apply the politics of symptomatic reading to these novels as an index of something specifically "Chinese" while bracketing the problems of indexical reading. Perhaps Chinese cultural nationalism is "symptomatic," in turn, of a structural complicity in the postcolonial/postimperial world system. Such considerations are averted, however, as Richardson concludes his review with the question "What makes Chinese science fiction Chinese?" posed by the contemporary science fiction writer Xia Jia. It is not the repetition of Xia's disingenuous question that is problematic, but rather the absence of reflection—the critic's responsibility—about the stakes involved specifically in relation to the institution of literature and its peculiar form of engagement with the political via the power of fictioning and typology. That strategy replicates one of the foundations of the modern realist novel, but, as Rancière convincingly explains, is only one half of modern literature's engagement with the political.

The field of modern Chinese literature and cultural studies is structurally founded on an exclusive privilege accorded to symptomatic reading: "Chinese" texts inherently register "Chinese" reality. In that sense, the field shares a common topography with Liu's Trilogy, amplified by the misrepresentation of Chinese socialist realism common to both. Before we ascribe substance to this peculiar kind of topography, however, we should remember its essentially subjective, rather than cartographic, aspect. Behind the expression of apparent common sense lies a series of moves that repress the historicity of the production of subjectivity. The principal means of achieving this repression consists of harnessing the modern regime of translation to the institution of literature in the service of a cartography of species difference. The act of referring back to that cartography as justification for subjects created through the act of

referral erases the inherently subjective moment involved in privileging symptomatic reading.

Yet precisely because this apparatus concerns the production of subjectivity, a work of fiction like *Remembrance* on its own could never be simply *representative* or *symptomatic*. To make such claims would be to forget that subjectivity is not only produced but also productive. It is here, I think, that we can grasp the workings of the aesthetic ideology shared by *Remembrance* and institutional China studies. The element of fiction, or more precisely, the *performative nature of fictioning*, is actively repressed by both sides. The type, created as an *act* of fictioning, is nevertheless represented as something *a priori* and given. This repression is a subjective act that produces material effects whose crystallization can be discerned in the apparatus of area and anthropological difference.

My argument also needs to be distinguished from one that asserts the critical discovery that Chinese or Asians are not objects, but subjects, too (Lanza 2017, 35). While lauding this historical progression in North American China studies, I also ask: How shall we understand the inscription of anthropological difference into subjectivity? The peculiar form of recursive causality typical of modern social relations requires us to acknowledge that the identity is not inherent. Anthropological difference is constituted through an act of the subject. Anthropological difference is not an *attribute* of subjects, even subjects whose agency is recognized as being the same as ours; it is not given and cannot be comprehended through the structural metaphor of identity while ignoring the operation or act that accompanies it. That act is eminently theoretical and performative. Hence, “theory” always exists in an ambivalent state relative to anthropological difference. The risk of seeing theory as a remedy for overcoming anthropological difference lies not only in unacknowledged universalism, but also in ignoring the way in which anthropological difference has always been a theoretical enterprise, even when not explicitly recognized as such. The model for handling this risk, at least as far as area studies is concerned, has been up until recently, the modern regime of translation, which represses the historicity of those presuppositions required to represent translation as a bridging technology. According to that model, it remains perfectly plausible—if conceptually indefensible—to assert that theory “unsettles the very idea of belonging to a location” (193). Yet, if theory unsettles belonging to such an extent, two questions arise: One, why are fields traditionally associated with theory’s “core” still linked to the pseudo-geographical idea of the West? (This question might also

be rephrased as an interrogation of the historical conditions that favor an amphibological construction associating “theory” with a geolocalized area, the template of which would be that incoherent construction known as “the West”). Two, why is the field of Chinese literature and culture today still ruled by the proscription against using (too much) “Western theory”? While I do not have time here to explore these questions in depth, I will note instead that they point to a common lacuna: they both allow the social experience of discontinuity *prior* to subjectivation to pass unnoticed. This omission, an active form of forgetting, amounts implicitly to believing in a spiritually concrete substance called “Westernness” or Western civilization that inheres in specific subjects with whom we can enter into alliance, conflict, or dialogue.

The point is not to unsettle the *idea* of belonging while the institutional practices of translation and the disciplinary regime that maintains them remains intact. This strategy is readily susceptible to be recuperated by the complicity between universalism and particularism that is the hallmark of knowledge production under the modern regime of translation. At stake is not only the way a certain understanding of theory serves to consolidate the pre-existing array of disciplinary divisions correlated to pseudo-geographical areas, but, more pertinently, the way that such understandings consolidate the kinds of social relations codified and disciplined through the apparatus of area and anthropological difference that combines the modern regime of translation and the institution of literature.

In a fascinating study of the relationships among the realist novel, modern subjectivity, financialization, and anthropological difference in the context of the Atlantic slave trade, Ian Baucom insists that what needs to be “unsettled” is the *point of decision* that adjudicates between exemplarity and singularity. To read something exclusively as symptomatic or exemplary is to risk grounding the value of that way of reading in a constellation of forces, such as financialized slavery networks and realist novels, that *capitalize* and *speculate* on the differential value of biopolitical types (Baucom 2005, 168). Hence, the point of decision is also inevitably a point of *indecision*, or, more accurately (and quite differently), the point of choosing both in a way that creates new roles for each. In terms of thinking about social relations, the best way to think of this subjective act would be in terms of translation. What Sakai describes as “a *poietic* act of inscribing continuity at the singular point of discontinuity” (2018, 73) is a practice of exemplarity and singularity.

It is exactly analogous to what Rancière describes as the irreducible opposition between the politics of symptomatic reading and the politics of literariness. Together, these are essential tools for understanding the biopolitical apparatus of area and anthropological difference.

Notes

- 1 While Liu's Trilogy is often referred to by the title of the first volume in the series, *The Three Body Problem*, I prefer to conserve the author's original title for the trilogy to highlight its connection to representation and history, particularly the history of criticism in its relation to the reception of Chinese socialist realism.
- 2 See Siegert (1999, Chapter 22), for an excellent discussion of Shannon's path-breaking article in 1948 and its importance for modern literature and criticism.
- 3 The "black box" is mentioned only in relation to command and control systems used by interstellar spaceships (Liu 2016, 325). For a description of the black box, see Galloway (2011) and Pasquale (2015).
- 4 "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'" Max Weber, "Science as Vocation" (*Wissenschaft als Beruf*), originally a speech delivered at Munich University. See Gerth and Mills (1946, 155).
- 5 An excellent analysis of temporality in Wuhe's *Remains of Life* can be found in Chen (2012), which also makes clear the connection between temporality and alternate forms of community and identity.
- 6 Peter Button's reading of *Song of Youth* is a brilliant exegesis of a particular work in this tradition. See Button (2009, Chapter 5).
- 7 Peter Button uses the term "eidaesthetics," which "refers to the aesthetic presentation in literature of the philosophical idea of freedom as the modern subject's identity" (2009, xii), to name the relationship between these terms and their central importance for both Chinese Marxist aesthetics and Chinese socialist realism.
- 8 Martinsen's translation creates further obstacles for the English reader seeking precision by rendering 文學形象的塑造過程 (*wenxue xingxiang de suzao guocheng*; Liu 2016, 68), the process of crafting literary figures, simply as "literary creation" or alternates translating *xingxiang* (Liu 2016, 69) in a literary context by "image."

- 9 For an extensive analysis of the politics of conversion in *Pax Americana* with regard specifically to translation, see Solomon 2019b. For an analysis of the role of faith and conversion within *Pax Americana* since the rise of financialization in the 1980s, see Cooper (2008, Chapter 6).

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