

Rejoinder to Yo Shu and Atsuko Tsuji

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I would like to begin by saying that both Shu and Tsuji raise some extremely interesting and important questions when responding to my paper 'Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness'. Their responses are formally different in significant respects—Shu's piece is critical of the arguments presented in my paper and the reading of Derrida presented there, whilst Tsuji's paper opens up another area of discussion by introducing the voice of Walter Benjamin. There is arguably a common thread that links Shu and Tsuji's arguments, which concerns the ways in which they represent/understand 'otherness'. We will return to this point later. Let us begin by trying to answer the concerns raised by Shu.

During his paper Shu argues that I only present a partial account of Derrida's treatment of otherness and the arrivant. Shu maintains that my argument only takes on board the structuralist aspect of Derrida's philosophy. He refers to the claim that whatever whiteness 'is' is determined by the fact that is not blackness, that whatever the Occident 'is' is what the Orient is not. Shu argues that this claim is structuralist in character as 'Structuralists argue that what anything is can be determined by its place in a structure. To understand what anything 'is' we must understand what it is not'. There are several points that are worth making here. Firstly, much of my paper is dedicated to an explanation of how Derrida's philosophy of language departs from Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign—Saussure is probably the most important/influential figure within the structuralist movement. The reader will also find a passing reference in 'Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness' to Derrida's critical reading of Lévi-Strauss, the structuralist anthropologist. Although I wish to direct attention to these sections of the text, the argument perhaps needs restating in abbreviated fashion.

Firstly, though it is true that Saussure treats language as a structure that is dependent on differences, those differences are perceived as being absolute. The fact that Saussure thinks of these differences as absolute derives from his theory of the linguistic sign. Here the arbitrary signifier is married to the 'necessary' signified which takes on the quality of logocentric presence. Therefore, although meaning is dependent on linguistic differences, those differences pertain to linguistic signifieds that are hermetically sealed from one another. Consequently, maintaining that the concept of blackness is internal to whiteness is to recognize the rupturing of the hermetic seal, a rupture that characterizes deconstruction and produces difference (as opposed to difference). As my paper attempts to show, this (the fact that whatever a word/concept is is dependent on all the other words/concepts that it is not) only represents the synchronic dimension of what Derrida calls the madness of language. The diachronic dimension

characterized by iterability is the other.

Although Shu refers to iterability, he appears to see it as being in some ways opposed to the synchronic aspect of difference described above. Iterability takes on board the diachronic aspects of language in the sense that words are haunted by their previous and future contexts. For words to mean anything at all they must be repeated and in being repeated they enter into new contexts. However, the new context does not reframe the word in an entirely new way as words carry their old contexts with them. If we take a word like 'nigger', this word used to be a straightforward term of abuse. However the word has been reclaimed within black culture—black people sometimes refer to each other as niggers. Of course, this reclamation does not make the old context go away. Rather the force of its use is determined by that older context—this is not a word that anyone can innocently use in any old way they like without causing offence. Ultimately, I would like to direct the reader to my account of the changing usage of the term 'Orientalism', as this demonstrates both the synchronic and diachronic concerns mentioned above.

In one part of his paper Shu maintains that I am trying to argue that texts from other other cultures and those from the literary heritage should be treated in accordance with a principle of equality. He makes quite a big deal of this word 'equality', which, I should point out, makes no appearance in my text.

When I maintain that it is necessary to do justice to texts from other cultures, I am trying to do several things. Firstly, at one point I question the term 'other cultures' as writing in English from outside the UK is often written as a response to racist assumptions that haunt the canonized works of the literary heritage. Consequently, this implies a discursive hybridity that the National Curriculum document fails to account for. The fact that such texts are written in English is already indicative of some degree of hybridity. Secondly, though my paper does not try and impose a calculable judgement as regards equality, it does point to the 'inferiority' and relative lack of sophistication that is assumed to characterise 'texts from other cultures'. Trying to scientifically calculate equality amongst texts is of course absurd. Think of the scene from *Dead Poets' Society* in which the class read a text that attempts to calculate the relative merits of 'works' by Byron and Shakespeare using a graph. The teacher rightly asks the students to rip out this section of the book. Judging the importance of works of art can never be an exact science. However, to exclude writing from large sections of the globe on the assumption that it is automatically inferior is problematic in the extreme.

Now one might say that making literary judgements may on some level be relative to culture. Perhaps the whole enterprise of ranking works of art comes out of a Western aesthetic tradition with its limited conception of criteria. Of course, the formation of the canon is bound up with suppressing 'other' voices. Consequently, we might note that the 'canon' is subject to iterability and the reframing of judgement emerges through the kinds of project undertaken by the likes of Said. Shu's claim that judgement is determined by making the incommensurable commensurable through establishing a 'general homogenous dimension' comes under duress—the appearance of the arrivant means that the judging process is not fixed in its operations.

Ultimately, I think that the disagreement between Shu and myself rests on differing conceptions of otherness. Shu maintains that otherness should be conceived of as 'something prior to phenomena', which 'always escapes from our comprehension'. Consequently, it would

seem that ‘otherness’ must be thought of as something external or prior to representation/language. It seems odd that Shu should make such a claim as he is against seeing ‘identity as secure’, yet surely the identity of this prior otherness is secure in the sense that we cannot get at it because it is irreducibly other. Shu also talks about being open to the transformative aspects of ‘other’ cultures, yet this cultural otherness is presumably not prior to phenomena. Ultimately, there seems to be something contradictory about any discussion of an otherness ‘prior to phenomena’ as this notion is obviously presented to us in words. One must be within language to gesture towards what is beyond it.

This is perhaps the moment to respond to Tsuji’s reply to my paper. Tsuji devotes the first part of her reply to providing what I consider to be a very accurate description of the argument presented in ‘Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness’. In the second half of her piece she introduces Benjamin’s discussion of different forms of mimesis. Following Benjamin, Tsuji directs the reader towards an otherness that is somehow felt to be before/beyond language and that shows itself through mimesis.

Tsuji draws several distinctions during her reply. Let me try to set these distinctions out briefly and schematically: (1) Tsuji distinguishes between voluntary imitation and non-voluntary mimesis in human behaviour. She argues that in education too much emphasis is placed on voluntary imitation, and that the importance of the chance event that encapsulates non-voluntary mimesis is missed. (2) The second distinction refers to the difference between sensuous and nonsensuous similarity. It appears that sensuous similarity is produced through mimicry and is onomatopoeic. So an example of sensuous similarity might involve using one’s voice to imitate an owl. In contrast nonsensuous similarity is represented by dance, cultic ritual and language. In the case of nonsensuous similarity, ‘mimesis has no object to imitate’. (3) The third distinction is between ‘seeing’ similarities and ‘producing’ similarities. To see similarities involves passivity to an accident or moment that arrives—this is the educative moment *par excellence*. In contrast ‘producing’ similarities is about ‘talking or writing experience that denies the representation or reproduction of an original’.

Tsuji seems to favour one element in each of the pairs presented above. Non-voluntary mimesis is favoured over voluntary imitation, non-sensuous similarity is more important to Tsuji’s argument than sensuous similarity and ‘seeing’ similarities needs more urgent attention than ‘producing’ similarities. Generally speaking, Tsuji’s focus is on the passive (non-voluntary, non-sensuous, seen) dimension to human experience, which she feels has been pushed aside by the active (voluntary, sensuous, productive) dimension. The question that then arises is: passivity in the face of what? The answer would appear to be ‘the arrivant’, but what is meant by this is clearly something quite different from what I take Derrida to mean by the term. It appears that for Benjamin/Tsuji, the arrivant emerges (through mimesis) from a place prior to/beyond a symbolic system. Here is Tsuji:

In Benjamin’s use of the term, ‘mimesis’ has no object to imitate. When Benjamin considers language in terms of this nonsensuous similarity, he thinks of the most ancient way of reading, which took place ‘prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances’ which enable us to read the mysteries of the world (Benjamin, 1933/1999, p. 722).

It would seem that for Benjamin/Tsuji there are two kinds of language—language as symbolic system and language as something ancient, something other to all symbolic systems. To say what this language, this something ‘is’ should be impossible, as this would involve representing it. Of course, representation has not vanished from the picture for either Benjamin or Tsuji. Rather, a certain vague ‘poetic’ language (involving entrails, stars and dances) that conjures an image of unmediated bodily behaviour is being employed to represent that which precedes or is ‘other’ to language as a symbolic system. This use of language seems to be at work when Tsuji discusses the ‘ateleological moment’. Such a moment apparently occurs immediately prior to our inability to ‘see’ the difference between the playing child and play, an example that is supposed to exemplify the occasion on which mimesis has no object to imitate. Here is Tsuji: ‘Mimesis in the gift of seeing similarity is necessarily different from the moment itself because the moment of ex-subject always exceeds the gift for producing similarity.’

This is confusing and possibly contradictory in regards to the distinction between ‘seeing’ and ‘producing similarities’. We are supposed to accept that there is a difference between passively ‘seeing’ similarities and actively ‘producing’ them. However, it would seem that if the ateleological moment is necessarily prior to seeing similarities, then, according to Tsuji’s account, ‘seeing’ is a passive form of production. If we ‘see’ that something has occurred then it is no longer beyond representation. This form of seeing/producing partakes in ateleological process that moves from the moment itself to ‘seeing’ that moment. Now, the distinction between seeing/producing and producing might be represented like this: to see/produce mimics something that actually happened prior to language whereas to ‘produce’ something is to simply make it up. The problem that then arises pertains to how on earth we are supposed to know if the former or latter applies. Of course, to even take this problem seriously is to accept the possible existence of a realm beyond symbolic systems by gesturing towards that realm and representing it, which undermines the project from the outset.

CONCLUSION

I should acknowledge at this point that both my paper and the reply to Tsuji and Shu’s responses may be trapped inside the confines of a particularly limited understanding of poststructuralist thought—my reading of Derrida might be too prosaic. Shu and Tsuji argue that the arrivant is something wholly other that comes to us from a realm that exists beyond language. This may reflect the kind of ‘tiger jump’ that I am unable to make. Despite our differences, all three of our papers have one thing in common, namely a rejection of logocentrism in its traditional form. It is clear that Shu and Tsuji reject logocentrism in the sense that they feel that what is before/beyond language is not present to us—it can never be captured. However, it seems that in looking beyond language to account for otherness, both writers indirectly conjure a static/stable image of symbolic systems. Language is neither static nor stable, and as I argue in my paper, profound educational/moral implications follow from an acknowledgement of linguistic instability/movement.

REFERENCE

- Benjamin, W. (1933/1999) On the Mimetic Faculty, in: M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland & G. Smith (eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).