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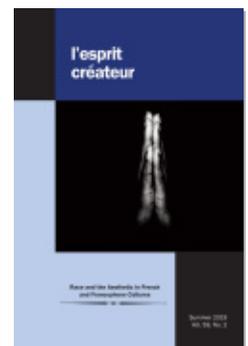
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East Asian Francophone Writers and Racialized Aesthetics?

Gao Xingjian and Aki Shimazaki

Xiaofan Amy Li

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES the connection between aesthetics and the question of race in literary works by francophone writers of East Asian descent, asking how race is relevant to understanding literary aesthetics, and how aesthetics may also transform our perceptions and criticism of racial constructs. Since the 1980s, East Asian francophone writers have formed an important emerging body of literature, seen as “one of the most promising areas of Francophone studies.”¹ This East Asian *francophonie* includes more than twenty-five writers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean origin² who are shaped by twentieth-century migratory movements and the formation of East Asian diasporas in Europe and North America. As the growing field of criticism on these writers shows, they transform *la francophonie* into a space that explicitly goes beyond the postcolonial. Simultaneously, they pose questions about interpretive approaches to migrant francophone writers of minority ethnicities.

One such important question is that the recognition of East Asian francophone writers involves the simplistic assumption that they are exotic spokespeople for their ethnic groups and ‘native’ cultures who convey specifically Chinese, Japanese or Korean images and ideas to their Western audience. As Nicholas Harrison observes, writers of minority groups are rarely read as individuals and are often generalized into a “typicality” that reflects their ethnic and cultural group.³ In other words, the non-white francophone writer is “condemned to dialogue” with her country of “origin” (Harrison 104). This approach applies especially to East Asian francophone writers, who, despite falling outside French colonial history, belong to ethnicities and cultures that have been enduring objects of *chinoiseriste* and *japoniste* fantasy. These writers’ assumed representativity clearly correlates with their ethnicities, which prompts the question of how we can better understand these writers’ position in the racialized French-language literary market and their strategies to dispute these assumptions. Moreover, to avoid the simplistic bunching together of these writers with other francophone writers as ‘all the rest’ in contrast to hexagonal French writers, a critical consideration of race should recognize how East Asian francophone writers differ from other Fran-

cophone writers and between each other. This article takes as case studies the Chinese-French writer Gao Xingjian (1940–) and the Japanese-Québécois writer Aki Shimazaki (1954–). Besides being two of the most prolific East Asian francophone writers with continuous output, Gao and Shimazaki form an interesting pair whose comparison can enhance our understanding of theoretical connections between discourses about race, aesthetics, and literary reception. The comparison hinges upon, first, one commonality shared by both writers: their depreciation of racialized interpretations of their works and insistence on the universality of their themes and aesthetics, which aspire to transcend racial and political identity; second, the comparison also brings out how Gao and Shimazaki differ in their approach to universality, by trying either to transcend or to emphasize cultural specificity. The crucial question here is therefore what the universal means for Gao and Shimazaki, and what its place is within an already racialized literary field. May we think of a relativized universality—a universality that emerges from racialization and contests the norm of the unmarked Eurocentric universality and its supposed neutrality? Moreover, does this emerging racialized universality provide effective arguments against predisposed perceptions of minority ethnic writers?

To call Gao and Shimazaki “francophone” writers already carries political and racializing implications. *La francophonie* is a political and ideological category that conventionally denotes literature from France’s ex-colonies, in clear contrast to *la littérature franco-française*. This division, with its implied racial binary of white French literature and French-language literature produced by peoples of color, has been strongly challenged by the 2007 manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde en français,” which argued first that the white “franco-French” canon be subsumed under the francophone, and that *la francophonie* is obsolete and should be simply “world literature.” While I agree with the 2007 manifesto on the first point, I believe nevertheless that the francophone still holds critical potential for affirming the huge diversity of all French-language authors and does not need to be jettisoned. East Asian writers like Gao and Shimazaki show how the francophone is not necessarily the diametrical opposite of the French by their in-between status. For they are authors who write in metropolitan centers of the traditionally “franco-French” world but do not fit the stereotype of the racialized francophone writer from a country that was historically colonized by France. Moreover, East Asian francophone writers embody a “francophonie libre/choisie” in contrast to the “francophonie contrainte.”⁴ But the East Asian writer suffers similar processes of exoticization and racialization, in subtler forms of culturalist views that essentialize cultural differences and produce stereotypical images.

For example, Gao is predominantly discussed with other diasporic Chinese-French writers and in the context of twentieth-century Chinese history, but he is seldom discussed with other French and European writers (with an occasional comparison to Beckett, Brecht, and Artaud). Interviews with Gao repeatedly bring up Chinese politics, though Gao considers his best works to be those that do not “counter problems” with China.⁵ Although this reference to Chinese politics understandably has much to do with Gao’s Chinese-language writings and his experience in China, it still reveals a critical bias towards Gao that insists on his Chineseness despite his French citizenship, French-language works, and strong aesthetic resonances with European and North American avant-gardes. Shimazaki, similarly, is exoticized by book reviewers and critics who see the simplicity of her language as a particularly Japanese trait. Shimazaki’s language is described as “minimaliste,” for example, written in short “haiku-like sentences,”⁶ and full of “délicatesse,”⁷ even though Shimazaki has attributed her stylistic minimalism to her use of French rather than Japanese: “En japonais, mes phrases sont plus longues”;⁸ “[le] français m’a apporté la clarté et la précision.”⁹

Racialized literary fields as described above and racializing literary interpretations are haunted by the question of aesthetics, not least because this question is the site of tension between two understandings of aesthetics: as universal or racialized. Does aesthetics provide an autonomous space where a neutral universality is possible and therefore transcends racialization? Or is the very term and concept “aesthetics”—stemming from the Greek *aisthesis* (“sensation,” “perception”)—always already a category that carries inherent cultural and racial biases? Such biases include, for instance, the culturally contingent focus on the senses and emotions, which go back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*; the racial bias in Kantian aesthetics that depreciates non-white races and their physiology; and the default position of aesthetics in European modernity as a separate, even antithetical space to politics and ethics, which originates from Kantian aesthetic “disinterestedness” and is reinforced by Adorno’s “functionless” aesthetics that remains autonomous from society. We need to question these premises of aesthetics, for many notions that support the idea of aesthetic universality are themselves a product of European modernity and thus are culturally and historically contingent. If we consider Chinese and Japanese terms that approximate “aesthetics,” we have 審美 *shenmei* and 美學 *meixue/bigaku* (used in both Chinese and Japanese), both of which center on the notion of beauty (美) and the acts of assessing (審) and studying (學). *Shenmei* and *bigaku*, therefore, neither explicitly emphasize the senses and are more abstract than *aisthesis*, nor focus primarily on emotional response

(*catharsis*) but on the more dispassionate acts of evaluation and thought. Simultaneously, the idea of aesthetic autonomy typically does not feature strongly in premodern Chinese discussions about beauty. This brief comparative reference to aesthetics in China and Japan shows the cultural and racial biases inherent in European aesthetic ideas. This does not mean, however, that universality and racialized aesthetics are simply moot, but we need to ask: what kind of universality? what way of racializing aesthetics? Are there other understandings that eschew and contest Eurocentric universality and the white man's hierarchy of race?

In Gao's and Shimazaki's case, these questions lead us to consider "transcultural aesthetics," a term that has gained currency in recent decades and is now frequently used to characterize émigré writers of minority ethnicities. The transcultural, intriguingly, splits into two polarized conceptualizations: one universal and theoretically aligned with cosmopolitanism; the other racialized and applied to minority ethnicities and artworks in (semi-)colonial contexts. The universalist definition of the transcultural, argued by Patrice Pavis, is that it "creates hybrid forms drawing upon [...] traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas," resulting in a new aesthetic that "transcends particular cultures on behalf of a universality of the human condition."¹⁰ The transcultural thus seems to enable aesthetics to break away from ethnocentric and culturally particularist interpretations, asserting the international characteristics of migrant and diasporic literature. Nonetheless, in practice, the "transcultural" signals racialized aesthetics, for it is typically used for colonial borderlands where hierarchies of power mix and clash,¹¹ and for writers of non-European and non-white heritage who do not fit comfortably into the white Western canon. Gao is repeatedly described as "transcultural" (for example by Todd Coulter, Claire Conception, Sy Ren Quah) whereas Kafka, Picasso, and Ionesco are rarely characterized as such. This difference suggests that the transcultural is analogous to the racially *métis* and denotes aesthetics in a less 'pure' form. Paradoxically, therefore, "transcultural" aesthetics encompasses both the transnational or universal and a subtly racialized aesthetics of *métissage*. Revisiting the understanding of the transcultural through the tensions between the universal and the racialized in Gao's and Shimazaki's works may help us better understand and contest relations between race and literature. In the following, I explore Gao's and Shimazaki's engagements with race in their creative writings and critical views, then assess their aesthetics of universality within their respective racial and political contexts.

Gao Xingjian

Gao's writings are linguistically divided between French and Chinese. Since 2000 when he won the Nobel Prize, Gao has increasingly written in French. Significantly, this linguistic split in Gao's works also correlates with the extent to which he engages with race. Gao's Chinese writings show his keen awareness of racial identity and explicit championing of minority ethnicities and cultures, whereas his French writings invariably depict characters and themes that are depersonalized, abstract, and apolitical. In more detail, we may briefly consider two Chinese-language works by Gao, translated into French by Noël and Liliane Dutrait as *La montagne de l'âme* (1995) and *Le livre d'un homme seul* (2000).¹² In *La montagne*, there are notable references to minority ethnicities in Southern China such as the Qiang (chapter 2), Yi (chapter 21), and Miao (chapter 41). These ethnic groups and their cultures have been, according to Gao (*Témoignage*, 45–78), marginalized by the Beijing-centric state and Confucian orthodox culture that reinforce Han Chinese ethnic dominance.¹³ Through the "I" persona's journey in these ethnic minority regions, Gao gives voice to under-represented peoples and cultural aspects in China. In *Le livre*, a heavily autobiographical fictional narrative where the narrator, a Chinese man in exile in Hong Kong, reminisces about his traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution, an obvious reference to racial identity and discrimination is the narrator's lover Marguerite, a German Jew. The Holocaust is evoked multiple times through Marguerite, who absolutely affirms her Jewish identity and urges the narrator to remember his past and denounce totalitarian power: "Elle dit que bien que son père soit allemand, sa mère est juive, [...] elle ne peut se soustraire au souvenir."¹⁴ Gao's pairing of the narrator and Marguerite is all the more meaningful because "the shared identities as diaspora" between them "set up a historical parallel between the Cultural Revolution and the Holocaust, not only due to the atrocities [...] that occurred during these [events], but even more because of their traumatic effect on the personal psyche."¹⁵ Suffering and trauma establish the emotional bond between the narrator and Marguerite, with Marguerite's identity as the crucial "déclencheuse" of the narrator's memories.¹⁶

In contrast, Gao's French writings do not engage with the theme of race. These works—comprising plays, poems, and critical essays, but never novels—are generally highly abstract and metaphorical. They manifest an aesthetic fusion that, as Mary Mazzilli observes, hardly contains any culturally or ethnically identifiable features, earning the epithet of "transcultural" in the universal and non-specific sense.¹⁷ For example, the stage settings of Gao's French plays typically indicate no particular historical

background, location or characters' identities. Characters are generic and described as "le jeune homme," "la jeune fille," "l'homme" (*La fuite*, 1992); "une femme," "une autre femme" (*Au bord de la vie*, 1993); or sometimes they are named by their roles as "le somnambule," "le sans-abri," "la prostituée" (*Le somnambule*, 1995). Gao's characteristic use of personal pronouns instead of names for his characters also conveys the impression of impersonality, such as "Elle," "Je," "Vous" (*Ballade nocturne*, 2007) and a general address to his audience by using "Tu" in the allegorical poem *L'errance de l'oiseau* (2003, "Si tu es un oiseau"). This abstract style is seen by the critic Conceison as reflecting the fluidity of categories such as "nation, language, genre," to which we can also add race and culture.¹⁸ In sum, Gao's French-language works form a remarkable contrast to his earlier Chinese writings, suggesting a deliberate disengagement from questions of racial and cultural identity.

Why this change in Gao's style and themes? And does it relate to his choice of writing in French rather than Chinese? Some explanations can be found in Gao's own views about literature. First, Gao rejects particularist interpretations of his writings because he does not want to be seen as a spokesperson for China, Chinese culture or the Chinese people. In an interview with Gregory Lee, Gao comments on his Chinese-language works:

I don't want to emphasize their Chinese background, neither do I want them to be taken as realistic or historical, I'd like them to be read at the level of their common human meaning.

Lee: That's to say you feel there's a universality to them?

Gao: Yes. [...] a good work of literature has to transcend national boundaries.¹⁹

The border-crossing nature of good literature, in Gao's view, renders Chinese particularism impossible in his Chinese-language writings, and in fact would transgress any particularism. But we also observe an implicit opposition Gao draws between being Chinese and being universal, so that Gao's aspiration to the latter means his deliberate distancing from the former. Gao's anxiety about being read as a Chinese writer is again manifest in his meeting with Conceison, where Conceison remarks that Gao prefers to use French in interviews and that "his acquaintances in France are 'Westerners,' not Chinese. He does not desire or need Chinese friendships; he does not want to talk about China, which he considers irrelevant to his life and work" (Conceison 304). This discounting of China suggests that Gao's abstract and de-racialized French works stem partly from his desire to be less Chinese and therefore more universal, besides the liberating effect of writing in French, a language that is dissociated from Gao's unhappy memories of China.

Nevertheless, Gao's refusal of being associated with a perceived Chinese-ness in favor of universality inadvertently reinforces the Eurocentric view that the Western canon is inherently universal—a quality not accorded to non-Western literatures. As Jane Hiddleston demonstrates, French colonial discourses have always posited a binary between cultural specificity and universal humanity, presuming that French values are universal while suppressing the difference and particularity of colonized non-white peoples.²⁰ That “the colonized assert their freedom” and universality “in the very same terms that [they are] conceived by Western civilization” precisely reaffirms the Franco-centric and colonial version of universality (Hiddleston 151). Likewise, Alain Mabanckou remarks that the francophone African writer is considered closer to universality only when she is less African.²¹ By extension, the Chinese francophone writer can only be either Chinese *or* universal, whereas the white French writer (Sartre for instance) can always be both French *and* universal. Gao's avoidance of Chinese identity does not challenge French standards of aesthetic excellence but in effect reaffirms them.

Nevertheless, we need to place Gao's un-Chineseness in the bigger picture of his understanding of aesthetic universality, which is a genuine effort to decondition the biased conceptual frameworks applied to literature. In Gao's theoretical articulations of “ne pas avoir de -isme” and “la littérature froide,” he argues that literature and art transcend all political struggles, ideologies, and categories of race, nation, and culture. First, “ne pas avoir de -isme” signifies the absence of art's engagement with all -isms (including racism, of course), “n'avanc[e] aucune proposition politique,” and represents no group.²² Literature that embodies “ne pas avoir de -isme” is its own justification: “ne pas servir autrui ni être utilisé par autrui” (*Témoignage* 12). This is a “littérature froide” that refuses to be the tool of ideological battles: “La littérature n'a rien à voir avec la politique” (*Témoignage* 39), a statement that shows Gao's explicit depreciation of the politicization of literature. The “coldness” of “la littérature froide” is the state of literature when everything superfluous to literature itself is pared away: “Cette littérature qui a recouvré ses valeurs intrinsèques, pourquoi ne pas l'appeler 'littérature froide'?” (*Témoignage* 40-41). In a conversation with the Chinese poet Yang Lian, Gao further asserts, “What we need is a kind of literature that doesn't have any attributes. Such genres as ‘pure literature,’ [...] ‘modernism’ [...] have no meaning.”²³ In this way, “cold” aesthetics fundamentally involves the idea of “literature *without*,” or simply “literature,” the ontology of which is negative rather than having positively universal attributes.

Gao's “cold” aesthetics therefore depoliticizes, deracializes, and dehistoricizes literature. This aesthetics also applies to Gao's Chinese and French

works: if Gao deconditions his Chineseness, he also deconditions his Frenchness and has no desire to exploit his use of the French language as a marker of national identity or cultural distinctness. If Gao avoids the Chinese language because it carries too much baggage and is prone to ethnocentric interpretations, he can still use French in an abstract and non-culturally specific way (as in his French works). A writer, after all, has to write in a particular language. But the suggestion here is that we do not need to overestimate the Frenchness of the French language. As writers of “la littérature froide,” the Chinese francophone writer, black francophone writer, and white French writer are all deconditioned, becoming simply a “writer”—which is also emphatically a “writer *without*”—and equally related to each other. In this sense, literature can communicate something fundamental to humanity, which is “la difficulté fondamentale d’exister du genre humain,” as Gao declares in his Nobel Prize speech (*Témoignage* 124). This universality can be understood as something commonly shared between all human beings, of which existential vulnerability—for example—the “difficulté” and “fragilité” of life (*Témoignage* 132)—is the most central aspect. Note that Marguerite and the narrator in *Livre* are both scarred by oppressive regimes and in exile, implying that nothing other than the embodied experience of suffering has more power in drawing different people together in an empathetic relation. Gao’s understanding of universality as a connection relating different people’s experiences functions like a *tertium comparationis*, that is, the respect in which different things are compared. As I argue elsewhere,²⁴ the *tertium* does not need to be an invariant property that exists in the compared elements; it only needs to denote a common ground that is *relatable* to all compared elements. Human vulnerability can therefore be this common ground that relates to different individuals and their experiences, establishing an affective connection between them. Seen in this light, Gao’s universalism relates rather than equates, particularizes rather than totalizes. For instance, the experiences of the marginalized traveller protagonist in *La montagne* connect with those of the local peoples he visits; the emotions of “he,” “you,” and “I” crisscross just as the pronouns are swapped constantly in Gao’s narrative. It is a fragmented universality that disintegrates “power formation” rather than establishes it (Kong 128).

In short, both Gao’s engagements and disengagements with the politics of race emerge from a racialized literary field. Gao’s “cold” aesthetics—“cold” in the sense of deconditioning and distancing from specific political positions, but not in the sense of lacking the power to create empathy between text and reader—is the negative reflection of racialized aesthetics and identity politics,

stemming from his refusal to use race to label himself and his works. Although Gao's deliberate dissociation from Chineseness does not seem to challenge European standards of aesthetic universality, when contextualized within his "littérature froide" that deconditions all ethnocentrism, we understand that Gao endeavors to level the field of aesthetics for Chinese and European literatures alike. Ultimately, the aesthetic ideal Gao implies is neither European nor Chinese.

Aki Shimazaki

Like Gao, Shimazaki evokes universality as the most important interpretive perspective on her own works. In her interview with Linda Amyot, Shimazaki asserts her universal theme is "la tragédie humaine."²⁵ She addresses big questions in life, for instance, injustice: "n'oublions pas que l'injustice est omniprésente, dans n'importe quelle société. C'est un thème universel" (Amyot 49). The broad relevance of Shimazaki's themes is also confirmed by Gabrielle Parker, who argues for an "interprétation universalisante" of Shimazaki's œuvre.²⁶ Unlike Gao, however, Shimazaki writes only in French and only fiction. Her novels are invariably about Japan, extremely context-specific, portraying individuals with identity issues that are particular to Japanese society. Her book titles are always Japanese words, for example *Wasurenagusa* ("Forget-me-not") and *Hotaru* ("Fireflies"), and her texts are strewn with special Japanese terms that are explained in an additional glossary. Shimazaki's works thus manifest a pronounced foreignness to its Francophone readers and seem self-Orientalizing, as Musella and Lequin observe,²⁷ since Shimazaki fits the stereotype of the migrant minority writer who always refers to her ethnic and cultural origins. How do Shimazaki's culturally-specific works co-exist with her claims to universality? Intriguingly, Shimazaki professes, "Je raconte la vie d'individu, ce qui est universel" (Amyot 45-46). This claim suggests that Shimazaki sees her own work as both Japanese and universal, which clearly contrasts with Gao's conceptual split between Chineseness and universality. But in what way is the individual also universal? As a case study, we may consider how this question relates to the theme of race in Shimazaki's pentalogy *Le poids des secrets* (1999-2004).

Le poids, comprising five novels, *Tsubaki* ("Camellia"), *Hamaguri* ("Clams"), *Tsubame* ("Swallow"), *Wasurenagusa*, and *Hotaru*, narrates a family saga set in the background of twentieth-century Japanese history, with identity and racial discrimination as its central themes. Shimazaki reveals two kinds of racism, each correlated to two historical catastrophes: first, Japanese racism against Koreans, embodied by the Great Kantō earthquake in 1923

which led to the massacre of Koreans because of false rumors that Koreans had poisoned wells and plotted to exploit the crisis;²⁸ second, American racism against the Japanese, marked by the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945. Shimazaki's explicit treatment of these two racisms with different structures—Japanese as the oppressors of Koreans but the victims of Americans—suggestively draws them into comparison, making Shimazaki's Western French-speaking readers reflect on racism in Japan and at home. More specifically, Japanese racism against Koreans is based not on prejudices against skin color and differences in physical appearance—since the Japanese and Koreans share very similar physical traits—but on colonial discrimination against non-Japanese East Asian ethnic groups and the belief in pure Japanese blood. In Japanese racial theories, as Yuko Kawai notes, “the idea of Japaneseness” that emerged in modern Japan “created the dominant assumption that the Japanese are a race.”²⁹ This view contributes to the myth of *tan'itsu minzoku*, “single-race/ethnic nation,” which is fundamental to the construction of Japanese national identity.³⁰ In this context, anyone who does not have ‘pure’ Japanese blood is excluded as not fully Japanese. Shimazaki takes issue with this stigma of ‘impure’ blood through the character Yonhi Kim in *Le poidis*, an *enfant métis* born in Japan of a Korean mother and a European priest, during Japanese colonial rule of Korea. Yonhi, like many Korean immigrants in Japan, is forced to change her name to Mariko Kanazawa and assume Japanese identity to avoid discrimination. A complete effacement of her ethnic origins—by both society and her own dissimulation—thus occurs, highlighted by Yonhi/Mariko's loss of sense of self and her unidentifiable physical traits: “son visage, qui n'appartenait à aucune race, lui conférait un air mystérieux.”³¹ The absence of racial identity does not render Yonhi/Mariko's origins insignificant, but makes itself painfully felt. Shimazaki does not offer any hopeful indication of redress of discrimination against Koreans in Japan, as Yonhi/Mariko dies carrying her secret to the grave:

Je n'étais plus capable de lire le coréen. [...] La défaite du Japon et l'indépendance de la Corée n'ont rien changé à l'attitude des Japonais contre les Coréens au Japon. La discrimination est toujours là. [...] Je ne pourrai jamais avouer l'histoire de mon origine à mon fils et à sa famille.³²

Shimazaki's portrayal of Yonhi/Mariko is remarkable for its open discussion of and particular sensitivity to Japanese Korea-phobia. “The dominant Japanese view has been that racism is a foreign, not a domestic issue” (Kawai 26). One reason for this obscuration is, Kawai argues, that the Japanese concept of *jinshu-shugi*, equivalent to the English term “racism,” “refers to

racism directed to different *jinsu* [racial] groups but not to peoples in the same *jinsu* group”; so discriminatory practices against Koreans and Chinese, in other words people of the same *jinsu* [racial] group (though not of Japanese ethnicity) “are often not viewed as racism in Japan” (Kawai 42–43). Shimazaki’s portrayal of Yonhi/Mariko’s suffering would be particularly politically charged if she were read in Japan. But because she writes in French and is situated in the North American and European literary market, she is distanced from Japanese audiences and freer to talk about taboos and ideologically-obscured issues in Japanese society. She is thus safer from attacks by the Japanese audience—to criticize from afar is often the advantage of the expat writer—but when read carefully abroad Shimazaki’s politically subversive potential can also be recognized, as critics such as Lequin, Schulman, and Kano have done.³³

Shimazaki exposes the second type of racism—Americans’ discrimination against Japanese and non-European peoples—in the account of atomic bombing given by Yukiko, another main character in *Le poids*. Yukiko survives the bombing of Nagasaki, and years later, when her grandson presses her with questions about it, she denounces the underlying violent racism in the catastrophe:

[grandson:] “Pourquoi ont-ils [Américains] [...] lâché ces deux bombes, grand-mère? Les victimes étaient pour la plupart des civils innocents. Plus de deux cent mille personnes ont été tuées en quelques semaines! Quelle est la différence avec l’Holocauste des nazis? [...] Si les bombes atomiques servaient à menacer la Russie ou bien à expérimenter ces nouvelles armes, pourquoi l’ont-ils fait sur le Japon, où il n’y avait rien à détruire? Pourquoi pas sur l’Allemagne?”

[Yukiko:] “[...] L’Allemagne avait déjà officiellement renoncé à la guerre. Même dans le cas contraire, les Américains n’auraient pas osé lâcher des bombes atomiques au centre de l’Europe. Ils sont des descendants d’Européens, après tout. Pour les Américains, tous les Japonais, civils ou militaires, étaient leurs ennemis, car ils n’étaient pas *hakujin*.”³⁴

Two things stand out in this conversation: the term *hakujin*, which is the Japanese expression for “white people,” typically denoting white Americans and Europeans, here used by Yukiko to identify white American racism against the Japanese; and the comparison of atomic bombing with the Holocaust—both unique historical events of indescribable violence and human suffering. With regard to the racism of *hakujin*, according to Yukiko, the second bomb on Nagasaki was an experiment and not necessary for winning the war, but Americans needed to demonstrate strategically their power to Russia and collect data on the bomb’s effect and power.³⁵ More important, Yukiko also believes that because Americans were racist and did not care about experimenting on Japanese, in other words non-white lives, they would

have rather bombed Japan than Nazi Germany. Although Yukiko's views are not historical reflections and we need to remember that we are hearing a fictional voice, they can tell us something about the importance of racial discourses in wartime and postwar Japan-USA relations, and about Shimazaki's choice to give such views to Yukiko in a French-language novel that targets an implied white French and Canadian audience.

Racial discourses and conflicts were key aspects in relations between Japan and the Western powers from the interwar period through WWII to postwar decades. The official ideology of the Japanese empire was that Japan would lead Asian peoples' resistance against Western imperialism. This vision was set forth by Yōsuke Matsuoka in his famous speech in 1933 at the League of Nations, where Matsuoka criticized Western attempts to colonize East Asia (particularly China) and established the image of Japan as championing and protecting peoples of color in Asia against white European and American colonizers. In practice, however, imperial Japan also inflicted racist violence on non-Japanese Asian groups including Koreans, Chinese, and Filipinos. In postwar Japan, the construction of collective mourning and memory of atomic bombing, especially in atomic bomb literature (such as Masuji Ibuse's novel *Kuroi Ame / Black Rain* [1965]), focused on the scale of destruction, catastrophic technological power, and traumatic after-effects of radioactivity. The condemnation of Americans as white racists who cared little about Japanese lives was a relatively minor narrative typically deployed by Japanese right-wing nationalists as an anti-American discourse. Compared with other Japanese writers on the memory of atomic bombing, Shimazaki's presentation of the racial narrative is unusually prominent and approximates Japanese nationalist stances. But the very same views, situated in Canada, where Shimazaki writes in French, take on new political dimensions. Shimazaki obliges her French-speaking readers, mostly white North American and European, to learn about the Japanese perception of atomic bombing as racist violence against the Japanese. Simultaneously, displaced from the Japanese literary and political context, Yukiko's views lose their echo of Japanese nationalist discourses and take on a new confrontational force that prompts Shimazaki's Western readers to reflect on their narratives of the war and racism in their own societies.

The comparison between atomic bombing and the Holocaust made by Yukiko's grandson in fact frequently occurs in Japanese discourses about war memory and is studied by many historians (for instance, recently by Gordon Fraser).³⁶ Here, this comparison can be better understood through Shimazaki's connection between universality and individual lives. Rather than subtract

from the uniqueness of these two traumatic historical events, Shimazaki suggests that racist violence—though inflicted on different ethnic groups, in different ways and degrees of atrocity—is a commonly-existing problem in all societies that everyone must address. This implication coincides with Michael Rothberg's argument for the cross-irrigation of "multidirectional memory," for seeing different memories of trauma not as competitive but "convergent" and mutually productive.³⁷ Shimazaki's cross-referencing of the Holocaust thus reminds her *hakujin* Francophone audience that the personal and collective tragedies in wartime Japan should not be taken any less seriously than those in contemporaneous Europe and North America. Like Gao, Shimazaki also posits human suffering as the common denominator between atomic bombing and the Holocaust. Suffering becomes a universal relation that connects different individuals despite their ethnic, cultural, and historical differences. Universality here may be understood as empathetic connections between human beings, emerging from comparing two events of suffering and racially-motivated violence. Seen in this light, Shimazaki's statement that "la vie d'individu [...] est universel[le]" makes precise sense. This universality is not, therefore, a generalizing and neutral one that denotes a panoramic standard or quality; instead it creates specific connections through literary affect. Shimazaki's evocation of the universal complements rather than contradicts the forms of racial violence portrayed in her works.

Shimazaki's literary aesthetic—writing in French while keeping distinct Japanese vocabulary and concepts (such as *koseki*, *hakujin*, *zainichi*) and treating profoundly Japanese historical and cultural experiences—is itself a racialized choice of style that takes on particular critical force for Shimazaki's Western readers. Those who are initially attracted by the apparent self-Orientalizing style of Shimazaki's novels will likely find in them a biting critique of white self-consciousness. *Le poids* thus gives rise to critical reflections about how the concepts of race and ethnic identity are different in Japan and the West. These reflections stem from the unique position of Shimazaki, who writes in French about Japan, lives in Canada, and publishes jointly with the Québécois press Leméac and Actes Sud in France. Shimazaki's works, her Western audience, and the Japanese literary tradition create a triangular conversation that shows how cultural specificity and cosmopolitanism enrich each other.

Aesthetics: racialized, transcultural, and universal?

Despite wide divergences in style and critical stance between Gao and Shimazaki, they both insist on the importance of universality in their literary

themes and aesthetics. For both, this universality is a relation that can “articulate in a common horizon the most disparate modes of being.”³⁸ Nevertheless, Gao’s and Shimazaki’s claim to universality—also present in other East Asian francophone writers (such as Ying Chen and Eun-Ja Kang)—is not neutral and reflects their ethnic and cultural minority standpoint. By claiming that their writing holds universal value, Gao and Shimazaki tell their Western and international audience that their works are not only about China and Japan, but are also relevant to non-Chinese and non-Japanese readers. Precisely because East Asian diasporic writers are typically seen as representative of their racial and cultural origins and are marketed in Orientalizing ways, they are inadvertently condemned to particularisms that imply they have nothing important to say about literature, aesthetics, and humanity beyond East Asia. As Judith Butler says, “What one means by ‘the universal’ will vary, and the cultural articulation of the term in its various modalities will work against precisely the transcultural status of the claim. [...] the term gains its meaning [...] precisely through the decidedly less-than-universal cultural conditions of its articulation.”³⁹ Both the “universal” and “transcultural” dimensions of Gao’s and Shimazaki’s writings are racialized and relativized according to their particular standpoints in the French-language literary field.

When race is posed as a question through which to approach literature, it should be applied not only to minority ethnicity authors but also to majority ethnicity authors (for instance white American and European authors). Gao’s “littérature froide” as a “littérature sans” reminds us not to take for granted the Frenchness or Westernness of white Western writers. Relativized universality (for minority writers) can also be a relativizing universality (for the majority). Similarly, the *métissage* of transcultural aesthetics in Gao’s and Shimazaki’s case can encompass the cosmopolitan precisely because the latter emerges from the comparison and tension between Japan and Canada/France for Shimazaki, China and France for Gao. Instead of a “reconciliatory poetics” that affirms coherence and unity, the transcultural may be formulated as a more conflictual and fragmented aesthetics.⁴⁰ This non-conciliatory aesthetics may then transcend supposedly coherent categories of migrant literature, East Asian diasporic literature, as well as the white Western canon, shedding new light on how they are all hybrid, fractured, and prismatic.

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Notes

1. Karen Thornber, "French Discourse in Chinese, in Chinese Discourse in French," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 13:2 (2009): 223.
2. Some of the best-known writers include François Cheng, Gao Xingjian, Dai Sijie, Shan Sa, Ying Chen, Aki Shimazaki, Ryoko Sekiguchi, Akira Mizubayashi, Hisashi Okuyama, perhaps Asuka Fujimori (possibly a pseudonym for a writer whose identity is unknown), Eun-Ja Kang, and Ook Chung.
3. Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 100.
4. Béatrice Bouvier-Lafitte, "Francophonie chinoise," *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 16:3 (2013): 267–68.
5. Gao in interview with David Der-Wei Wang, <https://asiasociety.org/conversation-gao-xingjian>.
6. Linda Amyot, "Aki Shimazaki: Ce qu'on ne peut pas dire," *Nuit blanche*, 108 (2007): 46.
7. Lise Schaller, "Un univers japonais sans surprise," <https://z.umn.edu/44av>.
8. Interview with Shimazaki, <https://z.umn.edu/44aw>.
9. Françoise Dargent, "Le français, langue d'accueil de tous les écrivains du monde," <https://z.umn.edu/44ax>.
10. Patrice Pavis, "Introduction," in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, Patrice Pavis, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 6–8.
11. As in Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 1992).
12. I refer to the French translations here because they are produced collaboratively with Gao himself and read more frequently than the Chinese originals.
13. The Han are the dominant ethnicity (among the officially recognized fifty-six ethnicities) in China. When "Chinese" designates ethnicity, it typically means Han Chinese.
14. Xingjian Gao, *Le livre d'un homme seul*, Noël and Liliane Dutrait, trans. (La Tour d'Aigues: L'Aube), 30.
15. Shuyu Kong, "Ma Jian and Gao Xingjian: Intellectual Nomadism and Exilic Consciousness in Sinophone Literature," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 41:2 (2014): 137.
16. Lena Bisinger, *Rencontre interculturelle dans le roman franco-chinois* (Berlin: Logos, 2016), 85.
17. Mary Mazzilli, *Gao Xingjian's Post-Exile Plays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
18. Claire Conceison, "The French Gao Xingjian," *香港戲劇學刊*, 8 (2009): 317.
19. Gregory Lee and Noël Dutrait, "Conversations with Gao Xingjian: The First 'Chinese' Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature," *The China Quarterly*, 167 (2001): 742–43.
20. Jane Hiddleston, *Decolonising the Intellectual* (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 2014).
21. Alain Mabanckou, "Immigration, 'Littérature-Monde,' and Universality," *Yale French Studies*, 120 (2011): 85.
22. Gao, *Le témoignage de la littérature* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 12.
23. Gao in Gao and Lian Yang, "The Language of Exile," *Index on Censorship* 31:3 (2002): 120.
24. Xiaofan Amy Li, "When Do Different Literatures Become Comparable?" in *Minding Borders*, Adriana X. Jacobs, Matthew Reynolds, et al., eds., (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017).
25. Aki Shimazaki, cited in Amyot, (2007): 45.
26. Gabrielle Parker, "Poétique de la distance: Deux approches contrastées, Ying Chen et Aki Shimazaki," *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 16:3 (2013): 307.
27. Sonia Musella, "L'imaginaire japonais et ses contradictions chez Aki Shimazaki et Asuka Fujimori," *Francofonia*, 57 (2009): 33–49; Lucie Lequin, "De la mémoire vive au dire atténué: L'écriture d'Aki Shimazaki," *Voix et Images*, 31:1 (2005): 89–99.
28. The Kantō massacre is still a highly politically sensitive topic in Japan, and it is unclear to what extent the state was involved in the event's mob violence.
29. Yuko Kawai, "Deracialised Race, Obscured Racism," *Japanese Studies*, 35:1(2015): 24.
30. Eiji Oguma, *Nihonjin no kyōkai [The Boundaries of the Japanese]* (Tokyo: Shin'y osha, 1998).
31. Shimazaki, *Hamaguri* (Montréal/Arles: Leméac/Actes Sud, 2000), 100.

32. Shimazaki, *Tsubame* (Montréal/Arles: Leméac/Actes Sud, 2001), 60.
33. Lequin (2005); Peter Schulman, "The Weight of Secrets," *Chimères*, 31:1 (2010): 15–27; Yukiko Kano, "Le mythe du bilinguisme littéraire—cas Aki Shimazaki," unpublished conference paper presented at La Réunion de l'Agence de la Francophonie, 2011.
34. Shimazaki, *Tsubaki* (Montréal/Arles: Leméac/Actes Sud, 1999), 11–13.
35. The ethics and legal aspects of atomic bombing are still debated, but Yukiko's view is not unsupported in some historical studies.
36. Gordon Fraser, *The Quantum Exodus: Jewish Fugitives, the Atomic Bomb, and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2012).
37. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford U P, 2009), 311.
38. Maxime Cervulle, "The Uses of Universalism: 'Diversity Statistics' and the Race Issue in Contemporary France," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17:2 (2014): 129.
39. Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions*, Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, and Drucilla Cornell, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 129.
40. Marie Carrière and Catherine Khordoc, "Revisiting *Écriture migrante* in Québec," in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, Cynthia Sugars, ed. (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2016), 629.