

Tales of an Improbable Reality and Its Consequences.

Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary**

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Despite the fact that most technological achievements of the 20th century were received as promises for a better future, the taming of the atom – one of the most extraordinary of them all – proved to have dire consequences for a great number of people. In March 2011 Japan experienced a threefold catastrophe: the Tōhoku earthquake and following tsunami and the melt-down of three reactors at Fukushima nuclear power plant. One month after the earthquake an unprecedented number of people took to the streets of Japan to protest against nuclear power. The writer Yoko Tawada is one of the voices that criticized Japan government's nuclear politics that prioritized profit over the security of Japan's people and nature. Her short novel *The Emissary* (translated by Margaret Mitsutani) imagines a worst-case scenario: after an unspecified cataclysm Japan cuts off every connection to the rest of the world, old people seem unable to die while watching the frail young children in their care suffering every minute of their short lives. It is a tale of a generation fraught with guilt over its failure to leave the planet inhabitable for the generations to come.

1. The Horrifying Prospects of Nuclear Accidents

In 1953, President Eisenhower concluded his Atoms for Peace speech pledging the United States' "determination to help solve the fearful atomic dilemma – to devote its entire heart and mind to finding the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life". When Arkady and Boris Strugatsky imagined the eerie and mysterious Zones that extraterrestrial Visitors had left behind after their short "roadside picnic", a story later masterfully adapted by Andrei Tarkovsky into his much lauded science fiction art film *Stalker* (1979), little did they know that – in the not so distant future – humanity will delimit its own two "Contamination Zones", with no help from any unknown forces outside Earth's perimeter. It was by human error in Chernobyl and by faulty design, which did not take into account the possibility of a once-in-every-one-thousand-years-disaster happening close to the coastal area of Japan, in Fukushima, that the two major nuclear accidents happened, greatly affecting the lives of inhabitants of nearby cities and villages. The Exclusion Zones were evacuated, many former residents fell victims to the exposure to heavy radiation or died of related causes and people residing on the outside margins of the Zones will continue to live in fear of contamination and disease.

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Four years after the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, Akira Kurosawa directed *Dreams* (1990), a movie inspired by the director's nightly visions. The last three of these dreams embody the nightmarish world created by man's mistakes. In the first one, six atomic reactors explode one after another next to Mount Fuji, a calamity much worse than a volcanic eruption, as one of the fleeing people shouts to the confused "surrogate Kurosawa" (interpreted by Akira Terao). Facing the ocean in which citizens had jumped towards their imminent death, a woman desperate to save her children from the fatal radiation cries in dismay: "Adults have lived long enough. It's okay if they die. But the children haven't even lived yet. They told us that nuclear plants were safe. Human accident is the danger, not the plant itself. No accidents, no danger. That's what they told us!". The next dream is an allegory of the consequences of the nuclear disaster. The land is inhabited by mutated men with one or two horns feeding on each other, where two horned *oni*-monsters are superior and immortal, which is actually a punishment, for they are tortured by their sins (presumably the sin of destroying the natural world they were born in is the greatest) and by constant excruciating pain. The one-horn monster laments: "Stupid mankind did this. It made our planet a junkyard for poisonous wastes. Proper nature has vanished from the earth. We've lost the birds, animals, fish". All that is left is a wasteland of suffering, inhabited by mutant dandelions, as big as a person, by two-faced hares, one-eyed birds and human-like monsters. In the last dream, Kurosawa visits an unnamed watermill village, where people have returned to the natural way of life, using firewood and candles instead of electricity. The old man that Kurosawa's character in the movie speaks to criticizes humankind's, and especially scientists' arrogance in thinking they can do something that surpasses nature. The three dreams express the fear and uncertainty regarding the use of nuclear power in a land that had already known the terrible force of this element and the excruciating pain it can bring. Nonetheless, Kurosawa's warning, which mirrored public reluctance towards nuclear energy, must have been taken lightly by The Atomic Energy Commission of Japan (*Genshiryokuiinkai*). Another public figure that openly expressed his concerns regarding the existence and proliferation of nuclear plants in Japan, in spite of the long history of seismic activity in and around the archipelago, was the rock singer Kiyoshiro Imawano. One of his anti-atomic songs, "*Samaataimu buruuzu*" ("Summertime Blues"), launched in 1988, after the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown, exposed this foreboding anxiety: "The Tokai Earthquake is on its way/ But still there are more and more of them/ They keep on building nuclear power plants".

The mistrust towards this allegedly "clean" source of electricity (when compared to energy obtained from coal or oil) was reinforced by several nuclear accidents that occurred in Japan before the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Of these, the accident at the nuclear facility in Tōkai, Ibaraki, in 1999, resulted in two deaths and the hospitalization and evacuation of hundreds of people, while the one at Mihama nuclear power plant in 2004 resulted in five fatalities. Despite the nuclear lobbyists' argument that nuclear power plants are designed to produce "clean" energy, unlike fossil fuels, that impact air quality, nuclear materials are too dangerous to man and nature, and human error, unpreventable accidents caused by faulty design or natural disasters can have terrible consequences, "not just for the citizens of the nation which is applying them, but also for her neighbors and under certain circumstances the neighborhood could be the whole planet. Therefore (...) [t]heir use implies political and even moral responsibilities" (Maya-Ambía, 2012: 226).

2. Japan's Reality Check: Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant Meltdown

Japan is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, in a zone of high crustal instability, along the subduction of the Pacific Plate and the Philippine Sea Plate. Minor earthquakes are a daily occurrence, but even magnitude 4 or 6 earthquakes are dealt with in a composed manner, following a strict discipline that Japanese people learn as early as their kindergarten years. Modern architecture is designed to resist major earthquakes and city planning designates evacuation areas in parks or sports grounds for each neighborhood in case of an earthquake, and to higher grounds for areas facing the ocean, for the eventuality a tsunami should be triggered by an undersea earthquake. Seismologists predict earthquakes of great magnitude occurring every couple of decades in different areas of Japan and preparations are made as such: the Earthquake Early Warning is a system implemented to issue warnings as soon as seismometers detect seismic activity of considerable amplitude (3.5 or higher on the Richter magnitude scale), crisis management departments broadcast warnings and alerts instructing people what to do in an emergency, the infrastructure is regularly upgraded and expanded and levees protect areas facing the ocean.

Nonetheless, the March 11 earthquake surpassed the magnitude of scenarios that seismologists had taken into account. With its undersea epicenter approximately 72 km east of Miyagi prefecture, the earthquake lasted six minutes, but caused very few casualties during that time. The colossal tsunami it triggered, though, overtopped the walls protecting coastal areas, devastating entire towns and destroying villages in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures. The death toll surpassed 15,000 people, and more than 2,500 went missing, when their bodies were taken by the receding waves. At a time when the world was gasping in horror watching the recordings of the tsunami engulfing entire neighborhoods or even entire villages and when Japan was mourning with dignity, conscious of the necessity to start rebuilding everything from scratch, another harrowing event became the news: three of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant's Reactors exploded one after the other between March 12 and 14 as a result of the tsunami flooding, causing radiation leaks and endangering the lives of a great number of people. More than 170,000 Japanese residents were evacuated from the area and the great majority of them are still living in temporary shelters. Moreover, the air, soil and water pollution spread even beyond the 30 km evacuation area, affecting the livelihoods of farmers and other small businesses. Following the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japan shut down all its nuclear reactors for maintenance, but restarted nine of them after thorough inspection and in spite of public protests. The 22 nuclear plants with their 54 reactors supplied almost one third of the consumed energy in Japan before 2011, reducing Japan's dependence on oil to other fossil fuels, which it had to import from other countries (Maya-Ambía, 2012: 226).

In his essay "Globalization of Uncertainties: Lessons from Fukushima", Carlos J. Maya-Ambía discusses how Tepco's prioritizing profit over the wellbeing and safety of the Japanese population in Fukushima was the main cause that led to the 2011 catastrophe. The tragedy was triggered by a highly unexpected event, that of the earthquake and tsunami, both of unforeseen magnitudes.

The promoters and defenders of the use of nuclear energy have constructed what I suggest to call a "Gaussian" justification. It should be remembered that the normal or Gaussian distribution of events is considered the most prominent probability distribution in statistics. The "bell" shape of the normal distribution suggests that the events located in the tails or extremes of the bell, can be considered highly improbable. (...) But the other side of

the coin is unexpected events of tremendous impact, what Taleb calls “Black Swans”. (...) [B]efore 1697, when the first Europeans discovered black swans in Western Australia, it was a common idea in the old continent that all the swans were white. Therefore a black swan was impossible or more strictly expressed the probability of seeing a black swan was minimal. (223-224)

The paradox is that “black swans” (or elements of minimal probability) do not cease to exist in order to comply with disbelief over their occurrence. Maya-Ambía poses an ethical question regarding the repercussions of a nuclear event, especially taking into consideration the greater scale on which societies are affected by it. Though infrequent, the impact of the “highly improbable” is too great to ignore. Displacing entire communities, radiation-induced diseases and deaths, stress-induced deaths are costs that cannot be quantified in currencies, but must be quantified in human suffering. The tragedy is further enhanced by the situation left in the exclusion zone and nearby areas. As radioactive Caesium was found in soil, vegetables and plants, contamination disrupted agriculture, a major industry in Fukushima Prefecture. Both livestock and pets were left behind in the exclusion zones, which added to the plight of displaced residents. It may be that the area will, in time, become an unintended wildlife sanctuary, like it happened in Chernobyl, but even so, the cost that this tragedy posed on animal lives was considered unnecessary and a result of bad management and unreasonable decisions taken by the Japanese government. Even though extreme measures were not taken, in contrast to Chernobyl, where livestock was killed by the army (as described by witnesses in Svetlana Alexievich’s *Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*), it is estimated that more than 22,000 companion animals and 660,000 livestock animals died in Fukushima’s Evacuation Zone (Itoh, 2018: 8). As well, Mayumi Itoh identifies a flaw in the idea of wildlife thriving in Chernobyl, as “health of a wild animal species is judged by the number of its population rather than by the condition of individual animals” (181) and we have no records of the biological cost of radiation to individual animals, because nature tends to dispose of weaklings and only the fittest survive. This observation reminds us that despite the appearance of nature reclaiming its territory, the lasting problem cannot be erased: the perimeter around Fukushima Power Plant will remain unfit for humans for decades to come.

3. A Foreboding Tale of Survival: Yoko Tawada’s short novel *The Emissary*

3.1. A Protest Following Fukushima Power Plant Meltdown

One of the literary figures that openly discussed the uncertainties and dangers of atomic power use in Japan is Yoko Tawada, a bilingual Japanese writer who has been living in Germany for most of her life. Tawada moved to Hamburg in 1982, immediately after graduating in Russian literature at Waseda University in Tokyo, but continues to visit her native country every year for lectures, performances and book launch events. In a discussion with Ortrud Gutjahr, which took place only three days after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, when the news about the meltdown at Fukushima had already spread around the world, Tawada questioned the necessity of nuclear plants in Japan, breaking the taboo concerning this issue and properly laying the responsibility on people (Gutjahr; Tawada, 2012: 34-35). Whereas in Europe natural disasters are seen as a failure in humanity’s control of nature, for the Japanese people earthquakes, tsunamis, fires and typhoons are natural occurrences that belong to everyday life and no one has the impression that humankind is stronger than nature or can control it (36).

One year after the 2011 triple disaster, a collection of reflections on the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear meltdown, entitled *Sore de mo sangatsu wa, mata* (“And even so, in March it happened again”) and its English translation *March Was Made Of Yarn*, were simultaneously published in Japan (Kodansha) and the United States (Vintage Books). The collection gives expression to the feelings of loss following the March 11 calamity and to the growing dissatisfaction with the manner in which authorities dealt with the Fukushima crises. There was an outburst of anti-nuclear sentiment across the Japanese archipelago that led to massive protests. One month after the Tōhoku disaster, on April 10, 2011, around 15,000 people marched the streets of Tokyo under the slogan *Genpatsu yamero!* (Stop the use of nuclear power!). The festive demonstrations were criticized as inappropriate in the midst of so much suffering, but for the participants they were an opportunity to vent their frustration and anger while also welcoming a feeling of liberation and emotional release. The demonstrations were repeated, though on a smaller scale, in March, June, August, September 2011 and July 2012 (Brown, 2018: 39).

Among writers such as Yoko Ogawa and Ryu Murakami, Tawada also brought her contribution to the collection *Sore de mo sangatsu wa, mata* with a short story entitled “Fushi no shima” or, in Margaret Mitsutani’s translation, “The Island of Eternal Life”, in which the first person narrator, a Japanese woman living outside Japan, recounts the transformations that took place in Japan after the March 11 events, as a consequence of the fact that the country did not take the necessary security measures to prevent anything like the Fukushima disaster from happening again. The prime-minister is the only political figure that supports the shutdown of all nuclear power plants, but he mysteriously disappears. Shortly after, the Japanese government is privatized and starts to be run by its main shareholder, as if it were a corporation – a critique towards the institutional practice of *amakudari* in Japan, where senior Japanese bureaucrats receive lucrative employment within the private and public corporations they strategically favored during their work within the public sector. After the fictional Great Pacific Earthquake, that is supposed to have occurred in 2017, Japan closes its doors to the outside world, entering a state of isolation similar to the *sakoku* isolationist foreign policy (1633-1853) of the Tokugawa shogunate during the Edo Period. The narrator then recounts the information published by a Portuguese writer who had supposedly sneaked into Japan: the radioactive material in the air had robbed old people’s ability to die and they tend to the frail young children, who are “too feeble to walk or even stand up, with eyes that can barely see, and mouths that can hardly swallow or speak” (2012: 9-10). There is no electricity and people entertain themselves reading woodblock-printed newssheets and listening to storytellers accompanied by guitars or *biwa* lutes, like the people of Edo period.

Tawada subsequently developed this story into a short novel, entitled *Kentōshi*, which was first published in the Japanese literary magazine *Gunzō* (69(8), 7-82) in August 2014. Its translation into English by Margaret Mitsutani was published in the United Kingdom with the title *The Last Children of Tokyo* and in the United States, where it received the National Book Award for Translated Literature in 2018, as *The Emissary*. The same year Peter Pörtner signed the German translation under the title *Send bo-o-te*, which splendidly reveals the state of emergency illustrated in Tawada’s short novel, for it plays upon the similarity between the noun “Sendbot” (“envoy”) and the urgent imperative plea “Send Boote!” (“Send boats!”).

3.2. *The Emissary – A Comic Dystopia*

Following a catastrophe far greater than the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, which displaced the entire archipelago further away from the continent, Japan breaks off all contacts with the rest of the world. Internet, electricity, household appliances, television or cars are not used anymore, fruit, vegetable and other plants are too contaminated for human consumption and all animals besides rental-dogs and carrier-pigeons have disappeared. Furthermore, old people have stopped dying, children are sick and tired, unable to walk or eat properly and everyone's sex changes once or twice during their lifetime. Tokyo is a ghost town, real estate prices have plummeted and people are running towards Okinawa where they toil in "orchard factories", for uncontaminated fruit and vegetable are now the most sought after commodities.

This short novel's title, written 献灯使 (*kentōshi*) in Japanese, refers to a messenger holding a *kentō*, which is a votive lantern offered to deities in shrines or temples. Its homophone, written with the characters 遣唐使 (*kentōshi*) used to designate the Japanese envoys sent to Tang China between 630 and 894 with the purpose of absorbing and importing elements of Chinese civilization: knowledge regarding Chinese medicine, government, poetry and Buddhist religion, but also culinary recipes, the taste for tea, different musical instruments and games such as *sugoroku* and *go*, or festivals like *Tanabata*. The latter is also the title of the novel that Yoshiro, the main character, leaves unfinished and buries, afraid that his writing might contain too many foreign toponyms, prohibited since Japan's isolation policy had taken effect. "Place names spread throughout the novel like blood vessels, dividing into ever smaller branches, then setting down roots, making it impossible to eliminate them from the text" (35). The outside world is so pervasive in Yoshiro's narrative, that, eliminating all geographical references to it leads to the obliteration of the entire story. Even in this fictional context of self-imposed isolation, cultural exchanges, commercial and intellectual intersections cannot be imagined as anything but integral elements to every corner of the once open world and the idea of disconnecting an entire nation from the wires of globalization is as traumatic as its annihilation from world history.

Yoshiro takes care of his great-grandson, Mumei, a child of exceptional intelligence and insight, though trapped in a body too fragile to fend for himself. He keeps himself constantly busy, running with a rental-dog in the morning, assisting Mumei in most of his daily activities outside school and bewailing his great-grandson's infirmities and the arduous task of raising him in a contaminated world. He torments himself with regrets and feelings of guilt over his generation's failure to preserve a world suitable for next generations. "My great-grandson wants to have a picnic, in a field. Whose fault is it that I can't make even a little dream like that come true, why are all the fields contaminated? (...) Wealth, prestige, none of it has the value of a single blade of grass" (134).

The story progresses slowly, interspersed with Yoshiro's recollections of his family's history: his wife, Marika, who always seemed to avoid him, until work became a convenient excuse to relocate, his daughter Amana, also touched by the same kind of itchy feet as her mother, who ends up moving to Okinawa with her husband, his rebel nephew Tomo, who did not even attend to his wife's funeral and left his son, Mumei, in Yoshiro's care. This is, to some extent, the image of Japan's society today, something that Tawada herself mentions in her interview with Denis Scheck: the older people are those that helped Japan come back to life after World War II, some of them still working even after they had retired, whereas "die mittlere Generation ist etwa orientierungslos, weil sie dann die Industrialisierung in Frage stellen, aber doch keinen anderen Weg gefunden haben" ("the middle generation is somehow

disoriented, because they question industrialization, but have not found any other way"). Yoshiro's family is one that lacks cohesion or a sense of common identity in a society of displaced people, in a country where there is no real travel mobility and the only type of communication available are postcards brought by carrier pigeons. The question that finds no answer though (and to which Tawada seems to hint) is what led Japanese society to its actual state and what led to the dissolution of connections that once existed inside the familial structure. Yoshiro's disjointed family is in utter contradiction with the ideal image of the family, but the same can be said about many such families in today's Japan, where the older and middle generations live apart with little contact to each other and middle-aged men prioritize work over family.

Beyond the intricate family affairs, Yoshiro's paths cross with those of episodic characters, like the baker who names his bread with German city names, which he hides under Japanese ideograms, or the cutler who sells knives together with his autobiography. Unknown to Yoshiro is the fact that his wife, the baker, the cutler and a certain Mr. Yonatan all belong to the secret Emissary Association, whose mission is that of appointing children to be sent abroad for research purposes. This glimmer of hope, as faint as the flame of the candle that members of the Emissary Association light every morning before dawn, goes off in the last scene of the novel, when Mumei dies. As Brian Haman observes, "Tawada's incongruous juxtapositions endow the story with a certain incommensurability. Interweaving plot strands, disrupted flashbacks, and non-linear perspectives 'zip through the air, then stop, hovering for a second before taking off in a completely unexpected direction' like the long-forgotten dragonfly of Yoshiro's youth" (2018). Tawada brings all these plot strands together in a sort of narrative tapestry that makes sense of a dystopic world, where sense itself seems to have lost its meaning.

But the fictional world in *The Emissary* is at the same time a comic dystopia, in which the privatized police force marches as a brass band through the streets, performing circus melodies, as there is no crime anymore, bankrupt banks hire "Sorry-men" to bow in front of angry customers, letting the latter give vent to their anger, occupational training schools profit from parents' belief that admission to one of these expensive schools means that their child's talent has been recognized, even though graduates cannot find jobs or end up being exploited for very low wages. As well, national holidays are "perfectly democratic" and popular elections are organized in order to choose the name and date of each new holiday or abolish or rename old holidays that do not correspond to the current state of facts.

"Children's Day" was now "Apologize to the Children Day"; "Sports Day" was changed to "Body Day" to avoid upsetting children who were not growing big and strong; so as not to hurt the feelings of young people who wanted to work but simply weren't strong enough, "Labor Day" became "Being Alive Is Enough Day." (43)

At the same time, the "National Founding Day" is abolished, when general public objects that "a country as splendid as Japan could not possibly have been founded in a single day." (44) All the fuss around these holidays reflects the real fact that similar ones, such as Health and Sports Day, Marine Day or Mountain Day already exist and are interspersed throughout the Japanese calendar, being the only days of the year when most employees do not work, since taking one's statutory paid leave is framed upon in Japanese society. Other suggestions for holidays are the "Extinct Species Day", a holiday that should actually have already been added

to the global calendar, “Pillow Day”, which encouraged couples to have sex (the lack of intimate relations in couples being a problem that real Japan is currently facing) or “Off-line Day” during which “the day the Internet had died” would be commemorated. It is quite amusing that the loaned word *off-line* is written using the ideograms ‘Honorable-Woman-Naked-Obscenity’ (御婦裸淫).

And despite the all-pervading contamination, people are trying to make the best of the situation, still fighting over irrelevant matters, such as how legitimate the submission of mutant dandelions—a reference to Kurosawa’s dream episode of the horned-men in *Dreams*—to the annual Chrysanthemum Show should be. When the anti-dandelion faction claimed that “The chrysanthemum, that noble flower chosen for the Imperial crest, cannot be put in the same category as a weed.” (9), “the Dandelion Support Association, comprised mainly of members of the Brotherhood of Ramen Workers¹, fired back with the famous Imperial decree that “There is no such thing as a weed,” (...) ending the seven-month-long Chrysanthemum-Dandelion controversy.” (9) It is also noteworthy to mention that the word *mutation* (突然変異 *totsuzen hen’i*) has been conveniently replaced by the more optimistic syntagm *environmental adaptation* (環境同化 *kankyō dōka*), which is nothing more than a positive reframing of the consequences of radioactive pollution.

3.3. Language Productivity

Besides exploring the question of mankind’s duty and responsibility to leave a clean and habitable planet for future generations, *The Emissary* also investigates the limitations imposed by nationalist policies of isolation and the possibility of national identity within the confines of a closed country. And its main devices are linguistic experiments, in the way that only an exophonic writer like Tawada could create.

During her discussion with Gutjahr Tawada observes the inadequacy of words in situations as extreme as the disaster in Tohoku. The word “Katastrophe”, she explains, would be difficult to translate into Japanese, as “saigai” (calamity) is too dry and “hakyoku” (collapse, tragic ending) would never be used in the context of the 3.11 tragedy, whereas the German “Katastrophe” is so commonly used in everyday language, that it has almost lost its meaning (2012: 34). As a matter of fact, only “shizensaigai” (natural disaster) appears twice in the novel. As well, with the prohibition of loanwords, the language spoken by the characters has to either reinvent itself or to go back to its roots. And even so, while South Africa and India stopped the export of underground resources and started selling their languages to other countries, Japan has no language to export, for no one would be interested to learn the language of a closed country, especially of a country that seems to be the black sheep of the planet on account of the radioactive contamination it set free (2018a: 96).

Throughout the novel, Tawada plays upon language’s creative capacity. In a world where words are censored, lose their referents or slowly disappear, written language has hypnotizing qualities, ideograms are juxtaposed in fantastic combinations and archaisms are revived. As “Hundreds of thousands of dead washing machines had sunk to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean to become capsule hotels for fish”, people provide manual cleaning services, but even

¹ Tawada alludes here to the Japanese “noodle western” *Tampopo* (directed by Juzo Itami), starring Tsutomu Yamazaki and Nobuko Miyamoto. The main character, Tampopo (Japanese for ‘dandelion’), is a middle-aged woman who is learning how to run a Ramen restaurant. The movie was highly acclaimed and became a classic of Japanese cinema. As a result, a number of ramen restaurants in Japan and around the world have been named ‘Tampopo’.

this job is first met with reluctance: “*cleaning* being a foreign word, dry cleaners almost had gone extinct until someone got the idea of writing it in Chinese characters meaning ‘chestnut-person-tool’” (51). The same technique is used in the names of the bread that the baker sells in his shop: “This faintly sour black bread was called ‘Aachen’, written in Chinese characters that meant ‘Pseudo Opium’. The baker had named each variety of bread he made after a German city, which he wrote in Chinese characters with roughly the same pronunciation, so that Hanover meant ‘Blade’s Aunt’, Bremen ‘Wobbly Noodles’, and Rothenberg ‘Outdoor Hot Springs Haven’”(11). As a matter of fact, there is a quite confusing overlapping of meaning and sound in the Japanese original, where the reader simultaneously sees the ideograms and plays the pronunciation of the toponyms in his mind.

The poisoned breast milk of mothers is also a very relevant element in the use of this broken language, in which *kanji* characters used for their phonetic values cannot be separated from their semantic value, transliterating loanwords as a blend of disconnected meanings. In Tawada’s works breast milk is closely related to mother tongue, for the mother is usually the primary person that conveys language to her child. In *The Emissary*, though, mothers are almost inexistent, leaving the elderly in charge of their offspring, and children learn the language from their great-grandparents, most of them older than one hundred. As well, as Mumei’s generation seems to be the last one to have been born, the legitimate question arises: who will speak the language after the children die and how will it be renewed by the old people, who are actually learning to unlearn the words they once used?

4. Conclusions

In the midst of the tragic events that unfolded after the March 11 earthquake in Japan, the population came together, determined to overcome this unprecedented tragedy and rebuild the country. The discussion about how a catastrophe of this magnitude could be prevented in the future became urgent and the public pressed the government to shut down the atomic plants and prioritize the safety of the population over financial profit. The debate is still ongoing, while more than one hundred thousand evacuees continue to live in temporary lodgings.

Tawada’s short novel *The Emissary*, inspired by the events that unfolded on March 11 and immediately afterwards, focuses on the consequences of an unspecified catastrophe. From a stylistic point of view, this fiction rearranges real facts in a very disorienting and defamiliarizing manner: the short novel is a comic dystopia that capitalizes on the comic potential of discrepancies and patterns that already exist in Japanese society and in the ways of the government. The linguistic experiments explore the potential of adaptation of loanwords in Japanese (mirroring a similar phenomenon of cultural adaption that happened during the Japanese missions to Imperial China), but also the deceitful potential of language, that can make us perceive reality in a different manner (for example, the syntagm ‘environmental adaptation’ sugar-coating the term ‘mutation’).

Borders are spaces of ambivalence, being at the same time barriers and places where two conjoined territories meet, the place that makes the exchange between them possible. But if we think of Japan as an archipelago, whose borders are constituted by the vast ocean, it is noteworthy that the contaminated water surrounding the islands, as fluid medium of connection between Japan and the overseas, has become inaccessible. Consequentially, transgressing this border, once the channel through which Japan could communicate with the world, becomes an impossible task.

Yoko Tawada's contributions on the topic of the perils of the "peaceful atom" imagine the "highly improbable" scenario, but are not at all far-fetched if we judge by how unpredictable earthquakes are and how prevalent radiation-caused diseases among the young children at Chernobyl were. In the eventuality of another nuclear accident there is no assurance that the "highly improbable", but worst scenario will become a reality. Thus, Tawada's *The Emissary* is a plea for help, a letter to be read by all nuclear power lobbyists and to be sent outside Japan in request for "ships" (aid and cooperation) for a better future.

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