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Masaya Shimokusu on translating Kim Scott for Japanese readers

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Narratives by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors began appearing in Japanese translation in the early 1980s, initially as children's picture books and later as novels, dramas and short stories. However, less than twenty translations of Indigenous works have been published in Japan, to date, according to bibliographical data from the ongoing BlackWords project in AustLit, Australia's largest database on Australian literature and criticism based at the University of Queensland. Moreover, this number is only a fraction of the approximately 1,300 Australian literary works that have been translated into Japanese since the early 1940s, including a further 30 works tagged with the bibliographical subject term of "Aboriginal Australians" but written by non-indigenous authors. Interestingly, three of the BlackWords records are linked to the multi-award winning Western Australian Noongar author and scholar Kim Scott and his Japanese translator Masaya Shimokusu, a professor in the Department of English at Doshisha University, Kyoto.

Kim Scott debuted in 1993 and has a diverse writing career spanning fiction and non-fiction works in English and the Indigenous language of Noongar. He is also a professor of writing at Curtin University in Perth and noted for his work across Aboriginal studies and language revitalisation projects. In June 2006, Scott's writing was introduced to Japanese readers through Masaya Shimokusu's translations of the short stories "Capture" (2002) and "Into the Light" (2000) which appeared in *Subaru*, a leading monthly Japanese literary journal that was featuring a selection of contemporary Australian short stories to celebrate the Australia-Japan Year of Exchange. Driving this selection was *Diamond Dog: Contemporary Australian Short Stories: Reflections on Multicultural Society*, a long-term project that was later published by Gendaikikakushitsu Publishing in 2008 with support from the Australia-Japan Foundation (AJF). *Diamond Dog* was the first anthology of its kind in Japanese translation to shine a light specifically on multicultural and Indigenous writing, including Scott's "Capture".

My research interest in Scott in Japan relates to the Miles Franklin Award-winning novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010), which was translated by Shimokusu as the 5th work in the Masterpieces of Contemporary Australian Literature series in 2017. The Masterpieces series (2012-2023), which followed on from *Diamond Dog*, was an initiative of Gendaikikakushitsu Publishing that was made possible through AJF funding and the support of scholar translators tied to Australian Studies in Japan. In investigating the Masterpieces series and the role of scholar translators, I interviewed Masaya Shimokusu in October 2023 via Zoom. I was eager to learn about his approach to translation and professional experience in introducing contemporary Australian Indigenous writing to Japanese readers. In this excerpt from the interview, Shimokusu reflects on his translation process and journey of learning the Noongar language. He also touches upon the issues of translator's notes and transliteration with reference to the Japanese context, while expressing his desire to encourage Japanese readers to learn more about the Noongar language and Australian Indigenous writing through and beyond translation.

Sonia Broad (SB): How did you go about the translation and the checking process over the two-year period?

Dr. Masaya Shimokusu (MS): So, this may be my translation or related to my own translating method but, actually, translation is really hard work! Now, in recent years, I have avoided committing to translation too much. I think that without translation everyday life is really easy! But if we have a book for translation, if anything happens, we must move forward even if it is little by little. We must move forward—without doing that the project never ends. That's how I kept translating from beginning to end, little by little. And in the process, I noticed we cannot escape the limits of time. But thanks to modern technologies now, we can check earlier issues or some words, special words, on the computer. We can easily go back to a former part, and so whenever I noticed that my translation had a kind of contradiction or something like that, I returned to that part. But that was a really hard thing for me because I wished to go forward steadily, like a turtle or a caterpillar. I wanted to move forward, but I must go back, so that was frustrating.

Another challenge is the language of Noongar, so the language of the Aboriginal people (from the south-west of Western Australia). Noongar pops up (in *That Deadman Dance*) so I stopped my translation and I bought this book published by UWA Publishing.

SB: Is that a Noongar picture book?

MS: Yes, a Noongar picture book.

SB: Brilliant!

MS: Yes, I bought a couple of books.

SB: They're beautiful.

MS: Yes, this is *Mamang*. This has a kind of YouTube presentation video, so I saw it again and again. Do you know the training for interpreters—shadowing or something like that?

SB: Yes, I'm familiar with that.

MS: Yes, I did shadowing with this one! I did that, you know!

SB: Wow!

MS: Yes, so actually I found out about a Noongar actress, Kylie Bracknell (née Farmer) Kaarljilba Kaardn. She is not a member of Kim's group, but in an Australian Noongar theatre company—Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company. So, I discovered that Noongar is performed in Shakespearian plays.

SB: Yes.

MS: So, I found a couple of her videos. And I learnt that the greeting *kaya* is very important for the Noongar people. So, I must thank the internet and modern technologies, but still translating (Noongar into Japanese) is difficult for me. I also found a Noongar-English

dictionary on a PDF that I could follow on the internet, so actually I checked various things. But even then I felt I couldn't do a perfect job. But the point is that the author Kim Scott, himself, did not put any notes to Noongar words. It's a kind of "noise", you know, for the English-speaking readers. But I think that must be okay. And do you know the author Lafcadio Hearn? Koizumi Yakumo?

SB: Yes. You've done work on this Greek-Irish writer and translator who became a Japanese national later in life.

MS: *Kwaidan*, ghost stories of Japan, is maybe one of Hearn's best-known books. And he sometimes put Japanese words into his translation, but with no notes. Probably, Hearn wished English readers to enjoy the sounds.

SB: Yes.

MS: So, imagine the meaning with the sound. That's why I focussed on putting the alphabetical Noongar words into Japanese phonetic letters, katakana. But, as you know, I also faced another problem. For Noongar words, their spelling doesn't perfectly correspond to the sounds of the words. So, I checked some lectures on *That Deadman Dance* but the pronunciation for the name of the hero in *That Deadman Dance* varied. This posed difficulties (for translation), but fortunately Kim gave a lecture on *That Deadman Dance*, so I could pin down the pronunciation of the protagonist's name. However, the pronunciation doesn't correspond to the spelling. Throughout this process, though, I noticed that at the beginning of the book the protagonist, Bobby, tried to write his own name in English. And so, he thought about what he should write down, you know, and in that special spelling. This one [holding the source text] is let me say Bobby W-a-b-l-n-g-n. Maybe this one on the first page is ボビー・ワバランギン *Bobii Wabarangin* in Japanese and this may be a clue from Scott to the reader. And so, thinking (about) those things, and believing my own instinct of the language, I tried to put the Noongar lines into the Japanese phonetic letters without (translator's) notes. But this book is my translation, you know, so in the translator's afterword, I wrote "If you are interested in the (Noongar) language, itself, you can find the language education materials for that, so you can buy this kind of book [*Mamang*] like myself or please keep studying the language" or something similar.

SB: Yes.

MS: That's why I did that, you know.

Reflecting on my interview with Masaya Shimokusu, I am drawn to his passion to introduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories to Japanese readers who have limited exposure to these works in their native language. At the same time, I often return to his concept of "noise" to consider how translators negotiate the space between writing to deliberately foreignize and transliterate words that are deliberately foreign.