Title

In the Postmonolingual Condition: Karin Sander's *Wordsearch* and Yoko Tawada's Wordplay

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On September 29, 2002, the Sunday issue of the *New York Times* included a 68-page paid insert previewing a conceptual artwork called "Wordsearch: A Translinguistic Sculpture," conceived by German artist Karin Sander and sponsored by the Deutsche Bank, the world's largest corporate art collector.[1] In response to the sponsor's request to offer a global perspective in a metropolitan location, Sander's project set out to document as many of the languages spoken in New York City as possible. It did so by finding one native speaker for each of 250 languages and asking each speaker to contribute one personally meaningful word in his or her "mother tongue" to a list. This list of unduplicated words was then translated into all the other languages. The resulting 62,500 words were arranged into columns resembling stock market tables and published as the actual "translinguistic sculpture" in another paid, eight-page insert in the business section of the *New York Times* on October 4, 2002. This commissioned artwork, "Wordsearch," thus sought to render the novelty of globalized life at the turn of the millennium through attention to the proximate coexistence of many languages in the same social space, that is, through multilingualism.[2] Such renewed attention to multilingualism has been a hallmark of recent years.[3] Yet contrary to the tenor of most scholarly appraisals, not all forms of multilingualism carry innovative and critical potential. In fact, despite the apparent popularization of multilingualism in a globalizing world, monolingualism and the notion of the "mother tongue" continue to inflect the way that subjects, communities, and modes of belonging

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[1] "Wordsearch" was realized under the auspices of the Deutsche Bank art series "Moment," which began in 2001 and solicited original conceptual art works (see Deutsche Bank Art). A virtual version of "Wordsearch" can be viewed on the accompanying website: http://moment-art.com/.

[2] I use "multilingualism" as a broad umbrella term referring to the conjunction of two or more languages. Many related terms are currently in use in literary and cultural studies discourses about languages, including "bilingual," "translingual," "interlingual," "plurilingual," and "polyglot," with widely varying definitions for each. This diversity of terms is indicative of a relatively new, interdisciplinary field still in great terminological and methodological flux.

[3] To name just a few titles in literary studies, cultural studies, and linguistics, respectively, see Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination;* Sommer*, Bilingual Aesthetics;* and Pavlenko*, Emotions and Multilingualism.*

are conceived. As I will show through my reading of "Wordsearch," even cultural products that feature multiple languages can follow such a monolingual paradigm.

To understand the functioning of multilingualism today, it is necessary to take to heart what some scholars working on languages have known for quite a while, namely that *monolingualism* and not multilingualism is the more recent historical innovation.[4] Emerging only in the course of the eighteenth century at the confluence of radical political, philosophical, and cultural changes in Europe, the notion of monolingualism rapidly displaced previously unquestioned practices of living and writing in multiple languages.[5] To pre-modern rulers, for instance, it had been of little concern whether their subjects spoke one or more languages. With the gendered and affectively charged kinship concept of the unique "mother tongue" at its center, however, monolingualism established the idea that having one language was the natural norm, and that multiple languages constituted a threat to the cohesion of individuals and societies.[6] Even as they supported the study of other languages, late eighteenth-century German thinkers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich Schleiermacher advocated the view that one could properly think, feel, and express oneself only in one's "mother tongue." This notion of the "mother tongue" has been in turn a vital element in the imagination and production of the homogenous nation-state.[7] Based on its provenance and function, monolingualism is thus much more than a simple quantitative term: it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities, to the formation of disciplines and institutions, and

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[4] See for example linguists Kurt Braunmüller and Gisella Ferraresi, education scholar Ingrid Gogolin, and literary critics Leonard Forster and George Steiner.
[5] See for instance Mary Catherine Davidson on medieval multilingualism in Britain and Georg Kremnitz on patterns of language choice among Early Modern European writers.
[6] On the history of the term *Muttersprache* and its changing meanings, see Claus Ahlzweig.
[7] On the role of language in the production of the nation as an imagined community, see Benedict Anderson.

to imagined collectives such as cultures or nations. It is, in other words, a paradigm.[8] According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one "true" language only, and, through this possession, to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation.

Yet, from the beginning, this paradigm has confronted divergent linguistic practices, and thus has always required an active process of monolingualization. On the one hand, this process has entailed the social engineering of monolingual populations. Schooling has been a primary site in this regard.[9] On the other hand, the same process has constantly minimized, pathologized, or simply disavowed existing multilingualisms both in the present and the past. Multilingualism, then, has not been absent in the last couple of centuries, but it has been refracted through the monolingual paradigm. This persistence of a monolingual framework, I propose, is the backdrop against which we need to see today's seeming increase of multilingualism.

To describe the tense co-existence of a still dominant monolingual framework tied to the nation-state, on the one hand, and (re)emergent multilingual practices, on the other, I introduce the term "postmonolingual." This "post" has, in the first place, a temporal dimension: it signifies the period *since* the emergence of monolingualism as a dominant paradigm. Such a historicized understanding is necessary, because the appearance of the monolingual paradigm substantially changes the meaning and resonance of multilingual practices. It thereby begins to illuminate the radical difference between premonolingual forms of multilingualism and postmonolingual ones,

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[8] Aneta Pavlenko speaks of a "monolingual bias" and discusses this bias specifically in linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and psychology. Mary Catherine Davidson likewise refers to a "monolingual bias" in the study of medieval multilingualism; Gogolin refers to a "monolingual habitus" stemming from the late eighteenth century that is built into the German educational system to this day. I use the term "paradigm" to indicate the way in which presumptions of monolingualism thoroughly structure both modern European (and European-inflected) modes of thinking and institutions.

[9] Hanna Burger describes such a process for late nineteenth-century Austria as the "expulsion of multilingualism."

a difference that other studies generally neglect.[10] In this sense, "postmonolingual" refers to the unfolding of the effects of the monolingual and not to its successful overcoming or transcendence. But aside from this temporal dimension, the prefix "post" also has a critical function, where it refers to the opposition to the term that it qualifies and to a potential break with it, as in some notions of postmodernism. In this second sense, "postmonolingual" highlights the struggle *against* the monolingual paradigm. As Marianne Hirsch notes with regard to the "post" in her own term "postmemory," then, the prefix "reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" (106). Taking these two dimensions together, I use "postmonolingual" to identify a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself while multilingual practices persist or reemerge. It thus brings into sharper focus the back and forth movement between these two tendencies that I see as characteristic of contemporary linguistic constellations. Focusing on the tension rather than on one or the other pole helps to account for many phenomena that initially appear to be contradictory, including the monolingual logic of a multilingual artwork.

Because the monolingual is a paradigm rather than a quantitative term, the mere multiplication of languages does not alter it. The number of languages is not an issue for the monolingual paradigm in the Herderian vein, as long as each language is conceived as distinct and separate, and as belonging to just one equally distinct and separate people. What this position cannot abide is the notion of blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages.[11] Such effects, however, can be achieved through the arrangement and configuration of languages—in other words, through form. To analyze instantiations of the "postmonolingual

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[10] See for instance Kellman's list of what he calls "translingual" writers, which usefully underscores the prevalence of forms of multilingualism throughout history, yet does not provide historicized distinctions (117-118).

[11] See also Carl Niekerk on Herder's "theory of territoriality" that accompanied his view of cultural pluralism and has had a substantial impact on subsequent conceptions of cultural difference.

condition" therefore requires attention to the particular *form* that multilingualism takes rather than to the number of languages present. With this framework in place, I now return to the artwork "Wordsearch," which I read as symptomatic of the postmonolingual rather than as critically engaging with it. In the final part of the essay, I then turn to German and Japanese bilingual writer Yoko Tawada, in whose work I see one subtle but intriguing counterperspective to the monolingual paradigm in the postmonolingual condition.

Wordsearch: Reasserting the Monolingual

The first aspect that is striking about "Wordsearch" in the context of the present study is the fact that the image of societal multilingualism in a global city that it seeks to render rests on a conception of the monolingualism of individuals. The magazine insert, which functions as the catalogue to the final art piece, features numerous full-page color images of individuals who are photographed in the midst of their busy workdays as they take a moment to write down their particular words on pieces of paper. In these pictures, the catalogue highlights the individuals constituting the multilingual global city as speakers of distinct "mother tongues" who are effectively associated with that language only. Although the magazine insert mentions the multilingual competencies of the pictured individuals ("Julia […] speaks Tajiki, Russian, and English" [Deutsche Bank Art 28]), it identifies each person solely with one language, his or her ostensible "mother tongue": "Julia" is introduced under the heading "Tajiki" and is asked to contribute a word from this one language only.[12] While the artwork renders the social space as marked by the presence of multiple disparate languages, it thus continues to cast the individual

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[12] See http://moment-art.com/moment/wordsearch/d/tj.htm.

according to a monolingual model where all languages but the singular "mother tongue" are treated as secondary and irrelevant.[13]

The claim to the exclusivity of the "mother tongue," however, rests on the continued disavowal of multilingualism. Like "Julia," many of the participating individuals actually speak multiple languages, as the brief notes on the speakers in the catalogue and the accompanying website reveal. Gambian immigrant Sanna Kanuteh, who contributes a word in Soninke, for instance, also speaks "nine languages," with Soninke just "one of his native languages."[14] By denying what it also acknowledges on the margins, the artwork effects a form of disavowal: "I know very well that these are speakers of multiple languages but nevertheless I will present them as possessing a single language." This "I know very well, but nevertheless" structure is, of course, the signature of fetishism. Fetishism, we recall, preserves the wholeness of the mother in order to disavow castration and lack. In the case of the monolingual paradigm, it is the "mother tongue" whose purported wholeness and exclusivity needs to be preserved.

What is at stake in this staging of *individuals* as primarily monolingual, as defined by their "mother tongues," when at the same time they are posited as the building blocks of a larger multilingual whole? Throughout the catalogue text, printed in both English and German, the predominantly German commentators equate language with culture. Sander, for instance, states about the prospective reader of her translinguistic sculpture: "Der Leser findet […] durch die Verwendung seiner Sprache seine eigene Herkunftskultur repräsentiert" ["through the use of his language […] the reader finds his own culture of origin represented"] (Sander in Deutsche Bank Art 17).[15] The reference to "origin" suggests that the term "culture" is in fact used in the

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[13] Claire Kramsch's study *The Multilingual Subject*, which insists on the transformative experience of encountering and experiencing multiple languages, counters precisely such a perspective on the subject.
[14] See http://moment-art.com/moment/wordsearch/e/son.htm.
[15] All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. I have retained Sander's gendered language in this passage.

anthropological sense of ethnicity. The prevalence of embassies and consulates as sources for native speakers for the project extends and further underscores the assumed homology between language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality that underwrites the project.[16] The insistence on identifying the individual with one language only, namely the presumed "mother tongue," thus amounts to an insistence on the continued validity of a Herderian conception of language. The individual, in other words, becomes the site (or scale) at which the Herderian conception can be preserved even in the face of globalization.

To understand more fully the stakes behind reestablishing the distinctness of cultures and ethnicities, it is necessary to turn to another issue that "Wordsearch" raises but does not explicitly address. The project is the brainchild of a German artist who realizes it for a nominally German, but in fact transnational financial institution. To explore the coexistence of multiple languages, she turns to New York rather than considering a German site. Frankfurt am Main, the bank's headquarters, would have been a viable alternative, as it is one of the country's most diverse, multiethnic, and multilingual cities.[17] Instead, it serves only as a place of reception, where the entire *New York Times* issue with the "Wordsearch" insert was printed by special arrangement and distributed to pedestrians on the same day. As so often since the nineteenth century, the United States—and New York in particular—serves as a site for German fantasies about cultural heterogeneity that are implicitly contrasted with an imagined German homogeneity.[18] "Wordsearch" displaces multilingualism outside Germany, into a space whose globalized and transnational nature is more readily recognized and accepted than that of Germany. The displaced form of the project's multilingualism offers a safe distance for savoring

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[16] Several assistants did the actual work of collecting words around New York City. See Franziska Lamprecht's contribution to the "Wordsearch" catalogue and the blog entries on the accompanying website for accounts of this process.

[17] On Frankfurt, see Regina Römhild.

[18] For perspectives on "Americanization" discourse in the twentieth century, see Agnes Mueller's edited volume.

difference and heterogeneity without having to acknowledge it at home. Ultimately, the assertion of the distinctness and separateness of cultures and ethnicities attempts to assuage often-voiced German fears of being leveled by globalization. Rather than reconfiguring and altering languages, cultures, and ethnicities, the "Wordsearch" catalogue presents globalization as preserving and accommodating them harmoniously. The configuration of languages in this artwork thus carefully *manages difference* by producing it along preserved homogeneous, ethno-cultural lines and by situating it outside Germany. Multilingualism, in other words, does not simply constitute a straightforward expression of multiplicity, but rather a *malleable form* that can be put to different and contradictory uses.

"Wordsearch" itself demonstrates this possibility in its dual form. The catalogue to "Wordsearch" is after all only one side of this artwork. The final piece itself lays out an entirely different logic. In contrast to the emphasis on particularity, cultural origin, and identity in the colorful catalogue and its stress on handwritten, and thus authenticated words, the final "translinguistic sculpture" itself celebrates abstraction, universality, and equivalency. The arrangement of the words in stock market tables suggests that language is a commodity to be traded like any other, while translation becomes the means of producing equivalency and surplus value. As in a financial dream, the collected words begin to multiply; through translation, the starting capital of 250 words generates a massive 62,500.

This proliferation differs from heteroglossia by its very orderliness.[19] While multilingual environments generally lead to language contact and thus to new linguistic forms via borrowing and code-mixing, the words in these stock market columns stay separate and untouched by each other. Thus they, too, reproduce globalization as a process that preserves distinctness. In this

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[19] For his theory of heteroglossia, see Mikhail Bakhtin, on whose dynamic and socially imbricated notion of language I draw.

case, the unchanged nature of the words obscures the results of the global financial activity to which the arrangement of the words refers, namely the deep-seated transformations such financial activity causes, the destabilization it brings, and the uneven distribution of wealth to which it leads.

Between the pictures of individuals in the catalogue and the endless columns of words in the verbal sculpture, "Wordsearch" performs multilingualism as a fantasy of preserved particularities and individuality, on the one hand, and as a fantasy of complete equivalency, anonymity, and unencumbered universality of the financial markets, on the other. Given this perfect self-image of neoliberal globalization, it may be symptomatic that an art critic refers to "Wordsearch" as an "artwork" and "exhibition" by Sander (Gregory Volk), while a business news report calls it a Deutsche Bank "integrated advertising campaign" ("Deutsche Bank"). By recasting the monolingual paradigm for a new age, "Wordsearch" *enacts* the tension inherent in the postmonolingual condition, rather than challenging it.

A Critical Multilingualism: Yoko Tawada

Even in the present form of "Wordsearch," however, the word arrangement may provoke responses that go beyond the ones highlighted by the artist. Rather than primarily reading the words for the representation of "one's own culture of origin," the modulations of words can incite pleasure in shapes and imagined sounds, a possibility briefly mentioned by the artist but quickly subordinated to the privileged identificatory mode of reception. The unfamiliar words may even draw the viewer in more than the familiar ones, or they may converge in new ways with familiar ones. One could stumble, for example, over the word "leydi baabaa" in the West

African language Fuuta Jalon, which means "fatherland," but which I cannot help but read as both "Lady Gaga" and "lady father" via English (lady) and Turkish (baba=father). In a pleasant subversion of strictly gendered images of the nation, the "fatherland" thus suddenly reveals itself to be secretly crossdressing. What if, instead of denouncing these new acquaintances as "false friends," we began to hang out with them?

To explore such a different perspective on languages—namely one that privileges contingency over identity and surprise over familiarity—I turn to the multilingual poetics of Yoko Tawada.[20] What sets Tawada's engagement with multilingualism apart both from Sander and from other multilingual practitioners is precisely her attention to the workings of monolingualism. Writing in the rare combination of Japanese and German, Tawada is an author in two languages and national contexts in which the monolingual paradigm is deeply ingrained. The myth of the homogenous, monolithic, and monolingual nation has governed the imagination of both Germany and Japan, both inside the countries and elsewhere.[21] If anything, the perception of Japan's alleged homogeneity is even greater than that of Germany, and no more true.[22] Much of Tawada's writing, as I show elsewhere, is directed against the force of *inclusion* into the monolingual paradigm as a Japanese subject with a Japanese "mother tongue."[23] Yet she does not simply write two parallel yet unduplicated oeuvres in Japanese and German; she also develops an aesthetic around reading words of one language through the lens of another. That is,

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[20] Tawada, who was born in Tokyo in 1960 and has been living in Germany since 1982, has published more than thirty books of prose, poetry, and drama in the two languages. For a range of perspectives on Tawada from German Studies, Japanese Studies, and Comparative Literature, see the volume edited by Doug Slaymaker. TRANSIT, of course, features a video of a reading and discussion with Tawada, along with Zafer Şenocak and Homi Bhabha, on its website. See "Where Europe Continues: Translingual Writers and the Cosmopolitan Imagination." Accessible at: http://german.berkeley.edu/transit/2009_2010/articles/WhereEuropeContinues.html.

[21] For a comparison of postwar Germany and Japan, see the volume edited by Ernestine Schlant and Thomas Rimer.

[22] Mary Goebel Noguchi and Sandra Fotos's edited volume documents both the myths surrounding Japanese and their "crumbling" (Noguchi).

[23] See the chapter "Detaching from the Mother Tongue: Bilingualism and Liberation in Yoko Tawada," in my forthcoming book *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*.

she mobilizes bilingualism within each language to find new connections and associations between them. Rather than looking for the "mother tongue," she looks for spaces beyond it and thus offers an ideal counter-perspective to Sander's "mother tongue" fetishism.

The humor, subtlety, and deceptive simplicity that is characteristic of Tawada's writing can mask its stakes, yet it is part and parcel of her mode of challenging the monolingual paradigm. In her essay "Schreiben im Netz der Sprachen" ("Writing in the Web of Words"), for instance, Tawada initially seems to describe globalization in terms similar to Sander:

> Im heutigen Leben sieht man ständig Wörter und Bilder aus verschiedenen Welten nebeneinanderstehen. Durch Migration, Weltreisen oder Surfen im Internet befindet man sich immer häufiger in einer Situation, in der das Nebeneinander bereits existiert, ohne daß ein entsprechender Denkraum entwickelt worden ist. Manchmal fahre ich mit dem Bus durch die Stadt und bin umgeben von mehreren Gesprächen in verschiedenen Sprachen. Zwei Sätze, die zufällig direkt hintereinander in meine Ohren dringen, haben noch keinen gemeinsamen Raum. Man braucht eine Rahmenhandlung, um diese Sätze miteinander zu verbinden. ("Netz" 41)
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> [Nowadays one frequently sees words and images from different worlds juxtaposed. Through migration, world travels, or Internet surfing, people often find themselves in a situation where the juxtaposition already exists but a corresponding frame of mind has not yet been developed. Sometimes I ride the bus through a city and am surrounded by several conversations in several languages. Two sentences where one right after the other penetrates my ears by

chance don't yet occupy a common space. You need a frame story to connect these sentences.] ("Web" 152-153; trans. modified).[24]

In this essay Tawada is engaged with some of the same questions as Sander, namely making sense of linguistic configurations in a globalizing context. As in "Wordsearch," Tawada focuses on the everyday of the urban metropolitan space and identifies it as inhabited by multiple languages. Again, as in "Wordsearch," these languages appear as distinct and set apart ("nebeneinander") and do not point to hybridity and code-switching. Yet Tawada, in contrast to Sander, takes the side-by-side coexistence of languages only as a starting point for developing new ways of thinking and for imagining new framing narratives. What is not obvious in this passage is the fact that it contains in highly condensed form Tawada's response to the very question she raises. It is hidden in the "frame story" or "Rahmenhandlung" that she calls for:

> Eine Sorte Nudelsuppe heißt [auf Japanisch, Y.Y.] zum Beispiel genau wie das deutsche Wort "Rahmen." Ein Laden, in dem man diese Nudeln kaufen kann, könnte „Rahmenhandlung" heißen. Die beiden Wörter haben natürlich historisch nichts miteinander zu tun. Deshalb wird ein solches Phänomen nicht ernst genommen und als Zufall abgetan. (41)
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> [A kind of noodle soup, for example [in Japanese, Y.Y.], has a name just like the German word "Rahmen" [frame]. A shop in which one can buy these noodles could be called a "Rahmenhandlung" [ramen noodle shop/frame shop/frame story]. These two words have of course nothing to do with each other historically.

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[24] I draw on Monika Totten's translation of this essay here—including her alliterative translation of the title, rather than its more literal rendition "Writing In the Web of Languages"—but modify it in order to highlight particular formulations of Tawada's German original.

Therefore such a phenomenon is not taken seriously and dismissed as coincidence.][25]

By introducing the Japanese word "ramen" as a homophone of the German "Rahmen," the German word suddenly takes on a new, surprising, and somewhat lighthearted meaning. Tawada achieves this not by rewriting or adding anything obvious to the word. Instead, she rereads the word, or better still, she suggests listening to it differently. The German homonyms ("Handlung" as action, as plot, and as shop) are also mobilized in the same moment and add to the destabilization of the meaning one assumed to be clear in the first instance. As exemplified here, Tawada's multilingual practice intervenes in a subtle manner, not by altering words and languages themselves but rather by altering the *perception* of words and languages.[26] This new perception is not limited to one language alone but listens for new meanings and words both within and across languages.

Such accidental correspondences of words from disparate languages stand against connections based on history, genealogy, or meaning. In contrast to a "historical way of thinking" about language on the model of etymology, a "new chain of words offers possibilities for associations that have a lot to do with the present and in which the elements from different cultures and realms come together in a surprising way" ("Web" 151). This rejection of the historical, genealogical, and etymological is programmatic not just for Tawada's conception of globalization but also for her attempt to overcome the monolingual paradigm and its naturalizing, genealogical kinship metaphor of the "mother tongue."

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[25] Because Totten's translation at this point diverges substantially from the German orignal in order to provide an explicit explanation of the central pun to English speakers, I provide my own, more literal, translation in this instance. For Totten's version see "Web" (152).

[26] See also Susan C. Anderson's elucidation of Tawada's "hyperattentiveness to form and literality" (50) and specifically her insightful reading of the role of "hearing" and "listening" as means of enabling "new perceptions" in other texts by Tawada (64-5).

Globalization, in Tawada's version, is then the meeting of unexpected points, of chance encounters, and new, fleeting associations. Where "Wordsearch" emphasized the whole individual as bounded and as the building block of the global city, Tawada focuses on finding startling moments of contact not necessarily linked to any discrete individual identity or bounded subject. In their ephemeral way, Tawada's rereadings of words invite readers to discover such connections for themselves, rather than making multilingualism substantial, fixed, and reified. These phenomena do not accumulate to produce value and capital, but remain primarily performative interventions.

By rereading rather than rewriting, Tawada offers a form of multilingualism that affects the monolingual paradigm from within. It insists, against fetishistic disavowal, that multilingualism is always already there. Through homophones and homonyms Tawada points to structures that look alike but are not, and that look like one word, but are not. In this way, Tawada's writing offers a multilingualism that does not just reproduce the pre-existing boundaries of cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities, but imagines subjects as intricately, if invisibly, tied to other places, languages, and histories.

Multilingual performances are most productive and promising when they help to change the conceptual frameworks through which we perceive languages and the arenas in which they circulate. A critical multilingualism could open "new affective paths" through linguistic practices not tied to kinship and ethnic identity.[27] In the process, it could contribute to a rethinking of the subject, of institutional and social structures, and of modes of belonging. Such a rethinking in turn is urgently needed at a time when notions of neatly separated languages, cultures, and

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[27] On new languages opening up "new affective paths," see Jacqueline Amati-Mehler, Simona Argentieri, and Jorge Canestri's landmark study of multilingualism and psychoanalysis.

nations continue to hold sway and do much damage in the political arena. The postmonolingual condition holds this promise of change, but without guarantees.

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