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Travelling without Moving: Physical and Linguistic Mobility in Yoko Tawada's *Überseetzungen*

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Travel, in its many forms—e.g. (im)migration,¹ tourism,² colonial expansion³—has been one of Yoko Tawada’s most persistent thematic preoccupations. Many of Tawada’s German-language works are, in a broad sense, travel stories and offer up a veritable catalogue of travelers with varying relationships to the privilege of motion. Her writings subsequently raise a number of intriguing questions about the interconnections of space, subjectivity and mobility: e.g. how is space productive of subjectivity or, conversely, how might subjects have a hand in producing the spaces they inhabit? How is travel bound up with the production of knowledge of the cultural Other and how are cultural identities formed in acts of travel? Finally, what models of subjectivity are made possible by the constant travel across spaces, cultures, and—most importantly for Tawada—languages?

Indeed, it is the experience of linguistic mobility that constitutes another of Tawada’s primary investigations. *Talisman*, for example, explores the linguistic consequences of the narrator’s move from Japan to Germany, and the resulting clash of linguistic sign systems that make up her daily reality. The protagonist in *Das Bad* returns to her native Japan after a long sojourn in Germany and must reflect on her new, and at times distanced, relationship to her mother tongue.

While many of Tawada’s writings consider the consequences of linguistic as well as geographic dislocation, in *Überseetzungen* travel through language becomes a substitute for, not a side-effect of travel through space. Embedded in *Überseetzungen*’s dual focus on geographic and linguistic dislocation are wider implications about the nature of modern communication and travel, arguably resulting in Tawada’s most sustained reflection on the interconnectedness of mobility, geography, language, and identity to date.

Published in 2002, *Überseetzungen*’s neologistic title and layout announce these thematic concerns. As many review articles were quick to point out,⁴ the title can be understood in two ways. Read as a compound consisting of *Übersee* and *Zungen*, the title reflects the collection’s consideration of foreign places and foreign languages; the word *Zungen* also suggests a link between language and the body, or between sound and its physical production. Alternatively, if the stress is allowed to fall on the second syllable, the title bears phonetic similarity to the word *Übersetzungen*. The typography of the book cover suggests the latter: there is a barely perceptible italicization of the second syllable on the front cover, suggesting that the stress should fall there. The fourteen essays are arranged cartographically into three sections, entitled “Euroasiatische Zungen,” “Südafrikanische Zungen,” and “Nordamerikanische Zungen”; each chapter’s title page displays a black and white graphic resembling a torn scrap of paper shaped like the geographical region in question and covered with typewritten symbols and characters from various alphabets.⁵

¹ Several of Tawada’s German-language works contain Japanese narrators residing in German or European locales: e.g. *Talisman*, *Das Bad*, *Ein Gast*, *Überseetzungen*, *Das nackte Auge*.

² The *Talisman* essay “Rothenburg ob der Tauber” and the drama *Till* both depict Japanese tour groups visiting medieval German cities and reflect much contemporary theory about leisure travel and the social construction of tourist sites.

³ Siberia’s colonial past forms an important subtext of the short story “Wo Europa anfängt.”

⁴ See, for example, Bütthe or Treude.

⁵ The images from *Überseetzungen* have been copied with the permission of the Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke.

EUROASIATISCHE
ZÜNGEN

KARIBIKANISCHE
ZÜNGEN

NONWESTLICHE
ZÜNGEN



Together, the book's title, the chapter headings, and the graphics reflect the themes that run through each text: language, translation, travel, geography, and the embodied self.

Many essays describe trips made to various locations within these three regions. Most often the traveler seems to be Tawada herself; she describes, for example, her stay in Boston as the Max Kade Distinguished Visitor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1999) and her visit to Toronto for the International Festival of Authors (2001).⁶ The collection thus blurs the boundaries between essay, autobiography, travelogue, and short story. Consequently, the reader must always consider how truth and fiction are interwoven in each text.

Tawada's travelogues take up a variety of forms of physical and virtual mobility, from plane travel to the flow of information along telecommunications highways, considering how modern technology may alter perceptions of distance or reorganize the interactions between community members. Furthermore, her texts consider how the increasing uniformity of modern-day transportation turns travel into immobility. Consequently, even some forms of physical travel—for instance, airplane travel—take on the qualities of virtual travel. This observation prompts her to question what is really 'in motion' in contemporary journeys, e.g. to ask what is altered for the traveling subject and how it is changed. Tawada concludes that, as travel between places can in some instances become less distinct, it is travel through language in which the most compelling journeys take place. In *Überseetzungen* language takes on the qualities of space, and it is the experience of linguistic, not physical, mobility that has the most radical effect on subjectivity and embodiment.

Virtual Travel

While many physical journeys take place in this collection, the essays also contemplate forms of virtual mobility: the travel of information via internet technology, email, or

⁶ I am referring here to the piece "Eine Scheibengeschichte" which recounts the narrator's flight to Toronto. Although the essay does not refer to the occasion for, or the date of, the visit, in her on-stage interview at the International Festival of Authors Tawada related the details of her arrival in Toronto and the ensuing conversation with her interviewer, who had picked her up from the airport. These are the very same details that form the premise of her essay.

communications technology. This is not a new concern for Tawada; in “E-mail für japanische Gespenster” she considers how computer technology erases the materiality of handwritten script, as characters on the computer screen appear “gespenstischer als Pinselschrift auf Papier, denn sie sind da und doch nicht da” (*Verwandlungen* 42). These characters can disappear or materialize in distant places via electronic communications, erasing time and distance “so wie Geister es können” (*Verwandlungen* 42). In *Überseetzungen*, however, Tawada investigates how communication, information, and transportation technology affect our perception of space and our sense of community.

“Die Ohrenzeugin,” for example, takes up the impact of communications technology. The essay describes an afternoon in the department of foreign languages and literature at MIT. Appropriate to her subject, Tawada paints a linguistic portrait, piecing together the languages, voices, scraps of conversation, non-verbal human sounds (laughter, footsteps, coughing), and mechanical noises (e.g. the ring of the telephone, the whir of the photocopier, the click of computer keyboards) that the narrator hears from her office. She describes the department hallway as a row of similar offices that resemble “Gehörorgane” through which the narrator can take in the sounds that comprise her workplace (97).

This level of attentive listening provokes reverie; the narrator contemplates several subjects and reflects on language, communication, and technology. She muses about how she communicates with her colleagues—how often, via which media, and over what distance—and about how these factors affect her relationships and her sense of physical proximity to each member of the department. Narrative devices encourage this line of thought. While constant references to the passage of time arrange events chronologically, repeated statements about the location of her colleagues’ offices in relation to her own prompt the reader to consider the web of communicative events in spatial terms.

The telephone conversations, voice messages, and emails that the narrator describes are remarkable not for their content, but for what they reveal about how the medium shapes the parties’ sense of distance or community. For example, a colleague on another floor is reached by telephone rather than in person since “[e]ine andere Etage bedeutete eine andere Welt” (99). Similarly, colleagues in another building communicate with each other by email, thus intensifying their sense of distance from one another (102).

Tawada here comments on how telephone and email are used not only as devices for communicating with those who are geographically remote, but also as a medium of exchange with those in close proximity. They thus bridge, but also maintain, distances. The narrator notes her skepticism about claims that modern geographies of telecommunications networks collapse space, arguing instead that they may reinforce the distance between individuals:

Man sagte mir, die Welt sei vernetzt, die Entfernung spiele keine Rolle mehr. Es schien mir aber so, als ob nicht die Entfernung, sondern die Nähe keine Rolle mehr spiele. Auch jemandem, der nebenan sitzt, kann man eine E-Mail schicken. Ist die Welt wirklich vernetzt oder ist sie vielleicht verletzt? (101)

In this instance, the convenience of email keeps people who are in fact in close proximity distant from one another. Nevertheless, technology can also unite people. The narrator confesses that technology disempowers her and, thus, requires her to seek human

assistance, especially when technical problems arise: “Die Technik entmündigt Menschen wie mich, darin besteht die Menschlichkeit der Technik: Technische Probleme verbinden Menschen miteinander oder erzeugen neue Geschichten, die dann von Mund zu Mund weitererzählt werden” (100). These technologies bring people together in unexpected ways. They also generate new stories and motivate further communication, becoming a source of shared experience and community.

Taken together, these mundane telephone conversations display the multiple uses of technologies. For example, technologies can be employed in a variety of ways depending on the social context. They can create a sense both of proximity and of widening distances and can prevent or simulate movement, or render it superfluous altogether. In this vein, the narrator’s recollection of the work of Joseph Beuys can be read as a commentary on her ambivalent reactions to the multiple uses and effects of modern communication systems:

Ich erinnerte mich an das »Erdtelefon« von Joseph Beuys, ein Lehmklumpen, vermischt mit vertrocknetem Gras, und unmittelbar daneben stand ein schwarzer Telefonapparat aus den fünfziger Jahren. Heutzutage sind die meisten Telefonhörer handlich und federleicht. Warum soll das Telefonieren nicht mehr an die Erde gebunden sein? (99)

Beuys’ *Erdtelefon*⁷ can be interpreted in a number of ways. It may offer a statement on the rupture between nature and modernity, or reflect on the power of technology to shape our conception of the natural world. Finally, communication and communication technologies might be taken in Beuys’ work as the substance to be molded, reminding the viewer that such organization or reorganization can be actively negotiated. The narrator’s question about why the phone should not be earthbound is similarly ambiguous: it might serve as a critique of the present reconceptualization of distance where “die Nähe keine Rolle mehr spiel[t],” or it might be interpreted as a reminder that the current order of things needn’t be accepted passively. Either way, her statements remind us that geographies of communication networks have the power not only to affect perceptions of distance, but also to influence social and cultural definitions.

Technologies of Motion

While “Ohrenzeugin” deals primarily with the virtual travel of voices and emails between relatively immobile individuals housed in various offices on the MIT campus, “Eine Scheibengeschichte” concentrates on physical travel, describing the narrator’s flight to Toronto. Its position in the text directly after “Ohrenzeugin” is significant: in “Scheibengeschichte” Tawada explores how real and virtual travel may have a lot in common. Reflecting on a transatlantic flight, Tawada reminds the reader that to travel by plane is to remain immobile and disconnected from the landscape below. More specifically, she considers how our experience of airplane travel has resulted in a shift in spatial parameters and affected our relationship to space and place, suggesting that modern-day travel often constitutes a break between the traveler and the space through which she moves.

⁷ [See < http://www.3sat.de/imperia/md/images/kulturzeit/2006/extras/beuys/1102_beuys109_n.jpg>]

In this regard, Tawada seems to echo the insights of Michel de Certeau offered in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he comments similarly on the effects of modern modes of transportation. In his chapter “Railway Navigation and Incarceration,” de Certeau considers the interface between subject, vehicle, and space, pointing out the disconnection between subject and landscape and the relative immobility of the passenger within the space of the train compartment (114). De Certeau maintains that the enclosed capsule of the train creates a sense of stable identity for the traveling subject where the “self could believe itself *intact* because it [is] surrounded by glass and iron” (114). Passenger and landscape remain still within the “rationalized cell,” where “everything has its place”; only the vehicle, the “rationalized cell” itself, travels (111). This “closed system” creates “a bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity—that is what can traverse space and make itself independent of local roots” (111). De Certeau maintains that the production of internal order and of independence from the terrain through which one travels can be increased in other modes of transportation. Airplane travel offers the subject a “position that is more abstract [...] and more perfect” than that afforded by train travel precisely because it withholds the melancholic pleasure of “seeing what one is separated from” (113-114).

Tawada briefly alludes to a similar phenomenon in “Bioskoop der Nacht.” Here, she contemplates the hermetically sealed space of the airport, where the gateway to the airplane becomes the passage to foreign territory: “Das Tor zwischen Warteraum und Flugzeug heißt hierzulande »Ausgang«. Man wird zum Ausgang Nummer soundso gebeten und geht hinaus ins Ausland” (71). Like de Certeau, Tawada posits airplane travel as abstract. It disconnects passengers from the terrain through which they move, erasing any sense of the distance to be traveled. From this perspective, airplane travel becomes virtual.

In “Scheibengeschichte,” she focuses on the space of the plane itself and on how, as in virtual travel, the traveler is rendered relatively motionless. Unlike de Certeau, however, Tawada does not posit the intactness of subjectivity. Rather, that intactness is threatened as soon as language comes into play:

Wenn ich im Flugzeug sitze, habe ich keinen Raum für Körperbewegung. Mein Rücken wird steif, die Füße und Waden schwellen an, das Steißbein sitzt nicht mehr richtig, und die Haut trocknet aus. Nur die Zunge wird immer feuchter und elastischer. Sie bereitet sich auf die Begegnung mit einer Fremdsprache vor. (115)

In de Certeau’s model, the fixedness of the vehicle’s interior allows for the creation of order. In Tawada’s model, the order of the plane cabin is less rigid; despite her own physical immobility, things shift through the intervention of language. More specifically, the confrontation with a foreign language provides a greater sense of dislocation than the actual plane journey. Tawada elaborates on this phenomenon in a radio interview for Joachim Büthe’s review of *Überseetzungen*:

Es gibt nichts bewegungsloseres als Sitzen im Flugzeug. Aber in dem Moment, in dem ich eine andere Sprache spreche, im Flugzeug wird man ja

z.B. von jemandem plötzlich angesprochen in irgendeiner Sprache, und man versucht dann zu antworten und spricht eine andere Sprache. Dann merkt man sofort, vom Körperinneren, erst mal von der Zunge, die versucht, diese fremden Laute auszusprechen, wie eine Verwandlung, eine Veränderung stattfindet. Um eine Sprache zu sprechen, muss man ja auch Muskeln im Gesicht ganz anders bewegen, als wenn man andere Sprachen spricht. Und das ist für mich eigentlich die Reise. (Yoko Tawada in Bütthe)

In this interview, Tawada summarizes the main points of her more poetic reflections in “Eine Scheibengeschichte” where she explores the modes of subjectivity open to the airplane passenger. Like de Certeau, Tawada posits that the motionless interface of subject, space, and vehicle offers a stability of identity. But language offers another sort of journey altogether, a linguistic journey in which the subject may be transported—or, more properly, translated—into another system of sounds and significances.

Language and Corporeality

While *Überseetzungen* shows how the physicality of motion can be lost in some modes of travel, the linguistic journeys documented in *Überseetzungen* are nevertheless intensely physical, requiring, but also increasing, a bodily relationship to language. This fact is announced by the collection’s title, where the presence of the word *Zungenrot* only evokes the themes of translation and language, but also alludes to the symbolic organ of speech and hence the body’s role in the production of sound.

In the interview cited above, Tawada comments on the physical transformation that takes place when switching from one language to another: crossing over into another language can heighten the speaker’s awareness of the physical exertion inherent in speech, especially when the languages in question are phonetically distinct. In *Überseetzungen*, Tawada considers not only the corporeal component of speech, but also the traversal of the body by language. In “Eine Scheibengeschichte,” the narrator recalls a conversation with her Canadian host and considers how the body may be coded differently in a foreign language. When her host uses the English word ‘disks’ to explain why one suffers from backache after a long flight, the narrator is taken aback:

Ich habe keine Diskette in meinem Körper, weder eine floppy disk noch eine Musik-CD, erst recht keine CD-Rom, erwiderte ich.

Mag sein, daß CDs in einer anderen Sprache nichts mit den Bandscheiben zu tun haben, aber wenn wir Englisch sprechen, haben wir Disketten in der Wirbelsäule. Darin sind alle Körperhaltungen gespeichert, die man im Leben eingenommen hat. Und immer, wenn eine Diskette aus der Wirbelsäule herausspringt und auf der Nervensaite reibt, wird eine schmerzhaft Musik gespielt. (116)

This encounter with the English language creates a new and unexpected sense of her own embodiment. Later, the narrator sums up her journey as a bodily metamorphosis: “Eine Reise kennt keine Bewegung, aber sie macht die Zunge feucht. Wenn sie spricht, verwandelt sich der Körper” (117). While there is no motion or kinesis in Tawada’s depiction of plane travel, in crossing over from one linguistic territory to another, the

speaking body is nevertheless doubly transformed, both through a renewed sense of the bodily exertion inherent in speech acts and through a recoding of the body in the foreign language.

Tawada has considered this sort of linguistic transformation elsewhere. In *Verwandlungen*, for example, she notes how an awareness of her speaking body was absent in her native Japanese and contrasts this corporeal erasure with the materiality and permanence of script (10). When linguistic borders are crossed, however, the voice is decentered and defamiliarized, and thus takes on a new materiality. Words are imagined as living creatures: “Es ist, als würde man nicht Wörter sondern Vögel ausspucken” (7). The adoption of a new language results in the same kind of linguistic metamorphosis described in *Überseetzungen*. Vowels and the signs of punctuation permeate the body, transforming the speaking subject:

Was macht man, wenn man von fremden Stimmen umgeben ist? Einige Menschen versuchen bewußt oder unbewußt, ihre Stimme der neuen Umgebung anzupassen. Tonhöhe und Lautstärke werden korrigiert, der neue Sprachrhythmus wird nachgeahmt und auf das Ein- und Ausatmen geachtet. Jeder Konsonant, jeder Vokal und vielleicht auch jedes Komma durchlaufen die Fleischzellen und verwandeln die sprechende Person. (*Verwandlungen* 8)

Überseetzungen bears witness to this radically physical experience of language throughout, as Tawada attempts to reinstate the presence of the corporeal or material in her texts,⁸ attributing substance to the symbolic and reinvesting words with the power to evoke physical sensation. For example, in “Eine leere Flasche,” the word *atakushi*, the Japanese first-person singular pronoun indicating privileged social status, bears the fragrance of “Zypressenholz”, e.g. the scent of wealth, luxury, or comfort (53). Or in “Bioskoop der Nacht,” she compares the laborious acquisition of Afrikaans to a cutting out of her tongue (89). Paradoxically, as physical travel gives an impression of immobility, movement from one linguistic territory to another provides a new sense of embodiment.

Travel, Translation and Territory

While many physical journeys are undertaken in *Überseetzungen*, the emphasis on linguistic dislocation has prompted one reviewer to refer to the collection as a series of “Spracherlebnisse” in another of Tawada’s many “Sprachexpeditionen” (Ott). In her review, Sabine Treude similarly refers to the *Überseetzungen* essays as “Sprech- und Sprachabenteuer.” Both descriptions focus on Tawada’s interest in language and space,

⁸ It is likely this interest in reevaluating the corporeal component of language that has led Tawada to look beyond textual media for expression. While drama has always been one part of Tawada’s German-language production, in recent years she has also explored the potential of the performance of the spoken word. *Diagonal* offers selections from her live performances with Japanese pianist and composer, Aki Takase, where the spoken texts are set to Takase’s original piano compositions. Many of these texts originate from previous publications, nevertheless taking on a new quality in the act of performance where the physical production of sound is foregrounded. In many of these performances, the stress patterns of words and the intonation of sentences are non-standard, drawing attention from the lexical or semantic to the phonetic level of language.

where languages are imagined as territories that can be navigated and explored. Within such a model languages become sites through which the individual can move, locations where identity can reside, or bounded spaces demarcating belonging or exclusion. This vision leads Tawada to consider the relationship between language and territoriality. A shared language, she reminds us, can create the same feelings of belonging and loyalty as a common geography can: linguistic identities can be as powerful as national ones. Consequently, the individual who moves between languages, particularly ones that are as removed from one another as German and Japanese, may be a particular object of scrutiny or even suspicion (Büthe). This idea is explored in “Bioskoop der Nacht” where Tawada confronts the question often posed to the multilingual subject: “In welcher Sprache träumen Sie?” (63, 64, 70).⁹

The story begins with a sequence from one of the narrator’s dreams and introduces the reader to the language of her dream world. Some readers may recognize the influence of Afrikaans in the structure of some utterances (e.g. double negation, the absence of the *Sie*-form, the system of gender); in some lexical items (e.g. *tot*, *Winkel* or *lecker* in contexts atypical of German); or in the word *Bioskoop* (cinema) in the story’s title. Others may recognize the image of the horizontal ‘Y’ on a green, red, and blue background as the South African flag. Or the unique linguistic mix and symbols might remain foreign—as they do to the narrator at this point—and, therefore, be reminiscent of the distortion of language and the indecipherable symbols characteristic of dreams.

The narrator of “Bioskoop der Nacht” experiences such an alienation, which is exacerbated by the tendency of those she meets to insist on interrogating her linguistic identity. A series of vignettes follow, in which the narrator is questioned about the language of her dreams, something she registers as “ein qualvolles Spiel” because she is never able to answer with the certainty demanded of her:

In ihren Augen leuchtete Erwartung, ich wußte aber nicht, was sie von mir erwarteten.

»Ich weiß das leider nicht. Es ist eine Sprache. Ja, es ist sicher eine Sprache, aber eine Sprache, die ich nie gelernt habe, deshalb verstehe ich meine eigene Traumsprache nicht.« (63)

Here Tawada problematizes the commonly held notion that dreams reveal the degree of a subject’s connection to a particular language, that is, where the intimacy of a certain language is measured by whether or not one dreams in that language. The narrator cannot quite fathom the belief that, by submitting to this line of questioning, she will be forced to locate conclusively her linguistic identity.

These lines express unease at the expectation that identity should reside firmly in one language and, furthermore, that this language should be accessible in dreams. Later, at a party, it is suggested that the protagonist’s dream language is a result of the struggle

⁹ In *Verwandlungen*, Tawada takes up this same subject when she writes: “Es gibt eine beliebte Frage zur Sprache im Traum: „In welcher Sprache träumen Sie?“ Es ist aber nichts Besonderes, wenn man im Traum eine fremde Sprache spricht. Die gesprochene Sprache kann schnell in den Mund hineinschlüpfen und wieder aus ihm herausspringen. Man muß sich eine Sprache nicht einverleiben, um sie in einem Traum verwenden zu können” (39). In her essay, Tawada problematizes the notion that the linguistic medium of one’s dreams can ultimately reveal anything about one’s cultural allegiances, since dream language is often in some way a distortion.

between her first and second languages. It is thus implied that the individual can exist fully only in one language:

Ein Mann [...] sagte, die Sprache, die ich beschrieben hätte, sei eindeutig die deutsche Sprache, jedoch völlig deformiert. Diese Mißgestalt nähme sie an, weil sie in meinem Kopf ständig von der mächtigen Muttersprache unterdrückt werde. Es sei eine Zumutung, daß zwei erwachsene Schwestern ein kleines Kopfbzimmer teilen müßten. (64)

Here Tawada works overtly with images of territory and language. According to the model of linguistic identity held by the fellow guest, Japanese and German battle for the space of the narrator's psyche.

It is not until a third party that a Dutch woman finally identifies the dream language as Afrikaans. While the protagonist welcomes this revelation, unfortunately it does not help her to negotiate better the dreaded question. In fact, it seems to make matters far worse: she has neither visited Africa nor studied Afrikaans (66). One guest in particular refuses to accept this complete lack of correspondence between cultural identity, place, and language, insisting, "[m]an träumt doch in der Sprache des Landes, in dem die Seele wohnt" (70). Undaunted, the narrator refuses to reduce her identity to any one location, claiming, "[i]ch habe viele Seelen und viele Zungen" (70).

This passage reveals the expectations embedded in the questions about the Japanese woman's dream language. It is hoped that if she submits to this line of questioning, she will be forced to declare her ultimate allegiance, not simply to language, but also to place, to the country "in dem die Seele wohnt." To declare one's linguistic ties is thus akin to showing identity papers.

"Wolkenkarte" makes this link between language, territory, identity, and document explicit. Ostensibly about supermarket client cards that offer consumer rewards in countries around the world while tracking customer purchases, the essay provides a number of insights regarding language, regional dialects, geography, and belonging. Asked to show one of these cards in a supermarket in Basel, the narrator does not understand the cashier's request at first. The situation calls to mind a similar episode in Boston:

Es war auch an der Kasse eines Supermarktes gewesen, und die Kassiererin hatte mich gefragt, ob ich die »starcard« hätte. Ich verstand die Frage zuerst nicht, die Kassiererin wiederholte sie. Dann verstand ich sie, aber die Karte besaß ich nicht. Es kam mir vor, als ginge es um einen Ausweis, den man braucht, um zu dem Ort zu gehören. Ich besaß keine Sternenkarte in Boston, also war ich von einem anderen Planeten. Und was für eine Karte sollte ich hier in Basel haben? [...] Wenn ich nach einem Ausweis gefragt worden wäre, hätte ich meinen Reisepaß oder meinen Fahrausweis [...] zeigen können. (51-52)

The narrator considers how the names of such cards vary from place to place, and then ponders the lexical items that are indigenous to particular locations. She recalls, for instance, that in Switzerland there are approximately 75 variants of the word for ladybug

(52). When asked whether she has a bicycle (*Velo* in Swiss German), she relates languages and documents:

Eine Woche später fragte mich eine Frau:

Haben Sie ein Velo?

Ich war erschrocken, denn »Velo« klingt fast genauso wie ein japanisches Wort, das »Zunge« bedeutet. Haben Sie eine Zunge? Das ist eine wichtige Frage. Haben Sie die Zunge, die man braucht, um hierher zu gehören? (52)

In this passage Tawada repeats the question that begins her essay (“Haben Sie eine ...Karte?”), altering only the final word (“Haben Sie ein Velo?”). Each question prompts a consideration of how the object in question legitimates presence in a particular place. The phonetic similarity between the Swiss German word *Velo* and the Japanese word for tongue reminds the narrator how a shared language creates a sense of belonging and community. The structural similarity of the questions asked as well as the responses given sets up an equivalence between the words *Karte* and *Velo*; the latter can, therefore, also be regarded as a sort of document, required “um hierher zu gehören.” The essay concludes with the statement that all new Swiss acquaintances are asked to reveal their particular regional variant for the word ‘ladybug’ (52). This question can be likened to the question in “Bioskoop der Nacht” where the answers are expected to reveal a speaker’s linguistic, and therefore national or regional, identity.

In “Bioskoop der Nacht,” however, Tawada counters the notion that the self must choose a linguistic home, opting instead for the travel between places, languages, and identities. Thus begins yet another of *Überseetzungen*’s many journeys. The narrator decides to book a trip to Cape Town because, as she puts it, “[d]ie Sprache, in der geträumt wird, muß besucht werden” (68). The essay continues to mimic the structure of dream, interspersing realistic episodes with more surreal elements; for instance, characters appear unexpectedly or seem inexplicably changed, and the narrator has no firm sense of the passage of time or the relationship between events (87, 85, 74). The fragmentary nature of the essay allows for disjointed reflections on everything from the sounds and structure of Afrikaans and Xhosa, a language the narrator encounters in a nearby township, to the history of South African apartheid. Despite the narrator’s desire to embrace multiple linguistic identities, however, many people she encounters insist that one language must prevail over all others. The narrator’s contention that she in fact has “viele Seelen und viele Zungen” is repeatedly discounted and mistrusted.

“Porträt einer Zunge” explores this idea of a single, restrictive linguistic identity further. Here, an encounter with the German word “Eingeborene” leads the narrator to consider how languages create spaces of belonging or enclosure:

Ich hatte ganz vergessen, daß es dieses deutsche Wort gab. Wenn man eine »native American« als »Eingeborene« bezeichnen kann, könnte man unter einem »native speaker« jemanden verstehen, der in eine Sprache hineingeboren wird. Ich war also ins Japanische hineingeboren worden, wie man in einen Sack hineingeworfen wird. Deshalb wurde diese Sprache für mich meine äußere Haut. (103)

Linguistic identity seems to be fixed, where the metaphor of an “äußere Haut” casts such identities as natural and permanent.

If languages create spaces of belonging, however, then concomitantly they also create barriers of exclusion. The narrator muses that in Germany, she will always be considered an outsider who can approach the German language only from its outer borders: “In Deutschland wurde ich immer als eine Fremde betrachtet, die die Sprache der Einheimischen von außen antastet” (109). She counters this notion with another bodily metaphor: “Die deutsche Sprache jedoch wurde von mir hinuntergeschluckt, seitdem sitzt sie in meinem Bauch” (103). Language, she maintains, can indeed be adopted or internalized.

But this clearly makes some uncomfortable. If languages create boundaries, then to translate oneself into another idiom might be regarded as an act of transgression. This is illustrated in the narrator’s recollection of conversations with the American author Ivan Levi, who claims that while Japanese society and culture are closed to non-natives, the Japanese language is nevertheless open: everyone may write it. The narrator, however, holds that a majority of Japanese would reject such a notion and instead seek to secure their national identity precisely through the “Unantastbarkeit der heiligen Muttersprache” (109). Drawing a parallel to the German situation, the narrator points out that native German speakers may also have proprietary instincts about their native language:

[I]ndirekt geben sie einem immer wieder zu verstehen, daß die Sprache ein Besitztum sein muß. Sie sagen zum Beispiel, daß man eine Fremdsprache nie so gut beherrschen könne wie die Muttersprache. Man bemerkt sofort, daß das Wichtigste für sie die Beherrschung ist. (110)

The metaphor of ownership (“Besitztum”) that the narrator employs underscores the territorial notions of identity she encounters, where crossing into another linguistic space is cast as a violation of another’s native language. Within such a framework, even switching linguistic allegiances might be regarded as suspicious. The narrator reflects on how many people believe that only in one’s native language “könne man authentisch seine Gefühle ausdrücken, in einer Fremdsprache lüge man unwillkürlich. Sie fühlen sich bei ihrer Suche nach dem authentischen Gefühl gestört, wenn sie ihre Sprache auf fremden Zungen sehen” (110). For some, translation constitutes treachery, a distortion of intended meaning.

Throughout her writing, however, Tawada has persistently negated the notion that there is any possibility of unmediated—and therefore genuine or authentic—expression of emotion in any language, be it ‘native’ or ‘foreign.’ Asked in an interview about the publication of translations of her original works and the possible danger that in translation her original ideas might be “verfälscht,” Tawada rejects the notion that an authentic rendering is possible in either language:

[D]ieses Moment ist für mich sehr wichtig, daß das Gefühl oder Leben oder das Geschriebene auch in der Muttersprache etwas anderes ist. Daß dazwischen so eine Kluft ist, wo man auch hineinfallen kann. Und dieser Zwischenraum ist für mich sehr wichtig. Und [...] ich möchte so schreiben, daß dieser Zwischenraum sichtbar wird. (Tawada in Dittberner 197, 198)

Tawada thus casts doubt on the notion of a subject who can master the signs of language. She points instead to the gulf that exists between perception and language, a space that she wishes to illuminate in her own writing. Later in this interview, she demonstrates how translations from one language to another can help render this space more clearly visible (198). We can therefore read the presence of the word *Übersetzungen* in the collection's title as a reference not simply to translation between first and second languages, but to acts of translation of many kinds: the move from lived experience, emotion, or cognition to language; from written to spoken language (and vice versa); and, in "Bioskoop der Nacht," from the workings of the subconscious to the language of dreams.

Tawada's *Überseetzungen* offers numerous reflections on these various acts of translation. "Ein Chinesisches Wörterbuch," for example, considers the intersections of German and Chinese. This brief text consists simply of German to Chinese translations, where both entries are rendered in German, but the Chinese translations are literally expressed. Graphically highlighted on the centre of the page is the word "Tintenfisch," which in Tawada's rendering exhibits an identical structure and evokes similar connotations in both languages; both allude to the presence of ink (31). The other entries, however, do not mirror each other in this way. The word "Computer," for example, is translated as "Elektrisches Gehirn"; "Kino" is translated as "Institut für elektrische Schatten" (31). Each entry therefore shows a gap between the two languages. "Ein Chinesisches Wörterbuch" becomes, then, less about simple translation than about untranslatable: the blank spaces that exist between words, the gaps characteristic of lives lived in the intersections of languages and signifying systems.

Another example of the disconnection between language systems occurs in "Eine leere Flasche," an investigation of the many ways to render the first person singular in Japanese. Factors such as gender, age, social status, and the relationship between speakers affect the choice between the many possibilities: *boku*, *ore*, *atashi*, *watashi*, *atakushi*, *watakushi*. The essay revolves around a childhood memory about a young girl who referred to herself as *boku*, a masculine pronoun. This prompts reflection on the various subject positions available in Japanese, a problem that is non-existent in German:

Das Mädchen, das sich als »boku« nannte, verlor ich irgendwann aus den Augen. Das Problem der Selbstbezeichnung verlor ich auch aus den Augen. Denn ich zog nach Europa und fand das Wort »ich«, bei dem man sich keine solchen Gedanken mehr machen mußte. Ein Ich muß kein bestimmtes Geschlecht haben, kein Alter, keinen Status, keine Geschichte, keine Haltung, keinen Charakter. Jeder kann sich einfach »ich« nennen. Dieses Wort besteht nur aus dem, was ich spreche, oder genauer gesagt aus der Tatsache, daß ich überhaupt spreche. (56-57)

As in "Ein Chinesisches Wörterbuch," this essay points to a gap between signifying systems, which, in this instance, is viewed as positive: "»Ich« wurde zu meinem Lieblingswort. So leicht und leer wie dieses Wort wollte ich mich fühlen" (57). The essay's title, "Eine leere Flasche," functions as a metaphor for this space between languages as well as for the space of the self; the metaphor is aided by the fact that the German verb *bin* phonetically corresponds to the Japanese noun for bottle: "Auch »bin«

ist ein schönes Wort. Im Japanischen gibt es auch das Wort »bin«, das klingt genau gleich und bedeutet »eine Flasche«. Wenn ich mit den beiden Wörtern »ich bin« eine Geschichte zu erzählen beginne, öffnet sich ein Raum, das Ich ist ein Pinselansatz, und die Flasche ist leer” (57). The image of the empty bottle offers a metaphor for the use of the German first-person pronoun, which is emptied of the many markers of age, gender, status, etc. demanded in Japanese. Tawada thus reminds us how movement across geographical boundaries may involve the translation of the self into another linguistic medium. Here translation from Japanese to German offers a liberating space of altered subject positions where the self is freed of the numerous self-identifications required in Japanese.

Überseetzungen does not, however, concentrate simply on translations from one language to another; in several essays Tawada considers the relationship between the written and the spoken word. In “Der Apfel und die Nase,” Tawada explains the act of typing in Japanese where, because the keyboard cannot contain the wealth of ideograms present in the Japanese language, lexical items must be rendered phonetically: “In Wirklichkeit schreibt man ein Wort so, wie man es ausspricht” (15). This leads her to contemplate the relationship between two separate moments of language, between writing and speech: “Natürlich kann man nicht so schreiben wie man spricht, wie man auch eine Suppe nicht so malen kann, wie sie schmeckt” (15). Here translation from the spoken to the written word constitutes loss, as the voice is erased as it is represented in the signs of written language.

Ultimately, though, all these essays consider the theme of the translated self, the multilingual subject who continually moves across linguistic borders. The finest and most sustained example of this theme is “Porträt einer Zunge.” In this essay Tawada draws an acoustic portrait of P, a German woman living in Boston and lecturing in German at Harvard. Like the narrator, P lives between locations and languages. We learn nothing of her appearance, although a photo is taken at the outset of the narrative. Instead, P’s portrait consists of her turns of phrase, diction, and accents; the qualities of her voice and pronunciations; the languages she speaks (American English, German, and French); and these languages’ unique intersections in transplanted accents, neologisms, and her anglicized German. “Porträt einer Zunge” thus reminds the reader of the power of words to evoke memory: while memories of place fade, linguistic memories remain powerful. The narrator can no longer remember where certain conversations with P took place (145). Back in Berlin, however, the sudden appearance of one of P’s anglicisms in the narrator’s speech has the power to evoke her memory: “Das Wort kam unerwartet aus meinem Mund, wie ein Stück Erinnerung” (140). Language transports her to another place and time in a way that visual memory cannot.

Überseetzungen thus reminds us of the double meaning of translation, which is at once to render the spoken or written word from one language in another, but also to move or carry from one place to another, a dual meaning more immediately present in the German *übersetzen*. This duality of language and mobility, translation and transportation is everywhere visible, from the collection’s title and chapter headings, to the essays that embed reflections on language and translation in narratives of travel, to the graphics combining alphabetic characters and cartographic images that introduce each of the collection’s three chapters. Tawada reflects on travel and translation of various sorts: the geographic displacement of speaking subjects, the translation of lived experience and

cognition into acts of speech and writing, the carrying over of significance from one language into another, and the translation of the subject into another cultural or linguistic medium. As the interview with Büthe suggests, it is in these acts of translation that Tawada locates the most compelling journeys: “Und das ist für mich eigentlich die Reise.”

But while Tawada’s reflections on physical and virtual mobility may echo much contemporary thought about the collapsing of distance or the increasing uniformity of place, her focus on language and territoriality tells another story altogether, where regionalisms and nationalisms flourish. Tawada thus suggests the fallacy of the notion of a world without borders: even as geographical borders may seem increasingly insignificant, linguistic boundaries may nevertheless remain intact. In fact, the crossing from one linguistic territory to another may prove a more radical change of environment than mere physical displacement.

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