
Between “East” and “West”: Goethe’s World Literature, the Question of Nation, and the Postnational in Yoko Tawada’s Novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*

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ABSTRACT

Goethe had established a literary connection between “Europe” and the “Orient” in his *West-Östlicher Divan* (*West-East Divan*). His idea of “world literature” can be reframed when it is linked by Homi K. Bhabha with the cosmopolitan: “the study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness.’” The contemporary author Yoko Tawada is from East Asia and has been writing poems, prose, and plays in German and in Japanese. In her playful way of writing, she explores the interrelationship between “Western” and “Eastern” cultures, thereby translating them in cross-border poetics. Using the method of constellation, we examine the question of nation and the postnational in Goethe and Tawada alongside Bhabha, and propose to read Tawada’s novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* as “world literature” in light of how the transnational migrants’ perspective becomes literally difficult to place.

KEYWORDS world literature, Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan*, Yoko Tawada, *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, the national

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Ex-position
June
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Goethe's World Literature

Yoko Tawada, born in 1960 in Tokyo, is a postnational writer who lives in Berlin, Germany and travels the world. She is already famous, and, among other prizes, in 2017 she received the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation for *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, together with the translator Susan Bernofsky. The adjective “postnational,” according to the *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, indicates “relating to a time or society in which national identity has become less important. Origin 1940” (“Postnational”). While the denotation of the adjective “postnational” itself seems to undermine any relation to an origin, the definition from the dictionary ironically indicates that it may be difficult to think of the adjective without thinking about any connection to a historical time (hence “Origin 1940”). At first, Yoko Tawada’s enigmatic novels and stories in German and Japanese do seem rather exclusive. Still, many of her texts can be read as something universal, the paradigmatic human condition in the contemporary globalized and transnational world.

In literary criticism, the term “world literature”—a translation¹ from the German word *Weltliteratur*—is usually read as a keyword for intermediation between nations and often appertains to a gesture of codification. At the same time, the term “world literature” is an opaque one. One important notion of the term “world literature” goes back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his 1827 “Allgemeine Betrachtungen zur Weltliteratur” (“General Considerations on World Literature”) (Apel et al. 14, 914). To him, “world literature” was not just a collective term for all the discoverable literatures in the world. For Goethe, the translation of foreign poetry was one of the key means to connect individual national literatures. In this regard, Tawada’s poetic writing can be considered “world literature” because not only does she write in her mother tongue Japanese, but she has translated some of her works herself, which started a process of interaction between different peoples. Her choice as a non-German native to write as well in the German language “clearly is a break with the tradition of canonical German and western literature” (Benoun 133). Also, by means of translation she defamiliarizes the distinction between the self and the foreign and undermines a given constitution of cultures (Mae 35). As will be seen, we can also argue, with Goethe, that besides

¹ In every attempt of a translation of literary texts there is not only something gained but always something lost, even in “world literature.” With Walter Benjamin one can say that it is impossible to reveal the hidden inner relationship of languages through translation, and that translation cannot possibly reproduce that relation; however, translation can at least display it by germinally or intensively implementing it (Benjamin).

international distribution as “world literature,” the artistic value of Tawada’s work has to be widely recognized since she received, among others, the Akutagawa Prize in 1993 and the Kleist Prize in 2016.

Following a poly-methodological openness, we will first introduce different terms and try to elucidate the difficult issue of nationality in Goethe with a short exemplary close reading of his *West-East Divan* (cited as *Divan* hereafter), followed by an inquiry into the question of culture and world literature. Through a reading of Tawada’s 2011 novel *Yuki no renshusei*, translated by herself into German in 2014 as *Etüden im Schnee* (*Etudes in the Snow*) and published in 2016 in English under the title *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, we will analyze the inherent minoritarian condition of the “interstitial” third space, borrowing Bhabha’s words (326). We open up the following questions: What kind of rhetorical, linguistic, and stylistic means are used to describe the idiosyncratic perception of Tawada’s protagonists? In which manner is social and cultural displacement addressed? How are the topic of otherness and the split position of the transnational minoritarian condition projected? In this way, we will show how the oscillating transnational background of Tawada’s protagonists makes the contrast between different cultures productive.

Between
“East” and “West”

The Question of Nation and Unhomeliness

Identity formation is usually constituted not only by class and gender identity, but also by geographical and cultural notions of identity construction, e.g., the personal relation to a city or to a homeland as a national identity. A precedent division of the denotation of the term “nation” can be observed when we examine its Latin roots, thereby opening up its semantic splitting. The word “nation” stems etymologically from the Latin noun *nātiō*, meaning “birth” (Stowasser 293). Secondly, the term metonymically signifies “nation/clan” (as group of a people) and “tribe”; and thirdly, it implies metaphorically the notions of “species,” “genre,” “class,” and “kin.” The emphasis on birth is important since the nationality of a human being is bestowed by birth in relation to its location (*jus soli*), and by birth the nationality is also tied to the parents’ nationality (“*Jus sanguinis*”) and their people. Yet, the adjective “ethnic” also indicates “of or relating to races or large groups of people who have the same customs, religion, origin” (“Ethnic”) and can be “associated with . . . a particular race or group of people who have a culture that is different from the main culture of a country” (“*Jus sanguinis*”). The term “ethnicity” stems from the Greek noun *éthnos*, which suggests, among others, a folk, or a group of people or a group of animals (Liddell 226). What it does not address, however, is that the problematic attribution to the social

structure category “ethnicity” is traditionally also connected with visible, pictorial, demarcating signs that have to be interpreted. Accordingly, these are construed, for instance, with elements that (just) appear culturally determinable (such as clothing, skin color, hair structure, forms of facial parts) and are interpreted as a sign of belonging to a nation or a tribe.

It becomes clear that the term “nation” is difficult to grasp since it overlaps partly with the concept of “ethnicity.” However, we can say that, unlike the notion of “ethnicity” which also stands for a “quality or affiliation” (“Ethnicity”)—for instance, a cultural, religious, or linguistic background—the term “nationality” bears reference to a geographical place of birth. Furthermore, since in modern English the term “nation” implies the notions of nationality, tribe, and people as well, the term today also designates a human being in terms of its legal relationship to a political entity such as a sovereign state. While the narrative of a common national identity is needed to build a state, the construction of an ethnic identity seems less bound to a geographical area.

Goethe was born in 1749 in Frankfurt in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (962-1806) that was multi-ethnic and had a “multi-lingual structure, a decentralized and multi-confessional form” (“Holy Roman Empire”). Remarkably, in *Dichtung und Wahrheit (Poetry and Truth)* he narrated his own birth, implying that as a stillborn child he later came to life (Flüh). In the regions of today’s Germany the process of nation-building was much belated since scattered regionalism prevailed due to the proliferation of many small states. After the defeat of Prussia at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806, Prussian statesman Baron vom Stein stated the lack of an all-German national consciousness (Burgdorf 28). Between 1815 and 1866, the Germans had merely a confederation that united them more or less, so the German notion of “nation” is less concentrated on thinking about democracy. The issue of “nation” in Goethe seems problematic, and at times he used the German term *Volk* instead of *Nation* (Kimura 468), which describes simple folk, ethnic people, and a nation (with less political associations). According to Naoji Kimura, the issue of “nation” in Goethe could be problematized under four aspects: Goethe’s contact with France in times of Storm-and-Stress, the “Nationaltheater” (national theater) in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship)*, Goethe’s thinking of morphology, and his concept of “world literature” (Kimura 466). Analyzing Goethe’s notion of “nationality,” we will concentrate on the latter and on his poem collection *Divan*.

In his *Divan*, Goethe mingled his voice with that of fourteenth-century poet Hafiz, bringing the literature of the German and the Persian cultures together. Still, next to the title page in the 1819 edition there is an Arabic inscription which

emphasizes East and West (“The Eastern Divan by a Western writer” [the print in Boerner 116]) and signifies a dichotomy of the cultural other. Thus, how is nation and nationality formulated in Goethe? In the second book of his *Divan* (the “Book of Hafis”), Goethe used the noun “German” when the aging poet played with a figuration of himself in the poem’s title “Der Deutsche dankt” (“The German thanks”) (32). Although for Goethe the French language was to him “like his second mother tongue” (*Dichtung*, 3rd part 512), he saw himself as German. How did Goethe formulate his thoughts about nationalistic tendencies? Interestingly, the elderly Goethe marks the nationalistic aspirations in the end phase of the Napoleonic wars in his lyrical poem “Wanderers Gemütsruhe” (“The Wanderer’s Peace of Mind”) in the fifth book of the *Divan*, a chapter titled “Rensch Nameh” or “Buch des Unmuts” (“Book of Displeasure”), with the following words:

Between
“East” and “West”

Überlieferung, o du Tor,
Ist auch wohl ein Hirngespinst! . . .
Dich vermag aus Glaubensketten
Der Verstand allein zu retten, . . .

Und wer franzet oder britet,
Italienert oder teutschet:
Einer will nur wie der andre,
Was die Eigenliebe heischet. (*Divan* 80)

These verses were translated into English by J. Whaley as follows:

Yet tradition, foolish clown,
Is a fancy of the brain! . . .
From the chains of your belief
Only reason brings relief . . .

Though he German or Italian,
French or British tongue commands,
Each man wants like every other
What his vanity demands. (81)

Goethe’s verses can be read as a resistance to a fixation on traditions and religions, especially directed against egoistical tendencies of national interests. Still, in the

Ex-position
June
2021

original version he did not employ nouns to describe the nationalities. Instead of the respective adjectives, Goethe invented for this poem the enigmatic neologistic verbs *franzet*, *britet*, *italienert*, and *teuschet*. What relevance does this extraordinary creation have in terms of the verses' implied meaning? These newly created verbs move Germanness to the "performative" (Mersch 259), denoting something negative: the egoistic nationalist interests that lingered in Europe's political and cultural spheres at the time. This becomes especially clear when one looks at the term Goethe used to describe German(ness). Unlike the nominalization of the adjective *deutsch* for "German," he ironically employed the term *teusch-* as an archaic form for "German," which signifies a German nationalist's state of mind as outdated, thereby emphasizing the overly petty display of Germanness as a form of "Teuschtümlichkeit" (Trunz 614), or Teutomania. Following the resistance to Napoleon, the nationalistic willfulness brought to the fore a nationalism among different peoples which consisted of narrow-mindedness and self-exaltation, at least from the viewpoint of Goethe. He marked nationality as activity to imply that instead of a hyper-Germanness a position of world-historical vision of reason and foresight would be required. Later, in the *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (*Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of His Life*) from March 14, 1830, his amanuensis Johann Peter Eckermann cited Goethe:

Überhaupt, . . . ist es mit dem Nationalhaß ein eigenes Ding. Auf den untersten Stufen der Kultur werden Sie ihn immer am stärksten und heftigsten finden. Es gibt aber eine Stufe, wo er ganz verschwindet und wo man gewissermaßen über den Nationen steht, und man ein Glück oder ein Wehe seines Nachbarvolkes empfindet, als wäre es dem eigenen begegnet. Diese Kulturstufe war meiner Natur gemäß"

Altogether, . . . national hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture. But there is a degree where it vanishes altogether, and where one stands to a certain extent above nations, and feels the weal or woe of a neighbouring people, as if it had happened to one's own. This degree of culture was conformable to my nature. (Eckermann)

Goethe formulated his relation as corresponding to a level of culture or a stage beyond nations. While he accentuated compassion with the ethnic other, he still thought in terms of a single nation and of a oneness of peoples. Yet, his formulation hints at a non-place where unduly negative feelings toward other

nations vanish in correspondence to the degree of culturalization of a human being. Accordingly, Goethe as writer felt that he did not have overly nationalistic tendencies.

The concept of a perspective standing beyond nations can also be found in Edward W. Said's book *Representations of the Intellectual*, in which the narrative of a "double vision" is deployed to depict the view of a Palestinian critic in exile with its contrapuntal capacity. Emphasizing space and time, Said proposed that because people in exile, especially intellectuals, are able to

Between
"East" and "West"

see . . . things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation. Every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country. Intellectually this means that an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making them both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light. (Said 60)

Instead of the oneness of a fixed perspective that includes a view on more than one culture, Said spoke of a mobile "double perspective" that belongs to people in exile, especially intellectuals, therefore emphasizing a certain stage of culturalization as well. Still, with this "double perspective" as two ever-counter-positioned views, he suggested that the exiled intellectuals hold an insecurity that comprises rather negative implications (unlike Bahbha's positive view in his re-reading of Said that concentrated on place, not on time, a point which will be elaborated later). According to Eckermann in his 1836 *Conversations with Goethe*, Goethe said the following on July 15, 1827:

Es ist aber sehr artig, daß wir jetzt, bei dem engen Verkehr zwischen Franzosen, Engländern und Deutschen, in den Fall kommen, uns einander zu korrigieren. Das ist der große Nutzen, der bei einer Weltliteratur herauskommt und der sich immer mehr zeigen wird. "Carlyle hat das Leben von Schiller geschrieben und ihn überall so beurteilt, wie ihn nicht leicht ein Deutscher beurteilen wird. Dagegen sind wir über Shakespeare und Byron im klaren und wissen deren Verdienste vielleicht besser zu schätzen als die Engländer selber.

It is pleasant to see that intercourse is now so close between the French, English, and Germans, that we shall be able to correct one another. This is the greatest use of a world literature, which will show itself more and more. Carlyle has written a life of Schiller, and judged him as it would be difficult

for a German to judge him. On the other hand, we are clear about Shakespeare and Byron, and can perhaps, appreciate their merits better than the English themselves. (Eckermann)

Ex-position
June
2021

Goethe described the benefit of a future world literature exemplarily with the ethnicities of the French, British, and Germans, that is, using neither the German word *Volk* nor *Nation*. Following the end of the Napoleonic order, the different people in Europe seemingly had more exchange or contact through “traffic” and were enabled to correct one another regarding the appreciation of literature from opposite cultures. The translation of foreign poetry was crucial for Goethe in connecting individual national literatures, and he translated many texts (Boerner 117). To him, “world literature” was not just a collective term for all the discoverable literatures in the world since to him there was but one “real” poetry, “die ächte” (qtd. in Apel et al. 22, 287).

In his 1994 book *The Location of Culture* Homi K. Bhabha draws on Goethe’s remarks on world literature. While Goethe’s annotations suggest at first that “world literature” produces a universal literature, Bhabha traces formulations with which Goethe suggests that a national language is always permeated by other languages and proposes a process of hybridity of culture. Emphasizing the cultural confusion in Europe induced by the terrible Napoleonic wars, Bhabha notes that Goethe had underlined in his literary essays that after these conflicts nations unconsciously learned foreign ideas and foreign ways (16f.). However, Sigrid Weigel has emphasized that this is confined to wars between equally sovereign states (2). According to Bhabha,

Goethe suggests that . . . the cultural life of the nation is “unconsciously” lived, . . . [.T]here may be a sense in which world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of “otherness.” (17)

With Bhabha’s reading, Goethe’s talk of world literature thus announces a cosmopolitanism that is yet to come. This echoes Goethe’s words that world literature helps to counterbalance one another when one judges literature. The utopian property of the term is complemented by the aspect of geographical spreading. Bhabha links cosmopolitanism to Goethe’s idea of world literature while noting

that it includes not the assumption of a general human consensus but a thinking of the other and of conflict. In consequence, instead of a universal literature, with Bhabha, “world literature” produces a hybridity of cultures and calls into question the notion of national literatures. While Goethe’s thinking of primal world literature was still based on “original” cultures and while he already thought on a level beyond cultures, Bhabha’s multicultural concept of world literature becomes a “comparative method that would speak to the ‘unhomely’ condition of the modern world” (13). Bhabha does not follow the tradition of translating Freud’s term *das Unheimliche* into “the uncanny” in English. While the German adjective *heimlich* means “secret,” “hidden” or “surreptitious,” its negative counterpart *unheimlich* is usually interpreted as “uncanny” or “terrific.” However, Bhabha uses the new translation “the unhomely,” thereby emphasizing the inner part of the word *unheimlich*, i.e., the German noun *heim*, denoting “home.” Bhabha’s formulation of the unhomely signifies the return of the repressed or the unconscious that makes in particular the notion of “home” sinister or uncanny. His concept of unhomeliness describes the condition of the modern transnationalized world, and it can be formulated as the return of the repressed or the unconscious, which makes the home not uninhabitable but incredibly unhomely. “Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature,” Bhabha develops a program in which “transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature” (Bhabha 17).

Border-Crossing and Otherness in Tawada’s *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*

A contribution to primal “world literature,” Tawada’s complex trilogy *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (cited as *Memoirs* hereafter) supposedly tells the chronicle of not one but three generations of polar bears. Its time frame (which is partly based on real events) spans half a century, starting in the Moscow of the post-war Soviet Union and ending with Knut’s death in the unified German capital in the spring of 2011. Strangely enough, the protagonists are actually not ordinary bears although they think of themselves as bears. They also possess human traits; thus, they rather stand between human and animal and could be described as “human-bears.” *Memoirs* has more than one first-person narrator or narrating “I.” Moreover, there is a multifold split in the second chapter: the second narrating “I” is divided into, on the one hand, the trainer Barbara, who narrates the first part of the story until an old Tosca² takes

² In April 2012, according to Torsten Flüh, the Lasenkan Theater had performed in Nishinomya, Japan a

over (marked by a paw print), and, on the other hand, a second younger reborn version of Tosca (*Memoirs* 158, 162). This could be formulated as an uncanny challenge to the concept of the narrator as a singularity. John Namjun Kim already reads the “I” in Tawada as a scene of “comedic irony played out between two opposed figures that are in fact one” (348), and here the Tawadean “I” seems even more pluralized. It could also be read as an opaque element between fiction and transformation of an autobiographical representation of the self into a poetological cipher, a split ego that always changes again and again (Schmitz-Emans 146, 148) to demonstrate its inner foreignness. When the first narrating “I,” a nameless grandmother-bear, is forced to retire from the Moscow circus because of knee injuries caused by her rehearsing of Latin American dance, she concludes:

[Now,] I was unfit for circus work. Ordinarily they would have just shot me, but I got lucky and was assigned a desk job in the circus’s administrative offices. (*Memoirs* 14)

The grandmother-bear tells a story with a paradox of good and bad luck at the same time because she is physically handicapped, but she is also spared from getting killed. Mediating an ethical realization, this story indirectly criticizes the non-existing employment law for circus animals; they have to work hard but are not entitled to claim a pension and later will be probably used as animal food. In this fabulous text the narrating “I” is thought of as a creature that worked as a circus bear and, unexpectedly, has easily switched to working as a circus clerk which belittles any administrative work in a witty way. Since an animal would not be able to work as a clerk, this exemplary passage creates a comical effect that already demonstrates that Tawada deploys irony as a dominant figure of speech in *Memoirs*. The irony produces a constant fluctuation of meaning and brings to the fore a playful loss of control. The indeterminacy of the signifier “I” of the first-person narrator that seems to be both animal and human implies an enigmatic foreignness. Tawada’s protagonists (i.e., the grandmother-bear, her daughter Tosca, and grandson Knut) are created as an assemblage of animals and humans, and their otherness can be considered as insinuating an ambivalent hybridity that commutes between different positions, thereby opening up the question of textual constructions of perspective at the intersection of supposed species’ borderlines.

theater play written by Yoko Tawada called *Shirokuma Toska*, which could be translated as *Polar Bear Tosca*, citing one of the protagonists in this other genre as well *Memoirs*.

Animals that are not ordinary have already appeared frequently in Tawada’s works. They display fairytale-like human-animals who can marry human beings (*The Bridegroom Was a Dog*, 2013), or they transform themselves from animals into human beings or the other way around—for instance, the narrator with scales who becomes mute like a fish in *Das Bad* (*The Bath*, 1989/2015). According to Christine Ivanovic and Miho Matsunaga, one can clearly see the influence of old fairy tales from Japan and other Asian countries in these characters (149). Apart from Japanese literary influences, the literary discourse has already detected an influence of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in her complex writings, especially in the book *Opium für Ovid, ein Kopfkissenbuch für 22 Frauen* (*Opium for Ovid, a Pillow Book for 22 Women*), published in 2000, in which reading and transformation as such produce delirious states and ironize social norms (Palmeshofer 39).

Featuring white fur, when opened, the inner flap of the cover of *Études in the Snow*, the German version of Tawada’s *Memoirs*, announces that the novel “can be read in different ways: as profound animal story, as historical novel, or as light-footed persiflage of migrant literature.” In order to examine the question of nation and the postnational in Tawada, we will be concerned with the latter. *Étude*, a French word for “study,” may refer in the German plural form *Etüden* to the novel’s trinary principle of composition, three different variations of autobiographical narration. Since in former times the noun *étude* indicated a music piece for a solo instrument and was a virtuoso’s chance to present his skills, the term insinuates a mastery in the arts as well. It may refer to the remarkable artistic skills of all three human-bears and may also point to the mastership of Tawada’s writing. There seems to be more than one “original” version, and the title of Tawada’s 2011 Japanese novel *Yuki no renshusei* could be translated as *Snow Trainees* (Ivanovic and Matsunaga 150). This title suggests that although they long for the cold, all three are not used to surroundings of snow since they are not living in their native range, the Arctic.

Memoirs seems to be a fabulous border crossing. The blurred line between animal and human is also produced on the linguistic level by metaphors which are related to the signifier “bear,” e.g., a “bear’s thirst” (*Memoirs* 4) and “my bearish weight” (5). The text describes the protagonists’ body parts in neologistic compounds like “paw-hands,” “claw-fingers” (3), and “snout-mouth” (11), which illustrates that Tawada does not stop at Darwin’s border, the creatures’ separation into different species, but linguistically assembles them to create metamorphically a hybrid language. A relation to Kafka is clearly detectable not only because of the allegorical tone but also because of her references to Kafka’s animals—for instance, when the grandmother-bear from Russia tells of her experience of learning German:

[In] the book, I found a section with the heading “Applied Grammar”; it contained a short story. . . . I devoured it like the salmon, forgetting about the grammar.

The protagonist was a mouse. Her form of gainful employment: singing. Her audience: The people. On the vocabulary list I found the word *Volk*, which corresponded to the Russian *narod*.

There had been times when I was convinced that the word *narod* meant more or less the same as “circus audience.” Later, . . . I came to realize that this supposition had not been correct, but I remained unable to define the term exactly. . . . (*Memoirs* 49)

A vocabulary list seems insufficient to appropriate the foreign language, or the other. In an attempt to acquire a foreign language, the first narrating “I” tells of her method to incorporate a story instead of applying grammatical forms as a learning exercise, which metonymically makes apparent a “materiality of language” (Grewe 159, 163). In the rhetoric of a simile the multilingual grandmother-bear compares here tongue-in-cheek her favorite food to Kafka’s story “Josefine, die Sangerin” (“Josefine the Singer”), in which the protagonist, a mouse, is a celebrated singer. Despite her publicly undisputed art, she in fact whistles only ordinarily, but she seems enigmatic and is able to bring the mice community together.

As a second simile in the text, the people of a *Volk*, *narod* or nation are set into a relation to the audience of circus performers in a mocking tone (“more or less the same”). Although in the following passage this speculation is revoked (“unable to define the term exactly”), the simile produces another comical effect by degrading what is thought of as nation or people and points to the incapacity of the collective consciousness. Just as Kafka’s “mice-people” admire a whistling singer who blinds them with her self-consciousness, in Tawada the circus audience is struck by the star performers. The convergence of a nation or people and a “circus audience” conveys also a depreciation since it implies that the nation is open to manipulative performances and shows. However, what a nation is stays ultimately unclear, and the inability of the narrating “I” to distinguish between a people or nation and a circus audience generates an interruption in the reading process: we may ask from whose point of view the nation appears like a circus audience. This metonymical reduction indicates an instability of the narrative mode. The disruption suggests that this lapse of the narrating “I” proves her narrative to be misleading and can actually be read as an ironic figure of speech. If Kafka’s short story refers to multiple issues related to art, artist, and performance, as well as the ever-changing narratives of a nation, Tawada seems to follow suit

and calls into question the possibility of translatability of languages due to the semantic surplus of any signifier. The phrase “circus audience” may actually indicate numerous other analogies beyond clear boundaries, e.g., the audience of the conferences, the audience of the writing author (the grandmother-bear and/or Tawada herself, etc.). Different definitions of the “circus” are given repeatedly throughout the novel (“a top-notch form of entertainment for the working class” [*Memoirs* 29], “a floating island” [161]), so that what seems to be moving and ever-changing is not really a succession of the circus maximus but points to a culturalized process of learning.

Each of the three chapters in *Memoirs* tells a different autobiographical narrative by a first-person narrator about a human-bear with artistic abilities of a different generation. In the first chapter, writing takes place in the non-place of a hotel room surrounded by darkness:

Writing: a spooky activity. Staring at the sentence I’ve just written makes me dizzy. Where am I at this moment? I’m in my story—gone. To come back, I drag my eyes away from the manuscript and let my gaze drift toward the window until finally I’m here again, in the present. But where is *here*, when is *now*?

The night has already reached its point of greatest depth. I stand at the window of my hotel room, looking down at the square below that reminds me of a theater stage, maybe because of the circular light cast by the streetlamp. (*Memoirs* 4)

The act of writing is formulated as “spooky”: apparently, all of a sudden, in the isolation and anonymity of a dark hotel room, writing itself becomes unhomely when the narrating “I” is at two places at the same time. Being between the inside and the outside of the story, between “here” and “gone,” produces a dizziness and insecurity in the narrating “I” which can be read as a split position, that is, the inherent minoritarian condition of the “third space,” in Bhabha’s words. Accordingly, this place of in-betweenness can be described as the location of culture that is dislocated and beyond all binary divisions: Bhabha coined the term “third space” (5) to describe it. It signifies another space, meaning an intermediate space or non-existing place between the transitory place of a subjective home and that of an actual (historical) site. When Bhabha wrote about his concept of hybridity, he re-read Said, and his notion of a double perspective got positive connotations. It was reflected in Bhabha’s concept of “double vision” (8), which describes a migrant’s perspective on different cultures. He noted a transgressive

ability developed by migrants at the contingent intersections of constructions of cultural borderlines. According to Bhabha, the migrants' perspective is "occupying two places at once" (89). It functions as a remedy for the breach of a (supposed) "firm" identity, which means a splitting of the self, its desire, and its identity.

In Tawada, the dissolution of the perception ("dizzy" [*Memoirs* 4]) mirrors the condition of a subject in the cultural displacement of a transnationalized world. The "circular light" of the streetlamp sets itself apart from the dark surroundings and produces the reminiscence of a theater stage. At first, the passage about the association of a "theater stage" stays enigmatic. Later, following the recurring leitmotif of the circus, a connection to the theater can be drawn: a circus is usually thought of as public entertainment with performers of a travelling troupe who perform show acts in a tent. The circus is perpetually traveling and never at home. This characteristic together with the element of performance can also be found in the playing companies of actors who in former times toured in the provinces. Moving constantly between places, and living in caravans and anonymous hotel rooms indicates asolitude and at the same time a connectedness with an audience by their public performances.

When we read *nātiō* as birth, the scenes of the birth of the human-bears come to mind. One of the techniques that binds the three chapters in *Memoirs* together is the introductory description of a sequence that oscillates between depictions of a reality and dreams, recounting the perception of senses of the human-bears after their birth. The motif of birth as an unhomely riddle is repeated multiple times in *Memoirs* (e.g., Tosca's birth in variations) (104, 111), recalling what Bhabha calls an "ironic compromise" (122), stasis and change at the same time. When the circus is dissolved after the German reunification, the grandmother-bear's daughter Tosca is moved to the Berlin zoo, where she gives birth to Knut. Yet, she gives him up for her literary writing:

I entrusted Knut's care to another animal. This wasn't an easy decision, but because of my literary work I didn't have time enough for him. (*Memoirs* 164)

Without the bonds of a family or relations to a tribe the human-bear seems relatively isolated and has to rely on another species. The other "animal," however, is the male zookeeper Matthias, who has to raise Knut. This background is based on a true story concerning a polar bear with the same name in the Berlin zoo, a story that gained much attention and that was seen as a symbol of global warming since the polar bears are endangered; this adoption also poses the question of species-appropriate animal husbandry. Adoption also takes place in Tawada's

Memoirs in the form of writing by means of copying other stories:

While I was copying out these passages from the book, I entered the story being told as its protagonist. I wanted to adopt what was being told as my own story and live it myself. (*Memoirs* 71)

Tawada deconstructs the relationship between the (functional principle of the) author and the text: copying or transcribing produces authorship, first of all, and subverts it as well. “My own” story is the story of an other, which becomes the lived life. Thus, origin does not play a decisive role in her novel, nor do biological motherhood, genealogy, and biological origins. Gender norms are broken and role models are questioned, and motherhood rather becomes a cross-species ordeal (“his mother Matthias” [179]).

When visiting a conference, in a contingency the scent of milk brings to mind the grandmother-bear’s childhood: “It had always been Ivan who prepared my food. I had no memory of my mother” (*Memoirs* 9). Only her former animal trainer Ivan is remembered, but her biological mother seems untraceable. Back in her Moscow apartment, a desire to write takes over:

I kept painting over the same period of my childhood again and again. . . . My memories came and went like waves at the beach. Each wave resembled the one before, but no two were identical. I had . . . to portray the same scene several times, without being able to say which description was definitive. (*Memoirs* 11)

Playing with the fictivity of her autobiography, in this scene of writing the figure of *repetitio* indicates an uncanny moment since the subject’s memories are all but narratives that are overwritten again and again (just like a permanent palimpsest, or like in Freud’s “Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad,’” where the writing vanishes every time the close contact is broken), which undermines a one-sided view of the archive of memory as well as any truth narrative. The search to return to an origin proves to be impossible, when a spectral figure appears, frightening the narrating “I”:

Suddenly Ivan stood beside me, looking down at my text from above. . . . [Many] questions I wanted to ask, but my voice failed me. As I breathed deeply in and out several times, Ivan’s figure silently vanished. He left behind his familiar body heat and a faint burning sensation on my skin. Ivan, dead

Between
“East” and “West”

Ex-position
June
2021

within me for so many years, came back to life because I was writing about him. (*Memoirs* 12)

After she is already retired from dancing, Ivan's uncanny ghost comes back to haunt her. The text addresses the trauma of torture ("burning . . . on my skin") with a "stove" (11) which the grandmother-bear suffers under her trainer to become a dancing bear. Without a genealogical family she has to rely on a human being, and although tortured, she develops a strong emotional bond that stays ambiguous since the caregiver is her only psychological parent. The opaque words about a "familiar body heat" can be read in two ways, as her trainer's body or her own; it indicates a familiarity of a family she never had: her recollection proves to be unhomely. In the following episode, while the grandmother-bear feels the urge to drink vodka to forget, her concierge suggests writing an autobiography instead (13-14). The text reveals an unhomeliness as the basis of writing. The nexus of writing and *nātiō* as nation and birth can also be traced to a metaphor for writing in the scene when the grandmother-bear starts to write her best seller, demonstrating a corporeal aspect of writing:

When I sat in my room licking the tip of my pencil, I wanted to go on licking it all winter long. . . . Writing isn't particularly different from hibernation. . . . [I]n the bear's den of my brain, I was giving birth to my own childhood. . . . (*Memoirs* 15)

According to the first narrating "I," the process of writing seems similar to a bear's energy-saving sleep in winter, the "hibernation." This is the time when a female polar bear goes to her den "during the cold winter months to give birth to her offspring" ("Hibernation"). Tawada inverts this metonymically, and instead of giving birth to cubs the brainchild of the narrating "I" becomes her autobiography. Dreaming while sleeping is connected to the unconscious, and the unconscious mind also helps in the act of writing by creatively condensing the texture of thoughts. Instead of a bear's den, the place of home is a room that is not so much uninhabitable as incredibly unhomely. Read in tandem with Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness, which can be formulated as the return of the repressed, or the unconscious, the act of writing in *Memoirs* constructs a place of memory based in repressed emotions that haunts the narrating "I." Hidden in Tawada's text is also the interlinking of creative writing as metaphorical birth with the tongue as a body part that is associated with language, a typical motif in Tawada (Kraenzle 92). Licking as activity of the tongue can be nourishing, or erotic. *Memoirs* puts

an emphasis on this connection between language and the tongue as orality, as pointed out by Torsten Flüh, when he wrote that the mouth and tongue of polar bears in the baby age play a decisive role; whether the mother's milk, bottle milk or cube sugar, *Etüden im Schnee* is a decidedly oral novel in the space of writing. Licking as oral activity is an attempt to test and taste a surface and/or incorporate nourishment. Still, licking a pen on its tip while writing makes sense if the pen is a paintbrush ("painting over" [*Memoirs* 11]), as to moisten it. It is also a question of the mother-tongue as a linguistic interference, engulfed between different ambiguously intertwined languages, which could be read as a critique of the "monolingual paradigm" (Yildiz 141). This may also include a "sensory perception of language" (Grewe 159) via the tongue, since "Tawada's tongues are objects in motion that produce and expend energy in their encounters with language" (Grewe 189). In addition, the metaphor of the tongue in Tawada can be seen not only as a link between language and body, but also in connection to mobility (Kraenzle 91).

Between
"East" and "West"

In Tawada, the question of mobility and the linguistic and geographical dislocation is intertwined with virtual travel (92). This is evident in *Memoirs*, especially in its dream sequences in the second chapter where Barbara, a character who embodies a figuration of the "Princess of Bears," animal trainer Ursula Böttcher (*Der Stern*), tells the story of Tosca, and seems able to communicate in dreams with her. The name "Tosca" is an insinuation to the historical she-bear Tosca, Knut's mother, and as well to the star in Puccini's opera *La Tosca*. Instead of singing, the human-bear features stage artistry in different kinds of dancing, before she ends up in the Berlin zoo. Barbara's dangerous circus performance "kiss of death" by Tosca licking a sugar cube out of her mouth produces a different kind of playful and erotic tension. This erotic scene of two female characters alludes to a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (II.401-507), which tells the mythological story of the nymph Callisto, a companion of Diana: her beauty attracts Jove, who transforms himself into a figure of Diana to seduce her. After it is discovered that Callisto has fallen pregnant and gives birth to a son, Jove's furious wife transforms her into a bear (Ovid II.478). Later, she is set among the stars as Ursa Major, "the Great Bear." Reading *Memoirs* with this Ovidian anthropometamorphosis, the otherness of the human-bear—another kind of star—could also be associated with the excessive body hair of an unshaven human being (e.g., a skin disorder like hypertrichosis). In the second chapter of *Memoirs*, writing becomes only possible for Tosca by means of opening up to another species through dreams and the kiss ("her soul had flowed into me through our kiss" [*Memoirs* 164]). *Memoirs* practices hybridity by writing an oral exchange of

Ex-position
June
2021

“soul” into an animal, thereby becoming a writer. It covertly teaches us about taking the perspective of the foreign other.

Considering the question of mobility, we may ask: What nation and which ethnicity do the human-bears belong to? When in the second chapter the young director Honigberg in the GDR suggests to Tosca to escape to West Germany, Barbara recounts:

[Tosca’s] elderly mother who’d had an unusual past, was against that idea. West Germany, she said, was like heaven: nice to dream about, but you don’t want to end up there too early. Tosca’s mother had been born in the Soviet Union, had emigrated to West Germany, and then continued on to Canada, where she married her husband and gave birth to Tosca. Then at the request of her Danish husband, she’d moved to the GDR. She was all exiled out. (*Memoirs* 108)

To the human Barbara the relocations of the human-grandmother in different countries are thought of as an exile, which seems to allude to a form of banishment, or at least somewhat “unusual.” Yet, when we look at the episode of how the idea was born that Tosca should join the circus, the result shows a different picture. Following objections to invite Tosca and put a show together with nine polar bears from the UDSSR, Barbara replies:

“Don’t worry, the Russian politicians will never notice that Tosca is not from the Soviet Union but from Canada.”

For polar bears, national identity has always been a foreign concept. It’s common for them to get pregnant in Greenland, give birth in Canada, then raise the children in the Soviet Union. They possess no nationality, no passport. They never go into exile and cross national borders without a visa. (*Memoirs* 86)

This passage states that polar bears do not share the concept of national identity. For polar bears the concept of exile is not thought of since migration is their way of life (“never go into exile”). This assertion corresponds to the grandmother-bear’s reaction on the train which consists of a play on homophone words after she left the country by airplane:

A fly bumped against my forehead, or wait, not a fly, a sentence: “I am going into exile.” Suddenly I grasped my situation. (*Memoirs* 38)

Her going into exile is seemingly mistaken for a tiny insect, a fly, which corresponds in a semiotic deferral with the action of the insect, flying, as well as with the action of the protagonist. The misconception of taking an inner thought for an outer disturbance, like a fly, has a comical effect, and demonstrates that migration is taken lightly by the human-bear. Without any nationality, the migrating protagonist is living in a locale outside of national thinking. As a consequence, the protagonist is a subject in motion, subjected to a situation in permanent transit. This proves as well an “interconnectedness of mobility, geography, language, and identity” (Kraenzle 91) in *Memoirs*.

One of *Memoirs*' main “playthings” exhibited in Tawada’s “cross-border intertextuality” (Surana 341) is the signifier “white,” which in physics is actually an achromatic color, or a non-color. As the color of the snow, it appears when sunlight as an optical phenomenon is reflected with the absorption of the color-spectrum, that is, when different color wavelengths (i.e., the colors of the rainbow) are mixed together to produce white. Its traditional associations in Western cultures are positive. While the white (non-)color symbolizes the true, good, and beautiful, it may also represent the color of ghosts and phantoms, and—in Asian cultures in particular—the color of mourning and death. Its meaning in *Memoirs* is multiple, creating “world literature” by many meaningful cross-cultural effects of intertextuality beyond clear boundaries. It can also be read as a resurgence of the haunting ghosts of historical trauma (e.g., Ivan, as explicated above). Besides the “gleaming” (*Memoirs* 165) sugar and the color of paper, there is also the bears’ white fur, a whiteness of skin that can be related to the whiteness of mystical animals like the White Buffalo of Indian legends (Wrigley) and the animal protagonist in Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, as symbol of nature. Furthermore, a whiteness of the skin refers to the categorizing concept of a so-called “race.” Physical traits that are interpreted as supposed ethnic determinables are also recalled in Tawada’s narrative when the grandmother-bear depicts her childhood:

Behind my back, the other children called me “snout face” and “snow baby.” . . .
The shape of my nose, the color of my fur made me stand out from the majority.
(*Memoirs* 7-8)

The cruelty of giving offensive nicknames concerning her physiognomy by classmates underlines a supposed foreign appearance of the protagonist. It also brings to the fore a feeling of otherness, which is the start of societal isolation. In another flashback the grandmother-bear recalls:

I was the only girl who was white and sturdily built; all the others were slender and brown. . . . “I envy the other girls. They look beautiful, . . . I want to be like them.” Then the human being . . . said: “They’re all brown bears. . . . Stay just the way you are.” (59-60)

Ex-position
June
2021

As a child, the protagonist seemingly belonged to a minority in class, because her corporal traits, e.g., the skin color, are interpreted as different from the majority. Yet she self-deceivingly mirrored herself in the surrounding brown bears since she was only used to seeing brown bears, so the majority seemed to “look beautiful” compared with her whiteness, but a circus worker explains that the others are from another species. This excerpt addresses the question of ethnicity and the process of othering by satirically reversing the hierarchical opposition of different descendants from (groups that actually are all) immigrants, and turning around the minority vs. majority discourse. In this way, Tawada mocks the Eurocentric whiteness discourse of supremacy (“sturdily built”). This disruption of the privileged position of whiteness makes the concept of a so-called “white” ethnicity slippery.

When migrating to Berlin, a fellow train passenger’s “ethnic gaze” (Grewe 157) with its orientalist perspective mistakes the grandmother-bear for a member of an ethnic minority. She argues, however:

Was my clan part of an ethnic minority? . . . [B]ut high up in the North, many more of our sort exist in Nature than Russians. (39)

This perspective of the foreign and the other illuminates that everything depends on the perspective: while the quantity of human beings in Russian cities are higher, which implies that the protagonist belongs to a minority group, from the view of a polar bear the humans are the minority in the Arctic Circle. In Tawada the allegedly hierarchically higher human beings lose their dominance and make pace for another new evolutionary theory, one of transformation of the subject which is placed into a foreign environment and is forced to go through many processes of acculturation. Traveling and migrating seems easy for Tawada’s nomadic protagonists: when the grandmother-bear hears that Canada is a “very cold [country, she] wanted to move to Canada right away” (*Memoirs* 45), because to her, “Berlin was a tropical city” (45). Although to a polar bear it might seem tropical, the city of Berlin in Germany has actually a moderate climate. In addition, the sentence can also be read rhetorically as a trope. The term “trope” derives from the Greek *τροπος*, which indicates “a turn, direction, course, way” (Liddell

821). It describes the use of figurative language. On the one hand, the sentence can be read as a pun on the city’s canting coat of arms which is historically linked to the sound for “Bär,” a bear; on the other hand, the text suggests that the city is also one of change. In *Memoirs* Tawada constantly applies the trope technique in its etymological sense of a representational device that produces a specific meaning by altering and changing its former semantic implication, poetically contesting a supposed unity of signifiers.

A “Multifold Vision”

In order to consider the question of nation and the postnational, we read a constellation of Goethe, Bhabha, and Tawada. Goethe has touched on the issue of nation and nationality—e.g., in his translation works and in his thinking of “world literature.” In his *Divan* he interlinks different cultures and works against fixed traditions, and to him nationality seems less important for identity construction. In citations by Eckermann, his emphasis is on a non-place beyond the nations (as a positive notion, and with a unity of perspective). As analyzed in our short close-reading of *Divan*, Goethe demonstrates his position against egoistical tendencies of national interests by drawing a fine line between *teutsch* and *deutsch* and ironically employing neologisms in which Germanness becomes something performative. Notwithstanding literature of any nationality, for Goethe, poetic literature and poetry as such is undivided and is thought of as one. Bhabha emphasizes the thinking of the other and of conflict in Goethe’s thinking of “world literature,” and with his “dislocation” of culture we can detect a cosmopolitanism in Goethe’s concept of world literature.

The issue of the nation is one of the decisive questions in Tawada’s *Memoirs* as well. Unlike in Goethe, however, in Tawada the undermining of national identity is more pronounced. Tawada’s Kafkaesque *Memoirs* can be read in multiple ways (for example, as advocacy for animal rights, as migrant literature persiflage, or as rewriting of “Josefine, die Sängerin”), and it demonstrates the un-seclusion of language. Still, the rhetoric of irony is evidently one of Tawada’s most dominant writing strategies. This article has concentrated on a trace that unfolds *nātīō* as nation and birth and touched upon the question of ethnicity. Among others, Tawada challenges the concept of the narrator and the concept of the author by employing an ambivalent hybridity (e.g., in a variety of narratives of birth and of adoption, both of which are also metonymical figures for the act of writing).

Given that each speaking “I” in the novel seems to be a hybrid being between human and polar bear (except for Barbara), this breach of species’ borderlines

seems already uncanny. In *Memoirs* the “third space” takes place in the “spooky activity” (*Memoirs* 4) of writing when it produces a ghostly return of the repressed, making the home not uninhabitable but “unhomely” (Bhabha)—for instance, when the formerly repressed memories of a hybrid human-bear are brought back. Genealogical lines start to blur and go beyond the species when the intimate role of a mother is transferred across species from the biological mother to a male caregiver.

Unlike Goethe, Tawada is concerned neither with a cultural transfer nor a bridging of the linguistic and cultural discrepancies (Albrecht 284), but rather with change and differences. Transformation takes place in her poetic novel of alienation and “estrangement” (Grewe) not only through aging and change of location, but most prominently through linguistic operations as a writing strategy. The hybrid protagonists migrate from one country to another (with the exception of the young generation, Knut) and stand outside of national thinking—for example, the grandmother-bear considers herself neither as Russian nor as belonging to a minority group. We have addressed her “double vision,” which includes an instability of identity that becomes a “menace” (Bhabha 126), when unhomeliness as well as the ethnic gaze produce insecurity and isolation in the human-bear. The dominant trope of the hybrid bear can be read as a figure of hyperbolic metonymy, an exaggeration of the other to intensify the perspective of the foreign and the migrant.

With Torsten Flüh, we may say that this can be formulated as “a radicalization of postcolonialism” (Flüh).³ Instead of postulating a transmission of national traditions in hierarchical binary oppositions of East-West (e.g., on the cover of *Divan*), Tawada’s novel defers this traditional binary motif, as well as others (animal-human, femininity-masculinity, etc.) and their implicit hierarchies. *Memoirs* indicates a future world citizenship and a “cosmopolitan to come” (Bhabha). According to Bhabha, Goethe had developed his concept of world literature out of a thinking of unfamiliarity and cultural dissension. Today’s world literature represents the incompleteness of cultural translation, a paradoxical position in an unhomely present between the cosmopolitan and the local. Tawada

³ “Colonialism” is an ambiguous term. However, “postcolonialism” generally stands for an ideological response to colonialist thought. The term “postcolonial” initially refers to the phase of decolonization after 1945, whereby the prefix *post-* still has a chronological meaning (Bachmann-Medick 184). Beyond this historical location, the discourse-critical cultural theory—under the sign of postcolonial studies—focuses now on Western and Eurocentric systems of knowledge and systems of representation (184). In the 1980s, the term gained a political-programmatic and discourse-critical sense: *post-* is no longer synonymous with “after” or the end of colonialism. Rather, it is a critical analysis category used to describe the continued effect of colonialist structures in other forms, not least in cultural and economic guises (185).

belongs to a people or nation located in between that acquired new multifold perspectives with which to occupy more than two places at once. To depict her new view, we cannot use Bhabha's narrative of a "double vision" anymore; instead, we have to deploy a "multifold vision."

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Between
"East" and "West"

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