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Inhabiting the Discourses of Belonging; Franz Kafka and Yoko Tawada

Cover Page Footnote

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INHABITING THE DISCOURSES OF BELONGING: FRANZ KAFKA AND YOKO TAWADA

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ABSTRACT

This piece examines the role of language in creating the identity of the foreigner in German prose. Writing at opposite ends of the 20th century, Kafka and Tawada serve as harbingers for a broader sense of alienation that comes with writing as an Other. Using lenses provided by Spivak, Butler, Said and Deleuze, this essay surveys the broader cultural concepts and theoretical implications of the notion of the metaphorical subaltern that can be created in prose, and the particularities presented by the German language in creating and articulating this identity. This essay examines six texts, three by Kafka and three by Tawada, placing them in contrast with one another. Ultimately this essay seeks to shift the hermeneutics of reading the Kantian Ding an sich of subaltern as hopeless, rather to see these six texts as a plea for understanding.

Writing is born from and deals with the acknowledged doubt of an explicit division, in sum of the impossibility of one's one place... it remains strange to itself and forever deprived of an ontological ground, and therefore always comes up short or is in excess, always the debtor of a death, indebted with respect to the disappearance of a genealogical and territorial "substance," linked to a name that cannot be owned.

– Michael de Certeau,
L'Écriture de l'histoire
(Paris: Gallimard, 1975),
p. 327

In their prose, both Franz Kafka and Yoko Tawada challenge conventional notions of belonging through highlighting the absurdity of the quotidian. Both authors write from uniquely distinct perspectives and ethnic identities, yet their similarities highlight a nuanced conception of what it means to use language, in this case, German, to simultaneously understand and define their place in the world. This

essay will examine three texts by Franz Kafka, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Hunger Artist*, and *The Metamorphosis*, and three texts by Yoko Tawada, *The Reflection*, *Canned Foreign*, and *The Bath*, the majority of these works having been translated by contemporary scholar Susan Bernofsky, to support this claim. In weaving together these texts with scholarly works, we will begin to see a picture of the German language as a simultaneous wall and tool for those chasing the elusive and protean definition of what it means to be German.

Although Franz Kafka lived the majority of his short life in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Austria, his use of German as a means for communicating his prose has laid foundation to the claim that Kafka is a quintessentially German author. While the scholarly suppositions and implications of Kafka's works are as endless as they are tenuous, it is advantageous to reiterate the understandings that will serve us as we analyze these texts alongside German-Japanese author Yoko Tawada. Although Kafka

himself consistently voiced insecurity regarding his command of the German language, reviewers have maintained that his mastery remains unsurpassed. Hannah Arendt notes that Kafka "speaks the purest German prose of the century" (Butler 1.). In fact, Arendt's review of Kafka is eerily similar to filmmaker and author Wim Wenders' preface of Yoko Tawada's work. Wenders says that "[Tawada] has indeed written this complex, subtle, intelligent and poetic book in German!... It flows effortlessly" (Tawada IV). This raises an important question: are Kafka and Tawada's insecurities regarding the German language unfounded? The answer, as I maintain, is a resounding no. Both Kafka and Tawada's uncertainties vis-à-vis their prose is indicative of a much larger anxiety about their identities and places within an increasingly protean Germany. Franz Kafka, a Jew in Europe at the apex of anti-Semitism, and Yoko Tawada, a foreigner living in contemporary Germany during a major debate on multiculturalism, uncover spatial solidarity despite their cen-

tury of separation.

In her work, Yoko Tawada weaves together vast incongruities with moments of familiarity that cut across national boundaries. In a review of Yoko Tawada's collection of short stories titled *Where Europe Begins*, author Rivka Glachen notes that when reading Tawada's works, we as spectators have "wandered into a mythology that is not one's own... [yet similarly] mythologies mix with more familiar tropes" (Glachen). These mythologies represent the dual embodiment and disconnect of an identity that foreigners are constantly demanded to perform, challenge, and shift every day. Tawada's works both subverts and is subverted by conventional tropes and understandings of what it means to be German. This sensibility parallels Tawada's sense of language, as she notes, "I cannot bend and mold this foreign language the way I want to. I perceive it rather like an independent entity" (Totten 95). This understanding of the utilization of language allows Tawada to use discourses in unorthodox ways and craft her own phenomenological understanding of what it means to be German.

Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* follows an unnamed explorer's unexplained arrival on a tropical island to witness a barbaric execution through anachronistic means. He is simultaneously revered, childishy coddled, and suspiciously minded by the Commander who represents a bygone era and who is overcome with crippling nostalgia. Through the explorer's gentle yet subversive inquiry, the officer ultimately realizes his superfluity and puts himself to death in the execu-

tion machine. The final parable follows the explorer leaving the Island, resolved to never return to this savage place.

In this work, Kafka relays his experience as an outsider through a rearranged power dynamic. Even while the officer essentially reveres the explorer's perspective, "the Officer kept watching the explorer sideways as if seeking to read from his face the impression made on him by the execution" (Kafka 175). The explorer nevertheless maintains his position as one of a delicate observer, evidenced in the following passage:

"The explorer thought to himself: It's always a ticklish matter to intervene decisively. He was neither a member of the penal colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged. Were he to denounce this execution or actually try to stop it, they could say to him: You are a foreigner, mind your own business."

(Kafka 151)

The explorer's own anxiety about being a foreigner was prevailing enough that no explicit display of power on the part of the Officer was necessary to hold dominance over the explorer. While this runs contrary to the understanding of the text as one in which the explorer comes out the victor, having exposed the barbarity of the system, Kafka was arguably more interested in the explorer's inability to make a connection on the island.

The explorer's internalized doubt and inability to find resolution, which the Officer arguably found in death, makes him the tragic hero of the tale. This internalization creates a dia-

logic disconnect. As the explorer looks into the dead eyes of the officer he notes, "no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found" (Kafka 190-191). This quote raises a crucial question: did the explorer finally believe that the machine offered redemption as the officer had asserted? This subversion of the explorer's convictions and confirmation of his insecurities reveals an important insight into Kafka's assertion: the outsider always remains on the lower rung of the power binary.

Yoko Tawada's *The Reflection* follows a well-loved Monk who, while exploring a pond in the forest, commits suicide by disrobing and jumping into his own reflection. The brief story, compiled in fragments, then recounts the neighboring town's response to the news and their reflections on the event. The primary implication of this story is the Monk's philosophical drive to achieve wholeness. Like many of Tawada's protagonists, the monk was constantly plagued by an inability to feel a unity of self. In this imagery, Tawada makes a striking claim: people who strive for a sense of belonging in foreign spaces are analogous to the monk, who ultimately found that death was his only means to achieve completeness. Tawada's narrative is amplified by the powerful image of the village finding the naked body of the monk. His nakedness in this context presents itself as a final display of the submissiveness of the foreigner. This notion of nudity repeats throughout Tawada's works as she conflates the naked form with the vulnerability of the ethnic and

racialized other. The community's reaction to the discovery of the dead monk and their collective inability to comprehend his death represents the chasm between the center of power and the created other: the foreigner.

One of the most vivid passages of the tale comes when the community realizes the Monk's prayer book is nowhere to be found. The omnipotent narrator notes that, "the water is cold. But the Book does not drown. The texts can breathe without air" (Tawada 65). This passage is one of the many that reference Tawada's élan as an explorer of language. Exploring language, Tawada posits, "is a condition similar to meditation or the trance of the shaman in that you empty yourself in order to be receptive, to accept foreign voices which, in fact, are not foreign but very familiar" (Totten 95). Within the context of this quote, Tawada's use of a monk as the conduit for this philosophy becomes quite clear. Language represents, for the foreigner, both the disease and the cure. No better image represents this tension than the monk drowning while his text floats.

Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* is written as the memoir of a traveling performer who sits in a cage in public spaces without eating for weeks on end. The protagonist recounts, with deep nostalgia, the long-gone era in which his presence would draw the whole town to the public square to witness his talents. This cherished memory contrasts his present situation in which he is the footnote of a traveling circus and freak show. What stands out most in this quintessential Kafka vignette is the hunger artist's

pride in his state of slavery. While he is beholden to his spectators, he depends on the attention given to him by the crowds. It extends beyond the classic trope of pleasure through submission by adding a layer of god-like reverence for the practice of voyeuristic fasting. As William Rubenstein notes, "the artist then, who denies himself life... rewards those who understand him with the food which he will not eat, but for those who do not understand him, the entertainment is merely the spectacle of a man fasting, and, as such, never rises above the level of an amusement" (14). In performing an exaggerated version of the other, the hunger artist is providing for those already in a position of power, but throughout the story it becomes increasingly clear he has gotten nothing in return. This archetypal sense of isolation and increasing alienation is a key tenant of Kafka's oeuvre. Despite a lifetime of service and reverence to the locales in which he worked, the hunger artist dies knowing he will always be a subaltern, "seeking refuge in some quiet corner of a circus" (Kafka 274).

Tawada's *Canned Foreign*, like *A Hunger Artist*, is written as an incongruous memoir. Tawada recounts her experiences as a foreigner in Germany unable to read street signs as comparable to ethnic Germans unable to read her face. She forms a relationship with a lesbian couple, Sasha and Sonia, who expect her to serve as a conduit for the entire continent of Japan. She ends this short memoir with a musing describing Hamburg as a series of disparate meaningless texts. Edward Said's magnum opus *Orientalism* postulates that "The West"

aggregates the vastness of Asia and the Middle East into a single ethnic identity: The Orient. Yoko Tawada's *Canned Foreign* pays explicit homage to that sensibility, "I encountered these questions everywhere I went: mostly they began 'Is it true the Japanese...' I was never able to answer them" (Tawada 87). In this account, Tawada exposes a double standard for foreigners living in western countries: a demand for sweeping generalizations about other cultures and ethnicities and an inability to articulate their own. Tawada says, "often it sickened me to hear people speak their native tongues fluently. It was as if they were unable to think and feel anything but what their language so readily served up to them" (87-88). This uncharacteristically critical passage highlights Tawada's frustration in struggling to define her identity while those who have it "served to them" are unable to articulate it.

Through the memoir style, both *A Hunger Artist* and *Canned Foreign* subtly present the tension between a longing for acceptance and a nuanced criticism of those whom they'd like to become. For Kafka, this longing harkens back to more fruitful times; for Tawada, it is nostalgia for her upbringing in Japan. Kafka's uncertainty goes back to his childhood where, as Yasemin Yildiz points out, one's identification and legitimacy within a language community was conditioned by the growing German and Czech nationalist movements: "this monolingualizing process was especially tenuous for German- or Czech-speaking Jewish communities because of their non-acceptance by the dominant German and

Czech language communities.” (Butler, C.). Thus, Kafka’s notion of the legitimacy of language was shaken from the very beginning. It follows then that his prose maintains an almost listless simplicity and his narrative arcs are unconventional. Tawada’s relationship with language, the German language in particular, embraces a similar sense of ennui and taciturnity. As Tawada herself notes, “I do not believe that an author can use a language as a tool to express her thoughts. I imagine the author to become, by means of the language, a knot in a big net” (Totten 95). Here Tawada highlights a sensibility she shares with Kafka that foreigners are beholden to the language of the dominant cultures they occupy. This passage highlights the sort of bricolage that both Kafka and Tawada perform in order to inhabit their adopted cultures and languages; it is a performance that is paralleled both by the hunger artist and the protagonist of *Canned Foreign*.

The Metamorphosis opens on Gregor Samsa, who inexplicably has transformed into “some sort of monstrous insect” (Kafka 1). The novella examines Samsa’s own self-critical reflection of his condition alongside that of his families. After a moment of shock, his family comes to tacitly accept his condition, never once wondering how it came to be, until the burden becomes too much to bear. As a depression-tinged futility seems to descend over Gregor, his family begins the arduous process of “othering” him to the point that his death and alienation is ultimately perceived as a victory.

Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” pos-

tulates that as apparatuses of elite and dominant cultures, literature and language become subversive tools. Within this understanding, Gregor Samsa’s awakening as an incoherent “insect” mirrors the realization by the subaltern of his or her own muteness. Gregor’s downfall is presented as an enlightened understanding of his own exploitation at the hands of the very people he trusted most. Gregor’s inability to communicate reflects Kafka’s own anxieties regarding language. Thus it becomes entirely clear to the reader as the story progresses that Samsa’s metamorphosis is merely a physical manifestation of his preexisting status as a subaltern. The image of Gregor transformed into an “insect,” literally cordoned off in his room, represents an ultimate othering. This Kantian Ding an sich presents the ethnic other as a vermin and language as the barrier between the dominant and subordinate. Deleuze and Guattari note that Walter Benjamin urged movement beyond the symbolic iconization that is so easy to fall into when interpreting Kafka (xi). While it is simple to conflate Kafka’s well known icons such as a castle with God, and in this case vermin with anxiety, the true noumenon of the ethnic other is not vermin, rather a tenuous connection to self as mediated by the politics of language. While Gregor Samsa awoke this particular day transformed, he had been a subaltern all along.

The first novella in Tawada’s collection *Where Europe Begins* is perhaps her most fractured. This first section of this novella, *The Bath*, presents her uncertainties regarding assimilation in a disparate structure.

There are illusions throughout the tale that the protagonist is becoming a fish and learning to live with scales. She also unites with a German photographer who both romanticizes and chides her “orientalism.” The story ends as it begins, through a reflection on looking in the mirror and discovering one’s body.

These musings seem to pay direct homage to French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and his Nine Talmudic readings. Translated by Annette Aronowicz, Levinas states, “seeing the other is already an obligation towards him. A direct optics – without the mediation of any idea – can only be accomplished as ethics” (47). Zeroing in on the phrase “direct optics” above, we begin to notice Tawada’s prioritization of the cameral act of seeing. As a non-native German speaker, Tawada returns continuously to the safe and non-hierarchical sense of visual perception. If, as Spivak claims, words are tied up in a power play, the visual becomes Tawada’s realm in which to play. In *The Bath*, Tawada embarks on a meditation on the poetics of the image: “one sees a different face in the mirror each morning. The skin of the forehead and cheeks changes shape from moment to moment like the mud of a swamp, shifting with the movements of the water below...” (Tawada 3). Tawada’s prose reveal a sensibility that, for her, words illicit images and it is those images that have the power to incite emotions. In short, the primacy of the image serves as the intercedent between words and emotions. Thus for Tawada, it is not so much a question of whether the subaltern can speak, but rather, can the subaltern be

heard?

Later on in *The Bath*, Tawada reaffirms this primacy of the image. She challenges the notion that language is the most valuable form of communication and asserts that rather, it is a strong sense of identity. When her boyfriend alerts her that she did not show up in any of the photographs he took of her, she is stunned and demands to know why. His explanation is simple, "It's all because you don't have a strong enough sense of yourself as Japanese" (Tawada 11). In this regard, Tawada's prose are very much a phenomenological understanding of her dual Japanese and German identities. In essence, they are a vociferous plea not to be understood, but rather to understand oneself.

For Tawada, language is the tool to incite the image which is the universal. Kafka, on the other hand, is consistently plagued by his inability to access such a universal. Samsa's regression presents Kafka's uncertainty regarding his identity as a failure to access his own universal. Kafka uses language to barricade himself inward, furthering the schism between self and other, whereas Tawada's prose function to build bridges, acknowledging, and then moving beyond such a divide. For both Tawada and Kafka, the process of assimilation is presented as the perception of metamorphosis. However, what they both show us is that if one cannot retain access to the universal through visual poetics, everything is at risk of being lost.

How does one articulate the process of being the ethnic other? Both Yoko Tawada and Franz Kafka show through their prose that it is in the encounters

of the day to day in which opportunities arise to subvert conventional notions of being "foreign." What is distinctive about these two authors is their shared perception of language as both the tool and barrier to access the universal. Kafka plays with this notion of language as barrier as Yasemin Yildiz notes, "Kafka at first tried to operate within the monolingual paradigm, wedding language and identity, it was his working through the imaginary power of this paradigm and its 'radical depropriation' in the post monolingual condition that dismantled the idea that one's identity is not based on a language given through national origin and natural property." (Butler, C) Samsa's inability to speak reflects his character's anxiety regarding identity yet, as Walter Benjamin's layered analysis of Kafka indicates, that is not all it reflects. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, "the impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality. And the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself" (16). Samsa's process of deterritorialization is thus presented by Kafka as the feeling of an "irreducible distance" from an axis of existence: being human.

Tawada's relationship to language pieces together the multiple discourses of her identity to create her distinct style. She derives a sense of hopefulness for the future of her self-identification under the auspices of a bricolage-like relationship to her phenomenological self-awareness. She will never have to choose between her Japanese and

German identity, for in the process of writing, albeit in German, she is building for herself an intersubjective, multi-cultural space within which to articulate her existence. Tawada carries with her in both domains the pejorative and positive baggage of her past. Yildiz supports this claim by noting, "Tawada's characters as seeking the bilingual experience through territorial and linguistic movement, but it is through this performance of multilingualism that an individual's monolingual history is highlighted.... Subjective multiplicity and multilingualism invisibly construct how one sees the world." (Yildiz Chapter 3) If language can be integrated into how one sees the world, then it is without a doubt the primary apparatus for one's own understanding of self. As Tawada comes to inhabit the German language more fully, does she lose a strong sense of herself as Japanese? I argue the answer is far more nuanced than a simple loss-gain binary. Her work is fully aware of the disconnect between her current self and her reflection.

It would be inappropriate at such an occasion to reduce the discussion to a selection of overly simplistic polemics regarding the implications of these two authors' works. Rather, the vastness of interpretation at this juncture is quite telling insofar as we are concerned moving forward. The major take-away from Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation is that one must free Kafka from naïve misinterpretations that either make a spectacle of his anxiety or interrogates an "Oedipalized neurosis" (xxiv). This does not, however, put us in a paradoxical stasis. Rather,

Toward A Minor Literature allows us to move beyond these naïvetés toward a major understanding. Kafka is neither resigned nor defeated as he would trick us into believing. Rather his work presents what can be seen as an all-out war against the power dynamics directly embedded in language. In this language, it becomes clear that Gregor Samsa was not retreating into his vermin cave; rather he was carving out a space for him to exist as he was. As he embraced his subaltern identity, he simultaneously proved that he had a hope for the achievement of the multi-cultural harmony that is embraced in Tawada's literature.

For Tawada, the notion of language and identity are inseparable. Tawada's command of the German language is a reflection of her command of what I will call the poetics of identity. Her ruminations present the subtleties both of what it means to be German and to use the German language in a way only one who has spent extensive lengths of time reflecting on those very questions can. Her absurdist works cuts across territorial boundaries into the often-familiar waters of the urge to create communities. It is here where the humanity of her prose lies.

When we move beyond the work of the academy in its byzantine interpretations of both Franz Kafka and Yoko Tawada, we see the venerable tradition of the quest for belonging. A shift in hermeneutics allows us as readers to see familiarity in the often times absurd and seemingly removed prose of Franz Kafka and Yoko Tawada. By framing these works within their author's

respective struggles to inhibit the ever-mutable definition of what it means to be German, we begin to appreciate these works as not inauspicious and melancholic, but rather optimistic and buoyant. To long for one's own identity, one must have hope in what the future holds. The sanguinity of the possibility of confirming and inhabiting one's own German identity allows both Kafka and Tawada the determination to move forward. In the meantime, they will continue to circle the castle of identity in search of an entrance, occasionally penetrating its fortified parapets with vivid prose.

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