

The postcommunist eye: an interview with Yoko Tawada.

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Yoko Twada (b. 1960, www.tawada.com) writes and publishes in Japanese and in German. Her first story, "Missing Heels," won the Gunzo Prize for new Japanese writers in 1991. Two years later she received the Akutagawa Prize--Japan's equivalent of a Booker or a Pulitzer--for *The Bridegroom Was a Dog*, published in English by Kodansha International in 1998.

Tawada established residency in Hamburg, Germany, in 1982. By the time she was awarded the Chamisso Prize in 1996--a literary award bestowed upon outstanding foreign-born authors writing in German--Tawada had written a short novel, a collection of essays, a volume of stories and poems, and a play in German. Since then the author has published a dozen more titles in Japanese and German. These include the novel *Opium für Ovid* (*Opium for Ovid*) the collections *Überseesungen* (*Overseas tongues*) and *Exophonie* (*Exophony*), as well as the prize-winning novel *Yogisha no yakouressha* (*Night train with suspects*). Three honorary lectures, which Tawada delivered at the University of Tübingen, were published as *Verwandlungen* (*Metamorphoses*). Besides fiction, the author frequently writes literary essays. Tawada's writings have been translated into English, French, Italian, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Norwegian, Dutch, Korean, and Chinese. In 2002 *New Directions* published her short-story collection *Where Europe Begins*.

In the interview that follows, Tawada discusses the setting of her recent novel, *Das nackte Auge* (*The naked eye*), and reflects on the spaces that the demise of communism has opened up and left behind. The novel tells the dreamlike story of a young Vietnamese woman who, during an official visit to East Berlin, is carried off to West Germany against her will. Now on the run, she ends up in Paris where--homeless, without a visa, and oblivious to the postcommunist world--she develops a fascination for the cinematic image of Catherine Deneuve. The interview, which was conducted in German and translated by the interviewer, took place in April 2005 when Tawada read at the New York Festival of International Literature, "World Voices," sponsored by PEN.

Bettina Brandt You write poems, novels, stories, and plays for radio and theater, and you also write a considerable amount of literary criticism. How do you understand the relationship between your fiction and your literary essays?

Yoko Tawada My affinity for these two discourses is not unlike my relationship to German and Japanese, also two rather different languages. There are things you

can see in one and not--or at least not in the same way--in the other. German and Japanese inspire each other and push each other forward. The same interaction takes place between my critical and my poetic writings. I am not a poet who has distaste for scholars of German literature, and I am also not a scholar of German literature who secretly despises poets. Both of those exist, and, though they try to keep it a secret, it always shows! (Laughter)

BB You are often asked to comment on your national and cultural identity. Why are these questions of little interest to you?

YT Implicit in such questions is a particular model of life that has no appeal to me. If I, for example, were to argue that I am from Japan, that I am a Japanese woman, and so forth and so on, I would be saying something that, quite simply, does not correspond to my reality. Nowadays, human existence is made up of continual, varied interchanges. What I refer to as "I" is made up of what I hear, what I read, what I see, and how I react to it. What I see in New York City right now makes me who I am today. Of course, this current "I" has also something to do with the past, but my past, too, does not consist solely of Japan.

It is more important to think about existing differences, and to reflect upon how these are perceived and incorporated. We are constantly changing, and change is not a threat. It is much more difficult to try to understand this process of transformation than to hold on to a rigid, permanent shape.

BB You produced the CD *Diagonal* with jazz pianist Aki Takase. How did this artistic collaboration come about?

YT In Germany there is a modern tradition in which poetry readings are paired up with improvised jazz. Gunter Grass and Peter Ruhmkorf were doing these kinds of readings in the 1960s. Aki Takase, who composes and likes to read, also comes from a tradition of free, improvised jazz. She wanted to work with literature and, after reading a few of my sound poems, started composing melodies and settings for my texts. When we got together, I read my poems in the same way that I always read them out loud. Aki played, listened carefully to the poems, and started improvising. I also learned to adjust my readings to Aki's music, but I can't improvise yet. That is still too difficult. My texts are set at the beginning of the performance, but how I read them changes considerably depending on what Aki does. Over the years we have added some small objects to our performances. We now use ping-pong balls, for instance, or dried bread that we grate, but not to make breadcrumbs for a Wiener schnitzel. This grating produces an unusual sound to which I then read my poems.

Those who typically comment that my poems are too difficult no longer feel this way once they perceive the entire performance as music. They understand probably just as little or just as much as before but no longer feel that the poems must be

understood as information. When I look at their faces, I can see that they listen differently. A new passage has opened up, one that is too often closed when people listen to poetry.

BB Will there be further collaborations between you and the jazz pianist?

YT Oh yes, most definitely. So far, we have produced only one German CD. We hope to produce a Japanese one as well. We recently performed at a Brecht and Chekhov theater festival in Japan. This material might eventually become a CD.

BB You created Japanese texts that were based on or inspired by works of Brecht and Chekhov?

YT Yes, that is to say, I hate Brecht, so I wrote against Brecht, and I love Chekhov, so I wrote for him. In some ways it is more interesting when you write against an author. In trying to determine what I find so irritating in Brecht I have become increasingly fascinated with him, but I would never admit that, of course.
(Laughter)

BB *Das nackte Auge* is situated in postcommunist territory. What is it that you are looking for in the former GDR or in Vietnam?

YT That is an excellent question, which I probably will be pondering for the next decade. (Laughter) Right now I am writing another postcommunist text, how odd. When I started writing *Das nackte Auge*, I was searching for a specific geographical point from where I could start telling the story. Personally, I was never politically active, but my friends formed a communist island in high-capitalist Japanese society. For them, Moscow was an imaginary place; something very big, confusing, scary, and like a jungle but also wonderful and extremely modern. To me as a child, Moscow was also a dream city because of the many Russian fairy tales and stories that I read. Besides, I was not just dreaming about Moscow. During the 1980s I traveled to Moscow at least five times. The city became real, but the notion of an imaginary city continued to interest me independent of the actual city of Moscow. In my first German story, "Where Europe Begins," which starts in Japan and takes the narrator on the Trans-Siberia Express in the direction of Europe, Moscow also functions as a dream city.

I have traveled a lot in Asia, Europe, and North America. A few years ago I realized that Vietnam is an equally interesting scene from which to observe the last one hundred years of history. That is, of course, a topic that is much too big to be discussed right here and now, but still. First we had Indochina and French colonialism, then Japanese colonialism, and ultimately the Vietnam War with the United States. All these powers were there to conquer and destroy, some might say to help, but, in any case, all penetrated the country. Now we like to say that the Cold War is over and that, instead, we are in the middle of a conflict with the

Islamic world. It is not accurate, however, to say that a conflict is over and another has begun. No, all conflicts are related. In my eyes, the Vietnam War is not over, and colonialism in Southeast Asia is not over either. I don't have the impression that communism, as a topic, has been resolved and that suddenly an entirely new issue has reared its head. That is simply not the way it is. Our present becomes more visible when we look at it from the perspective of that which is only supposedly over.

BB Part of *Das Nackte Auge* is set in East Berlin. Why did you choose this particular locale?

YT East Berlin was something very unique, impressive, and concrete to me. Unlike many West German cities, it did not have a generic German look. I was in the German Democratic Republic for the first time in 1979, and I visited a few more times after that, but at some point the GDR simply ceased to exist, and the city became immortalized in me. Something that is no longer there is something that I like to describe, and it is easier to describe as well.

Other West German cities like West Berlin, Hamburg, or Munich probably have changed as well, but I can't situate these changes quite as easily. For instance, I can no longer clearly differentiate between what Hamburg was like in 1979, when I first saw the city, and how it is now. It has all blended into a kind of stew. That is why the GDR is much more concrete to me than West Germany.

There are several German writers in my generation who are from the GDR. One of them once told me: "You are from Japan and your country still exists, but the GDR no longer exists and when you write about the GDR you write about a country that has actually disappeared." It is remarkable, in some ways even funny, when a country ceases to exist. For a writer, it can also be good. I could, of course, also write about a Japan that no longer exists. Japan today is partly the Japan that I knew, but at the same time it has become something rather different. But it is much more difficult to see those differences clearly.

BB Emigrants tend also to remember their country the way it was when they left it behind. They carry this dated historical image with them even when they regularly go back to visit the place. In some ways, those countries that were left behind also disappeared a long time ago.

YT Yes, indeed. One of my friends, a literary critic, works on the prominent role of photo albums in migrant literature. She studies Central and Eastern European authors who now live in Germany. These writers were aware that they would not be able to go immediately back to their country of origin. They could take only a few things with them, and photo albums became very important.

Photographs age but do not really change, and these photos became the memories

of the migrants. In single snapshots they exist in the present and can be shown, but, unlike a film, they do not tell an ongoing story. On the contrary, they are unique but movable pieces. Even when glued into a photo album, the viewer can still change the order. The literary stories in which these photographs occur are written in a special style, in what we could call a photo-album style in which single moments are emphasized.

Unfortunately, I can't write like that because Japan still exists! But I am fascinated with the GDR, even though that is not my home country. The GDR has a more photo-like distinctness than Japan does.

BB Finally, can you tell us something about your work method?

YT A single word can inspire me. When this happens, I want to create a whole text out of that one word, which seems to contain the entire microcosm. That is my dream, and it is how I often start writing. I use variations of this word, place associations next to each other, create word chains like branches of a tree, and play with different forms and shapes. Finally, I realize that I have to create an ending, but I don't find an ending because I don't want to and cannot have a result. A text is a weird and wonderful plant that has grown in all directions out of a single word knot.

New York City

Editorial note: To listen to Tawada performing with jazz pianist Aki Takase on their Diagonal album, follow the links to the January issue on our website (www.ou.edu/worldlit).

RELATED ARTICLE: Repulsion.

Das nackte Auge (Konkursbuch, 2004) consists of thirteen chapters, each one named after one of Catherine Deneuve's films. The enigmatic opening paragraph below describes a shot of Deneuve in Repulsion (1965, dir. Roman Polanski).

A FILMED EYE, ATTACHED TO AN UNCONSCIOUS BODY. It doesn't see anything because the camera already robbed it of its vision. The gaze of the nameless lens licks the floor like a grammarless detective. A doll, another doll, a stuffed animal, a vase, cacti, a TV, cables, a basket, a corner of a sofa, a piece of rug, cookie crumbs, sugar cubes, an old family photograph. There's a girl standing in it, looking obliquely up at nothing. The girl's one eye, as it comes into focus, becomes bigger and bigger, more and more blurred--now it looks like a blot on a piece of paper. Who'll know later that this was once an eye? The camera slowly moves back. Next to a tipped-over sofa, there's a cupboard standing on its head--you can't reconstruct a story out of this ruined landscape.

In this film I saw HER for the first time. One year earlier, I still had been a student at a high school in Ho Chi Minh City, which in the past had been named Saigon, and still was often called that today. The teachers thought of me as the student with the iron blouse. My grades were unrivaled. That spring, our school received a letter from the GDR in which we were asked to send along a student, male or female, for an international meeting of youths in Berlin. They wanted to hear an authentic voice on the subject of "Vietnam as Victim of American Imperialism." Our principal had a good rapport with the GDR and also had been there already. He had told us several times about his stay in Berlin and about a certain "Pergamon museum." "Pergamon" sounded like the name of a migrating bird, and we liked the image of the Berlin sky with this bird fluttering in it.

In a special meeting, the teachers decided to send me to Berlin. I mostly wrote lucid essays and, furthermore, had the voice of a crane; I had already made my appearance several times during athletic events and visits of official guests. Besides, I probably gave adults the impression that I could not easily be seduced.

Translation from the German By Bettina Brandt

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