Visiting Yoko Tawada's Hamburg:

An Attempt at "Border-Crossing" Literary Research

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1. Introduction

In my presentation I discussed some of the challenges and opportunities presented by contemporary Japanese "border-crossing literature" (*ekkyō bungaku*), with a particular focus on Yoko Tawada, who writes in both Japanese and German. "Border-crossing" or "transnational" authors, by definition, have backgrounds and careers that span multiple nations, cultures, and languages. However, it is difficult to write about them and their works without having to "translate" into existing, monolingual and nationally aligned academic disciplines, which are not ideally placed to interpret the negotiation across difference by such writers.

Below I will introduce the relevant practical and theoretical issues in the context of a recent four-month period of fieldwork conducted in Hamburg, where Tawada lived, studied and worked from 1982 to 2006.

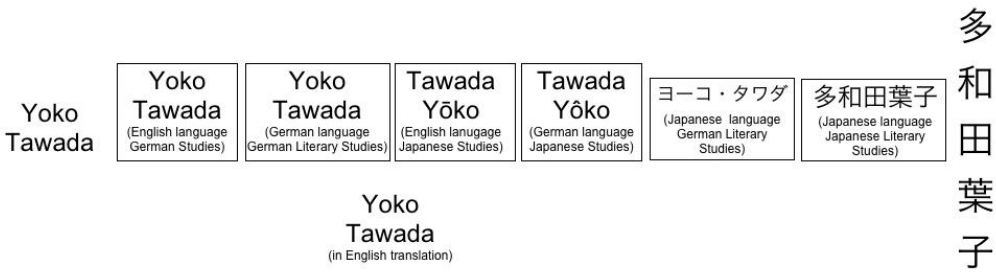
2. Yoko Tawada and the difficulty of writing about "border-crossing" literature

Yoko Tawada (1960-), or Tawada Yoko (多和田葉子) in the Japanese order, has won both critical acclaim and the attention of literary scholars worldwide for her creative writing in Japanese and German. Following the publication of the bilingual *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts* (Only there where you are there is nothing; 1987), consisting of one short prose piece and twenty poems in the Japanese original and German translation, she has over 30 individual publications in Japan and over 20 in Germany. In addition to her Japanese and German writing, she has also been translated into languages including English, French, and Chinese, and regularly performs her work at locations around the world.

The first collection of academic writing on her work in English, *Yōko Tawada: voices from everywhere*, was published in 2007, and its importance is described by Michael K. Bourdaghs in an appraisal on the back cover in the following terms: "To capture the multilingual, cosmopolitan brilliance of Yōko Tawada would require assembling a team of scholars specializing in different disciplines and regions—and that is precisely what Doug Slaymaker has accomplished in this fine volume" (Slaymaker, 2007, back cover). The requirement presented by Tawada's literary work for such a multidisciplinary approach is demonstrated by Slaymaker's own observation that Tawada is "a writer very different in Japanese than in German" (Slaymaker, 2007, p.1). This difference relates to a paradox common to contemporary transnational writers, even those who may only produce work in one language: the crossing of national and linguistic borders typically embodied by their work does not only challenge, but also provides an opportunity for pre-existing geopolitically and linguistically defined academic disciplines to renegotiate their own borders, in a process parallel to the maintenance of world order through international cooperation. Necessary though such work may be, it risks overlooking the broader question of how the "difference" across cultural, national, and linguistic boundaries is actually generated and negotiated by transnational writers and their readerships.

The diagram below is an attempt to represent the way knowledge and interpretation of Tawada's work in German (left) and Japanese (right) is asymmetrically compartmentalised into distinct disciplinary specialisations that due to their linguistic/regional focus risk overlooking the "cross" or "trans" (e.g.

multilingual) aspects of her literature:



The major obstacle is the act of translation itself, as it results in the aforementioned "difference" being reduced to knowledge that is legible in what is considered a mutually shared language, whichever language that might be. It follows that not only is Tawada "a writer very different in Japanese than in German" but that also the scholarship concerning her work is also different in Japanese, German, English, and other languages. Here I draw from what the Japanese literary critic Komori Yōichi 小森陽一 has described as the "asymmetry" between writers of Japanese of diverse ancestry—although they may both be writing in the "same" Japanese, the use of that language by a writer of American background and a writer of Korean background is also separated by the irreducible difference of their circumstances in relation to the wider geopolitical dimensions of language use worldwide (Komori, 1998, pp. 291-293).

3. Visiting Yoko Tawada's Hamburg

A four-month period from October 2018 to February 2019 spent at the University of Hamburg was an opportunity to consider the wider context of Tawada's work, particularly in regard to her negotiation of the aforementioned "difference". Born and raised in Tokyo, Tawada began study at the University of Hamburg in 1983 and completed a Masters degree there in 1992; Hamburg remained her home until 2006 when she moved to Berlin. Not only is Hamburg the setting of some of her writing in Japanese, but Tawada's experiences in Germany and in Hamburg are also often the subject of her early essays, published during her residency there. Hamburg is a real city, and as a point of reference it is a real part of Tawada's semi-autobiographical oeuvre. The question of how Tawada relates to her experiences in Hamburg and Germany is an example of what could be called "extra-disciplinary" enquiry, as it straddles writings in Japanese, German, and potentially other languages, not to mention the actual reality of the city and region. If the public (i.e. in print) personae of literary figures, in particular those marked as "transnational", are inseparable from their literary works in terms of the way they are both written and read (the underlying assumption in Komori's notion of "asymmetry"), it also becomes necessary to consider how Tawada's literary persona exists both within distinct boundaries (i.e. in German and in Japanese) and across them.

The issue of translation prompted me to consider aspects of Tawada's writerly existence that are not immediately confined to the literary text or a single language. Being in Germany, Tawada's German publications are more readily available than elsewhere. That is, they are stocked in academic and public libraries, and can be purchased at select bookshops in person. The fact that Tawada's work is arranged

differently in the university's various libraries—next to Tanizaki Jun'ichirō in the Japanese section—for example, reflects the "asymmetrical" presence of Tawada's literary oeuvre in different contexts. Tawada's German publications also differ conspicuously from her Japanese publications in the frequent use of a portrait of the writer on the inside cover, which as of writing I have not observed in her Japanese books.

Although a photograph is not featured in Tawada's debut poetry collection, *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts* (in the third [1997] and fifth [2015] prints), the bilingual text, readable from left to right in German and right to left in Japanese, similarly highlights the "asymmetry" of the author's persona through the materiality of the Japanese and German scripts. The juxtaposition of the Japanese and German versions of the poems provides readers with the ability to see and read, or attempt to read, the other version. Although it is conceivable that many of Tawada's potential readers in Germany cannot read Japanese at all, it is worth considering that Tawada (and her collaborators) may have had other potential (future) readers in mind, such as German-speaking learners of Japanese and Japanese-speaking learners of German—particularly residents of Germany—when deciding how to design the volume. A further "extra-disciplinary" question raised by such multilingual experiments by Tawada is how the meaning generated across multiple versions of the "same" poem impacts the way she is read. Space does not permit detailed analysis here, but the way non-gendered nouns in Japanese gain a gender in German translation, for example, is one area of meaning production across language that, while depending on a "foreign" or "non-native" reading of German (i.e. a consciousness of gendered nouns), potentially alters the way an "individual" poem is read, interpreted and remembered.

It is only through asking such "extra-disciplinary" questions that broader, hypothetical but important questions can be posed about how Tawada's literary project as a whole is intended by the writer herself to influence and impact her readers, and how her work, and she as a writer herself, exist not only in Japanese (Tokyo, Japan) and in German (Hamburg, Germany) but also in the wider world. An extract featured on Tawada's official homepage (http://yokotawada.de) contains the lines: "Come, allow us… / I will open a door; I know not which, / it plays no role; bring / the young man in with you" (in German, my translation; accessed 07/12/2018). The "door" opened in this fragment of poetry is symbolic of the elusive aspect of Tawada's writing that lies outside the area of established academic disciplines. Whether it is left gaping open or becomes a conduit for exploration into new areas of enquiry rests upon the way "we" read and write about her.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP18J20597. I also express my gratitude to the University of Hamburg and staff and students who facilitated my stay.

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