

Illegible Bodies and Cultural Illiteracy in Yoko Tawada's *Verwandlungen* and "Das Fremde aus der Dose"¹

Jeremy REDLICH

In order to be able to see Europe, I have to put on my Japanese glasses. Since there neither is, nor ever has been, such thing as a 'Japanese view' – which for me is not a regrettable fact – these glasses are necessarily fictive and must be constantly remade anew. My Japanese 'view' is in no way authentic, in spite of the fact that I was born in Japan and grew up there. ("Eigentlich darf man es niemandem sagen, aber Europa gibt es nicht"; my trans.; 51)²

In many respects, Yoko Tawada's texts are about ways of *seeing* (in the sense developed by John Berger in his seminal work of the same name), and by extension ways of knowing, ways of understanding, and ways of reading. As the quotation above indicates, how one sees, reads, knows and is known, is contingent on a number of unstable factors. Of particular importance in Tawada's writing is the role of skin as a surface that communicates information to a 'literate' reader. To explore the recurring motif of skin as an inscriptive surface in Tawada's writing, this paper aims to analyze the complex and variegated representations of human epidermis in select Tawada texts. It highlights the diverse ways skin is articulated as discursively produced and then interpreted

1 This article has been adapted, modified, and updated from chapter sections in my unpublished doctoral dissertation

2 "Ich muss mir, um Europa sehen zu können, eine japanische Brille aufsetzen. Da es so etwas wie eine 'japanische Sicht' nicht gab und gibt – und für mich ist das keine bedauerliche Tatsache—, ist diese Brille zwangsläufig fiktiv und muss ständig neu hergestellt werden. Meine japanische Sicht ist insofern keinesfalls authentisch, trotz des Faktums, dass ich in Japan geboren und aufgewachsen bin" (51).

through a culturally specific grid of intelligibility, how it becomes the site upon which ‘otherness’ is written and read, and how skin as a lived, embodied material can be constitutive of subjectivity and reflect internal psychological processes as a kind of communicative surface connecting inside and outside. In texts like *Verwandlungen* (*Transformations*) and “Das Fremde aus der Dose” (“Canned Foreign”),³ for example, Tawada explores how skin, and more specifically the skin of the face, is produced and read through a kind of cultural literacy limited by often habitual and stereotyping reading practices, and in which the narrator/protagonist becomes a kind of object of ethnographic inquiry. These texts advocate for a ‘change of perspective’ that recognizes the types of cultural codings embedded in skin as a legible bearer of significations and problematic signifier of ‘foreignness’. Moreover, “Das Fremde aus der Dose” also considers how this ‘foreignness’ inscribed on the protagonist’s skin is appropriated as a marketing technique by totalizing and packaging an easily consumable semantics of otherness into a canned commodity. However, as Tawada demonstrates in her subversion of Lavater’s physiognomic interpretation, the external packaging is no one-to-one representation of an internal essence, no outward projection of a ‘true self’ inside. Rather, in a sense analogous to Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*, these texts show that beneath the layers are only more layers, or more signifiers that are unbound to a core signified.

Whether it is primarily on the face or elsewhere on the skin, reading and interpreting bodies through disparate cultural codes that are contingent on place

3 *Verwandlungen*, which means ‘transformations’, has not been translated into English. The book is a collection of Tawada’s lectures that focus on various forms of transformation or metamorphosis in literature and literary and cultural theory. “Das Fremde aus der Dose” has been translated as “Canned Foreign.” Because there is no published translation of *Verwandlungen*, all English translations are mine. All English translations of “Das Fremde aus der Dose” are from the version published as “Canned Foreign,” translated by Susan Bernofsky.

and history is a central theme in a number of Tawada's texts. While certainly these texts exhibit characteristics of the derridean notion that "body and text alike are palimpsestic, nobody is natural, no one writes the first word" (MacKendrick 151), it is also necessary to bear in mind that this inscriptive development is ceaseless, since the subject is *always in process*. Frequently in *Verwandlungen*, for example, Tawada's narrator underlines the fact that not only is she forever in a process of writing her face, but also that her face is constantly being re-written by those with whom she comes in contact, thereby placing, at least to a certain degree, her identity development outside of herself. In a conversation with Maurizio Ferraris and Giorgio Vattimo titled "I have a Taste for the Secret," Derrida points to this often unconscious and exterior construction of the self in the brief but germane lines "there is no identity. There is only identification" (28). Elsewhere in "Psyche: Inventions of the Other" Derrida also makes the claim that "we are (always) (still) to be invented" (61),⁴ which further serves to interconnect his disavowal of originality and closure with regard to the text and intertextuality, together with the idea that the body and bodily identities are likewise always in a process of becoming through re-articulation. Tawada's texts, such as "The Writing Body and the Written Body" in which she reflects on the story of "Hoichi the Earless"⁵ with his textual mask, frequently engage with the idea that the

4 Peter Sloterdijk, in *Zur Welt kommen – Zur Sprache kommen*, makes a similar remark, namely that we are anything but unwritten pages: "Wir sind, im status quo genommen, alles andere als unbeschriebene Blätter . . . Was wir das Individuum nennen, ist zunächst nur das lebende Pergament, auf dem in Nervenschrift von Sekunde zu Sekunde die Chronik unserer Existenz aufgezeichnet wird"(15).

5 In this article, which in the original German is titled "Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper," Tawada discusses the myth of Hoichi from Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, which was later adapted to film in Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*. In this well-known story, the brilliant performer Hoichi has a heart sutra written all over his body in order to protect him from evil spirits who seek to capture him. Although the plan works, the script is not written on his ears, they are left unprotected, and as a result are ripped from his body.

body is (like) a text, insofar as it is it bears delible signs that are constantly being rewritten, overwritten, and (mis)interpreted. The figure of the textual palimpsest can also be productively conceptualized as comparable to the palimpsestual body in Tawada's texts; one that is never an original body, but is always a hybrid imbrication of multiple identities and is constituted by the cultural, historical, and social discourses that pre-exist it and construct its intelligibility. The following sections will explore two of Tawada's texts that discuss the various ways that the body is read and written.

Reading and Interpreting the Face as Text in *Verwandlungen*

The two quotes above by Jacques Derrida establish a context for the following excerpt from *Verwandlungen*, which indicates that Yoko Tawada is of a similar mind with respect to the interminable process of writing and being written by others:

I have yet to complete writing my face. Above all else I have never even seen my face, but only its reflection in the mirror . . . Since I was born into this world, I have never seen my face from the outside. No mirror can show me how I appear when having a conversation with another person. I often see puzzling features in the face of the other person. These features fascinate me, and I reflect them on my own face like a sketch book. (43)⁶

The narrator in this passage likens her face to a sketch book that is always being written, but also establishes that this writing process is profoundly influenced

6 "Ich habe mein Gesicht noch nicht fertig geschrieben. Vor allem habe ich mein Gesicht noch nicht einmal gesehen, sondern nur sein Spiegelbild . . . Seitdem ich auf dieser Welt geboren bin, habe ich niemals mein Gesicht von außen gesehen. Kein Spiegel zeigt mir, wie ich im Gespräch mit einer anderen Person aussehe. Oft sehe ich im Gesicht der anderen rätselhafte Züge. Sie faszinieren mich, und ich spiegele sie auf meinem Gesicht wie ein Skizzenbuch"(46).

by her identification with, and mimicry of, the faces she meets.⁷ Tawada is forwarding the notion here that there is no internal, core, and authentic essence to the subject transmitted through the face or the skin, but rather that bodies are always contingent on the literacy of the reader and the prevailing codes of intelligibility through which they are read. The surface of the body is a communicative surface, as Tawada highlights earlier in *Verwandlungen* when she states that the human body is a medium which can serve as a kind of *Leinwand* or projection surface, particularly with respect to the human face. The text reads, “like a projection screen, the face can receive and show images . . . A face is something that becomes visible . . . Apparently faces don’t show themselves on their own, but rather only appear when they are read” (42).⁸ The meaning a face transmits, therefore, is produced more by the gaze and expectations externally projected upon it rather than from some internal essence. For Tawada, *ein Gesicht* (a face) is something that is perceived in the phenomenal sense,⁹ like *ein Geräusch*, *ein Geruch*, *ein Geschmack* or *ein Gefühl* (“a sound, a smell, a taste or a feeling”), rather than simply as a physical part of the body that can reveal, through its visibility, insight into an individual’s character. She differentiates her

7 A similar sentiment is echoed in Tawada’s *Ein Gast*, where the protagonist is described as rubbing her forehead from left to right as though she were rewriting her face. Analyses of this writing on the face can be found in Brandt’s “The Unknown Character” (117-119); Margret Brüggemann’s “Jeder Text hat weiße Ränder” (350-51); and Markus Hallensleben’s “Rewriting the Face, Transforming the Skin, and Performing the Body as Text: Palimpsestuous Intertexts in Yoko Tawada’s ‘The Bath’” (168-89).

8 “[e]in Gesichtsfeld . . . kann wie eine Leinwand Bilder empfangen und zeigen . . . Ein Gesicht ist etwas, das sichtbar geworden ist . . . Anscheinend zeigen sich die Gesichter nicht von sich aus, sondern erscheinen erst, wenn sie gelesen werden.”

By far the most expansive analysis of Tawada’s *Verwandlungen* can be found in Ruth Kersting’s *Fremdes Schreiben* (173-81), though for my analysis Carola Hilmes’s “Jeder Riß im Kopf” (320-24) has proven most useful.

9 Tawada frames *ein Gesicht* as something that needs to be perceived with, “wenn das Gerochene der Geruch heißt und das Geschmeckte der Geschmack, könnte das Gesehene das ‘Gesicht’ heißen” (44).

understanding of Gesichter in the following lines:

When speaking of the face we are not talking about an anatomically fixed body part, since a face can be seen on a hand or in handwriting or in the movement of the head. Faces are everywhere, but even so they are often impossible to recognize. For example, it is difficult to really 'see' the face of your conversation partner. In his or her eyes I see my own facial expressions reflected back at me. (*Verwandlungen* 44)¹⁰

It is vital that the reading of 'faces' to which Tawada refers in this text not be confused with the kind of physiognomic reading popularized in the late eighteenth century by Johann Caspar Lavater in his *Physiognomischen Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (*Essays on Physiognomy: For the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*). Although it is a simplification, physiognomy in the sense of 'interpreting nature' on the body is described as "the technique or art of discovering temperament and character from outward appearance (as from facial features)" (Benthien 103). The influence and consequences of this theory on interpreting moral, intellectual and behavioural proclivities through the face led to the classifying and typifying of humans based on these principles. Moreover, the kind of pseudo-scientific interpretation promoted by Lavater's physiognomy significantly contributed to the specious and insidious logic of Franz Joseph Gall's phrenology, and the later development of Sir Francis Galton's darwinian eugenics and composite photography, which sought to reveal the shared facial characteristics of criminal, racial and ethnic

10 "Es geht beim Gesicht also nicht um einen anatomisch fixierbaren Körperteil, denn man kann ein Gesicht auch auf einer Hand sehen oder in einer Handschrift oder in einer Kopfbewegung. Gesichter sind überall, dennoch kann man ein Gesicht oft gar nicht erkennen. Es ist zum Beispiel schwer, das Gesicht des Gesprächspartners wirklich zu 'sehen'. In seinen Augen sehe ich meinen eigenen Gesichtsausdruck widergespiegelt" (*Verwandlungen* 44).

'types'. Tawada unequivocally discards this notion of interpreting the natural 'essence' of a subject through the outward transmission of an inner being in favour of Walter Benjamin's conception of reading faces and things. The two concepts are juxtaposed as follows:

When Benjamin speaks of physiognomy, he's not considering the face as a kind of expression of a person's 'inner truth' in the sense Johann Caspar Lavater describes (sees) – Lavater's work incidentally still resonates in popular impressions of physiognomy. In Lavater's physiognomy faces are typified and classified in order to be able to morally evaluate the face's owner. The body's changeability is of course negated in this approach. According to Lavater's physiognomy it is also unthinkable that a face can always reflect something foreign. Benjamin is approaching physiognomy from a completely different perspective. As a physiognomist Benjamin reads the faces of objects, dream-images and also architecture as multivalent texts. By writing this, the world of objects is transformed into literary texts. (*Verwandlungen* 43)¹¹

It is because Lavater's reading (judging and classifying) of faces is premised on a core 'inner truth' transmitted and hypostatized through the face that the

11 "Wenn Benjamin von Physiognomie spricht, betrachtet er die Gesichter nicht etwa als Ausdruck einer 'inneren Wahrheit' einer Person, wie etwa Johann Caspar [Lavater] beschreibt (sieht), dessen Arbeiten die noch immer gängigen Vorstellungen von Physiognomie stark geprägt haben. In Lavaters Physiognomie werden Gesichter typisiert und klassifiziert, um den Besitzer des Gesichtes moralisch bewerten zu können. Die Verwandelbarkeit eines Körpers wird in dieser Konzeption selbstverständlich verneint. Nach Lavaters Physiognomie ist es auch undenkbar, dass ein Gesicht stets etwas Fremdes widerspiegelt. Wenn Benjamin von Physiognomie spricht, bezieht er sich auf eine ganz andere Wahrnehmung. Als Physiognomiker liest Benjamin Gesichter von Gegenständen, Traumbildern oder auch Architektur als mehrdeutige Texte. Indem er diese beschreibt, verwandelt sich die Dingwelt in literarische Texte" (*Verwandlungen* 43).

mutable and transitory subject who constantly reflects something foreign becomes untenable according to his model.¹²

Tawada later expands on physiognomic reading in her dissertation from 2000 titled *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie in der europäischen Literatur: Eine ethnologische Poetologie*, where she makes explicit reference to physiognomically reading faces as gendered, raced and classed, and how these categories were linked to internal characteristics and qualities:

Johann Caspar Lavater, the famous representative of the physiognomic tradition, even attributed an underlying physiognomy to every race, gender and class, which he connected with characteristics of quality. He attempted to establish corporeality as a fixable material; an assumption that would find traction and confirmation in the body images of racist ideologies that later followed. (my trans.; 64)¹³

Tawada is reacting against the proposition that the face is static and coherent and unable to reflect the unfamiliar (“it is unthinkable that a face can always reflect something foreign”). She is also rejecting the notion that races, genders and classes ‘read’ on the face are inextricably and interminably tied to internal qualities or a singular essence. On the contrary, Tawada insists that the subject’s

12 In her article “Hybridisierung und Polyphonie” Christine Ivanovic also contrasts Tawada’s reflections on physiognomy with Lavater’s. Ivanovic states “[e]ben dieses Aufgreifen und Widerspiegeln des Fremden auf dem eigenen Gesicht aber scheint das Faszinosum zu sein, das Tawadas Blick auf Europa nun im dezidierten gegensatz zur Position Lavaters prägt; es ist die Option, das Fremde . . . in den eigenen Körper zu übersetzen, welche sich als dessen Verwandelbarkeit ausspricht: anstelle des ‘polyphonen Körpers’ also eine per se hybride Gestalt?” (141-42).

13 “Johann Caspar Lavater, der berühmte Vertreter dieser physiognomischen Tradition, schrieb sogar jeder ‘Rasse’, jedem ‘Geschlecht’ und jeder ‘Klasse’ eine grundlegende Physiognomie zu, die er mit ‘Qualitätsmerkmalen’ verband. Er versuchte, Körperlichkeit als fixierbare Materie zu fassen und Voraussetzungen für spätere rassistische Ideologien, die in solchen Körperbildern ihre Bestätigung finden” (64).

identity is constantly in flux, disavowing the notion of a *wahres Selbst* or internal essence in favour of an external appearance that is “formed only in the eye of the observer – meaning that it is produced by an other” (Hilmes, my trans.; 324).¹⁴ Every face, as a contingent, processual, *verwandelbare Leinwand* always holds the possibility of reflecting the stubborn uniqueness of individuality, rather than common features of physiognomic classification.

Other Tawada scholars have also considered how *Verwandlungen* is a reaction to Lavater’s theory of physiognomy. For example, in her article “Die Verfremdung des Fremden: Kulturelle und ästhetische Alterität bei Yoko Tawada” (“Alienation of the Foreign: Cultural and Aesthetic Alterity in Yoko Tawada”) Clara Ervedosa writes:

For Europeans the study of physiognomy revealed the inner truth and morals of a person, because in the Christian tradition the face is the entrance to the body . . . This metamorphic ability – to continuously appropriate another form, to go outside and even disappear – that is so negatively valued in European art, is conversely positively connoted by Tawada. (my trans.; 576)¹⁵

Likewise, Carola Hilmes’s “Jeder Riß im Kopf bedeutet eine Klang: Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung im literarischen Werk von Yoko Tawada” (“Every Tear in the Head Makes a Sound: Perceptions of the Self and the Foreign in the Literary Work of Yoko Tawada”) also sees this text as a reaction to the highly problematic potential of reading the expression of a human being’s ‘inner truth’ through the face as a means of gaining knowledge in order to categorize. Hilmes distinguishes

14 “entsteht erst im Auge des Betrachters, wird also von den Anderen erzeugt”

15 “Für die Europäer [verrät] das Studium der Physiognomie die innere Wahrheit und die Moral der Person, weil das Gesicht in der christlichen Tradition als Eingangstor zum Körper gilt . . . Diese Fähigkeit zur Metamorphose, ständig eine neue Gestalt anzunehmen, in der Umwelt oder Phantasie aufzugehen und sogar zu verschwinden, in der europäischen Kunst negativ bewertet, konnotiert Tawada positiv” (576).

the difference in Tawada's position from that of Lavater's with "for Tawada polysemy and metamorphosis are central. A person's identity is correspondingly transitorily conceived" (my trans.; 323).¹⁶

To round off the point then, a few more words need to be said on the role of physiognomy and the face in relation to *Verwandlungen*. As the vast majority of Tawada's texts (and the two quotes above from Ervedosa and Hilmes) emphasize, the notion that there is a viably singular, unified, and immutable self that remains invulnerable to temporal and spatial contingencies is unsurprisingly also disabused in a text titled *Verwandlungen*.¹⁷ Plurality though is not necessarily always positively received, as Tawada frames the idea of possessing multiple faces against the backdrop of a religiously-grounded, negative connotation. The relevant lines in the text read "usually in Germany having more than one face is valued negatively. In Christian paintings it is only the figures embodying evil that have multiple faces" (47).¹⁸ For Tawada, the plural and re-writable face is an inevitability, or at least more realistic and reflective of the majority of people's realities for whom the static and singular identity is a mere myth. It is especially for those who travel into other lands, cultures and languages that this facial heterogeneity is most closely experienced, considering it is in these situations and

16 "Für Tawada aber stehen Mehrdeutigkeit und Metamorphose im Zentrum. Die Identität einer Person wird entsprechend transitorisch gefaßt" (323).

17 While numerous analyses of Tawada's texts highlight her refusal that any identity is tied to a singular, stable core self, Doug Slaymaker's "Writing in the Ravine" succinctly articulates this sentiment: "Tawada asserts that if such a thing as an 'actual self' exists, then that is the self that speaks/thinks/dreams in multiple languages . . . [T]he insistence on a single, stable identity denies the messy complexity that constitutes the individual subject who is not, in the end, comprised of pure categories, but of multiple minds and positions" (49).

18 "Es wird in Deutschland meistens negativ bewertet, wenn man mehrere Gesichter hat. In den christlichen Gemälden haben nur die Gestalten, die das Böse verkörpern, mehrere Gesichter" (47).

interpersonal encounters that ‘foreignness’ is most acutely brought into intimate contact with the bodily surface, and where one becomes most aware that he or she is being physiognomically and ethnographically read as raced and othered.

In *Verwandlungen*, Tawada reflects on how the face is a pliable and multi-layered palimpsestuous surface that adapts to, and is constructed by, the expectations of observers, but she also subtly points to its performative dimensions here as well. In this text Tawada recycles a scene from her 1989 short story “The Bath” (*Das Bad* or うろこもち) where the female Japanese protagonist returns to Japan in order to visit her mother after having lived in Germany for a substantial duration of time. She is subsequently accused by her mother of having acquired an Asian, but also somehow foreign, face that resembles the Japanese actors in American movies. The dialogue between the protagonist and her mother proceeds as follows:

My mother glanced me up and down. “How did you get such an Asian face?” “What are you talking about, Mother? I am Asian.” “That’s not what I meant. You’ve started to have one of those faces like Japanese people in American movies.” (“The Bath” 43-44 and *Verwandlungen* 48)¹⁹

In this scene, the protagonist, who earlier in the story does not appear on photographs taken of her by her German travel photographer boyfriend Xander because, in his opinion, she lacks the visible signifiers of an easily readable Japanese ‘essence’, and only once her face has been marked by the photographer with an X can she be seen in the photographic image, is conversely viewed in Japan as having a face that reflects the perceptions and expectations of Westerners.

19 “Ich bemerkte, wie sie ihren Blick über meinen Körper streifen ließ:

“Warum hast du so ein asiatisches Gesicht bekommen?”

“Du redest Unsinn, Mutter. Das ist doch selbstverständlich. Ich bin eine Asiatin.”

“So habe ich es nicht gemeint. Du hast ein fremdes Gesicht bekommen; wie die Japaner, die in amerikanischen Filmen auftreten” (*Das Bad* 133).

The latter misrecognition is due to the protagonist's perceived lack of a Japanese essence—she fits neither one mould nor the other, and thus remains foreign in both the German and Japanese cultural contexts. In her article “Verschwinden ist schön” (“Disappearing is nice”) Sabine Fischer outlines this position of existing between stereotypes and expectations with:

The traditional image of the Japanese woman – a stereotype which combines exotic beauty, childishness, and a readiness to self-sacrifice – is nevertheless not only a firm component of the European-masculine discourse, but also features in western feminist theories as a basis for critiques of the exploitation of Asian women in European and Asian patriarchal systems. (my trans.; 107)²⁰

The fact that the protagonist, according to her mother, resembles the Japanese characters appearing in American movies—roles frequently played by non-Japanese and until the 1960s often non-Asian actors in Hollywood cinema—not only underscores the mutability and cultural contingency of identity, but also its dramaturgical and performative aspects as well.²¹ The protagonist is being equated with an actor who performs her identity, and depending on where she is

20 “Das traditionelle Bild der Japanerin, ein Stereotyp, in dem sich exotische Schönheit, Kindlichkeit und Aufopferungsbereitschaft vereinigen, ist jedoch nicht nur ein fester Bestandteil des europäisch-männlichen Diskurses, sondern dient auch der westlichen feministischen Theorie häufig als Grundlage für die Kritik an der Ausbeutung der Asiatin durch das europäische und asiatische Patriarchat” (“Verschwinden” 107).

21 The dramaturgical performance is meant here in the sense of Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, while the performative connects to Butler's notion of performativity, and especially gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*). Goffman's understanding of self-presentation as a theatrical performance incorporates a much more explicit dramaturgical vocabulary and assumption of agency and will on the part of the performer than does Butler's development of performativity, which is far more discursively based and which pre-exists the performative actor. For Butler, the script (or discourse) is much more deterministic and constitutive than it is for Goffman.

and with whom she is speaking, this identity can assume any number of roles. Her role in this social interaction, however, is received as a misrepresentation by the audience (her mother), thereby exposing the protagonist's performance as inauthentic, as *dramatically* Japanese but not Japanese in essence. In Germany the protagonist is overlooked as 'not having enough sense of herself as Japanese' (as her boyfriend explains), while in Japan she is seen as *affectedly* Japanese. In both cases however, the misrepresentation of identity expectations underscores the absence of an 'original' ethnic essence by stressing the protagonist's performative enactment, and further points to the prominence of visual media (photograph and film) in constructing these expectations of ethnicity.

This scene from "The Bath," with the protagonist's 'unrecognizable' face (or even 'inscrutable' as Homi Bhabha notes in "Signs Taken for Wonders"), is reproduced and analyzed in *Verwandlungen*, and is subsequently contextualized in relation to Roland Barthes's "The Written Face" chapter from *Empire of Signs*. The mother/daughter facial mis-reading in Tawada's texts is reminiscent of Barthes's musings on his own photograph that appeared in the *Kobe Shinbun*, and it is the following lines from *Empire of Signs* that Tawada directly reflects upon in *Verwandlungen* (48-49). Recollecting his photograph Barthes observes that "[t]his Western lecturer, as soon as he is 'cited' by the *Kobe Shinbun*, finds himself 'Japanned', eyes elongated, pupils blackened by Nipponese typography" (90). Then in reference to a photograph of a famous Japanese actor, he queries "[w]hereas the young actor Teturo Tanba, 'citing' Anthony Perkins, has lost his Asiatic eyes . . . What then is our face, if not a 'citation'?" Tawada also considers the face as a kind of citation, as medially contingent, and always in need of translation. She reflectively states in relation to the mother's (mis)interpretation of her daughter's face cited above that "the observer's expectations produce masks that grow into the flesh of the foreigner. Someone else's look is always being written into one's own face. A face can hold many layers. Maybe you can

even flip through a face like a travel report" (*Verwandlungen* 48).²² This passage suggests that a degree of cultural literacy is required in order to decode the multi-layered inscriptions written on the subject's face, making the face analogous to a travel report whose pages can be turned and read. However, it is also necessary to recognize that one's face is constantly being re-written by the expectations and the gaze of others. This is especially true, as Tawada emphasizes, when it is the face of a foreigner: "When you are dealing with foreignness, it is very difficult to avoid the theme of the face. This is why travelers receive many masks impressed into their faces by the locals, since otherwise they would remain invisible" (*Verwandlungen* 48).²³

Reading Masks and Faces in "Das Fremde aus der Dose"

The symbolic deployment of faces as performative 'masks' in the preceding section is emblematic of how Tawada develops and complicates the connection between the bodily exterior and identity formation throughout her texts. Crucially though, in this case the masks are the creation of the observer and say nothing of the foreigner or their culture. Most masks, by their nature, are designed to conceal the identity of those who wear them, thereby evoking the prospect that an 'authentic' identity resides beneath, and can be revealed if the disguise is removed. The fact that these masks, which are constituted outside the subject, grow into the flesh of the 'foreigner' corresponds, on the one hand, to the notion that the skin is a mask external to the authentic self that envelops, constricts, separates, and announces

22 "Die Erwartungen der Betrachter erzeugen Masken, und die wachsen ins Fleisch der Fremden hinein. So werden stets die Blicke der anderen ins eigene Gesicht eingeschrieben. Ein Gesicht kann mehrere Schichten erhalten. Vielleicht kann man ein Gesicht wie einen Reisebericht umblättern" (48).

23 "Man kann das Thema des Gesichtes kaum umgehen, wenn man sich mit der Fremdheit beschäftigt. Reisende bekommen von den Einheimischen deshalb so viele Masken aufs Gesicht gedrückt, weil sie sonst unsichtbar bleiben" (48).

difference, but only to the literate of the cultural coding.²⁴ In this sense, the mask is not worn of the subject's own volition, and is instead inscribed onto the bodily exterior as a way of making difference visible and legible. On the other hand, however, these foreign masks bring to mind the separate theme of 'fictive ethnology' and the ethnographic gaze that Tawada is countering and complicating throughout her texts. They connote performance, deception and the faulty logic that the 'truth' lies beneath. The theatrical and performative connotations of these masks as ethnographic objects will therefore be detailed below.

Yoko Tawada makes frequent reference to masks and identity masquerades in her texts, and the preceding section detailed a few select textual examples from *Verwandlungen*. Another revealing example of Tawada's use of masks can be found in *Talisman's* short fictional piece "Das Fremde aus der Dose" (translated as "Canned Foreign"). In this short story readers witness how the female 'foreigner' experiences 'strange encounters'. The Japanese first-person narrator and protagonist in the story is read and interpreted through a cultural coding worn on her face and/or skin like an imposed mask. In the first line of this text the prominence of (il)literacy as a thematic thread that runs throughout the story is underscored, although this literacy does not just refer to the ability to read linguistic sign systems, but also the significations constructed from non-linguistic codes, such as those imprinted or reflected on the body. "Canned Foreign," like many of Tawada's texts, describes the observations and everyday experiences of a female Japanese narrator/protagonist who lives in Germany (in this case

24 Katrin Sieg's *Ethnic Drag. Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* from 2002, in considering cross-racial castings in West German theatre, also examines the performance of race as a masquerade in a specifically German theatre context, but within a more North American theoretical paradigm. Sieg's analysis considers representations of Jewish, African and Eastern ethnicities in West German theatre, and while it is not particularly relevant for my research, it does present insight into the idea of race as a performative category based on Butler's outline of performativity.

specifically Hamburg). Initially the protagonist is unable to establish any semantic meaning between German words and the individual alphabetic letters of which they are comprised, for while she knows each letter on its own, when placed together to form words they say nothing to her. Later she befriends a German woman in her mid-fifties named Sascha. Although this woman is illiterate, there is nothing in the text to suggest, as Thomas Wägenbaur does, that she is also “mentally handicapped” (343).²⁵ Sascha’s illiteracy is not exclusively meant in the sense that she is linguistically analphabetic, nor that she is cognitively impaired, but rather that she is not able to ‘read’ the narrator’s face through the conventional or habitual code of intelligibility with its preconceived, common-sense understanding and potentially problematic judgments. Ivanovic and Matsunaga, in the ‘Lesen’ (‘Reading’) excerpt from their “Tawada von zwei Seiten” (“Tawada from Two Sides”) glossary, note that in “Das Fremde aus der Dose” Tawada posits “not being able to read as the opportunity for another kind of perception and successful social interaction” (my trans.; 131).²⁶ The text explains Sascha’s alternative approach to reading in the line, “She didn’t want to ‘read’ things, she wanted to observe them, in detail” (“Canned Foreign” 86).²⁷ Tawada places ‘read’ in quotation marks in this sentence because it signifies more than just reading in terms of gleaning meaning from a linguistic text, but rather that complex signifying processes are present everywhere, even, or especially, on the surface of the body. In reference to “Das Fremde aus der Dose” (“Canned Foreign”) Florian Gelzer underscores this point with, “Tawada’s essay expresses that essentially the whole world is readable.

25 “Das Fremde aus der Dose” does say that she lives with a friend named Sonja, who suffers from a physical condition that prevents her from exiting a bus by herself, and it mentions that a care giver visits them three times a week in order to handle any written matters, but it does not explicitly state that either Sascha or Sonja are mentally disabled.

26 “Das Nichtlesenkönnen gerade als Chance für eine andere Art der Wahrnehmung und der gelingenden sozialen Kommunikation” (131).

27 “Sie wollte nichts ‘lesen’, sondern alles genau beobachten” (“Das Fremde aus der Dose” 41).

The narrator reads tears, cracks, lines on the hand and folds as ‘nature’s writing’” (my trans.; 75).²⁸

In the following passage, the narrator describes how Sascha differs from most of the people she meets in Hamburg in terms of how they see and interpret her as foreign: “Whenever [Sascha] saw me she gazed at me intently and with interest, but she never attempted to read anything in my face. In those days I often found that people became uneasy when they couldn’t read my face like a text” (“Canned Foreign” 86).²⁹ While this text is certainly not valorizing or advocating illiteracy as a model for intercultural communication, it is identifying that certain types of reading are limited and constricted by *Wahrnehmungsgewohnheiten*,³⁰ or established conventions of perception, cultural stereotypes and expectations of foreign that prevent the foreigner from being read as anything but a pre-determined representation and representative of his or her culture of origin.³¹

28 “Lesbar, so teilt der Essay mit, ist grundsätzlich die ganze Welt. Die Erzählerin liest Risse, Spalten, Handlinien und Falten als ‘Natureschrift’” (75).

29 “[Sascha] blickte mich jedes Mal an, wenn sie mich sah, intensiv und interessiert, aber sie versuchte dabei niemals, etwas aus meinem Gesicht herauszulesen. Damals erlebte ich oft, dass Menschen unruhig werden, wenn sie mein Gesicht nicht lesen können wie einen Text” (“Das Fremde aus der Dose” 41).

30 Though in a slightly different context, this term is taken from Sabine Fischer’s “Durch die japanische Brille gesehen” (67). In this essay she approaches “Das Fremde aus der Dose” from the perspective that illiterates can lack both language and cultural competence when it comes to reading signs and images, indicating the numerous codifications embedded in signs that supersede mere linguistic abilities (67-69).

31 Bettina Brandt, in her article “The Unknown Character,” develops a comparable analysis with regard to Tawada’s *Ein Gast*. The text, which also deals with a female Japanese protagonist in Germany, describes her visit to a flea market where a vendor tells her that a book written in an unknown script is actually a mirror. The man explains to her, “to our eyes you look exactly like this writing,” suggesting that the unknown script and the narrator’s mirrored reflection are one and the same. The protagonist then rubs her “forehead from left to right, as if rewriting [her] face.” Brandt contends that “reading the other as a mirror, we know from Lacan, might be a necessary developmental stage in the attempt to create a coherent self, but has precious little to offer as a device that might produce knowledge about the other. Seeing the stranger as mirror means that we have erased the features of the other to see only a reflection of our familiar self on the flattened surface of the other’s face” (118).

Brian Lennon, in his book *In Babel's Shadow*, focuses first on the protagonist's scorn towards native speakers who easily and comfortably articulate their own language, and then on the protagonist's friendship with Sascha that is based on physiognomic illiteracy. Lennon states:

The narrator of "Das Fremde aus der Dose" valorizes neither her own cultural hybridization – for this serves mainly to position her as a representative of Japan on a German public stage – nor the cultural purity of illiteracy as 'alternative', to be embraced in symbolic rebellion by those already possessing its privilege. She prizes her friendship with someone who chooses not to read her, who is uninterested in reading her, who is uncomfortable with a face that is not also a text – or a book. Her own position as a nonnative speaker of German makes her profoundly, physically wary of fluency in any language, of the exclusionary exuberance of monolingualism, its inherent self-celebration; her emphasis . . . is on fluency as a kind of ethical weakness, rather than on nonfluency as ethical strength. (20-21)

Similarly, Susan C. Anderson describes the friendship between the narrator and Sascha (and also with Sascha's illiterate friend Sonja) as "the possibility of intercultural communication based on concentrated attention to direct observation rather than on inattentive stereotyping" (62). Although it borders on cultural stereotyping, there is a sense in this text of a population in possession of a very limited cultural literacy, meaning they are only able to read from others what is already familiar to them. Referencing this idea, Bettina Brandt writes, "Tawada has insisted that in order to let 'the strange' and 'the stranger' exist in their own right, this type of reading the other should be avoided" (118). Even the title itself, and perhaps more so the English translation "Canned Foreign," implies a certain pre-packaged, stock set of easily palatable and ready-made stereotypes that are on-hand for reading and interpreting foreignness. With this in mind, it is productive to acknowledge that the official English translation is not "Canned

Foreigner,” as the definite article *das* is used here rather than *der* or *die*, making it “a disembodied, abstract and intangible notion of foreign” (Grewe 12). Nor is the title, as Thomas Wägenbaur puts it, “The Strange out of a Can” (343), although this does retain the disembodied and abstract connotation of *Fremde*, but also makes more explicit in the term ‘strange’ what is only implicitly implied in ‘foreign’.

Nevertheless, the protagonist’s experience in this text is both as a foreigner and a stranger, insofar as she is nationally, racially and culturally foreign, but also someone whom the locals are unable to read ‘like a text’ (‘wie einen Text’), indicating that she is somehow also strange. Yet the stranger is not simply one who is unknown, but rather someone who is always already known as a stranger. Sara Ahmed supports this approach when she notes “the figure of the ‘stranger’ is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as ‘a stranger’ . . . The alien stranger is hence, not beyond human, but a mechanism for allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond” (*Strange Encounters* 3). The prospect that foreignness is something that can be reduced to a singular and knowable truth worn on the body is suggested and subverted in the text’s title and its English translation. While it may appear simplistic, both titles, “Das Fremde aus der Dose” and “Canned Foreign,” as figurations of packaging the abstract into portable containers, elicit the notion of marketing and commodifying foreignness. This commodification suggests that the exceedingly disparate ways a person experiences *displacement* from home can be totalized and universalized into a singular and easily consumable status of foreign that is visible on their skin. Here, as a canned product, foreignness is framed as something to be desired as opposed to feared, mistrusted or, in its more extreme form, disdained. This certainly counters discourses on ‘stranger danger’ that have proliferated and manifested in the various guises of racism and xenophobia, “but only insofar as it keeps in place the fetishism upon which those discourses rely”

(Ahmed 4). In this text, *die Fremde* is transformed into *das Fremde*, from a figure into a fantasy, where the specificity and individuality of the subject melt into an easily readable and consumable semantics of foreignness.

One of the most troublesome difficulties the narrator experiences as the embodied foreign in this text is that when she is called upon to articulate the cultural differences separating Germany and Japan, she invariably fails to satisfy the request. The text reads:

Every attempt I made to describe the difference between two cultures failed: this difference was painted on my skin like a foreign script which I could feel but not read. Every foreign sound, every foreign glance, every foreign taste struck my body as disagreeable until my body changed. (“Canned Foreign” 87)³²

In this passage we witness a very literal enactment of *reification* (*eine Verdinglichung*, making a human into a ‘thing’, or to be more precise, a commodity) as here the cultural differences which the narrator fails to articulate hypostatize on her skin as markers of classification and differentiation. On the one hand, the fact that difference is ‘inscribed directly onto the skin’ of the protagonist underscores how the seemingly physical and biological ‘truth’ of skin is really the result of ideological and cultural processes, demonstrating how “the painful pressures of the dominant culture [work] to incorporate her and to impose its view of ‘Japanese’ culture on to her” (Anderson 63). But on the other hand, the idea that she is able to feel but not read this script, and also that her body keeps changing, point to the fact that she, like the tuna can at the end of this text with the image of the Japanese female on its packaging, resists being fixed

32 “Jeder Versuch, den Unterschied zwischen zwei Kulturen zu beschreiben, misslang mir: Der Unterschied wurde direkt auf meine Haut aufgetragen wie eine fremde Schrift, die ich zwar spüren, aber nicht lesen konnte. Jeder fremde Klang, jeder fremde Blick und jeder fremde Geschmack wirkten unangenehm auf den Körper, so lange, bis der Körper sich veränderte“ (“Das Fremde aus der Dose” 42).

to, and comprehended as, the label which has been attached to her (“Once, in the supermarket, I bought a little can that had a Japanese woman painted on the side. Later, at home, I opened the can and saw inside it a piece of tuna fish. The woman seemed to have changed into a piece of fish during her long voyage”) (“Canned Foreign” 89).³³ Since there is no natural, one-to-one relationship between the contents of the can and the image-signifier on its packaging, no internal essence revealed on the exterior, “Canned Foreign” can be read, as Gelzer suggests, as a “plee for the liberation of the signifier” (75) that advocates against reading bodies as metonyms of a unified and coherent ethnic or racial type.³⁴ The final line of the text states “These words now and then led me to open the wrapping paper on the outside, only to find different wrapping paper below” (“Canned Foreign” 90),³⁵ essentially confirming that there is no essence or core signified to be uncovered, only more signifiers.

Conclusion

In concluding this short story with, first, a representation of a Japanese woman who serves as an advertisement for a commodity (but who morphs into a fish inside the can), and then, second, with an image of unpacking a product only to find more packaging underneath, there is a clear interrogation here of both *reading* and *reifying* bodies as knowable and consumable objects. This conclusion to the story ties together the conceptual thread in “Das Fremde aus der Dose” wherein Tawada represents skin, and in particular the skin of the face, as a

33 “Einmal kaufte ich mir eine kleine Dose im Supermarkt, auf die eine Japanerin gemalt war. Ich öffnete die Dose zu Hause und sah ein Stück Thunfisch darin. Die Japanerin schien sich während der langen Schiffsfahrt in ein Stück Fisch verwandelt zu haben” (“Das Fremde aus der Dose” 45).

34 “Plädoyer für eine ‘Befreiung der Signifikanten’”

35 “Diese Wörter motivierten mich hin und wieder, die äußere Verpackung zu öffnen, um eine weitere Verpackung darunter zu entdecken” (“Das Fremde aus der Dose” 45).

surface of inscription and legibility that can perform as the site and marker of an individual's otherness when read through habitual, pre-conceived and culturally-limited codes of intelligibility. This text stages the Japanese female protagonist as the object of observation, who is neither feared nor viewed suspiciously as an unknown element, but rather is already known as the visible stranger. The narrator exposes and critiques how the foreignness inscribed onto the protagonist's skin is appropriated as a marketing technique through totalizing and packaging an easily consumable semantics of otherness into a canned commodity. Yet, as Tawada demonstrates in her subversion of Lavater's physiognomic interpretation (outlined in the context of *Verwandlungen*), the external packaging is no one-to-one representation of an internal essence; there is no 'true self' inside, but rather beneath the layers are only more layers, or more signifiers that are not anchored to a stable, internal signified.

Similarly in *Verwandlungen*, Tawada depicts masks that are inscribed onto the faces of foreign subjects by the external expectations of observers, which also undercuts the notion of an authentic self that is hiding behind the mask. Analogous to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, texts like *Verwandlungen* (which also references "The Bath" and Barthes's *Empire of Signs*) present the seemingly irreconcilable tension between performing identities within the limited and rigid regulatory frame of discourse and normativity, and the possibility of disrupting and undermining this repetitive process by revealing identities, such as gender, ethnic or racial, to be imitations, groundless performances, and citations or copies of an original that does not exist. Masks, whether real or symbolic, prove to be a recurring motif in Tawada's texts: as cosmetic self-stylizations worn to meet prescribed gender, racial and ethnic body image ideals (as seen in the opening lines of "The Bath"); or as externally imposed, culturally specific expectations written into the faces of Tawada's protagonists, which falsely give the impression that an authentic self, or true

identity, resides within.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. Routledge, 2000.
- Anderson, Susan C. "Surface Translations: Meaning and Difference in Yoko Tawada's German Prose." *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2010, pp. 50-70.
- Benthien, Claudia. *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap, Columbia UP, 2002.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Viking, 1972.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- Brandt, Bettina. "The Unknown Character: Traces of the Surreal in Yoko Tawada's Writing." *Yoko Tawada: Voices from Everywhere*, edited by Douglas Slaymaker, Lexington, 2007, pp. 111-24.
- Brügmann, Margaret. "Jeder Text hat weiße Ränder: Interkulturalität als literarische Herausforderung." *Postmoderne Literatur in deutscher Sprache: Eine Ästhetik des Widerstands?*, edited by Henk Harbers, Rodopi, pp. 335-51.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Psyche: Inventions of the Other." *Reading de Man Reading*, edited by Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzisch, translated by Catherine Porter, U of Minnesota P, 1989, pp. 25-65.
- . "I Have a Taste for the Secret." *I Have a Taste for the Secret*, edited by Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, translated by Giacomo Donis, Polity, 2001, pp. 3-92.

- Fischer, Sabine. "Verschwinden ist schön: Zu Yoko Tawadas Kurzroman *Das Bad*." *Denn du tanzt auf einem Seil. Positionen deutschsprachiger MigrantInnenliteratur*, edited by Sabine Fischer and Moray McGowan, Stauffenburg Verlag, 1997, pp. 101-13.
- . "Durch die japanische Brille gesehen: Die fiktive Ethnologie der Yoko Tawada." *Gegenswartsliteratur*, vol. 2, 2003, pp. 59-80.
- Gelzer, Florian. "Wenn ich spreche, bin ich nicht da: Fremdwahrnehmung und Sprachgrammatik bei Yoko Tawada." *Recherches Germaniques*, vol. 29, 1999, pp. 67-91.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Overlook, 1973.
- Grewe, Maria S. *Estranging Poetic: On the Poetic of the Foreign in Select Works by Herta Müller and Yoko Tawada*. 2009. Columbia U, PhD dissertation.
- Hallensleben, Markus. "Rewriting the Face, Transforming the Skin, Performing the Body as Text: Palimpsestuous Intertexts in Yoko Tawada's 'The Bath'." *Beyond Alterity: German Encounters with Modern East Asia*, edited by Qinna Shen and Martin Rosenstock, Berghahn, 2014, pp. 168-89.
- Hearn, Lafcadio. *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Houghton Mifflin, 1930.
- Hilmes, Carola. "Jeder Riß im Kopf bedeutet einen Klang: Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung im literarischen Werk von Yoko Tawada." *Selbstfindung - Selbstkonfrontation: Frauen in gesellschaftlichen Umbrüchen*, edited by Andrea Rudolph and Marion George, J.H. Roell, 2002, pp. 317-37.
- Ivanovic, Christine. "Hybridisierung und Polyphonie: Zum Dialog von klassischer Antike und japanischem Altertum bei Yoko Tawada." *Neue Beiträge zur Germanistik*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2007, pp. 129-47.
- Ivanovic, Christine, and Miho Matsunaga. "Tawada von zwei Seiten - Eine Dialektüre in Stichworten." *Text+Kritik*, vol. 191/192, 2011, pp. 108-56.
- Kersting, Ruth. *Fremdes Schreiben. Yoko Tawada*. WVT Wissenschaftlicher

- Verlag, 2006.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1974.
- Kwaidan*. Directed by Masaki Kobayashi, performances by Rentaro Mikuni, Michiyo Aratama, Misako Watanabe. 1964. Criterion Collection, 1964.
- Lavater, Johann Caspar. *Physiognomischen Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*. Edited by Johann Michael Armbruster, Verlag Heinrich Steiner, 1783.
- Lennon, Brian. *In Babel's Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States*. U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- Sieg, Katrin. *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany*. U of Michigan P, 2002.
- Slaymaker, Douglas. "Writing in the Ravine of Language." *Yoko Tawada: Voices from Everywhere*, edited by Douglas Slaymaker, Lexington, 2007, pp. 45-58.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Zur Welt kommen - Zur Sprache kommen: Frankfurter Vorlesungen*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998.
- Tawada, Yoko. "The Bath." *Where Europe Begins*, translated by Susan Bernofsky and Yumi Selden, New Directions, 2002, pp. 1-55.
- . *Das Bad (U Rokko Mochi)*. Translated by Peter Pörtner, Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke, 2010.
- . "Canned Foreign." *Where Europe Begins*, translated by Susan Bernofsky and Yumi Selden, New Directions, 2002, pp. 85-90.
- . "Das Fremde aus der Dose." *Talisman*, 7th ed., Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke, 2011, pp. 40-45.
- . "Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper." *Zuerst bin ich immer Leser: Prosa Schreiben Heute*, edited by Ute-Christine Krupp, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000, pp. 71-79.
- . *Verwandlungen. Tübinger Poetikvorlesungen*. Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia

Gehrke, 2018.

Wägenbaur, Thomas. "Semiotic Ethnocriticism: Tawadas 'Das Fremde aus der Dose'." *Semiotics Around the World - Synthesis in Diversity: Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of The International Association for Semiotic Studies, Berkeley, 1994*, edited by Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr, Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 343-46.