

Issue 29 (2023)

## **Reading Matters – Materiality and (Il)legible Inscriptions in Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad***

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### Abstract

*In Das Bad, Yoko Tawada creates a narrative that opens up to the physical materiality of language and text. Several pages of this short novel present images alongside text engaging the reader in a multi-layered process of meaning making that challenges conventional reading practices. Language is not only telling a story but also points to and connects with its own materiality spilling out onto the pages. In her novel, Tawada explores the psychological and physical violence of inscribing bodies to make them legible. The only escape for Tawada’s protagonist is illegibility, a water-like transparency that offers material existence while resisting inscription. Reading Das Bad in conversation with new materialist theories of materiality, I aim to show how Tawada’s short novel envisions bodies, identities, language as something fluid and open, something that reaches beyond its pre-conceived bounds and instead forges unexpected connections. If we are taking the violence experienced by the protagonist in the story seriously, we, as readers, have to contend with our own involvement in the process of making legible and inscribing meaning. Das Bad challenges conventional ways of reading and meaning making by entangling sense and senses asking its reader to read more than just the story.*

### Keywords:

Yoko Tawada – Materiality – Inscription – Water – Feminist New Materialism – Text and Image

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How to cite: Höller, Lisa. “Reading Matters—Materiality and (Il)legible Inscriptions in Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad*.” *focus on German Studies*, no. 29, 2023, pp. 55–84.

DOI: 10.34314/fogs2022.00004

## Reading Matters –

### Materiality and (Il)legible Inscriptions in Yoko Tawada's *Das Bad*

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#### Introduction

Yoko Tawada's writing engages and entangles its readers in the multifaceted nature of reading; her texts call on, and play with, our sense and senses. While questions of legibility and intelligibility often remain at the forefront of her stories and her protagonists, the diverse interventions that occur on the material level of her books must not be overlooked. As Monica Tamaş points out,

Writing in both her native tongue, Japanese, and German, the language of her adoptive country, Yoko Tawada's poetics, constructed at the crossroads between cultures and meanings, breaks familiar patterns and unravels worlds of strangeness, where words are tangible, bodies transform and souls travel unhindered. (140)

Tawada actively and purposefully interferes with our usual reading practices not just by breaking with the familiar and conjuring the strange, but more materially by making words into tangible matter which demands its own attentive and extensive reading.

In the following pages, I aim to show how a focus on the materiality of Tawada's writing can reveal new layers of meaning-making within her work. Drawing on new materialist understandings of body and materiality, I will examine the multilayered process of reading Tawada's short novel *Das Bad*. After offering a brief introduction to the novel as well as new materialism and some of the pertinent concepts used in this analysis, this paper will engage readers in an open and multilayered exploration of bodies—female bodies, foreign bodies, bodies of water—and materiality in Tawada's *Das Bad* in order to provide insight into how we

might approach Tawada's writing by reading more than just the words on the page. After all, as John Namjun Kim has observed with regard to Tawada's writing, "what the narrative *says* is not identical to what the text *does*" (337, italics in original).

### **Yoko Tawada's *Das Bad* (1989)**

Being one of Tawada's earlier novels, *Das Bad* ("The Bath"<sup>1</sup>) has attracted relatively little scholarly interest in recent years (which considering Tawada's extensive oeuvre and continued literary production, is not all that surprising). Nonetheless, *Das Bad* offers many opportunities for interpretation that have so far remained unexplored and warrant further and renewed scholarly interest in this novel. Manfred Weinberg attests, "Obwohl es sich nur um einen Kurzroman von 59 groß gesetzten Seiten handelt, ist der Text von einer (...) fast unendlichen Dichte" "Although it is only a short novel of about 59 pages in large print, the text is almost infinitely dense"<sup>2</sup> (231). In the at times only loosely and associatively connected scenes of the story, the Japanese female protagonist and first-person narrator of the story navigates her life in Germany; in the course of the novel, she changes jobs several times, and her body experiences unusual transformations (growing scales and losing her tongue among others). In the end her body becomes a vessel for a dead woman who visits the world through the protagonist's material presence. After submitting to the roles of exotic model, simultaneous translator, "Schuppenträgerin" 'woman with scales' (*Das Bad* 111; "The Bath" 38) in a circus, and typist, the protagonist in the end concludes that she is "ein transparenter Sarg" 'a transparent coffin' (*Das Bad* 165; "The Bath," 55). All of the identities that have been prescribed for and inscribed onto her foreignized female body have left her with nothing of her own. While themes such as gender, inscriptions of foreignness, and body as text have figured prominently in the secondary literature on the novel and several articles have discussed water as a motif in Tawada's oeuvre as a whole (see e.g. Anderson; Bay; Hallensleben; Maehl;

Redlich; Tamaş; Weinberg) including *Das Bad*, the materiality of the book itself as well as its complex layering of text and image have not been analyzed in detail.

My analysis will focus on the 2015 edition of *Das Bad*<sup>3</sup>, which offers the German and the Japanese version of the story side by side and shows not only an intriguing contrast of the two writing systems (the two texts do not run parallel because the German text runs horizontally from left to right and the Japanese runs vertically from right to left, both texts do however intersect at the beginning of chapter 6), but also an intricate layering of text and images. More than just a playful design element, the visual level of the book is intimately interwoven with the themes of the book and draws attention to materiality as an important aspect of Tawada's story.<sup>4</sup>

## **Materiality Matters**

Tawada's *Das Bad* is a complex and multilayered text. It challenges its readers to read on several different levels at the same time. It is not only meaning, not only content that we, as readers, are asked to engage with, but also the physical book in front of us and the images and letters on its pages. As readers, we are confronted with the bodies of the characters, the bodies of the images (bodies of women, bodies of water, bodies of pages), as well as the material reality of the letters and words. These many bodies at times underscore, at times entangle, and at times overshadow our reading and meaning making with their presence. They reject the status of mere "schmückendes Beiwerk" 'ornamental addition' instead occupying their own space in the creation and disruption of "senses"<sup>5</sup> (Arslan 344); their physical presence and how we sense and make sense(s) of this presence matters. Tawada at once plays with and takes seriously the diverse forms of materiality that emerge in and from her text.

Breaking with the hegemony of plot development and sense over form and materiality in the novel genre, Tawada's text explores materiality in a way akin to that of feminist new

materialisms albeit several years before much of the seminal ideas and texts of feminist new materialisms gain traction. New materialist ideas prove, nonetheless, fruitful for an in-depth analysis of materiality and (il)legibility in *Das Bad*.

In the feminist new materialisms the autonomous, independent, separated, discrete, individualized notion of the body is no longer adequate to how the world and its complex entanglements are conceptualized politically and ethically. In so doing the notion of the body is somewhat erased, replaced by other concepts such as: the bodily, materiality, matter, or (trans)corporeality, which do justice to how the body is never one, but part of open systems (always already in plural). (Rogowska-Stangret)

Drawing on these feminist new materialist notions of materiality and corporeality provides a terminology that helps us conceptualize the open and contingent bodies of *Das Bad*. When Tawada writes “Das Wasser war eine transparente Haut, die von ihrem Körper glitt” “The water slipped off her body like a transparent skin’ (67; “The Bath” 23), we are confronted with two bodies that through Tawada’s use of language and metaphor merge into one body only to be separated again in the relative clause following. “The body is never one, but part of open systems,” as Rogowska-Stangret describes it. As we see in only this very brief example from Tawada’s novel, bodies in her texts are constantly changing, constantly moving, ever-becoming. The reader already learns about the unreliability of (human) bodies in the first sentence of the novel, “Der menschliche Körper soll zu achtzig Prozent aus Wasser bestehen, es ist daher auch kaum verwunderlich, dass sich jeden Morgen ein anderes Gesicht im Spiegel zeigt“ ‘Eighty percent of the human body is made of water, so it isn’t surprising that one sees a different face in the mirror each morning’ (*Das Bad* 7; “The Bath” 3). While her readers might still assume bodies to be “autonomous, independent, separated, discrete, individualized” (Rogowska-Stangret), Tawada proposes a different understanding of matter. Taking seriously

the fact that water is the main material substance of our bodily being, she offers us a new “reading” of the material world within and around us.

So far, feminist new materialist perspectives on Tawada’s oeuvre remain few and far between. In his article on palimpsestuous intertextuality in *Das Bad*, Markus Hallensleben observes that “the text also fosters a materially feminist perspective” (168). However, he draws on feminist new materialisms only tangentially, most evidently when using Stacy Alaimo’s concept of *transcorporeality* to trace Tawada’s destabilizing and blurring of bodily and textual boundaries.

In fictional form, as well as in the layout, “The Bath” presents readers with a theoretical and practical approach to what one might call transgendered écriture or a transcorporeal literature, comparable to the queer technique of a critical palimpsestuous writing style that constructs body and text as interchangeable spaces. (Hallensleben 176–177)

While I find Hallensleben’s claim of “transcorporeal literature” intriguing, a more in-depth exploration of the many different but contingent bodies in *Das Bad* is needed. Alaimo’s *transcorporeality* provides an interesting avenue for looking at Tawada’s short novel but it is, in my opinion, not apt to capture the full networks of bodies and materialities at work here because transcorporeality generally focuses much of its attention on human (or at least living) bodies<sup>6</sup>. Instead, I will engage two other concepts coming from feminist new materialism in my approach to the novel, Nancy Tuana’s *viscous porosity* and Claire Colebrook’s *indifference*.

Nancy Tuana’s seminal paper “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina” insightfully analyzes the conditions as well as the effects of a real environmental catastrophe, the Category Four hurricane Katrina ripping through New Orleans in 2005 leaving behind real destruction and real death. She shows how this catastrophe “resulted in multiple destabilizations” and she employs “the conceptual metaphor of viscous porosity” to highlight how “agency is diffusely enacted in complex networks of relations” (188–189). Porosity as a characteristic of bodies

resonates with Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality and the fact that the seeming borders between inside and outside are not impermeable, but the idea of viscosity, on the other hand, highlights that exchange and permeation do not happen unhindered but "there are membranes that effect the interaction" (Tuana 199–200). Thus, we are in part not only results of this interaction, but our materiality partakes in the interaction itself. *Viscous porosity* offers a particular avenue for exploring how the material bodies present in the novel and on the pages interact with the materiality of water and participate in these interactions in obvious as well as less visible and legible ways.

In her essay "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual," Claire Colebrook proposes the term *indifference* to challenge our inclination to erect and foreground differences, "Indifference is how we might think about an 'essentially' rogue or anarchic conception of life that is destructive of boundaries, distinctions, and identifications. To live is to tend toward indifference, where tendencies and forces result less in distinct kinds than in complicated, confused, and disordered partial bodies" (4). This is, in many ways, an approach focused more on the constant questioning of categorization and differences than a strictly materialist approach. Nonetheless, Colebrook's *indifference* as a rethinking and undermining of boundaries, a complication and fracturing of bodies, but also of concepts like gender and identity strongly resonates with Tawada's short novel.

### **Tawada's Watery Bodies and Linguistic Presences**

Water plays an important role throughout Tawada's oeuvre; *Das Bad* being one of her earlier texts that center around water. As mentioned earlier, there have been several analyses of water and related motifs like ships and the sea in Tawada's works (see for example Anderson "Water Under The Bridge"; Bay; Gutjahr; Maehl). Highlighting the connection between water and identity in Tawada's works, Jeremy Redlich suggests that "[b]efitting the provisional and

indeterminate nature of bodily and linguistic identity, Tawada regularly employs water and movement as literary devices to underscore change and transformation in her texts” (76). Hansjörg Bay argues that Tawada creates a poetics of water through intricate engagement with watery imaginaries throughout her texts. Considering water not just a central element in her texts but also a conceptual framework for writing and reflection of the writing process, Bay describes Tawada’s oeuvre as “Wasser-Werk” ‘water-opus’ (237) on the fictional as well as the theoretical, metafictional level. Silja Maehl understands water to be part of the larger semantic field of fluidity that she sees as central in many of Tawada’s texts: “Motifs of fluidity, the fluidity of a decentered world, are linked to the flowing nature of the imagination; in fact, this ambiguous fluidity is the prerequisite for creativity, which can only prosper in a position that is neither too shaky nor too comfortable” (77). However, water is also material reality within Tawada’s stories, a liquid that is present within and outside of the characters connecting inner and outer world, a substance that seeps in, spills out, and permeates seemingly stable material borders. Maehl states,

The recurrent theme of Tawada’s work as a whole is a continuous and open-ended transgression through which the foreign becomes a part of the proper, thereby constantly reshaping the very nature of both. Within her poetics of porosity, the motif of foreign water embodies this permeability. (60)

Drawing on Tuana, we might call it a poetics of *viscous porosity*. The water in Tawada’s texts transgresses boundaries and exposes porous bodies that can never escape their own instability. However, in *Das Bad* the water also meets resistance, the resistance of other bodies, the resistance of preconceived ideas and categories, the resistance of the page that will show water without materially being water. Tuana’s concept emphasizes this: “‘viscosity’ retains an emphasis on resistance to changing form” (194). Destabilizing existing boundaries is not a smooth and easy process of flow, but a slow and often difficult process of infiltration and undermining.



We see Tawada's poetics of *viscous porosity* not only with regards to the motif of water but also in the motif of the foreign(er). Growing up in Japan, Tawada often employs "pseudo-Japanese" (Anderson, "Surface Translations" 50) narrators to filter encounters, cultures, languages through a "foreign" perspective. Thus, while readers of German are at first inclined to perceive the narrator as the foreigner, they soon also perceive the foreignizing and alienating effect of the familiar, the culture, the language, and the words themselves. Tawada plays with foreign words, language, culture by exposing their foreignness as viscously porous, as permeable but also resistant. Monika Schmitz-Emans attests,

Der Idee des »widerständigen« Textes korrespondiert die einer nur begrenzten Autorität des Schriftbenutzers; dieser verfügt nicht frei über die Bedeutungen der Zeichen, da diese durch die Geschichte früherer Verwendungen mitdeterminiert ist. Gerade die Erfahrung der Fremdheit und Widerständigkeit von Buchstaben und Texten stimuliert zu reflektierten Schreibweisen und schriftbewussten Lektüren.<sup>7</sup> (274; translation in notes)

While this process might at times be disorienting, it also offers great potential for forging new connections and creating new meanings. Susan Anderson writes, "[Tawada] recasts alienation as a stimulant to new ways of thinking about gender, otherness, and belonging" ("Reading the Strange(r)" 357). Many of Tawada's protagonists go through a stage of speechlessness and an inability to read and understand, they experience the resistance of the material language. In Tawada's texts, this is closely linked to inscriptions onto the skin that are felt on the body but otherwise unintelligible. In "Das Fremde aus der Dose" 'Canned Foreign', the protagonist states, "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" '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' (Tawada 42; 87). The foreign language frequently becomes part of

the characters' bodies first, giving priority to linguistic materiality and blurring the boundary between sense and the senses. It is my opinion that paying close attention to materiality and how we might read the material aspects of this novel with sense *and* senses can offer new insight into the complexly interwoven and entangled themes and motifs of the text.

### **Reading On Multiple Levels**

Written in Japanese but first published in German and now available in a bilingual edition that alternates by page between the German and Japanese and intersperses and layers the texts with images of water, female bodies, and fish, the book design of *Das Bad* is itself indicative of the hybrid character of the plot. Tawada's text oscillates between meaning and physical materiality. The story unfolds at the same time independently from and underpinned by the physically present pages. Thus, language is not only spelling out a story but also evidences its own materiality spilling out onto the pages and over into the images. The reader might foreground the words and the story, but I argue that Tawada invites us to constantly shift our focus between text and image. While the words create the narrative, the images that we see materially present behind the words draw our attention to the visual and material quality of the page, perceiving the letters also as lines etched into a picture.

Not all pages of the 2015 German/Japanese edition layer images and text; several pages are blank except for the words, and several pages in the beginning and end of the book as well as the dust jacket are visually "filled with water", showing images of water with little to no text (if we encounter text, it is author and title or the blurb and author biography on the inside of the dust jacket). In contrast, the pages of the first two chapters as well as the last chapter of the German version layer images of female bodies with the text of the story, physically inscribing the words into the images. All three of these chapters deal in depth with the physical features of the female protagonist as well as inscriptions of femininity and foreignness through cultural practices and performances. Thus, one of the central themes of the story, the

inscription of gendered and racialized identities onto the body, is mirrored visually and materially on the pages of these chapters.

### **Being Legible**

Right from the beginning, Tawada highlights two central motifs of the story which are also the most frequent images we see throughout the pages of the book, namely water and the human body. In the first sentence of the first chapter, she entangles the two as co-dependent and interacting forces, “Der menschliche Körper soll zu achtzig Prozent aus Wasser bestehen, es ist daher auch kaum verwunderlich, dass sich jeden Morgen ein anderes Gesicht im Spiegel zeigt” ‘Eighty percent of the human body is made of water, so it isn’t surprising that one sees a different face in the mirror each morning’ (Tawada, *Das Bad* 7; “The Bath” 3). The unsurprising nature of a different face every day notwithstanding, the reader soon finds out that it is exactly the sameness of her face that the first-person narrator and protagonist of the book attempts to re-create every morning. This stable face, this stable outside appearance is based on a portrait of herself next to her mirror according to which she “corrects” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 7) her current appearance through washing, combing, and applying make-up. Thus, while the first lines of the chapter seem to suggest that human appearance is fluid and unstable (Weinberg 224), the protagonist nonetheless feels the need to present a stable identity.

This is thwarted when we pay attention to not only the text but also the images of these pages; the pages present us with images of different naked female bodies and body parts that interrupt the idea of sameness and stability. While we might consider every page of a book to be the same except for the words, this does not apply in the case of *Das Bad*. Instead, every page in chapter 1, 2, and 10 has its own, different material body which becomes visually readable. The ever-changing images not only emphasize the futility of the protagonist’s endeavor to stabilize her own appearance according to a gendered and racialized picture, but

they also invite us to read the words on the page as well as the practices they convey as inscriptions on naked female bodies and onto the material of each page.

As we learn in the second chapter, the portrait the protagonist is trying to recreate every day was taken by a German named Xander. At the time, Xander was working as a photographer taking pictures for a travel agency. He is specifically interested in the protagonist as a Japanese woman, an exotic foreign face to put on a poster. However, after taking several pictures and prompting the protagonist to look more Japanese, it turns out that she is actually not visible in the pictures, only the background shows. In order to capture the Japanese woman that Xander wants to depict, he uses makeup, lipstick, and hair dye that exactly match her skin, lip, and hair color to fill in his own image of the exotic foreign female face. Xander inscribes a racialized and gendered appearance onto her body that is not visible before but will come to define the protagonist's life thereafter; it is this picture according to which she attempts to correct her appearance each day, "a process of identity construction guided by a fake image" (Tamaş 141). Not only is it the German white male that sets the standard for the protagonist's appearance in her new environment, but the practice of painting over her face and capturing his stereotypical idea of her as a representative of a foreign culture, a racialized and gendered "other" is clearly framed as a suffocating and violent act. To illustrate, I will quote the end of chapter 2 at length:

„Darf ich Sie schminken?“

Er begann, eine weiße Creme auf mein Gesicht aufzutragen, so dick, dass sie alle meine Poren verstopfte und die Haut nicht mehr atmen konnte. Mit einem feinen Pinsel zeichnete er meine Lidränder nach; vorsichtig wie ein Archäologe, der Erde von einer ausgegrabenen Tonscherbe entfernt. Dann trug er auf die Stelle, wo mein Mund ist, ein Rot auf, das sich von der Farbe meiner Lippen in nichts unterschied.

„Ich färbe Ihnen auch die Haare noch schwarz.“

„Warum wollen Sie schwarze Haare schwarz färben?“

„Weil ungefärbte Haare im Blitzlicht weiß wie die einer Greisin aussehen.“

[...] Nachdem er meine Haare gefärbt hatte, schrieb Xander ein X auf meine Wange.

„Als ich ein kleiner Junge war, markierte ich alles, was mir wichtig war, mit einem X. Damit es mir gehörte.“

Nun küsste Xander dieses Zeichen, stellte mich vor eine Wand und betätigte dann den Auslöser so unbekümmert wie einen Gewehrabzug. Der Buchstabe X fraß sich in mein Fleisch. Er machte dem Spiel des Lichts ein Ende und die Gestalt einer Japanerin war auf Papier geätzt.<sup>8</sup> (Tawada, *Das Bad* 34–35; translation in notes)

It is noteworthy that after making the protagonist visible by inscribing a racialized and gendered identity onto her face (the description of the text evokes a geisha-like image), Xander goes on to literally inscribe his initial X onto her cheeks which used to be a way for him to mark his property when he was a child. Thus, while he might not own the protagonist, insofar as he is the creator of this racialized image of her, he can claim ownership of her as she now appears. But making her visible through makeup and hair dye is not a simple act of creating an image; instead, the makeup on her face clogs up her pores and prevents her skin from breathing. Xander is compared to an archeologist handling a delicate ancient object further indicating the protagonist's status as a lifeless object, a long dead relic of a different culture. It is apparent in the final sentences of chapter 2 (quoted above) that an intensification of the violence of inscription takes place when Xander goes on to capture her now visible face on camera (triggering the camera release being equated with the trigger of a gun). It creates a stable, lasting image of a Japanese woman that is now burnt (“geätzt”) onto the paper just as the X on her cheeks burns itself into her flesh.

This scene also evokes the idea of an artist signing his work. The face of the protagonist is now Xander's creation and the X for his name marks it as such. Considering that X is also a symbol for a variable that typically stands in for any number of possible values, a fact which the protagonist also brings up when she first encounters the name Xander (Tawada, *Das Bad* 25–26), the inscription X can also be interpreted as a stand-in for everybody in her new environment that encounters her as a foreigner, an “other”. Yet another facet of the X marking is that the protagonist cannot pronounce this letter, thus what remains of Xander's name is ander, the German word for “other”. While this might indicate an alienation on the protagonist's part, through the X as a mark on her own skin, she effectively becomes alienated from herself, unable to pronounce and comprehend the sign that is carved into her own skin. Just like the narrator in “Das Fremde aus der Dose” experiences this alienation of being inscribed by language that is illegible (“Der Unterschied wurde direkt auf meine Haut aufgetragen wie eine fremde Schrift, die ich zwar spüren, aber nicht lesen konnte” “[T]his difference was painted on my skin like a foreign script which I could feel but not read” (Tawada, “Das Fremde” 42; „Canned Foreign” 87)), the protagonist of *Das Bad* is inscribed with a sound unspeakable for her; she becomes othered from her own body.

Considering the image layered with the text on this page, it is noteworthy that one of the Xs written on that last page of the second chapter is actually placed on the cheek of the woman's face shown on this page, thus mirroring the inscription event of the story on the visual level of the page. While in the scene in the book, Xander is the source of the violence, by replicating this violence on the physical page, the reader<sup>9</sup> of this story becomes implicated in the violence themselves; it is not only an individual (i.e. Xander) who inscribes the “foreign” body and identity with specific, stereotypical meaning in order to make it legible, but it is also the readers of this inscription that participate in this inscription and perpetuate its violence through centering the legible words while disregarding the “background” image. The juxtaposition of image and text invites us as readers to read more than just what is easily legible,

to understand the letters also as literal inscription onto a page and onto a women's face. By reading in this multi-dimensional way, we are asked to constantly move between what's obvious and visible and what's hidden and erased by any one act of inscribing meaning into this text and are prompted to consider the potential violence enacted by it.

Let us now revisit the rituals and practices of the first chapter where the protagonist attempts to replicate the picture. As we now know, the face on the image was first painted onto her by Xander in an attempt to fix a stereotypical appearance and identity onto the body of the protagonist, namely that of a foreigner, a female Japanese other. Jeremy Redlich suggests,

The fact that the protagonist is attempting to conform the image in the mirror to the static image of the photograph gives the impression that the gender and racial performance proceeds from a prior ground or origin, yet this act reveals the pervasive performativity that standard accounts of identity fail to see. (77)

It is impossible to locate identity within a static, unchangeable picture because identity does not equal essence, but is always carefully crafted through repeated performances. While the image seems to suggest stability, it is exactly its artificial nature and the protagonist's attempt to replicate it as her authentic self that exposes the performativity of body and identity formation as well as their intimate entanglement. The protagonist is nonetheless quick to accept the foreignizing inscription on her body as a legible representation of her identity and incorporates it into her daily routine: "Mein Tag begann damit, dass ich beim Vergleich des Spiegelbilds mit der Fotografie Unterschiede entdeckte, die ich dann mit der Schminke korrigierte" "The first thing I would do when I got up was to compare my reflection with the photograph, checking for discrepancies which I then corrected with makeup" (*Das Bad* 7; "The Bath" 3). By "correcting" her appearance according to the image created by the male German, she internalizes her own othering and its violence in an attempt to make herself legible to the outside world, a world in which she will always be a "Fremdkörper" 'foreign body'. Not only

does she herself re-inflict the violence of the initial inscription by Xander, but through this static keeping up of appearances, she drains herself of her own life: “Im Vergleich zum frischen Teint auf dem Foto wirkte das Gesicht im Spiegel blutleer; wie das einer Toten. Wahrscheinlich erinnerte mich der Rahmen des Spiegels deshalb an den Rand eines Sargs” ‘Compared to the fresh complexion shown in the photograph, the face in the mirror looked bloodless and pale, like the face of a dead person. Perhaps this is why the rectangular frame of the mirror reminded me of a coffin’ (Tawada, *Das Bad* 7; “The Bath” 3–4). Reinscribing herself with this static, legible identity becomes a repeated performative act for the protagonist that forecloses the open exploration of other identities, other appearances in favor of guaranteeing a socially legible and acceptable body, a body that is nonetheless made of water and thus necessarily unstable.

### **Inscriptions and (In)Difference**

Inscribing bodies with meaning makes difference legible. It also in many ways clearly divides bodies into recognizable categories. The ever-changing and always contingent nature of any body becomes obscured because all we read is its difference. Tawada intervenes in this process by entangling the bodies in the text, the bodies behind the text, and the bodies of the text and producing layered meanings that at times seem to underscore, at times undermine each other. In this regard, *Das Bad* unfolds in a way akin to Colebrook’s concept of indifference, “destructive of boundaries, distinctions, and identifications” resulting in “complicated, confused, and disordered partial bodies” (4). Colebrook advocates to accept *indifference* as a fundamental life force; everything is complex and fuzzy rather than orderly and separate. Tawada’s novel depicts exactly this complexity and fuzziness, this movement of constructing, destroying, and constructing anew of images of the protagonist’s body and identity. The text challenges the notion of a stable and distinct person on the narrative as well



as on the visual level and instead presents us with erratic mobility and obfuscating metamorphoses “always destroying and confusing inscribed differences” (Colebrook 5). In a world of water, fluidity, and instability, Tawada sketches the violent and oppressive force of (gendered, racialized) inscriptions onto the body that try to fix and stabilize a difference “always haunted by its dissolution” (Colebrook 5). The body enduring these inscriptions is not only the human body, but also the body of our planet:

Der Weltball soll zu siebzig Prozent mit Meer überzogen sein, es ist daher kaum verwunderlich, dass die Erdoberfläche jeden Tag ein anderes Muster zeigt. [...] Ich breite eine Weltkarte aus. Auf der Karte hat das Wasser seine Bewegung eingestellt, daher scheinen die Städte immer an der gleichen Stelle zu liegen. Die zahllosen roten Linien, die von Stadt zu Stadt gezogen sind, bezeichnen Flugrouten und Fangnetze. Das in den Netzen gefangene Gesicht der Erde wird von den Menschen jeden Tag nach dem Modell der Karte geschminkt.<sup>10</sup>  
(Tawada, *Das Bad* 145–147; translation in notes)

Inscriptive practices happen on different levels, different scales but they always carry the same violent force (“Weltkarte” as the fixed picture of the Earth, “das in den Netzen gefangene Gesicht der Erde” as a literally and figuratively captured face of the Earth). The text states clearly that such inscribed difference is not a reality of life but a system of organization and oppression; any “body” of water is unstable and will tend towards indifference. *Das Bad* explores the possibilities of engaging with rather than working against indifference. The protagonist’s fluid and coalescent identities unfold in a dream-like and often disorienting way for the reader, constantly changing and disrupting her legibility as a character until in the end she finally escapes legibility through transparency, becoming indifferent only through radical and painful means.

## Becoming Illegible

Since, for the purpose for this article, I am specifically interested in the interaction of image and text in Tawada's novel, I will now focus on chapter 10, the last chapter of the novel and the third chapter that layers text with images.<sup>11</sup> In this chapter, we return back to the theme of inscribing the body through the application of makeup. This time, however, there is no picture that the protagonist is trying to model herself after, neither is there a mirror. Instead, we learn that mirrors are unnecessary for putting on makeup unless you are a young girl; as an adult woman, you can find your skin by feeling for the boundaries of the world surrounding you, "Die Haut ist eine Membran, die diese Welt von jener Welt trennt" "The skin is a membrane separating this world from the other one" (*Das Bad* 161; "The Bath" 54). Anything inside of the protagonist's skin seems to be another world, something strictly separate from the world around her. Her skin connects the two while at the same time functioning as the barrier between them. The protagonist has become alienated from the world around her through continuously reinscribing her own body and internalizing its foreignizing effects. It becomes clear why inscriptions on the skin play such a crucial role; these inscriptions make the barrier of the skin a surface for connecting the two worlds. When the skin becomes inscribed, it becomes legible for the outside world ideally creating an outward appearance that relates to the world inside the skin. The inscriptions on the protagonist's skin are, however, not simply outward expression of an inside world. Instead, the need to be legible and read by the outside world complicates this relationship. While trying to feign a legible identity in chapters 1 and 2, in chapter 10, the protagonist rejects outside legibility and social acceptance, choosing instead to apply makeup that will make her skin transparent and thus fundamentally unreadable.

In contrast to Marja-Leena Hakkarainen, I do not read the end as "painful but liberating" (216). The choice to become completely illegible offers an escape from violent inscription but is ultimately not an empowering liberation for the protagonist. The violence of

identity and gender inscription onto her body has taken a severe toll; it has made it all but impossible to sense and make sense of her own body. In order to escape the violent and oppressive forces of inscription, the protagonist in the end chooses to become transparent, to “return” to her self before Xander’s inscriptions, before being gendered and racialized. In the first pictures Xander took of her, her body was present during the photoshoot but invisible in the picture, illegible for the camera. Her rejection of inscription can however not recover her body before the inscription because it infiltrated and permeated her body beyond just skin level. She cannot simply return to the body before the violence occurred; the body retains previous inscriptions as sedimented acts. These acts cannot be undone, only “renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler 523). The protagonist in *Das Bad* needs to reinscribe herself in new acts of renewing, revising, and consolidating inscriptions. Thus, she can gain transparency now only by applying makeup, painting over previous inscriptions and disappearing them, indifference not as a life force but as a carefully crafted appearance. The penultimate sentence of the book is “Erst recht bin ich kein Fotomodell, denn ich bin auf Fotos gar nicht zu sehen” ‘And of course I am farthest of all from being a model, since in photographs I am completely invisible’ (*Das Bad* 165; “The Bath” 55). The protagonist, therefore, is able to extract herself from the process of being read as a stable body that can be captured and burnt onto paper. However, in the process, she has to empty her body of any meaning, any identity, anything legible for the outside world. After stating all that she is not, the final sentence of the novel provides an uncanny and bleak identity statement: “Ich bin ein transparenter Sarg” ‘I am a transparent coffin’ (*Das Bad* 165; “The Bath” 55). What she can ultimately be, the space she can carve out for herself through a process of renewing, revising, and consolidating all the sedimented acts of inscription is a see-through coffin,<sup>12</sup> a space of violence and death.

It is important to consider how the images on the pages of this last chapter (a relatively short chapter of only 3 pages) relate to the text and its meaning. The images of women layered

with the text reappear for the first time since the end of chapter 2. This suggests not only a certain continuation between the three chapters on the level of the narrative but also a resuming of inscriptive practices within the story as well as on the physical pages of the book. Although the protagonist is not attempting to reinscribe herself with a pre-established identity anymore, she nonetheless still uses inscriptive techniques by applying makeup. While her ultimate transparency allows her to prevent further inscription and precludes being read through inscription, painting herself see-through is still the same technique that made her visible and legible as a gendered and racialized body in the first place. Thus, she cannot fully escape the performative practices that did violence to her body. This is rearticulated on the visual level by the renewed layering of text and images of women again. Once again, the words of the text are inscribed onto the images of female bodies, seemingly leading us back to the beginning of the book. However, the pattern is disrupted on the final page of the book.

Just as the protagonist becomes transparent in the final chapter, so does the page. Instead of layering the final page with an image, the page shows the text on what is for all intents and purposes an image of transparency. The expected image of a gendered and racialized naked body, however, is not completely absent; it gets pushed to the side and onto the page of the Japanese text. This is the only time throughout the book that the Japanese text is layered with such an image. The protagonist of *Das Bad* struggles to inhabit a space of meaning making because her body is first and foremost visible as a symbol, a representation of gender and foreignness, a function of a pre-established meaning. The letters of the Roman alphabet on the pages of chapter 1, 2, and 10 inscribe the Japanese body with European ideas and stereotypes, foreignizing the female Japanese body. Many of Tawada's texts focus their attention on the letters of the European writing system, and in numerous instances these letters exude physicality, even threat, "Man darf ihn [den Buchstaben] nicht anschauen, sondern muß ihn sofort in einen Laut übersetzen und seinen Körper verschwinden lassen" "One must not look at it [the letter] but one has to immediately translate it into a sound and make its body

disappear' (Tawada, qtd. in Kilchmann 358). It is this technique that the protagonist in *Das Bad* finally applies to her own body. In order to undo the inscriptions of "Fremdkörper" (the foreign letters of the German alphabet, particularly the X) and in order to escape from her own status as a "Fremdkörper" herself, the protagonist makes the letters on her body as well as her whole body disappear. In her article "Making Senses: Translation and the Materiality of Written Signs in Yoko Tawada," Gizem Arslan states,

In all cases, some of Tawada's key textual elements strive to appear or in fact be illegible, for a moment or longer. Be they purportedly accidental illegibilities treated by characters and the author as deliberate, or strategic illegibilities related to typographic or sound phenomena, they are intended to foreground the foreignness of the familiar and the familiarity of the foreign. By refusing to transmit meaning, they force the reader to contend with the materiality and corporeality of texts and by extension, subjects. (340–341)

Illegible sense challenges the reader's senses and highlights the material presences that are always there to be read nonetheless. By challenging the reader to read beyond the familiar ways and consider the foreign (bodies, subjects, ideas) in the familiar, the different levels of the book collapse into one; the image of a "zusammen geschobenes Teleskop" 'retracted telescope' (130) that Sigrid Weigel borrowing from Walter Benjamin uses to describe Tawada's oeuvre comes to mind.

### **Pages Full of Water**

After the end of the story, there are still several pages left, if only due to the fact that the Japanese version requires more space than the German version. These pages, which are the beginning of the Japanese version, privilege the visual. After the narrative has come to its conclusion, the remaining pages are filled with pictures of water layered with pictures of an

open book seemingly floating or sinking into the water. The letters, the language, the story are visually drowning in the water on the pages. While we can at times still read these pages and recognize parts of the story we have just read—the pages are from the first German edition of the book—they do not form any coherent narrative whole anymore; instead, the opened pages stand on their own. At times the water image obscures parts or the whole of the text and makes it nearly impossible to read anything. We are now asked to read images rather than text. While we might have been inclined to dismiss the images in chapter 1, 2 and 10 as mere backdrop, we are at this point unable to disregard the visual level. The story, its meaning, our way of reading are dissolving, but what we are left with is not empty pages, it's not nothing; what we are left with is visual expression that defies its own legibility and undermines traditional Western reading practices. Instead of being inscribed with meaning, water offers the possibility to dissolve, to drown, but also to swim, to emerge, to generate. In this way, these last pages not only emphasize the importance of reading on multiple levels (text, image, meaning, materiality), but also remind the reader that water is an essential element—in the human body (*Das Bad* 7), on our planet (*Das Bad* 145), and in this book.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of this reappearance of water in the book, we might even reinterpret the protagonist's transparent body in the end as her attempt to become more like a body of water. Just as the protagonist mentions in the beginning of the novel, water is fluid, it moves and changes, it flows and connects, but not without resistance; it is viscously porous. But, in contrast to more solid and malleable bodies like the human body, water cannot be inscribed in the same way. Instead, it has the power to destabilize inscriptions because it can change them, dissolve them, make them illegible, and wash them away; it can create indifference where there was difference. Throughout the last pages, text is still present, at times going under, at other times reemerging, but these inscriptions do not have the upper hand; in this space of water, reading them does not depend on the words. Instead, the reader is asked to engage in a different, more disorienting but also infinitely more hopeful kind of meaning making by

privileging movement and dissolution over legibility.<sup>14</sup> In the end, the book embraces *viscous porosity* and *indifference* as a way to break out of the repeated and violent inscriptive practices; it demands reading as an open process of sense and the senses.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While *Das Bad* has been published as a separate book in German (in several editions, see note 2 below), the English translation “The Bath” has to date appeared in the collection *Where Europe Begins* (2002) alongside several other stories but has not been published separately.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine unless cited otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> *Das Bad* has to date been published in three clearly distinct editions and it would be a worthwhile endeavor to explore and examine how each edition changes and grows, almost organically, out of its predecessors. As Hallensleben points out, “Tawada herself considers her writing rhizomatic, a never-ending text that ‘is a weird and wonderful plant that has grown in all directions out of a single word knot’” (169). We might understand each new and changed edition of *Das Bad* as a material expression of this never-ending growth process of Tawada’s writing.

<sup>4</sup> Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad* is an extremely intricate and complex text which makes it a difficult task to do justice to it in a single article. For this article, I have chosen a relatively narrow focus in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of just a few selected features. Consequently, much will go unmentioned and further research is certainly needed to explore the multifaceted story and the many motifs of the novel further. I hope to offer more insights into questions relating to water, hybridity, and feminist perspectives in *Das Bad* as part of my dissertation project.

<sup>5</sup> In this emphasis on multiple “senses” that are part and emerge from the reading process, I am indebted here to Gizem Arslan’s article “Making Senses. Translation and the Materiality of the Written Sign in Yoko Tawada,” specifically her claim that “Reading here is a process not exclusively—nor even primarily—of making sense, but of ‘making senses’” (344) with the phrase under quotation marks borrowed from the German literary scholar



and media theorist Friedrich Kittler.

<sup>6</sup> In her highly influential book *Bodily Natures* (which is also the source for Hallensleben's concept of *transcorporeality*), Alaimo writes, "Imagining *human* corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which *the human* is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the *human* is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2; emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Own translation: "The idea of a 'resistant' text corresponds with that of a user of a script who possesses only limited authority; this user does not freely command the meanings of the signs, because they are co-determined through the history of its prior usage. Precisely this experience of foreignness and resistance of letters and texts stimulates reflected writing and script-conscious reading."

<sup>8</sup> "Would you mind if I tried makeup?"

Xander covered my face with a powder base. He laid it on so thickly that I it closed up all my pores and my skin could no longer breathe. Then with a fine brush he traced the outline of my eyelids, working as carefully as an archeologist brushing bits of dirt from an earthenware shard he's excavating. Then he filled in the area where my mouth was with lipstick exactly the color of my lips.

"I'll dye your hair black for you."

"Why do you want to blacken hair that's already black?"

"Unless it's dyed, it'll come out white as an old woman's because of the flash."

(...) When he finished dyeing my hair, Xander drew an x on my cheek.

"When I was a child, I marked everything precious to me with an x, so it would belong to me." Then he kissed the mark.

After that Xander stood me in front of a wall and pressed the shutter release button as casually as if he were pulling a trigger. The x on my cheek dug into my flesh. It stopped the light from playing and crucified the image of a Japanese woman onto the paper.

(Tawada, “The Bath” 12)

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the reader that I am referring to here is always the reader of the German text, thus the reader more closely aligned with Xander as well as the language and culture that the protagonist enters and for who she is visible first and foremost as a “foreigner.” The reader of the German is not the same as the reader of the Japanese; the protagonist is herself Japanese and thus already legible and accepted within the context of the Japanese language and culture. This is also obvious in the design of the book as none except for one of the Japanese pages are layered with images of the “exotic, foreign” women. We can, therefore, conclude that a different kind of reading is assumed within the German text compared to the Japanese.

<sup>10</sup> “Seven-tenths of the globe is covered with water, so it isn’t surprising that one sees different patterns on its surface every day. (...) I spread out a map of the world. On the map, the water has suspended any motion, so all the cities look as if they’re always in exactly the same place. Countless red lines, perhaps air routes or fishnets, run from city to city. The earth’s face is caught in this net. Every day, human beings adjust the face with makeup, using the map as their model.” (Tawada, “The Bath” 49–50)

<sup>11</sup> There is one more instance throughout the novel where an image is layered with the text. In chapter 3 (page 47) the image of the front half of a fish appears on the lower half of the page. The text on this page details Japanese and German businessmen being served and eating a big fish. The protagonist is present at the business meeting and dinner as a translator for the two groups.

<sup>12</sup> The image of the coffin appears throughout the novel and seems strongly tied to the protagonist’s experience of her body and her identity. Right on the first page, she remarks, for example, that her mirror reminds her of a coffin. The mirror provides her with the means to model herself after the picture hanging next to it, an act of reinscribing the appearance of a foreign woman onto her body. The mirror as a coffin already seems to

foreshadow the fatal effect of this (re-)inscription on her body and identity.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that the pages shown in the water are pages of the older edition with only the German translation of the story. This generates some continuity with the older edition referencing the evolution of this specific book, but it also prevents the old version from speaking and being legible because of its transparency. This visualizes a development parallel to that of the protagonist of the story.

<sup>14</sup> Tawada alludes to this possibility of “watery” existence, “watery” realities in her *Hamburger Poetikvorlesungen*. In “Tangeshima,” she asks, “Was wäre aber, wenn sie [die Realitäten] alle aus Wasser bestehen würden? Wie kann man die Differenzen zwischen unterschiedlichen Wassern sichtbar machen oder halten?” ‘But what would happen if all of them [the realities] were made of water? How can one make the differences between various waters visible and hold them in place?’ (55)

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