

## ESSAY

# “No More Translations”: Uncounting Languages in Yoko Tawada’s *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*

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One of the narrators of Yoko Tawada’s 2011 novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* makes several perplexing remarks about reading and writing: “I won’t write about the past, I’ll write about all the things that are still going to happen to me. My life will unfold in exactly the way I’ve set it down on the page” (69). Later, she adds, “While I was copying out these passages from the book, I entered the story being told as its protagonist” (71). To write one’s own future and to plagiarize: bold pronouncements we scarcely think of as proper to the memoir, preoccupied as it is with establishing the originality of an author’s past. In *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (hereafter *Memoirs*), however, these unusual claims take on a strange, novelistic life of their own. They announce the preferred compositional strategies of the protagonist, an unnamed female polar bear who is writing her memoir after retiring from the circus, and who is trying to resolve the linguistic conundrum arising from her migration across geographic borders—from the Soviet Union to West Berlin and possibly on to Canada. Her statement “I hoped it won’t confuse me to be suddenly writing my life in several languages at the same time” (66–67) voices not only the polar bear’s concerns about the future of her writing but also the particular problem the novel’s author has been addressing in her vast body of work. Tawada, who moved to Germany from Japan in 1982 at age twenty-two, has drawn an enormous creative energy from what the bear-protagonist presents as a potentially debilitating source of confusion, as attested to by her work in Japanese and German published to critical acclaim in both countries and beyond. Still, “being a novelist it would be much easier to write in just one language,” Tawada said in an interview

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(Interview), but her embrace of the less evident path of exophony—writing in a language other than her native language and writing in her native language with a view from outside it—suggests she eschewed the easy solution.

Tawada's deft interrogations of this multilingual condition have attracted much scholarly examination of the diverse "translational poetics" (21) driving her practice—a term I take from Keijirō Suga (see also Matsunaga). Noting Tawada's mental agility that goes "through the available phonetic and semantic resources in (at least) two languages" and her "constant process of self-translation" (27), Suga proposes using the term "omniphone"<sup>1</sup>—defined as "a state of language in which many other languages of the world resonate" and that thus refutes the "very abstract notion of 'purity' and stability of a national language" (28)—to describe Tawada's literary practice. In a more recent essay, Sigrid Weigel points out that the form of translation involved in Tawada's work is not so much "translation in general" as an "experimental mode of writing [that] develops over the abyss of two languages which have nothing in common within the horizon of comparative linguistics, not any affinity and no hidden communicating tubes," separated as Japanese and German are "by entirely different writing systems," one "a pictographic script and [the other] an alphabetic system" (49). On the other hand, noting that translational poetics has become so broadly applied to Tawada's works as to risk becoming stereotypical, Christine Ivanovic proposes a finer distinction between the different kinds of translationalism in Tawada's texts (e.g., whether the text is written by Tawada in one or two languages, whether it is adapted or translated by Tawada), while calling for attention to Tawada's developing techniques over three decades of writing (62–63).

This essay, too, takes up the issue of translational poetics but from a narratological perspective. Recently critics have begun to explore narratology in the study of translation and its relation to multilingual narratives. Klaus Kaindl's edited volume *Transfiction* (2014), focusing on "translation-related phenomena in fiction" (4) and in particular the

appearance of "translators and interpreters as fictional beings" (5), notes that few studies have pursued narratological categories of character analysis—studies like Gerard Genette's and Mieke Bal's but that classify the translators and interpreters portrayed (18). In a like vein, concerned with fictional representations of multilingualism and translation, Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman broach the possibility of constructing "a 'grammar' or a 'matrix' of typical multilingual or translation-based plots," while further suggesting that narratological theory with its distinctions between levels of diegesis can enable us "to model very different ways of fictionalising multilingualism and translation, namely those whereby the fictional translator operates not within the story but at the (extradiegetic, metadiegetic, metanarrative) level of the story's telling" (24–27). Gerald Prince points out that attention to what does not "quite survive translation" can help narratologists reflect on "the weight or significance of various [narrative] features" and their functioning (29). This essay extends these reflections, proposing that shifts and ruptures of narrative voice in *Memoirs* illuminate our understanding of Tawada's translational poetics, particularly these recurrent preoccupations in her work: mother tongue, language choice, translation, and identity formation.<sup>2</sup>

### Overlapping Voices

The issue of translation arises explicitly in part 1 of the tripartite novel. Following her retirement from a circus career, the female polar bear protagonist has taken up the challenge of writing her memoir. Passages evoking scenes from her childhood are interwoven with present-day happenings of her life in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The narrative chronicles the bear's rise to literary fame as her memoir, still in the process of being written, is published in installments, but her success quickly turns to infamy as translations of her work read on the other side of the Iron Curtain are taken as evidence of socialist abuse of animals. The bear's imperiled status with the authorities results in a rescue effort orchestrated by Citizens Initiative KAOS—Keeping Authors Out of Siberia—which brings her to West Berlin. Though the group wishes to

encourage her creative aspirations under freer, more humane conditions, the bear's observations of life on the other side undercuts, with light humor, stereotyped notions of difference and opposition. It is her exile that kindles the thought of venturing into writing in German, the dominant language of her new home.

While the polar bear sees the multilingual challenge as essential to her project of self-writing, her attempts are deemed improper and discouraged. When Wolfgang, one of the members of Citizens Initiative KAOS, learns that the bear is setting her native Russian aside and learning German so she can continue writing her memoir in the language of her new home, he admonishes her, telling her that she “[has] to write in [her] own mother tongue,” “to be pouring out [her] heart . . . in a natural way” (51). Wolfgang's view is reiterated by Herr Jäger, leader of the initiative, who though “seething” over their charge's errant behavior, feigns calm reserve: “I thought we had communicated quite clearly that you are to write in your own language, since we have a fantastic translator” (57). Both their editorial directives reveal assumptions about language and translation stemming from what Yasemin Yildiz has called the monolingual paradigm, which imagines “individuals and social formations . . . to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (2). For Wolfgang, the “mother tongue” generates the desired “natural” emotional expression. Further, translation is vested with the task of policing the border between native and nonnative, domestic and foreign, authentic and inauthentic, and thus with maintaining the imagination of a singular true language.

Read in this light, the polar bear's unusual approach towards memoir writing, as seen in the quotations that opened this essay, can be understood as a rejection of the monolingual paradigm espoused by her two sponsors. Toward the end of part 1, the polar bear applies to immigrate to Canada as a political refugee. Wondering how she would write about her future move without repeating the arrival scene

she experienced in Berlin, she consults three works of “literature of migration” (69) recommended to her by Friedrich, a bookseller she has befriended in Berlin and who earlier had introduced the bear to various works privileging an animal protagonist's point of view. Although the language of these three books is unspecified, it is reasonable to presume that they are written in or translated into German, the language the bear is learning, rather than her native Russian. It is while reading the third of these accounts that the polar bear begins copying out the passages and claiming to live out the story as her own. Through her plagiarism, she in fact grants the new language power to inscribe her future identity. In this fictional portrayal we descry hints of the autobiographical, echoing the extrafictional challenge Tawada's exophonic writing poses to what counts as a language and what one's own language is. Shortly after the bear's writerly manifesto that she will go on to write about the lives of her daughter, Tosca, and grandson, Knut, part 1 of the novel ends. The reader is thus invited to consider parts 2 and 3 as an extension of the polar bear matriarch's writerly experimentation—a response outlining a multilingualism not bound by the strictures of the monolingual paradigm.

When part 2 opens, the juxtaposition of a polar bear against a narrator who is not a bear suggests that the narrative perspective has shifted:

My spine stretches tall, my chest broadens, I tuck my chin slightly and stand before the living wall of ice, unafraid. It isn't a struggle. And in truth this ice wall is really just warm snowy fur. I gaze up and discover two black pearl eyes and a moist nose. Quickly I place a sugar cube on my tongue and stick it out as far and as high as I can. The polar bear bends down toward me slowly. (77)

In the next paragraph we learn that this polar bear's name is Tosca. The new narrator cannot be the narrator whose memoir the bear in part 1 is supposedly copying from, for in that account the narrator describes Tosca as her child rather than a counterpart. The perspectival shift therefore denotes a break from the earlier narrative, as the reader

concludes that two new characters—another unnamed narrator and Tosca the polar bear—are presented here. This interpretation is substantiated as the reader gleans more details about the new narrator: she is human, petite in stature, grew up during the Second World War and is now living in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and her name, we learn far into part 2, is Barbara. Like the initial polar bear protagonist, she works as a circus artiste, performing with animals considered to be wild and dangerous. On the other hand, Tosca the polar bear, with whom Barbara performs, appears to be the offspring of the polar bear matriarch in part 1, but unlike her predecessor she has lost all ability to speak and write. At the beginning of part 2, the human Barbara and the bear Tosca are said to "[lack] a common language" (96, 106), but fortunately the duo is able to converse freely in sleep, in the realm of dreams, as marked by the appearance of direct discourse. In one of their dialogues, when Tosca observes she has already been written as a character in her mother's autobiography, Barbara offers to help her "escape from [it]" (110) by "writing Tosca's biography in the first person" (111). In the next paragraph, the narrative perspective shifts from that of a human to that—we may suppose—of a human-as-bear: "When I was born, it was dark all around me, and I heard nothing. I pressed myself against the warm body beside me, sucked sweet liquid from a teat, and fell back asleep. I'll give this warm body the name Mama-lia" (111). Although this attempt lasts not even two paragraphs and much of part 2 continues to be narrated from Barbara's perspective, the writing of self-as-another signals the start of a trajectory that will end with the bear entering into the human and with their voices speaking as one:

"Are you planning to come inside me?"  
 "Yes."  
 "I'm scared."  
 We laughed with one voice. (138)

In the final pages of part 2, the narrative perspective shifts again to that of a bear. This time the shift seems to take place definitively, and in the English

translation it is foregrounded by the graphic representation of a paw print (🐾).<sup>3</sup> Structurally, part 2 closes with the same scene that opened it—a depiction of the circus act called Kiss of Death performed by the bear-and-human duo—but this time narrated from a "bear's-eye-view": "I stand on two legs, my back slightly rounded, my shoulders relaxed. The tiny, adorable human woman standing before me smells sweet as honey. Very slowly, I move my face toward her blue eyes, she places a sugar cube on her short little tongue and holds up her mouth to me. . . ." (165). Part 2, joining human and bear voices, puts the perspectival shifts in a new light. By the end of the section, it is possible to read the opening and closing depictions of the Kiss of Death as narrated not by *either* human or bear, but by a bear-as-human or a human-as-bear; indeed, this merging of voices holds true for the polar bear matriarch in part 1, who assumes the voice of another narrator through her copying. Thus, the perspectival "shift" is conceptualized not as a crossing of a rigid divide or a switching of sides but as the subsumption of one into another and a convergence of perspectives.

Through a delicate equilibrium of ambiguity wherein the narrative perspective never settles on one side or the other, *Memoirs* deconstructs the human-animal binary.<sup>4</sup> This marks *Memoirs's* divergence from previous literary works featuring animal protagonists, a point about which the novel is eminently self-conscious, as seen in its copious citations of texts, including but not limited to Franz Kafka's *A Report to an Academy* (51) and *Investigations of a Dog* (50; 61; 63), Paddington (42), Goldilocks (41), and so on. For the cited works, one might argue that despite—or because of—the anthropomorphic characterization, the animal-human binary is not ultimately discarded even if the nature of its boundary is being renegotiated. The citations underscore the difference in *Memoirs*, where the perspectival convergence renders the boundary between animal and human porous.

The novel's deconstruction of the human-animal binary—accomplished by means of these shifting, converging narrative perspectives—doubles

as a metaphor for a revised conception of linguistic difference. If we read part 2 as a continuation of the polar bear matriarch's multilingual self-writing, it may be possible to take the eventual deconstruction of difference in biological species as suggesting the deconstruction of linguistic difference. To contemplate the question "What difference?" we may want to look to the work of Naoki Sakai, who has argued that the unity of a language cannot be empirically verified since it is something like Immanuel Kant's regulative idea, an "object in idea" that, for instance, enables knowledge about languages to be systematically organized "in a modern, scientific manner" ("How Do We Count" 73). Sakai argues for reversing the concept that there are unified languages anterior to the act of translation, proposing the term "schema of co-figuration" to explain how the representation of linguistic unities arises in what he elsewhere terms the "modern regime of translation" ("Modern Regime" 106):

[O]nly when translation is represented by the schematism of co-figuration does the putative unity of a national language as a regulative idea ensue. The schema of co-figuration is an apparatus that allows us to *imagine* or *represent* what goes on in translation; it allows us to give to ourselves an *image* or *representation* of translation. Thus imagined, the representation of translation is no longer a movement in potentiality. And this image or representation always contains two figures, and in due course, is necessarily accompanied by spatial division in terms of "border." ("How" 75)

To restore the "movement in potentiality" proper to an understanding of what happens during translation, Sakai cautions that "we have to guard against the static view of translation in which difference is substantialized" (72), hence challenging the simplistic notion that we always know what is being referred to when we speak of, say, Russian or German, to name the languages relevant to Tawada's polar bear. The misgivings the bear felt toward the imposition of translation on her reflects just such a rejection of the ascription of substantialized difference.

As a strategy to circumvent the monolingual paradigm of translation, the bear's second assertion,

that she is copying the text of others as her own, is an attempt to redefine linguistic difference and translation. Her surprising invocation of plagiarism draws us into dialogue with the familiar trope of translation as reproduction and of the perfect copy as the apotheosis of a translation well executed. But we see that conceptualizing translation as such presupposes a known, a priori linguistic difference, against which the copy is judged for how perfect a counterpart it is. The copy inevitably falls short of that aspiration to equivalence, for as a belated product viewed against or, as Sakai might say, co-figured alongside the original, the translation is laden with the negative connotations of being derivative, secondary, and, by extension, inferior.<sup>5</sup> By executing the impossible ideal flawlessly, then, the bear's plagiarism turns that idea of translation on its head. *To present the original as the copy* is to negate notions of a priori difference, even compelling the reader to recognize other forms of difference inevitably generated through the act of copying—for instance, in the time and place of (re)inscription.<sup>6</sup> The mechanics of the copy, as staged through the merging of Barbara's and Tosca's voices, suggests that translation moves through a sphere of convergence before differentiation; the convergence reminds us that the apparent surficial difference denotes not a difference "between" but a difference "within."<sup>7</sup> Trading a schema of co-figuration for a schema of convergence, the novel's narratological interventions undermine the representation of linguistic unities arising from translation in a monolingual paradigm. I reiterate that by convergence, I mean here not a merging of two already defined and enclosed entities, but an original convergence where continuity is being negotiated at a point of incommensurability.<sup>8</sup>

This schema of convergence is amplified by a further shift in narrative perspective: Toward the end of part 2, the narrating bear reveals herself as "Old Tosca reborn" (162), a second and later bear, born in 1986, and not the original whom Barbara kissed in the 1960s. Two possibilities arise: either the storytelling in part 2 is shared between not two but three narrators (Barbara and two Toscas) or, when it comes to Tosca's voice, we never hear

from the first but only from the later bear. What matters is less reaching a verdict on this point than recognizing the recurrent trope of merged perspectives. The second bear becomes implicated, through temporally recursive narration, in a history she had not been alive for; her narration beyond the confines of her temporal existence mirrors what the polar bear matriarch had professed to do, only this time the temporal dynamics are reversed, reaching into the past instead of the future. To the synchronous interrelation between Barbara and the first Tosca is added a diachronic dimension, stretching the temporal imagination on which the construction of the bounds of a countable language relies. In this peculiar portrayal of merged bears we find a reiteration of an original presented as a copy and the renunciation of definitive contours in favor of permeability, both of which disarticulate the borders of countable languages. If, as Sakai argues, the modern regime of translation provides a "diagnosis of modernity and its politics of language [as premised on] the assumption that language is *countable*" ("Modern Regime" 107; see also Sakai and Mezzadra 13), it becomes clear that the narratological devices in *Memoirs* work against this regime, by *uncounting* languages and dismantling the borders that enable enumeration: in the polar bear's words, "no more translations" (Tawada, *Memoirs* 51). Considering these narrative dimensions enriches our discussion of Tawada's translational poetics.

### Speech and Writing

In *Memoirs*, the disarticulation of separate, linguistic unities is effected not only through temporal manipulations but further through a split in the narrative voice into what Jonathan Culler might call a vocal writing and a graphic writing. When the novel opens, although the narrative voice seems to be recounting its childhood and situating the reader in the familiar territory of the memoir, this illusion is disrupted four paragraphs in. A metatextual voice, also the narrator's own, interjects as if in a voice-over, to consider the text written up until this point: "Writing: a spooky activity. Staring at the sentence I've just written makes me dizzy. Where am I

at this moment? I'm in my story—gone. To come back, I drag my eyes away from the manuscript and let my gaze drift toward the window until finally I'm here again, in the present. But where is *here*, when is *now*?" (Tawada, *Memoirs* 4). Here, the dislocation of the self ("where is *here*, when is *now*?") is engendered through the split—and then collapse of the distinction—between graphic and vocal writing, for we further note that the novel is ultimately presented as written text. *Memoirs* challenges the conception of speech/writing as a neat bifurcation—an opposition that, as Culler observes in his essay "Writing and Logocentrism," undergirds philosophical inquiry and stems from a long tradition of phonocentrism, which "treats writing as a representation of speech and puts speech in a direct and natural relationship with meaning" (92). The conventional narrative voice, purporting to index reality through a written text, could be said to be rooted in this supposition. Such a phonocentric conception of the narrative voice is troubled by the polar bear matriarch's self-reflexive attention to the literary procedures of invention, editing, and framing—that is, her positing of a simple instance in which writing precedes and constitutes the speaking voice.

Phonocentrism, seen as undergirding Ferdinand de Saussure's theorization of a linguistic system, has had important ramifications for how twentieth-century structural linguistics conceptualized language. In playing up the split between speech and writing, *Memoirs* seems interested in underscoring their nonconvergence into linguistic unities. For instance, in West Berlin, the polar bear matriarch finds herself, almost out of nowhere, "apparently now capable of improvising a brief conversation in German" (48), even though reading and writing in the new language still elude her. In part 2, Barbara alternates between speaking or writing herself, conversing with Tosca, and laboring to write Tosca's biography in the bear's voice. In part 3 Knut does not write at all, but even then, a perspectival shift midway when he learns to speak about himself in the first person rather than the third throws another wrench into the conception of speech as originary. The deconstruction of the speech-writing binary, by exposing the artifice that constructs a language's

apparent unity, partakes in the uncounting of languages. It is apt then that, as a whole, the novel stages an uncountable multilingual aesthetic, since the text, basically wholly written in Japanese at its inception (although I shall next bracket this), does not allow the reader to identify the precise moments when the polar bear presumably switches from Russian to German, whether in her speech or writing.<sup>9</sup>

On the linguistic level, an uncounting takes place through a reconfigured relationship between phonology and graphology, sound and script. In part 3, German emerges in the Japanese text, seeming to provide a kind of representation of the sonic landscape of present-day Berlin, where this part of the narrative unfolds. The passage below narrates the buzz of preparation underway as the zoo readies itself for Knut's debut:

ローザはクリステイアンのつるつるした肌の上でパフパフと粉をはたきながら、「今日は、だいたい平均的な先進国首脳会議キプフェル・トレッフエンの時と同じくらいの数のマスコミ関係者が取材に来るそうですね」と言ったが、クヌートはそれを聞いて、「キプフェル 峯」という響きの高く鋭く尖った感じが恐ろしくなって、戸棚の後ろに駆け込んで、一番奥の壁に身体を押しつけた。

(Tawada, *Yuki no renshūsei* 247–48)

Rosa applied powder to Christian's smooth skin and chattered away, repeating everything she'd heard: "They're saying there'll be more reporters than at a political summit." Threatened by the pointy sound of the word "summit," Knut hid behind the big cupboard, pressing his body against the wall.

(Tawada, *Memoirs* 196)

Twice in the Japanese quotation, furigana appears. A form of notation that affixes *kana* in small print above *kanji* to indicate its pronunciation, it provides Tawada with an opportunity to decouple phonological and graphic aspects that, yoked together, contribute to the notion of a putatively unitary (Japanese) language. Deploying the furigana as a poetic device, Tawada combines Japanese and German by suturing the German words *Gipfeltreffen* ("summit meeting") and *Gipfel* ("peak, or summit meeting")—rendered sonically in the Japanese phonographic signs “ギプ

フェル・トレッフエン” and “ギプフェル”—to the *kanji* “先進国首脳会議” and “峯,” respectively, here the “native” element in Japanese inscription. If we look further, we will find other examples where such a Germanized *kana* is affixed to a combination of both *kanji* and *kana*—e.g., 自由行動する人 (*Freigänger* [“prisoner on day-release”; 262] and クラゲンバア (*Kragenbär* [“Asian black bear”; 266])—leading us to ask if what Tawada accomplishes is not more than a simple suturing of a foreign sound to a familiar inscription, but also what could plausibly be described as a suturing of sound to sound. In his essay on Tawada's reading of Paul Celan, Sakai introduces Morinaka Takaaki's understanding of translation as “repetition of that which has been already operative in potentiality within the original language, which shatters its putative coherence, as it were, folding back its border onto its inside” (qtd. in Sakai, “Image” 37). In a subtle but consequential way, Tawada's choices illuminate such a shattering—for are we reading German or Japanese here? Does not German appear as Japanese and vice versa? Rescrambling the codes that had made Japanese appear unitary, Tawada's poetics destabilize “the phonocentrism of linguistic nationalism” (39). Mirroring the narratological convergence of voices, these linguistic moments linger over the meeting ground of languages, making visible encounters that cannot be reduced to the notion of translation as foreignizing or domesticating.

### Mother Tongue

Although the novel appears to narrate the fate of three generations of polar bears living among humans, the interjection of the human Barbara's perspective in part 2 marks a clear disruption of linear temporality and denotes the subsequent narrative's—or narratives'—resistance to the narrative terms and temporal schemata outlined in part 1. A similar rupture and resistance arises in part 3, the section ostensibly about Knut, grandson of the polar bear matriarch. When part 3 opens, the narrative perspective is ambiguous:

口に乳首が突きつけられる。思わず顔をそらしても、乳首は口にくっついてくる。脳がと

ろけそうになるくらい甘いにおいに誘われて、鼻がひくひくし、口がだらしなく開いてしまう。顎を伝ってこぼれる生暖かい液体は、ミルクなのか、それとも涎なのか。唇に力を入れ、喉をごくんとやって、喉の奥を暖かいミルクが流れ落ちていくのを感じる。それが胃におさまって、お腹がまるくなる。肩の力が抜けて、手足が重くなる。

(Tawada, *Yuki no renshūsei* 211)

He turned his head away, but the nipple came with it as if glued to his mouth. There was a seductively sweet odor, his brain could melt in it. While his mouth relented and opened, his nose twitched three times. Was the warm liquid running down his chin milk or saliva? He collected all his strength in his lips, swallowed, and felt the lukewarm sensation descend, landing in his stomach. His belly grew ever rounder, his shoulders lost their strength, and his four limbs hung heavy.

(Tawada, *Memoirs* 169)

The ambiguity is less apparent in the German and English versions than in Japanese, since the insertion of the third person pronoun "he," to resolve the grammatical demand for a subject, lessens the effect; we seem to be reading third-person narration. Japanese syntax permits the omission of the subject, however, so the above paragraph could be interpreted as being told from a first- or third-person perspective. A few pages later, the narrative seems to elucidate:

力強い腕の持ち主は、ミルクをくれる前に必ず熱っぽく「クヌート」と何度も呼ぶので、ミルクを飲みたいという気持ちそのものを「クヌート」と名付けることにした。

飲み始めると暖かさが上から下へ道を作る。その道がクヌートという名の欲望を線状に引き延ばし、その先端がお腹に達すると、今度は心臓が強く動きだし、そこから指の先まで放射線状に暖かいものが広がっていく。下腹は重くなりごろごろ鳴って、お尻が少しかゆくなる。そのうちまた眠ってしまうのだけれど、意識がなくなる前のその暖かさが広がっている区域全体がクヌートになる。

一方、ミルクを与えてくれる力強い腕の持ち主は、次に出現した新しい男によって「マテイアス」と呼ばれた。(214–15)

The man with the strong arms always excitedly called out the word "Knut!" to announce the milk. Desire for the white liquid acquired the name "Knut."

When he'd sucked in several mouthfuls of milk, the warmth began to make its way through his ribcage. The milk-lust named Knut reached his belly. He could feel his heart. Something warm fanned out from the center of his heart, arriving in the very tips of his fingers. His abdomen murmured melancholically, his anus itched, and just before he fell asleep, he was prepared to describe this entire well-warmed territory as Knut.

A new man appeared in the room. He gave the giver of milk with the strong arms the name "Matthias" and the milk-drinker the name "Knut." (171)

After identifying "Knut" as the subject being spoken about, the narrative proceeds to substitute "Knut" in place of the previously ambiguous subject, seeming to confirm a third-person perspective. But the rug is pulled out from under our feet, as the words of a sun bear, whom Knut encounters on a morning ramble around the zoo, disabuse us of our misconception:

「君はそんな薄着をしているから寒いだろう。クヌートを見ろ。いいセーターを着ているだろう」とクヌートが言いかえすと、マレーグマは顔を皺だらけにして笑って、「お前は自分を自分でクヌートと呼んでいるのか。はっはっは。三人称の熊か。これは愉快だ。それとも、君はまだ赤ん坊なのか」とかかった。(264)

"You aren't dressed warmly enough. Just look at Knut. He's wearing a nice sweater."

When the sun bear heard these words, innumerable laugh lines appeared on his face. "You call yourself Knut? A bear speaking in the third person? I haven't heard anything that hilarious in a long time. Are you still a baby?" (208)

At this point the reader realizes that the third-person perspective indicates not an external observer but the young bear himself as yet unschooled in linguistic conventions. In part 3, the shift from a "third"- to "first"-person perspective, instead of marking a



division between an other and a self, collapses the demarcation between exteriority and interiority. Notably, what might seem to have been the polar bear matriarch's writing of Knut's life is turned inside out—and shown to be narrated in Knut's "own" voice. Far from lining up on a temporal continuum in *Memoirs's* narrative, the interjection of the voices of characters appearing "later," in parts 2 and 3, eschews diachronic indebtedness.

That Tawada's narrative rejects linear familial genealogies suggests an analogous rejection of the idea of translation as lineal inheritance. None of the polar bear progeny are depicted in direct interaction with their forebears: the matriarch interacts neither with her mother nor with Tosca, her daughter. In part 3, Knut is abandoned at birth by his mother, Tosca, and he is depicted as unwittingly tearing up a photograph of his biological parents that Matthias, his caretaker, had hung up on his crate. "The word 'family,'" the novel reads, "had an unsettling effect on the little bear" (180). This sense of alienation from their biological families extends to the novel's human characters: Barbara has left Anna, her daughter from her first marriage, to the care of her mother, and her second marriage—to Markus—seems doomed by an increasing mutual suspicion and mistrust. Knut's keeper, Matthias, seems to prefer the little bear's company to that of his family (178), and a friendly exchange with Knut's other caretaker, Christian, suggests that Matthias understands bears even better than he understands his wife and children (219). Thus the generational difference constituting *Memoirs's* tripartite structure only highlights their separation and discontinuity, subverting what Patricia Drechsel Tobin has termed the "genealogical imperative," the figure for linear time found in the "classical novel . . . with the dynastic line that unites the diverse generations of the genealogical family" (6–7). In *Memoirs*, biological genealogy is evoked only to be upended.

Tobin further draws an analogy between linear temporality and patriarchalism—between "the prestige of cause over effect, in historical time" and "the prestige of the father over the son" (12), the latter of which she notes to be "an extreme statement of the genealogical imperative" (10). It should hardly

surprise us that in a novel where linear temporality is problematized, fathers are conspicuously absent. The male characters who assume responsibility for the bears' upbringing and welfare—Ivan and Matthias—do not figure as fathers, but time and again as "male mother[s]" (Tawada, *Memoirs* 52, 188, 222). In part 3, instead of displaying an interest in marriage and copulation with female bears, Knut notes that when he grows up, he "want[s] to marry Matthias and live with him until death [do] us part" (217). Whether we take this as an expression of simple childlike affection or of homoerotic desire, which is suggested elsewhere in part 3,<sup>10</sup> what seems incontrovertible is a repudiation of the patriarchal prerogative and, once again, of genealogy. The appearance of Michael, Knut's phantomlike interlocutor, reiterates the point: enough clues suggest that this is a reference to Michael Jackson, here a symbol of perpetual youth, cementing part 3 as an arrested bildungsroman. The decision to go against a generic convention reflects, once again, *Memoirs's* rejection of a developmental view of individual languages and the attention it draws instead to the multiple temporalities within language. And Tawada's experimentation with narrative structure relates back to her translational poetics: in the revised schemata, the "after"-life of a text enabled by translation, if we are to revert to Walter Benjamin's terms, like the prefix "post" in postcolonialism or postmemory, does not occlude the coexistence of other—and previous—lives.

Tawada plays with another aspect of familial structure as she reconceptualizes what language is. In not substituting motherhood with fatherhood, but instead positing "male mothers," *Memoirs* rethinks the slippery concepts of motherhood and maternity. As Andrew Parker's *The Theorist's Mother* explains, attempts to define maternity (which generally asks "who *and* what a mother is") have tried to "constrain 'the' polysemia of 'meanings, practices, and structures' by filtering it through a series of binary oppositions," for instance, contrasting the "mother" to "mothering" as identity to practice (12). In an age where new reproductive technologies have precipitated a "split between social, biological, and genetic mothers" (14), the

"gender of the referent" (13)—that is, of the mother—is not a settled matter as earlier theories may have assumed. The fracturing of the "maternal reference [along] bio-legal-social dimensions" (14) illuminates the "structural conditions" wherein the mother, as per Jacques Derrida, is "more than one mother. Supplements of mothers, in an irreducible plurality" (qtd. in Parker 15). Among the implications one can draw from Derrida's "more than one mother," Parker argues, are the shift away from a binary logic opposing the mother to the father (17) and a suspension of the invocation of the mother to regulate distinctions between the literal and the figural (18). These statements apply to the maternal condition as represented in *Memoirs*: the supplement of adoptive mothers both male and female to female biological mothers, as well as the presence of biological and social dimensions of mothering under the sign of the maternal, point to an irreducible plurality of the mother.

In complicating notions of maternity, *Memoirs* questions the kinds of claims associated with the concept of "mother tongue"—specifically, claims made about language and about its relation to individuals. Here in greater detail is the interchange between the polar bear matriarch and Wolfgang, in which the bear responds in perplexity to her sponsor's insistence that she use her mother tongue:

"... I'll write in German, and you can save time. No more translations."

"No, that's out of the question! You have to write in your own mother tongue. You're supposed to be pouring out your heart, and that needs to happen in a natural way."

"What's my mother tongue?"

"The language your mother speaks."

"I've never spoken with my mother."

"A mother is a mother, even if you never speak with her."

"I don't think my mother spoke Russian."

"Ivan was your mother. Have you forgotten?"

The age of female mothers is over."

(51–52)

On one level, the lack of connection between the bear and her biological mother presents a comical

critique of the idea that one's relationship to language is—literally—of the same organic and natural order as biological inheritance; the mother tongue is only a metaphor, and a metaphor that falls flat.

But *Memoirs* does more than dismantle the metaphor of the mother tongue. In *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, Yildiz points out that "mother tongue" is a "gendered and affectively charged kinship concept" pivotal to the monolingual paradigm (6). Yildiz further argues that "within the monolingual paradigm, 'mother tongue' is more than a metaphor. Instead, it constitutes a condensed *narrative* about origin and identity" (12). Through figures such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, Yildiz traces the coupling of language to nation in the German tradition in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, describing, as an example, how Schleiermacher trades a mechanistic image for *Muttersprache* ("mother tongue") when speaking of an individual's attachment to language, hence using *mother* to connote "a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation" (9). She continues:

I propose to read the modern notion of 'mother tongue' as a linguistic family romance. The linguistic family romance helps to fantasize a bodily as well as familial grounding in language that does not exist, say, in Schleiermacher's image of language as changeable horses strapped to a carriage. At the same time, this model offers a blueprint for tracing the emergence of possible alternative family romances that produce different conceptions of the relationship between languages and subjects and the origins of their affective ties. (12)

Yildiz's proposition is instructive: it enables us to see that what *Memoirs* chooses to do is not to proffer a different trope for language—not a reversion to the anachronistic horse-carriage image, for instance—but, through the irreducible plurality of the mother, to tell an alternative family romance. In *Memoirs*, the intimate relationships depicted are those between bear and human—between the polar bear matriarch and Ivan, her caretaker; Tosca and

Barbara; Knut and Matthias—pairings that find an echo in Christian’s words: “I think foster parents are more important than biological parents, anyhow” (Tawada, *Memoirs* 180). In contrast to the linguistic family romance, kinship is jettisoned in favor of “lateral alliance(s)” to which linear descent and filiation do not apply (Tobin 41). In evoking a temporality that extends in multiple directions (diachronically and synchronically) and suspending the literal-figural distinction in the family (as in the maternal), in thus rendering the mother more than one mother, *Memoirs* puts forward an antinarrative about the mother tongue, language, origin, and identity.

Echoing Parker’s remarks about the mother’s being “impossibly literal *and* figural” (19), David Bellos suggests that the phrase *mother tongue* is not a neutral expression but instead “insidious[ly]” suggests that “our preferred language is not just the language spoken to us by a mother but is, in some almost mystical sense, the mother of our selfhood—the tongue that made us what we are” (64). Thus, by way of an alternative family romance, *Memoirs* disentangles language and subjects from the purview of the nation construed monolingually, a process that enables the polar bear’s contestation of the border where she is seen to cross into foreign territory, beyond her own proper sphere. It calls into question the point at which one must surrender, according to Wolfgang and Herr Jäger’s schema, to translation by another and, notably, an other who supposedly represents the unbreachable native realm. As the bear notes, after all, “national identity has always been a foreign concept” to polar bears (Tawada, *Memoirs* 86); the bear’s writerly experiments amount to a working out of the conditions of possibility for the existence of a postmonolingual subject.

### Toward a Postmonolingual Paradigm of Translation

In sum, perspectival shifts reconceptualized as convergences in *Memoirs* deconstruct a host of binaries—animal/human, past/present, speech/writing, interior/exterior—that have structured the imagining and framing of linguistic difference. The

deconstructed binaries disarticulate the borders rendering languages countable. Through a translational poetics that expresses itself narratologically, Tawada’s novel creates a narrative structure that enables the telling of an alternative family romance different from that encapsulated by the “mother tongue” metaphor and narratives based on it. Indeed, the deconstructive procedure extends to the female-male binary when we remind ourselves of the presence of the polar bear matriarch hovering over part 3 and subsuming Knut’s male authorship into her female self, and not least, to an East-West opposition, not only through the matriarch’s own traversing of the Iron Curtain but again through the subsumption of subsequent geographies—the GDR in part 2, contemporary Berlin in part 3—into the spaces from which the matriarch writes. As such, *Memoirs*’s narratological workings allegorize a postmonolingual paradigm of translation where languages are uncounted and unmoored from naturalized relationships to geographic spaces.

The novelistic world *Memoirs* constructs has moved far from the monolingual paradigm of which Wolfgang and Herr Jäger are perfect representatives. In a mock-conciliatory act following their visit, the polar bear matriarch leaves a sentence written in Russian, reminiscent of *Anna Karenina*’s opening line—“All penguin marriages are alike, while every polar bear marriage is different” (58)—to be found by the two, and when they do, it is seized upon, translated, and pronounced enthusiastically by Wolfgang as “*Weltliteratur!*” (“world literature”). This is likely an allusion to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*, which in its conceptualization derives inexorably from a view of difference understood on national terms, as illustrated in one of his claims, that “it is . . . this connection between the original and the translation that expresses most clearly the relationship of nation to nation” (qtd. in Strich 349). This vision of translation is one that *Memoirs* ironizes. A view that objectifies the world as one where languages line up alongside each other, representing respective geographies, is no longer possible when the ostensible divide between exteriority and interiority is dissolved. What, then, of an image of the world? In

part 3 when Knut is taken out of his zoo enclosure for a walk, he marvels at seeing his familiar abode "from a new angle"—"[s]o this was the other side, the reverse of the stage" (204):

脳味噌が頭の中で百八十度回転して、視点の中心が鳥になって空に羽ばたいていった。上を見ているうちに、なんだか周りの世界が違って感じられ始めた。そうだ、いつも空から眺めていれば、反対側に来たからといって、おたおたする必要はなくなるんじゃないのか。  
(Tawada, *Yuki no renshūsei* 258)

[His brain matter revolved a hundred-and-eighty degrees inside his head; the center of his vision became a bird flapping its wings in the sky.] What was that just now? Knut gazed up at the sky, something was different from before. If he could just view everything from above, he would never again be startled by a change in perspective.

(Tawada, *Memoirs* 204)<sup>11</sup>

The movement of the bear's gaze toward the sky—a higher vantage point—might be read as a metaphor for greater objectivity or a whole-world view, but this view is ultimately presented as an impossibility: "[I]f he could." And Knut could not. Instead, echoing the notion of translation as bordering, it is a constant change in perspective, a fluid negotiation of porous borders, that is his lot and ours.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Andrew Parker, Janet Walker, Doug Slaymaker, and Anne Coldiron for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.

1. As Suga notes, the term is introduced by Patrick Chamoiseau (29).

2. Passages analyzed in this essay will be taken from Susan Bernofsky's English translation (2016) for reasons of readability and accessibility. Where the argument pertains specifically to poetics on a linguistic level—the narrating—I will include passages from *雪の練習生* (*Yuki no renshūsei* [2011]), the original Japanese text. In instances where I discuss variations between different language editions, I will also refer to the German edition self-translated by Tawada, *Etüden im Schnee* (*Studies in the Snow* [2014]), and the Chinese edition translated by Tian Xiaoxia, *雪的练习生* (*Xue de Lianxisheng*; *Snow Apprentice* [2012]).

3. In the Japanese edition this transition is unmarked, whereas in the German it is marked by an asterisk. Given my analysis in this

paragraph, one wonders if the decision to insert a paw print—thus seeming to mark the expressive presence of the bear—does not rather undercut what the narrative structure gains from keeping ambiguous. The point I am making is that the Japanese edition supports an ambiguity about whose perspective is expressive, and that the insertion of the paw print could be read as limiting.

4. My reading here diverges slightly from McNeill's. For McNeill, the boundary crossing involves "bringing [the] polar bear onto the other side of the human-animal divide" (54) and, ultimately, a "metamorphic merging" (58), a "fusion of a human soul and a polar bear soul" (59) in a reincarnated Toska. ("Toska" is the spelling used in the German edition.)

5. Venuti has written about how the devaluation of translation as "second-order representation" stems from an "individualistic conception of authorship," particularly in Anglo-American culture, which valorizes the foreign text as the original, authentic copy "true to the author's personality or intention" (6).

6. Benjamin's writings have had an influence on Tawada's thinking about translation (e.g., Arens; Tawada, *Celan*). Arens's argument that "Tawada's radical difference from Benjamin lies in her suggestion of the meeting between the original text with its translation at the time of the genesis of the original, not later" (62) seems borne out in this reading of *Memoirs*. If we return to Benjamin's essay, it seems clear that his vision of translation as "realizing . . . seminally or intensively" the "innermost relationship among languages," "a relationship of special convergence" where "languages are not alien to one another, but *a priori*, and irrespective of all historical connections, related to each other in what they want to say" (77) is reflected in *Memoirs's* depiction of converging languages. Benjamin, nonetheless, situates translation as temporally posterior, as proceeding "from the original . . . as from its 'afterlife' or 'survival'" (76). "To set free in his own language the pure language spellbound in the foreign language, to liberate the language imprisoned in the work by rewriting it, is the translator's task" (82), which suggests that the tasks of the translator and the poet are distinct (80). By contrast, the decoupling of teleology from linear temporality in *Memoirs* returns a fuller import to the term "translational poetics," used to describe Tawada's practice, one in which, to reformulate Aren's words, the translator's task is to travail at the genesis of the original.

7. In her essay "The Critical Difference," Barbara Johnson writes, "Difference, in other words, is not what distinguishes one *identity* from another. It is not a difference *between* (or at least not between independent units). It is a difference *within*. Far from constituting the text's unique identity, it is that which subverts the very *idea* of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole" (3). Johnson is interested in the textual difference emerging from the rereading of texts, but her notion of "difference within" can be extended to the analysis of linguistic identity and difference.

8. Sakai defines translation as "an instance of *continuity in discontinuity* and a *poietic* social practice—bordering—which institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability" ("How" 85).

9. This applies to the German edition as well, where the polar bear comments—in German—"Inzwischen konnte ich schon ein kleines Gespräch auf Deutsch improvisieren" (the sentence is

translated by Bernofsky as “I was apparently now capable of improvising a brief conversation in German”; 48).

10. For example, Maurice, one of Knut’s other caretakers, proposes reading from Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, or Yukio Mishima to the young bear. The Chinese edition draws attention to this in a footnote: “莫里斯偏爱的作家们都是同性恋” (“The writers favored by Maurice are all homosexual”; 164). And at one point, Knut attends a male-only party.

11. The part of the translation in square brackets is mine.

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**Abstract:** Following recent suggestions that multilingual narratives be studied for their narratological features, this essay reads Yoko Tawada’s *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (2011) as one instance where narratological features are refashioned to allegorize postmonolingual translation. In lieu of relying on narrative perspectival shifts, the novel merges the voices of its animal and human characters. Examining the consequent deconstruction of numerous binaries—animal/human, speech/writing, past/present—the essay tracks the novel’s disarticulation of countable languages as they have been imagined in biological, phonocentric, and genealogical terms. The uncounting of languages alongside the novel’s rethinking of maternity enables a reading of *Memoirs* as an antinarrative that counters the linguistic family romance (as articulated by Yasemin Yildiz) encapsulated by the trope of the mother tongue. A narratological reading of *Memoirs* reveals the structure through which monolingualism is undermined and the emergence of a postmonolingual subject made possible.