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Intercultural Identity through the Prism of Language: Yoko Tawada’s *Storytellers without Souls*

Gordon Gamlin

Yoko Tawada who lives and works in Berlin, Germany, is a unique figure in the German literary landscape. She writes both in Japanese and in German as a poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist. Born and raised in Japan, she first acquired German in high school, studied Russian language and literature at *Waseda University*, visited Germany, and later went on to earn a Ph.D. in German literature at the *University of Zurich*. Tawada is one of the most important authors in contemporary German Literature. She is an extraordinary citizen of the world who moves effortlessly between continents, cultures, and languages, and who thus developed an impressive intercultural awareness expressed in truly unique style. As author and literary scholar she further crosses the boundaries between research and literary practice. In her essays she discusses the ethnological, philosophical, and literary theoretical influences on her own writing. Thematically, Tawada astutely highlights the dilemmas of postindustrial globalization and its Zeitgeist. Her works combine early Japanese folklore, German philology, and travel observations in complex and often self-reflexive ways to tell of intercultural being. Critics recognize that the masterful storyteller and winner of the prestigious Japanese *Akutagawa* prize employs her original intercultural
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dialectic as she challenges readers to see the familiar in new light. In many of her writings, Germany's geography and the plots set in it are both curiously removed as well as part of the German language. In other words, a linguistic creativity or even a kind of poetic structural ingenuity lets images appear oddly detached from the language in which they are originally written. Polyglot, often Japanese, references, metaphors, and narratives that fracture and refract German semantics like a prism further strengthen this effect. The result is a liberating perspective with truly original images of life in Germany and elsewhere that are also surprisingly close to observable verisimilitude. Like all great authors, Tawada's art of storytelling communicates different ways of feeling, seeing, hearing, and even tasting the commonly accepted, thereby helping us to comprehend our world anew. On another level, the way in which her writing is estranged, mirrors the role of the artist who is at once part of the world around her and at a critical distance from it. Though this is a well-established literary theme, the complex tensions thus revealed, equally illuminate the persistently problematic role of the individual in today's postindustrial era. Throughout, her structural devices help to raise intercultural sensibilities as one frame of reference illuminates or comments on the other and vice versa. As Tawada's texts show us, intercultural competence within the literary realm is a reading's outcome after culturally specific encounters as refracted through her prism of language that forms meaningful translated and transformed images.

Past literary criticism on Tawada places her works within the field of German migration literature (*Migrationsliteratur*). However, it becomes increasingly more difficult and seems arbitrary to speak of emigration literature, migration literature, and even national literatures among the
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paradigmatic shifts of our time. Amidst the confused struggles and blind clashes of multinational commercial interests in this accelerated era, the experience of displacement, uprooting, and challenges to one’s sense of self may be more strongly felt by those who remain fixed in one location than by those who travel the mighty rivers of goods and service exchanges. Historically, of course, the relation between language, meaning, and culture in migrant literature is most widely discussed with regard to Turkish writers in Germany. Leading voices on this topic belong to Jost Hermand (1999), Aytac Gursel (1997), Elizabeth Boa (1997), Peter Hohendahl (1995), and Nilufer Kuruyazici (1997). In some ways, the methodology brought to Turkish German writing helped spark discussions of Tawada’s work but by and large the secondary literature on Tawada’s has only recently gathered real momentum: Sabine Fischer and Moray McGowan (1997) argue that female identity is culturally constructed – something that is also true for social identity in general. Sabine Fischer is a thorough reader of Tawada’s works, as her study entitled *Kulturelle Fremdheit und sexuelle Differenz in Prosatexten von Yoko Tawada* (2005) in which she examines cultural alienation and sexual difference in Tawada’s prose works attests. On the occasion of awarding the 2005 Goethe-Medal to Tawada, Ursula Mârz finds in the author’s intercultural work a longing for an open semantic space that defies definitions (Mârz, 2005). Mârz sees Tawada build a culture of language (*Sprachkultur*) that brings about a cultural transformation (*Kulturverwandlung*) rather than a comparison of cultures. This is also an important departure from previous views on migration literature because within the gaze of national literary criticism as implied by the term *Germanistik*, the foreign immigrant (as empirical immigrant, as textual figure, and as immigrant author) is always in danger of being coerced to reenact
cultural stereotypes. Precisely this point is repeatedly made in the more serious scholarship on this literature by Adelson and others. Still, the earlier seminal work on German migrant literature essentially highlights the diversity of writers that form an important part of the cultural experience of German speaking Europe. Another comprehensive introduction to Tawada’s German works by Florian Gelzer (1998) sees the author’s work informed by a twofold cultural background. Although Tawada does not represent her perception and practice of cultural and poetic estrangement as women’s writing, Gelzer’s focus on Tawada’s semiotic language critique (2000) allows for such a reading. In the past decade, a group of secondary sources has emerged that includes Bettina Brandt (2005 & 2008), Maria S. Grewe (2009), Ruth Kersting (2006), Christina Kraenzle (2004), Petra Leitmeir (2007), and Douglas Slaymaker (2007). In their discussions, these scholars focus largely on language and space. This study hence builds on the aforementioned scholarship to address the more fundamental aspects of the author’s underlying narrative strategies and their operative potential for raising intercultural awareness. As mentioned, Tawada employs language as a prism to refract and change this awareness along with her very own symbolism and cosmology as reader, author, and text form part of a transformational progression in the process of meaning making. In doing so, Tawada creates voices that articulate the experience of a dissolution of meaning for those living on the social fault lines of accelerated consumer cultures.5

Importantly, Tawada’s *Storytellers without Souls (Erzähler ohne Seelen)* serves as a key to her German works and unlocks new pathways into the German literary landscape.6 In hindsight, many of the author’s works to date relate in one way or another to this central piece. The same sense is
Intercultural Identity through the Prism of Language: Yoko Tawada’s *Storytellers without Souls* underlined by her doctoral work *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie* (2000) in which she revisits familiar themes within an analytical framework. Formally, *Storytellers without Souls* is a hybrid text located between a travel narrative and an academic essay divided into eight parts. It was first published in *Talisman* (1996) and later in English translation in the collection entitled *Where Europe Begins* (2002). Overall, *Storytellers without Souls* stands as one of Tawada’s most enduring writings for a number of reasons: A redefined role for literary narrators in a new Germany gradually emerges as the narrative weaves together many of the author’s reoccurring signature themes, symbols, and patterns along with a reference to the oldest recorded Japanese folktale in a contemplation on authorship, writing, and interlinked questions of being without, or rather in between cultures. (See Adelson, passim, for a problematisation of the ‘in between’ metaphor.) The same questions also lead towards a possible understanding of one’s identity or soul, and so Tawada’s title *Storytellers without Souls* plunges readers directly into her central argument. At first the opening is rather intriguing and provocative. As is commonly remarked, to be soulless generally means to lack compassion, emotion, and humanity in general. The combined want of these qualities is anathematic to any conception of great storytellers who are expected to observe human nature closely in order to reveal some of its mysteries. A soulless narrator would presumably take no interest in the human condition and proceed to tell very dull stories. Tawada’s narrators and the forms they choose, are on the contrary very engaging as they tell of her worlds typically populated with numerous animals, plants from Asian folk tales, and dolls of all varieties. Throughout *Storytellers without Souls*, the central narrator and protagonist constructs such a story that mimics traditional narrative conventions and emerges as a metatext of a certain kind.

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that relies heavily on the logic of association in describing historiographical verisimilitude. Simply put, the text is associative. Playful game logic is at work in Tawada's Überseezungen (2002), in which there is talk about sole (über Seezungen) as well as translations (Übersetzungen). The result here is not as pronounced as in Franz Kafka's elaborate puns, for example. Still, Tawada employs the same intriguingly willfully/playfully literal construct in her text. Wordplay in all its variations undoes definitions and lends the writing coherence in often unexpected and entertaining ways. We will return to the "soul/sole" parallel inherent in "Seezungen" shortly. In Spielzeug und Sprachmagie, Tawada makes an observation that can also be applied to her own works when she notes how a story is created from homonyms. To explain this strategy, Tawada uses the term acoustic association (akustische Assoziation) in her reading of Kafka (140). Tawada comments on a similar structural device in Kafka's Kreisel and later devotes an entire chapter to a closer analysis of Kafka's narrative strategy in her reading of Blumenfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle. In it she gives a detailed description of the story's linguistic and literal transformations and provides a Freudian analysis along with quotes from Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Kafka. Tawada points out that the images in Kafka's text are not meant to be metaphors because there is no "origin" to link the image to (147). At some level, the disconnect between the missing original and the word on the page mirrors the precarious existence of all translation. Several of Tawada's works explore this notion and function on a similar level. In addition we find in Storytellers without Souls that further references repeatedly link the narration to a Japanese folktale less as a structural device for the plot but rather as a kind of metonymy for the central condition portrayed.

These tales also link personal symbolism to Japanese folklore in
Intercultural Identity through the Prism of Language: Yoko Tawada’s *Storytellers without Souls* reinterpreting local experience within the contemporary European context. In this instance, her fictional essay uses the central notion of ‘the cell’ (*das Wort “Zelle”*) to explain the role and positioning of the narrator in a series of culturally specific encounters. Like the physical body, the storyteller is made up of many cells. “Each space contains a voice that is telling a story” (16). The narrator’s voice in each space is born into a specific characteristic condition from which it speaks. Tawada thus begins by drawing a distinction between three types of ‘cell’ to conflate telephone booths (*Telefonzellen*), monks’ chambers (*Mönchszellen*), and prison cells (*Gefängnisszellen*). In the lines to follow, Tawada suggests that the telephone booth in the night (*nächtliche Telefonzelle*) could have been a newly arrived spaceship. In the unfolding scenario a moon girl (*Mondmädchen*) files a report about life on Earth and turns private communication into a public gesture. The picture of the illuminated glass booth amidst the dark trees (*Gestalten der Bäume*) mesmerizes the narrator from the outset. From sunset to midnight a steady procession of young girls visits the booth to talk to friends presumably about romantic interests. The booth also becomes a transparent tree in which a tree spirit (*Baumgeist*) stands. Light draws attention to one of the girls in the city park as she bares her soul to friends on the phone. The physical enclosure of the telephone booth moreover foreshadows that of the bamboo shoot in the ancient Japanese tale to follow. The wish to communicate and be in communion with others plays itself out in words and light as the student in the park is given an aura of otherworldliness and briefly becomes the girl from the moon in her spaceship or narrative cell (*Erzähl-Zelle*). To the extent to which “languages are signs of belonging,” the girl also finds consolation in the act of translation and transformation. Later, specific physical enclosures dedicated to narration and communication are cited in the example of
the confessional and the translator's booth, which are discussed in light of Benjamin's dichotomy of narrators as will be discussed in more detail below. Initially, however, it is important to note that each cell is a physical space that is socially constructed to lend its inhabitant a specific identity. The young girl in the phone booth which predates the proliferation of cell phones, finds herself in a space that is explicitly outside the parental home and thus a space where she could "develop [her] talent for telling stories better" and more freely (102). The other cells impart labels such as "monk" and "prisoner" and thus define the identity and kinds of social interactions for all participants. They introduce subcultures and suggest connections to further sources of influences on identity.

Initially, Tawada's narrator thus begins a complex series of interrelated images with the booth at the corner of a city park. She then connects them with a direct reference to the oldest recorded Japanese tale (Bambusprinzessin), often translated as The Shining Princess. The Tale of the Woodcutter, as it is also known tells of a beautiful but cruel princess who demands of her three suitors to travel in vain as far as India and China in order to prove their love for her. Tawada's narrator, however, is very selective in her retelling of the tale. We thus see her as a reader, as much as a storyteller, and a writer who weighs the nuance of each word. Positioned near the opening of the narrative, the classic Japanese folktale lends thematic unity to the text. Tawada's narrator briefly retells the beginning of the ancient tale. As others have pointed out, here as elsewhere, Tawada reveals her allusions to Japanese language and culture intermittently and reflects on them (Gelzer 6).

The Japanese fairy tale The Bamboo Princess begins with an old
man seeing a luminous bamboo trunk and chopping it down. Inside he discovers a newborn baby girl that he raises together with his wife. The tale ends with the girl, who has become a grown woman, flying back to where she really comes from: the moon (102).13

In Tawada's text, the tale of the shining princess is invoked and distilled into a single central image of the little girl within a shimmering frame waiting to be discovered. The girl is marked as a stranger and named after her natural enclosure that prefigures her social identity as the bamboo cutter's daughter. In a series of such emblematic images the bamboo shoot is linked to the aforementioned telephone booth, the confessional, the monk's cell, the prison cell, as well as a translator's booth and later a row of transparent coffins. All of these narrative spaces involve certain aspects of communication while they confine and define the extent to which such communication is made possible. In the central story of the shining princess the girl returns to the moon and leaves her suitors with nothing but the memories of their own travels. Tawada omits the suitors and focuses wholly on the girl who moves from one world to another as she leaves readers to wonder if her sense of self was ever connected with a certain locale. Surely the princess, who returns home to the moon after her life on earth, has been keenly aware throughout that not all elements that constitute her self were present on earth. Without belaboring the spiritual element of this representation we clearly see an example of how one's sense of self here is both culturally and socially determined while simultaneously being informed by a space outside the temporary confines of any given place in time. This part of one's identity, the soul, is discussed in more detail as the narrative progresses. For now, however, the girl's image simply signals her otherworldliness by
the beam of light that draws the woodcutter toward her bamboo enclosure. In this sense light is the first language of the shining princess. Japanese mythology here provides a reference point for self-identification that is also linked to the Japanese mother of the protagonist. The same mother may be seen abandoned through the physical distance between her and her daughter's new home in Germany. Like the souls in the shaman passage to follow later, the childhood self that is now left behind begins to wander and develop in unconscious terrains as it lives out an independent life of its own. This form of a living self is closely yet almost invisibly tied to the conscious struggle against hostile surroundings and forms the basis for the will to survive extreme experiences. One should also note that the infant in this tale enters the parent bond already in a state of being once removed from home. Though she becomes the woodcutter's daughter, her true home and identity originates elsewhere. From the very beginning hers is a space in between.

As mentioned earlier, the tale of the Shining Princess stems from early oral tradition and thus exists in several versions. Tawada's narrator does not embellish the tale nor does she elaborate beyond the central image of the initial encounter. Still, her reading of the folktale infuses *Storytellers without Souls* and we receive a perspective on the ancient story in the form of a literary narrative that relies on oral narrative strategies as much as on thematic reprises within each fragment. Thus, in the next paragraph, Tawada's narrator is again reminded of her childhood memory and the phone booth at the park when she enters a Catholic church in Austria. In an unlit corner she sees an inviting wooden structure. She learns that it is a confessional, and her acquaintance explains to her that just like the Tokyo phone booth this is a place to tell of "sexual encounters" (106). Just as the schoolgirl briefly escapes the moral confines of the parental home to tell her
confidants about early romantic liaisons, the church similarly invokes a sense of morality. The imagined narrative within the confessional again defines the individual in relation to the value and belief system of the society around it. Tawada links the wooden confessional to previous enclosures by stressing its radiant warmth in which the narrator pictures herself sharing important information just like the girl in the city park. While the spaceship-like phone booth is mobile, however, the confessional is rooted “like a tree” in the culture and history of a specific location (103). Tawada uses this occasion to draw a distinction between two types of “storytelling cells” or narrative spaces (Erzähl-Zellen); those that, locally rooted, “stay in one place” (sesshaft), and those that appear to be “mobile” (beweglich). These two types of locations of telling offer two fundamentally different perspectives on any given subject, and anticipate her quotation from Benjamin’s Illuminations as more voices are gradually added in a collage that informs the travel narrative before us. In that sense we are always also privy to the narrator’s reading of the cited texts and to the memories and allusions these texts trigger.

The third enclosure is the study (Schreizimmer) translated only as “chamber” (103), which is at first closely associated with a prison cell in a possible reference to the solitude and discipline that accompanies the physical act of writing. The narrator muses how the restrictions of a sparse room can inspire life-affirming erotic texts and concludes that the location has unpredictable influences, but that sensuality enters the text through experience. For her, the physical body always already contains the narrative and the narration can take many forms. It is a matter of “listening” to the experience that is trying to reveal itself in the act of writing. That experience is as fragmented as the many roles and social identities the narrator has assumed in the course of her life. As the chosen quotations testify,
literary works can also form a part of the overall experience. Writing thus becomes a process of self-discovery, which sometimes can lead to surprising confrontations with one’s past. This self-distancing allows new perspectives on one’s personal history. In the “study” segment, literally the “writing room”, we also learn how the act of writing anticipates and prefigures the act of reading. Just as different readers bring their own experience to the text, so does the creative process of writing bring previously unarticulated elements to the surface that otherwise might have slipped into oblivion. Both the public and the private enclosures or narrative spaces serve as (social) frames that redefine identity, as each context reflects differently on the individual. In the fourth narrative space of the translator’s booth, the translators are limited and characterized not only by the cultures and languages they bridge but also by the messages they strive to convey. From their illuminated glass booth several translators simultaneously translate the speaker’s words into many languages. Thus the oral text is mediated, changed, and approximated while the translators strive to retain its essential qualities and preserve its message. The narrator speculates that the body’s memory is much like a myriad of translations but without original source texts. This is one of the most fascinating and profound reflections the work provokes and hence deserves more attention. Tawada then links her contemplations of the soul further to the image of the narrator: The body, she argues, is at the same time a body of experience. In it, different narratives are played out and told. She also allows that it may contain an essential text which is commonly equated with the soul, since some believe that each individual receives a text which constitutes it. However, this text is not so much about fate, or life as it is written in the stars but more of a story of purpose that needs to be translated continuously as circumstances forever change. Metaphorically
Intercultural Identity through the Prism of Language: Yoko Tawada’s *Storytellers without Souls* speaking, *Storytellers without Souls* is such an original narrative that reflects the soul of Tawada’s works in many ways. For example, the role of the translator is illustrated in more complexity in *Überseezungen*, mentioned earlier. Similarly, allusions to other Japanese tales are found in *The Bridegroom was a Dog*. These are not merely recurring themes but a transfer of the metaphor where ‘bodies have texts, which are their souls’ in turn becoming ‘corpora of texts with individual texts as their souls’ within them.

In the second part of her text, Tawada goes on to discuss the nature of the soul in more detail. She begins with a local anecdote from Hamburg in which the devil builds a bridge for a group of merchants in exchange for a soul he is promised. The clever merchants deliver a rat to the devil who, thus fooled, retreats. The narrator observes that the devil in this tale adheres to a Christian value system because the rat, like all other animals, possesses a soul in many other beliefs. Tawada’s devil of Hamburg is not a personification of evil. After all, this poor devil upholds his end of the bargain but is cheated instead by the powerful merchant class. For German readers the story of the bridge builder may also connect to the previous “translator” vignette on a literal level since “translators” in German, as in the Latinate root of the English word, are also the “ones that cross over” (*Übersetzer*). The ‘late’ in translate is derived from the past participle *latum* of the verb ‘to carry.’ Subversion incarnate is only the first example in a series of encounters with those outside the matrix of global commerce. Indigenous peoples and the dead later complete the list. In her reading of the merchants’ tale, the narrator thus takes issue with the notion that the soul is an exclusively human attribute and stresses its value. Even the lowly rat deserves recognition, and in her retelling she restores dignity to the animal. As we will see, the soul may
also lead a separate life from its related body and by implication death itself becomes an act of traveling like so many others. The narrator then employs a whimsical pun on rolls commonly known in Swabia as Seelen. Here, the soul is envisioned as a bun-shaped hole that needs to be filled with the “breath of love” (Dampf der Liebe) to avoid a feeling of loss (106). In this elemental sense, the soul is the yearning for meaning, and that meaning is love. Another parallel is drawn to a lake (See) and water in general, while reference is made to a fish that resembles the soul. Tawada’s English translators Bernofsky and Selden take full advantage of the pun waiting to be explored in this context: “The second way I picture the soul is as a fish whose name is also “sole”: thus the soul is related to water, or to the sea” (106). In German this association by sound does not work as precisely: “In meiner zweiten Vorstellung ähnelt die Seele einem Fisch. Das Wort See-le zeigt, dass sie mit dem See oder überhaupt mit dem Wasser zu tun hat.” (21). However, the pun connects perfectly with Tawada’s work Überseezungen, literally about “sea tongues”, “about soles” and about translations (Übersetzungen) since Seezungen (Solea solea) are soles. The following sentence relates the fish immediately to a shaman of the Siberian Tungus nation alluded to earlier in Tawada’s text. Here, the soul is transferred to the body of an animal and leads life separated from its original “owner”. In this separation we find a parallel to Tawada’s own work which is commented upon earlier: “I live”, the narrator points out, “and my life lives as well” and “even my writing lives” (103). Thus the individual and collective memory of the text assumes its own identity as it drifts away in space and time. This not only complicates the notion of ownership but the narrator also points out that she may appear soulless because her soul, too, is constantly traveling elsewhere. Tawada’s narrator explains this concept, which she has “read in a book about Native Americans”, in more detail and suggests that
travelers often find themselves without their soul, since the soul is confronted with the physical challenge of following its rightful body while excessively accelerated by air travel and high speed trains as mentioned earlier. She, too, therefore becomes a "narrator without soul" because she has traveled vast distances at great speeds, which caused her soul to be temporarily left behind. In this way, travel parts all of us from our soul or previous identity, "and so tales of long journeys are always written without souls" (107).

There are a number of concepts at work in this second segment. The spiritual mystery of the soul is reflected in the shamanic relation to the roaming animal and to creation in general. Tawada revisits the notion of the separation between body and soul later in Spielzeug und Sprachmagie where she offers a more in-depth contemplation. Quoting from Freud's Totem and Taboo, Tawada points out that Freud offers a connection to animism through dream analysis. Freud speculates that the origin of animist concepts lies in the observation of the phenomena of sleep and Tawada further emphasizes that sleep, in turn, is a precondition for dreams. Tawada then probes deeper into the distinction between body and soul in animism and concludes that this is a false distinction. The body is not merely a soulless shell while the soul is neither invisible nor ethereal. Again, Tawada cites Siberian shamanism as she describes how a shaman can transform his soul into a wasp to save the soul of an abducted woman without compromising his own physical vitality. We witness a "multiplication of bodies" that are by no means soulless (39). In a footnote, Tawada then offers one further clarification. Her concept of the shaman's soul is perhaps best understood as a double in Baudrillard's sense. Baudrillard also rejects Freud's suggestion of any degree of 'primitive' abstraction between the subject, the soul, and consciousness. Thus Tawada takes her lead from Baudrillard in an attempt to merge the two.
Intercultural Identity through the Prism of Language: Yoko Tawada’s *Storytellers without Souls* respect at least, her title *Storyteller without Souls* is misleading. Tawada is really proposing a soul with many narrators (or bodies) instead. In the arts, of course, this is merely stating the obvious, since all those who create, successively breathe life into their different works. More importantly, Tawada also illustrates the power of the imagination: It is a “pleasant concept” (*schöne Vorstellung*) to think of one’s soul as “independent.” Although one can never fully articulate the life of one’s soul, one nonetheless defines the other. Like the unconscious, the soul in this case mutely mirrors the complete experience of the narrator. As long as memory proves unreliable within the imagination of the narrator, she also remains without her soul. In this sense, the notion of a temporarily and temporally disoriented ever-changing identity in today’s world is first exemplified by the abrupt disjuncture of air travel. On a metaphorical level, just as literary meaning is an obvious product of narrative; identity is shaped by individual stories. If we now revisit the earlier dichotomy between fixed and mobile narrative spaces and transfer this notion to literary meaning, we are also invited to consider the tension between the rooted (*sesshafte*) meaning that resides in a static text and the malleable (*bewegliche*) interpretation that is impressed upon the reader. Reader response theory addresses this transformational dynamic in greater detail. However, Tawada’s concern here is not so much with the theoretical intertextual aspect as found in the works of writers like Jorge Luis Borges or Umberto Eco, for example. Her kind of story telling aligns her closer to Kafka who also explores the spaces in between that open up at the intersections of shifting experience. Tawada focuses on the human aspects, implications, and consequences of this tension. To this end she quotes Benjamin’s essay on the storyteller (*Der Erzähler*) found in *Illuminations (Illuminationen)*.

Significantly, Benjamin laments the loss of the oral tradition within this
context, which consequently leaves us with narrators without experiences worth telling. The modern experience thus has a direct impact on the storyteller: "Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant" (Benjamin 87). At its worst, self-absorbed consumer societies spawn the negation of experience coupled with the impossibility to mediate or even address this destructive state of affairs that is directly aimed at the manipulation of the human soul and identity. The wish to reclaim the role of the storyteller in the face of such overwhelming odds is described by Benjamin and partly quoted by Tawada. When we examine the original quote in its entirety we realize that Benjamin sees oral literature as a bridge that will connect the act of communication with experience. Yet the storyteller is increasingly adrift and no longer a "present force." Tawada’s narrator attempts to remedy this state. The following quotation also precedes and originally frames her selected passage:

"Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. Incidentally, among the last named there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. "When someone goes on a trip…” (Benjamin 84)."
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already witnessed how she successfully opens up the space in between and answers Benjamin’s call for new modes of narration to mediate the fragmented and often neurotic human experience in a modern and now postindustrial age. The historical modality that Benjamin demands of traditional story telling at first seems no longer relevant to discontinuous (post)modern experiences. Tawada answers this challenge and exemplifies her approach in her contemplative, self-reflexive prose. She quotes directly from Benjamin’s *Illuminations* and his description of the two archetypes of storytellers both of which are rooted in the oral tradition. Though the two overlap and complement each other, there are essentially two kinds of narrators: On the one hand we find narrators that have traveled far abroad and are now returning to tell their tales. On the other hand there are those who have stayed home to become an authority on everything that relates to their specific location. Tawada’s narrator omits the framing reference to the oral tradition above, which introduces Benjamin’s original quote. Yet, while Benjamin here stresses the growing impossibility to communicate experience in a changed age, Tawada demonstrates throughout how the oral narrative strategies suggested by Benjamin can be combined in a literary text to counter and overcome this challenge. She thus employs different voices, the use of mnemonic devices, free association, and repetition, all of which are rooted in the oral tradition. *Storytellers without Souls* is thus also an exemplary answer to Benjamin’s call. Tawada’s real concern however, is with the position the storyteller finds herself in and the resulting conditions around her. In her work she thus quotes directly from Benjamin:

“When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,” goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone
who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman.” (Benjamin 84-85)24

On one level this is a distinction between insider and outsider. The insider is a historiographer rooted in local tradition. The outsider without an identity beyond that very label reports news and observations from afar. Another distinction can be added to this basic dichotomy: The local storyteller is intimately connected to the surrounding community and its society. The traveling narrator, on the other hand, is largely disconnected from the encountered social fabric and perhaps even from any emotional depth that might color the narrative. The move from the tiller/trader contrast to insider/outsider can also be reversed. In a migrant or nomad culture, but also amongst merchants, the insider/outsider pairing would be reversed; in many cultures, the person who has traveled thus gains considerable authority, a stronger, not weaker position. As Benjamin observes, the two archetypes are found coexisting in various permeations (Durchdringung), as exemplified in the past by the wandering apprentice and the local master of any given trade. The local master is so partly by virtue of his apprenticeship. His wanderings are a precondition of his masterhood, which significantly complicate his insider/outsider status. Benjamin’s example of the trading mariner (handeltreibende Seemann) points to the underlying economic dynamics that create the traveling narrator in the first place. However, the same necessities put the teller in a precarious position. The more commercial interests dictate
human experience and shape the dominant discourse, the less there is to tell for a narrator who has to cover increasingly longer distances to bridge ever larger divides.

Benjamin further prefaces his comments on the two types of narrators with the observation that “experience” has been cheapened and “has fallen in value.” Ever increasing mechanization, manipulation, and commercialization threaten to render human experience obsolete and irrelevant to the propagated enterprises of societies everywhere. Experience today often becomes an exchangeable commodity, ultimately irrelevant, and finally incommunicable. Still, for the reader at least, the dichotomy between the cultural insider and the outsider does not change the fundamental value of the observed phenomena. Only the reinsertion of oral narrative strategies into the novel’s text can counter the destructive forces as defined above. Tawada’s use of (Japanese) mythology and folk tales, as well as the voice and quotation of Benjamin himself, along with anecdotal travel accounts, all combine in her work to self-reflexively address the problems outlined by Benjamin. We see the author as a reader who uses these narrative strategies to weave a response to ancient tales and social criticism from personal experience and memory. Furthermore, the distinction here is between authenticity on the one hand and the shallow charade of mannerisms on the other. This conflict is implicitly projected onto the dualities of an upbringing in one culture and a coming of age in another. The confrontation of selves is layered with the resonance of different interpretations, different theoretical approaches to language, and reflections on observable phenomena that are reenacted within societal constraints. The artistic literary production and self-reflexive contemplation of that production adds a further layer to the process of meaning making. One approach to the soul of the work leads through the
playful critique of language itself. Necessarily all meaning must be encoded one way or another to be communicated. Tawada’s contemplative prose thus takes us further through a series of sometimes playfully associated vignettes into a space that is still clearly rational though not always analytical.

Following the important distinction between the two types of storytellers, one who has traveled far, and one who is intimately linked to his surroundings, we are introduced to a more radical concept. The dead, Tawada points out, have traveled the largest distance while their graves are very much part of a given local. She thus lists the ghost of Hamlet’s father, mummified indigenous people in a German museum of anthropology, dolls in the image of murdered infants in Japan, the language of such dolls, Tibetan monks, and finally an English automaton. The Shakespearean ghost articulates an otherwise inaccessible truth on stage that cannot be experienced in any other way. The living voice is invoked even after the speaker’s demise. This emphasis on oral history is especially interesting in a rapidly synchronizing world that values future (market) opportunities embodied by the promise of youth more than any historical knowledge which might serve as a prerequisite for wisdom. The dramatic narrative strategy here affords a voice for the victimized as in the case of Hamlet’s murdered father. More powerful is the silent reminder from the representatives of indigenous nations in a museum of anthropology in Hamburg. Upright in their transparent coffins, they tell of successive waves of colonization and of genocide. Though they are merely dolls, their message of past conquest is clear. As Gelzer has pointed out, Tawada here alludes again to Benjamin when she observes that all these nations were economically or culturally conquered at one point. Now they are exhibited in a show of power in which the displayed is always that which is conquered. Still, as Tawada shows, the voice of the victims is not
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silenced but in mere need of translation and remembrance. The museum of anthropology displays dolls, equated with death, that also serve as a transition to a reminder of *Kokeshi* dolls, all of which function as mnemonic devices within oral traditional narratives. In *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie* Tawada again examines the significance of dolls in a number of cultures and relates these to Kafka as well as Benjamin. Throughout her works, Tawada introduces dolls: In her comprehensive analysis of the cultural significance of different types of dolls she also examines the celebratory function of Japanese *Hinaningyo* dolls which reaffirm social structures, and contrasts these with the more sinister *Mizuko-Jizo* dolls made of stone which each represent an aborted child. (99). Both *Kokeshi* and *Mizuko-Jizo* dolls recall different forms of infanticide in times of famine and desperation. Together the dolls tell about the identity that was taken from them. They themselves signify mutely and bemoan the loss of a possible future. Though these can be viewed as “narrators without souls” since their souls have transcended earthly reality, their stories will never be forgotten.

After the many chilling reminders of ruthless profiteering, Tawada strikes a sadly comforting note when she describes the chant of a Tibetan monk in Katmandu as “the language of the dead” (25). The narrator becomes conscious of secondary voices (*Nebenstimmen*) that are woven together in complex fashion. Only the act of listening intently to these other voices can produce a new forward-looking story (26) such as the one she has just told. Tawada closes her contemplation with an emblematic image of a modern manufactured teller without a soul: On one of her many travels, the narrator encounters an automaton in London. The automaton in the shape of a physician claims to be able to read the palm of her hand. However, at the end of the session, the automaton’s prescription (*Rezept*) is illegible and
communication is thwarted. The manufactured narrator draws attention to the dilemma of the traveling storyteller he counsels. At Madame Tussauds' wax museum, the distinction between local and foreign becomes less clear and the two are merging, as a uniform commercial landscape takes over industrialized and industrializing historic sites around the world. The closing image of the narrator without a soul bespeaks the dilemma of the soulless narrator and its human counterpart. The latter is entrapped to purchase a flawed service in an attempt to have her story told. Language here fails the narrator as she tries to put her life in words. Tawada's final segment is thus also the articulation and artful critique or lament of the condition that threatens to rob her narrator of her soul. This condition is characterized by acceleration, entrapment, and mechanization. In this, she points to a danger and articulates a fear that is rooted in a memory of meaningless experiences. The final image is intriguing because the narrating automaton truly has neither soul nor identity outside nor inside itself. Yet even this machine is not a lost soul in the common sense but rather elevated by the narrator who attempt to communicate with it. In time, and in the time it takes to read Storytellers without Souls, the traveling narrator embodies and comes into contact with different souls during different stages in the development of her identity. At the same time, the composition underscores how modernity in general and the accelerated culture of globalization specifically reduces and compartmentalizes individual identities and continuously seeks to commodify them by limiting individuals in their actions and aspirations.

Ultimately, the central image of the shining princess discovered inside a hollow bamboo shoot remains emblematically hopeful at the heart of Tawada's contemplative prose while European and Asian thought, literary history and tradition are combined in new ways to broaden her readers' perspective.
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We wander aside the narrator through the landscapes of Tokyo, Hamburg, Katmandu, and London to look at these cityscapes with new eyes. This new perception is the beginning of an intercultural awareness in which the external frame of reference illuminates the observable phenomena and vice versa. This kind of travel commentary, which takes its cue from Benjamin's *Illuminations* and answers with elements of the oral tradition, also shows us new ways of understanding. The "new beauty," to borrow Benjamin's term, is an expression of feeling, seeing, hearing, and even tasting the real so readily misunderstood. The result is better intercultural competence and comprehension through the literary realm in which this realization grows from a reader response to reflections on translated images. The work before us self-reflexively draws from the original texts, which ultimately can only be paraphrased as circumstances demand it and thus also mirror the nature of metaphor and the condition of the traveler. Both defined and later redefined entities stand ad infinitum for an elusive original. While weaving her images around the central theme of the bamboo princess, Tawada moves through the rich evocative tapestry of her narrative worlds to explore individual identity formation processes. Throughout, the storyteller and the soul, language and meaning, remain the central agents at work in her contemplation. As Tawada's multifaceted narrator continuously constructs her identity from historical and contemporary cultural and social contexts, these frames inform her complex identity as much as do current circumstance. In Tawada's work we therefore witness a coming of age of German literature for a changed multicultural society in German speaking Europe and for readers outside these particular linguistic borders who will likely see part of their own experience reflected and thus find kinship in this recognition.

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1 Besides the Akutagawa prize (1994) which is Japan’s equivalent of a Booker or Pulitzer, the long list of Tawada’s literary prizes also includes the Tanizaki (2003), Hitoshi Ito (2003), Adelbert von Chamisso (1996), Lessing (1994), and Gunzo (1991) prize to name only a few.

2 In *Das Fremde aus der Dose*, for example, Tawada takes an estranged look at her German neighbor’s earrings as “metal pieces on the ear” and speculates about their significance as a talisman. The effect is especially pronounced in the three translated works entitled *Fersenlos, Der Hundebräutigam*, and *Der Faltenmann vom Sumidafluss*, all of which are found in *Tintenfisch auf Reisen*.

3 Where, for example, does academe place an Austrian author like Erich Wolfgang Skwara who lives in California and writes in German? The term exile literature applied to Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, Leon Feuchtwanger, Bertolt Brecht, and so many others hardly fits.


5 A good recent example of this is found in the novel *Das nackte Auge* which tells of the fate of a Vietnamese girl who finds herself brought to the West from East Germany.
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6 The English translation of this story along with other short works such as *Das Bad, Wo Europa Anfängt,* and *Ein Gast,* along with a preface by Wim Wenders are found in *Where Europe Begins* (2002).

7 In *The Trial (Der Prozess),* for example, a judicial trial becomes entwined with a process of confronting bureaucracy. In Kafka’s short story “*A Hunger Artist (Ein Hungerkünstler)*” the starving artist’s performance consist of starving himself in public.

8 Another good example of this technique is found in Tawada’s *Opium für Ovid* where we learn of the metamorphoses of twenty-two women.

9 Tawada writes: “Erneut wird hier sichtbar, wie aus einer sprachlichen Gestalt - in diesem Falle der Übereinstimmung zweier Wörter auf der lautlichen Ebene - eine Geschichte erzeugt wird” (Sprachmagie, 36).

10 Tawada writes: “Man kann weder die Spielbälle noch sonst ein Bild in diesem Text als Metapher für etwas verstehen, was man an einen Ursprung knüpfen könnte” (Sprachmagie, 147).

11 “In jedem Raum befand sich eine erzählende Stimme” (16).

12 For a discussion of this notion see Gonzales & Phipps (2004).


14 One might note that these merchants would also have to be members of the *Hanseatic League,* which relied on the structure of colonialism without actively espousing it and thus prefigured an underlying mechanism for world trade expansion.

15 “*Auch meine Schrift lebt*” (18).


17 Incidentally, we also find the same notion echoed at the opening of William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* (2003). Gibson writes: “She knows now, absolutely, hearing the white noise that is London, that Damien’s theory of jet lag is correct: that her mortal soul is leagues behind her, being reeled in on some ghostly umbilical down the vanished wake of the plane that brought her here, hundreds of thousands of feet above the Atlantic. Souls can’t move that quickly, and are left behind, and must be awaited, upon arrival, like lost luggage (Gibson, 1).”
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21 Rosenblatt’s *transactional theory of reading* (Rosenblatt, 1938 reprinted 1996) takes surrounding social context into consideration when embarking on a literary interpretation. Individual readers invariably also change during the act of reading (Iser, 1978) as they move through a narrative and time. Throughout, a reader is always part of an interpretive community (Fish, 1983) with certain values and ways of perceiving the text and the world in it. Reader response theory thus also serves as a good framework for analysis because it anticipates the kinds of intercultural
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positions that we now see coming into their own.


23 Benjamin writes: „Erfahrung, die von Mund zu Mund geht, ist die Quelle, aus der alle Erzähler geschöpft haben. Und unter denen, die Geschichten niedergeschrieben haben, sind es die Großen, deren Niederschrift sich am wenigsten von der Rede der vielen namenlosen Erzähler abhebt. Im Übrigen gibt es unter den letzteren zwei, freilich vielfach einander durchdringende Gruppen. Auch bekommt die Figur des Erzählers ihre volle Körperlichkeit nur für den, der sie beide vergeben. Wenn einer eine Reise tut...“ (Benjamin, 332).

24 Tawada directly quotes Benjamin who writes: „Wenn einer eine Reise tut, so kann er was erzählen“, sagt der Volksmund und denkt sich den Erzähler als einen, der von weither kommt. Aber nicht weniger gern hört man dem zu, der, redlich sich nährend, im Lande geblieben ist und dessen Geschichten und Überlieferungen kennt. Will man diese beiden Gruppen in ihren archaischen Stellvertretern vergeben, so ist die eine im seßhaften Ackerbauer und die andere im handeltreibenden Seemann verkörpert“ (Benjamin, 78 as quoted by Tawada in *Storytellers without Souls*).

25 “die Erfahrung ist im Kurse gefallen”.

26 Benjamin gives the following explanation for these phenomena: “Denn nie sind Erfahrungen gründlicher Lügen gestraft worden als die strategischen durch den Stellungskrieg, die wirtschaftlichen durch die Inflation, die körperlichen durch die Materialschlacht, die sittlichen durch die Machthaber.” Today, we can, perhaps, add “globalization” to Benjamin’s list.

27 Gelzer offers the following comparison between Tawada and Benjamin: „Wie auch in anderen Museen wird hier ein Machtverhältnis sichtbar, daß nämlich das Dargestellte immer zugleich das Eroberte ist.“ (Erzähler ohne Seelen, S. 24.) – „Die Beute wird...im Triumphzug mitgeführt. Man bezeichnet sie als Kulturgüter...Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein.” (Benjamin, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“, in: GS I/2, S. 693-704, hier: S. 696.)

28 In Spielzeug und Sprachmagie Tawada revisits the notion of the doll’s writing (Puppenschrift) and contemplates a prelapsarian state in which there is no distinction between spoken and written speech, which Benjamin yearningly calls “Sprachmagie” (Sprachmagie 118).

29 It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of
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history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.