IMAGINING EUROPE THROUGH A PAIR OF JAPANESE GLASSES
RETHINKING EURASIAN BORDERS IN THE WORKS OF TAWADA YŌKO

Emanuela Costa

University of Naples "L'Orientale", Naples, Italy

ABSTRACT - *This paper focuses on how Europe is imagined in the works of contemporary writer Tawada Yōko. It argues that Tawada engages in a discourse that invites readers to reflect upon the relativism of geographic and linguistic borders dividing Europe and Asia. Specifically, I aim to show how Tawada develops a series of narrative strategies to rethink seemingly obvious categories of identity and belonging to European spaces. First, I will focus on the clash between landscape and mindscape, suggesting that Tawada's writings – along the lines of contemporary discourse on the 'spatial turn' – aim to decolonise taken-for-granted assumptions about Europe. Secondly, I will look at how stereotyping in Tawada's work functions as signifying practice for essentialising definitions of Europeanness and Japaneseness. At the same time, I will consider how Tawada, by insisting on the fictionality of her visions of Europe, rejects any claim for 'authentic representation'. Then, I will briefly touch upon Tawada's en-gendering of Europe in relation to the question of ethnic and linguistic subalternity, leading to the conclusion that the act of imagining Europe through literature has a significant performative function in changing our ways of thinking geographic, racial and cultural differences.*

This paper analyses the way Europe is imagined and portrayed in the literary works of transnational writer Tawada Yōko. Born in Tokyo in 1960, Ta-

wada moved to Hamburg in the 1980s, after an inspirational train ride on the Trans-Siberian railway. Since 1989, she has developed a parallel career in Europe and Japan, writing both in German and in Japanese. Her work has recently gained critical attention and appraisal throughout Europe, Japan and the US because of her borderless imagery and polyglot qualities. This paper argues that Tawada's representation of Europe problematises traditional ways of conceiving space by shedding light on how the perception of geographic landscapes relies heavily on socially and politically constructed mindscapes. In other words, Tawada's narratives suggest that imagination is at the core of geography just as it is essential to literature. The literary representation of geography, even when it is 'objectively' represented as the projection of a real place, is never the purely mimetic image of that space, not only because complete objectivity is an epistemological impossibility, but because the notion of space itself is not self-contained and self-referential; instead, it is built on a dialectical relationship between its real-world referent and human perceptual and cognitive structures.

In doing so, Tawada's work reveals an engagement with postmodernist paradigms of mobility and deterritorialisation that question the meaning of geographic borders in this era of profound political and cultural shifts. At the same time, Tawada's insistence on borderlands and frontiers foregrounds issues which prominently feature in postcolonial thinking and in gender discourse, such as the relation between center and margin as well as the problem of female agency in transnational contexts. While these topics have been extensively addressed in contemporary literature and Tawada's

JACQUES DERRIDA

SOMETHING UNIQUE IS AFOOT IN EUROPE, IN WHAT IS STILL CALLED EUROPE EVEN IF WE NO LONGER KNOW VERY WELL WHAT OR WHO GOES BY THIS NAME. INDEED, TO WHAT CONCEPT, TO WHAT REAL INDIVIDUAL, TO WHAT SINGULAR ENTITY SHOULD THIS NAME BE ASSIGNED TODAY? WHO WILL DRAW UP ITS BORDERS?

engagement with such issues might therefore not seem ground-breaking, this paper suggests that Tawada's Japanese work is worth exploring from the perspective of cultural geography, postcolonial theory, and deconstruction-ist thinking to shed light on how her works give shape to a literary vision that challenges both European and Asian readers to develop a culturally aware and self-critical reading of the meaning of Europe and Asia in the current era of transnational flows of people, objects and ideas.

In this respect, Tawada's way of imagining Europe is less concerned with rec-reating an 'imaginary homeland' – to borrow Salman Rushdie's memorable phrase – than it is with pointing out how notions of geographical inclusion or exclusion have functioned to foster discourses of national belonging to an 'imagined community'. Nevertheless, Tawada's figurations of Europe, as we shall see, do not suggest a simplistic dichotomy between East and West, but suggest the complicity of Asia in perpetrating Orientalism, implying that both Europeans and Asians have built up an image of Europe that fails to acknowledge the significant contribution of non-Europeans in the making of Europe itself. Imagining Europe through the lens of literature thus becomes for Tawada a means to call for a much-needed change in the way we define and mark the boundaries of 'European' and 'Asian' identity in the wake of globalisation. To what extent do non-Europeans living in Europe partake in defining the notion of Europe itself? Can transnational subjects actually pro-duce new meanings to the notions of Europe and Asia?

GEOGRAPHIES OF THE MIND: EUROPE AS LANDSCAPE, EUROPE AS MINDSCAPE

Tawada's first work in German was a collection of stories significantly titled *Wo Europa Anfängt* (1991).[1] The centrepiece of the collection is a fictional travelogue about a Japanese woman travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway to visit Moscow, a city which has long stood in her imagination as the thresh-old to Europe. In the text, Moscow functions first of all as a dream place and as objective correlative of Europe cherished in the mind of the young nar-

1. Yōko Tawada, *Wo Europa Anfängt* (Tübingen: Konkursbuch Verlag, 1991)

rator for decades.[2] This ends when "a poster advertising a trip to Europe on the Trans-Siberian Railway transformed the immeasurably long distance to Europe into a finite sum of money."[3] The meaning of the woman's journey, however, is increasingly put at stake the closer she gets to Moscow. Day by day, she discovers that what she had taken for granted – namely that Moscow is in Europe – is a matter of dispute among her interlocutors:

> Europe begins not in Moscow but somewhere before. I looked out the window and saw a sign as tall as a man with two arrows painted on it, beneath which the words "Europe" and "Asia" were written. The sign stood in the middle of a field like a solitary customs agent. "We're in Europe already!" I shouted to Masha, who was drinking tea in our compartment. "Yes, everything's Europe behind the Ural Mountains," she replied, unmoved, as though this had no importance, and went on drinking her tea. I went over to a Frenchman, the only foreigner in the car besides me, and told him that Europe didn't just begin in Moscow. He gave a short laugh and said that Moscow was not Europe.[4]

The passage quoted here is particularly relevant to the understanding of Tawada's idea of Europe, as it highlights a key concept the author aims to problematise: the gap between landscape as an actual locality, and mindscape as the subjective meanings our minds project on landscape itself. In other words, Tawada shows here how territories can be appropriated as living entities, contributing to the creation of 'geographies of the mind' which, as Knight contends, "can and do find expression in the way space is structured."[5] The delusional reaction of the protagonist in Tawada's story stems precisely from the sudden realisation that her fellow travellers do not agree with the image of Europe she envisioned. The apparently neat and unequivocal borderlines dividing Europe and Asia thus become empty signs – two mere arrows – with no clear referent: geographic space, albeit real and experienced, here reveals its arbitrary nature and destabilises the way the main

2. In an interview Tawada claims: "To me as a child, Moscow was also a dream city because of the many Russian fairy tales and stories that I read. Besides, I was not just dreaming about Moscow. During the 1980s I traveled to Moscow at least five times. The city became real, but the notion of an imaginary city continued to interest me independent of the actual city of Moscow." Quoted in Bettina Brandt, "The Post-Communist Eye: An Interview with Yoko Tawada," *World Literature Today. A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma* 80 (2006): 41.

3. Yōko Tawada, *Where Europe Begins,* trans. Susan Bernofsky and Yumi Selden (New York : New Directions, 2002), 125.

4. Ibid. p. 141.

5. David B. Knight, "Identity and Territory: Geographical Perspectives on Nationalism and Regionalism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72 (1982): 517.

character perceives herself in relation to place.

Borders, frontiers and liminal zones play a pivotal role in the story, because of their epiphanic power to reveal how individual and collective senses of belonging to a place are culturally constructed. In this respect, Tawada's interest in interstitial zones can be read in the context of postmodern discourses on the 'spatial turn', which work at the intersection of human geography (in the tradition of Foucault, Lefebvre and, more recently, David Harvey and Edward Soja) and the humanities (with particular reference to the process of deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation configured in the works of Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Bhabha, Anzaldúa, to name a few) in order to explore the dynamic relationship between space and its narrative articulation. Tawada's questioning of the stability of borders and her doubts about the frontiers of Europe echo Derrida's preoccupation about who will draw up its borders, and suggest – along the lines of postcolonial thinking – that the spaces once thought to be autonomous and self-evident according to a Eurocentric vision of the world, are in fact constantly shifting. Borders in Tawada's works are overtly porous, as they are permeable to both the influence of geo-political changes and socio-cultural constructs.

6. Tawada, *Where Europe Begins*, p. 139.

Yet the simple acknowledgment of the social production of space is not sufficient to redefine frontiers and reconstruct a new 'border narrative'. If geographic coordinates have so far encapsulated space – firmly establishing a 'here' and 'there'— how can we express them through language now that such distinctions have become unreliable? In Tawada's story the main character is caught in precisely this semiotic trap when a child asks her where she is from. The woman promptly answers "Tokyo", but the boy has no idea of where it is, so his grandfather explains that Tokyo is in the East. At this point, the woman realises that, in order to define her own identity, she also needs to refer to the same geographic coordinates: "Hadn't I also asked questions like that when I was a child? — Where is Peking?—In the West—And what is in the East, on the other side of the sea? —America."[6] This conversations,

and others on the train, play a key role in the text: in fact, contrary to what we would expect from a travel narrative, the novel abounds in recollections of dialogues, whereas descriptions of places seen during the journey are of little importance to the protagonist, conveying the feeling that the narrator is fonder of the *idea* of reaching Europe than of visiting it. As Kari van Dijk notes, the problematic notion of 'arrival' lies at the core of *Wo Europa anfängt,* complicating the possibility of agreeing on a common European voice, culture or territory.[7] The act of arriving implies reaching a destination as well as a definition, both geographically and conceptually, of what Europe truly is and where it originates. As the narrative unravels, however, it becomes clear that every passenger anchors his view of Europe in distinctly local contexts. The journey thus turns into a process of deconstructing the protagonist's image of Europe, which is ultimately confirmed when, at the end of the story, the protagonist arrives in Moscow only to be denied an entry visa. Once the idea of Europe, as she had imagined it, collapses, the only thing the woman can see is a building with the letters MOSKVA in flames – a row of empty signs with no reference. The letters eventually vanish and the woman finds herself standing, cold and confused, in the middle of Europe.

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF STEREOTYPES: ORIENTALISM AND SELF-ORIENTALISM

Tawada's questioning of European borders and her way of imagining Europe as an unreachable space testify how, despite the fact that actual places and localities nowadays have become ever more "blurred and indeterminate" as a result of frequent mobility and increased communication through technology, "ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient."[8] The fragmentation in the perception of Europe is a theme that also features in Tawada's Japanese novel *Perusona* (1998), which revolves around the emotional turmoils of Michiko, a Japanese girl living in Germany.[9] The cause behind Michiko's identity crisis can be traced to the trauma she experiences upon hearing that her friend Seonryon, a Korean

7. Kari van Dijk, "Arriving in Eurasia: Yoko Tawada Re-Writing Europe, " in *Re-thinking Europe: Literature and (Trans)National Identity*, ed. Nele Bemong et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 172.

8. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference", in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta et al. (New York: Duke University Press, 1997), 10-11.

9. Yōko Tawada, "Perusona," in *Inu mukoiri*, (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1998), 8-76.

male nurse who works at the local hospital, has been accused of sexual harassment. At first, the German staff of the mental hospital where Seonryon works refuse to give credit to such a slanderous claim against a man who is known to be serious and hardworking, but eventually the nurse's reputation is put at stake when a therapist interprets the lack of expression on his face as proof of a skilfully hidden cruelty. The accident causes Michiko to ponder the racist attitude displayed by the Germans, and to question her own status and identity as an Asian expat in Europe. When articulating her feelings, however, neither her German nor her Japanese friends seem to understand Michiko's concerns, so the girl starts wandering around Hamburg in order to find her 'identity'. When the girl reaches Floating Europe, an immigrant district situated along the river Elbe, she expects to feel at ease, imagining that all the inhabitants of the area share a sense of alienation regarding their immigrant condition. Through this image Tawada creates an alternative space to conceive Europe, elaborating on the meaning of being a European from Eastern Europe as opposed to the Europeans in Western Europe. The idea of a floating Europe refers, on the one hand, to the fact that the houses in this area are small houseboat-like buildings that float on the water of the river. On the other hand, it metaphorically refers to the peripheral position occupied by its inhabitants, who all come from countries such as Rumania, Albania, Poland and are somewhat marginalised because of their origins. Even though they receive support from the government to study German and integrate in the new country, their being gathered in a district partially built upon water – i.e. on a border zone – suggests how their 'Europeanness' is not on a par with that of individuals coming from Western Europe. At the same time, Tawada does not portray Eastern Europeans as mere victims of a system which exploits them and then subtly tries to acculturate them. Instead, she focuses on how the immigrants are complicit in reinforcing their outsiderness by fostering the same logic of national identification and cultural stereotypes which cause their isolation. In Floating Europe Michiko is looked down on by the inhabitants of the area because of her Asian ethnicity – she is first mistaken for a Vietnamese, then for a Korean and for a Filipino

– as if intrinsically inferior because of the colour of her skin.

In similar fashion, the Japanese expatriates who appear in the story display strong nationalistic feelings and are not at all interested in establishing relations outside their small expat community. Michiko's brother Kazuo, for example, rejects any comparison between his own status in Germany and that of other Asians. When Michiko feels offended by the comments of the Germans about the supposedly inexpressive face of Asians, Kazuo responds unsympathetically, as if he is not involved: "Kazuo didn't mind that his sister used the word 'East Asian'. Clearly there was no such a word in Japanese."[10] Here, Tawada does not attempt to propose an easy East-West dichotomy, in which Germany stands for the lofty European country that looks down on its exotic other, while Asia plays the role of the victim. Although the Europeans in the story are clearly reticent to trust immigrant communities – and with their behaviour they prove that the foreigner is, after all, a perennial guest – the Japanese in the story are also not interested in erasing cultural stereotypes. As Stuart Hall points out, stereotyping is a signifying practice essential to the maintenance of the social and symbolic order: "it sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them."[11] Stereotyping in this novel plays the same role for both Europeans and Asians as a means of avoiding disruption and confirming the social order according to a binary logic of same/other.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Japanese immigrants in the novel is complicated by the dynamics of what Koichi Iwabuchi defines as 'self-orientalism'.

> While Japan's construction of its national identity through an unambiguous comparison of itself with "the West" is a historically embedded project, Japan's modern national identity has, I would argue, always been imagined in an asymmetrical totalizing triad

10. Ibid. p. 22. My translation.

11. Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 258.

between "Asia," "the West" and "Japan." […] Japan is unequivocally located in a geography called "Asia," but it no less unambiguously exists outside a cultural imagery of "Asia" in Japanese mental maps. […] This duality points to the fact that "Asia" has overtly or covertly played a constitutive part in Japan's construction of national identity. While "the West" played the role of the modern Other to be emulated, "Asia" was cast as the image of Japan's past, a negative portrait which illustrates the extent to which Japan has been successfully modernized according to the Western standard.[12]

Tawada herself discusses the issue of such reverse nationalism in her essay "Eigentlich darf man es niemandem sagen, aber *Europa* gibt es nicht" (Don't tell anybody but Europe does not exist) where she provocatively argues that, just as the East has been for a long time a trope of the West, the idea of Europe is a fictional one.[13] She argues that in Japan many people believe that European culture is not the property of the Europeans, as it is easy for others to imitate. In order to see 'Europe' she therefore has to put on an imaginary pair of "Japanese glasses".[14] However, the writer contends there is no such thing as an authentic Japanese viewpoint either, because, after all, the ideas of Europe and Japan are both the outcome of a perennial process of mutual fabrication:

> My Japanese glasses are not a tool that you can easily buy in a store. I cannot put them on or take them off according to my mood. These glasses emerged from the pain in my eyes and grew into my flesh, just as my flesh grew into the glasses.[15]

Tawada here brings forth the issue of authenticity, elaborating on the intrinsic fictionality of cultural identities. Traditionally, Tawada suggests, Europe has envisioned itself through self-images and, in a rather ethnocentric fashion, it has conceptualised 'the others' on the basis of their implied difference

12. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7-8.

13. Yōko Tawada, "Eigentlich darf man es niemandem sagen, aber *Europa* gibt es nicht," in *Talisman* (Tübingen: Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke, 1996), 45-51.

14. Ibid. p. 49.

15. Ibid. p. 49.

and diversion from the normative Western modes of thinking. These 'others', however, while somewhat complicit in maintaining such essentialising procedures of Orientalist conceptions of non-Western societies, have also appropriated the same categories of belonging superimposed on them and in turn they have created their own representational narrative. As Claudia Breger suggests, "the Japanese eye is, in Homi Bhabha's words […] 'evil': its mimicry produces a 'partial vision of the colonizer's presence, a gaze of otherness' that displaces identity and thus disrupts his authority."[16] By shedding light on the dynamics behind the formation of paradigms of cultural belongings, Tawada wittingly undermines the authority of any narrative presented as an 'authentic' account or deep insight into cultural differences. She denies the existence of reliable viewpoints and, with a certain irony, she dismantles the authority of both the represented self and the observer, showing the impossibility of achieving an objective representation of otherness.

Nevertheless, the reference to the fact that, whenever talking about Europe, the author has to put on an "imaginary pair of Japanese glasses" which has grown into the flesh, also implies that essentialist cultural positions are so embedded in our perceptions of identity that it is impossible to eschew them. Tawada is aware that, imperfect as it is, this binary way of envisioning belonging is deeply embedded in our experience and thus it is hardly possible to move away from it. Furthermore, this imaginary pair of Japanese glasses described by Tawada is deeply embedded in language, which makes it difficult for non-Europeans to articulate their ideas of culture in a different way. In the closing line of the essay, Tawada confesses that at first she could not express herself in Europe because she had little grasp of European languages. Nevertheless, even now that she is able to articulate her thoughts in German, she cannot brush away the feeling that she is speaking in the way Europe wants her to speak, through its imagery and set of values. "I repeat Europe in Europe", she laments, suggesting between the lines that, unless a new language of hermeneutics is developed within non-European cultures and then acknowledged by Europe itself as equally valid, there will

16. Claudia Breger, "Narratives of Nomadism or Copying German Culture," in *Writing against Boundaries: Nationality, Ethnicity and Gender in the German-speaking Context,* ed. Barbara Kosta et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 56-57.

be no opportunity to develop a new 'vocabulary'. This vocabulary would go beyond the binary categories of identification that are generally assumed unproblematic and "hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition."[17]

EN-GENDERING EUROPE

The strategy Tawada develops to illustrate and criticise the conceptualisation of Asia as other to Europe, involves an act of en-gendering to contest the positioning of Europe as autonomous and self-reflexive 'centre' of cultural production. Tawada engages in a critique of European culture by imagining Europe as a two-folded mythological figuration. On the one hand, she sees Europe as an ambiguous female figure whom Europeans are perpetually in search of. Since they keep talking about the loss of Europe and the urge of finding her but never actually engage in such a quest, Tawada suggests that the Europeans have idealized the image of Europe precisely because it is helplessly lost: "The female figure of Europe must have been lost in a mythical time."[18] On the other hand, Europe as a male character is imagined as a very aggressive figure: the European body, Tawada contends, wants to be the focus of people's gaze every time ("the male figure of Europe asks, above all, for the constant gaze of the public").[19] Europe is very critical towards itself and towards other cultures, but such forms of (self-)criticism are not necessarily a form of narcissism. Indeed, Tawada points out, they are essential to Europe because they put it in the spotlight and prevent it from vanishing.[20] It can be argued that Tawada's way of imagining Europe operates on the basis of an epistemological reversal: instead of defining the other as what Europe is not, Tawada challenges Europe to define itself not in oppositional terms. The result, the writer suspects, will prove the inconsistency of a claim for a coherent 'European identity': any assumption of cultural superiority might be no more than a lack of self-confidence hidden behind the façade of rigorous criticism. According to Tawada's imagination thus, Europe is obsessed with criticising the other or even itself because

17. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

18. Tawada, *Talisman*, p. 48. My translation.

19. Ibid. p. 47. My translation.
20. Ibid. p. 48. My translation.

this is the only strategy to maintain the established hierarchies of cultural and political power. Without the established dialectics of same/other, here/there, centre/margin, it is Europe, rather than others, that would lose its referents. After all, the writer notes, something that is not being looked at can disappear at any time.

In this respect, it is significant that Tawada imagines Europe as an aggressive figure as well as a subaltern lost one. Tawada seems to suggest that for the Europeans, identity cannot be conceived outside binary juxtapositions. Europe can only be defined against a subaltern image, be it that of the exotic other or the woman who needs to be rescued. The double figuration of Europe as a gendered entity thus hints at an ontological weakness of Europe, a soft spot that can be potentially breached. To formulate the question according to the well-known formulation of Gayatri Spivak, Tawada's envisioning of Europe suggests that the subaltern can speak upon the condition that it finds a way to escape the trap of ethnically predetermined language. While the realisation of this latter aspect is not yet actualised in Tawada's essay, her way of problematising the meaning of Europe by turning it into the object of the Asian gaze lays the foundations for a reassessment in the perceptions of Europe that takes into account the globalised, intertextual dimension of cultural production in the contemporary age.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a key feature in Tawada's narratives is the portrayal of characters who wander around a labyrinthine Eurasian landscape in which signposts and maps fail to provide a place for locating identity. Through their travelling, Tawada calls for an understanding of Eurasian frontiers as interstitial zones permeable to changes, suggesting how borderland territories are often the space where the most relevant cultural and political activities take place. This attitude, which develops along the lines of postmodernist and postcolonial discourses on space, invites the reader to re-examine the eth-

nocentric ideologies that still persist in this supposedly multicultural world.

Tawada imagines Europe as a counter-empire of empty signs where, behind the physical surface of the 'real space' – i.e. the geographic space that Tawada's characters cross – the protagonists never find a correspondence between the actual landscape of Europe and the notion of Europe constructed in their mindscapes. Speaking from the position of a voluntary Asian expatriate in Europe – with a solid cultural background in both Japanese and Western philosophical and literary thought – Tawada contests Europe's legitimacy to claim for any 'authenticity' of its cultural narrative, while refusing to essentialise 'unique' characteristics of Japanese and German culture from a 'foreign' perspective. Far from being ethnographic, Tawada's approach confirms time and again the fictional nature of her prose. Ultimately, imagination becomes the only possible mode of representation because, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, fantasy is what allows our mind to make sense of the world: imagination provides a framework through which we see reality.[21] Unconstrained by the demands of documentary veracity, Tawada's way of imagining Europe suggests how fiction can detect new meanings hidden in the folds of the real. Literary imagination thus not only manifests its ability to represent the world, but it is able to participate actively in its making.

21. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997).

Emanuela Costa holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Naples "L'Orientale", where she teaches classes in Japanese language and literature. Since December 2012, she has been a JSPS Postdoctoral fellow at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, where she is working on a project that traces the development of transnational writing in Japan. She specializes in Japanese literature, with a particular interest in the articulations of transcultural and translingual imagery in contemporary fiction.