

**Troubling the Waters: Porous Materiality, Contaminated Environments, and Female Bodies of
Water in Ingeborg Bachmann's "Undine geht," Yoko Tawada's *Das Bad*, and Katharina Köller's**

Was ich im Wasser sah

by

Lisa Hoeller

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Dissertation Committee:

Susan Anderson, Co-Chair

Martin Klebes, Co-Chair

Dorothee Ostmeier, Core Member

Oluwakemi Balogun, Institutional Representative

University of Oregon

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Lisa Hoeller

Doctor of Philosophy in German

Title: Troubling the Waters: Porous Materiality, Contaminated Environments, and Female Bodies of Water in Ingeborg Bachmann's "Undine geht," Yoko Tawada's *Das Bad*, and Katharina Köller's *Was ich im Wasser sah*

In my dissertation, I examine water—watery environments, fluid materialities, bodies of water—in literature and environmental theory. I argue that literary texts offer creative and imaginative ways to engage with environmental concepts such as hybridity, indifference, viscous porosity, impurity, and monstrosity. Attempting to address the multiple climate crises of today, many environmental theories demand a radical rethinking of how we view the world and our place in it; connecting such theories with literary analysis creates opportunities to envision how futures in which we more fully account for the material contingency of embodied existence might take shape.

I offer a close reading of three German literary texts that center around water, Ingeborg Bachmann's "Undine geht," Yoko Tawada's *Das Bad*, and Katharina Köller's *Was ich im Wasser sah*. Bachmann's 1961 narrative "Undine geht" imaginatively attunes itself to the watery milieu of Undine, abandoning the anthropocentric terrestrial perspective in favor of a more fluid and hybrid point of view. The text makes clear that we exist in a world of entanglement and partial knowledge and can never truly separate ourselves from our surroundings. Tawada's *Das Bad*, first published in 1989, offers a complex exploration of watery bodies and unstable materiality. More than that, Tawada's writing is itself porous and materially contingent; how we make sense is always connected to our sense as well as our senses. Finally, Köller's 2020 novel *Was ich im*

Wasser sah highlights how ideas of intactness and purity are unable to account for the material realities of interconnected and contingent existence. Instead, Köller writes about pervasive contamination and its resultant monstrosity to imagine ways of engaging with our own impure existence.

Focusing on troubled waters, the literary stories discussed in my thesis make their own contribution to the environmental humanities. Connecting them with concepts of environmental theory helps bring their contributions to light and allows for a deeper understanding of our entangled existence in this world.

This dissertation includes previously published material.

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction: Testing the Waters	11
Why Us? – A Brief Note on the Use of the Pronoun ‘We’	11
The Significance of Water	12
Stories of Water	14
Contribution to Existing Scholarship.....	17
Theoretical Considerations	18
Water Matters – Hybridity and Indifference.....	19
Hybridity.....	19
Indifference	23
Water Matters.....	24
Water Encounters – Borders and Porosity	27
Borders	27
Porosity	30
Water Encounters.....	32
Water Troubles – Impurity and Monstrosity	38
Impurity.....	38
Monstrosity	42
Water Troubles.....	44

Literary Storytelling as a Hybrid, Porous, Impure Practice.....	47
Methodology.....	54
Literary Deep Dives.....	57
II. (Re)Writing the Waters – Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine geht” and the Quest for a New Language.....	57
Introduction.....	57
The Undine Tradition.....	61
Bachmann’s Undine.....	69
Undine Emerges.....	70
A Subject, Speaking.....	73
Destabilizing and Deconstructing.....	76
The Blurry Boundaries of Entangled Existence.....	81
Watery Abjection and its Monstrosity.....	84
Water/Woman: Utopian (Im)possibilities.....	91
Conclusion: (Re)Writing the Waters.....	97
III. Reading the Waters – Yoko Tawada’s <i>Das Bad</i> and the Materiality of Storytelling.....	100
Introduction.....	100
Brief Note on the Edition.....	105
Tawada’s Watery Bodies and Linguistic Materiality.....	106
Viscously Porous Story-Telling.....	110

Unstable Bodies and Impossible Identities	113
Becoming “a Transparent Coffin”	120
Reading Matters	126
Pages Full of Water.....	132
Conclusion: Reading the Waters.....	134
IV. Transforming the Waters – Katharina Köller’s <i>Was ich im Wasser sah</i> and the Pervasiveness of Impurity	137
Introduction.....	137
A Story of Two Women.....	139
A Story of Environmental Degradation	141
When Everything Becomes Contaminated	143
“Unfrau”: Breast Cancer and the Contaminated Body	149
Octopus-Woman: Another Water-Woman	157
Be Like an Octopus.....	161
The Many Monsters of Pervasive Contamination	166
Conclusion: Transforming the Waters	167
V. Conclusion: Troubling the Waters	170
Epilogue: Schwimmen	176
Bibliography	183

List of Figures

Figure 1: "Fluid Movement"	10
Figure 2: "Golden Waves"	56
Figure 3: "Sunset Full of Water"	99
Figure 4: "Dripping Web"	136
Figure 5: "Drifters"	169
Figure 6: "Colors of Water"	175
Figure 7: "Surface Tension"	182
Figure 8: "Liquid Light"	190

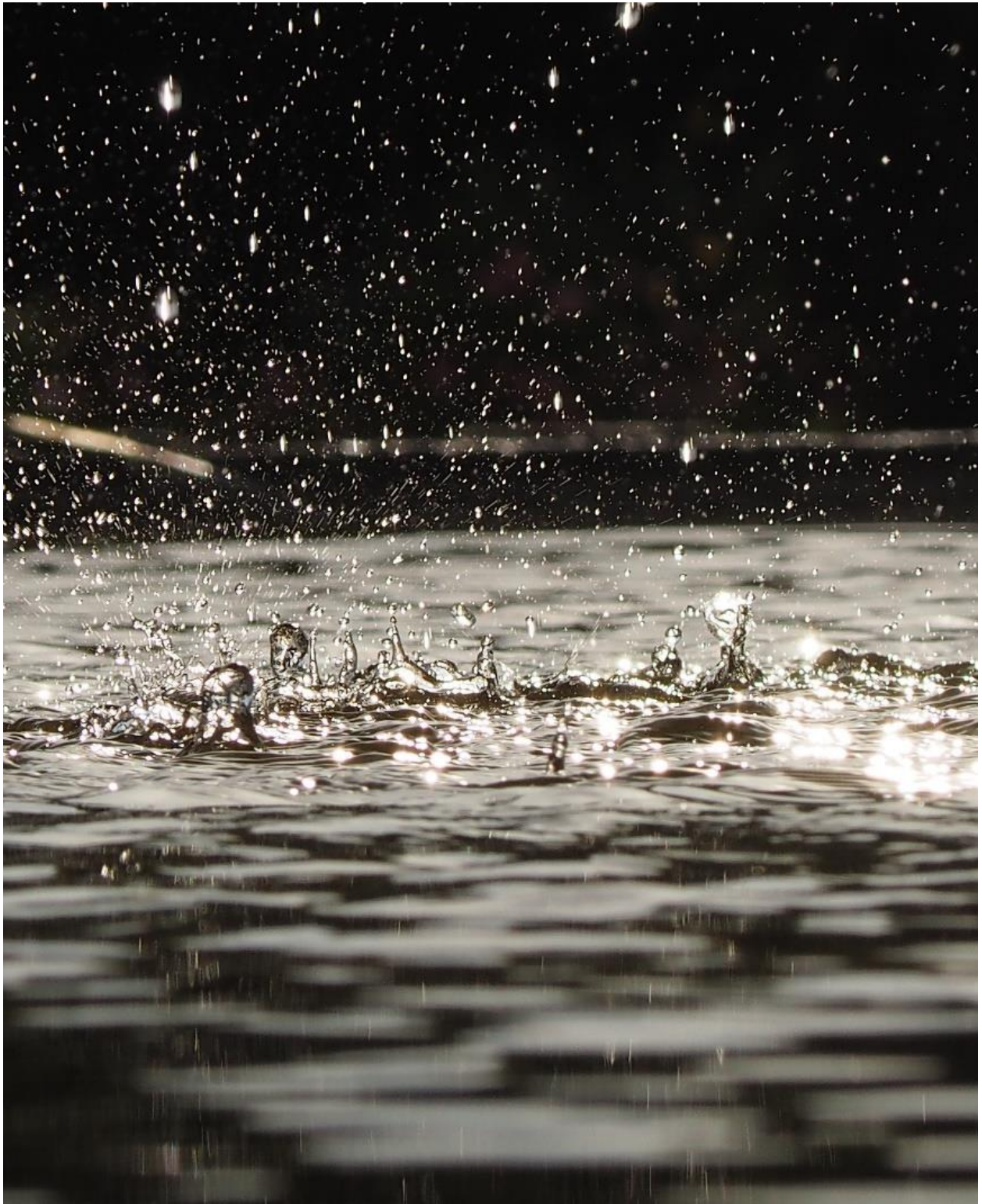


Figure 1: "Fluid Movement"

I. Introduction: Testing the Waters

*And oh, poor Atlas
The world's a beast of a burden
You've been holding on a long time
And all this longing
And the ships are left to rust
That's what the water gave us*

Florence and the Machine – “What the Water Gave Me”

WHY US? – A BRIEF NOTE ON THE USE OF THE PRONOUN ‘WE’

I generally use “we” throughout my dissertation as a collective pronoun to refer to humanity as a whole at our point in time or to refer to the readership of a text. I do realize and acknowledge that different people are differently implicated and affected in societal privilege and environmental crises all around the world. At different instances in the text, people might feel more or less part of the generalizing ‘we’ used in the text which they have every right to. I decided to use the highly undifferentiated collective ‘we’ rather than ‘man,’ ‘humans,’ ‘the Western world,’ or ‘the Global North,’ on the one hand simply for the purpose of ease and readability, on the other hand exactly because of the vagueness of the pronoun. Specifying a subgroup like ‘the Global North’ might create a false sense of an uncomplicated category as if it did not itself comprise differently distributed shares of responsibility and affectedness. Using a label like ‘man’ or ‘humans’ at the same time seemed too detached and lacks the appeal to a more personal level. The problems and events I address in the following might feel relevant for different people at different points in the analysis, so that staying as open and ‘inclusive’ as possible ultimately seemed the better choice.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER

Water is an essential element in our world. It is a precondition for life and an elemental force of life on our planet. Our surroundings are in every aspect integrated in a larger water cycle, our survival is highly dependent on access to water sources, our bodies themselves are largely water. Hartmut Böhme declares, “Die Ubiquität des Wassers in allem Lebendigen macht es zu einem ›absoluten Phänomen‹” (8) [“The ubiquity of water in all living things makes it into an ›absolute phenomenon‹”].¹ The ubiquitous and absolute nature of water means that it is a crucial part of our everyday existence, and that it has been, and will continue to be, a fundamental force in our environment and our imagination.

Many of the environmental crises and injustices with which we are faced today unsurprisingly revolve around water: the warming of the oceans, the rise of the sea level, the pollution of our waterways with microplastics, the contamination of drinking water, torrential rains or the lack of rain, etc. It has, however, been difficult to address such problems because of water’s fluidity and ubiquity, its involvement and entanglement with everything. It is problematic to consider issues surrounding water from only one disciplinary standpoint. As Böhme observes, “So sehr die Moderne durch Ausdifferenzierung von Einzeldisziplinen charakterisiert ist, so unangemessen, ja gefährlich ist dies gegenüber dem Wasser” (8) [“As much as modernity is characterized by the differentiation of individual disciplines, this is inappropriate, even dangerous, when it comes to water”]. Addressing watery problems through highly specialized solutions disregards the big picture of the water networks permeating our planet, ourselves included. Water cannot be easily contained but always continues to flow, seep, leak, and erode.

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Since we are ourselves “bodies of water,” (Neimanis) we are materially unable to take ourselves ‘out of the water.’ Nonetheless, we often look at water as an object, a substance outside, apart, vis-à-vis from us. It is difficult to encounter water differently in our everyday lives, to attune to the constant interaction of our bodies with water and to consider its far-reaching implications for us, the world around us, and the substance that we call water. As Rita Wong and Dorothy Christian assert, “It is insufficient to only talk about water as a substance that is outside and separate from us, for water is always making us up from within. [...] Water continually remakes us, whether we notice it or not” (7). Being attentive to our own encounters with water as well as exploring our watery realities by means of language, dream, imagination (Böhme 11) can help us to actively entangle ourselves in the watery reality of our planet. “Wer mit der Erscheinungsvielfalt des Wassers vertraut ist, wird leichter einräumen, daß jene Trennung von Subjekt und Objekt, wie sie für die neuzeitliche Wissenschaft kennzeichnend wurde, ein Irrweg ist oder zumindest nur zur halben Wahrheit führt” (Böhme 11) [“Those who are familiar with the diverse phenomena of water will more readily concede that the subject-object separation that has come to characterize modern science is erroneous, or at least leading only to half-truths”]. Literature, as a space of imagination and creation, offers us an opportunity to connect with centuries worth of watery imaginaries and to find new ways of relating to water. Through art and imagination, we might more easily “shift from presumptuously ‘knowing about’ water to humbly learning with and through water” (Wong and Christian 10) attentively exploring our own material interconnectedness with our watery world. It is imperative to approach water through multiple perspectives, disciplines, and understandings including imaginative and creative engagement and practices as well as our own material experiences.

STORIES OF WATER

The three texts that I will analyze in the following chapters negotiate watery beings and their attachments and entanglements by means of imaginative literary storytelling. I have chosen to focus my analysis on three prose works by female authors published between 1961 and 2020. The three authors I am discussing here span three generations; two of them are Austrian, one is Japanese but lives in Germany and writes in Japanese and German. Although all three prose texts, Bachmann's "Undine geht," Tawada's *Das Bad*, and Köller's *Was ich im Wasser sah*, center on a female protagonist (in the case of *Was ich im Wasser sah*, we might speak of two female protagonists) who is closely connected to water, the three narratives are at first glance very different. It is, however, not so much the obvious connection in storylines or intertextual references that I am interested in here but the way in which all three authors negotiate the relationship between body and environment and create a sense of watery entanglement.

There have to date been few analyses that foreground ecocritical, environmental, or other nature elements in Bachmann's work. Much of the critical reception has instead focused on feminism and trauma in her writing. While nature or environment are not necessarily at the forefront in Bachmann's texts, intricate interplay and interaction between characters and their surroundings are certainly present in her works. I focus on "Undine geht" in my project as one text by Bachmann that presents a protagonist intimately connected to her environment, to society, and to the multiple Undines that came before. Bachmann's search for a better, a truer language leads her to an exploration of the Undine myth and its potential for imagining a different, more connected existence. We will see that Bachmann's text finds language for the water-woman that anticipates

and mirrors concepts and terminology within the still young field of the environmental humanities which conceptualizes humans as always enmeshed in the more-than-human world.²

Some of Tawada's works, particularly texts like *Etüden im Schnee* (2014, published first in Japanese in 2011) or the essay "Meine Salzwassermutter. Von Minamata zu Fukushima" (2017), explicitly tackle environmental issues and have received considerable attention from scholars in the environmental humanities. Annegret Märten attests that "[a]fter the triple catastrophe of the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and the subsequent nuclear reactor meltdown in Fukushima in March 2011, Tawada Yōko's work has increasingly featured themes of environmental catastrophe" (163). The author's explicit interest in environmental issues in recent years certainly calls for an ecocritical reading of her newer works. With *Das Bad* I focus on a text, however, that has been published much earlier in Tawada's career and on the surface does not demand such a reading. As is the case for many of her older texts, scholars have mostly focused on questions of foreignness and language in *Das Bad*. Some interpretations have furthermore emphasized the importance of materiality in this short novel, something which I will build on in my own analysis. Reading Tawada's text in conjunction with environmental humanities theory reveals the astute attention Tawada pays to her protagonist's watery existence and the multiple instabilities and entanglements that follow such watery existence. I will analyze Tawada's short novel not only concerning plot and character development but also show how this text folds its own materiality into the meaning-making process, prompting us to read more than just the words on the page. Parts of this chapter

² The phrase *more-than-human* was first introduced by David Abram in his 1996 book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. He coined the phrase "to indicate that the human world is a subset within the larger set of the more-than-human world – a world that encompasses, subtends, and even pervades the human world but that also always exceeds the human world" (Abram et al, "Interbreathing Ecocultural Identity in the Humilocene" 8).

have previously been published under the title “Reading Matters - Materiality and (Il)legible Inscriptions in Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad*” in *Focus on Literatur*.³

In the last chapter, I discuss Köller’s novel *Was ich im Wasser sah*. This is certainly an environmental novel; among the texts I chose for this project, it is the one most clearly concerned with environmental crises and their effects on the human body. Due to the fact that this text was published less than three years ago and is Köller’s first foray into prose writing, there has to date been no significant scholarship on this novel. While we encounter many aspects in *Was ich im Wasser sah* that connect directly to questions of environmental theory, my approach focuses specifically on the portrayal of entangled existence exploring the interactions between the protagonists’ bodies and their environment. Köller’s novel specifically foregrounds questions of environmental contamination that are not addressed explicitly in either “Undine geht” or *Das Bad* but have become more and more acute in our world today. Köller’s focus on contamination provides an opportunity of thinking through the many ways in which bodies and behaviors are affected by and implicated in environmental degradation and tied “to complex webs of suffering” (Shotwell 5). I will detail how *Was ich im Wasser sah* asks us to contend with pervasive contamination and challenges our ideas around impurity and monstrosity.

Despite their many differences, all three authors embrace water as a destabilizing and seeping force and, in the watery worlds of their stories, find possibilities for imagining new ways of relating to and being in, and of, the world. Be it Bachmann’s Undine, Tawada’s nameless protagonist, or Köller’s two sisters, each of them is forced to encounter their material interconnectedness and interdependency and find ways to cope with their resulting vulnerabilities.

³ See Höller, Lisa. “Reading Matters - Materiality and (Il)legible Inscriptions in Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad*.” *Focus on Literatur*, vol. 29, 2023, pp. 55–84.

While written at different points in time throughout the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries and each offering their own particular story of a water-woman, all three texts analyzed here show literature's contribution to envisioning different worlds and imagining new ways of existing in them.

CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

First and foremost, this thesis is an analysis of German literary texts. In this capacity it contributes to the scholarship on German literature connecting three texts and their authors that have not previously been studied together and at first glance might not seem strikingly similar. While the connecting force was the fact that all three texts revolve around women and water, studying the texts through concepts such as hybridity and porosity also revealed in which ways all three texts question bodily integrity and complicate our understanding of the environment as separate and apart from the human. Little scholarly attention has to date been paid to the environmental dimension of the texts analyzed here; my analysis underscores how an environmental reading can add to our understanding of them. Exploring these texts from an environmental humanities perspective not only offers new insights for the interpretation of these texts but also demonstrates how integrating environmental theory into literary studies provides fruitful avenues of exploration even if texts are not overtly environmental.

Secondly, my work is situated in the field of the environmental humanities, a growing field of research considering environmental concerns by means of inquiries and approaches from the field of the humanities. Theoretical approaches coming out of the environmental humanities are often grounded in real-life experiences and deal with actual environmental events or states; this

often creates a terminology that seems compelling for the natural and social sciences but appears to lack a more direct connection with cultural studies, cinema studies, or literary studies. I do not mean to say that such connections do not exist, but I believe that more work is needed that explicitly brings together such theoretical concepts with the interpretation of cultural artifacts. Seeking out the many different ways in which humans make sense of the world and putting them in conversation means creating a fuller picture. I see my own work contributing to this fuller picture by finding ways to entangle environmental theory and literary studies without simplistically using one for a better understanding of the other; instead my aim was to engage them in a conversation teasing out what each contributes to a rethinking of the human-nature relationship and how they might complement but also complicate each other.

Lastly, my work also follows Böhme's by now decades-old call for more scholarship on water in the cultural imagination (. I understand my project as a contribution to such scholarship. Literature, as a space of imagination and creation, offers us opportunities to connect with centuries' worth of watery imaginaries and create new interconnected ways of relating to water. It is important that we take seriously what literary texts have to say and see what we can learn from and through them.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the following pages, I aim to offer some insight into the complex theoretical concepts that will play an important part of my literary analysis. Additionally, I will explore here how thinking theoretical concepts with and in water variously clarifies, troubles, or challenges our

understanding of these concepts and intensifies our engagement with them. I will also provide preliminary conclusions on their connection to and relevance for the work of literary analysis.

Water Matters – Hybridity and Indifference

Hybridity

Being hybrid means being multiple, recognizing that we as humans are not only and singularly human but always in need of something more and other. Hybridity acknowledges that environments, bacteria and viruses, microplastics, machines and technology can be “prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly [or unfriendly] selves” (Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto” 61) of our bodies. Water is always an intimate component of life on this planet; it exposes our dependence on the world around and our constant interaction with it. Like the characters in the literary texts I will be discussing, we are all hybrid in our connectedness with, and our need for, water, a substance that may not be human itself but is still the basis of the human body.

My understanding of hybridity is first of all a feminist one. Feminist hybridity and hybrid feminism challenge traditional forms of knowledge production which are based on knowing, defining, and categorizing material realities from an objective, scientific standpoint and which are deeply entangled with (traditionally masculine) compartments and tactics of abstraction, detachment, and separation, thus creating an object of study through othering it. However, ‘knowing’ the world happens just as much when we tap into relations and connections, accepting materiality that does not exist in a vacuum and does not conform to, nor is exhausted by, one understanding of it, one way of knowing only. As Patricia Hill Collins observes, “Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes,

paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship” (251). This ultimately makes society a space where epistemologies that do not originate from White men or come out of the institutions created by them in turn do not receive the same platform and visibility and are more easily dismissed. Nonetheless, people outside of these institutions generate knowledges and worldviews, and they tap into different potentials and pay attention to different implications (Collins 252). These ‘other’ (differently generated and generative) knowledges create spaces to reexamine what we think we know. In these spaces we are frequently confronted with approaches, understandings, and experiences that connect and combine rather than try to separate. By being open to diverse ways of making sense of the world we live in, our understanding reflects the hybrid realities we engage with: complex and messy and always partial.

My own engagement with the concept of hybridity started with and is deeply indebted to Donna Haraway, “always a (feminist) theorist in and of hybridity” (Kroker 106). As Haraway suggests, “to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial” (“Cyborg Manifesto” 60). If the concept ‘woman’ is ‘other’ to the hegemonic, strictly defined and policed White male position, the exclusion from said position leaves an identity that is out of bounds: partial, relational, messy, unstable, hybrid. The way feminist thinkers and scholars make sense of the world and generate knowledge needs to reflect the multiple positionalities and differently distributed oppressions we face and acknowledge the intersection from which each of us addresses them.⁴ Haraway states, “We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated

⁴ To be the ‘other’ is not to be the same because the other is not and should not be defined through its difference from the dominant masculine position alone. As Kimberlé Crenshaw’s influential concept of ‘intersectionality’ highlights, gender, race, disability, etc. all affect the positionality of a specific person and create diverse positions within identity groups that need to be addressed.

knowledges make possible” (“Situated Knowledges” 590). There is potential in acknowledging that our bodies and our understandings are multiple and partial because it opens ourselves up for seeking connections and relationships with the world around us.

Furthermore, if we attempt to sever our selves from our surroundings in order to be a singular, delimited, ‘only’ self, we deny, Cary Wolfe asserts, the many ways in which “human beings are *prosthetic* beings. What we call ‘we’ is in fact a multiplicity of relations between ‘us’ and ‘not us’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, organic and non-organic, things ‘present’ and things ‘absent’” (358). It is relationality and intimate connection that inform us as human beings, the hybrid nature of living as a body that is at once separate and intimately entangled with the world around us. As Haraway states, “the body is a collective; it is an historical artifact constituted by human as well as organic and technological unhuman actors” (“The Promises of Monster” 483). One of the big feminist interventions has been returning the body to theory by understanding matter as an essential factor not just as a signifier but as an actor. Jasib Puar maintains, “matter is not a ‘thing’ but a doing [...] matter does not materialize through signification alone” (57-58). Thus, while we might look at gender performance among many other performances as a process of signification that expresses a certain gender, we should not forget the material body and its constant interaction with its surroundings. Similarly, while we might understand literary texts to work based on signification alone, they too have a body, a material reality that can interfere in the meaning-making process. As we will see specifically in Tawada’s *Das Bad*, the material characteristics of the words and pages of a book can be an integral part of what we read demanding us to come to terms with the book’s own hybrid character.

We are hybrid beings not only because of being always partial and in need of connection, but also because we think and generate knowledge with both our minds and our bodies. While in

terms of knowledge production and validation Western science has privileged the mind over the body at least since the Enlightenment, our body and its location in and interaction with the world offers us another site for meaning making and embodied knowledge production. Different bodies, differently influenced positionalities can contribute different partial situated knowledges. The material position will always inform and influence and even co-create knowledge. Thus, rather than striving for the impossible impartial and universal understanding of the world, rather than giving in to the god-trick, as Haraway calls it (“Situated Knowledges” 581), we are called to theorize by fully inhabiting and acknowledging the locations and standpoints that we are materially grounded in and from which we can be accountable (Haraway, “Situated Knowledges” 583).

Writing about Haraway’s concept of hybridity, Arthur Kroker wonders, “will the concept of hybridity itself constitute a way of living at the creative borderlands of all the broken (universal) identities of the future?” (107). Engaging our own hybridity can allow us to think with and through its multiple generative and creative possibilities. If we don’t have to be one and only one and if we are not separating ourselves and our bodies from our surroundings, we might learn to attune ourselves more to our own location and its partial vantage points as well as the situations in which we depend and rely on other beings, other matter. “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto” 61). Embracing hybridity as a fact of our existence, we might actively think through the potentialities of our own material interconnectedness and explore ways in which these connections fundamentally call into question ideas of stability, independence, and purity.

Indifference

Neat separations and clear-cut categories, understanding the world from the outside, cannot do justice to hybrid bodies and their many material entanglements; materiality will always elude outsider perspectives and exceed what might be understood with our minds alone. In her essay “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual,” Claire Colebrook proposes the term ‘indifference’ to challenge our inclination to erect and foreground differences.

Indifference is how we might think about an ‘essentially’ rogue or anarchic conception of life that is destructive of boundaries, distinctions, and identifications. To live is to tend toward indifference, where tendencies and forces result less in distinct kinds than in complicated, confused, and disordered partial bodies. (4)

Indifference should not suggest here a lack of care or a detached and disinterested attitude, but a realization that what we encounter in this world is not exhausted in our understanding of it. Indifference is a fluid, porous, seeping force akin to liquid substances like water. Water erodes and incorporates, often disregarding or overcoming boundaries and differences that it runs up against.

Additionally, Colebrook points to the primacy of sexual difference in human thinking about reproduction and the moralism attached to it, “It is because the human organism fears sexual indifference, fears the loss of its bounded being and its differentiated world of fixed kinds, that it has been unable to perceive, consider or allow differences and rhythms beyond those of its own sensory-motor apparatus.” (“Sexual Indifference” 181) However, thinking and wondering beyond what makes sense to our human mind, engaging what scares and alienates us might “enable the human species to confront its current milieu” (“Sexual Difference,” 180). For this reason, Colebrook’s ideas around indifference focus on the constant questioning of categorization and differences in an effort to provoke a rethinking and undermining of boundaries, a complication

and fracturing of matter and life. All three texts discussed in the following negotiate the imposition of categories onto bodies and expose the inadequacy and even violence of such categories. The literary characters in these stories always exceed existing categories, their watery bodies and fluid identities disrupt stable ascriptions of difference. Indifference is a concept that allows us to acknowledge the inadequacy of categorization and find meaning in always provisional and ever-changing difference.

The practice of reading, ascribing, and inscribing difference is helpful insofar as it helps us separate things so that we can better and more clearly relate them to each other and to ourselves. Thinking difference always with and through indifference is essential because it opens up space for questioning and reinterpretation. “[B]ecause we no longer assume that the world is reducible to the world *for us* ... whatever presents itself as natural or necessary is nevertheless given contingently and might always be thought otherwise” (Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene” 7). The boundary around what we declare to be different entities or concepts is always provisional, “haunted by its dissolution” (Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene” 5). While water does not turn everything around it into water, it entangles and changes the materiality of what it comes into contact with and undermines their separateness. Watery worlds tend—maybe most clearly and obviously—towards indifference.

Water Matters

In her book *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue explores what media theory might look like under water. Through attentive encounters with the watery milieu of the salty oceans, Jue shows that our ways of knowing are always highly dependent on the conditions of the milieu they were produced in and should critically reflect on their situatedness as well as understand their own

limitations. I am interested in Jue's attention to, and description of, physical oceanic experiences. These are experiences with disorientation (when moving through water) and with buoyancy (being suspended in the water) and pressure (ever increasing as one dives into the depths of the ocean). Jue tests our terrestrial knowledge and asks us to question our biased preconceptions in order to tease out what being attentive to water might look like.

To achieve relative ease in moving through water and diving deeper into the ocean, the human body has to relearn its environment and become differently materially entangled with the watery world around it. But this change in our ways does not end at the surface of the water, it does not stop existing in our bodies and in our minds once we are back in our terrestrial environments. Instead, Jue writes, "you become alienated from the land in the very process of becoming able to breathe comfortably deep underwater and have to spend time reversing that process to go safely back to sea level elevation" (164). The deep oceanic environment forces us to question and unlearn many of our basic instincts and behaviors; these experiences of the material reality of being submerged under water – though highly mediated and adapted to human bodily needs – do not leave us untouched, but they entangle us into new material and relational webs of becoming. Our own understanding of the world and how to be in the world becomes hybrid. Literary stories similarly have the power to alienate us from our immediate surroundings by immersing us into unfamiliar worlds. By taking up the perspective of the water-woman hybrid, "Undine geht" for example tries to move beyond the anthropocentric perspective of our own world and conceive of an existence that is more than human.

Attuning our bodies to ocean water's buoyancy and pressure also requires us to let go of notions and understandings cultivated on land such as our idea of bodily integrity and separation. Within water, the body is subject to "a sort of buoyancy, a sense that the human is held, but not

held up” (Alaimo, “States of Suspension” 477-478). The deeper the body immerses itself, the more it is also subject to pressure. At that point it is not just losing its sense of direction, but it becomes gripped by the force of the water around it. However, pressure is not simply an opponent to reckon with and fend off, but rather it seeps in and permeates the body from without and within through the interface of the lungs. Jue suggests, “Rethinking the interface through the lungs means considering the fluidity of gases and liquids together, the absorption of pressurized air into the body’s tissues as a volume rather than a surface. Here, interior and exterior are folded into the flesh of the human body through the semipermeable membranes of the lungs” (43). In the case of oceanic submersion, it requires close attention to one’s milieu and its material interactions with the body to avoid life-threatening consequences. The most obvious differences become indifferent, as other differences emerge and demand closer attention. In the most general terms, Jue’s work shows that being attentive to water in its materiality might open up avenues for more interconnected, materially aware ways of thinking.

Water matters. It is not just in a state of submersion in the depths of the oceans that we might see just how much water matters. What happens, for example, to the integrity of our body when we drink contaminated water? Isn’t this water also our body, its contamination also our contamination? Our body is multiple, more than just the one entity that we might feel and understand ourselves to be. Looking at water we know it to be materially separate and different from the human body, yet we also know it to be not only a necessary substance for life but also a potential source of sickness and contamination, something that can infiltrate our bodily boundaries and change us intimately. We are hybrid beings, relational, multiple, messy.

If our bodies are approximately 60% water, are we materially separate and different from water? When we submerge ourselves in water, do we truly know our bounds, our edges, where our

body ends and water begins? Water tends towards indifference in Colebrook's sense: it obfuscates the difference inscribed in matter, it materially changes what it touches. Materially, humans and water are closely linked. Our bodies are less separate, less different from water and more tending towards indifference with it, contingent and intimately connected.

Water matters in and through literature. Böhme asserts, "Es gibt keine Kunst-, Text- oder Stilform, die nicht mit Wasser zu tun haben könnte und tatsächlich hat" (19) ["There is no type of art, text, or style that couldn't be, and indeed isn't already, connected to water"]. Water is, once again, everywhere. It inspires us to imagine and tell stories of other possible worlds and ways of existing in them. Thinking through water provides one avenue for becoming more attentive to the material entanglements and the messy beings in our world, ourselves included. The three literary texts analyzed in the following chapters adapt themselves, each in their own way, to the fluid and watery realities of their stories, attending to hybrid being and indifferent becoming through imaginative stories and their characters. They negotiate the material entanglement of water and bodies through their characters demonstrating how water matters in multiple ways for each of these characters.

Water Encounters – Borders and Porosity

Borders

Borders are everywhere in our human understanding and conceptualization of the world. Borders are not just geopolitical lines but any line that humans draw in space, in time, or simply in our heads in attempts to separate and categorize the world. However, while borders might suggest a boundary and while there are many attempts to defend and police such boundaries, the

material reality frequently proves to be much more complex. It is at the border (any border, be it geopolitical, temporal, conceptual, etc.) that the impossibility of neatly separating two sides becomes most glaringly evident: it is at the border that what is being separated by said border is also most obviously connected and entangled. While we might imagine these borderlines as clear-cut and impenetrable boundaries, the bodies that inhabit the territory circumscribed by these borders (physically and metaphorically) defy the dividing and separating character of the border and instead expose its porosity. Although we likely feel our own bodily boundaries to be relatively concrete, our bodies start to feel less clearly defined when we are exposed, for example, to crippling heat or heavy storms.

Separating, defining, sorting are all practices intrinsically tied to being human and making sense of the world around us. As such they are activities that cannot be prevented or eliminated, nor should they be. It is, however, crucial to acknowledge that the material reality of the world will stay messy, no matter how many borders we erect. Colebrook suggests, “we might think of all the differences we make and mark as supervening on a world that does *not* come with its own inscription or difference but is not, for all that, devoid of a complexity that will always exceed any of the differences we read into the world.” (“We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene” 4) The reality around us will always fray the categories we have established and render their boundaries permeable.

What’s at stake in the drawing of clear, restrictive boundaries is delimiting and defining a positive inside as well as creating the need to police and protect this defined inside. What remains outside is other and as such always potentially dangerous. The restrictiveness of borders plays out as a safety mechanism that attempts to protect intactness, stability, and purity from corruption and infiltration. In her book *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo traces how we (mis)understand and

(mis)interpret the borders of our human body as a clear separation between body and environment. Instead, she proposes that we consider “the many interfaces between human bodies and the larger environment,” and states, “[t]hose particular sites of interconnection demand attention to the materiality of the human and to the immediacy and potency of all that the ostensibly bounded, human subject would like to disavow” (4). Our notion of distinct borders between humans and nature has led to the misapprehension that we can sever our own materiality from the material world around us. Alaimo suggests the concept of ‘trans-corporeality’ as a way of reconceptualizing our own bodies and their permeable and porous boundaries, “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from »the environment«” (2). In this context, conceiving of oneself as an autonomous and impenetrable human body is an illusion. It is, however, not only the outside that threatens, but also the ever-shifting, unstable inside.

While borders in our everyday discourse seem particularly important as a protective mechanism against an imagined outside, the inside of any category is itself also unstable and potentially dangerous to its own borders. Haraway suggests,

Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; “objects” do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice. (“Situated Knowledges” 595)

Thus, claiming and defining boundaries also constantly means to reassert and police its own inner intactness, because both sides of a boundary exert their material force and are prone to seepage. Steve Mentz considers seeping “an ecological truth that all borders must be crossed and all boundaries spanned” (282). While seeping does not obliterate differences, it contaminates,

corrodes, stains. Thus, we can still make out individual things, shapes, ideas; it is their edges that are frayed, their boundaries that are porous and shifting. Material realities are messy and uncontainable; their impurity is pervasive and generative. This is exactly what border spaces teach us, that nothing is so easily limited and defined that it will not infiltrate and be infiltrated by its surroundings.

It is border crossings that inform our own materiality, the hybrid nature of living as a body that is at once separate and intimately entangled with the world around us, not the clear-cut separation of a self. We all cross borders in our lives, some more obvious, some more subtle. Rather than separating two sides, borders are instead spaces of encounters. What would it look like to think through the potentialities of porous borders and explore ways in which the resulting encounters challenge our understanding of the world? Literature offers imaginative ways of answering this question. The three texts analyzed in the following chapters all negotiate border spaces and border bodies, characters that are unable or unwilling to erect and protect their own bodily borders and separate themselves from the outside world. The characters of these stories actively, albeit not necessarily willingly, craft a borderline existence where they constantly encounter and interact with the world around them.

Porosity

Understanding borders as a space of encounter, rather than a space of separation, means to pay attention to the converging at the border and the movement across it. This becomes especially evident when we consider the way water acts and interacts in border spaces. Thinking of the tides, we can observe that the border between land and sea is continuously in flux and the two sides constantly change in response to their encounter. Bordering also means interacting.

We are ourselves “bodies of water”, as Astrida Neimanis reminds us. Drawing a clear line between ourselves and the water we encounter means erecting a border that exists only as a paradox. Thus, the border between our bodies of water and a body of water means attuning ourselves to the many ways in which water seeps into as well as out of our bodies. If we think through our encounters with water and critically enmesh ourselves in these encounters, we become witness to what Nancy Tuana calls “viscous porosity,” the multiple and diverse material entanglements of our bodies and the environment. “[...] as bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation” (Neimanis 2). It is not just the pressure from the outside, but movement and interaction that come from within as well.

Tuana’s seminal paper “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina” insightfully analyzes the conditions as well as the effects of a real environmental catastrophe, the Category 4 hurricane Katrina ripping through New Orleans in 2005 leaving behind real destruction and real death. She shows how this catastrophe “resulted in multiple destabilizations” and she employs “the conceptual metaphor of viscous porosity” to highlight how “agency is diffusely enacted in complex networks of relations” (188-189). Porosity as a characteristic of bodies resonates with Alaimo’s idea of trans-corporeality and the fact that the seeming borders between inside and outside are not impermeable. The idea of viscosity, on the other hand, highlights that exchange and permeation do not happen unhindered but “there are membranes that effect the interaction” (Tuana 199-200). Thus, we are in part ourselves not only results of the outcome of this interaction, but our materiality partakes in the interaction itself. Viscous porosity offers a particular avenue for exploring how the material bodies interact with the materiality of water that will prove fruitful for my literary analysis as it helps our understanding of the complex interaction of bodies and water in the three texts

discussed here. The characters envisioned in these texts are porous, open to infiltration from the outside, but they also actively encounter their surroundings, resisting and pushing back.

Water opens up spaces for life, for interaction, for thought; it calls for attention materially, relationally, conceptually. Much research has been done in the environmental humanities (even generating the subfield of the ‘blue humanities’) and beyond to respond to that call, specifically concerning oceanic watery worlds and deep-sea environments. Alaimo, Mentz, and Jue, to name but a few, have done insightful and important theoretical work on seawater and the ocean as material and conceptual environment.⁵ Additionally, Neimanis’ book *Bodies of Water* investigates the implications of our own watery existence from the perspective of new materialism and posthuman feminism. With water – maybe more than with anything else – we become aware of unstable boundaries between any given in- and outside and realize the necessity of grappling and actively engaging with seepage and porosity.

Water Encounters

If we take our porosity, our entanglement with and in the world around us seriously, we are always encountering, even though much of the time we are unaware of it and/or indifferent to it. It would be impossible to pay attention to everything that we encounter at any given moment. Nonetheless, we can bring our attention to an encounter that we typically overlook, we can investigate and fathom these spaces where we encounter, and we can linger and partake in a mutual

⁵ Some examples of publications on the topic of ocean waters are Stacy Alaimo’s “Violet Black” (in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, 2013), “Your Shell on Acid” (in *Exposed*, 2016) & “States of Suspension: Transcorporeality at Sea.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* vol. 19, no. 3; Steve Mentz’ *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization 1550-1719* (2015) & *Ocean* (2020, part of the *Object Lessons* Series); and Melody Jue’s *Wild Blue Media* (2020).

event of becoming. While the word *encounter* might seem to suggest neat boundaries of the encountering entities, I propose that the encounter (as *en-counter* from Latin *in-contra* meaning ‘in-against’) should be understood as a meeting of entities which in meeting are forging a connection while at the same time coming up against one another; encounter is at the same time harmonious and antagonistic.

In her essay “More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves”, Eva Hayward describes encounter as an essential space where we experience “the boundedness of [our] flesh as part of the world. This is to say, ‘we’ (as in you and me) are ourselves specific parts of the world’s ongoing refiguring; ‘we’ are part of the world in its (and our) dynamic structuration, its (and our) differential becoming” (67). Through attentive encounters, we effectively break down our own borders, our ill-conceived ideas of independence and autonomy as, instead, dependence becomes most apparent. Every encounter shapes our becoming as well as the becoming of the world. Encounters are spaces where different bodies can become visible and viable, where we negotiate our contested borders but at the same time have to continuously question our assumptions and re-configure and trans-figure our language in order to encounter, and account for, the dynamic material reality around us.

One specific watery world to be encountered and explored – vastly different from Jue’s oceanic depths but water nonetheless – is rain. Our encounter with this watery weather phenomenon opens up a wide array of different experiences and vulnerabilities. We might – voluntarily or involuntarily – engage in vastly different encounters with rain, from joyful contact and curious interaction to life-threatening exposure that reveals what is at stake in our encounter with water.

Rain. Water falling, in a drizzle, in drops, light and heavy, in buckets, in a downpour – these are only a few ways to describe the watery weather phenomenon that we will attempt to attentively encounter. How are we in and against rain as the word *encounter* would suggest? What agencies and vulnerabilities come to the surface in our encounters with rain?

Attentive encounters with rain mean getting (our feet, our heads, our bodies) wet, relinquishing what typically shields us from the rain – be it the roof over our head, the umbrella, or other ‘protective’ clothing/fabric. Encounter means exposure, allowing the material, the ‘flesh’ to interact and linger in this interaction. Tuana writes, “There is a viscous porosity of flesh – my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world” (199). Rain lets us experience this viscous porosity, at once interacting with water and resisting it as raindrops start to moisten our skin, seep through our material barriers, soak us. In her essay “Visibility Sometimes Wandering and Sometimes Reassembled: On Being in Rain,” Judy Spark concludes, “I am brought out into the world as a part of it, a world that is so much more than I am able to perceive and where, in every encounter with it, I risk losing my edges. This permeation of boundaries *is* the richness and depth of experience” (254). Through her intentional and mindful engagement with rain, Spark not only finds that the border we as humans like to erect between inside and outside is no longer tenable but that “losing [our] edges” makes it possible to perceive and experience the world around us more fully.

If we take these encounters seriously, then we must attempt to tease out in how far we are ourselves implicated in these encounters. Spark writes, “The rain itself may fall silently, but it falls onto things and so is like the wind, heard only through its concussion with those other things” (250). Our perception of rain is only possible from our very own material entanglement with the falling water. Matter is what creates resistance for the rain, allowing us to feel, see, hear, perceive

the water, in diverse and always different interactions (Spark 244). Rain as we understand it does not exist in a vacuum, but in and against its entanglement with our material and conceptual worlds.

In an attentive encounter, we make ourselves vulnerable. We let go of our protections, material and otherwise, and we provide the flesh that offers itself for interaction. “[Flesh is] a messy, visceral word that lays wide open the unpredictable aliveness, impermanence and volatility of all that is around us and I feel myself in it and I respond to it, through my body” (Spark 250). Because our flesh is permeable, exposing ourselves to our diversely entangled and interacting surroundings means acknowledging that we are only a small part of the “processes of becoming in which unity is dynamic and always interactive and agency is diffusely enacted in complex networks of relations” (Tuana 188-189). We cannot simply presume our own will and agency as an outside force that can take control. The rain itself has material agency as it interacts with the matter around it and can thus contribute to exacerbating specific social and material vulnerabilities like poverty, race, disability, and others.

In her essay, Tuana articulately shows the many material interactions in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina that led to the flooding and its catastrophic effect specifically on poor communities.⁶ This alerts us to the fact that rain does not equal rain, but that location, time, race, class, etc. all matter. Encountering rain might be viewed as a universal experience, connecting our globalized world; nevertheless, not even the experience of the same rain shower in the same location at the same time will result in the same encounter.

⁶ As Tuana addresses in her essay, there were several communities that were disproportionately affected. Poor communities and communities negatively affected by racial discrimination and institutional racism became the most visible in the news media at the time, but Tuana also points to people with disabilities that were in many instances left behind and could not physically leave the city because of their disabled bodies. Again, we see how different material and social realities are entangled and how they interact differently with “natural” disaster, which is itself inseparable from environmental and societal factors such as land use, toxic waste, etc.

Rain – like everything – entangles people differently. Tuana uses “viscous porosity as a means to better understand the rich interactions between beings through which subjects are constituted out of relationality” (Tuana 188). It is these interactions and our own specific situatedness that are always already implicated in our encounter with rain. Our body is the matter that interacts, our embodiment creates the situated knowledge from which we presume to understand our lives. This holds true also in the context of more destructive, less voluntary interactions with water. As Tuana writes, “Poverty leaves its effect in the bodies and psyches of those it touches. This material-semiotic interaction should come as no surprise to anyone” (203). During the flooding in the aftermath of Katrina in 2005, the people in many poor neighborhoods of New Orleans were differently materially and psychologically entangled. They did not choose to relinquish their protections in order to experience their trans-corporeality in the world around them. They did not willingly venture into a vulnerable encounter with water. Still, their encounters with the devastating rainfalls effected the becoming of a different world.

While the ocean as a conceptual as well as material model for rethinking our metaphors, our knowledge, and our worlds offers an intriguing milieu to test our understanding, I maintain that water in all its forms – surface-level, ankle-deep, submersed, abyssal; a glass of water, raindrops, waterfalls, oceans – can challenge how we view the watery world we live in. In *Wild Blue Media*, Jue advocates for “an awareness of our necessarily anthropogenic perspectives. Human embodiment is a form of situated knowledge that accounts for the epistemic conditions from which we – as scholars, artists, and passionate observers – begin” (37). From our body and our embodiment we can actively entangle ourselves, lay bare our assumptions, challenge our thinking, and through attentive encounters (with water and otherwise) permeate our situated knowledge.

We can let rain entangle us. Not just with the falling water, with raindrops crashing on our skin and on the world immediately around, but also with borders (physical and psychological), with new understandings, with new worlds. Every raindrop has the potential to create space for more encounters, encounters of people, encounters of knowledges, encounters of bodies of water, and to open up space for all these watery worlds to seep into each other. Because although our encounters with rain are always different, they all have the potential to make our trans-corporeality evident. Furthermore, if we think through water in its different but always entangled materiality as it encounters us, touches us, soaks us, seeps through our borders, ventures into and through our bodies, becomes us, we can experience our trans-corporeal, watery existences with diverse watery worlds emerging, all of which matter.

Attentively encountering water means paying close attention to interactions with water. While this can be difficult to achieve, especially in our everyday life, literary texts can provide opportunities of exploring such encounters in creative ways. The literary works discussed here offer attempts of encountering water through imagination and language and thinking through their implications. In these texts we encounter multiple destabilizations and border crossings of bodies, be it watery, human, or more-than-human bodies; the makeup of every body is exposed as porous and always interacting with its surroundings. Thus, they help us to attune ourselves to attentive encounters and what they might bring to light about our own watery world.

Water Troubles – Impurity and Monstrosity

Impurity

Purity is in many ways connected to a sense of intactness, stability, and beauty, a nostalgic longing for a state now lost. As Alexis Shotwell maintains, we have now reached

the moment that humans worry that we have lost a natural state of purity or decide that purity is something we ought to pursue and defend. This ethos is the idea that we can access or recover a time and state before or without pollution, without impurity, before the fall from innocence, when the world at large *is truly beautiful*.

(3)

But this ethos, this idea of purity is fraught with a normative claim equating pure with morally good and hence also fraught with degradation, control, and oppression of anything and everything not meeting the standards of purity. Who sets these standards and what exactly is deemed pure and impure depends on the borders that are erected, who erects them, what is at stake in erecting them (as also discussed above); the fact is that purity has never been a neutral concept but has always been used to create and exercise power and domination. If hybridity is a defining characteristic of life on earth, however, then purity has always been only wishful thinking, an unattainable ideal, or as James Proctor observes in his article “Saving Nature in the Anthropocene,” “if the Anthropocene represents the hybrid realities we live in, we have always lived in the Anthropocene” (91).

If the ideal of purity is (and has always been) a powerful fiction and nothing else, we now have the opportunity to reject this fiction and all its oppressive and restrictive forces and, in its stead, form an alliance with the multiple impurities of our “hybrid realities” (Proctor). Shotwell suggests,

Being against purity means that there is no primordial state we might wish to get back to, no Eden we have desecrated, no pretoxic body we might uncover through

enough chia seeds and kombucha. There is not a preracial state we could access, erasing histories of slavery, forced labor on railroads, colonialism, genocide, and their concomitant responsibilities and requirements. (4)

Instead, Shotwell suggests accepting and engaging impurity and the responsibility implicated in impurity so as to “allow us to take better collective action against the destruction of the world in all its strange, delightful, impure frolic” (8-9).

In both feminist theory and environmental theory, purity is a loaded concept. From a feminist perspective, we might consider the Christian purity dogma that has for a long time been imposed on women and demands girls and women be sexually ‘pure’ (the main physical characteristic being virginity, although the purity dogma frequently spills over into other areas of life) until entering into marriage with a man. While much feminist writing has fought this purity dogma, we nevertheless find “purity moves” (Shotwell 139) also within feminism and feminist theory itself. Writing the history of feminism can and often does take the form of such a move towards purity, creating a simplistic and reductionist narrative around the multiple and incongruent feminist approaches of any given moment in time in an attempt to find a unifying and coherent feminist history and create a legitimacy and trajectory for present and future feminist inquiry. In her article “Telling Feminist Stories,” Clare Hemmings offers an excellent analysis of the theoretical as well as emotional investment in feminist storytelling and what we lose by purifying the messy feminist stories into simplistic and conveniently consistent parts of a whole. Instead, Hemmings advocates for an understanding of “the feminist past [...] as a series of ongoing contests and relationships” (131).

Shotwell reminds us of another “purity move” within feminism, “Too often feminist and queer theory takes a simplistic and reductive approach to normativity, an approach that I see as articulating purity moves” (139). Establishing “normativity” as the problem creates the idea of

normativity as an always restrictive and oppressive force, a “pure evil.” However, as Shotwell points out, if normativity refers to something that is normal, that ought to be, that is desirable, rejecting normativity as purely evil forecloses establishing new normativities, a concept Shotwell calls “open normativities” and I am tempted to call “impure normativities.” They would posit something as normal and desirable in society without making it restrictive. “[Open normativities] don’t swap out one restrictive norm for another; rather, they set norms that expand the space of what can be pursued, endorsed, and so on” (Shotwell 154).

These are two examples of feminism’s own fraught relationship with purity. While feminism has been essential in exposing and pushing back against purity myths affecting women and ideas surrounding gender identity, it has also forged its own problematic connections with purity moves and has in turn marginalized and alienated feminist voices that are “too difficult, too unorthodox, too contrarian, too inconvenient to the dominant narrative” (Lewis) and relinquished the power to potentially reclaim concepts like normativity by branding them as purely bad.

Environmentalism has a similarly problematic relationship with concepts of purity. In a time when human activity is impacting any place on Earth, from immense amounts of non-biodegradable trash floating around in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and microplastics being found in wild animals and even the remotest locations on this planet, how we can conceptualize and relate to nature can be a powerful tool for change. One narrative that has been repeated time and again within environmentalist movements tells of modern-day human activity as destroying an otherwise intact, beautiful, pure nature. This destruction of purity, of untouched wilderness evokes a nostalgic longing for an imagined world from before, a return to a state of some kind of grace, to a time of moral goodness.

Proctor observes, “in an era where many have abandoned other once-solid moral shortcuts such as science, religion, and the state, nature seems to be the only solid moral ground we can find” (91). However, while morality paired with purity might have the potential to rattle people, it is ultimately not well-suited to provoke meaningful action. Instead, “[p]urism is a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair” (Shotwell 9). Returning to an idealized state of “pure” nature is, if anything, petrifying in its futility. Coupled with a moral appeal, it will only succeed in making people aware of their own complicity and implicatedness within the systems that make a return to the hailed pure nature impossibly despairing in the face of their own inability to act morally. The alternative to purism is to start engaging with complicity and contamination rather than exiling them and shutting them out. “We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure. This is a kind of impurity implied in the sense of ‘compromised living’ that involves making concessions” (Shotwell 7).

What is at stake in writing narratives about purity, be it within feminism, environmentalism, or other areas, is the drawing of clear, defined boundaries. *Pure* denotes good, intact, beautiful. What remains outside these borders, is, once again, “other” and potentially dangerous. But, as discussed above, also the inside is unstable and potentially dangerous to its own borders. Thus, claiming and defining purity and its boundaries also constantly needs to reassert and police its own intactness. The intactness and ‘goodness’ inherent in the idea of purity is ultimately impossible to sustain in our “compromised times.” Shotwell suggests that purity moves of all kinds and on all levels are tied to circumscribing material purity: “The delineation of theoretical purity, purity of classification, is always imbricated with the forever-failing attempt to delineate material purity — of race, ability, sexuality, or, increasingly, illness” (4). Material realities are messy and unbounded; their impurity is pervasive and generative. The question then

is: why not tap into their productive potential? The literary texts analyzed in the following chapters explore this potential not simply by attempting to come to terms with pervasive impurity but also by following the unexpected openings such impurity provides. Köller's text in particular finds ways of showing the dangers of contamination alongside the positive and generative potential of impurity.

Monstrosity

If purity is what lies within specific conceptual borders that define and delimit it, impurity naturally can be found outside of these borders. "The more you are circumscribed, the easier it is to deviate, and the more deviation comes to seem outlandish or even dangerous" (Zimmerman 8). If the fiction of purity is broken and impurity—or better: impurities—come to be affirmed and asserted, they also gain visibility and become threatening to the status quo that is grounded in purity narratives; dangerous and threatening, impurities become rebranded as monstrous. Jess Zimmerman, in her book *Women and Other Monsters*, draws on ancient myths of female monsters to illustrate the importance of how, by whom, and for whom borders are established.

For women, the boundaries of acceptability are strict, and they are many. We must be seductive but pure, quiet but not too aloof, fragile but industrious, and always, always small. We must not be too successful, too ambitious, too independent, too self-centered – and when we can't manage all the contradictory restrictions, we are turned into grotesques. Women have been monsters, and monsters have been women, in centuries' worth of stories, because stories are a way to encode these expectations and pass them on. (Zimmerman 8)

Thus, women are monstrous when they defy expectations, when they assert qualities, characteristics, bodies that do not conform to the very narrow standards set for them. In order to enforce the boundaries of what a woman should be like, women who think, behave, and embody outside of these boundaries—women like Bachmann's Undine or Köller's Klarissa—need to be

marked as dangerous deviations that are to be avoided at all costs. “But,” Zimmerman muses, “if stepping outside the boundaries makes you monstrous, that means monsters are no longer bound” (9). Thus, there is a certain freedom when venturing beyond the boundaries and exploring monstrosity as the potential for living otherness.

I would go even further than Zimmerman and suggest that monstrosity offers us a powerful way of thinking and embodying impure and contaminated ways of being. Because what makes women (and this is true for all the ‘others’ of heteropatriarchy) monsters is not that they are inherently impure (although they—like everyone and everything else—are), but that they reject the boundaries that were set for them and instead start from a place of compromised, damaged, imperfect being. This challenges not just the boundaries itself, but also the central and uncompromised position of ‘man’ and his objective knowledge claims. Acknowledging our particular situatedness within this world makes it possible to engage our different and differently hybrid and impure existences and to recognize everyone else’s compromised positioning as well as their particular access points and ways of knowledge creation.

While monsters are individual and partial to their own perspective, monstrosity as a quality in all of us demands that we also come together to address it collectively and find compromises and concessions. Tapping into our potentially multiple and always partial monstrous selves can also open the door to finding strength and creativity that has long been repressed. Audre Lorde asserts,

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within [...] Within these dark places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, it is deep. (36-37)

The space Lorde describes here might not be easily accessed nor necessarily welcome in society. Nevertheless, it holds great potential, a potential that goes beyond metaphysical knowledge and instead connects to creativity, power, emotion, and feeling. It seems to me that this is the hybrid nature of meaning-making and world-making that we will need in order to come to terms with our contaminated ways of being. ‘Pure’ reason, impartial knowledge, and a perspective from nowhere are an elitist and detached project that can never account for the fact that we are indeed somewhere, we are “living within limits and contradictions” (Haraway, “Situated Knowledges” 590). Thus, unleashing our own ‘monstrosity’ can help us to avoid the trap of purity moves and look for possible paths forward. “All there is, while things perpetually fall apart, is the possibility of acting from where we are” (Shotwell 4).

Water Troubles

Once again, we might think impurity and monstrosity in and through water. Water is itself highly entangled with our desire for purity. How often is bottled water advertised as pure and coming directly from a pristine natural spring far away from pollution? How many water filters are sold every year because they claim to improve tap water through special processes of purification? And at the same time, how many people are exposed to unsafe drinking water? How many rivers, streams, lakes are polluted to the point where they pose risks for the environments and communities around them? The relationship between water and purity is fraught with complications and contradictions.

Contamination and pollution not only create impure waters, but also monsters floating in the waters and washing up on land. Be it marine organisms turned monstrous in response to contamination, be it dead fish chimeras filled with plastic, or be it the trash itself, which, once

discarded, drifts through the water as alien matter. Geneviève Godin describes encounters with, and her interpretation of, such pollution-made sea monsters in her article “Monstrous Things: Horror, Othering, and the Anthropocene,”

The sea monster I stumbled upon was made up of things adrift—purposely thrown away, inadvertently lost, or otherwise abandoned—that, as they outlived their past roles and fell out of human networks of ordering, clung to the present with renewed vitality, failing to meet their end, to remain inert, to disappear. Such things are best described as ‘unruly’ [...] the ever-accumulating masses of things, unintentional monuments, and involuntary memories of the current epoch that make the past neither distant nor ever truly gone. [...] The notion of monstrosity enters the narrative presented here through the impossibility of fully grasping, categorising, and making sense of such things. Their scale, spread, and fragmentation prevent us from understanding them as a whole, as a complete story to be read. (116)

These “new monsters of the Anthropocene” (Godin 116) are “ever-accumulating” and “unruly,” something we can neither contain nor fully understand.⁷ Because water is fluid: always in flux, frequently eroding boundaries, potentially seeping beyond its confines, the pollution of one drop, one pool, one lake is unlikely to stay in place. Once impure, water has the potential for all-pervading and ever-evolving monstrosity.

Water troubles our aspirations to purity. It is, at this point in time, an impossible feat to protect our bodies against every source of contamination and disease, to purify every body of water that has been polluted, in short: to (re?)create a state of purity and stability. “There is no food we can eat, clothing we can buy, or energy we can use without deepening our ties to complex webs of suffering” (Shotwell 5). While we work so hard to attempt the impossible, what we encounter along the way are more impurities, more instabilities, more contamination, and with it, frustration and resignation. As long as we view contamination as a dangerous outside with potential only for

⁷ We might also call them “hypperobjects” in the sense proposed by Timothy Morton (2013).

deformation and destruction, we will only recognize its threatening monstrosity, fear it, exile it, but we will be unable to engage with it and take responsibility for it.

We need to acknowledge the impure nature of materiality. Instead of trying to overcome the monstrosity of contaminated being, we might consider working from where we are at: hybrid, impure, monstrous. I understand all three of these as rallying cries, as ways to literally and figuratively break our boundaries open, to overflow, seep out and in, contaminate and be contaminated, and to take responsibility, individually and collectively, for the world that we make and that we are made of. As Haraway, Shotwell, Zimmerman, and many others have shown, there is great generative and creative potential in being hybrid, impure, and monstrous. I reaffirm Haraway's statement, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (68). I don't want to give in to the seductive appeal of the goddess, cyborgian (Puar 63) or not, that is in my mind still too close to claims of superiority, purity, and detachedness. As Haraway asserts, "Immortality and omnipotence are not our goals" ("Situated Knowledges" 580). Instead, we might try to start from and embody our own partial, unstable, impure perspectives, be monstrous in order to break out of restrictive norms, sexism, and heteronormativity, and collectively work towards desirable futures and "an openness to the possibility of things being otherwise" (Shotwell 155).

Writing about troubled waters, the literary stories discussed here make their own contribution to reconceptualizing impurity and monstrosity. When the monstrous other is allowed to speak, as is the case in "Undine geht" for example, our understanding of monstrosity as dangerous outside is challenged; we must, instead, contend with the fact that monstrosity and impurity are pervasive characteristics of everyone and everything, and they demand attention. Because, as we clearly see in Köller's novel, contamination will not stop at the skin; like water, it infiltrate our bodies and trouble our perception of ourselves and our world.

Literary Storytelling as a Hybrid, Porous, Impure Practice

Like water, literary texts are in constant interaction with their surroundings, they are entangled in a far-reaching web of linguistic reference and expression which seeps into the meaning-making process and creates an unstable and often unpredictable textual (after)life. Thus, it is not only the plot, the characters, the events that are told, but also the language and the form that swim in and immerse themselves in the ocean of literary production. Each text is one partial, relational, and messy part of a fluid, ever-changing whole. Writing a story means sending it out to sea without knowing how it will matter, what it will encounter, and how it will trouble the literary waters and the worlds beyond.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks says about theory, “I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently” (61). For me, this place is literature and storytelling. Stories offer us the openness for “things being otherwise” (Shotwell 155), for envisioning life “lived differently” (hooks 61). In them we can imagine different worlds, create different meanings, explore different ways of knowing. Literary storytelling can thus provide a space for porous and monstrous being and for partial, relational, and impure knowledge production taking seriously the potential that emerges in accepting permeable boundaries and hybrid existence and exploring the varied possibilities of such an understanding.

Imagining different worlds, offering different relations, laboring within the confines and (sometimes unexpected) openings of language is literature’s most formidable characteristic. In these texts, we not only find solace and hope, but such storytelling has the power to shift our

understanding of our own entangled existence. It is in their stories but also in the words and linguistic expressions that writers negotiate existence and worldmaking. Everyday language is often mired in stagnant expressions and linguistic conventions that become obstacles in changing our own minds. Literary storytelling can actively work against conventional language by exploring how things might be said and understood differently. Ingeborg Bachmann, whose short narrative “Undine geht” I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, considers language to be central to how we understand the world and says, “Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden, die unserer eigenen Bewußtseinslage und dieser veränderten Welt entsprechen“ (*Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden* 19) [“We have to find true sentences which correspond to our own consciousness and this changed world”]. For her, literature provides the space to look for these “true sentences” outside of the confines of conventional language use and makes it possible to experiment with and labor at finding new expressions that better describe our existence and our world. This is why I argue that literature is and always has been essential for creating better futures.

The material that authors of literary texts work with is first and foremost language.⁸ Language offers much flexibility and space for new and innovative combination. Literary world- and meaning-making always depends on the words without which there would be no story, but it also often depends on the readers’ openness, imagination, and careful interpretation of the blank spaces, the points where language goes beyond the comprehensible or where it fails altogether. Much of literature works beyond the obvious meaning of words and tries to express what lies outside of our grasp. Thus, it is vitally important in literary analysis to pay attention to the words and their potential of meaning something new, something different. We need to read closely, and

⁸ I will discuss ways in which literary texts expand their material to include more than linguistic signification specifically in Chapter Two on Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad*.

at the same time openly, with an open mind and open senses directed to the text, if we want to move beyond understanding only with our minds.

While language certainly appeals to our cognitive function, we can also hear, see, sense words in their materiality. Many of Yoko Tawada's texts direct their attention to the words' material presences. In *Verwandlungen*, Tawada observes,

Während man ein Ideogramm nicht auseinandernehmen kann, kann man jedes alphabetisch geschriebene Wort sofort zerteilen und neu zusammensetzen. Allein durch diese oberflächliche, technische Operation kann man den Sinn des ganzen Satzes zerstören. Wenn man die Buchstaben anders aneinanderreicht, entsteht ein ganz anderer Sinn. (30)

[While you can't take apart an ideogram, you can immediately divide each alphabetically written word and reassemble it. You can destroy the meaning of the whole sentence through this superficial, technical operation alone. If you string the letters together differently, an entirely new meaning develops.]

Attuning herself to a different writing system, Tawada approaches alphabetical letters as meaning-making components even if they do not signify semantically on their own and muses about their visual qualities such as the tunnel-like opening of an *o* or the hills of an *m* (*Verwandlungen* 34 & 39). As I will show in my analysis of her short novel *Das Bad*, Tawada's close attention to the materiality of letters and words creates literary texts that demand being read on multiple levels, with our cognitive as well as our sensual perception. If more and more scholars within the environmental humanities demand that we do not disregard our body and its positionality and relationality with its surroundings, bringing the environmental humanities into literary analysis means taking seriously the material presence of language as well as our own bodily perception and understanding of a text.

The boundaries of what we understand to be the text and what lies outside of it are permeable and frequently a point of contact rather than separation. They reflect the ambiguous

meaning of the word *border*, a point that separates and connects at the same time. This holds true for texts in many respects, for example, when speaking about the boundaries between the fictional world of a text and the real world of its reader. While literature might conjure up worlds far removed and clearly separate from our reality, it still offers points of contact in numerous and at times unexpected ways. Additionally, while the material boundaries of any given text are marked by its beginning and end on the page, their imaginative potential, especially when talking about literary texts, often extends these texts far beyond these confines.

Another way in which literary texts routinely cross their own borders is through their interconnectedness and entanglement with a specific historical moment and literary tradition. Like anything else in this world, literature does not exist on its own but is dependent on and interacting with the traditions and history they have grown out of and the circumstances of their own creation. Considering the question of ‘original’ vs. translation, Karen Emmerich states, “Translations *are* derivative, of course – but so are so-called originals” (14). No literary text – be it translated or not – stands alone. The literary ‘original’ is itself not without sources, not without imitation, not without citation, and certainly always multiple and unstable. Echoing Haraway’s question “Why should our bodies end at the skin,” (“Cyborg Manifesto” 61) one might ask, why should our literary stories end with the last word on the page. Literary texts are hybrid. Moving within the vastness of literary production, texts can create their own distinct position while at the same time variously gesturing towards intertexts and alluding to plots that came before, exposing their own infiltration by and filtering of their surroundings, and potentially dissolving from a distinct text into an indifference of literary continuity and complexity. By picking and choosing from what has come before and by innovating and adding new elements, they actively integrate various traditions, elements, ideas through a practice of hybrid creation.

However, these literary texts also remain porous beyond their creation as the many openings and blank spaces of a text offer space for unexpected connections and interpretations. Interpreting Bachmann's "Undine geht" through theoretical concepts of the environmental humanities, as I will do in the following chapter, could be viewed as exploring one such unexpected opening. Far from being an environmentalist or nature writer, there are nonetheless ways in which Bachmann's work connects with environmental questions of our time. Undine's existence is one of interconnectedness with her surroundings. Bachmann attempts to find language to express Undine's entangled nature in an effort to open up our language to new ways of meaning making.

While many literary texts still seep out and into the texts and artworks coming after them, they are themselves also not hermetically closed off from their future but open to reinterpretation and renegotiation. This is one reason why literature from one hundred years ago is still relevant and interesting today, apart from its insights into the past. As we can see through and in the practice of literary interpretation, embracing connection and interdependency, be it trans-corporeal or trans-textual, will result in a more complex and more complete understanding while at the same time never fully exhausting the possibilities of the many openings and blank spaces. Thus, literary texts are hybrid in their makeup, drawing on and alluding to traditions, stories, ideas beyond their own words; but they are also porous, becoming infused, infiltrated, and potentially expanded⁹ by our interpretations of them.

Because of the embeddedness of any text in a wide web of traditions and inspirations, any literary text will variously draw from and gesture beyond itself. Through the combination of a

⁹ My understanding of interpretation as expanding the text is indebted to Emmerich's book *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals* in which she frequently gestures to the modes and instabilities of literary production more generally. She states that "All [translations] are gains, greater or lesser, but gains all the same." (128) Interpretation is an essential part of translation (Emmerich 8) which is why we can understand interpretation more broadly similarly as a gain, a way to expand a text by filling some of its blanks and at the same time likely creating new ones.

certain narrative tradition with a new form, the stability of certain literary categories becomes muddled and impurities between seemingly distinct forms arise. Similarly, many authors rewrite or combine well-known stories changing a clearly defined plot into an impure and messy bundle of potential storylines and elements. As I will show in more detail later on, Katharina Köller's novel *Was ich im Wasser sah*, for example, tells a wholly different story from any of the traditional water-woman fairytales but nonetheless draws on and integrates elements of well-known mermaid and Undine stories. In "Undine geht," the Undine fairytale undergoes radical change but remains nonetheless anchored in, and only interpretable against, the mythological tradition; instead of a simple retelling of the tradition, Bachmann's text variously combines elements from several different Undine storylines that came before changing, deconstructing, and reclaiming them in the process. This way, impure stories emerge that gesture to the complexity and diversity of the tradition while at the same time carving out their own space. Another instance of such an impure literary practice might happen on the level of genre by mixing several genre conventions and traditions. Literary practice, be it formally or on the level of the narrative or both, exposes purity as fiction. As will be seen in "Undine geht," *Das Bad*, and *Was ich im Wasser sah*, literature's drive for linguistic and formal exploration, for innovation on any and all levels of the text, allows it to move beyond the status quo in envisioning existences, worlds, meanings. When examining literary impurity, we will see that such muddling is at the core of much literary innovation, and we might say with Shotwell that it has provided us with much "strange, delightful, impure frolic" (9).

However, the strange, the impure often at first appear eerie and dangerous, something that is more akin to monstrosity. Monsters are certainly within the purview of literary narratives as numerous stories deal with monstrous beings and the question of how to overcome them. What is envisioned as monstrous in these texts can reveal much about rules and norms of a society and

work to reinforce them, but such narratives might also question rules and norms by siding with the monsters in some form or another.¹⁰ Köller's novel, for example, takes up monstrosity in both of her female main characters, yet much of their monstrosity stems from the fact that their bodies call into question such categories as womanhood and humanity. Because the story asks us to sympathize with rather than demonize the other, we learn to see the strength and transformation that results from the characters' hybrid, monstrous existence.

Furthermore, monstrosity can be part of literary texts outside of the plot as well. Be(com)ing monstrous can mean exploring spaces out of bounds, deviating from what is supposed to be, breaking open the neat categorization of the world. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes monsters as "the Harbinger of Category Crisis," explaining "they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration." (40) Frequently, literary texts use language and form in ways which defy expectations. They fall out of clear-cut categories, instead offering language and textual forms that are more open, more vague, more ambiguous, as can be seen in Undine's fluid and paradoxical language that resists the phallogocentric logic of pure reason and detachment. Such creative and playful approaches to understanding the world, however, are excluded from traditional Western knowledge claims. Literary texts are the monsters of textual knowledge production, partial, fluid, unbound, and always ready to poke holes into our solid, grounded understandings.

¹⁰ Some narrative moves might be presenting a story from the monster's perspective, reversing the roles of monsters and heroes, compassionately telling the back story of how a particular monster came to be monstrous, etc.

METHODOLOGY

In the following chapters I will provide a detailed analysis of three German texts by women writers in what I call literary deep dives. I aim to consider how literary forms and their stories about bodies in and of water can challenge how we view the watery world we live in. I will perform close readings describing in detail how the characters of these texts are variously entangled within their fictional worlds and how the authors cross and destabilize multiple boundaries not just within the storyline but also in language, form, and beyond. In bringing in the theoretical concepts outlined above, it will be possible to gain deeper insight into how each narrative offers, in its own way, a radical reconfiguration of how bodies, gender, and identities are constantly interacting with, and in, their environment. I will draw on the aforementioned concepts to tease out the intricate relationships between the human and the more-than-human world set up by the text. These concepts will help discern and map the textual moves and rearrangements and highlight the power of fiction in conceiving of entanglement, water, and world in a new, imaginative way.

It is crucial that we take fictional texts seriously for the partial and situated knowledges they offer¹¹ because immersive and attentive encounters with water and environment do not happen on ‘neutral ground,’ but in many ways demand that we enter and interact with ‘uncharted waters’ giving up our terrestrial standpoint for an at times disorienting underwater perspective. Bachmann’s “Undine geht,” Tawada’s *Das Bad*, and Köller’s *Was ich im Wasser sah* all find ways

¹¹ In “Poetry is not a Luxury,” Lorde says, “our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas.” (37) Black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, to name but a few, have repeatedly claimed literature, music, art, and lived experience as alternative sites for theorizing and knowledge production, as epistemologies of their own, a notion which challenges traditional means of Western knowledge production and validation which is a process that is often confined exclusively to specific institutions such as universities and research institutes that have a long history of racist, sexist, and ableist practices and policies.

to engage with porous materiality, contaminated environments, and female bodies of water in insightful and inspired ways. I aim to show that neither the female main characters nor the environments of these stories are pure; instead, the narratives plunge us into troubled and troubling waters, into waters of a more-than-human and more-than-female subject, into waters of unbound bodies and identities, and, quite possibly, into the murky, muddled, ominous waters of the Anthropocene.

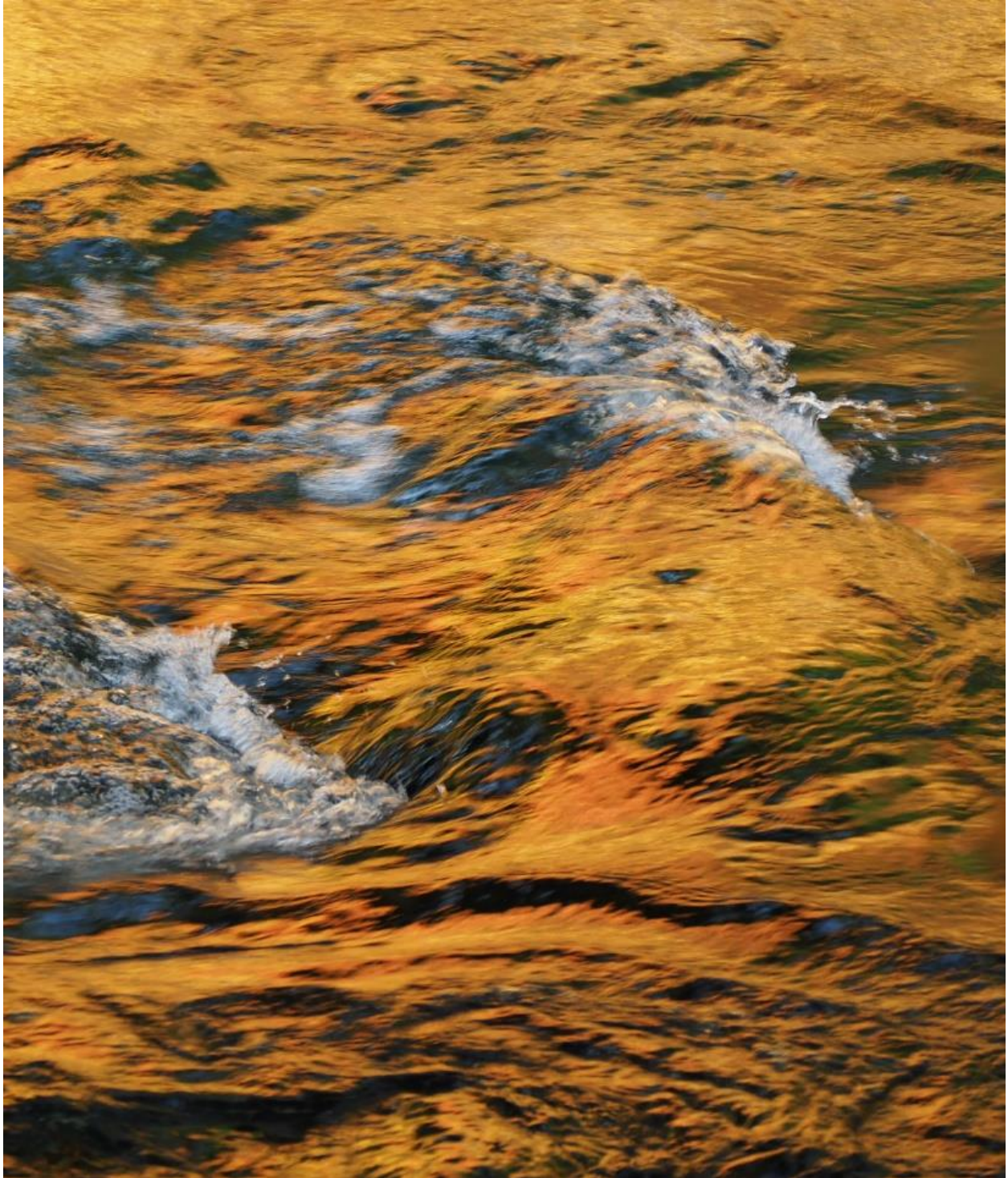


Figure 2: "Golden Waves"

II. (Re)Writing the Waters – Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Undine geht” and the Quest for a New Language

*I'ma wade, I'ma wave through the waters
Tell the tide, "Don't move"
I'ma riot, I'ma riot through your borders
Call me bulletproof*
Beyoncé feat. Kendrick Lamar – “Freedom”

INTRODUCTION

Published in her prose collection *Das dreißigste Jahr* in 1961, “Undine geht” is probably one of Ingeborg Bachmann’s best-known texts. Not only has it been influential as a retelling of the Undine myth, this “anti-fairytale,” as Bernd Witte called it (as cited in Lennox, *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* 136), has often been considered a central element of Bachmann’s oeuvre. Sara Lennox, for example, argues that the short narrative “Undine geht” essentially anticipates much of Bachmann’s later prose as “Bachmann’s writing from the mid-1960s onward pursues the insights first expressed in “Undine Goes”” (*Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* 136). It seems from the moment of her surfacing in Bachmann’s work, Undine is continuously calling out to us.

Interpretations and analyses of “Undine geht” abound in Bachmann scholarship. Feminist scholars in particular have written extensively on this short text and produced “spirited and subtle reinterpretations” (Lennox, *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* 43) of “Undine geht” and other prose works of Bachmann.¹² Finding expression for female subjectivity and creating space for the

¹² For a critical summary of feminist approaches to Bachmann between the late 1970s and early 2000s see Sara Lennox’s “Bachmann’s Feminist Reception” in her book *Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* (2006).

female subject in language are central concerns in Bachmann's writing and are especially apparent in her prose. Her texts respond to the notion that the phallogocentric language of patriarchy does not allow for female voices to establish themselves, which is reflected most strikingly in Bachmann's unfinished prose cycle *Todesarten*; all attempts of establishing and working towards a female existence within language end in "einer Todesart," a type of death; the language of man prevails, the woman disappears like the female I in *Malina* into a crack in the wall. Speaking and writing female subjectivity is ultimately impossible, a utopian project that in Bachmann's work always falls short.

While Bachmann's rewriting of the Undine fairytale certainly offers much critique concerning gender relations and the precarity of the female subject within patriarchy, it is crucial to consider that Undine is not only a woman, but also a being of water, i.e. more than human. Less scholarly attention has so far been paid to how this short narrative relates to water as an environment and how it negotiates the more-than-human world and 'man's' place in it. I do not mean to suggest that Undine's watery existence has so far gone unnoticed; numerous scholars have considered Undine's connection to water metaphorically through images of fluidity and/or have emphasized the long-standing tradition in Western culture of associating women with water and nature (Böhme 26). However, few analyses exist that consider the implications of "Undine geht" in the context of environmental theory. My goal is not to make Bachmann into an environmentalist, but to explore how far Bachmann's text finds expression for the precarious existence that we humans living in our current times are becoming intimately familiar with. Bachmann herself vehemently rejected the idea that she tries to represent nature in her works, "Nein, gewiss will ich das nicht, die Natur oder was man im Zusammenhang mit Lyrik unter Natur versteht, interessiert mich überhaupt nicht. Ich glaube nicht, dass ich zu den Gräserbewisperern gehöre" (Bachmann,

Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden 45) [„No, I certainly don't want that; nature or what is meant by nature in connection with poetry doesn't interest me at all. I don't think I'm one of the grass whisperers“]. Conjuring pastoral landscapes, idylls, and a harmonious nature is certainly not at the forefront in Bachmann's poetry or prose. Similarly, “Undine geht” does not offer us an idyllic and harmonious natural state apart from man; nonetheless, in her astute attention to her character Undine and in her search for a more appropriate language, Bachmann approximates the complexities of hybrid existence, of being water-woman, of living entanglement.

While there might not be a hidden environmentalist intention, Bachmann's text provides openings for reading with and through the environmental humanities nonetheless. Bachmann understands writing to be bound up in its historical moment, “Daß Dichten außerhalb der geschichtlichen Situation stattfindet, wird heute wohl niemand mehr glauben – daß es auch nur einen Dichter gibt, dessen Ausgangsposition nicht von den Zeitgegebenheiten bestimmt wäre” (“I Fragen und Scheinfragen” 314) [“Today, no one will believe anymore that poetry takes place outside of the historical situation – that there is even one poet whose starting position is not determined by the circumstances of the time”]. It is not just writing, but also our reading that is informed by the historical situation and by the reader's lived experience. Reading is not, and should not be, a one-dimensional process. In an interview in 1971, Bachmann asserts, “Man muß überhaupt ein Buch auf verschiedene Arten lesen können und es heute anders lesen als morgen” (*Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden* 100) [“You have to be able to read a book in different ways and read it differently today than tomorrow”]. The complexity of literature demands diverse interpretations that will necessarily be entangled in the reader's own position and stakes in reading the text. As Lennox notes, “since different kinds of readings serve different political ends, disagreements about interpretations in fact are very often the consequence of the different political

“positionality” of those who advance them.” (*Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* 44) With Haraway, one might say there is a situatedness to how we read and analyze a text, which is after all just another form of knowledge production. Bachmann’s short narrative negotiates the intimate connection between Undine and her watery environment and searches for language and expression that can better attend to the complex interactive materialities of our world. Reading “Undine geht” today offers us the opportunity to foreground such aspects of the story as they resonate with our current times of environmental crises and precarious existence.

Bachmann’s Undine text suspends the physical separation of water and human bodies and explores the implications of living outside of bounded bodies and pre-established identities. Undine feels free to seek connections with her surroundings and assert her own situated knowledges. She conceals neither her connection to water nor her opinions anymore in order to conform to the identity of woman or lover but instead openly shows her fluid being. Drawing on concepts discussed in the introduction, such as entanglement, hybridity, and monstrosity, I will examine how Bachmann’s text destabilizes the boundaries of the traditional speaking subject by creating a fluid and paradoxical language for her character Undine. In her astute attention to words, to fluidity, to the complexities and contradictions of her protagonist Undine, Bachmann writes an interconnected existence that seems to anticipate concepts that shape and inform the environmental humanities discourse of today. After situating Bachmann’s Undine in the context of the mythological tradition, I will demonstrate what it means for Bachmann’s Undine to speak her mind and how her language attunes itself to her entangled existence. Through embracing her own hybrid status, Undine undermines established binaries and proposes a more open, more fluid way of being in and of the world. I read “Undine geht” through the lens of the environmental humanities to show how reading Bachmann today challenges us to pay ever closer attention, to attend to our deeply

entangled existences, and to, nonetheless, believe in the possibility for things to be otherwise (Shotwell 155).

THE UNDINE TRADITION

In her writing, Bachmann is always astutely aware of the tradition she writes within and against. She consciously fathoms and crafts her own position in a web of references and allusions to other works. Bachmann was intimately familiar with the Undine myth because of her cohabitation in the 1950s with Hans Werner Henze, who was working on his music for the ballet *Ondine* (Petersen 19). Her own Undine story variously addresses, incorporates, and deconstructs the different iterations of Undine stories that came before by deliberately playing with allusions and references without preferring any one version over another. Thus, while “Undine geht” presents in many ways a completely new and different approach to this water creature, it is nonetheless also deeply connected to the versions that came before.

While tales of water sprites and mermaids go back at least to the sirens of Ancient Greek mythology, the origins of the Undine tale in particular have been traced back to the 16th century. Mention of “undinae” can be found in Paracelsus’s *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* (published posthumously in 1566), a book which is concerned with a theoretical description of elemental spirits and understands their existence as part of God’s creation. While not providing us with an account detailing the fate of one Undine, Paracelsus’s description nevertheless includes important details that resurface in later narratives, such as their similarity to humans which makes them almost human except for the fact that they do not possess

a soul. The first important literary adaptation of the *undinae* character in German literature is Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811).

Fouqué's *Undine* was a highly popular fairytale-novel of the early 19th century. It has inspired numerous operas, adaptations, and rewritings in- and outside of the German-speaking countries since it was first published. Fouqué's mythical fairytale narrative enjoyed great popular success. It was soon after turned into an opera by E.T.A. Hoffmann, for which Fouqué himself wrote the libretto; the opera could not replicate the novel's success. Fouqué lacked the necessary distance to his own work to write an effective libretto which would truly adapt the fairytale for the stage (Fassbind-Eigenherr 110-111). Thirty years later the story was again adapted for the opera stage, this time by Albert Lortzing who wrote his own libretto. This second opera adaptation became a great success, "wenngleich hier das von Hoffmann so trefflich herausgearbeitete Element der Natur- und Wassergeister zugunsten biedermeierlicher Bravheit geopfert wurde" (Kleßmann 15) [„although here the element of nature and water spirits, which Hoffmann accentuated so well, was sacrificed in favor of Biedermeier propriety”].

To briefly summarize, Fouqué's narrative revolves around the water spirit Undine who seeks to gain a soul in order to become immortal. She can only achieve this by marrying a man. Because of her appearance and other-worldly attraction, the knight Huldbrand von Ringstetten falls in love with her and quickly marries her. However, it soon becomes clear that his love for her is not unshakeable. More and more, Huldbrand becomes irritated and alienated by his wife's 'otherness,' not the least due to Berta, his former lover to whom he was engaged when he married Undine. While Undine can never completely overcome her 'otherness,' Huldbrand is more and more drawn to the 'normal' human Berta, ultimately leading to the end of his and Undine's relationship. When he curses her on open water, Undine loses her soul and is taken back into the

water. Huldbrand decides to take Berta as his new wife which forces Undine to kill the unfaithful husband with a kiss. In the end, their marriage is upheld but only in his death, and their union is represented in the image of the spring that surrounds Huldbrand's grave. While not a happy ending, this final image of the story nonetheless allows Undine and Huldbrand to be together; however rather than coming together as humans, it is instead in the realm of nature that they find their ultimate union (Lillyman 104).

Understanding Fouqué's narrative simply as a tragic love story, a fairytale without the "happily ever after" fails to engage the complexity of the story. Something grimmer, more sinister, and more radical always shines through in Fouqué's *Undine*. Although often viewed as largely trivial (Fassbind-Eigenheer 173), Fouqué's *Undine* is not as one-dimensional and superficial as it may seem at first glance. In his interpretation of the Undine figure, Fouqué carves out the central question of what it means to be subject and addresses the paradoxical and ultimately impossible path of becoming subject that is Undine's.

Menschen nennen wir uns auch, wie wir es denn der Bildung und dem Leibe nach sind; - aber es ist ein gar Übles dabei. Wir, und unsresgleichen in den andern Elementen, wir verstieben und vergehn mit Geist und Leib, dass keine Spur von uns rückbleibt, und wenn ihr andern dermaleinst zu einem reinern Leben erwacht, sind wir geblieben, wo Sand und Funk´ und Wind und Welle blieb. Darum haben wir auch keine Seelen; das Element bewegt uns, gehorcht uns oft, solange wir leben, zerstäubt uns immer, sobald wir sterben, und wir sind lustig, ohne uns irgend zu grämen, wie es die Nachtigallen und Goldfischlein und andre hübsche Kinder der Natur ja gleichfalls sind. Aber alles will höher, als es steht. (Fouqué 47-48)

[for human beings we call ourselves, being similar to them in form and culture—but there is one evil peculiar to us. We and our like in the other elements, vanish into dust and pass away, body and spirit, so that not a vestige of us remains behind; and when you mortals hereafter awake to a purer life, we remain with the sand and the sparks and the wind and the waves. Hence we have also no souls; the element moves us, and is often obedient to us while we live, though it scatters us to dust when we die; and we are merry, without having aught to grieve us—merry as the nightingales and the little gold-fishes and other pretty children of nature. But all things aspire to be higher than they are. (Fouqué, translated by Bunnett, chapter VIII)]

Because of her radical difference, her quintessential otherness, Undine is and will always be excluded from the realm of humanity; her attempts to overcome this inscription are doomed to fail.

As the alluring and dangerous water creature, Undine is an object. Her only possibility to become human, to become subject is exemplified in the word subject itself. Undine can only attain her 'subjecthood' through subjecting herself to a human, she can sever her ties with her old existence only by creating new ties. Becoming subject is thus a paradoxical process, gaining independence only to give it up. We can see a clear exemplification of that in Undine's voice. When she is first introduced, Undine speaks her mind. She does not submit to human conventions of politeness and flattery if she doesn't wish to do so. This drastically changes when she becomes Huldbrand's wife and thus a human subject. From this moment onwards, she abides by all the human-made rules and conventions and submits to her husband's needs. As we can see in the course of the narrative, Undine's new dependence is now in fact greater than before. It is tragic and ironic that the one person who makes it possible for her to gain a soul, namely Huldbrand, is also the one person who takes her soul from her again, and ultimately brings about his own death by the kiss of Undine due to his unfaithfulness.

Bebend vor Liebe und Todesnähe neigte sich der Ritter ihr entgegen, sie küsste ihn mit einem himmlischen Kusse, aber sie ließ ihn nicht mehr los, sie drückte ihn inniger an sich, und weinte, als wolle sie ihre Seele fortweinen. Die Tränen drangen in des Ritters Augen, und wogten im lieblichen Wehe durch seine Brust, bis ihm endlich der Atem entging, und er aus den schönen Armen als ein Leichnam sanft auf die Kissen des Ruhebettes zurücksank. Ich habe ihn totgeweint! sagte sie [...] (Fouqué 96-97)

[Trembling with love and with the approach of death, she kissed him with a holy kiss; but not relaxing her hold she pressed him fervently to her, and as if she would weep away her soul. Tears rushed into the knight's eyes, and seemed to surge through his heaving breast, till at length his breathing ceased, and he fell softly back from the beautiful arms of Undine, upon the pillows of his couch—a corpse.

"I have wept him to death," said she [...] (Fouqué, translated by Bunnnett, chapter XI)

This shows two things. One, Undine's otherness is fundamental and cannot be overcome. It can only be temporarily suspended, but in the end, she is relegated once again to her otherness. Her voice as a human voice is useless because she assumes the role of the subjugated woman who is not heard. Even her numerous warnings and pleas with Huldbrand have no effect because of her inferior position. Two, the realm of mankind is ultimately a dystopia, a place where the other will stay the other forever, a place where borders are set and binding, and a place where love cannot overcome the obstacles of inscribed difference. It is only in the realm of nature, when Huldbrand's body is returning to the earth that a union between the water spirit and the man can finally exist. And this is the only small glimpse of hope that we can see in this narrative; death and nature offer a space of incorporation and interconnection accepting the bond that can still exist in otherness.

One influential adaptation of the *Undine* story in the early 20th century was Jean Giradoux's *Ondine* (1938). Giradoux adapts the narrative text for the stage and turns the eerie fairytale dystopia into an ironic, albeit still tragic comedy. I will briefly discuss this version of the Undine myth here because it introduces crucial changes to the story that will prove influential for Bachmann's "Undine geht." Giradoux's adaptation of the Undine myth not only switches from narrative to drama, but it even doubles the dramatic form. The Illusionist, a character within the play, creates a play within the play. Giradoux's drama within a drama adds many levels of referentiality and possibilities for comedy and irony. I will, however, limit my brief description of this play here to the character of Ondine and her relationship with Hans as the most relevant aspects for the purpose of my analysis.

Unlike Fouqué's Undine who becomes tame and well-mannered immediately after her marriage to the knight Huldbrand, Giradoux's Ondine is in many ways not capable of such changes. She does not become a good and proper wife for her husband Hans—a modernizing name

change that is also used in Bachmann's text—as she cannot or does not want to adapt to the rules of human society, specifically not to the conventions of the court. Ondine's voice and language are still honest, passionate, and free, even when Hans requests her to lie. Even though “this Ondine was the most human being that ever lived. She was human by choice” (Giradoux 157), she does not submit to the human rules and conventions but essentially stays true to her being. Only in the very end does Ondine resort to lies, and only in an attempt to protect Hans from his fate. Thus, Giradoux's play presents an important step towards finding a voice that tries to stay true to Ondine's character and being.

The end of this story is still tragic. Hans has to die because he deceives Ondine, but she, however, is allowed to forget. Ondine is also not forced to kill her lover herself. Instead, the King of Ondines kills Hans for his unfaithfulness and erases Ondine's memory at the same time thus creating an end that is also a new beginning. This is obvious in the drama because Ondine repeats what she has said when she first saw Hans.

(HANS dies. ONDINE looks about in surprise.)

ONDINE

How did I get here? How strange! It's solid. It's empty. It's the earth?

SECOND FISHERMAN

It's the earth, Ondine. It's no place for you.

ONDINE

No ---

(THE ONDINES are heard singing in the distance.)

SECOND FISHERMAN

Come, little one, let us leave it.

ONDINE

Oh yes. Let us leave it. (She takes a few steps, then stops before the body of HANS which is lying on the platform steps) Wait. Why is this handsome young man lying here? Who is he?

SECOND FISHERMAN
His name is Hans.

ONDINE
What a beautiful name! But why doesn't he move? Is there something wrong with him!

SECOND FISHERMAN
He is dead.

FIRST ONDINE
Come, Ondine.

ONDINE
Oh, I like him so much! Can you bring him back to life, Old One?

SECOND FISHERMAN
Impossible.

ONDINE
What a pity! How should I have loved him!

(Giradoux 182-184)

This circularity might be understood as a vicious circle, but it nonetheless sounds almost hopeful in its recourse to beginning anew, possibly in the same manner, but possibly it can also turn out differently. Ondine has the chance for a new beginning; her fate is not once and forever linked to a man. Giradoux realizes the potential of Ondine's otherness, given that her difference might also mean a different "happily ever after."

While certainly not a relevant influence of Bachmann's "Undine geht"—the film was, after all, created more than 50 years after Bachmann wrote her story and over 40 years after her death—Christian Petzold's 2020 film *Undine* can serve as an example of how the Undine tradition lives on and what role Bachmann now plays in this tradition. Bachmann wrote an artful and new Undine story that has brought the medieval fairytale and its earlier iterations in contact with issues and questions of the 20th century. "Undine geht" is highly influential in that it altered our understanding

of Undine, inspiring many feminist readings to explore the questions of man's projections, phallogocentric reason, and the precarity of female subjectivity within the tale and within heteropatriarchal society more generally. In an interview for *German Currents Film Festival 2020*, Petzold explains his approach to the Undine story and Bachmann's relevance for it, "[Undine's] whole identity is made by the projection and desire of the male subject. Then in the 60s in Germany, or the end of the 50s, there is a female writer [...] Ingeborg Bachmann, and she has written an Undine tale [...] a deconstructed Undine. In this Undine, she says, I have only an identity because of you, but I want to have an identity by my own, but this is not possible. And in this balance, this impossibility, [...] the story is told and in this moment I know where I have the point of telling the story like this" (*UNDINE – Q&A with Director Christian Petzold* 4:54–5:45). It is in and through Bachmann's version that Petzold finds an interesting and relevant access point for his film.

Petzold's film provides a modern-day version of the traditional fairytale, less magical, but in many ways following the basic premises of the traditional fairytale. In the film, Undine is a historian giving lectures and museum tours in Berlin. She has love affairs with men, and when these men betray her, she is forced to kill them. One day, she meets the industrial diver Christoph, and they fall in love. This love affair seems to be different as Undine is actually in love and not simply following a fate which requires her to be with a man until he betrays her. Realizing that something is different, Undine attempts to break with her fate by not killing her former lover who has since betrayed her. When Christoph has a diving accident and ends up in a coma in the hospital, Undine suspects that breaking the pattern might be the reason for Christoph's accident and kills her previous lover in an attempt to save Christoph. Right after Undine fulfilled her fated task of killing, the film cuts to Christoph waking up. At this point, Undine goes back into the water. When

Christoph accepts that his search for Undine is futile, he starts a relationship with one of his diving friends. This betrayal of Undine should mean his death, but the end of the film seems to suggest that while unable to find a happier ending for herself, Undine is in the end able to break the spell that forces her to kill; Christoph reemerges unscathed from the waters where his final meeting with Undine took place.

While the film follows the traditional Undine plot in several important aspects—Undine is not really human but a water woman, she is fated to kill when betrayed, her lovers ultimately return to their “human” wives—there are also important differences and changes. One thing that Undine is unable to accomplish in any of the previous versions but seems to manage in the film is at least partially breaking with the vicious cycle that informs her existence. While Fouqué does not write the story as a cyclical narrative, it certainly ends tragically and does not suggest any agency on Undine’s part with regards to her fate to kill. Giradoux, on the other hand, writes Undine’s story as repetitive; she is unlikely to change her own fate as she is fated to forget. Petzold presents a more hopeful ending, an ending that is likely influenced by Bachmann’s story, the title “Undine geht” of which already indicates the attempt to get away. While it is a matter of interpretation if Bachmann’s Undine is indeed leaving her fate behind or if it might be more likely that the cycle will continue, Petzold’s film ends with one successful instance of breaking out of the confines of fate.

BACHMANN’S UNDINE

In her short narrative “Undine geht”, Bachmann drastically alters the Undine tradition in several aspects. First, switching from a fairytale-like third-person narrative to an inner monologue

spoken by Undine radically changes how we read this story. Secondly, this inner monologue does not offer an actual plot for the story. Karen Achberger argues, “Like most of Bachmann’s narratives, it has virtually no plot. It consists of the opposition of images from two separate worlds” (85). Instead of telling her own story in a narrative fashion, Undine admonishes human conventions and understanding and tries to break away from her continuous and fated love affairs with men by speaking into existence her parting from the human world. Lastly, Bachmann’s writing attempts to find a language and voice for Undine’s entangled and precarious existence rather than writing another story about her. Bachmann creates a complex web of references to the tradition as well as to other closely related stories and myths without losing sight of her foremost endeavor, writing before anything else Undine as a being of and through water. Her Undine narrative entangles the stories that came before and at the same time allows Undine to tell a story completely and wholly her own: unvarnished, disorienting, volatile; hybrid, monstrous, and out of bounds. Because such are the spaces and the words inhabited and embodied by Undine.

UNDINE EMERGES

While Bachmann chooses Undine as the focalizer and writes “Undine geht” in the form of a monologue, she does so taking into account Undine’s hybrid existence. Undine intimately knows two forms of existence, life under water and life on land. When in the water, Undine’s existence is flowing, effortless, “sprachlos”: “Ich liebe das Wasser, seine dichte Durchsichtigkeit, das Grün im Wasser und die sprachlosen Geschöpfe (und so sprachlos bin ich auch bald!), mein Haar unter ihnen, in ihm, dem gerechten Wasser [...] Tauchen, ruhen, sich ohne Aufwand von Kraft bewegen” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 183) [“I love the water, its dense transparency, the green in the water

and the dumb creatures (I too shall soon be equally dumb), my hair among them, in it, the just water [...] To dive, to rest, to move without effort” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 178)]. Water is *gerecht*, it is fair, just, but also suitable and right. The water is where Undine can simply be.¹³ However, it is not where Undine can always be: “eines Tages sich besinnen¹⁴, wieder auftauchen, durch eine Lichtung gehen, *ihn* sehen und »Hans« sagen. Mit dem Anfang beginnen” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 183) [“one day to stop and think, to rise to the surface again, to walk through a clearing, to see *him* and say ‘Hans’. To begin at the beginning.” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 178)]. The beginning as a marked point of the start of something is connected to land, to Undine’s other life. Under water everything is in flux, beginning and end are inconsequential; however, on land something new begins, even if it is ultimately always the same story with the same characters and the same ending: “Immer wenn ich durch die Lichtung kam ..., traf ich auf einen, der Hans hieß” and “Einen Fehler immer wiederholen, den einen machen, mit dem man ausgezeichnet ist” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 182 & 183) [“Every time I walked through a clearing [...] I met a man called Hans” and “Always to repeat a mistake, to make the mistake by which one is marked” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 177 & 179)]. This clearly marks that Undine’s story, her fate, is repetitive.

While it might seem that staying in the water is Undine’s only chance of escaping this fate, this escape might simply go unnoticed. Undine’s voice cannot reach us from under water because language does not signify in the water as it does on land; under water Undine will always be “sprachlos.” In order to tell her story, in order to be heard, Undine needs to leave the water. This

¹³ We might think of Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid here and the pain she endures in order to live on land. Under water, there is no such pain but effortless movement in its stead (“sich ohne Aufwand von Kraft bewegen”).

¹⁴ “besinnen” connotes remembering but also coming to one’s senses. It might here also point to sense and rationality. In order to emerge again and engage in human contact, Undine needs to gather her senses and her terrestrial, human-like faculties.

is why she emerges from the water this time. Maybe this action will make it possible for her to break the cycle, break with her tragic fate of always being bound to a man, bound to love him, bound to be betrayed. Finding words to express her story, using language to make herself understood could be seen as a submission to the human world that renders her unintelligible unless she speaks in their language on their terms. But as becomes clear in “Undine geht,” Undine can still push the boundaries within the linguistic system created by and for man. Her own use of words often eschews definitive meaning making and offers in its stead an attempt at a different, more open, more utopian language, a way of connecting what has been separated. In telling her story, Undine cannot overcome her own existence and resolve her fate, but she can start to search for a language for herself and start to speak her truth.

Coming from the watery world onto land, Undine speaks first of the men that lure her to the land and curses them: “Ihr Menschen! Ihr Ungeheuer!” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 182) [“You humans! You monsters!” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 177)]. This reverses Fouqué’s motif of Undine being cursed on water by her husband forcing her to go back under water and ultimately sealing his own fate: “Bleib bei ihnen in aller Hexen Namen mit all deinen Geschenken, und lass uns Menschen zufrieden, Gauklerin du!” (Fouqué, *Undine* 85) [“In the name of all the witches, remain among them with your presents, and leave us mortals in peace, you sorceress!” (Fouqué, translated by Bunnett, chapter XV)]. While this is the pivotal scene, the turning point in Fouqué’s story, its reversal becomes the starting point for Bachmann’s Undine. From the beginning, the rift between Undine and “man”¹⁵ is clear. Hers is not a romantic love story, a desire to make herself

¹⁵ In German, the grammatical gender of both “Mensch” and “Mann” is masculine, and consequently both words are referred back to by the pronouns “he/him.” This exemplifies the dominance of grammatical masculinity in the German language that traditionally uses masculine forms when referring to a group of people no matter what their gender/sex. I read Bachmann’s use of “Menschen” as a way of intentionally demonstrating the linguistic erasure of the female

fit into the human world, but instead an execration of human practices and their hypocrisy, an attempt to renounce the world of man and escape her fate. Using her voice to speak up first of all means that Undine is not bound to a human-centered perspective of her story anymore.

A SUBJECT, SPEAKING

While telling Undine's story focalized through the character of Undine in the form of an inner monologue is striking and allows Bachmann to transform the tale in radical ways, it is equally important to consider how this change in perspective centers not only the female experience, but also the female-nature hybrid's experience. As we can see in the course of the text, Undine is a being of water as well as human-like flesh and blood. She is hybrid, never just one being but always more than singular. This, however, does not exclude her from becoming the narrator of her own story. While Undine and similar creatures like mermaids and sirens have been the objectified hybrid creature for centuries, in Bachmann's text this female 'other' can assert herself using her voice. By choosing the female-nature hybrid character as the first-person narrator, the objectified 'other' becomes a speaking subject.

There is, however, another essential break with the more traditional plot: in Bachmann's version, Undine is not invested in changing herself to make her relationship with Hans possible,

position from humanity and evidencing the secondary role of human women, who are throughout the tale considered only in their attachments to men. The motif of erasure/disappearance of the female position within language is central to much of Bachmann's prose, specifically the unfinished *Todesarten* cycle.

While Bachmann uses "Menschen" (=humans) in the German text, I will frequently use the generic "man" in English for my analysis, only sometimes switching to "humans/humanity." "Man" better reflects the erasure of the female position in humanity that I see conveyed with the German "Menschen." Undine is at once the other to "man" and the other to "humanity," being at once a woman and a more-than-human creature. The English "man" bears a reference to the male/masculine as well as "mankind," hence my preference for "man" in most instances. I will use "humans/humanity" at times in an effort to clarify Undine's otherness from humanity as a whole.

she does not seek to become fully human. As Lorraine Markotic points out in her article “The Object of Desire Speaks: Ingeborg Bachmann’s ‘Undine geht’ and Luce Irigaray’s ‘Woman,’” Undine does not “desire to become a human subject” (234). Instead, she “returns to the water as a realm she has never regretted” (234). Speaking in human language allows Undine to be fully recognized as a subject. At the same time, she is able to reject the simplistic anthropocentric idea that all someone who is not (‘truly’) human could ever want is to become human.

While Markotic understands Undine’s subjectivity as being dependent on her voice (“her speaking grants her a form of subjectivity” [234]), I argue that Undine’s subjectivity, or maybe better her ‘subjecthood’, is given from the outset. The question is not whether a female nature-human hybrid is a subject rather than an object, but whether their status as a subject is being rejected or denied by some ideological framework according to which we operate. In claiming that only speaking makes Undine a subject, Markotic seems to reinforce the oppressive hierarchy, as she claims that voice, the human ability to speak, is central to ‘subjecthood.’ Using our voice and our linguistic abilities is essential for human communication, it is one of the most common ways for humans to share their thoughts and feelings in language. In this context, a voice means you can be heard and that you can assert yourself as a subject; voicelessness, on the other hand, means you are a mere object that has nothing to say. Genevieve Lloyd in her book on the long-standing connection in the Western world of reason with men and masculinity makes the observation that feminist attempts to assert themselves as equal often fall short insofar as they remain within the hierarchy that oppresses them: “the ideal of transcendence is [...] a male ideal; [...] it feeds on the exclusion of the feminine. This is what makes the ideal of a feminine attainment of transcendence paradoxical” (Lloyd 101). Simply attempting to become equal to men, in Undine’s case to be

allowed to speak, does not question the underlying philosophical assumptions of fundamental difference between men and women or humanity and nature but rather reinforces them.

Even if the act of gaining a voice and language may indicate subjecthood, this is not the only way subjecthood can be asserted. After all, for the non-male or non-human subject to speak in and through a phallogentric linguistic system that oppresses and undermines speaking from any point other than the dominant position of man¹⁶ will always undermine such speaking. As far as we understand her female-nature voice as a transgression of the boundaries of gender and humanity, the very possibility and necessity of this transgression confirms the dichotomy as essentially existent and valid. Furthermore, this specifically female bridging of reason and nature can be seen to produce a counter-ideal, a new normative optimum.

To have been largely excluded from the dominant, and supposedly more 'advanced', forms of abstract thought or moral consciousness can be seen as a source of strength when their defects and impoverishment become apparent. But such strengths must be seen in relation to structural features of gender difference. They are strengths that derive from exclusion; and the merits of such 'minority consciousness' depend on avoiding asserting it as a rival norm. (Lloyd 106)

This is not to say that the narrative strategy of letting Undine speak is not a crucial point of Bachmann's story, but the more radical move in "Undine geht" is in fact that Bachmann does not submit to previous models and dichotomies already in place but searches for a language that allows Undine to express herself and her story without just trying to imitate the human. As Achberger states, "As soon as the water creature is allowed to speak for herself, the desire to become human – in this case to have a soul – is not at all what seems to motivate her" (88). Already in Giradoux's drama, the question of a soul for Ondine becomes irrelevant:

¹⁶ As mentioned in the previous footnote, Undine is doubly other to man: she is female opposite the dominant male position of patriarchy, but she is also more-than-human opposite mankind/humanity.

THE KING

He is not for you. His soul is small.

ONDINE

I have no soul.

THE KING

Because you don't need one. You are a soul. But human souls are tiny. There is no man whose soul is great enough for you.

(Giradoux 117)

Bachmann brings the irrelevance of a soul to its conclusion by omitting it entirely. Even asserting herself as a subject is not the story's main focus. She is a recognizable and recognized speaking subject, but Bachmann does not highlight this fact as an achievement; this is not Undine's motivation or goal. Instead, Undine emerges in this text to question, to challenge, to critique. Like water, her presence makes waves and destabilizes.

DESTABILIZING AND DECONSTRUCTING

Bachmann does not fully reject the Undine tradition that has been created and formed by men and has perpetuated the oppression of the female and the more-than-human 'other;' instead, she creates intertextual continuity by deconstructing and reintegrating the old tradition into her story, a choice potentially problematic as it actively defines itself in connection to the Undine tradition. "In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir complained that women 'have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected', that they 'still dream through the dreams of men'" (Lloyd 86). Examining Bachmann's text, this still holds true. The Undine storyline, the plot, and the myth are still "dreams of men." Bachmann is not "erecting" her own myth; however, Bachmann is most certainly doing her own violence to the virile myth, calling out its sexist projections, destabilizing and eroding man's linguistic hegemony. Where Undine's contradictory

being is depicted or its depiction is attempted, even if only partially successful, resolution is not a priority in Bachmann's text. More often than not, it is contradiction and opposition that is the most striking and innovative feature of the text.

In her rewriting of Undine, Bachmann is able to participate in, challenge, and at least partially reject the mythological tradition that surrounds the story. In a radical shift in narrative focus and through her weaving together and connecting several different myths and story traditions in one text, she can tell a different story. Achberger claims,

It is not a subtextual reality that undercuts the "reality" of the surface narrative in "Undine Goes" but rather a submarine world of fluidity and impermanence – the dark, elusive world of sounds and sirens that serves to cast light, paradoxically enough, on the terrestrial world of firm ground and social order, the bright world of language and reason. (85-86)

Rather than casting light, I would argue that Undine's words and existence cast a shadow over "the bright world of language and reason" and exposes its oppressive forces and devastating shortcomings. Undine uses the many and multiple "dreams of men" in order to muddle them, deconstruct them, to subvert, if not pervert, them and undercut their force.

„Undine geht" offers much critique of the societal status quo. As Lennox describes it, "Undine mounts a frontal assault on the deadly repetitiveness of male-dominant, female-submissive domestic partnerships wherein husbands control power and money in the public arena and expect loyal wives, in return for financial support, to create a nurturant private sphere" (*Cemetery of the Murdered Daughters* 309). The mythical water creature Undine certainly launches into tirades against patriarchy and the inequality of heterosexual relationships but in her complaints Undine, the water sprite, the not-only human or more-than-human creature, also critiques humanity as a whole and challenges gender equality, capitalism, and human knowledge production more generally.

We might consider the following passage a critique of not only gender norms and expectations but also of the progress narrative of capitalism that is frequently at the center of the Anthropocene debates today,

Ihr kauft und laßt euch kaufen. Über euch muß ich lachen und staunen, Hans, Hans, über euch kleine Studenten und brave Arbeiter, die ihr euch Frauen nehmt zum Mitarbeiten, da arbeitet ihr beide, jeder wird klüger an einer anderen Fakultät, jeder kommt voran in einer anderen Fabrik, da strengt ihr euch an, legt das Geld zusammen und spannt euch vor die Zukunft. (Bachmann, "Undine geht" 185)

[You buy and let yourself be bought. I can't help laughing and being amazed at you, Hans, Hans, at you little students and honest workmen, you who take wives who work with you, then you both work, each of you grows cleverer in a different field, each of you makes progress in a different factory, you work hard, save money and harness yourselves to the future. (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 180)]

What Undine rejects and ridicules here is not only man's domination of woman but also the capitalist agenda and the idea of progress as a whole. Undine laughs and wonders about the human willingness to work, to achieve, to get ahead. She clearly identifies the progress narrative of capitalism as the driving force behind all the toil and trouble as we can see in her astute wording "spannt euch vor die Zukunft." Like cattle we yoke ourselves to the idea of a great future, which thus becomes impetus and goal all in one. We might recognize this narrative of a great future, always better, always more as something that is quickly losing credibility and probability in the world today, but that we are nevertheless unable or unwilling to leave it behind.

Furthermore, Undine challenges the limits of human understanding and scientific knowledge. She says,

Denn ich habe die feine Politik verstanden, eure Ideen, eure Gesinnungen, Meinungen, die habe ich sehr wohl verstanden und noch etwas mehr. Eben darum verstand ich nicht. Ich habe die Konferenzen so vollkommen verstanden, eure Drohungen, Beweisführungen, Verschanzungen, daß sie nicht mehr zu verstehen waren. (Bachmann, „Undine geht“ 186)

[Then I understood the refinements of politics, your ideas, your convictions, opinions. I understood them very well and a bit more besides. That was exactly why

I didn't understand you. I understood the conferences so completely, your threats, proofs, evasions, that they were no longer comprehensible. (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 182)]

In claiming that she understands the human world so completely that it cannot be understood anymore, Undine challenges rational understanding and scientific argumentation as insufficient and missing the mark. Undine's intervention here is to challenge notions of detached reasoning and understanding and the false sense of superiority that so often comes with it. Undine can comprehend and understand human matters, but she also understands more than that ("und noch mehr"). There is life beyond human life, beyond the connections that humans find within their world, a surplus, an added value of being outside of the anthropocentric conception of the world. Detached, seemingly impartial understanding might ultimately lead to not understanding at all anymore because we lose our connection with and attunement to the world around us. The passage continues,

Und das war es ja, was euch bewegte, die Unverständlichkeit all dessen. Denn das war eure wirkliche große verborgene Idee von der Welt, und ich habe eure große Idee hervorgezaubert aus euch, eure unpraktische Idee, in der Zeit und Tod erschienen und flammten, alles niederbrannten, die Ordnung, von Verbrechen bemäntelt, die Nacht, zum Schlaf mißbraucht. (Bachmann, "Undine geht" 186-187)

[And that was what moved you, the incomprehensibility of all this. Because in this incomprehensibility lay your really great, concealed idea of the world, and I conjured up your great idea out of you, your unpractical idea in which time and death appeared and flamed, burning down everything, order wearing the cloak of crime, night misused for sleep. (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 182)]

All the scientific knowledge and the terminology ultimately cannot prevent the incomprehensibility of the world from still seeping through. It cannot explain away emotions, ideas, and fears that will ultimately not submit to detached reasoning and that are demanding acknowledgement and a place in this world. Bachmann states in a 1971 interview,

alles, was uns heute die Soziologie, die Psychiatrie und andere Disziplinen zu sagen haben, mag ja sehr interessant sein, auch das Material, das sie zusammentragen,

vielleicht sogar die Weise, in der sie es interpretieren. Aber für einen Schriftsteller bleibt noch etwas ganz anderes zu tun. Und der Versuch heute, dem Schriftsteller die Notwendigkeit seiner Existenz abzusprechen, scheint mir daher sehr töricht zu sein; denn die Sprachen der Wissenschaft können bestimmte Phänomene überhaupt nicht erreichen, auch nicht ausdrücken. (*Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden* 90)

[everything that sociology, psychiatry and other disciplines have to say to us today may be very interesting, also the material they collect, maybe even the way in which they interpret it. But for a writer something else remains to be done. And the attempt today to deny the writer the necessity of his existence seems to me very foolish; for the languages of science cannot reach certain phenomena at all, nor can they express them.]

Bachmann recognizes the usefulness of scientific understanding but also sees its limits. Through works of fiction, writers fill a void in society that science and research cannot reach.

Bachmann's position resonates with Haraway's call for partiality within knowledge claims ("We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible." ["Situated Knowledges" 590]). Not only is science inadequate for the description of humanity and the world as a whole but situated knowledges, lived experiences, and emotions also allow new openings for understandings to emerge. Acknowledging that our bodies and our understandings are multiple and partial opens us up to seeking connections and relationships with the world around us. Undine is highly attuned to her own positionality and the environments she inhabits. And while she criticizes man's narrow-mindedness in his striving for knowledge, she also recognizes beauty and virtue in such striving,

Zu bewundern ist auch, wenn ihr euch über Motoren und Maschinen beugt, sie macht und versteht und erklärt, bis vor lauter Erklärungen wieder ein Geheimnis daraus geworden ist. Hast du nicht gesagt, es sei dieses Prinzip und jene Kraft? War das nicht gut und schön gesagt? [...]

So hat niemand von den Menschen gesprochen, von den Bedingungen, unter denen sie leben, von ihren Hörigkeiten, Gütern, Ideen, von den Menschen auf dieser Erde, auf einer früheren und einer künftigen Erde. Es war recht, so zu sprechen und so viel zu bedenken. (Bachmann, "Undine geht" 190-191)

[You are also to be admired when you bend over engines and machines, when you make and understand and explain them, till all your explanations tum them into a mystery again. Didn't you say it was this principle and that energy? Wasn't that well and beautifully said?

No one has ever spoken like that about men, about the conditions under which they live, about their servitude, goods, ideas, about the people on this earth, on an earlier and a future earth. It was right to speak like that and to reflect upon so much. (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 186)]

Science, history, and all these disciplines have their place, and Undine acknowledges that it is good and right to speak and think about them. Nonetheless, her speech destabilizes the detached, factual, anthropocentric knowledge of man as the only true knowledge and advocates for a more entangled and embodied understanding of the world.

THE BLURRY BOUNDARIES OF ENTANGLED EXISTENCE

It is essential to understand Undine not only as a woman, but as a water woman, a being that is intimately linked to the element water. Water is not just her environment, her surroundings, her origin; water informs Undine's whole existence. When she is submerged, there is no telling her apart from the water around her. Environment is frequently understood as something relatively solid and concrete, a space surrounding an entity that consists itself of relatively discrete entities that are connected and influencing each other in specific ways. Submerging this concept under water complicates this understanding of environment. Water does not interact with the entities in it in quite the same way as air, ground, plants, and even water do on land. In many ways, water more obviously informs every way of existing in it. In her book *Wild Blue Media*, Jue writes, "you become alienated from the land in the very process of becoming able to breathe comfortably deep underwater" (164). The body attunes differently to water and to air, the bodies' boundaries are in fact less a point of separation than a point of contact, a porous border where exchange is inevitable.

This is not to say that this is not true for existence on land; looking at life under water just foreignizes the relationship between bodies and their surroundings enough for us as land-dwelling humans to make evident how much everything is always entangled and how little environment can be separated from anything in it. Boundaries are permeable. In “Undine geht,” they are always assumed to be so. Existing as a water-woman hybrid, Undine breaks with clear-cut categories from the very beginning. In Undine, Bachmann creates an ‘other’ that is within, without and on the border: “Die nasse Grenze zwischen mir und mir...” (“Undine geht” 183) [“The wet frontier between me and me. ...” (“Undine Goes” 178)]. While these words seem to suggest that water is the border of Undine’s double life, one in the water and one outside of it, Undine is so intricately intertwined with water that she is herself the border as well as the two sides separated by the border. Every boundary is itself a mobile space that is not permanently fixed and always permeable from either side. Undine is a being of liminality, never only one or the other, but always combining both sides. She is at once water and human and thus in the liminal space between water and humanity, a borderline being.

In the figure of Undine, Bachmann shows not a discrete entity but a porous being (“Immer wenn ich durch die Lichtung kam und die Zweige sich öffneten [...]”, (“Undine geht” 182) [“Every time I walked through a clearing and the branches parted [...]” (“Undine Goes” 177)]) that is connecting rather than demarcating differences. Like water, Undine is not fixed or bound but not disconnected either. Undine is a nature-human hybrid making evident the intimate connection of human and more-than-human world. However, in an interview in 1964, Bachmann famously called Undine neither woman nor any living creature, but the embodiment of art itself.

Die Leser und auch die Hörer identifizieren ja sofort - die Erzählung ist ja in der Ich-Form geschrieben - dieses Ich mit dem Autor. Das ist keineswegs so. Die Undine ist keine Frau, auch kein Lebewesen, sondern, um es mit Büchner zu sagen, ‚die Kunst, ach die Kunst‘. Und der Autor, in dem Fall ich, ist auf der anderen Seite

zu suchen, also unter denen, die Hans genannt werden. (Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden* 46)

[The readers, and also the listeners, immediately identify this I - the story is written in the first person - with the author. This is by no means true. Undine is not a woman, nor is it a living being, but, to use Büchner's expression, 'art, oh art'. And the author, in this case me, is to be found on the other side, among those who are called Hans.]

This places Undine not simply between the human and the more-than-human but she is intimately linked to art bringing together not just the material worlds but also entangling matter with art, body with spirit and idea. Undine is a space of nexus, a place where seemingly discrete, demarcated concepts and entities exhibit their continuity and permeability.

As art, Undine is possibly everything and not necessarily anything. In her, Bachmann can entangle and weave together all the things so frequently understood as opposite – man, woman; nature, culture; human, more-than-human; body, spirit – because she draws on myth, philosophical concepts and reasoning, societal norms, but she does so without privileging one over the other. Instead, they all coexist and cocreate in this new textual whole. Undine remembers and embodies it all. She says, “Mein Gedächtnis ist unmenschlich” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 189) [“My memory is inhuman” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 184)]. Everything might exist in her and in her story as it would in art more generally, even if the human audience today does not remember or cannot access certain aspects, in art it is all preserved, one expansive, inhuman cultural memory.

This inhuman memory also points to more than just her non-humanness; “unmenschlich” also connotes inhumane, barbarous, and cruel. While it makes sense that Undine’s memory would be non-human, the connotations of “unmenschlich” furthermore indicate that remembering is itself a cruel act for Undine. Unlike Giradoux’s Ondine who is made to forget her Hans, Bachmann’s Undine remembers better than any human would, which makes the cruelty of her fate, forever

falling in love just to be betrayed, even more acute. The passage continues, “An alles habe ich denken müssen, an jeden Verrat und jede Niedrigkeit. An denselben Orten habe ich euch wiedergesehen; da schienen mir Schandorte zu sein, wo einmal helle Orte waren” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 189) [“I had to think of everything, of every treachery and every baseness. I saw you again in the same places; the places that had once been bright now seemed to me places of shame” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 184)]. However often the betrayal has been repeated, Undine cannot forget any of them. Instead, places that were once places of light, a clearing/glade (“Lichtung,” [Bachmann, “Undine geht” 182 & 183]), have become places of shame and disgrace reminding her of the big betrayal (“den großen Verrat,” [Bachmann, “Undine geht” 185]). Her memories are entangled with these places as she is always highly attuned to her surroundings. Only in the water can she exist apart from these places („Keine Lichtung wird sein. Du anders als die anderen. Ich bin unter Wasser” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 191) [“There will be no clearing. You different from all the others. I am under water” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 187)] and not be reminded of the memories of human betrayal. Emerging from the water and living as a human is paradoxically what triggers her “inhuman memory.”

WATERY ABJECTION AND ITS MONSTROSITY

If the connotation of *inhuman(e)* is barbarous, cruel, and potentially threatening, then this also indicates that its opposite *human* (“menschlich”) is the equivalent of kind, good-natured, and safe. Accepting this binary opposition closely links Undine, the non-man, with danger and viciousness, the abject and the monstrous. As mentioned in the introduction, monstrosity, while

typically understood negatively, also offers us a powerful way of thinking and embodying impure and contaminated ways of being. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes:

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless "primacy" constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, "subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain: Dostoyevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Celine. (18)

In “Undine geht”, Bachmann is concerned with limits and limitations of bodies and concepts, confrontation of subject and object and their collapse into one, and “the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable.” Thus, Bachmann joins the group of modern writers presented here who do not simply depict the abject in the object severing it from ‘subjecthood’ and ‘othering’ it further, but who probe abjection within the speaking subject, within discourse, within language, searching for words and sentences that evoke and express instances of “inseparable, contaminated, condemned” (Kristeva 18) existence. Kristeva’s description indicates an encounter, “‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again” (18). Whenever such encounters happen, fragile boundaries are negotiated as confluence and collapse become likely, even inevitable.

Tracing these fragile boundaries becomes an “aesthetic task” that brings us face to face with the abject. Writing the abject rather than ‘abjectifying’ is crucial if the goal is to make visible the defining and confining limits of existence and to escape the binaries that surround identity and subjectivity: subject – object, I – ‘other,’ nature – culture, independent – dependent, etc. The question then is what is abjection, i.e. the process of being and becoming abject. Kristeva writes: “It is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system,

order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). This makes clear that abjection does not operate inside of the dual system of order vs. chaos or cleanliness vs. filth; instead, it takes place outside of binaries playing with their implications and contaminating their difference. Kristeva further states, “What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous” (1). The abject is not simply the ‘other’ of the binary that is separate and outside of it; it is the liminal, the edge.

Bachmann’s Undine embodies exactly this space, the liminal space of neither-here-nor-there; she is this borderline being (=Grenzwesen – “die nasse Grenze zwischen mir und mir ...” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 183) [“The wet frontier between me and me. ...” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 178)]). This in-between is what makes her suspect, what makes her abject in the eyes of the ‘other’ (i.e. Hans) of the text. “Dann wußtet ihr plötzlich, was euch an mir verdächtig war, Wasser und Schleier und was sich nicht festlegen läßt” (Bachmann, “Undine geht“ 188) [“Then you suddenly knew what was suspicious about me, water and veils and whatever cannot be firmly grasped” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 184)]. Water and veil are symbols for her being outside of discrete categorization and definition, but water and veil can also be read as semi-transparent borderlines that are only just creating an in- and an outside. “Was sich nicht festlegen läßt” [“what cannot be firmly grasped”] offers us the explanation for her abjection, her being outside of clear “identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4).

The abject is closely related to the monstrous. Cohen observes, “The monstrous lurks somewhere in that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction, close to the heart of what Kristeva calls “abjection”” (51). Abjection creates the space for the most threatening, the most intimately familiar monsters to come forth. Monsters are an alter ego, “ejected beyond the scope

of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 1). What they represent and remind us of is a destabilizing, yet playful, a corrupting, yet freeing alternative existence. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock reminds us that “what is monstrous is always defined in relation to what is human” (358). The threat that both the abject and the monstrous pose is infiltration and contamination of the human leading to the constant need for reasserting and policing its boundaries, and for othering anything abject, anything “was sich nicht festlegen lässt” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 188) [“what cannot be firmly grasped” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 184)].

Undine’s watery existence refuses clear categorization which poses a threat to a patriarchal order that is founded and operates on the basis of a clearly definable and predictable definition of the world. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler states, “What is refused or repudiated in the formation of the subject continues to determine that subject. What remains outside of this subject ... persists as a kind of defining negativity” (190). By being the outside, the defining negativity of human existence and human categorization, the monstrous Undine is nonetheless intimately connected to and continues to determine this existence. At the same time, Undine cannot achieve her own subject formation or sustain it without human existence since the monstrous only ever exists in its perversion of the human. Human existence is the defining negativity of her own subjecthood.

However, Undine’s existence is still more complex. She is neither human nor non-human, neither only heroine nor only monster. In Bachmann’s version we never learn about Undine’s soul or a lack thereof, we do not read her as monster but are instead enticed to wonder where the monsters might really be found. As Weinstock has asserted, “ideas of monstrosity and the forms that monsters take will differ across time and from place to place” (358). They will also vary depending on perspective. While women monsters and monstrous women have a long tradition, as

Zimmerman has shown, speaking from such an abject position of monstrosity generates a different perspective on who is the monster. In an attempt to create a viable position for Undine to speak, Bachmann draws on the idea of monstrosity, but applies it to man instead of the non-human character. The story begins with: “Ihr Menschen! Ihr Ungeheuer!“ followed in the next line by: “Ihr Ungeheuer mit dem Namen Hans!“ (“Undine geht” 182) [“You humans! You mosnters! / You monsters named Hans!” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 177)]. The story reverses not only who speaks and who is spoken about but also who gets to call or be called names, who gets to erect borders and define what belongs inside and what outside.

However, “Undine geht” defies such a simple reversal. Although Undine starts her monologue berating humans, calling them “Ungeheur” twice in quick succession, then “Monstren” again once two paragraphs later, her raging tirade becomes less and less accusatorial as it continues on. Throughout the rest of the monologue, she uses “Ungeheuer” three more times, and also addresses humans/her readers as “Ihr Betrüger und ihr Betrogenen” (“You deceivers and you deceived!”) as well as “Verräter!” (“Traitors!”). As her monologue goes on and Undine becomes more accustomed to being on land and speaking within human language, she launches fewer direct accusations and the border between herself as subject and her object starts to become contaminated and threatens to collapse. It becomes clear that the abject creates monsters too intimately familiar to simply reject.

Undine is one such monster. But a monster called on and dreamt up by man:

Doch vergeßt nicht, daß ihr mich gerufen habt in die Welt, daß euch geträumt hat von mir, der anderen, dem anderen, von eurem Geist und nicht von eurer Gestalt, der Unbekannten, die auf euren Hochzeiten den Klageruf anstimmt, auf nassen Füßen kommt und von deren Kuß ihr zu sterben fürchtet, so wie ihr zu sterben wünscht und nie mehr sterbt: ordnungslos, hungerissen und von höchster Vernunft. (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 189)

[But do not forget that you called me into the world, that you dreamed of me, of the others, of the other, who is of your spirit yet not of your shape, of the unknown woman who raises the cry of lament at your weddings, who comes on wet feet, and from whose kiss you fear to die as you wish to die and now no longer die: in disorder, in ecstasy and yet most rational. (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 184)]

Undine was dreamt up by human "Geist" ("spirit"), by the mind, the imagination, by a longing. Man conjured her as a seductive but monstrous water woman. While Undine is the other, she originates from the human mind and is therefore entangled in human existence. Thus, while being positioned at the fringes just beyond the border, Undine is nevertheless so close to, so intimately bound up with man that she cannot exist without him. Conversely, as much as man fears this water-woman monster and rejects her destabilizing and entangled existence, he also desires her and her death-bringing fate. Bachmann's Undine does not attempt to please man but calls him out as the one who desires chaos and ruin himself. She demonstrates that the threat does not come from without as much as from within, from his own suppressed and corrupt desires.

Undine's kiss not only brings death and destruction but makes men wish for this death from her kiss. Her kiss offers the opportunity for an ecstasy that comes with fully embracing the contradictions of life and will leave the receiver "ordnungslos, hingerissen und von höchster Vernunft" ("in disorder, in ecstasy and yet most rational"), a state seemingly impossible because it unites many contradictory feelings in one moment. Kristeva writes that "[t]he abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts" (15). Here the kiss of love is corrupted into effecting death. However, man is also corrupt because he desires this kiss, this moment (and because it is deadly, it is only a moment) outside of regulated human existence, a chance for unconfined freedom.

Thus, monsters are found on both sides. Simple binaries and the logic of inside and outside are not upheld. They presume to give us guidelines for judging what is good and bad, what is right

and wrong as if clear distinctions existed, as if Kant's categorical imperative always applied. Undine's attempts to distinguish herself never hold for long because like water her language erodes its own possibilities for clear separation. Instead, things flow into each other, the monster on the outside is not held at bay but always finds its way in. Encountering the object also means coming into contact and is potentially a moment of confluence and harmony.

Und du hast geredet, mein Geliebter, mit einer verlangsamten Stimme, vollkommen wahr und gerettet, von allem dazwischen frei, hast deinen traurigen Geist hervorgekehrt, den traurigen, großen, der wie der Geist aller Männer ist und von der Art, die zu keinem Gebrauch bestimmt ist. Weil ich zu keinem Gebrauch bestimmt bin und ihr euch nicht zu einem Gebrauch bestimmt wußtet, war alles gut zwischen uns. Wir liebten einander. Wir waren vom gleichen Geist. (Bachmann, "Undine geht" 187)

[And you talked, my beloved, in a slow voice, completely true and saved, free of everything in between, you turned your sad spirit inside out, your sad, great spirit that is like the spirit of all men and of the kind that is not intended for any use. Because I am not intended for any use and you didn't know what use you were intended for, everything was good between us. We loved each other. We were of the same spirit. (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 182)]

Here, Undine addresses Hans not with "Ungeheuer" ("monster") but with "Geliebter" ("beloved"). Undine also has positive memories. She remembers encounters of confluence and collapse into one, with no in-between, no place for the abject and its monsters. But these are just moments. As Kristeva understands it, after the collapse, subject and object will emerge and confront each other again (18). The abject and its monsters will develop anew.

Positioned at the border, the abject does not adhere to societal rules, nor does it reject them; instead, it viciously plays with them to the point of corruption. In Bachmann's text this motif materializes in the word "Verrat" (English: 'treachery, betrayal'), a perversion of the rules of society: "daß man noch mehr als alles andere verführbar ist durch einen Schmerzton, den Klang, die Lockung und ihn ersehnt, den großen Verrat" ("Undine geht" 185) ["that you are more easily seduced by a note of anguish, by its sound, its enticement, than by anything else, and that you long

for the great betrayal” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 181)]. Treachery/betrayal in this context can be equally applied to Undine or Hans. In this moment of the text, one might assume that Undine will be the traitor as it is Hans who is longing for the treachery. Later in the text, however, it becomes clear that the traitor is indeed also Hans. Undine says, “Verräter! Wenn euch nichts mehr half, dann half die Schmähung” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 188) [“Traitors! When nothing else helped you, then abuse helped.” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 184)]. The abject is, thus, not only within and connected to Undine but also part of Hans. This means that abjection becomes a penetrating theme within the narrative that does not “abjectify” in an attempt to simply ‘other’ Undine or Hans since it highlights the abject in both; rather it shows the multifaceted and permeating nature of abjection in every encounter and the porosity of the boundaries that are meant to keep monsters at bay.

WATER/WOMAN: UTOPIAN (IM)POSSIBILITIES

To find expression for Undine’s entangled existence, Bachmann searches the language for words and sentences that move beyond conventional, simple-to-understand use. Everyday language is made up of phrases and imprecise expressions. Bachmann says, “da kann ein Schriftsteller sich nicht der vorgefundenen Sprache, also der Phrasen, bedienen, sondern er muß sie zerschreiben“ (*Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden* 84) [“a writer cannot use the language they find, that is the phrases, but he has to write them to pieces”]. Literature is the space for laboring with an imperfect language to create what is not yet but can be. Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, from which Bachmann frequently quotes, “4.027 Es liegt im Wesen des Satzes, daß er uns einen n e u e n Sinn mitteilen kann“ (40) [“4.027 It belongs to the essence of

a proposition that it should be able to communicate a *new* sense to us” (Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 41)]. However, the proposition (*Satz*) has to operate with facts and logic and cannot propose what is not true, or it would not make sense. In literature, logic still applies but the facts of the narrative can be changed. This makes literature a space for impossible possibility, a space for utopia.

Für das, was er [der Schriftsteller] will, mit der Sprache will, hat sie sich noch nicht bewährt; er muß im Rahmen der ihm gezogenen Grenzen ihre Zeichen fixieren und sie unter einem Ritual wieder lebendig machen, ihr eine Gangart geben, die sie nirgendwo sonst erhält außer im sprachlichen Kunstwerk. [...] sie gehorcht einer Veränderung, die weder zuerst noch zuletzt ästhetische Befriedigung will, sondern neue Fassungskraft. (Bachmann, “Fragen und Scheinfragen“ 311)

[For what they [the writer] want, what they want with the language, it has not yet proven its worth; they must, within the limits set for them, fix its signs and, in a ritual, bring them to life again, giving it a gait it acquires nowhere else except in the artwork of language. [...] it obeys a change which neither firstly nor lastly concerns itself with aesthetic satisfaction, but which seeks a new power of conception.]

This “neue Fassungskraft” (“new power of conception”) is what makes writing and the literary text a utopian space. It should not simply create an aesthetic experience but it must offer “die Möglichkeit zu erfahren, wo wir stehen und wo wir stehen sollten” (Bachmann, “Fragen und Scheinfragen” 314) [“the opportunity to know where we are and where we should be”]. This possibility, this new language and “neue Fassungskraft“ is what Bachmann attempts in writing a watery voice for the hybrid, more-than-human being of Undine. In her language, Undine exemplifies and expresses the hybridity and entanglement of bodies and water, human and more-than-human through her deconstruction of phallogentric logic and through her acceptance of contradiction. While we encounter a speaking subject, a voice that is linked to human existence, water is always present, its waves rippling the words, its fluidity permeating the structure of the

text. In her entangled existence, Undine allows her words to mean in paradoxical ways, entangling what is seen as separate and destabilizing boundaries and order.

Throughout the text, Undine is enchanted and mesmerized by human language. She appreciates words for their own sake, not as an instrument for use or justification. “Wenn dir nichts mehr einfiel zu deinem Leben, dann hast du ganz wahr geredet, aber auch nur dann“ (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 188) [“When you could think of nothing more to do with your life, then you spoke entirely truthfully, but only then” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 183)]. Paradoxically, it is in expressing oneself without a clear purpose, without grand ideas, that language gets close to the truth. Truth reveals itself in language when it is not bent to man’s will but when it touches on its own deeper meaning and let things resonate through it.

Nie war so viel Zauber über den Gegenständen, wie wenn du geredet hast, und nie waren Worte so überlegen. Auch aufbegehren konnte die Sprache durch dich, irre werden oder mächtig werden. Alles hast du mit den Worten und Sätzen gemacht, hast dich verständigt mit ihnen oder hast sie gewandelt, hast etwas neu benannt; und die Gegenstände, die weder die geraden noch die ungeraden Worte verstehen, bewegten sich beinahe davon. (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 191)

[Never was there so much magic over things as when you spoke, and never were words so powerful. You could make speech flare up, become muddled or mighty. You did everything with words and sentences, came to an understanding with them or transmuted them, gave things a new name; and objects, which understand neither the straight nor the crooked words, almost took their being from your words. (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 186)]

In this language, Hans brings together what would otherwise stay separate. Language transgresses the material boundaries of objects, makes things resonate with the words, becomes powerful, even mad in its flux. No word carries meaning on its own in the same way that it means when it borders on other words, when it entangles itself in sentences and larger ideas. Even if the meaning created is contradictory or paradoxical, language makes it possible to still bring the words together and in language we might find a way to understand their connection.

As readers, we encounter the paradoxical premises right from the start. Bachmann posits her narrative in and against the mythical Undine tradition. The title already points to how Bachmann tries to bridge the two moments, positioning the narrative within the tradition “Undine” but at the same time signaling the move away from it in “geht” (“goes”). Is Undine leaving us before the story even started? Reading the story, it becomes clear that the “traditional” Undine has indeed left already; however, the last word of the story is “komm” (“come”), reminding us of the title through its subversion. Though the traditional Undine, the familiar fairytale character, is leaving, she is at the same time still calling out to us to follow her, luring us into her story full of words and watery movement.

In the words and the grammatical structure of the text, it also becomes clear that Undine is intimately linked to the water. When describing the water, Undine says, “Nirgendwo sein, nirgendwo bleiben. Tauchen, ruhen, sich ohne Aufwand von Kraft bewegen – und eines Tages sich besinnen, wieder auftauchen, durch eine Lichtung gehen, *ihn* sehen und „Hans“ sagen. Mit dem Anfang beginnen” (Bachmann, “Undine geht” 183) [“To be nowhere, to stay nowhere. To dive, to rest, to move without effort—and one day to stop and think, to rise to the surface again, to walk through a clearing, to see him and say 'Hans'. To begin at the beginning” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 178)]. She imagines the water without the individuality of an I that dives, rests, moves effortlessly. The water is a space of connection and movement without clear individuality. Similarly, Undine loses the first-person pronoun when going back into the water at the end, “Ich bin unter Wasser. Bin unter Wasser” (Bachmann, “Undine geht“ 191) [“I am under water. Am under water.” (Bachmann, “Undine Goes” 187)]. Undine’s existence under water fully informs her to the point where she loses herself and just is. Washing away her individuality, this short passage is also suggestive of the undulating movement of water, repetitive while never fully the same.

In her 1953 radio essay “Sagbares und Unsagbares – die Philosophie Ludwig Wittgensteins,” Bachmann states,

[Philosophie] muß Luftgebäude zerstören und den Grund der Sprache freilegen, sie muß einer Therapie gleich sein, denn die philosophischen Probleme sind Krankheiten, die geheilt werden müssen. Nicht Lösung, sondern Heilung fordert er [Wittgenstein].

Somit hat die Philosophie eine paradoxe Aufgabe zu leisten: die Beseitigung der Philosophie. (124)

[[Philosophy] must destroy daydreams and expose the ground of language, it must be like a therapy, for the philosophical problems are diseases that must be cured. He [Wittgenstein] does not demand a solution, but healing.

Thus, philosophy has a paradoxical task to perform: the elimination of philosophy.]

Wittgenstein is ultimately unable to resolve this paradox in his philosophy; his way out is silence. Bachmann’s domain, however, is not philosophy but literature. The focus for Bachmann is not on resolving every conflict or paradox but attempting to heal the sicknesses of phallogocentric language in her writing. This, for Bachmann, means finding a space where she can connect disjunctive ideas and concepts despite their contradictory nature. This space for her is literature and language. Philosophy is scientific; it can order and systematize scientific findings, but literature can console, help, and offer insight into things outside of our experience. Bachmann, who studied law and philosophy, consciously chose literature because of its possibility for finding different forms of expression and meaning making, “weil es in der Natur des Menschen liegt, zu fragen und in der Wirklichkeit mehr als das Positive und Rationale zu sehen” (Bachmann, “Sagbares und Unsagbares” 125) [“because it is human nature to question and to see more than the positive and rational in reality”]. She clearly identifies the limits of the sciences and is also aware of the shortcomings of philosophical inquiry at penetrating “das Unsagbare” (“unspeakable”).

The opportunity of and in new and unresolved language is utopia. Utopia, the space of nowhere, is already in itself a paradox, it already indicates its modus operandi. It refers to an ideal

place, a perfect world, an unattainable dream land, yet it is literally no place at all. Additionally, the ideal place that is utopia is also generally understood as a place of pure wishful thinking, never to be achieved, always at a distance however much we move towards it. As such it is an impossible possibility.

Bachmann writes in “Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar,”

Es ist auch mir gewiß, daß wir in der Ordnung bleiben müssen, daß es den Austritt aus der Gesellschaft nicht gibt und wir uns aneinander prüfen müssen. Innerhalb der Grenzen aber haben wir den Blick gerichtet auf das Vollkommene, das Unmögliche, Unerreichbare, sei es der Liebe, der Freiheit oder jeder reinen Größe. Im Widerspiel des Unmöglichen mit dem Möglichen erweitern wir unsere Möglichkeiten. Daß wir es erzeugen, dieses Spannungsverhältnis, an dem wir wachsen, darauf, meine ich, kommt es an; daß wir uns orientieren an einem Ziel, das freilich, wenn wir uns nähern, sich noch einmal entfernt. (301)

[I am also certain that we must remain within order, that we cannot opt out of society and that we must prove ourselves to each other. Within these limits, however, we focus on the perfect, the impossible, the unattainable, be it love, freedom or any other pure greatness. In the interaction of the impossible with the possible, we expand our possibilities. That we create this tension, that we grow from it, I think that's what matters; that we orientate ourselves towards a goal which, of course, moves away again as we approach it.]

She describes exactly this paradox of utopia, a place that moves away as we get closer. It is the process of approximation that we need to consider the goal of our utopian vision rather than any utopian state or end point because in its possible steps towards the impossible we find possibilities we might have otherwise missed.

Bachmann does not simply write another Undine story taking the perspective of the female water creature to set the record straight; she probes the possibilities of language and literature to push the boundaries of what seems (im)possible, as Wittgenstein's statement that Bachmann is fond of quoting explains, “5.6 Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt“ (Wittgenstein 114) [“5.6 *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (Wittgenstein

115)]. Undine's use of language and her voice are transgressive, but her words are much more radical and probing: her desire for language is for an impossible possibility, for a speaking of her own existence in speechlessness. Bachmann seeks utopian being for Undine, "Nirgendwo sein. Nirgendwo bleiben" (Bachmann, "Undine geht" 183) ["To be nowhere, to stay nowhere." (Bachmann, "Undine Goes" 178)], utopia literally meaning no place, "nirgendwo". But writing as utopia is always only a motion, it can never reach the utopian state.

Die Literatur aber, die selber nicht zu sagen weiß, was sie ist, die sich nur zu erkennen gibt als ein tausendfacher und mehrtausendjähriger Verstoß gegen die schlechte Sprache – denn das Leben hat nur eine schlechte Sprache – und die ihm darum ein Utopia der Sprache gegenüberstellt, die Literatur also [...] ist zu rühmen wegen ihres verzweiflungsvollen Unterwegsseins zu dieser Sprache und nur darum ein Ruhm und eine Hoffnung der Menschen. (Bachmann, „Literatur als Utopie“ 346)

[Literature, however, which itself cannot express what it is, which only reveals itself as a thousandfold and several thousand year old breach of bad language – because life has only bad language – and which therefore contrasts it with a utopia of language; literature [...] is thus to be praised for its desperate journey to this language and only for that reason is it a glory and a hope for the people.]

Literature is the space for Bachmann where we can break with "schlechte[r] Sprache" ("bad language") and create a "neue Fassungskraft" ("new power of conception") where we can prompt our language to reflect and grasp the world around us as it changes and where we can change with and through it.

CONCLUSION: (RE)WRITING THE WATERS

Bachmann's short narrative "Undine geht" imaginatively attunes itself to the watery milieu of Undine, abandoning the anthropocentric terrestrial perspective in favor of a more fluid and hybrid point of view. Water entangles bodies differently; being attentive to the waters provides us

with the potential for finding more interconnected, materially aware ways of thinking. Bachmann's text offers an unusual version of the Undine myth: it allows the water sprite to find a voice and language to express her liminal and porous existence. Being so deeply entangled with and informed by the element of water, Undine cannot be contained but is always in flux moving between water and land, the human and the more-than-human. Her hybridity undermines simplistic categorizations and challenges their hegemonic position in the human understanding of the world. Instead, the text makes clear that we exist in a world of entanglement and partial knowledge and can never truly separate ourselves from our surroundings.

In her attempt to find expression for the hybrid, porous, and monstrous Undine, Bachmann is able to craft a language that destabilizes and deconstructs categories and boundaries of the oppressive heteropatriarchal world and explore how language might itself become a more open, more fluid medium that can better approximate the entangled realities of our world. Rather than working with pre-set phrases and established linguistic connections, Bachmann's rewriting of the Undine myth probes paradoxical language and an undulating writing style as a means of breaking out of linguistic norms. It is Bachmann's attempt to write the waters that inform Undine's character, a utopian effort to find language that can reveal the voice of the more-than-human water woman and linguistically approximate the element with which she is so closely linked. Bachmann's text reveals how we might write a watery language, create a fluid story, and conceive of a more interconnected, entangled existence. "Undine geht" is an attempt—always provisional, ever evolving, never complete—to push the boundaries of language and find ways to write and rewrite the waters. As Bachmann herself asserted, "Es gilt weiterzuschreiben" ("Literatur als Utopie" 349) [„It is necessary to keep writing“].

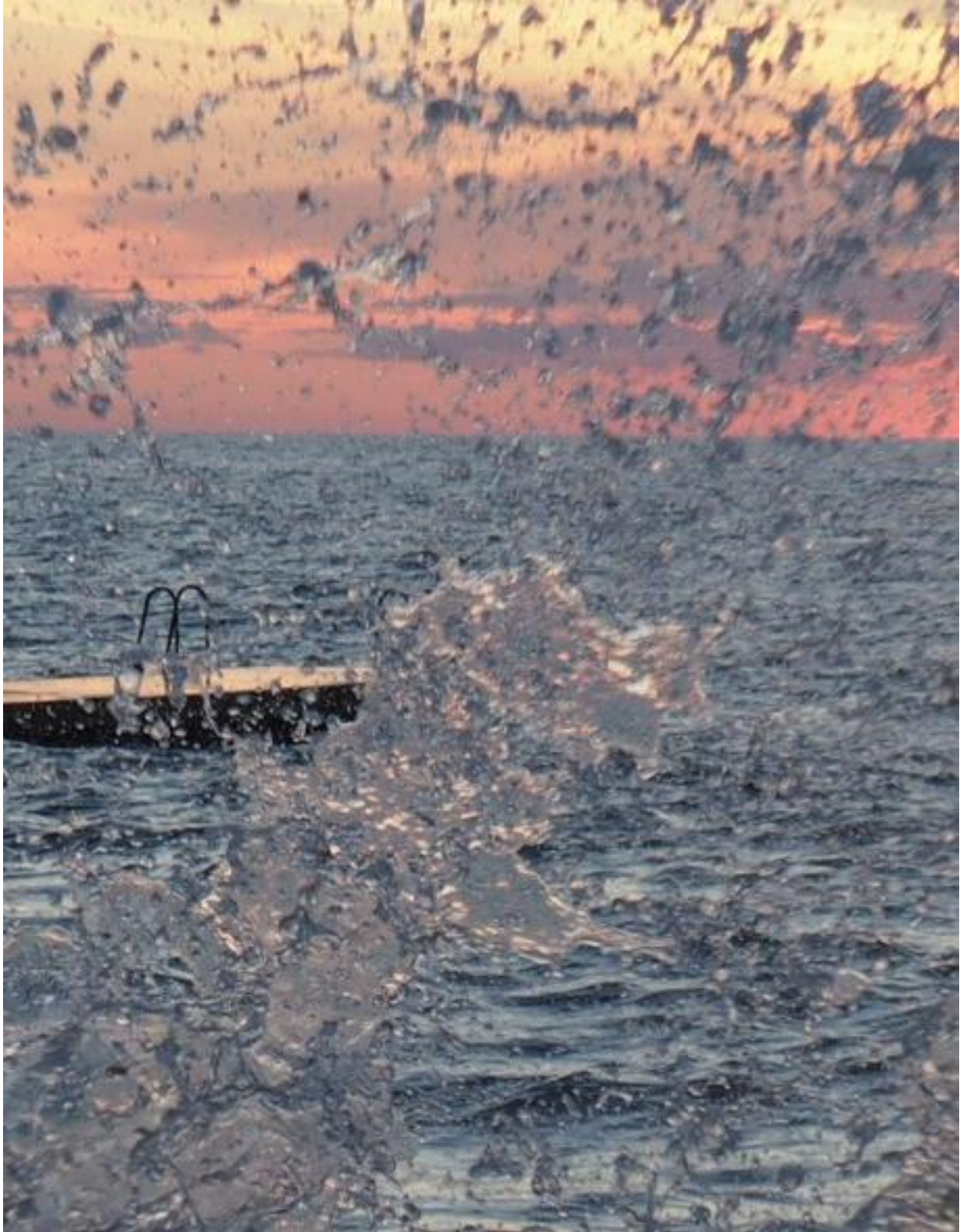


Figure 3: "Sunset Full of Water"

III. Reading the Waters – Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad* and the Materiality of Storytelling

*Forcing all forms of life inside of me to retreat underground
It grows relentless like the teeth of a rat
It's just got to keep on gnawing at me
It constricts like a ball on a hose
Nothing flows, so the pressure grows instead of the sea*
Fiona Apple – “Heavy Balloon”

Parts of this chapter have previously been published under the title “Reading Matters - Materiality and (Il)legible Inscriptions in Yoko Tawada’s *Das Bad*” in *Focus on Literatur*.

INTRODUCTION

Being one of Yoko Tawada’s earlier novels (first published in 1989), *Das Bad* (“The Bath”¹⁷) has attracted relatively little scholarly interest in recent years, which, considering Tawada’s extensive oeuvre and continued literary production, is not all that surprising. Nonetheless, *Das Bad* offers many opportunities for interpretation that have so far remained unexplored and warrant further and renewed scholarly interest in this novel. Manfred Weinberg attests, “Obwohl es sich nur um einen Kurzroman von 59 groß gesetzten Seiten handelt, ist der Text von einer [...] fast unendlichen Dichte” (231) [“Although it is only a short novel of about 59 pages in large print, the text is almost infinitely dense”]. In the at times only loosely and

¹⁷ While *Das Bad* has been published as a separate book in German, the English translation “The Bath” has to date appeared in the collection *Where Europe Begins* (2002) alongside several other stories but has not been published separately.

associatively connected scenes of the story, the Japanese female protagonist and first-person narrator of the story navigates her life in Germany; in the course of the novel, she changes jobs several times, and her body experiences unusual transformations (growing scales and losing her tongue among others). In the end her body becomes a vessel for a dead woman who visits the world through the protagonist's material presence. After submitting to the roles of exotic model, simultaneous translator, "Schuppenträgerin" (Tawada, *Das Bad*, 111) ["woman with scales" (Tawada, "The Bath," 38)] in a circus, and typist, the protagonist in the end concludes that she is "ein transparenter Sarg" (Tawada, *Das Bad*, 165) ["a transparent coffin" (Tawada, "The Bath," 55)]. All of the identities that have been prescribed for and inscribed onto her foreignized female body have left her with nothing of her own. While themes such as gender, inscriptions of foreignness, and body as text have figured prominently in the secondary literature on the novel and several articles have discussed water as a motif in Tawada's oeuvre as a whole (including *Das Bad*) (cf. e.g. Anderson, Bay, Hallensleben, Maehl, Redlich, Tamaş, Weinberg), the question of entangled bodies and unstable and porous materiality (in the characters, through Tawada's narrative style, and on the actual pages of the book) have not been analyzed comprehensively. Hang-Kyun Jeong's 2021 article "Die ambivalente Bedeutung des Mutterbildes in *Das Bad* von Yoko Tawada," however, provides one example for the renewed scholarly interest in the novel's complex exploration of permeable boundaries and hybrid identities, in Jeong's case focusing specifically on the figure of the mother and her influence on the protagonist's life.

Many of Tawada's works allow words to entangle each other, forming stories through associative wordplay and ever-evolving characters. These characters are often unable to disentangle themselves from the words and their ascriptions, inscriptions, and prescriptions complicating Western ideas of individuality and identity. While characters are highly entangled

with and dependent on culture and language, the element of water can infiltrate this relationship and destabilize this interplay of forces. Hansjörg Bay understands “die abgegrenzte Identität [...] als Effekt kulturellen Zwangs. Wo dieser unter dem Einfluss des Wassers nachlässt, die Identitäten flüssig und die Grenzen der Individuen durchlässig werden, stellen sich neue Beziehungen ein“ (243) [“delimited identity [...] as an effect of cultural coercion. Where this subsides under the influence of the water, where identities become fluid and the boundaries of individuals become permeable, new relationships emerge“]. Water exposes the porosity of the individuals which creates “connections and unexpected openings” (Haraway, “Situated Knowledges” 590). Although Tawada’s watery characters might be able to break with the identities forced upon them from the outside, the result is nevertheless not a separate individual or independent identity. These watery characters are still variously co-constituted beings, but in language, they can engage in their fluid and porous existence and explore the openings that it holds. As Ortrud Gutjahr attests, “Es ist diese sich immer neu erschreibende ‚Meer-Sprachigkeit,‘ in der Yoko Tawada navigiert“ (473) [“It is in this multi/sea-lingualism, constantly rewriting itself, that Yoko Tawada navigates”].

Das Bad is a complex and multi-layered text. It challenges its readers to read on several different levels at the same time. It is not only meaning, not only content that we, as readers, are asked to engage with, but also the physical book in front of us and the images and letters on its pages. As readers, we are confronted with the bodies of the characters, the bodies of the images (bodies of women, bodies of water, bodies of pages), as well as the material reality of the letters and words. These many bodies at times underscore, at times undermine, and at times overshadow our reading and meaning making with their presence. They reject the status of mere ‘schmückendes Beiwerk’ [‘ornamental addition’], instead occupying their own space in the creation and disruption

of “senses”¹⁸; their physical presence and how we sense and make sense(s) of this presence matters. Tawada at once plays with and takes seriously the diverse forms of materiality that emerge in and from her text.

Breaking with the hegemony of plot development and sense over form and materiality in the novel genre, Tawada’s text explores materiality in a way akin to that of feminist new materialisms albeit several years before much of the seminal ideas and texts of feminist new materialisms gain traction. New materialist ideas prove, nonetheless, fruitful for an in-depth analysis of materiality in *Das Bad*.

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

Drawing on these feminist new materialist notions of materiality and corporeality provides a terminology that helps us conceptualize the open and contingent bodies of *Das Bad*. When Tawada, for example, writes “Das Wasser war eine transparente Haut, die von ihrem Körper glitt.” (*Das Bad* 67) [(“The water slipped off her body like a transparent skin.” (“The Bath,” 23)], we are confronted with two bodies that through Tawada’s use of language and metaphor merge into one body only to be separated again in the relative clause following. “The body is never one, but part of open systems,” as Rogowska-Stangret describes it. As we see in only this very brief example from Tawada’s novel, bodies in her texts are constantly changing, constantly moving, ever-

¹⁸ In this emphasis on multiple “senses” that are part and emerge from the reading process, I am indebted here to Gizem Arslan’s article “Making Senses. Translation and the Materiality of the Written Sign in Yoko Tawada,” specifically her claim that “Reading here is a process not exclusively—nor even primarily—of making sense, but of ‘making senses’” (344) with the phrase under quotation marks borrowed from the German literary scholar and media theorist Friedrich Kittler.

becoming. The reader already learns about the unreliability of (human) bodies in the first sentence of the novel, “Der menschliche Körper soll zu achtzig Prozent aus Wasser bestehen, es ist daher auch kaum verwunderlich, dass sich jeden Morgen ein anderes Gesicht im Spiegel zeigt“ (Tawada, *Das Bad* 7) [“Eighty percent of the human body is made of water, so it isn’t surprising that one sees a different face in the mirror each morning.” (Tawada, “The Bath,” 3)]. While her readers might still assume bodies to be “autonomous, independent, separated, discrete, individualized” (Rogowska-Stangret), Tawada proposes a different understanding of matter. Taking seriously the fact that water is the main material substance of our bodily being, she offers us a new “reading” of the material world within and around us.

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

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

While I find Hallensleben’s claim of “transcorporeal literature” intriguing, a more in-depth exploration of the many different but contingent bodies in *Das Bad* is needed to capture the full networks of bodies and materialities at work here.

In the following pages, I aim to show how a focus on interdependent, interwoven, and interactive materiality can reveal new layers of Tawada’s short novel. In this chapter, I will engage in an open and multi-layered exploration of bodies – female bodies, foreign bodies, bodies of water

– and materiality in Tawada’s *Das Bad* in order to provide insight into how we might approach Tawada’s writing by reading more than just the words on the page. Drawing in particular on Tuana’s “viscous porosity” and Colebrook’s “indifference,” my analysis will take a close look at the novel’s innovative and entangled presentation of materiality. Focusing in particular on the instability of bodies and their borders, I will analyze the main character’s struggle to claim an identity (or multiple identities) of her own and inhabit her own body. Furthermore, I will examine how the book’s material reality is itself entangled in creating a complex web of interconnected matter and meaning asserting the central role of material entanglement in the novel. After all, as John Namjun Kim has observed with regards to Tawada’s writing, “what the narrative *says* is not identical to what the text *does*” (337, italics in the original).

BRIEF NOTE ON THE EDITION

Das Bad has to date been published in three clearly distinct editions and it would be a worthwhile endeavor to explore and examine how each edition changes and grows, almost organically, out of its predecessors. As Hallensleben points out, “Tawada herself considers her writing rhizomatic, a neverending text” (169). We might understand each new and changed edition of *Das Bad* as a material expression of this never-ending growth process of Tawada’s writing. My analysis will focus on the 2015 edition of *Das Bad*, which offers the German and the Japanese version of the story side by side and shows not only an intriguing contrast of the two writing systems (the two texts do not run parallel because the German text runs horizontally from left to right and the Japanese runs vertically from right to left, both texts do however intersect at the beginning of chapter 6), but also an intricate layering of text and images. More than just a playful

design element, I read the visual level of the book as intimately interwoven with the themes of the book drawing attention to materiality as an important aspect of Tawada's story.

TAWADA'S WATERY BODIES AND LINGUISTIC MATERIALITY

Water plays an important role throughout Tawada's oeuvre, *Das Bad* being one of her earlier texts that center around water. Highlighting the connection between water and identity in Tawada's works, Jeremy Redlich suggests that "Befitting the provisional and indeterminate nature of bodily and linguistic identity, Tawada regularly employs water and movement as literary devices to underscore change and transformation in her texts" (76). Bay argues that Tawada creates a poetics of water through intricate engagement with watery imaginaries throughout her texts. Considering water not just a central element in her texts but also a conceptual framework for writing and reflection of the writing process, Bay describes Tawada's oeuvre as "Wasser-Werk" (237) ["water opus"] on the fictional as well as the theoretical, meta-fictional level. Silja Maehl understands water to be part of the larger semantic field of fluidity that she sees as central in many of Tawada's texts: "Motifs of fluidity, the fluidity of a decentered world, are linked to the flowing nature of the imagination; in fact, this ambiguous fluidity is the prerequisite for creativity, which can only prosper in a position that is neither too shaky nor too comfortable" (77). However, water is also a material reality within Tawada's stories, a liquid that is present within and outside of the characters connecting inner and outer world, a substance that seeps in, spills out, and permeates seemingly stable material borders. Maehl states,

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

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

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

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

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

While this process might at times be disorienting, it also offers great potential for forging new connections and creating new meanings. Susan Anderson writes, "[Tawada] recasts alienation as

a stimulant to new ways of thinking about gender, otherness, and belonging.” (“Reading the Strange(r)” 357) Many of Tawada’s protagonists go through a stage of speechlessness and an inability to read and understand; they experience the resistance of the material language. In Tawada’s texts, this is closely linked to inscriptions onto the skin that are felt on the body but are otherwise unintelligible. In “Das Fremde aus der Dose“ [„Canned Foreign“] (1992), the protagonist states, “Jeder Versuch, den Unterschied zwischen zwei Kulturen zu beschreiben, misslang mir: Der Unterschied wurde direkt auf meine Haut aufgetragen wie eine fremde Schrift, die ich zwar spüren, aber nicht lesen konnte“ (Tawada, „Das Fremde aus der Dose“ 42) [“Every attempt I made to describe the difference between two cultures failed: this difference was painted on my skin like a foreign script which I could feel but not read” (Tawada, “Canned Foreign” 87)]. The foreign language frequently becomes part of the characters’ bodies first, giving priority to linguistic materiality and blurring the boundary between sense and the senses. We can find similar moments of experiencing language through the body in *Das Bad*,

Die Münder öffneten sich wie Müllbeutel; Abfall quoll heraus; ich musste ihn kauen, schlucken und in anderen Worten wieder ausspeien. Einige dieser Worte rochen nach Nikotin und andere nach Haarwasser. Das Gespräch war lebhaft. Alle redeten durch meinen Mund. Alle Stimmen preschten in meinen Magen und wieder aus ihm heraus. Ihre Schritte dröhnten bis in mein Hirn. (Tawada, *Das Bad* 51)

[People’s mouths fell open like trash bags, and garbage spilled out. I had to chew the garbage, swallow it, and spit it back out in different words. Some of the words stank of nicotine. Some smelled like hair tonic. The conversation became animated. Everyone began to talk using my mouth. Their words bolted into my stomach and then back out again, footsteps resounding up to my brain. (Tawada, “The Bath” 17)]

For the protagonist, spoken words are more than soundwaves; they have a materiality to them that, as an interpreter, the protagonist needs to chew and swallow in order to produce the equivalent linguistic material in the other language. The words are materially present for her, they have smell, weight, and sound, all of which physically infiltrate and reverberate through her body.

Similarly, the visual qualities of words and letters can at times cause physical and mental anxiety. Because of specific material features, words and letters can exert power over the characters. The translator-protagonist in “Saint George and the Translator” (1993), for example, observes,

The word for “victims” began with an “O.” I noticed there were “O’s” scattered across the first page. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the page was full of holes eaten away by the letter “O.” There was a wall behind formed by the white page so I couldn’t see inside and the harder I looked the more it seemed I’d never break through. I colored the insides of all the “O’s” black with my fountain pen and felt a slight sense of relief. (113)

The O of the Roman alphabet creates uneasiness and frustration within the protagonist because while O’s look like openings, they do not reveal what such an opening might lead to. In this way, the letter itself gains a sort of magical power over the character and potentially also over the reader. Anderson states, “Tawada’s writing in German aims in part to reawaken the lost mimetic ‘Sprachmagie’ of the alphabetic system by focusing on the visual aspects of letters, their individual shapes, and the sensory responses these evoke” (“Yoko Tawada and Reading the Stranger” 359). Visual linguistic presences ask us as readers to consider the materiality of individual letters, of the words on the page, and of the body of the book as well. It is my opinion that paying close attention to bodies and materiality and how we might read the material aspects of this novel with sense and senses can offer new insight into the complexly interwoven and entangled themes and motifs of the text.

VISCOUSLY POROUS STORY-TELLING

In *Das Bad*, Tawada writes an unstable and multiple story, a text that is full of openings and seepage. In a 2006 interview, Tawada draws on plant life as way to illustrate her writing process,

A single word can inspire me. When this happens, I want to create a whole text out of that one word, which seems to contain the entire microcosm. That is my dream, and it is how I often start writing. I use variations of this word, place associations next to each other, create word chains like branches of a tree, and play with different forms and shapes. Finally, I realize that I have to create an ending, but I don't find an ending because I don't want to and cannot have a result. A text is a weird and wonderful plant that has grown in all directions out of a single word knot. ("The Postcommunist Eye" 45)

Her texts themselves as well as what we learn through their story are in constant motion. Their growth does not follow a linear trajectory but branches and fans out. The story in *Das Bad* fluctuates between the protagonist's here and now, her memories and reminiscences, mythological tales, dream/nightmare sequences, and hallucinations without much indication through which the reader might orient themselves. Instead, one is variously left to swim, dive, float, and (almost) drown in Tawada's fluid narratives.

The many tales and references in the novel "fließen mäandernd nebeneinander, versiegen plötzlich an einer Stelle und tauchen an einer anderen wieder auf" (Gutjahr 473) ["they flow in a meandering fashion side by side, suddenly dry up in one place and reappear in another"]. The multiplicity of stories and allusions spans multiple cultures and traditions and aids the creation of an associative style of storytelling. Tawada, for example, integrates fairytale-like stories starting with the typical "Es war einmal ..." (*Das Bad* 9) ["Once upon a time ..."] ("The Bath" 4) only to end them abruptly and continue with the most mundane events of the protagonist's here and now,

Die Mutter jedoch, die all ihre Schuppen verloren hatte und wieder eine nackte Haut besaß, verblutete und starb.

Ich zog meinen Pyjama aus. Das Telefon klingelte. (*Das Bad* 13)

[... but the mother, who had lost all her scales and become human again, bled to death.

When I finished getting out of my pajamas, the phone rang. (“The Bath” 5)]

The tale ends with the death of the mother. As if this were the expected and most trivial outcome of such a tale, the story moves on without assigning any relevance to the tale or providing an indication of its meaning. The only clear connection between the two storylines is the fact that both include a “Schuppenträgerin” who ends up ridding herself of her scales. Although this might seem significant, Tawada’s text moves on with such a pace and a multitude of other interspersed tales and allusions all of which infiltrate the main storyline creating an exponentially growing potential for meaning making. In this way, Tawada’s writing can be described as porous and open to the side stories, allusions, and references which can then find their own way into the novel.

In contrast to the fairytales that are typically marked as such through an introductory phrase, the novel’s many dream sequences, on the other hand, grow out of the story almost organically making it extremely difficult for the reader to separate dream—or better: nightmare—from reality. When the protagonist writes sentences such as “Als ich erwachte, lag ich auf meinen Fingern, die taub und kalt waren” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 121) [“When I woke up, I was lying with my fingers under me. They were cold and numb” (Tawada, “The Bath” 41)] at the end of a dream sequence, we have evidence that what we just read must have indeed been a dream and we are tempted to reinstate a separation, a borderline between the reality of the text and the protagonist’s dreams and memories. While the text, in such moments, seems to support such a separation, Tawada’s fluid storytelling also constantly undermines it. Thus, we might be tempted to read the protagonist’s experience with the other woman in the basement as a figment of her imagination,

nothing more than another dream or a hallucination if it weren't for the loss of her tongue. The protagonist examines herself repeatedly to confirm her lack of a tongue, "Ich sah in den Spiegel und machte den Mund weit auf. Die Zunge war weg, der Mund eine dunkle, tiefe Höhle" (Tawada, *Das Bad* 79) ["I faced the mirror and opened my mouth wide. There was no tongue, only a dark cave continuing far back" (Tawada, "The Bath" 27)] and at the end of the same chapter, "Die Zunge war wirklich weg" (Tawada, *Das Bad* 89) ["My tongue was really gone" (Tawada, "The Bath" 30)]. The fact that the protagonist is still tongueless shows that the different individual narratives within the novel are open to unexpected connections and contingencies. The borders we attempt to draw between the fictional 'reality' of the text and the fictional dreams, memories, and fairytales inserted into this 'reality' cannot prevent infiltration and seepage between them. This type of storytelling challenges the hegemony of a perceived reality and imbues dreams with the power to change reality. Tawada's novel is reluctant to fit pre-established molds.

However, we might more accurately describe Tawada's writing as viscously porous. Tuana makes it clear that while porosity highlights "the rich interactions between beings," "viscosity" retains an emphasis on resistance to changing form" (194). While Tawada's text is open to, and constituted through, its interaction with different motifs, traditions, and narrative strategies, it simultaneously resists the logic and power of these influences and techniques through its own viscosity and undermines their integrity in the process. Fairytale-like stories such as the one mentioned above, while endowed with many fairytale elements, cannot satisfy the reader's expectations. Instead of offering more insight for the general narrative's interpretation or underscoring some kind of moral to help the bigger picture, they typically create more questions and evade simplistic interpretations. Thus, such tales and other references and allusions are rarely completely congruent with the overall story. Their integration is not seamless but points to

inconsistencies and rifts within the novel that are left unresolved. Through her viscously porous storytelling, Tawada is able to create a narrative that is full of exciting, yet frustrating openings. Only trial and error will tell which ones are the most rewarding and which ones we should have colored in, like the protagonist in “Saint George and the Translator,” for “a slight sense of relief” (113).

UNSTABLE BODIES AND IMPOSSIBLE IDENTITIES

Tawada’s novel grapples with materiality on many different levels. The most obvious and expected is the diegetic level of the story. From the very beginning, the body is put at the center (“the human body” are the first three words of the novel),

Der menschliche Körper soll zu achtzig Prozent aus Wasser bestehen, es ist daher auch kaum verwunderlich, dass sich jeden Morgen ein anderes Gesicht im Spiegel zeigt. Die Haut an Stirn und Wangen verändert sich von Augenblick zu Augenblick, wie der Schlamm in einem Sumpf, je nach der Bewegung des Wassers, das unter ihm fließt, und der Bewegung der Menschen, die auf ihm ihre Fußspuren hinterlassen. (Tawada, *Das Bad* 7)

[Eighty percent of the human body is made of water, so it isn’t surprising that one sees a different face in the mirror each morning. The skin of the forehead and cheeks changes shape from moment to moment like the mud of a swamp, shifting with the movements of the water below and the footsteps of the people walking above it. (Tawada, “The Bath” 3)]

This first paragraph expounds on the instability of bodily matter. If the human body is eighty percent water, fluidity rather than stability must be its most logical attribute. The concept of a stable human body is exposed as a fiction that ignores material realities. Instead, the body that Tawada envisions is subject to change from the watery movement within, providing an alternative body concept, one that is more attentive to matter and its agency. However, such bodies are not only unstable from within but also malleable from the outside. Like a swamp that has been

imprinted by feet, the body is also co-constituted by its surroundings. Materialities always interact and change each other. According to Tawada, we need to pay more attention to change and transformation, “We are constantly changing, and change is not a threat. It is much more difficult to try to understand this process of transformation than to hold on to a rigid, permanent shape.” (“The Postcommunist Eye” 43) Rather than holding on to a stable body, a permanent identity, *Das Bad* asks us to explore materialities full of connection and contingencies, a world of entanglement and interaction.

In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is working against her own unstable body. The unsurprising nature of a different face every day notwithstanding, the reader soon finds out that it is exactly the sameness of her face that the first-person narrator and protagonist of the book attempts to re-create every morning. This stable face, this stable outside appearance is based on a portrait of herself next to her mirror according to which she “corrects” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 7) her current appearance through washing, combing, and applying make-up. Thus, while the first lines of the chapter seem to suggest that human appearance is fluid and unstable (Weinberg 224), the protagonist nonetheless feels the need to present a stable identity.

The protagonist’s preoccupation with sameness and stability of appearance is to satisfy not so much her own desire to be perfect but the societal expectations of the people around her. The importance of her appearance is compounded by the fact that her body marks her as a foreigner, an identity that she then wears like a mask. Hallensleben reads this practice as a performance of an imagined and inscribed alterity, “Face and body become overexposed, composed of erased and rewritten/inscribed cultural identities. Similarly, skin is no longer a signifier of race, but a remediated performance space” (173). The act of upholding such a performance of stability and identity, however, has material effects of its own; the protagonist’s body interacts with the makeup,

the water, the light that she uses to create her appearance. The makeup clogs her pores to the point of suffocating the skin (Tawada, *Das Bad* 33). The water softens her scales (Tawada, *Das Bad* 15) and becomes her flesh (Tawada, *Das Bad* 17). Even the light leaves the protagonist's appearance permanently altered,

Ich griff mir erschrocken in die Haare, als meine Mutter wissen wollte, warum sie so dünn geworden seien.

Sie fragte:

„Und woher kommt der rötliche Glanz?“

„Wahrscheinlich vom Licht.“

„Wieso vom Licht?“

„Das Licht ist dort anders. Darum haben sich die Haare auch verändert.“

(Tawada, *Das Bad* 127)

[“And you, why has your hair gotten so thin?” Alarmed, I touched my hair.

“And why does it have such a reddish gleam?”

“It must be the light.”

“Why the light?”

“The light's different here, so my hair looks different.” (Tawada, “The Bath” 43)]

The protagonist's explanation for her changed hair is environmental. Her is different not due to age or hormonal changes but because of the influence of the environment. The body is contingent, always co-constituted by the material forces it comes up against. By trying to recreate her appearance as a way to represent a stable material reality, the protagonist nonetheless changes herself.

Ich bemerkte, wie [meine Mutter] ihren Blick über meinen Körper streifen ließ:

„Warum hast du so ein asiatisches Gesicht bekommen?“

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

„So habe ich das nicht gemeint. Du hast ein fremdes Gesicht bekommen; wie die Japaner, die in amerikanischen Filmen auftreten.“ (Tawada, *Das Bad* 129)

[My mother glanced me up and down.

“How did you get such an Asian face?”

“What are you talking about, Mother? I am Asian.”

“That’s not what I meant. You’ve started to have one of those faces like Japanese people in American movies.” (Tawada, “The Bath” 43–44)]

Creating Japanese-ness based on the expectations of others means inscribing herself with foreignness. Such inscriptions ultimately lead to visually and materially signifying foreignness, at all times and to everyone, even to her own mother. This way, her body becomes a sign; like a letter, it is now a mere signifier that relates to its signified only through convention. Nevertheless, this process of signification shapes and impacts the body in powerful, often violent ways.

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

„Darf ich Sie schminken?“

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

„Ich färbe Ihnen auch die Haare noch schwarz.“

„Warum wollen Sie schwarze Haare schwarz färben?“

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

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

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

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

[“Would you mind if I tried makeup?”

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

“I’ll dye your hair black for you.”

“Why do you want to blacken hair that’s already black?”

“Unless it’s dyed, it’ll come out white as an old woman’s because of the flash.”

[...] When he finished dying my hair, Xander drew an x on my cheek.

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

After that Xander stood me in front of a wall and pressed the shutter release button as casually as if he were pulling a trigger. The x on my cheek dug into my flesh. It stopped the light from playing and crucified the image of a Japanese woman onto the paper. (Tawada, “The Bath,” 12)]

It is noteworthy that after making the protagonist visible by inscribing a racialized and gendered identity onto her face (the description of the text evokes a geisha-like image), Xander goes on to literally inscribe his initial X onto her cheeks which used to be a way for him to mark his property

when he was a child. Thus, while he might not own the protagonist, insofar as he is the creator of this racialized image of her, he can claim ownership of her as she now appears. But making her visible through makeup and hair dye is not a simple act of creating an image; instead, the makeup on her face prevents her skin from breathing. Xander is compared to an archeologist handling a delicate ancient object further indicating the protagonist's status as a lifeless object, a long dead relic of a different culture. It is apparent in the final sentences of chapter 2 (quoted above) that an intensification of the violence of inscription takes place when Xander goes on to capture her now visible face on camera (triggering the camera release being equated with the trigger of a gun). It creates a stable, lasting image of a Japanese woman that is now burnt ("geätzt") onto the paper just as the X on her cheeks burns itself into her flesh.

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

difference between two cultures failed: this difference was painted on my skin like a foreign script which I could feel but not read” (Tawada, “Canned Foreign” 42)], the protagonist of *Das Bad* is inscribed with a sound unspeakable for her; she becomes othered from her own body.

This sheds new light on protagonist’s attempts to replicate a portrait of herself. As we now know, the face on the image was first painted onto her by Xander in an attempt to fix a stereotypical appearance and identity onto the body of the protagonist, namely that of a foreigner, a female Japanese other. Redlich suggests,

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

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

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

BECOMING “A TRANSPARENT COFFIN”

The protagonist is eventually able to reject her inscribed identity but not without sacrifice. When attending a business dinner as an interpreter for German and Japanese businesspeople, the protagonist feels sick from the combination of the fish she ate and the words that she feels like she physically ingests in order to spit them out in another language. She leaves the dinner table to go to the bathroom where she collapses. She wakes up next to a woman she does not know who later invites her back to her apartment. Their encounter appears to be a hallucination or vision of the unconscious protagonist as we learn later that the woman had actually already died in a fire weeks earlier. Nonetheless, it is this encounter that proves empowering for the protagonist and inspires her to reject the identity ascribed to and inscribed onto her by Xander.

The day after her encounter with the dead woman, the protagonist wakes up looking like the picture. Instead of embracing this however, she uses makeup to create a face that actively rejects her resemblance to the picture,

Ich blickte in den Spiegel. Die Frau sah gesund und kräftig aus; ganz wie auf dem Foto. Die Wangen leuchteten wie Pfirsiche. Die Lippen hatten sich in die Form eines Lächelns gefunden, obgleich ich mich nicht danach fühlte. Ich malte mir Spuren von Schlafmangel unter die Augen. Und zog mit weißem Lippenstift meine Lippen nach, so dass es aussah, als wäre kein Blut in ihnen. Zuletzt rieb ich die Augenränder mit Essig ein. Die Haut schrumpfte und fältelte sich. Ich zerriss das Foto und ging in die Küche. (Tawada, *Das Bad* 91)

[I looked in the mirror and found reflected there a healthy woman who looked just like the one in the photograph. Her cheeks glowed like peaches and her lips curved into a smile although I didn't particularly feel like smiling. I used makeup to create dark circles under my eyes. Then I filled in the contours of my lips with white lipstick, which made them look bloodless. Finally I rubbed the edges of my eyes with a little vinegar so that the skin shrank and puckered. Then I tore up the photograph and went into the kitchen (Tawada, "The Bath" 31)]

At this point the protagonist has repeated her process of inscribing a stable identity onto her face so many times that it has become her actual look. Her body has become visually altered and what she sees on her face now is indeed the picture of herself. In this moment, however, the protagonist feels empowered to reject this superficial inscription of identity and instead match her face to her mood. Again, she alters her appearance but this time not to reflect an expectation from the outside but to reject this expectation. She can finally break free from the picture and rips it up.

This rejection is linked to the protagonist's encounter with the dead woman the night before. However, while we might read this change as positive and freeing for her, it has its own price: the protagonist's tongue. The tongue is an important element of many of Tawada's texts because of its close relationship with language. The tongue is both a human body part and a metaphor for language; it is materialized language. In her encounter with the dead woman, the protagonist loses her tongue and is from now on unable to speak. The language that she learned

mostly from Xander (“Während ich wiederholte, was Xander mir vorsprach, ging meine Zunge in seinen Besitz über.” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 81) [“As I repeated Xander’s words, I felt that my tongue was starting to belong to him.” (Tawada, “The Bath” 28)]), as materially represented by the tongue, is taken from her. While this is the catalyst of her empowerment and liberation—losing the Western phallogocentric language allows her to reject the Western phallogocentric image of herself—she is now unable to speak at all and tasked with reclaiming her tongue and language from the woman who took it.¹⁹

This task proves too difficult for the protagonist. Instead of reclaiming her tongue and finding her own words and language, she submits to the other woman’s presence to the point where the other woman inhabits the protagonist’s body and dictates words for her to write down, “Man kann sagen, dass ich für den Rest des Lebens meine Zunge jener Frau geschenkt hatte. Jede Nacht hörte ich aufmerksam auf ihre Stimme und schrieb ihre Worte nieder“ (Tawada, *Das Bad* 143) [“One could say I had given the woman my life along with my tongue. Every evening I listened for her voice and wrote down her words” (Tawada, “The Bath” 48)]. Disentangling her life from Xander, his language, and his image of what she should look like does not result in finding her own voice or reclaiming her own body but creates an opening for another presence to claim the space. The protagonist is never only one, an individual, but always entangled in a multiplicity of presences; her body is still contingent on someone else, an influence this time not from the outside but from the inside.

¹⁹ Monica Tamaş’s insightful article “Silencing the Woman” makes a case for reading this other woman who died in a fire as an allusion to Ingeborg Bachmann and her tragic death. Throughout her analysis, she presents multiple connections to Bachmann and identifies intertextual references to Bachmann’s famous novel *Malina*. It would be a worthwhile project to investigate this connection further and consider its implications for the protagonist’s struggles with language and identity.

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

It is evident in the end that the protagonist can neither reclaim her outward appearance nor truly inhabit the world of flesh inside of the skin which she has now relinquished to the dead woman haunting her. Since the woman appears in the protagonist’s body at night, the protagonist cannot see nor hear her presence, but she feels it through vibrations in her bones (“Ich spüre nur,

wie meine Knochen ein Zittern weiterleiten” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 163) [“I can only feel my bones become a conduit for her trembling” (Tawada, “The Bath” 55)]. Making herself transparent allows the dead woman to see through the protagonist’s body and become part of this world, “Wenn die Haut schließlich durchsichtig geworden ist, erscheint dahinter die Gestalt jener toten Frau. [...] Jeden Abend besucht jene Frau, durch meine Haut hindurch, diese Welt” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 161) [“When my skin has finally become transparent, the figure of the dead woman appears behind it. [...] Every evening, the woman visits this world through my skin” (Tawada, “The Bath” 54)]. The protagonist becomes a threshold for the dead woman; through the protagonist’s transparent skin, the dead woman is able to cross the border between the living and the dead. The border that separates is also a space that creates connection and exchange. Tawada highlights the ambivalence of the border space—in this case the skin—through the image of the transparent skin. While the barrier separating the two worlds is not broken and destroyed, its transparency nonetheless creates the illusion that it has disappeared.

In contrast to Marja-Leena Hakkarainen, I do not read the end as “painful but liberating” (216). The choice to become completely illegible through transparency offers an escape from violent inscription but is ultimately not an empowering liberation for the protagonist. The violence of identity and gender inscription onto her body has taken a severe toll; it has made it all but impossible to sense and make sense of her own body. In order to escape the violent and oppressive forces of inscription, the protagonist in the end chooses to disappear from view. This is a sort of ‘return’ to her self before Xander’s inscriptions, before being gendered and racialized.²⁰ Her rejection of inscription can, however, not recover her body before the inscription because it

²⁰ In the first pictures Xander took of the protagonist, her body was materially present during the photoshoot but invisible in the picture, illegible for the camera.

infiltrated and permeated her body beyond just skin level. She cannot simply return to the body before the violence occurred; the body retains previous inscriptions as sedimented acts. These acts cannot be undone, only “renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 523). The protagonist in *Das Bad* would need to reinscribe herself in new acts of renewing, revising, and consolidating inscriptions, but she is already in the hands of another overbearing presence. The penultimate sentence of the book, “Erst recht bin ich kein Fotomodell, denn ich bin auf Fotos gar nicht zu sehen“ (Tawada, *Das Bad* 165) [“And of course I am farthest of all from being a model, since in photographs I am completely invisible.” (Tawada, “The Bath” 55)], shows that the protagonist is able to extract herself from the process of being read as a stable body that can be captured and burnt onto paper. However, in the process, she has to empty her body of any meaning, any identity, anything legible for the outside world. Her skin becomes a transparent shell, and her body is vulnerable to be claimed by other presences like that of the dead woman. After stating all that she is not, the final sentence of the novel provides an uncanny and bleak identity statement: “Ich bin ein transparenter Sarg” (Tawada, *Das Bad* 165) [(“I am a transparent coffin” (Tawada, “The Bath,” 55)]. In her entanglement with the dead woman, her body is now a see-through coffin,²¹ a space of death and emptiness.

²¹ The image of the coffin appears throughout the novel and seems strongly tied to the protagonist’s experience of her body and her identity already before the appearance of the dead woman on the scene. Right on the first page, she remarks, for example, that her mirror reminds her of a coffin. The mirror provides her with the means to model herself after the picture hanging next to it, an act of reinscribing the appearance of a foreign woman onto her body and slowly killing off her own existence. The mirror as a coffin already seems to foreshadow the tragic fate of the protagonist’s body and identity.

READING MATTERS

Yoko Tawada's texts often call on, and play with, our sense and senses. While we are of course inclined to focus on the story first, the diverse interventions that occur on the material level of her books must not be overlooked. As Monica Tamaş attests,

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

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

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

Not all pages of the 2015 German/Japanese edition layer images and text; several pages are blank except for the words, and several pages in the beginning and end of the book as well as

the dust jacket are visually ‘filled with water,’ showing images of water with little to no text (if we encounter text, it is author and title or the blurb and author biography on the inside of the dust jacket). In contrast, the pages of the first two chapters as well as the last chapter of the German version layer images of female bodies with the text of the story, physically inscribing the words into the images. All three of these chapters deal in depth with the physical features of the female protagonist as well as inscriptions of femininity and foreignness through cultural practices and performances. Thus, one of the central themes of the story, the inscription of gendered and racialized identities onto the body, is mirrored visually and materially on the pages of these chapters.

In this way, *Das Bad* invites us to read not only the text but also the images of these pages. In chapters 1, 2, and 10, the reader is presented with images of different naked female bodies and body parts; this disrupts the idea of sameness and stability. While we might consider every page of a book to be the same except for the words, this does not apply in the case of *Das Bad*. Instead, every page in chapter 1, 2, and 10 has its own, different material body which becomes visually readable. The ever-changing images not only emphasize the futility of the protagonist’s endeavor to stabilize her own appearance according to a gendered and racialized picture, but they also invite us to read the words on the page as well as the practices they convey as inscriptions on naked female bodies and onto the material of each page.

At the end of chapter 2, we see another example of how the images support the text and co-create its meaning. When we learn that Xander marks the protagonist as his by inscribing her cheeks with an X, one of the Xs written on that last page of the second chapter is actually placed on the cheek of the woman’s face shown on this page, thus mirroring the inscription event of the story on the visual level of the page. While in the scene in the book, Xander is the source of the

violence, by replicating this violence on the physical page, the reader²² of this story becomes implicated in the violence themselves; it is not only an individual (i.e. Xander) who inscribes the ‘foreign’ body and identity with specific, stereotypical meaning in order to make it legible, but it is also the readers of this inscription that participate in this inscription and perpetuate its violence through centering the legible words while disregarding the ‘background’ image. The juxtaposition of image and text invites us as readers to read more than just what is easily legible, to understand the letters also as literal inscription onto a page and onto a woman’s face. By reading in this multi-dimensional way, we are asked to constantly move between what’s obvious and visible and what’s hidden and erased by any one act of inscribing meaning into this text and are prompted to consider the potential violence enacted by it.

It is important to consider how the images on the pages of the last chapter (a relatively short chapter of only 3 pages) relate to the text and its meaning. First, the images of women layered with the text reappear for the first time since the end of chapter 2. This suggests not only a certain continuation between the three chapters on the level of the narrative but also a resumption of inscriptive practices within the story as well as on the physical pages of the book. Although the protagonist is not attempting to reinscribe herself with an identity forced onto her, she nonetheless still uses inscriptive techniques by applying makeup. While her ultimate transparency allows her to prevent further inscription and precludes being read through inscription, painting herself see-through is still the same technique that made her visible and legible as a gendered and racialized

²² It is important to note that the reader that I am referring to here is always the reader of the German text, thus the reader more closely aligned with Xander as well as the language and culture that the protagonist enters and for whom she is visible first and foremost as a foreigner. The reader of the German is not the same as the reader of the Japanese; the protagonist is herself Japanese and thus already legible and accepted within the context of the Japanese language and culture. This is also obvious in the design of the book as none except for one of the Japanese pages are layered with images of the exotic, foreign women. We can, therefore, conclude that a different kind of reading is assumed within the German text compared to the Japanese.

body in the first place. Thus, she cannot fully escape the performative practices that did violence to her body. This is rearticulated on the visual level by the renewed layering of text and images of women again. Once again, the words of the text are inscribed onto the images of female bodies, seemingly leading us back to the beginning of the book. However, the pattern is disrupted on the final page of the book.

Just as the protagonist becomes transparent in the final chapter, so does the page. Instead of layering the final page with an image, the page shows the text on what is for all intents and purposes an image of transparency. The expected image of a gendered and racialized naked body, however, is not completely absent; it gets pushed to the side and onto the page of the Japanese text. This is the only time throughout the book that the Japanese text is layered with such an image. The protagonist of *Das Bad* struggles to inhabit her own body because her body is first and foremost visible as a symbol, a representation of gender and foreignness, a function of a pre-established meaning. The letters of the Roman alphabet on the pages of chapter 1, 2, and 10 inscribe the Japanese body with European ideas and stereotypes, foreignizing the female Japanese body. Many of Tawada's texts focus their attention on the letters of the European writing system, and in numerous instances these letters exude physicality, even threat, "Man darf ihn [den Buchstaben] nicht anschauen, sondern muß ihn sofort in einen Laut übersetzen und seinen Körper verschwinden lassen. Sonst wird er lebendig, springt aus dem Satz und verwandelt sich in ein Tier" (Tawada, *Verwandlungen* 30) ["One must not look at it [the letter] but must immediately translate it into a sound and make its body disappear. Otherwise, it comes to life, jumps out of the sentence and transforms into an animal"]. It is this technique that the protagonist in *Das Bad* finally applies to her own body. In order to undo the inscriptions of 'Fremdkörper' (the foreign letters of the German alphabet, particularly the X) and in order to escape from her own status as a 'Fremdkörper'

herself, the protagonist makes the letters on her body as well as her whole body disappear. In her article “Making Senses: Translation and the Materiality of Written Signs in Yoko Tawada,” Gizem Arslan states,

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

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

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

fuzziness, this movement of constructing, destroying, and constructing anew, narrative and visual images of the protagonist's body and identity, challenging the notion of a stable and distinct person and instead presenting us with erratic mobility and obfuscating metamorphoses "always destroying and confusing inscribed differences" (Colebrook, "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene" 5). In a world of water, fluidity, and instability, Tawada sketches the violent and oppressive force of (gendered, racialized) inscriptions onto the body that try to fix and stabilize a difference "always haunted by its dissolution" (Colebrook, "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene" 5). The body enduring these inscriptions is not only the human body, but also the body of our planet:

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

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

Inscriptive practices happen on different levels, different scales, but they always carry the same violent force ("Weltkarte" as the fixed picture of the Earth, "das in den Netzen gefangene Gesicht der Erde" as a literally and figuratively captured face of the Earth). The text states clearly that such inscribed difference is not a reality of life but a system of organization and oppression; any 'body' of water is unstable and will tend towards indifference. Bay attests,

Tawadas Texte verweigern jene identifikatorische Anerkennung des Schöpfungsaktes als eines Akts der Grenzziehung, die dem abendländischen Denken zugrunde liegt. Ihr poetischer Entwurf einer Wasserwelt kehrt nicht etwa

nur die Wertungen um, sondern stellt die im wahrsten Sinn des Worts grundlegende Scheidung und Unterscheidung von Land und Wasser in Frage. (246)

[Tawada's texts refuse to recognize the act of creation as an act of demarcation that is at the basis of Western thought. Her poetic project of a water world not only reverses the valuations, but also questions the, in the truest sense of the word, fundamental separation and distinction between land and water.]

In the case of *Das Bad*, it is the separation and differentiation between body and water that is in question highlighting their indifference as much as their differences. *Das Bad* explores the possibilities of engaging with rather than working against indifference. The protagonist's fluid and coalescent identities unfold in a dream-like and often disorienting way for the reader, constantly changing and disrupting her legibility as a character until, in the end, she finally escapes legibility through transparency, becoming more indifferent to water.

PAGES FULL OF WATER

After the end of the story, there are still several pages left, if only due to the fact that the Japanese version requires more space than the German version. These pages, which are the beginning of the Japanese version, privilege the visual. After the narrative has come to its conclusion, the remaining pages are filled with pictures of water layered with pictures of an open book seemingly floating or sinking into the water. The letters, the language, the story are visually drowning in the water on the pages. While we can at times still read these pages and recognize parts of the story we have just read—the pages are from the first German edition of the book—they do not form any coherent narrative whole anymore; instead, the opened pages stand on their own. At times the water image obscures parts or the whole of the text and makes it nearly impossible to read anything. We are now asked to read images rather than text. While we might have been inclined to dismiss the images in chapters 1, 2, and 10 as mere backdrop, we are at this

point unable to disregard the visual level. The story, its meaning, our way of reading are dissolving, but what we are left with is not empty pages, it's not nothing; what we are left with is visual expression that defies its own legibility and undermines traditional Western reading practices. Instead of being inscribed with meaning, water offers the possibility to dissolve, to drown, but also to swim, to emerge, to generate. In this way, these last pages not only emphasize the importance of reading on multiple levels (text, image, meaning, materiality), but also remind the reader that water is an essential element – in the human body (*Das Bad* 7), on our planet (*Das Bad* 145), and in this book.

The pages of text shown in the water are pages of the older edition illustrating that the textual bodies of the editions are linked. The older version, however, is prevented from speaking and being legible because of its transparency. This visualizes a development parallel to that of the protagonist of the story. Throughout the last pages, text is still present, at times going under, at other times reemerging, but these inscriptions do not have the upper hand; in this space of water, reading them does not depend on the words. Instead, the reader is asked to engage in a different, more disorienting but also infinitely more hopeful kind of meaning making by privileging movement and dissolution over legibility. In the end, the book embraces ‘viscous porosity’ and ‘indifference’ as a way to break out of repeating violent inscriptive practices in the practice of reading; it demands reading as an open process of sense and the senses.

In light of the reappearance of water in the book, we might even reinterpret the protagonist's transparent body in the end as her attempt to become more like a body of water. Just as the protagonist mentions in the beginning of the novel, water is fluid, it moves and changes, it flows and connects, but not without resistance; it is viscously porous. But, in contrast to more solid and malleable bodies like the human body, water cannot be inscribed in the same way. Instead, it

has the power to destabilize inscriptions because it can change them, dissolve them, make them illegible, and wash them away; it crosses and erodes borders always threatening established differences and effecting instability and indifference. Although the protagonist's final statement that she is a transparent coffin suggests an empty but stable body, the transparency links her back to water. The semi-transparent images of water following the last page of the German text connect her with the substance that informs any human body (as we learned on the first page of the story) destabilizing even the seemingly stable final identity of the protagonist. Water is still seeping through the text.

CONCLUSION: READING THE WATERS

In her short novel *Das Bad*, Tawada investigates interdependent, interwoven, and interactive materiality; the waters in the story and on the pages are a destabilizing, but also freeing, force that challenges us to imagine a more fluid, more porous existence. Tawada alludes to the possibility of watery existence, watery realities in her *Hamburger Poetikvorlesungen*. In "Tangeshima," she asks,

Wenn ich von mehreren Realitäten, die nebeneinander existieren, ausgehen würde, müsste ich davon ausgehen, dass jede Realität für sich steht. Die Pluralität setzt Zählbarkeit voraus. Was wäre aber, wenn sie alle aus Wasser bestehen würden? Wie kann man die Differenzen zwischen unterschiedlichen Wassern sichtbar machen oder halten? (55)

[If I were to assume that multiple realities exist side by side, I would have to assume that each reality stands on its own. This plurality presupposes countability. But what if they were all made of water? How can you make the differences between different waters visible or hold on to them?]

If we accept that we are 'bodies of water,' that our material reality is intimately entangled with this wet element, how do we ascribe and inscribe difference in such watery existence? Tawada's

novel explores ways how we might conceive of an unstable, porous, indifferent existence. The main character's attempt to match her body and identity to pre-established expectations of her runs up against materiality's inherent instability; creating a stable image of herself becomes a violent and oppressive task that the protagonist can escape only through transparency.

The book's materiality, the interplay of words and images, is itself entangled in the process of meaning making. *Das Bad* challenges how we encounter the text in front of us and undermines our habit of privileging meaning over matter. The novel demands that we attune ourselves better to an interdependent, interwoven, interconnected world, an unstable and porous existence and accept that "whatever presents itself as natural or necessary is nevertheless given contingently and might always be thought otherwise" (Colebrook, "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene" 7). Tawada's writing is porous and materially contingent; the boundaries we typically draw between material words and their meaning cannot be upheld. Instead, the words on the page are materially present and significant, the materiality of the book demands that we make sense of it on multiple levels until, in the end, we are left to read the waters, to find meaning in fluidity and instability.



Figure 4: "Dripping Web"

IV. Transforming the Waters – Katharina Köller’s *Was ich im Wasser sah* and the Pervasiveness of Impurity

*It's in the water, it's in the story of where you came from
Your sons and daughters in all their glory, it's gonna shape 'em
And when they pledge and come together, and start rising
Just drink the water where you came from, where you came from*
Kings of Leon – “Radioactive”

INTRODUCTION

Katharina Köller’s *Was ich im Wasser sah*, published in 2020, was the author’s first foray into prose writing. She has worked mainly in and with the medium of theater. On her website, Köller describes herself as „Geschichtenerzählerin [...] als Autorin und [...] Theatermacherin – auf, vor, sowie hinter der Bühne“ (“Über mich”) [“Storyteller [...] as an author and [...] theater maker - on, in front of, and behind the stage“]. In a personal interview, Köller told me that she has had the idea for a novel revolving around two sisters for a long time, but that environmental aspects found their way into the story more recently when she started working seriously on her first prose text. This reflects a more general trajectory in Köller’s work. While many of her theater performances exhibit a clear focus on issues around gender roles and gender equality, the emphasis on environmental issues has gained significance in her work in the last years. Her most recent play *Windhöhe* (2022), for example, which Köller wrote and acted in, revolves around the question of how to lead a good life in our world today by actively including the more-than-human world in this question (“Windhöhe”).

Was ich im Wasser sah is a novel of magic realism. While for the most part realistic, the character of Irina adds a decidedly fantastic element to the story muddling the seemingly straightforward character of the novel. With her mutable body and her more-than-human need for,

and connection to, water, the novel certainly gets its sparks of magic. Nonetheless, Phillip Helmke interprets the italicized chapters in which Irina's magical transformation is complete as "einen surrealen und assoziativen Traum über ihre (Halb-)Schwester Irina" ("Die intellektuelle Ästhetisierung der schwankenden Welt") ["a surreal and associative dream about her (half) sister Irina "] rather than offering a more complicated, fantastic reading of the text and its magic reality. While the continuous intrusion of the ending throughout the text and its different appearance might suggest the dream, such a reading misses how seamlessly these chapters continue the story and also ignores several instances in the "regular" chapters where we learn of Irina's transformations. It is not by accident that *Was ich im Wasser sah* received the "Phantastikpreis der Stadt Wetzlar" in 2021. The jury reasoned,

Köllers Debütroman behandel[t] mit Mitteln des magischen Realismus ein ernstes Lebensthema, ohne dass er sich in einfachen Botschaften verliere [...] Darüber hinaus [ist] „Was ich im Wasser sah" ein Buch voller – teilweise phantastischer – Metamorphosen: Menschen werden zu Wasserwesen, die Insel und ihre Bewohner verändern sich. ("Katharina Köller erhält Phantastikpreis 2021")

[Using magical realism, Köller's debut novel deals with serious issues without getting lost in simple messages [...] In addition, *Was ich im Wasser sah* is a book full of – sometimes fantastic – metamorphoses: people become water creatures, the island and its inhabitants change.]

Köller says that she wants to tell stories that explore what could be, stories that move into the realm of possibility and imagination which she considers more intriguing than looking at the world from only a factual perspective (*Personal Interview*). Such an imaginative perspective might also prove to be better suited to what Shotwell calls "an openness to the possibility of things being otherwise" (155).

In this final chapter of my dissertation, I will examine how *Was ich im Wasser sah* tries to come to terms with pervasive and omnipresent impurity. We see this impurity most glaringly in the environmental contamination that has been happening on the island where Klarissa's family

lives, a once beautiful tourist destination turned ghost town. However, this is only the most obvious and consequential instance of environmental impurity; when reading Köller's novel carefully, the reader is confronted with many more. As the novel artfully demonstrates, no place remains untouched, no lifestyle or existence is purely good or right. Putting the text in conversation with environmental humanities concepts such as indifference, impurity, and monstrosity, I aim to show how the text undermines notions of bodily integrity and simplistic black-and-white categorizations; instead, we are tasked with coming to terms with the pervasive contamination that soon permeates every aspect of the novel's reality. I will examine how environmental contamination and bodily impurity interact in the novel to create monstrous bodies that at once threaten how we make sense of the world but also show new and transformative ways for making meaning in and with the world.

A STORY OF TWO WOMEN

Köller's novel *Was ich im Wasser sah* tells the story of two women. The first woman is Klarissa, the first-person narrator who is leaving the big city on the mainland to go back to a small island, her childhood home where her family still lives and runs a small restaurant. The other woman is Irina, a mysterious creature with a human body, who is often referred to as "Elfen-Feen-Monster" (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 177) ["elf-fairy monster"] and as "das fremde, wunderschöne Mädchen, das kein Mädchen und kein Mensch war" (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 92) ["the strange, beautiful girl that was no girl and no human"] by the first-person narrator. Through a flashback in the novel, we learn that Irina once saved Klarissa's life when they were both children and Klarissa shipwrecked at sea. Since Irina seems to come out of nowhere and no

family can be found, Klarissa's family takes her in and soon adopts her. Irina and Klarissa become sisters, inseparable for much of their childhood. Klarissa fondly remembers this time of sisterhood and closeness with Irina.

However, the two sisters are not close anymore. They have become more and more estranged as young adults in large part due to their relationships with men. While at school on the mainland, Klarissa starts a relationship with Robin. They are both aspiring filmmakers, although only Klarissa gets accepted into the film academy. When they visit the island hoping to work on a film project starring Irina, Klarissa gets caught in competing relationships and is unable to make space for both her sister and her boyfriend. She feels compelled to favor her relationship with a man over the sisterly bond. When Klarissa later battles breast cancer and wishes her sister would be by her side, Irina stays away. Instead, Klarissa has to confront her scarred breastless body without the support and comfort of her sister.

When Klarissa returns home to the island after their stepmother died, it is apparent that Klarissa is estranged from her family as a whole and Irina in particular. She reminisces about the times when she and Irina were inseparable but cannot reconnect with her sister in the here and now. While there are some moments of closeness and understanding between the two female protagonists, these moments of connection are easily broken up, most forcefully by Irina's budding relationship with Bob, a childhood friend who has come back into their lives. The situation is complicated by another factor. Klarissa wants to draw attention to the environmental degradation of the island by filming a documentary about the wind energy project that has taken over the island and is the likely culprit for the environmental contamination and its ensuing harm to people. Her documentary, however, gets overshadowed by Bob's awareness raising campaign on the same issue. He stages himself as the leader of a revolt against the forceful resettlement of the island's

inhabitants and demands Irina's full attention and support. Once again, the sister relationship cannot compete with the love attachment to a man. While Irina has always been a source of inspiration for Klarissa and her films, and while both women attempt to reconnect, they are ultimately unable to overcome their estrangement and prioritize their sisterly relationship over other relationships and responsibilities.

A STORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Köller's *Was ich im Wasser sah* is also a novel about environmental degradation. Although the text centers on the story of the two female protagonists, their relationship is set against the backdrop of questionable technological advancements and dangerous environmental degradation on the island. After learning that her stepmother has died, Klarissa returns to the island she grew up on to find that much has changed. Many people have left, tourists have not come back to their vacation cottages, and retail spaces and buildings have been bought up by a big corporation named STARFISH. The island is now part of an ambitious wind energy project run by STARFISH. Their office buildings are, however, highly guarded as they run many of their operations in secret. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that many of the secret goings-on on the island pollute the environment as well as impact the health of the island's inhabitants. The contamination of people's bodies as well as of the more-than-human world they inhabit ultimately forces people to abandon their homes and livelihoods on the island. While the many wind turbines on the island might generate "clean" energy, the island itself has become uninhabitable, a "blasted landscape" (Tsing 181).

This environmental subplot not only critiques the profit-focused capitalist progress narrative but also exposes how responsibility often gets deflected onto the individual. The individual, however, is ultimately powerless and unable to effect any sort of meaningful change. This is apparent in several instances in the novel, for example in Klarissa's own inaction when it comes to putting her ideas for the documentary into action. When stopped from filming by one of the guards of the STARFISH corporation, Klarissa relinquishes her memory card with all of her footage and quickly seems to abandon her documentary project. Even after the memory card with the film material still intact is returned to her, she neglects the project and never even watches the potentially incriminating recordings.

But even when plans are put into action and draw attention from the media, we see little to no effect. Bob is successful in raising awareness beyond the limits of the island—he and Irina are even featured on TV—but with little actual effects for the island's population. Similarly, we see the perverse futility of striving for a healthy and happy life in Bill, Klarissa's and Irina's brother. He lives on the island in seeming harmony with the land and the sea, fishing and farming vegetables in the garden; however, it is exactly this practice of local fishing and farming that turns out to pose the greatest risk since the island as a whole is highly contaminated.²³ When faced with secret corporate operations and widespread contamination, individual responses will be inadequate at best and harmful at worst.

²³ Köller related to me in our interview that she met a Taiwanese woman at one of her readings who asked her if she modeled her book after the events on Lanyu (also known as Orchid Island), a small island that is part of Taiwan and mostly inhabited by Indigenous Taiwanese. In the 1970s, a supposed fish cannery was built on the island which was in reality a dumping site for radioactive waste. What seemed at first a welcome, or at least tolerated, development turned out to be a site of secret contamination paralleling what happens in the novel. While these events did not serve as an inspiration or model for Köller's novel, they show the relevance and significance of such a plot. (*Personal Interview*)

This is of course not a particularly new or revelatory insight. In fact, one critique of Köller's text was "der intellektuell gehobene Zeigefinger" (Helmke) ["the intellectual wagging of the disapproving finger"] that at times makes the novel drift into a moralistic preaching to the choir. While I would agree that some of the criticism is obvious and at times schoolmasterly, the novel also insightfully negotiates the entanglement of human and more-than-human world and successfully eschews the portrayal of a nostalgic longing for a romanticized past. Köller's text pays close attention to contamination as a pervasive force with which humans will have to not only reckon but also become intimately familiar. The protagonists in the novel are porous and hybrid, impure and monstrous; their story is one of negotiating and engaging with their own entanglement in the world.

WHEN EVERYTHING BECOMES CONTAMINATED

Throughout the text, Köller plays with and undermines a simplistic understanding of environmental degradation. She pushes the boundaries of categories such as clean and dirty, natural and artificial, right and wrong. As the novel unfolds, a complex web of interaction and entanglement unfolds with it. Like Klarissa, the reader cannot find firm ground to stand on, but is left wavering and staggering. The world is shaky and unstable, "Die steinernen Treppen schwankten. Das Meer schwankte auch" (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 42) ["The stone stairs swayed. The sea swayed as well"]. This is mirrored in the structure of the text; inserting the final part of the novel in italicized segments throughout the text creates a feeling of uncertainty and instability for the reader since they are at first unaware of the significance of these short chapters; their phantastic content further heightens this feeling. When everything is contaminated, neither

places, nor people, nor texts are as straightforward as they seem; everything and everyone is more complex and has their own secret.

One of the first descriptions of the big city on the mainland where we first meet Klarissa reads as follows, “Frische, nicht nach Frittierfett stinkende Luft schlug uns entgegen. Eine Brise vermischte den Duft der blühenden Blauglockenbäume mit dem Salz und Algengeruch vom Meer“ (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 32-33) [“Fresh air, not smelling of frying fat, greeted us. A breeze mingled the scent of the flowering bluebell trees with the smell of salt and seaweed from the sea”]. The air outside of the fast-food restaurant where Klarissa works is fresh and smells like flowers and the sea. The image conjured up connotes a simple, natural environment. However, there are also other characteristics of an urban space: the subway with its dark figures lurking, the harbor water full of trash, a sea of people (“Menschenmeer” [Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 36]), the mention of partying, drinking, drugs, loud music in the middle of the night. While this city fits our expectations in many ways, it is not portrayed as a space devoid of invigorating nature experiences. Nature is as much part of the city space as are noise and pollution.

Similarly, the island is not just a beautiful vacation spot. While descriptions of the island and the small town on it certainly evoke the atmosphere of vacation islands in the Mediterranean sea (“eine[...] kleine[...], langweilige[...] Insel, auf der eine bescheidene Anzahl von Menschen in blauen Häusern wohnte” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 37) [“a small, boring island where a modest number of people lived in blue houses”]), corporate development and industry are also part and parcel of life on the island.

Mein erster Schritt auf Ei-Boden war ein unsicherer.

Der Boden war sehr hart. Alles hier war neu und glatt und perfekt. Sogar die Poller waren auf Hochglanz poliert. Der Beton war hellgrau und hatte keinen einzigen Riss. Nirgendwo wuchs ein Grashalm.

Die Plattform, auf der wir gelandet waren, war gigantisch. Eine zweite Plattform, von der aus man wohl die Türme begehen konnte, schob sich von der Seite über sie wie eine Stufe für Riesen. Eine weitere Riesenstufe führte auf eine dritte Ebene. Ein Parkplatz. Halb überdacht.

Auf allen Plattformen herrschte reger Verkehr, besonders auf unserer, der Hafen/SUNFISH/Supermarkt-Plattform. Arbeiter aus aller Herren Länder, zu Fuß, in LKWs, auf Gabelstaplern. Dazwischen elegante Leute in Anzügen und Stöckelschuhen mit Aktentaschen und Clipboards. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 79-80)

[My first step on Ei-ground was an unsteady one.

The ground was very hard. Everything here was new and smooth and perfect. Even the bollards were highly polished. The concrete was light gray and didn't have a single crack. No blade of grass grew anywhere.

The platform we landed on was gigantic. A second platform, from which one could probably reach the towers, slid over it from the side like a step for giants. Another giant step led to a third level. A parking lot. Half covered.

There was heavy traffic on all platforms, especially ours, the Port/SUNFISH/Supermarket platform. Workers from all over the world, on foot, in trucks, on forklifts. In between, elegant people in suits and heels with briefcases and clipboards.]

Upon arrival on the island, one is confronted with concrete and traffic, fast food and busy people. Everything seems geared towards productivity and efficiency and evokes the image of a modern metropolis rather than a quaint tourist destination. Not even one blade of grass is disrupting the man-made structures. The novel presents us with these two distinct places, but instead of contrasting these two places in the expected manner, portraying the urban space as a place of pollution and artificial structures while romanticizing the island as a nature idyll, it becomes clear throughout the text that both places are entangled in corporate development and environmental degradation; there is no refuge from pollution, just as there is no clean energy or pure nature.

The most romantic and idyllic description belongs to the family restaurant at the most Western point of the island,

Wir ließen die Stadt hinter uns, ich sah über Bills Schulter zum Sandstrand in der kleinen Bucht, auf deren felsigen Klippen als westlichster Punkt der Insel das blaue

Gasthaus Wind und Wetter und gläsernen Windrädern trotzte, mit seinen schiefen Wänden und quietschenden Türen, mit seiner kleinen Steinmauer und dem Pfad, der zum Haupteingang führte und an dessen Seiten Mammie weißen Oleander und blaue Hortensien gepflanzt hatte. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 81-82)

[We left the city behind us, I looked over Bill's shoulder to the sandy beach in the small bay where at the westernmost point on rocky cliffs, the blue inn with its crooked walls and squeaking doors, with its small stone wall and the path leading to the main entrance, along which Mammie had planted white oleander and blue hydrangea, defied wind and weather and glass wind turbines.]

Here we might find the ideal, the nostalgic description of a place seemingly far removed from industrial pollution and corporate development. But even in this passage two words interrupt the purity of the scene, even this remote location cannot be envisioned without the wind turbines that are so pervasive on this island and the ‘progress’ they stand for. And while the crooked and squeaky might still be able to defy the wind energy project and its contaminating effects, it soon becomes clear that the people living in it are already suffering the consequences. The environment of the island has not been pure and pristine for a long time; it has long suffered from pollution and harm that have affected everything and everyone slowly, invisibly.

The fact that it is a ‘clean’ energy project that is polluting the island to the point of uninhabitability—beyond the obvious irony of creating clean energy through pollution—also points to the euphemistic simplification in classifying something as ‘clean.’ Klarissa herself acknowledges the ingenuity of such euphemistic naming practices when she says,

“Wir machen einen Film über die neuen Eroberer, die das Land auf Umweltschutzmission unterwerfen. Es ist nicht mal eine Gehirnwäsche nötig. Die Eingeborenen wissen bereits, dass grüne Energie gut ist – jeder weiß, dass grüne Energie gut ist.“ (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 157)

[“We're making a film about the new conquerors who on an environmental mission are subjugating the island. Brainwashing isn't even necessary. The natives already know green energy is good – everyone knows green energy is good.”]

Thus, resistance is not only less successful but also much less likely to happen at all due to the generally accepted assumption that wind energy is good for the environment and an important solution towards a better future. Even the fact that residents on the island are coerced into relocation can in this context be justified as a means to achieve the greater good of clean energy. However, Köller's text makes it clear that nothing is ever purely clean and good. Instead, what is here hailed as improvement and progress, is in reality intimately connected to contamination and harm.

When Klarissa learns of STARFISH's wide reach on the island and their plans to turn the whole island into one big wind energy plant, she considers the pretty outward appearance of the already existing wind turbines: elegant, delicate, natural, beautiful.

Von der Blumenwiese aus hatte ich die gläsern-blitzenden Windräder in der Ferne gesehen und mir überlegt, dass ich sie filmen sollte, wie sie da halbtransparent gegen den blauen Himmel standen. Elegant. Fein. Natürlich. Schön. Ganz anders als Strommasten oder Fernsehtürme. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 157)

[From the flowery meadow I had seen the glassy-flashy windmills in the distance and thought I should film them as they are standing there semi-transparently against the blue sky. Elegant. Fine. Natural. Nice. Very different from power poles or television towers.]

“And completely different from the compromised and contaminated human bodies”, one might feel tempted to add. The wind turbines' elegance and beauty seem almost eerie in a world full of pollution and impurities. While older advancements like power lines and television towers are unattractive, man-made structures, these 'clean' energy generators showcase a purity, naturalness, cleanness that is a mere façade that distorts any hopes to identify what is good and beautiful and what is not. Klarissa intuitively sees their destructive potential, the dangers that can come from such purity. When Klarissa first returns to the island, before she knows about the expansive plans of STARFISH, she notes, “Die gläsernen Windräder stachen aus der staubigen Landschaft und

blitzten wie die blank polierten Zähne eines Raubtiers” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 116) [“The glass windmills stuck out of the dusty landscape and flashed like the polished teeth of a predator”]. The predatory image of fangs serves a foreshadowing of events to come; nevertheless, this description also highlights the purity and cleanness of the glass wind turbines compared to the dusty landscape, and while the image of the flashing fangs certainly signals danger, they are nonetheless brightly polished.

The clean green energy is starkly at odds with the impure and contaminated reality of the island. In the end, it is the clean energy project that turned the island into a blasted landscape that is barely inhabitable.

Eine Brise grüner Wind weht mir um die Ohren.

Ich fahre durch die sich verwandelnde Stadt, die langsam, aber stetig zu rotierendem Glas wird.

Das Glas bricht das scharfe Sonnenlicht und wirft es zersplittert in tausend Farben auf die blauen Häuser, die staubigen Zitronen- und Orangenbäume am Straßenrand, die hohen Gehsteigkanten, die Risse im Beton und den alten Fischmarkt mit seinen stinkenden Buden und zerschlissenen Planen am Fuß des Hochhauses.

Nach seiner Schließung hat man die Verkaufsstände unverändert gelassen. Niemand hat eine Idee gehabt, wie man den Platz anders nutzen könnte. Und jetzt wird es den Platz sowieso nicht mehr lange geben und das Hochhaus auch nicht, weil der Grund und Boden ein Standort für rotierendes Glas wird, das den Geist des Fischmarkts zersplittert in tausend Farben in die grüne Luft werfen kann.

Es riecht immer noch nach toten Fischen.

Es wird wohl noch einige Zeit lang nach toten Fischen riechen.

(Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 61)

[A breeze of green wind blows around my ears.

I drive through the transforming city that slowly but steadily becomes rotating glass.

The glass refracts the harsh sunlight and shatters it in a thousand colors onto the blue houses, the dusty lemon and orange trees lining the roadside, the high curbs,

the cracked concrete, and the old fish market with its stinking stalls and tattered tarps at the base of the high-rise.

After its closure, the stalls were left unchanged. No one had any idea how to use the square differently. And now it won't exist much longer anyway, and neither will the high-rise, because the ground will become another location for rotating glass that can throw the shattered spirits of the fish market into the green air in a thousand colors.

It still smells like dead fish.

It will probably still smell like dead fish for some time.]

This scene happens after much of the island is deserted. The company producing the wind turbines forced most of the people on the island out of their homes. Klarissa is looking for her adoptive sister who still lives on the top floor of the high-rise building. The wind might be green and clean, but the rest of the island is contaminated and deserted, slowly turning into nothing but wind turbines. However, the slick, elegant wind turbines can no longer belie a history of harm and degradation. The signs of life are still visible, but not much is alive anymore. The past is still present: the old town, the stands, the fish market. While everything is turning into a source of green energy for a “brighter future”, the past might be splintered in the reflection of the turbines, but it is still there. The smell of dead fish will stick around for a while longer.

“UNFRAU”: BREAST CANCER AND THE CONTAMINATED BODY

The opening sentence of the book is “Ich hatte keine Brüste mehr” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 1) [“I didn’t have breasts anymore”]. The first-person narrator of the book, Klarissa, has just had a mastectomy due to breast cancer. As becomes clear later on in the novel, the environmental pollution and contamination was at least a contributing factor for Klarissa’s illness and also causes illness and physical and emotional harm among her family members and other inhabitants of the island. The novel clearly shows that the human body is porous and open to

environmental influences and contaminants. Through her experience of suffering from cancer and undergoing breast removal, Klarissa becomes acutely aware of her own vulnerability. The boundaries of her body, of herself and not herself, become blurred. She feels physically polluted and contaminated by the cancerous cells growing in her body,

Als das Schalentier in meinem Oberkörper gewütet hatte, hatte ich das Gefühl gehabt, ich hätte einen Fremdkörper in mir. Einen Feind im Busen, der unter meiner Haut wohnte. Einen Parasiten, der mich verseuchte.

Damals hatte sich mein Bedürfnis nach körperlicher Hygiene stark reduziert, weil ich es lächerlich gefunden hatte, außen sauber und innen schmutzig zu sein. Jetzt versuchte ich mir wieder einzureden, dass ich sauber war, innerlich gereinigt, das Schalentier herausgekratzt, wieder nur ich hier, ich ganz allein, kein Nicht-Ich, das ich durch die Welt trug. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 15)

[When the shellfish raged in my upper body, I felt like I had a foreign body inside me. An enemy in my bosom that dwelt under my skin. A parasite that contaminated me.

Back then, my need for personal hygiene was greatly reduced because I found being clean on the outside and dirty on the inside ridiculous. Now I was trying to convince myself again that I was clean, cleansed inside, shellfish scraped out, just me here again, all alone, no not-me that I am carrying through the world.]

She calls cancer “a foreign body,” “an enemy,” “a parasite.” All of these words point to her need to separate herself from her illness even while she is deeply entangled with it. In the next paragraph (quoted above) however, we see that she also understands her inability to truly separate her body from the cancer. Hygiene rituals feel ineffective to Klarissa, because she will still be polluted on the inside. She cannot rid herself of something that is inextricably linked to her own flesh and cells. Even after the cancer cells are “scraped out” of her body, it seems doubtful that she can fully reinstate the idea of bodily integrity even though she is attempting to convince herself that it is now only her in her body and nothing else.

Klarissa’s illness undermines not just her corporeal integrity but also challenges her identity. Her boyfriend Robin cries and grieves for Klarissa’s former body and tries to come to

terms with Klarissa's changed appearance. Although Robin actively works on coping with her illness and her changed body, it is clear for Klarissa that their relationship will not survive, "Auf Robin konnte ich jetzt nicht mehr zählen. Ich könnte mich niemals wieder vor ihm nackt zeigen. Ich würde mich nie wieder vor ihm ausziehen. Er dürfte niemals, niemals die Verwüstung an meinem Oberkörper sehen" (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 18) ["I couldn't count on Robin anymore. I couldn't show myself naked in front of him again. I would never undress in front of him again. He should never, ever see the devastation on my torso"]. Klarissa's statement that she can no longer count on Robin seems to speak more to her own insecurity with her new body than to Robin's behavior towards her. This is not an uncommon story for women who have undergone a mastectomy. In her article "Being the Monster: Women's Narratives of Body and Self after Treatment for Breast Cancer," Laurie Rosenblatt analyzes how women come to terms with their changed bodies. She cites one woman saying "I felt my mutilation. I did not feel like a sexy woman. I don't think, ever since my mastectomy, I felt very sexy" (54). Similarly, Klarissa struggles to move past her mutilation and how much this means for her identity as a woman. She knows that she does not want to be seen naked and cannot imagine her body as anything but unbelievably ugly ("so unglaublich hässlich" [Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 16]) and destroyed ("Verwüstung" [Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 18]).

Nonetheless, Klarissa makes the conscious decision against reconstructive surgery. She does not want to open her body up to any new "Fremdkörper" ["foreign body"], does not want "Kunststoff" ["plastic/synthetic material"] to be part of her while she is trying hard to find into her own body again and carve out a new identity for herself. Thinking of her breasts, she says,

Meine Brüste. Ich hatte mich geschützt und beschützt gefühlt, wenn ich meine Brüste festgehalten hatte, wenn ich mich an meinen Brüsten festgehalten hatte.

Jetzt lagen meine Hände auf dem Verband über der knöchigen Brustplatte und spürten die Vibrationen meines pochenden Herzens und das Fehlen meiner Brüste, das Nichts, wo meine Brüste gewesen waren.

Es war eine Wunde.

Ich konnte nicht. Ich konnte jetzt nicht auch noch Kunststoff in diese Wunde einsetzen lassen, nicht das Nichts mit Kunststoff auffüllen. Auch wenn es halborganischer Kunststoff war. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 15)

[My breasts. I had felt safe and protected when I held my breasts, when I held on to my breasts.

Now my hands lay on the bandage over the bony breastplate, feeling the vibrations of my pounding heart and the absence of my breasts, the nothingness where my breasts had been.

It was a wound.

I could not do it. I couldn't have plastic inserted into this wound now, couldn't fill the void with plastic. Even if it was semi-organic plastic.]

Having been contaminated by cancer, Klarissa is resistant to inviting another substance to infiltrate her body. Filling her “wound,” as she calls it, with silicone means exchanging one contamination for another. Instead, she wants to re-establish a body that is all her own again, pure and uncontaminated. It is, however, more difficult than Klarissa had at first imagined since her body is also what signifies her identity to the outside world. As she works hard at finding into her own body and re-establishing her identity, her femininity and identity are continuously questioned because of her lack of breasts. While in the hospital, Klarissa is asked to reconsider her decision against reconstructive surgery several times. One of the advocates for surgery, a male psychologist, asks her, “Sie sind doch eine junge, attraktive Frau. Wollen Sie das wirklich aufgeben?” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 10) [“You are a young, attractive woman. Are you really willing to give that up?”]. It seems clear from his question that one can only be a young, attractive woman when one has breasts as these are the societal expectations for a female body. By trying to prevent further contamination and instead re-establish a pure body, Klarissa corrupts her outward appearance which now becomes unclear and impure in its signification to the outside world.

Klarissa is reluctant to cope with her new bodily existence in the world. She is shocked by her own appearance and has moments of dissociation wishing that this body was not her own (“Ich [...] wünschte mir von ganzem Herzen, dass diese Wunde nicht zu mir gehörte, dass das nicht mein Körper war und nichts Derartiges wirklich passierte.” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 17) [“I [...] wished with all my heart that this wound didn't belong to me, that this wasn't my body and nothing like that really happened.”]). It is only after her mastectomy that she realizes how much her body defines her identity as a woman. Her big breasts marked her body as female. Robin attempts to assure her that she is still the same, “Fühl dich bitte nicht als halbe Frau oder als Un-Frau, du bist immer noch derselbe Mensch, der du vorher warst, du bist immer noch genauso wundervoll und großartig und wunderschön wie vorher. Bitte. Du bist dieselbe Frau wie vorher“ (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 12) [“Please don't feel like half a woman or a non-woman, you're still the same person you were before, you're still just as wonderful and amazing and beautiful as before. Please. You are the same woman as before.”], but Klarissa is unable and unwilling to be her old self. After being infiltrated by the “Schalentier,” i.e. cancer, and now without her breasts, she finds it difficult to occupy the same space as before. She knows that she will be unable to perform and signify her womanhood for the outside world and for herself. She repeatedly calls herself “halbe Frau oder Un-Frau” (half woman or non-woman), “Wesen” (creature), “Fremde” (foreign/strange woman) signaling her difficulty to carve out a space for herself within the category ‘woman.’

Instead, Klarissa tries to find ways to engage with her impure body and identity. After having her cancerous breast tissue removed, Klarissa decides against reconstructive surgery. Instead, she opts to have an octopus tattooed on her now flat chest. She describes the first visit from her family after her cancer treatment in the following way:

Mein Vater und mein Bruder hatten ihr liebes kleines Mädchen erwartet und fanden ein gelbhäutiges, androgynes Wesen, das zwar wieder seine fünf Sinne beieinanderhatte und sprechen konnte, aber von dem man nicht sicher war, was es sagen würde.

Sie wichen meinem Blick aus, als würden sie sich schämen. Keiner umarmte mich und gratulierte mir zur Genesung. Niemand freute sich oder tat zumindest so, als ob.

Sie starrten auf den Oktopus. Der Oktopus starrte zurück.

Robin versuchte, sie zu beruhigen: „Die Metastasen sind alle weg. Die Ärzte sind sehr zufrieden. Klarissa sagt, dass Oktopusse Krebse fressen. Sie knacken mit ihrem harten Hornschnabel den Krebspanzer auf und saugen das weiche Krebsfleisch heraus. Ich glaube, der Oktopus wird Klarissa beschützen.“ (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 27)

[My father and brother were expecting their sweet little girl and found a yellow-skinned, androgynous being who was sane and able to speak, but one was not sure what she would say.

They avoided my gaze as if embarrassed. No one hugged me and congratulated me on my recovery. Nobody was happy or at least pretended to be.

They stared at the octopus. The octopus stared back.

Robin tried to calm them down: "The metastases are all gone. The doctors are very happy. Klarissa says that octopuses eat crabs. They crack open the crab shell with their hard horn beak and suck out the soft crab meat. I think the octopus will protect Klarissa."]

The reactions of Klarissa's family show surprise and shock at how cancer changed Klarissa's physical appearance. The fact that Klarissa decided to forgo breast reconstruction and instead had an octopus tattooed onto her chest can be read as emphasizing her change from a 'normal,' 'natural' female body, imagined to be sweet and pure like a little girl, to a yellow-skinned androgynous being, in the family's eyes more akin to a monster than a family member. Her lack of a clearly legible female body threatens not only her status as a woman but her humanity as a whole. Colebrook writes, "Sexual indifference—or the forces of life, mutation, generation and exchange without any sense of ongoing identity or temporal synthesis—have always been warded off as evil and unthinkable, usually associated with a monstrous inhumanity" ("Sexual Indifference" 171). Even though Klarissa is not sexually indifferent in the biological sense, her

now androgynous appearance erases formerly obvious signs of sexual difference. Her unwillingness to reconstruct a sexually explicit body threatens the binary system of sex/gender where sexual difference is seen as 'natural' and essential for humanity; this relegates Klarissa to an 'unnatural,' inhuman, monstrous existence.

In adorning her chest with an octopus tattoo, Klarissa not only creates an outer appearance that expresses her changing identity, but she actively embraces the idea of being monstrous. Acknowledging that her body is porous and impure allows Klarissa to build an equally impure identity for herself. She knows for example that she did not treat Robin well but used him for his support and care while she was ill, but she accepts this as her decision, "ich hatte mich dafür entschieden, ein böser schlechter Mensch zu sein, und war nicht zu Verhandlungen bereit" (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 34) ["I had chosen to be a wicked bad person and wasn't willing to negotiate"]. Since her body is already read as an evil and bad human because it does not uphold sexual difference, it becomes easier for Klarissa to allow herself to be a "bad" human without admonishing herself for it. Instead of trying to live up to other people's expectations, she decides to live according to her own.

The fact that her 'monstrous' body runs counter to expectations makes it possible for her to question and undermine those expectations in other parts of her life as well. Because, as Zimmerman suggests, "if stepping outside the boundaries makes you monstrous, that means monsters are no longer bound" (9). Klarissa is able to find an identity out of bounds by forgoing bodily integrity and intactness, and instead finding an existence with and in porous unboundedness. Developing this new concept for her life is intimately tied to her 'new' body and its display of the monstrous,

Zusammen mit dem Oktopus entwickelte ich einen neuen Lebensentwurf:

1. Ich würde mir nichts mehr wegnehmen lassen. (Ich hatte mir vieles wegnehmen lassen, am wichtigsten davon: meine Schwester.)
2. Ich würde mir keine fremde Realität aufpfropfen lassen und nicht mehr in jemand anderes Theaterstück mitspielen. Ich würde nur mehr nach meinem eigenen Wertesystem agieren.
3. Ich hatte überlebt. Ich war eine Überlebende. Ich hatte eine schwere Krankheit besiegt und einen möglichen Tod abgewendet und musste mir meiner Kraft bewusst sein.

(Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 20-21)

[Together with the octopus I developed a new concept for my life:

1. I would not let anything be taken away from me. (I had had many things taken away from me, most importantly: my sister.)
2. I would not have someone else's reality grafted onto me or act in someone else's play. I would only act according to my own value system.
3. I had survived. I was a survivor. I had conquered a serious illness and averted possible death, I needed to know my power.]

Her illness and its devastating effects serve as a reminder for Klarissa that she has incredible strength. Visibly inscribing her body with the octopus tattoo means not only accepting her changed appearance but taking charge of her life, her body, and how she will be seen and read, not least by herself.

For Klarissa, overcoming her life-threatening cancer has been a path to self-determination and acceptance. She decides to embrace her materially changed, impure, monstrous body as outside of a strictly confined norm and chooses the octopus tattoo as a form of coexistence, an active entangling with a creature that might protect her from cancer—octopuses eat crabs (the word *Krebs* referring to both cancer and crabs in German)—which points at the same time to her bodily autonomy from societal norms and her need for forging new alliances. Thus, while her body and her tattoo make her monstrous to people, she embraces this monstrosity in an attempt to acknowledge the harm done and to live with her visibly impure and affected body on her own terms. She does not attempt to superficially reconstruct an appearance that is untouched and pure

having mastered its own contamination; instead, she engages with her own impurities and vulnerabilities in a creative and generative way.

OCTOPUS-WOMAN: ANOTHER WATER-WOMAN

The second main character in *Was ich im Wasser sah* is Irina, Klarissa's adopted sister, who came into her life when she saved her from drowning. In this first encounter, Irina appears to be a young girl, but she is in fact a more-than-human being, a creature able to transform and exist on land and under water. Irina has a strong connection to water, even though she exists mostly on land from the moment of Klarissa's rescue. Throughout the novel, Irina is repeatedly portrayed as in need of water, dripping with water, or hastily immersing herself in water. She is a capable swimmer and enjoys being fully submersed in water,

Irina hatte mich hierher begleitet, sich kurz ins Wasser geworfen, war lange, lange Zeit nicht mehr aufgetaucht und dann war ihr Kopf weit draußen aus den Wellen gebrochen [...] Irina hatte mich ausgelacht, als sie zurückgekrault war und ich es immer noch nicht geschafft hatte, den Kopf unterzutauchen. Sie war aus dem Wasser gestiegen, hatte sich ihr Kleid übergeworfen und war tiefend wieder den Weg die Felsen hinauf zum Gasthaus gegangen, barfuß über die spitzen Felsen. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 97-98)

[Irina had accompanied me, had briefly thrown herself in the water, hadn't resurface for a long, long time and then her head had burst through the waves far asea [...] Irina had laughed at me when she was swimming back and I still hadn't managed to submerge my head. She had climbed out of the water, thrown on her dress and, soaking wet, had walked back up the rocky path to the inn, barefoot on the sharp rocks.]

Unlike Klarissa, Irina is infinitely comfortable in the water, plunges in right away, and does not resurface for a long time. When she comes back on land, she seems oblivious and indifferent to the hot, sharp rocks on which she walks barefoot home to the restaurant. It is clear that Irina's element is the water; human existence will never be enough for this octopus-woman.

This deep and intimate connection to the element of water as well as the difficulty existing as a human on land are two things that are typical for the figure of the water-woman. While on the surface, the octopus-woman Irina might not immediately bring to mind sirens and mermaids, there are nonetheless several parallels to well-known water-woman characters of literature and folklore. Even Irina's rather unusual transformation into an octopus rather than a fish, which would allude more readily to traditional mermaid characters, is not without precedent. In fact, it is in the Disney adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid" that we encounter an octopus-woman, namely in the character of the sea witch Ursula. Thus, despite not immediately ranking among the more traditional water-woman figures of literature such as the mermaid, Irina's particular hybrid character is nonetheless part of a larger tradition.

Köller also connects Irina to her predecessors in other ways, e.g. when telling the story of how Irina came to be part of Klarissa's family in the chapter titled "Sie hat mir geholfen" ["She helped me"]. The chapter begins,

Es war einmal ...

Ein Fischer und sein Sohn. Und seine Tochter. Und Mammie.

Täglich fuhren der Fischer und sein Sohn mit einem kleinen Boot aufs Meer hinaus, um dort Netze auszuwerfen und andere wieder einzuholen. [...] (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 89)

[Once upon a time there was ...

A fisherman and his son. And his daughter. And Mammie.

Every day the fisherman and his son went out to sea in a small boat to cast nets and haul in others.]

In introducing the chapter with "Es war einmal," the standard fairytale beginning, Köller clearly situates the character of Irina in the tradition of the literary water-woman motif that has traditionally so often been told in and through fairytales.

Furthermore, Irina's story evokes Andersen's "Little Mermaid" in several respects. First, Irina saves Klarissa's life when Klarissa is a little girl and attempts to take the boat out to sea to catch fish. After her boat has capsized, Klarissa wakes up lying on the beach with a "fremdes, wunderschönes Mädchen" ["strange, beautiful girl"] (i.e. Irina) next to her. This is a clear parallel to the Little Mermaid's rescue of the prince who would have otherwise died in a shipwreck as well,

She dived through the waves and rode their crests, until at length she reached the young Prince, who was no longer able to swim in that raging sea. His arms and legs were exhausted, his beautiful eyes were closing, and he would have died if the little mermaid had not come to help him. [...]

[...] the sea formed a little harbor, quite calm and very deep. Fine white sand had been washed up below the cliffs. She swam there with the handsome Prince, and stretched him out on the sand. (Andersen)

Secondly, Irina's muteness represents another parallel to the tale of the Little Mermaid. While we do not learn of any reason for Irina's initial inability to speak and while she quickly learns the language of her new family, she is at first unable or unwilling to speak or react to language, "Sie reagierte auf keine Sprache" (*Was ich im Wasser sah* 95) ["She didn't react to any language"]. The encounter between Irina and Klarissa is thus—not unlike the encounter between the Little Mermaid and the prince—an encounter with both, likeness and otherness, fondness and inability to communicate.

To read Köller's text in conversation with another water-woman myth, the text also displays similarities to the Undine story. As I have detailed in the first chapter on Bachmann's "Undine geht," Undine has been one popular representation of the water-woman motif that has inspired numerous works of art. In *Was ich im Wasser sah*, we can see several interesting allusions to Fouqué's Undine character. First, Irina is a foster child brought up by a fisherman and his wife, i.e. Klarissa's father and stepmother. She is beautiful and has a foreign, otherworldly attraction; she looks human but is not ("Die Tochter des Fischers bemerkte, dass das fremde, wunderschöne

Mädchen gar kein Mädchen war und kein Mensch.” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 91-92) [“The fisherman’s daughter realized that the strange, beautiful girl was no girl at all and no human”]). She also has no human family before being taken in by Klarissa’s family. Similarly, in Fouqué’s story, Undine is brought up by a fisherman and his wife as their foster daughter (“unsere Pflgetochter Undine” (*Undine* 10)). She is described as beautiful (“ein wunderschönes Blondchen” (*Undine* 11)) but she is a water sprite, not a human being. While the fisherman adores Undine, his wife is not always happy with her foster child since she is often rash and impetuous and does not behave as she should. This is another parallel to Irina, who is also not welcomed by her foster mother at first and frequently acts impetuously, especially as a child much to the dismay of her foster mother (“Irina war aufgeregt und kribbelig gewesen. [...] Mammie hatte mit ihr geschimpft. Aber Irina war Mammie kichernd entwischt” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 52) [(“Irina had been excited and antsy. [...] Mammie scolded her. But Irina had slipped away from Mammie, giggling”])).

Probably the most striking parallel between Irina and Undine, however, is the fact that they both kill their lovers. While it is not Irina’s fate to kill her lover, she is nevertheless pushed to act in this way. When Irina, fully transformed now into an octopus, kills Bob, the scene is described in the following way,

Irgendwann hört Bob auf zu schreien.

Die anderen Geräusche hören nicht auf.

Es sieht aus, als würde sie Bob innig küssen, und es klingt auch ein bisschen danach. Der Schnabel über dem Mund. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 310)

[Eventually Bob stops screaming.

The other sounds don't stop.

It looks like she's kissing Bob deeply, and it sounds a bit like it too. The beak over the mouth.]

This is reminiscent of Undine's final and fatal kiss for Huldebrand, „Bebend vor Liebe und Todesnähe neigte sich der Ritter ihr entgegen, sie küsste ihn mit einem himmlischen Kusse, aber sie ließ ihn nicht mehr los, sie drückte ihn inniger an sich, und weinte, als wolle sie ihre Seele fortweinen“ (Fouqué 96) [“Trembling with love and with the approach of death, she kissed him with a holy kiss; but not relaxing her hold she pressed him fervently to her, and as if she would weep away her soul” (Fouqué, translated by Bunnett, chapter XVIII)]. While Köller's reinterpretation of the water-woman motif is certainly innovative in many ways, she also draws heavily on the literary and folklore traditions of this motif connecting Irina to such prominent characters as the Little Mermaid and Undine.

BE LIKE AN OCTOPUS

The octopus-woman Irina is a hybrid creature able to transform and move between two existences. Unknown to Klarissa's father, brother, and later, Irina's boyfriend Bob, but immediately recognized by Klarissa and her stepmother, Irina is not merely another human being; she is a being of water, “das fremde, wunderschöne Mädchen, das kein Mädchen und kein Mensch war” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 92) [“the strange, beautiful girl that was no girl and no human”], das “Feen-Elfen-Monster” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 177) [“the fairy-elf monster”], “das Schlangenartige” (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 289) [“the snake-like being”], the octopus-woman. She is not just the ‘other,’ but also human, a liminal being—akin to Bachmann's Undine—who will never be just human but will always be hybrid.²⁴ It is Irina's more-

²⁴ In my interview with Köller, she referred to Irina “eine Urgewalt,” an elemental force that is more powerful than any of her human counterparts (*Personal Interview*).

than-human existence and power that complicates her existence among humans on land since her hybrid character does not fit neatly into preset categories.

Although hybridity is not only a characteristic of mythical creatures and fantastical beings, it is typically contrasted with the human. This suggests that ‘human’ denotes the purity of being only human; hybridity then lies at its borders and threatens infiltration and perversion of such pure humanity. After centuries of protecting this idea of pure humanity, it is difficult to accept that, and act like, “the body is a collective [...] an [sic] historical artifact constituted by human as well as organic and technological unhuman actors” (Haraway, “The Promises of Monster” 483). As we can see in Köller’s novel, being an accepted part of humanity is still contingent on suppressing what moves outside of the defined borders of the human. Irina needs to tame and contain herself or risk being “turned into [a] grotesque[...]” (Zimmerman 8). She manages this very well in daily life, but we also learn of moments when her octopus self and her more-than-human strength are impossible to contain. Most of these moments arise when there is a need for her to protect herself and the people she loves. Irina, the octopus, saved Klarissa from drowning. Although Klarissa only meets Irina as the little girl who is sitting next to her on the beach when she wakes up, she quickly senses that this girl is no regular human girl and that it is this more-than-human being that just saved her life.

In the course of the novel, Klarissa tells another childhood memory that sheds more light on Irina’s more-than-human nature. When as kids Klarissa and Irina encounter a man in the woods on the island who attempts to assault them, Klarissa recalls Irina vanishing only to reappear moments later, limp and unable to move,

Dann plötzlich ein lauter, klatschender Laut. Und ein überraschter, kurzer Schrei.
Ein ersticktes Röcheln. Ein Knacken wie von trockenen Zweigen. Dann noch eines,

laut und hohl, gefolgt von vielen, als würden kleine Zweige brechen. Ein Schlürfen und Schmatzen. [...]

Meine Schwester war verschwunden. Der fremde Körper tauchte in ein weit klaffendes, dunkles Loch. Ein Loch? Was dann passierte, wusste ich nicht genau. [...]

Wir hatten Irina getragen, die schlaff und knochenlos zwischen uns gehangen hatte. Auf einmal war sie wieder da gewesen, meine Schwester, ihre Kleider zerrissen.

[...] sie hatte sich in die Wellen geworfen.

Sie hatte tagelang nichts gegessen und literweise Wasser in sich hineingeschüttet. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 146-147)

[Then suddenly a loud, slapping sound. And a surprised short cry. A choked death rattle. A snap like dry twigs. Then another, loud and hollow, followed by many like small twigs snapping. A slurp and a smack. [...]

My sister had disappeared. The alien body plunged into a wide, gaping, dark hole. A hole? I didn't know exactly what happened next. [...]

We had carried Irina, who had hung limp and boneless between us. Suddenly she was there again, my sister, her clothes torn.

[...] she had thrown herself into the waves.

She hadn't eaten for days and had downed liters of water.]

Irina unleashes her octopus in order to protect them from potential harm. The immense strength of the octopus is able to save them from the sexual assault in the woods. However, as a being of water, the octopus almost dries out in the process. When Klarissa and the island's hermit, who appeared on the scene shortly after the attack, are able to carry Irina to the sea, she immediately immerses herself in it. For days after the attack, Irina drinks liters and liters of water to replenish her body with the necessary fluids showing how the woman Irina and the octopus Irina do not exist separately from each other but are one continuous and interdependent being.

However, there are also times when Irina simply loses control over her ability to transform. When the sisters learn of the long-standing and by now pervasive contamination of the island, Irina loses her ability to control her more-than-human side altogether. She can no longer contain herself within the borders of Irina, the woman,

Irinas Füße waren ganz klein, brachen weg beim Gehen und standen in grotesken Winkeln ab, ihre Knie und ihre Ellbogen wie aus Gummi, als wenn die Gelenke keine Gelenke mehr wären. Alles war so weich, dass es sich in jede Richtung biegen konnte, die Knie ganz verdreht und ganz falsch, als wenn es auf einmal gar keine Knochen mehr in ihren Armen und Beinen gäbe, sondern nur mehr Muskeln, sehr viele und sehr starke, wie bei einer Schlange oder etwas Schlangenartigem. Auch ihre Hände waren plötzlich klein, und ihre Arme schlenkerten, und ihr Hals schrumpfte, und ihr Kopf schien größer zu werden und ihre Augen auch [...]

Was ich noch von Irina sah, bevor sie in den Wellen verschwand, sah gar nicht mehr aus wie ein Mädchen und ein Mensch. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 285-287)

[Irina's feet were very small, broke off when she walked and stuck out at grotesque angles, her knees and elbows were made of rubber, as if the joints were no longer joints. Everything was so soft it could bend in any direction, knees all twisted and all wrong as if suddenly there were no bones in her arms and legs at all, just muscles, many of them and very strong ones, like in a snake or something snake-like. Her hands too were suddenly small, and her arms were swinging, and her neck was shrinking, and her head seemed to be getting bigger and her eyes too [...]

What I saw of Irina before she disappeared into the waves no longer looked like a girl and a human.]

The news that the island has been used as a secret dump for radioactive waste was too much for Irina's self-control. She collapses into herself and transforms without warning, not able to prevent her transformation right then and there. When Klarissa realizes what is happening, she grabs her and carries her to the water. One might read this scene as the inversion of the time when Irina saved Klarissa from drowning; Irina, the octopus, would dry out on land. After learning of the contaminated environment and the contaminated bodies of its inhabitants, Irina seems wholly defeated as it becomes clear that she was unable to protect the people she loved.

The ending of the story, which can be found interspersed throughout the text in the italicized chapters called "Was ich im Wasser sah 1-10," shows that Irina doesn't even attempt to contain her octopus self anymore. Still on the island, she lives as an octopus in a flooded apartment; she is now an uncontainable monster in the midst of uncontained contamination. As Cohen suggests, "Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis"

(40). Irina has turned into the monster she was always afraid she would be viewed as. While she might not be affected by the harmful contamination herself, everything has nonetheless changed,

In dem Artikel stand etwas von Fässern. Und von Geheimhaltung. [...]

Und ein schwarzes Loch tat sich auf, und die schwankende Weltkugel fiel hinein. Alles wurde hineingezogen und dann – verändert – wieder ausgespuckt. Unsere Klippe, unser Haus, ich sowieso und Bill und Bob und unsere tote Mutter und ihr Tod und Mammie und Bills Baby und der ganze Gemüsegarten und die Obstbäume, die Äpfel, die nach Marzipan schmeckten, und das Meer und die Fische darin und die schwarzen Schweine und alles.

Nur Irina nicht. (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 285)

[The article said something about barrels. And secrecy. [...]]

And a black hole opened up and the wobbling globe fell into it. Everything was drawn in and then, altered, spat out again. Our cliff, our house, me anyway, and Bill and Bob, and our dead mother and her death, and Mammie, and Bill's baby, and the whole vegetable garden and the fruit trees, and the apples that tasted like marzipan, and the sea and the fish in it, and the black pigs, and everything.

But not Irina.]

Why Irina is the only one not changed remains unclear. Maybe it is her octopus self that allows her body to adapt and to escape the effects of environmental pollution. The octopus is, as a species, a highly adaptable creature. A study in 2016 suggests that octopus and squid populations are booming despite climate change and its detrimental effects on marine organisms overall (Monahan). The island hermit tells Klarissa that humans will need to be more like octopi learning to adapt themselves to a changing world.

»In dem Meer der Zukunft wird niemand mehr schwimmen können. Die Tiere, die darin leben, werden für uns ungenießbar sein. Und es wird viel zu heiß sein. Aber dem Meer ist es doch egal, was man hineinkippt, was darin lebt. Nur wir müssen uns anpassen, and die neuen Bedingungen, wir müssen sein wie die Oktopusse.«

Er deutete auf meinen Oktopus. »Es gibt jetzt so viele Oktopusse, wissen Sie das?« (Köller, *Was ich im Wasser sah* 235)

[>No one will be able to swim in the sea of the future. The animals that live in it will be inedible to us. And it will be way too hot. But the sea doesn't care what you pour into it, what lives in it. Only we have to adapt to the new conditions, we have to be like octopuses.«

He pointed to my octopus. »There are so many octopuses now, did you know that?«]

With the temperatures rising and contamination becoming ever more prominent, the world will change. The question is if humanity can change with it and be more like an octopus.

THE MANY MONSTERS OF PERVASIVE CONTAMINATION

In Köller's text, the reader is confronted with monstrosity in different forms. Rather than locating the monstrous in one particular character only, monstrosity becomes a pervasive characteristic, as pervasive as the contamination of the island. However, the two sisters present us with the most tangible forms of monstrosity, albeit in very different ways. While Klarissa has been made into a monster, an impure female body infiltrated by the contamination on the island,²⁵ Irina has always been outside the boundaries of the human, hybrid from the start, monstrous in her otherness. Nonetheless, as their monstrosity establishes and reasserts the boundaries of the human and highlights their perversion of it, both forms of monstrosity also have allure. Monstrosity is liberating because it exists outside of clearly defined categories and expectations; monsters are not confined to an existence within pre-established boundaries, their characteristics can be multiple and open-ended. Cohen states that the monster's "corporeal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice" (51). When contamination becomes all encompassing, monsters start to spring up all around us and challenge us to incorporate

²⁵ One might also interpret her illness and the loss of her intact body as an opening for her to claim the space of the impure and monstrous for herself, a quality which exists in all of us, but which we typically attempt to keep at bay and from which we hope to dissociate ourselves.

them in our system of meaning making. Godin concludes her article “Monstrous Things: Horror, Othering, and the Anthropocene” saying,

Monstrosity presents itself as a way of grappling with the ambiguous, the unintelligible, and the unknowable—that is to say, a way of living alongside the Other. The figure of the monster therefore gifts us with historically situated ways of thinking through, speaking about, and engaging with the impossible. (123)

An ‘impossible’ that can help us create possibilities for different ways of existing in and caring for²⁶ our own contaminated and monstrous existence.

CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMING THE WATERS

Köller’s novel *Was ich im Wasser sah* explores pervasive and omnipresent impurity. The text undermines notions of bodily integrity and demonstrates the entanglement of every body with its environment. The characters are all subject to contamination and infiltration making them aware of their own material vulnerability. The novel ultimately highlights how ideas of intactness and purity are unable to account for the material realities of interconnected and contingent existence. Instead, Köller writes about pervasive contamination and resultant monstrosity to imagine ways to actively engage with our own material porosity and hybridity and live in and with our “blasted landscapes” (Tsing 181). Telling the story of two women who are trying to come to terms with their own material entanglements and contaminated monstrosity, the text asks us to rethink impurity not as a dangerous outside but as a pervasive quality of life that is always already seeping through our bodily borders, however much we may try to shield ourselves.

²⁶ The aspect of care has originally been proposed by Latour. He assesses in “Love Your Monsters,” “our sin is not that we created technologies but that we failed to love and care for them.”

Embracing our own material impurity can make us monstrous because our bodies show their unruliness, their unwillingness to neatly fit into a pre-established system of making sense of the world. Being hybrid and indifferent means relinquishing the need for purity and all its attachments. In the novel, Klarissa's contaminated body is monstrous not because it is 'unnatural' or 'abnormal,' but because it openly questions the idea of 'natural' and 'normal' through its defiance of the sexual binary, displaying its own impurity openly. The notion of pervasive impurity is troubling because it shatters our sense of control over the world and undermines our striving for emancipation from nature (Latour). Köller's text asks us to be more attentive to complex and interdependent materialities and to develop a sense of being in and of this world, transforming the waters from a substance and source of purity to a space of pervasive impurity that nonetheless offers room for hope and flourishing—at least if you can be an octopus.



Figure 5: "Drifters"

V. Conclusion: Troubling the Waters

*I'm everything that I'll ever be
I'm everything that I've ever seen
I'm everything that slowly falls
I'm everything but I am nothing at all*

Angus and Julia Stone – “Death Defying Acts”

*Rotting like a wreck on the ocean floor
Sinking like a siren that can't swim anymore
Your songs remind me of swimming
But I can't swim any more*

Florence and the Machine – “Swimming”

Troubling the waters means relinquishing stability, integrity, and difference, not searching for the bridge over troubled water but instead “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin with the Chthulucene*) and plunging into the uncertain waters. We can learn from, with, and through water if we submerge ourselves in its entangled ways and explore our own fluid and ever-changing existence. Wong and Christian remind us that “One of the many lessons water teaches us, if we are open to it, is continual transformation” (18). Continual environmental transformation is what we are already experiencing, an experience that makes it ever more evident how much we are ourselves entangled in such transformations and how little we are in control of them. Attuning ourselves to the ever-changing waters might help us to embrace our interconnectedness and learn to transform together with our environment. All three texts that I have discussed here offer their own ways of engaging in attentive and imaginative encounters with water, generating insight into our own entangled existence in this world.

Ingeborg Bachmann's short narrative "Undine geht" entangles its reader in a language that approximates the waters to which Undine is so intimately connected. The undulating movement of the text as well as its unresolved contradictions allow Bachmann to explore Undine's liminal position between water and land and find expression for her continuous, entangled becoming. Undine embodies what cannot be held and confined, an existence outside of rational thinking and objective truth. This is ultimately what makes her abject and monstrous, a threat to the status quo of the patriarchal order. But Bachmann's intervention in the Undine story is more than just giving Undine an opportunity to voice her complaints; it is the search for a language that can better reflect being in and of water. While Bachmann's text does not strike one as an environmental narrative, her astute attention to language and the watery element she is writing about offers much insight into how we might attune ourselves to a more fluid, more entangled existence in this world.

While similarly attentive to language and watery existence, Yoko Tawada's novel *Das Bad* offers a decidedly different story. Instead of embracing the watery make-up of her body as liberating, the protagonist in Tawada's text actively resists and works against her unstable body in an attempt to keep control over her outward appearance. She is unable to inhabit her body and identity and instead becomes a body open for, and co-created by, ascriptions and inscriptions of others. Tawada's main character is influenced and shaped not only by the world around her but also physically and mentally impacted by dreams and hallucinations and even haunted by ghosts. This is mirrored in the text through Tawada's fluid storytelling. A diverse array of substories infiltrate the main narrative in ways that frequently blur the boundaries between fictional reality and dream worlds. Tawada's biggest intervention, however, is entangling the visual and material level of the book with her story. Through the pictures and their complex interaction with the text, Tawada asks her readers to contend with the materiality of the letters, words, and pages of her

book. In this way, the novel is able to not only talk about material entanglement and indifference in the text but also let the material presence of the book speak for itself. Tawada's novel challenges us to read materiality as always enmeshed in the meaning-making process.

Finally, Katharina Köller's novel *Was ich im Wasser sah* is another narrative about female bodies of water and their environment. Here environmental degradation takes center stage as the novel explicitly deals with a contaminated island and its residents. Köller's text shows how easily bodily boundaries are breached, and the human body is infiltrated by invisible and undetectable threats. Presented with a pervasively impure world where humans can no longer extract themselves from the more-than-human world, we are left to wonder how to tell right from wrong, good from bad. It is in this text that Shotwell's call for engaging with our own impurities is most clearly addressed. Instead of holding on to the ideal of purity, the main characters of the text find creative and imaginative ways to reclaim and redefine their own impure body ultimately realizing that the body is always in flux and capable of transformation. While breaking out of the purity narratives and hegemony of the human is itself not a perfect, pure, and always righteous process, acknowledging monstrosity within ourselves demands that we care for it so as to minimize its harm. Addressing entangled existence against the backdrop of environmental contamination, Köller's novel imagines how we might engage with our own impurity and find interconnected ways of transformation and flourishing.

All three narratives challenge us to attune ourselves more to the potential of entangled and contaminated being, to understand the oppressions and dangers of purity moves and stringent classifications, and to find a better language, a more open reading, and a way to transform. We are all hybrid, porous, monstrous, powerful, and out of bounds; but in all this lies the potential for finding ways of living and entangling ourselves in messy existences, in impure spaces, in

contaminated being. In this potential, we might discover new ways of being attentive to the world around us, and for such potential to unfold, we need to imagine such worlds and tell their stories. Stories of hybrid being and connection, of porosity and openness, of impurity and flourishing, stories about everything we might be missing when we are too objective, too detached, too separate. We must not forget that our understanding of the world is ever incomplete, and that, as Colebrook suggests, we can “no longer assume that the world is reducible to the world *for us* ... whatever presents itself as natural or necessary is nevertheless given contingently and might always be thought otherwise” (“We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene” 7). In such an unstable and ever emergent world, discovering and exploring new perspectives is an essential practice because it means being attentive to what is in and around us, the expected and the unexpected, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, the beautiful and the monstrous.

I would like to mention two brief examples to show that our expectations and predictions are never able to fully anticipate what might be affected and effected. One such example is that after the Chernobyl disaster, there was an unexpected flourishing of plant and animal species in the Exclusion Zone, one of the most highly contaminated places on Earth (Thompson). A second example connects even better to the watery worlds of this project. In recent years, the number of coastal marine species surviving, and even thriving, out at sea is unexpectedly high—to the point where researchers are wondering if they are now invasive species—because they have unexpectedly attached themselves to floating plastic debris, the almost classical ‘monsters’ of the Anthropocene (Godin), in places like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (Greenfieldboyce). It is these small things, unexpected, incomprehensible, and potentially monstrous, that might offer glimpses of hope and reasons for imagining potential realities beyond scientific predictions.

Literature offers us ways to be more attentive to porous bodies and entangled materialities and opens up our minds to what worlds might also exist and flourish. As the literary texts discussed here have shown, there is great generative and creative potential in being hybrid, impure, and monstrous. I would like to again echo Haraway's assertion that "[i]mmortality and omnipotence are not our goals" ("Situated Knowledges" 580). Instead, pursuing 'situated knowledges' allows us to approach the world from a composite standpoint creating knowledge and understanding that is multiple and partial, porous and unruly, like the monsters of our imagination; seeking out the many different ways in which humans make sense of the world and putting them in conversation means creating a fuller picture. Literary narratives offer one such way to engage our entangled and contaminated ways of being. As Godin points out, "Discursively rendering the world through crafting narratives can serve both as a reflection of that world and as a sense-making device" (118). Storytelling is a practice of reflection and imagination making sense and senses of what is as well as what could be. The creative and imaginative potential of literature allows us to see beyond ourselves and trouble the waters, so as to break the seemingly stable surface and instead dive deeper and embrace the fact that we are all bodies of water.

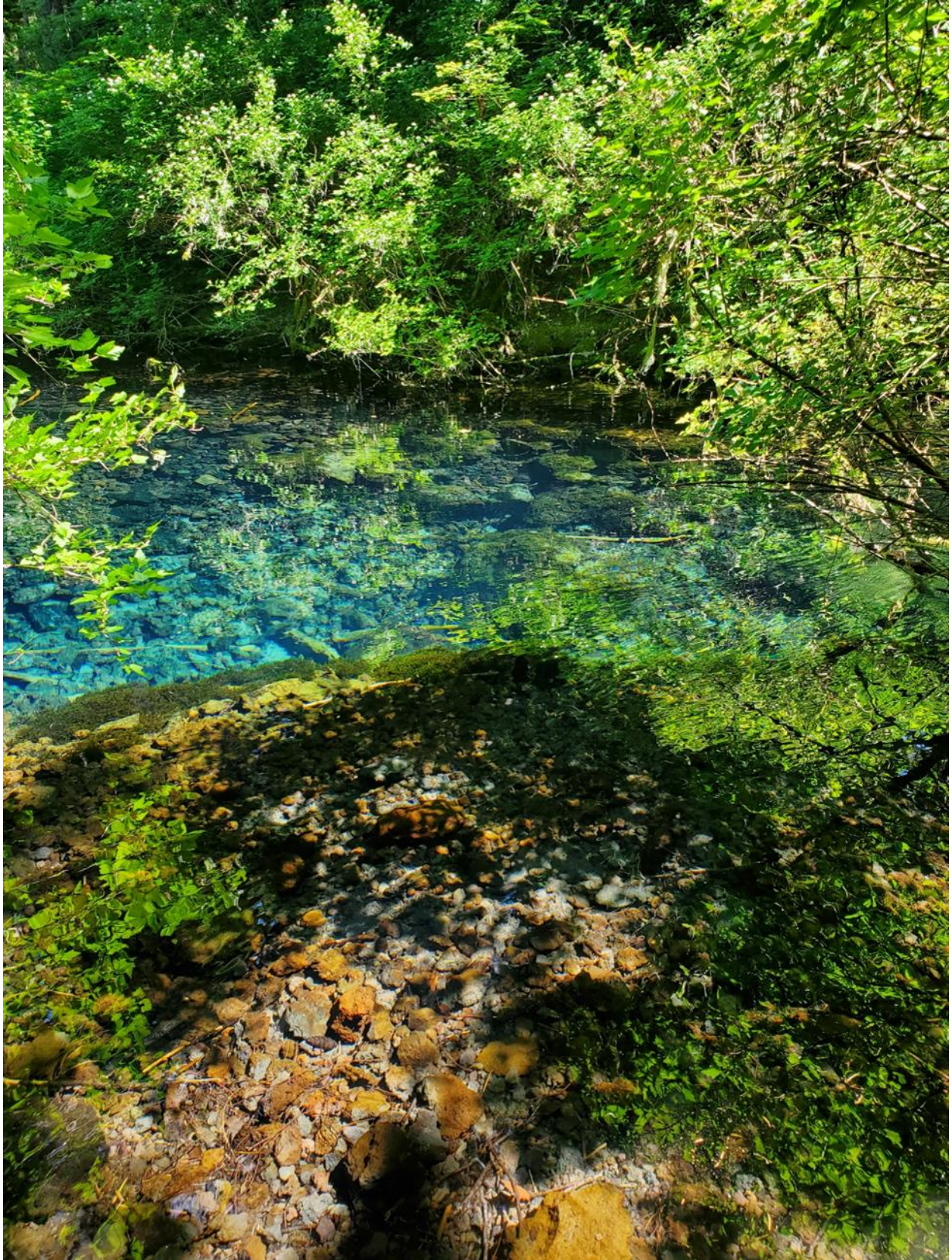


Figure 6: "Colors of Water"

Epilogue: Schwimmen

*Take a deep breath, suck the water in my chest
Take a deep breath, suck the water in my chest
And cross my fingers, and hope for the best
Then all of a sudden, I heard a note*

*It started in my chest and ended in my throat
Then I realized, then I realized, then I realized
I was swimming, yes, I was swimming
And now I'm swimming, yes, I am swimming*

Florence and the Machine – “Swimming”

Das Wasser lässt sich von meinen Armen und Beinen verdrängen, es umgibt jeden meiner Finger, jeden Zeh, meinen ganzen Körper vollständig und gleichmäßig. Und doch entsteht der Eindruck des immer wieder Neuen, es ist mit jedem Augenblick ein anderes Wasser, das meine Finger berührt, meinen Körper umschlingt, als noch im Vorhergehenden. Die spürbare Gleichmäßigkeit steht der stetigen Bewegung der Masse Wasser gegenüber, die verschiedentlich mit den Körpern, mit der Luft, dem Wetter, mit den Sinnen interagiert und sich immer neu formiert.

Bin ich erst einmal untergetaucht, ist das Wasser nicht mehr nass. Was nass ist, ist wohl eigentlich eine ganz eigene Wechselwirkung von Luft und Körper und einer begrenzten Menge Wasser. Das Im-Wasser-Sein hat mit Nässe nichts zu tun. Es ist da, um mich herum, in konstanter Berührung mit meiner Haut, die nur bedingt eine Barriere ist, vielmehr eine Schwelle, eine durchlässige Grenze. Versuche ich das Wasser als Fremdkörper zu fühlen, gelingt es mir nicht. Wo genau meine Fingerspitzen aufhören und das Wasser anfängt, schwimmt im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes. Im Schwimmen schwimmt mein Körper im Zusammenspiel mit dem Wasser, meine Grenzen sind porös. Zwar bietet das Wasser mehr Widerstand als die Luft, doch erscheint mir mein Körper deutlicher, wenn er von Luft statt Wasser umgeben ist. Das Wasser schmiegt sich

an. Seine Wärme oder Kälte verändert fast unverzüglich die Körpertemperatur. Es ist, als ob der Körper sich auf das Wasser einlässt, als ob er versucht, sich mit dem Wasser zu verbinden, so wie das Wasser ihn bindet.

Das Schwimmen ist ein Spiel mit Kräften, die ich nicht verstehe, da sie immer gleichzeitig zwei Dinge sind oder tun, die einander scheinbar diametral gegenüberliegen. Bewege ich meine Hände wie zum Beten gefaltet spitz nach vorne, drehe dann die Handflächen nach außen und drücke sie in einem großen Halbkreis zu beiden Seiten gegen das Wasser, ermöglicht mir der Widerstand des Wassers einen Vorwärtzug, ein Weiterkommen, ein Durchbrechen der Wasserbarriere vor mir, obgleich sich mein Körper im Wasser schwebend weich eingebettet und behaglich aufgehoben fühlt, das Wasser eine sanfte Berührung und ein flüssiger Übergang zwischen Körper und Fremdkörper. Wenn ich mich vorwärts bewege, erscheint es mir beizeiten nur Zufall, ein glückliches Geschick meiner Aufnahme ins chlorierte Wasserreich des Schwimmbeckens.

Was außer meinem Körper trifft nun noch auf Wasser und bestimmt die Erfahrung. Das herbstliche Freiluftschwimmen birgt hier eine Vielzahl an Wechselwirkungen, die in jedem Schwimmen, ja teilweise jedem Schwimmzug eine eigene Erfahrungswelt erschaffen. Ein Regentag – und auch hier gäbe es tausend Varianten zu unterscheiden – ist ein Spiel von gänzlich anderen Einwirkungen als beispielsweise ein windig-wehender Morgen. Wenn es regnet, sich also Wasser mit Wasser mischt, klar abgegrenzte Regentropfen auf eine stark chlorierte Wassermasse treffen, ihre Oberflächenspannung durchbrechen, unter Wasser beim ins Poolwasser Übergehen kleinere Wassertropfen hervorrufen, die sich sofort wieder untermischen und wo doch jeder Tropfen die gesamte Masse Poolwasser klar beeinträchtigt, ergibt sich eine weitere Dimension der Erfahrung. Die Oberfläche zeigt sich plötzlich als tänzelndes und spritzendes Spiel der

verschiedenen Wässer, eine Schwelle, die in jedem Moment und an jeder Stelle ständig wechselt und sich verändert. Jeder einzelne Tropfen wirkt dezidiert hart im Aufprall und unglaublich sanft in der Berührung. Er ist in ein und demselben Moment deutlich erkennbar und unauffindbar im größeren Wasserkörper. Die Nachwirkungen bleiben kurz an der Oberfläche erkennbar, bevor sie wieder anderen Einflüssen zum Opfer fallen. Die Kreise, die ein jeder Tropfen zieht, sind begrenzt durch den Einschlag anderer Tropfen und durch andere Bewegungen im und um das Wasser.

Für die Schwimmerin ist der Regen – solange es sich nicht um Regengüsse und -ströme handelt – ein Spiel, das an der Oberfläche zu beobachten ist. Der Körper fühlt das leicht beheizte Chlorwasser und kann die eintauchenden Regentropfen kaum wahrnehmen, nur manchmal dringt ein Tropfen kühlere Temperatur an die Haut, die sich dicht unter der Wasseroberfläche befindet. Das Fallen der Tropfen, in jedem Moment ein zeitgleiches und doch nur im Einzelnen wirklich zu beobachtendes Eintauchen des Fremdwassers, kräuselt das Wasser mehr oder minder langanhaltend, je nach Tropfendichte und -häufigkeit. Manche Tropfen bahnen sich über die Schwimmerin den Weg ins Wasser oder schaffen es, sich in ihrem Haar über Wasser zu halten. Jedes Auftreffen ist für das menschliche Auge ein ergebenes Verschwinden, das nicht zu übersehen ist. Es bietet jedem Schwimmszug einen neuen Fokus.

Überhaupt ist, was das Schwimmen dieser Tage für mich ausmacht, nicht das Unterwasser-Setzen meines Körpers, sondern vielmehr die Spiegelwelt der Wasseroberfläche. Zug um Zug eröffnet sich ein neues verzerrtes Abbild einer Welt jenseits des Beckenrands – eine Welt, in die das Wasser ständig überschwappt, auf die es aber kaum Einfluss zu nehmen vermag außer im Deformieren der Spiegelung. Wenn ich mich angestrengt darauf konzentriere, sehe ich nur Wasser, in der Farbe des Beckenanstrichs, und die Beckenmarkierungen. Aber diese Konzentration hält meist nicht lange, weil sich die Zerrbilder der Oberfläche mir aufdrängen. Sie lassen Bäume

erkennen, die sich jedoch im Zuge meiner schwimmenden Annäherung in sich selbst stülpen, nur um im nächsten Augenblick wieder wie neu hervorzusprießen. Jede von mir kreierte Welle beeinflusst die tentakelartigen Äste, versetzt Baumstämme, lässt alles in sich zusammenstürzen und wieder auferstehen. Das Wasser ermöglicht mir direkte Einflussnahme auf ein Abbild, das mich nicht mehr loslässt; ich bewege es und es bewegt mich, Körperbewegungen veranlassen Wellen und Wellen veranlassen Körperbewegungen, Blicke können dem Spiegelspiel kaum folgen, das Spiegelspiel folgt mir nicht. Meine Einflussnahme verliert sich schnell im Wasser, Eigenmächtigkeit vergeht vor lauter Interaktion, nichts bin ich allein, alles ist Wasser, Welt.

[The water can be pushed aside by my arms and legs, it completely and evenly surrounds my every finger, every toe, my whole body. And yet the impression of something new consistently arises; every moment it is a different water that touches my fingers, wraps around my body than in the previous one. The feeling of constancy contrasts with the continuous movement of the matter *water*, which interacts in various ways with the bodies, with the air, the weather, with the senses and is constantly forming anew.

Once I'm submerged, the water is no longer wet. What is wet is probably actually a very special interaction of air and body and a limited amount of water. Being in the water has nothing to do with being wet. It's there, all around me, in constant touch with my skin, which is only a limited barrier, rather a threshold, a permeable boundary. If I try to feel the water as a foreign body, I can't. The exact point where my fingertips end and the water begins is a literal blur. When swimming, my body blurs in interaction with the water, my borders are porous. While water offers more resistance than air, my body appears clearer to me when surrounded by air rather than water. The water hugs. Its heat or cold changes my body temperature almost instantaneously. It is as if the body engages with the water, as if trying to bond with the water as much as the water binds it.

Swimming is a game with forces that I don't understand, since they are always simultaneously being or doing two things that seem diametrically opposed to each other. If I move my hands pointedly forward as if clasped in prayer, then turn my palms outwards and press them in a large semicircle on either side against the water, the resistance of the water allows me to pull forward, to advance, to break through the water barrier in front of me, although my body feels softly embedded and snugly suspended in the water, the water a gentle touch and a fluid transition between body and foreign body. That I move forward seems, at times, mere coincidence, a lucky fortune of my admission into the chlorinated water realm of the pool.

What else besides my body now meets water and determines the experience. Autumnal open-air swimming harbors a multitude of interdependent effects that create a experiential world of its own with every swim, at times even with every stroke. A rainy day – and here too there would be a thousand variants to be distinguished – is a game of completely different influences than, for example, a windy, gusty morning. Another dimension of the experience emerges when it rains, water mixing with water, clearly defined raindrops meet a heavily chlorinated mass of water, break its surface tension, cause smaller water droplets underwater in their transition into pool water, which mix in again immediately, each drop clearly compromising the entire mass of pool water. The surface suddenly appears as a dancing and splashing play of the different waters, a threshold that constantly is altered and changes constantly at every moment and at every point. Every single drop is decidedly hard on impact and incredibly soft to the touch. It is clearly recognizable and at the same time untraceable in the larger body of water. The aftermath lingers briefly on the surface before falling victim to other influences. The circles drawn by each drop are limited by the impact of other drops and by other movements in and around the water.

For the swimming woman, the rain - as long as it is not downpours and torrents - is a game that can be observed on the surface. The body feels the slightly heated chlorine water and can hardly perceive the submerging raindrops, only sometimes a drop of cooler temperature penetrates the skin, which is just under the water surface. The falling of the drops, at every moment an immersion of the foreign water that is simultaneous but can only be observed individually, causes the water to ripple for a more or less long time depending on the density and frequency of the drops. Some drops make their way over the swimmer into the water or manage to keep above the water in her hair. For the human eye, each impact is a devoted disappearance that cannot be overlooked. It offers a new focus to every stroke.

In general, what defines swimming for me these days is not putting my body under water, but rather the mirror world of the water surface. Stroke after stroke, a new distorted image of a world beyond the edge of the pool opens up - a world, into which the water constantly spills over, but which it can hardly influence except by deforming its reflection. If I concentrate hard, all I can see is water in the color of the pool paint, and the pool markings. But this concentration usually doesn't last long because the distorted images on the surface force themselves on me. They reveal trees, which, however, in the course of my swimming approach, turn inside out, only to sprout out like new the next moment. Each wave I create affects the tentacle-like branches, displaces tree trunks, causes everything to collapse and rise again. The water enables me to directly influence an image that won't let go of me; I move it and it moves me, body movements cause waves and waves cause body movements, glances can hardly follow the mirror play, the mirror play does not follow me. My influence is quickly lost in the water, hubris fades for sheer interaction, I am nothing by myself, everything is water, world.]

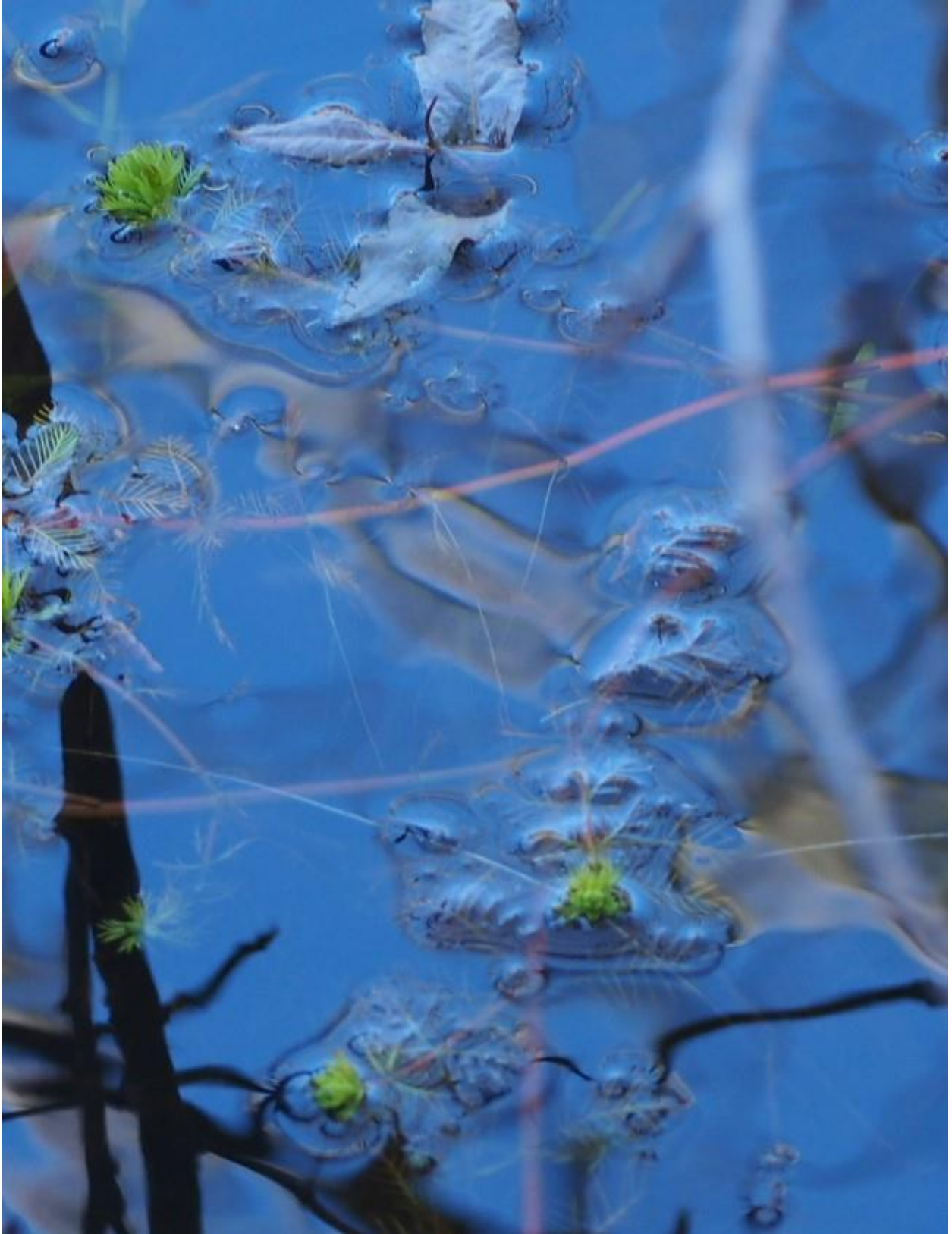


Figure 7: "Surface Tension"

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Figure 8: "Liquid Light"