

DE GRUYTER

Ottmar Ette

WRITING- BETWEEN- WORLDS

TRANSAREA STUDIES AND THE
LITERATURES-WITHOUT-A-FIXED-ABODE

MIMESIS ROMANISCHE LITERATUREN
DER WELT

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Mimesis

Romanische Literaturen der Welt

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Ottmar Ette

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Ottmar Ette

Writing- between- Worlds

TransArea Studies
and the Literatures-without-a-fixed-Abode

Translated by Vera M. Kutzinski

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Ithaca gave you a marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

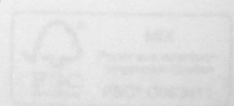
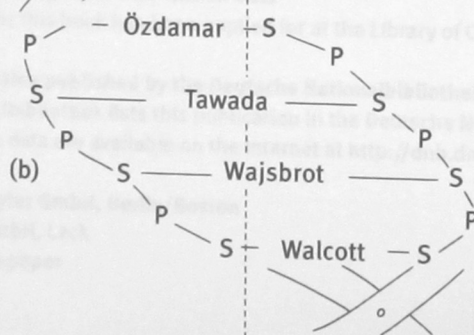
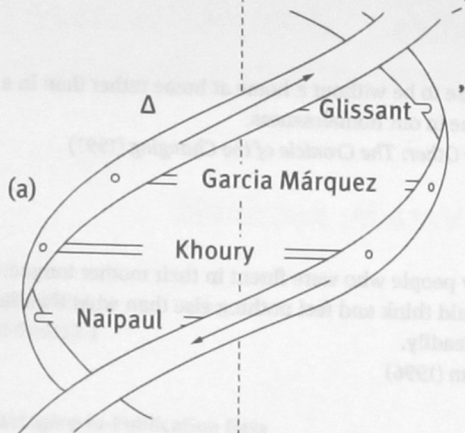
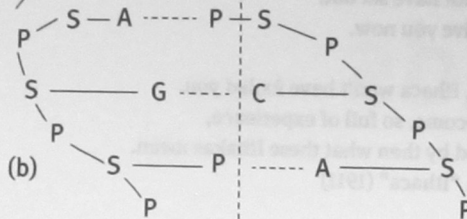
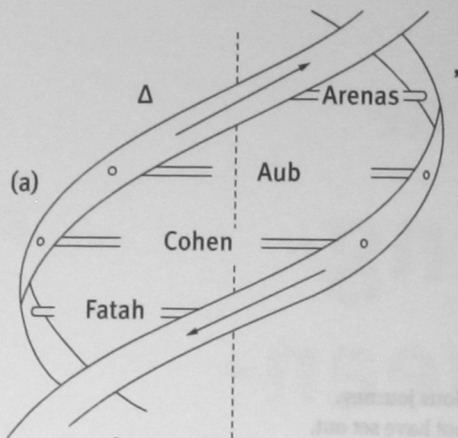
And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
You will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.
—Constantine P. Cavafy. "Ithaca" (1911)

It is means something else to be without a home at home rather than in a foreign country,
where we can find a home in our homelessness.

—Imre Kertész, *Someone Other: The Chronicle of the Changing* (1997)

I was often disgusted by people who were fluent in their mother tongue. They created the
impression that they could think and feel nothing else than what their language offers up
to them so quickly and readily.

—Yoko Tawada, *Talisman* (1996)



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Translator's Introduction

Literary studies as LifeStudies

We are deformed unless we read.

—William Carlos Williams

Why, then, should we read Ottmar Ette? A passage from Vandana Singh's short story 'The Tetrahedron' helps explain why I feel strongly that at least a portion of a body of critical-theoretical work written in German merits the attention of a wider audience. Singh offers a visual metaphor that encapsulates how Ottmar Ette reads and writes about literature. When Maya, Singh's protagonist, finds a 'door' into the titular Tetrahedron, an 'object [that] extends in a dimension [...] inaccessible to us,'¹ she undergoes what appears to be a remarkable transformation: suddenly, her hands are no longer singular but multiple, her own and also those of spectral presences from other spatiotemporal realms:

[Maya] looked at her two hands, the familiar river-valley of lines and tributaries, and she saw that they were the same as before, and not the same. Other hands branched off her hands, fading off into an infinity of hands, young hands, old hands, smooth and wrinkled. She took a deep, sobbing breath.

'What has happened to me?'

'Nothing. You see yourself as you are in more than three dimensions.'²

Maya's transformation is a change in (self)perception that results from her newfound ability to see herself from multiple, and multiplying, perspectives at the same time. Singh's figure for this mode of understanding human connectedness is significantly not a tree but a rhizome.³ I take Singh's image of the ramifications of Maya's hands as an especially apt fictional equivalent of what Ette describes as the 'vectoral spaces' created in literary texts through multidirectional movements across places and temporalities other than those we typically perceive as our own. Like Singh's 'The Tetrahedron,' Ette's *Writing-between-Worlds* teaches us to see ourselves as we are in more than three dimensions and to read

1 Vandana Singh: 'The Tetrahedron.' In: Singh: *The Woman who Thought She was a Planet: And Other Stories*. New Delhi: Zubaan 2013, p. 152.

2 Singh, *The Woman*, p. 165.

3 The figure of the rhizome links Singh's stories to the work of Édouard Glissant, and through him, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others.

literature in this initially disorienting way as well. Reading Ottmar Ette 'unflattens' our minds, which is no small matter.⁴

A specialist in Romance literatures by trade, Ottmar Ette is appreciated for different things in different places: in Spain and the Hispanic Americas for his scholarship on José Martí, Jorge Semprún, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez; in the francophone world for his writings on Roland Barthes, Assia Djebar, Édouard Glissant, and Amin Maalouf; and in his native Germany for his path-breaking work on Alexander von Humboldt.⁵ These are only some of the many different authors whose work that find their way into Ette's prolific critical writings. Yet, presenting his critical writings grouped in accordance with geographies that also coincide with different academic fields does a disservice to what I consider most compelling about Ette's scholarship: its comparative ethos, the fact that his work crosses national, linguistic, and disciplinary borders with impunity. *Writing-between-Worlds* alone immerses readers in the migratory contexts of Shoah, Caribbean, new-German, and Arab-Latin American literatures, which Ette approaches from ever-shifting angles and with diverse methods. While his multi-pronged approach, which he himself calls "TransArea studies,"⁶ has become an increasingly significant factor in all of his work, it is most visible in his more recent writings on literary theory and cultural history, notably in his 'ÜberLebenswissen' trilogy.

The monographs that make up this trilogy consist of *ÜberLebenswissen: Die Aufgabe der Philologie* (Survival-knowledge: the task [or surrender] of philology) from 2004,⁷ *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben: Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz* (Writing-between-worlds: literatures without a fixed abode) from 2005, and

⁴ See Nick Sousanis: *Unflattening*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2015.

⁵ See, for instance, Ottmar Ette: *Weltbewusstsein: Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne*. Weilerwist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2002, and Ette: *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung: Das Mobile des Wissens*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel 2009.

⁶ See Ottmar Ette: *TransArea: Eine literarische Globalisierungsgeschichte*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2012; also Ette: 'Unterwegs zu einer Weltwissenschaft?: Alexander von Humboldts Weltbegriffe und die transarealen Studien.' In: *HiN - Alexander von Humboldt im Netz* (Potsdam/Berlin) VII.13 (2006), p. 34–54.

⁷ *ÜberLebenswissen* focuses on the specific history and practices of the field of Romance literatures in the context of globalization, including chapters on Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Roland Barthes alongside readings of Alexander von Humboldt, Hannah Arendt, and Max Aub, among others. The difference of Ette's approach comes into view when one reads his chapter on Spitzer and Auerbach in concert with Emily Apter's 'Global Translatio. The "Invention" of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933.' In: Christopher Prendergast (ed.): *Debating world literature*. London: Verso 2004, p. 77–109.

ZusammenLebensWissen: List, Last und Lust literarischer Konvivenz im globalen Massstab (Knowledge-for-living-together: the ploys, cares, and pleasures of literary conviviality on a global scale) from 2010. The concept that links these three books may well be translated as “survival-knowledge,” as I have often done in the present volume and elsewhere. At the same time, however, it is important to note that the composite noun *ÜberLebenswissen* harbors an additional meaning that, as Ette’s unusual internal capitalization suggests, is indeed the primary one: ‘about (*über*) life knowledge’ or, as I prefer, ‘knowledge-for-living’ (in which the notion of knowledge *about* living is always already implicit).⁸ *Lebenswissen* – knowledge-for-living – is the root from which other terms quite logically branch off: ‘survival-knowledge’ (*ÜberlebensWissen*) and ‘knowledge-for-living-together’ (*ZusammenLebensWissen*). Ette developed the key concepts of ‘knowledge-for-living’ and ‘science-for-living’ (*Lebenswissenschaft*) to set them off from the biotechnological discourses of the so-called life sciences and thus (re)claim the term ‘life’ as a central concern of and an intellectual space for the humanities, and for literary studies in particular.⁹ *Writing-between-Worlds* and *ZusammenLebensWissen* build on these fundamental ideas to advance an alternate discourse about life and for living (together) through which the erstwhile philologies, now reinvigorated as what I think of as literary and cultural Life-Studies,¹⁰ would “be opened up, made accessible and relevant, to the larger society.” For the humanities, “[d]oing so is, simply and plainly, a matter of survival.”¹¹

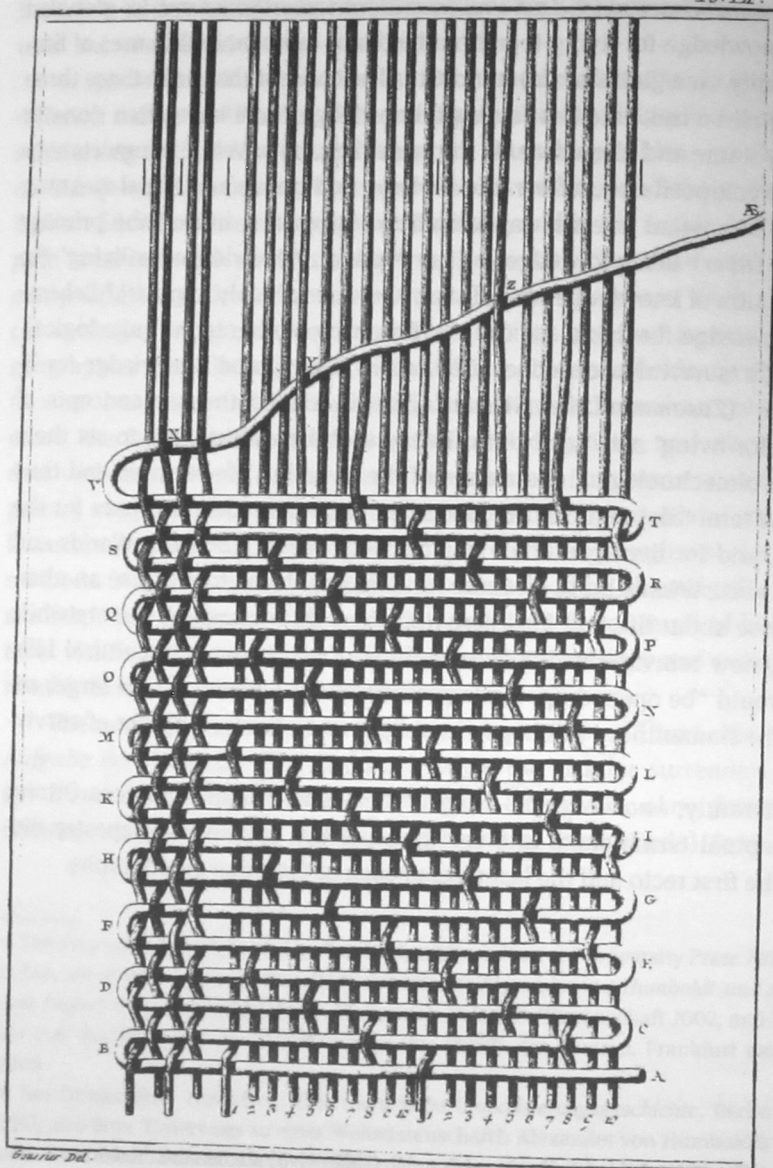
Put differently, *knowledge-for-living* is the filament that interlaces Ottmar Ette’s conceptual terminology into the figure of the open-weave tapestry displayed on the first recto and the last page of each of the three monographs.

⁸ Translations into French (*savoir-vivre*) and Spanish (*saber-vivir*) are less cumbersome.

⁹ While his first book-length articulation of these two concepts dates back to 2004, Ette also published a widely-noticed polemic on the topic three years later. Given how important these two concepts are to Ette’s post-2004 writings, it made good sense to include some of his provocative articulations in this book. See Note on the Text below.

¹⁰ The poems in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, which serves as my inspiration here, would certainly benefit from being read along Ette’s lines. Lowell: *Life studies*. New York: Farrar 1959; 1968.

¹¹ Ottmar Ette: *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben*, p. 270.



Soierie, Etoffes en Plein, Satin à dix Lisses Vu du côté de l'envers.

Fig. A: "Soierie. Etoffes en plein. Satin à dix lisses, vu du côté de l'envers," Plate LI, in: *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Volume Z 373 (1765), © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben*, four lines from Botho Strauss's 1992 lyric 'Beginninglessness' (*Beginnlosigkeit*) accompany the repeated tapestry image to highlight the fact that this weave has neither a definable beginning nor a foreseeable end. Both are always entangled, even if we cannot always see exactly where, when, and how they intersect and overlap:

When something is Now, it holds a
Once-Again and a Nevermore in its folds,
the Once of promise and the Once of remembrance
into a double spiral intertwined.¹²

Strauss's entwined double helixes must have been one of the inspirations for the book's emblematic frontispiece, which is also repeated in each of the three volumes but with the names of different writers in each iteration. It immediately conjures up familiar representations of DNA, the matrix of life – hardly a coincidence. The double helixes are thus a fitting motif for Ottmar Ette's very distinctive way of thinking (about) the relations among writers and texts from such diverse provenances. Intricate plays of similarities *and* differences, the relations to which he attends are precisely those that go unnoticed in more linear, static approaches to the literatures of the world and their histories.

In *Writing-between-Worlds*, as in the two books that frame it in the German edition, Ette advances two fundamental hypotheses: One, literature is always in motion. Dynamic rather than emplaced, literature, especially during the twentieth century – which he labels 'the century of migrations' – moves freely across all sorts of borders, including of course national ones. In doing so, literary texts draw attention to the fact that no single nation ever speaks only a single language. Instead, nation-states, as ideological frames, obscure and suppress their own multilingual realities.¹³ Two, literary texts artistically encode the patterns of such spatiotemporal movements and store them in the form of 'knowledge(s)-

¹² 'Wenn etwas Jetzt ist, dann trägt es ein / ingefaltetes Abermals und ein Nie-Wieder, / das Einst der Verheissung und das Einst der Erinnerung / in verschlungener Doppelspirale in sich.' Since *Writing-between-Worlds* is, strictly speaking, not part of Ette's trilogy, we decided not to reproduce the image of the weave.

¹³ Colleen Boggs, whose idea of 'linguistic mobility' is more limited than Ette's, sees nationalism and transnationalism as 'related strategies for negotiating linguistic plurality.' Boggs: *Transnationalism and American literature: Literary translation 1773-1892*. New York: Routledge 2007, p. 3. Ette would no doubt grant that 'reconsidering national formations from a position of estrangement helps us... to illuminate the nation's unconscious assumptions, boundaries, and proscribed areas.' Paul Giles: *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the transatlantic Imaginary*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 3.

for-living' in the service of survival and of living-together. For Ette, literary texts are largely untapped resources of culturally diverse forms not of knowledge as product, object, or information but of *knowing as process*. Accordingly, *Writing-between-Worlds* traces many different literary projections of 'fundamentally complex' intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic designs that, often unexpectedly, connect worlds otherwise cut up into nation-states and rife with linguistic divisions. Such tracings require critical vocabularies and methodologies capable of describing the various directional movements in (and of) literature in precise ways. They require what Ette terms a 'poetics of movement' in which to bring together different yet overlapping figures of movement – such as processes of writing-other(wise) (*Fremdschreiben*) and taking language(s) elsewhere (*Fort-schreiben*) – and analyze the effects their dynamic interrelations have exerted, and continue to do so, on nation-states singly and globally. Such an analysis productively interrogates the worn term 'globalization' from the perspective of the 'Literatures without a fixed Abode.' In these and other ways, *Writing-between-Worlds* challenges the prominence that the nation has enjoyed in literary studies, along with the ingrained distinction between national literary canons and so-called world literatures.

Yet, Ette does not just discard the idea of the nation as useful to literary studies today. Instead, he acknowledges the existence of nation-states and probes their function as the conceptual-discursive frames and political realities in tension with the 'Literatures without a fixed Abode.' The concept of the 'Literatures without a fixed Abode' rejects the exclusionary logic of either national literature or world literature.¹⁴ It is what Franco Moretti might call a 'problem' in search of a 'new critical method.'¹⁵ 'Literatures without a fixed Abode,' that is, literatures that do not belong to a single national context, are a theoretical 'problem' because they 'transect,' 'transverse,' and otherwise worry ideological lines and conceptual borders, be they national or disciplinary. The German verb for this process is 'queren,' which suggests unsystematic, disorderly crossings, actions that unsettle, disturb, and disorient conventions and taxonomies, in literary studies and elsewhere. The point of Ette's critical method is not to construct counternarratives as 'a (territorializable) defense against national literature'

¹⁴ 'Literatures without a fixed Abode' is, for instance, a phenomenon quite distinct from 'world literature' in David Damrosch's sense: 'literary works that circulate beyond their *culture of origin*.' Damrosch: *What is World Literature?* Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press 2003, p. 4.

¹⁵ Franco Moretti: 'Conjectures on World Literature'. In: Christopher Prendergast (ed.): *Debating World Literature*. London: Verso 2004, p. 149.

and other orthodoxies. Rather, he is intent on '[accounting] for geocultural and biopolitical changes, and for the literary-aesthetic developments that accompany those changes. Neither the perspective of national literature nor that of world literature enables us to think through such transformations and describe them fully. My goal is to articulate practices of Writing-between-Worlds that cannot be territorialized in any permanent (or settled) way.'¹⁶ Nor is Ette's method akin to Moretti's 'distant reading.'¹⁷ Ette is very clear that larger patterns perceived at a distance will always have to be re-contextualized, lest they lead to a 'de-localized knowledge' made up of reductive simplifications and generalizations about inherently dynamic locations such as 'home,' 'nation,' 'exile,' or 'world.' It is precisely through close attention to texts – and through (hopefully) increasing collaborations of readers from different specialties – that literary studies can supply the local cultural specifics without which the very idea of knowledge-for-living-(together) cannot but remain a meaningless abstraction.

Ette's theories about vectoral spaces in literature are not a backhanded way of returning to some wobbly concept of 'world literature' that flows from the purported universality of human life.¹⁸ Clearly, neither thematic nor formal similarities alone are the most fertile grounds for literary comparisons. Ette, for one, finds it far more fruitful to pinpoint areas of both divergence and overlap in the literary representations of human ideas and experiences across the planet, representations in which neither universality nor globalization simply spells homogeneity; instead, they refer to a vast, often violent, interplay of myriad mutable cultural, social, and political perspectives. "In no way do I want to misunderstand literature as a mere reflection of society in a vulgar-Marxist or positivistic sense," Ette clarifies. "Such theories of reflection reduce intertextuality to a mere positivistic analysis of sources, recklessly eclipsing, among other things, cultural differences and crossovers in literary writing. At the same time, any inquiry into the uses of literary scholarship, including theory, cannot but raise questions about specific historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, not to mention academic politics and educational policies."¹⁹

¹⁶ P. 8 below.

¹⁷ Moretti, 'Conjectures,' p. 151.

¹⁸ According to Haun Saussy, 'universality' is the 'most obvious, and usually undertheorized, candidate for 'trunk' status in the discipline of comparative literature.' Saussy (ed.): *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006, p. 13.

¹⁹ See p. 290 below.

To focus on the knowledges necessary for living and surviving, in and beyond our academies, does not mean to build thematic gateways to universality but to “adjust to multiple frames of reference and to attend to relations rather than givens.”²⁰ And terms such as ‘life,’ ‘survival,’ and ‘knowledge’ are never givens in Ette’s writings but abstractions that stand for remarkably complicated exchanges and relations, be they historical, social, political, economic, or cultural, especially linguistic. Not taking one’s language for granted resounds throughout Ette’s lively critical engagement with his own language, which has already yielded a crop of neologisms that test German readers’ imaginations no less than they do translators’. An example is ‘ZwischenSprachWeltenBereich,’ a noun that refers to the areas or spaces that form in the interstices of linguistic worlds, and which may well confound even German-language readers. Mark Twain’s famous complaints about long composite nouns in his essay ‘The Awful German Language’ (1880) come readily to mind here. ‘These things are not words,’ he wrote with endearing sarcasm, ‘but alphabetical processions.’²¹ English, of course, rarely accommodates the stacking up of words in the way that German does. That almost all of Ette’s key terms qualify as linguistic ‘processions’ does not exactly facilitate the task of translation; but it does force the translator (and any other reader) to engage with English as intensely as Ette does with German. In this sense, difficulty, even ‘untranslatability,’ can be quite enabling and, in fact, rather pleasurable.²²

I began translating excerpts from Ottmar Ette’s writings some years ago, but other projects and responsibilities kept getting in the way of completing this particular volume. Thanks to these otherwise frustrating delays, I have had more time than expected to ponder possible ways of bringing Ette’s vexing linguistic creations over into USAmerican English and also to reflect on the process having to rethink English via German, my first but now estranged language, in the same way that Ette reworks German, often via French and Spanish. It quickly became clear to me that simply importing Ette’s coinages into an English-language environment, as I have provisionally done above, either placing them in quotation marks or italicizing them (or both), was woe-

²⁰ Saussy: *Comparative Literature*, p. 34.

²¹ Mark Twain: *The Writings of Mark Twain*: P. F. Collier & Son Company 1907, p. 277.

²² Ette’s critical-theoretical vocabulary would make a fitting addition to the Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. It is somewhat surprising that the entry for ‘Life’ is very short and that, among the 400 entries included in this *Philosophical Dictionary*, neither ‘knowledge’ nor ‘survival’ have found a place. See Cassin et al. (eds): *Dictionary of Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014, p. 576.

fully inadequate. For one, it would needlessly clutter an already polylingual text in which words and locutions in French and Spanish have been left intact.²³ For another, such imports would mark the German words as linguistic oddities without necessarily making readers more aware of the need to reconsider their all-too-familiar English usage. I decided that a better way to achieve a measure of translational defamiliarization of English was by resorting visual markers of a different sort – hyphens, parentheses, and unorthodox capitalization – to signal that certain locutions in English (often versions of a single composite term in German) are descriptive phrases that also have distinct conceptual dimensions. The titular ‘Writing-between-Worlds’ is a good example. That, in contrast to ‘ZwischenWeltenSchreiben,’ I render the noun ‘Zwischenwelten’ as ‘inter-Worlds’ indicates clearly that the additive method Ette uses to create many of his neologisms does not, and cannot, produce the same sort of logic or consistency in English. I found ‘InterWorldWriting,’ which would have followed more logically from ‘interWorlds,’ unappealingly static when compared to ‘Writing-between-Worlds.’ Other prominent examples are the verbs ‘fortschreiben’ and ‘fremdschreiben’ – taking-language(s)-elsewhere and writing-other(wise), in my English versions – whose nuances in German quite simply elude English. ‘Fortschreiben’ can mean ‘to continue to write’ or ‘to add to;’ it can also signify ‘to write away from,’ as in ‘to revise’ but with an added spatial dimension. ‘Fremdschreiben’ emphasizes the strangeness of linguistic and cultural differences that accompany acts of spatial and temporal distancing. Both forms of writing are closely related: if one writes-other(wise), one may also take one’s (native?) language(s) *elsewhere*, that is, to other times and places.

Ottmar Ette’s writing shifts the linguistic and conceptual ground beneath our proverbial feet. Sometimes, he twists our readerly tongues only slightly, almost imperceptibly; at others, we are more fully aware of tectonic shifts that leave us feeling disoriented, contorted, estranged from ourselves. Ette’s point, indeed his entire critical and linguistic practice, is to make ideas and experiences thinkable, sayable, and writable that were not so before, or at least not easily. To do so, one has to take one’s language elsewhere and, in the process, alienate it from itself. The point is not to hand readers a cache of ready-made critical-theoretical terms – in German or in English – which they can apply without further critical reflection. Following Ette’s principles, I have attempted to make my translation a thought-provoking mixture of the familiar and the

²³ I have kept all quotations from the original texts (mainly in the footnotes) to render their differences from my own and/or others’ English versions palpable without interrupting the flow of the critical narrative.

strange in which intellectual excitement may at times (I hope) spring from linguistic impediments. These impediments include translational inconsistencies designed to keep English as dynamic as possible without risking definitional confusion. Readers of this book will finally decide whether my various choices as a translator are indeed effective in this way.

Like all of Ottmar Ette's work, *Writing-between-Worlds* challenges humanists worldwide to consider carefully how they might reclaim certain terms and discourses – notably on life, living, and living together – as grounds for their own intellectual and political pursuits and responsibilities. Doing so seems particularly urgent in societies where the rhetoric of life has been lionized not only by the biosciences (this is true nearly everywhere) but also, and often even more aggressively, by fundamentalist religious and other likeminded conservative organizations. Similarly, the momentous changes that are underway in Europe and worldwide in a century that is proving to be another 'century of migrations' require a great deal thoughtful knowledge-for-living-together in ways respectful, not just tolerant, of cultural differences, whatever those might be. To survive, a society clearly needs to know more than what it takes to keep its residents breathing. A society, any society, stands to benefit from understanding, for example, the exact differences between a language of mere tolerance and expressions of respectfulness toward other humans. To this end, societies need to cultivate more critical attitudes toward and within language. This is by no means a new idea. '[W]e need to have a habitually critical attitude toward language – our own as well as that of others,' Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa, a professor of English and a former U.S. Senator from California, wrote in the 1990 Preface to the fifth edition of *Language in Thought and Action* (1941). 'Hitler is gone,' he continued,

but if the majority of our fellow citizens are more susceptible to the slogans of fear and race hatred than those of peaceful accommodation and mutual respect among human beings, our political liberties remain at the mercy of any eloquent and unscrupulous demagogue.²⁴

Xenophobia is all around us, and it is not elsewhere but very much in our own homes, wherever those may be. When 'slogans of fear and race hatred' fill the airwaves and the internet almost daily, and when walls are once again being built around nations, it matters enormously that we reflect more carefully on how we think of ourselves in relation to other people and understand better

²⁴ S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa: *Language in Thought and Action*. San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1990, p. xi–xii.

how those we 'other' think about us. We live at a time in history when massive waves of migrants from the war-torn Syria and other war-devastated Middle Eastern and African regions are flooding Europe, changing the world as we known it. Reflecting on what these impending changes might mean in the future, and not just in negative ways, involves being more thoughtful than separating migrant populations into political (read: legitimate) 'refugees' and 'economic migrants.' Does it really matter why people fear for their lives enough to leave their homes? Do their lives matter less if they flee their countries for economic reasons rather than political ones? The answer should be self-evident; but self-evidence is always risky because it seems to require from us neither thoughtfulness nor action when both are most needed.

That most of today's media encourage us to approach cultural differences as something to be treated with fear and suspicion stands in stark contrast to what we could read in the literatures of the world, which are filled with many alternatives. I cannot help but wonder if it is mere coincidence that many of the texts Ette analyzes in *Writing-between-Worlds* are not even available in English (yet?). This lack is something I felt compelled to point out in some of the notes I added to this translation, because I find it important that English-language readers of this book realize how little they know about the different perspectives that writers in other parts of the world have to offer, writers who care deeply about mutual respect, survival in the eddies of cultural difference, and knowledge(s)-for-living-together. Ottmar Ette's scholarship points a way for humanists in the English-speaking world to reinvigorate their own disciplines, something that is indeed a matter of professional survival. One way of doing so (and there are many others) is by making available to English-language readers literary and critical texts that can make a substantial difference to how we think and live. These are the primary reasons why I read Ottmar Ette, and why I chose to translate *Writing-between-Worlds*.

Vera M. Kutzinski, Nashville, Tennessee, October 2015

Preface: What does literature know?

The question of what precise knowledge literature creates and delivers has moved closer to the center of current debates in literary studies for some years now. That it has done so seems to follow from the growing trend in the humanities, especially in literary and cultural studies, to replace the thematics of commemoration, dominant for the last quarter of a century, with the problematics of knowledge (production). This tendency may or may not amount to a paradigm shift of some import in the history of the sciences.¹ Commemoration will no doubt remain on the agenda. Particularly in connection with the deregulation of the world that Amin Maalouf has diagnosed,² it will, however, become important, in years and decades to come, to develop multi-perspectival approaches whose combination can guide a deepened historical field toward a *prospective* dimension and thus a modelling of the future. A new direction for literary studies? Absolutely, and it is already underway.

The question about knowledge in and through literature is also a question about the social, political, and cultural relevance this knowledge may have for today's differently organized information and (also) knowledge societies.³ What does literature want? What can it do? And what can it contribute to formulating new, imaginative answers to the challenges of globalization, answers that might get us out of the grooves of our entrenched ways of thinking?

In this book, I propose that there is no better, no more complex way to access a community, a society, an era and its cultures than through literature. For millennia, literature from a wide variety of geocultural areas has gathered knowledge about life, about survival, and about living together, without either falling into discursive or disciplinary specializations or functioning as a regulatory mechanism for cultural knowledge. Literature is able to offer its readers knowledge through direct participation in the form of step-by-step intellectual and affective experiences. Through this ability, it can reach and affect audiences across great spatial and temporal distances. Literature – what different times

1 [Ette's term 'Wissenschaftsgeschichte' encompasses both the history of the natural and social sciences and the humanities. TN]

2 See Amin Maalouf: *Disordered World: Setting a new Course for the twenty-first Century*. London: Bloomsbury 2011; see also Tzvetan Todorov: *The New World disorder: Reflections of a European*. Cambridge, UK: Polity 2005.

3 See Manuel Castells: *Das Informationszeitalter; Wirtschaft – Gesellschaft – Kultur*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich 2003.

and cultures have been able to understand as such in a broad sense – has always been characterized by its transareal and transcultural origins and effects. It is the product of many logics, and it teaches us to think *polylogically* rather than monologically. Literature is an experiment in living, and living in a state of experimentation.

In a vital, indeed radical way, literature (or better, the literatures of the world) is designed to be interpreted in many different ways, to release a cosmos of heteroglossia, of whose coordinates we are far more, and more clearly, aware thanks to Mikhail Bakhtin's work. Literature is a playing field of multiple meanings, of polysemousness, insofar as it can, indeed must, employ a variety of different logics at the same time. Through its fundamental polysemy unfold polylogical structures and constructions oriented not toward securing stable ground, in the sense of a single, fixed location, but toward identifying the movements of comprehension in all their permutations. Is not this ability more valuable for us today, in our present world of contradictory socio-globalization,⁴ than it has been for any of the generations that have preceded us?

Literature puts into relief the mobility of knowledge. As a mobile of knowledge, it ensures that very different areas of knowledge (production) and the partial knowledges of one, several, or many communities and societies are related in ever-new, experimental ways. Such uninterrupted transfer necessitates transformations. The cultural compression that literature produces always implies more than a simple interweaving;⁵ literature creates playing fields that resist and counteract the extermination of culture(s).

It follows, then, that literature is *knowledge in motion*. Its polylogical constructions are vital to human survival in the world of the twenty-first century, whose greatest challenge is the ability to live together in peace and in difference on a global scale. Through a serious experimental play always variously buttressed by the pillars of aesthetics and poetics, literature allows us to rehearse and refine simultaneous thinking in different cultural, social, political, and psycho-

⁴ See Mathias Albert: *Zur Politik der Weltgesellschaft: Identität und Recht im Kontext internationaler Vergesellschaftung*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2002. [The German term 'Vergesellschaftung' is a combination of globalization and socialization = socio-globalization. See also Matthias Albert and Lothar Brock: *Debordering in the World of States: New Spaces in International Relations*. Frankfurt am Main: World Society Research Group 1995. TN]

⁵ For the concepts of interweaving and 'histoire croisée,' see Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann: 'Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der 'histoire croisée' und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen'. In: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift für historische Sozialwissenschaften* (Göttingen) 28 (2002), p. 607–636.

logical contexts. Literature creates what is yet to come; it models our future from within the traditions of a millennial world consciousness.

This ability accounts for literature's extraordinary importance in the experimental creation of a future under the conditions of globalization. It may be that literature's experimental resourcefulness cannot stamp out the flagrant lack of imagination that marks global relations in political, economic, ideological, and religious areas; but it can fight that lack. With its manifold connections to life, literature reveals its own life force: its ability to acknowledge things as they are, or as they can be thought of, in their being-this-way, at the same time transforming 'how things are' and 'how things should have been' into a movement, indeed a pull, in the direction of 'how things should become.' In other words, the compression of life in literature creates not only a life (and thus a history) of literature but also drives a process of knowledge about life within living that extends across decades, centuries, and indeed millennia. Lodged within literature's systems of transmission, this process transforms life itself, individually and of course collectively.

To be sure, we should not stop examining the phenomena of globalization from the perspectives of economics and politics, finances, law, and medicine, history and geography. But we should be aware of the fact that these perspectives yield only more or less limited, partial views and prospects. By contrast, the literatures of the world enable sensory ways of thinking and experiencing that neither simplify the complexity nor screen out the contradictions of the multiple logics that might explain the life of and on our planet. Literature's knowledge has no substitutes: it is knowledge about life within living.

Since the *Gilgamesh* epic and the earliest narrative traditions of *Arabian Nights*, the literatures of the world have confronted the phenomenon of globalization through an aesthetic of writing and reading. As a result, literature and globalization are hardly strangers to each other, and there is no need to force any connections between them. Marked by transmission, transfer, and transformation, and thus by translation of varying sorts, their relationship could not be more intimate. In literature's world consciousness, there are many responses to the present world disorder and deregulation. They offer no simple guidelines but, rather, LifeSupport, that is, food for living and surviving,⁶ inasmuch as such nourishment can be understood as the provision of imaginative test sites or workshops for the future. To understand something anew, however, we al-

⁶ [Ette's composite terms here are 'LebensMittel' and 'ÜberLebensMittel', both pun on the German word for food or victuals, which is 'Lebensmittel,' literally, *means* for living and surviving. TN]

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