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Yasemin Yildiz. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. 292 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Yasemin Yildiz. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. 292 pp.

Keywords

postmonolingual writing, German literature, transnational writers, multilingualism

Yasemin Yildiz. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham UP, 2012. 292 pp.

Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* is an award-winning study of the tensions and disjunctions between lived, multilingual experiences in a nation that continues to privilege and adhere to a monolingual ideal that she suggests is not only retrograde but also fostered in response to the multilingual realities that define Germany today. In this welcome intervention into the myth of the mother tongue and its role in the cultivation of linguistic and cultural homogeneity, Yildiz traces the emergence of the monolingual paradigm from Johann Gottfried von Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher's romantic notion of a mother tongue and then shifts to twentieth and twenty-first century examples of postmonolingual writings by Franz Kafka, Theodor W. Adorno, Yoko Tawada, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and Feridun Zaimoğlu. Yildiz cogently unravels the knot of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic homogeneity by deftly demonstrating that the mother tongue has always contained elements of both overt and covert foreign origins and convincingly argues that the persistence of the monolingual paradigm is in fact a reaction to the reality of a postmonolingual condition represented by the writers she presents in her book.

In the first chapter, Yildiz reassesses Franz Kafka's writings and contends that the monolingual paradigm exerts a force not only on those included but also particularly on those, like Kafka, who would be excluded. Kafka's Jewishness and his relationship to Yiddish, evidenced through his German letters and diaries, are the focus of this chapter. Situated in the multilingual city of Prague with its competing German and Czech nationalisms, its citizens and the languages they spoke increasingly lived in a "side-by-side existence" determined not only by language but also by ethnicity (30). The monolingual paradigm—"a putative homology between native language and ethno-cultural identity"—negates the non-native individual's claims to the dominant language and to social and cultural belonging (34). Kafka's encounters with Yiddish and "Jargon" allow him to experience the *unheimlich* 'unhomely' in what, according to the monolingual paradigm, should have been his mother tongue. This awareness of a decoupled relationship between the mother tongue and ethnic identity signals a first step towards the postmonolingual.

Chapter Two turns the focus to Theodor W. Adorno's use and consideration of foreign words in *Minima Moralia* and the essays "Über den Gebrauch von Fremdwörtern" ('On the Use of Foreign Words') and "Wörter aus der Fremde" ('Words from Abroad') to show how multilingualism is embedded in the mother tongue. Foreign-derived words that are not fully appropriated into a language disrupt the notion of a "pure" mother tongue and serve as irritating

reminders of the foreign in the native. By examining Adorno's texts, Yildiz first shows that he "translates linguistic foreignness into social alienation," and later points to Adorno's racialization of foreign words after the Holocaust, when he relates them to Jewishness in *Minima Moralia* (81). Adorno subversively deploys foreign words in his German texts in a bid to make visible that which is deemed non-native and alienated. Thus, we see the ways in which Adorno's relationship to the German language and his use of foreign words change over time and take on a greater political urgency.

In the third chapter, Yildiz shifts to contemporary postmonolingual writers who are living and writing in a globalized Germany. Yildiz borrows Arjun Appadurai's concepts of flows and scapes to create the neologism "linguascape," a helpful term to understand language flows. Yildiz then turns to Yoko Tawada, whose work is divided into disparate Japanese and German oeuvres. Yildiz persuasively argues that Yoko Tawada's decision to live and work in Germany constitutes liberation from the ideologies couched in *Nihonjinron* (a Japanese literature movement that espouses a homogenous Japan and defines identity by blood). Similarly, Tawada's characters in the bilingual play *Till* and the German language collections *Talisman* and *Überseesungen* navigate new linguistic territories and must negotiate and re-negotiate their intersectional identities in the face of these movements. As Yildiz concludes in relationship to Tawada's work, "The postmonolingual condition . . . is not resolved by a one-time move beyond the mother tongue, but requires constant reinvention and questioning of the underlying concepts of language and identity" (142).

Where Yildiz posits a detachment from the mother tongue and freedom in Tawada's work, Chapter Four emphasizes trauma and survival in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge* (*Mother Tongue*) and *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (*Life Is a Caravanserai Has Two Doors I Came in One I Went out the Other*). In *Mutterzunge*, Turkish has become a mother tongue shaped by nationalist agendas and no longer reflects the tradition of its people. Yildiz's reading of Özdamar's postmonolingual writing, evident in the technique of literal translation, builds on the work of Leslie Adelson and Azade Seyhan and, through her emphasis on writing "beyond the mother tongue," uncovers new ways of approaching Özdamar's frequently studied works.

The final chapter demonstrates how Feridun Zaimoğlu excises the mother tongue and with it the notion of an "orientalized" masculinity from *Kanak Sprak: 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* ('Kanak Speak: 24 Discordant Notes from the Margin of Society'). Yildiz notes the absence of Turkish and the insertion of hip-hop English to render a racialized masculinity and further considers how Zaimoğlu foregrounds the abject in response to marginalization. She concludes by pointing out that while the book shows a "defiant existence

outside the monolingual paradigm,” it nevertheless cannot fully exit the monolingual paradigm against which Zaimoğlu writes (199).

Yildiz’s impressive contribution to the study of transnational writers in a German context and the broader consideration of multilingualism vis-à-vis globalization stands out in part because it is so well written. Yildiz’s prose makes the history of the German language, the modernist writings of Kafka and Adorno, and the contemporary literature of some of today’s most widely studied transnational authors in a German context accessible without the loss of rigor and fullness of ideas.

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