# The Un/Worlding of Letters: Literary Globalization's "Zones of Indistinction"

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**Abstract**  Connected with the rise of Western modernity, globalization is an equivocal project. As it eliminates one set of inequalities, it deepens another. A considerable number of its participants are thus relegated to "zones of indistinction" (Agamben 63), the non-juridical states of exception that sentence them to inarticulate lives. Nonetheless, according to Agamben, their exclusion makes the citizens' articulate lives possible. Following him, I propose these conjoined disjunctive realms of Western modernity, which not only condition but subvert and dislocate each other, to be taken as the point of departure for recent discussions of the "globalization of literature." In my interpretation, traumatic constellations that violently separate their authors from their familiar community by directing them toward a new, remote one on the world's looming horizon, nurture ethico-politically committed modern literary works. They open themselves to distant otherness in order to heal the traumatic experience of indistinction characteristic of their authors' dispossessed present. To demonstrate the manner of this opening, I attentively reconstruct Benjamin's idea of the traumatized subjects' interlocking memory chips. Such involuntary globalization counters the dominant systemic models of today, which render globalization a Western strategical project. In such a way, the model of globalization from below, which characterizes alternative, postcolonial or post-traumatic conceptualizations of world literature, opposes the model of globalization from above, which characterizes the large-scale systemic paradigms. In the final part of my paper, however, I interrogate this rigid opposition itself.
**Key words**  World literature; globalization; zone of indistinction; traumatic constellation; memory

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The feeling that the pattern of national literary and cultural historiography no longer works is growing in literary and cultural studies today. The evidence that Western literatures and cultures have been active constituents of the processes of globalization, from early modernity onwards, is burgeoning. However, the question remains open as to the manner with which this state of affairs must be dealt. The answer depends on the angle from which globalization is approached. There is an obvious disjuncture between the celebratory perspective of its proponents and the traumatized perspective of its victims, making globalization an equivocal development. As it eliminates one set of inequalities, it deepens another. In spite of its supporters' generous proclamations, imparity seems to be its essential element. Being at continuous pains to bridge up the existing gaps, it empowers some and dispossesses others.

In *Tracing Global Democracy,* I argued that the contribution of the modern idea of literature to the Western globalization of time, space, and meaning took place within this discriminatory frame. In this book, I focused on discussions about what "proper" literature ought to look like. Here I will also argue that literary works, primarily those that lay claim to "properness," emerge in response to particular traumatic constellations, that is, "political arena(s) characterized by asymmetries along (their) many intersecting and overlapping axes" (Biti, *Tracing* 5), such as national, social, economic, cultural and gendered. Rather than performing sovereign actions, literary authors respond to an injury experienced at these axes' intersection. Their works emerge from "poisonous knowledge" acquired in shattered social relationships (Das 54). "History is what hurts" (*The Political Unconscious* 102), Fredric Jameson famously remarked, and I would only add to this, especially for some of its participants. With the rise of Western modernity, they find themselves relegated to "zones of indistinction," the non-juridical states of exception, which the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben interprets as the excluded enabling domains of legislated political orders (*Homo Sacer* 63, 112, 181). Although this relegation

deprives them of their former identity attributes and political rights by reducing their human lives to bare life (*nuda vita*), Agamben leaves no doubt that it is their now inarticulate lives that provide the very condition of possibility of the acknowledged citizens' articulate lives. He claims that, within the constellation of Western modernity, "bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the common being of men" (10; trans. modified, *la città degli uomini*). According to him, the political life's *rule* and bare life's *exception* make up the conjoined disjunctive realms of Western modernity, which not only condition but subvert and dislocate each other.

Agamben is not the only contemporary political philosopher who pairs modern political rule with exception. The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari had already noticed that it is necessarily engulfed in the whirl of exception, which it cannot but "disgorge […] everywhere" (*What Is Philosophy?* 46–47). In place of a continuous history, this produces a discontinuity of "between-times (*entre-temps*), between-moments (*entre-moments*)" untranslatable into one another (Deleuze, "Immanence" 5; *Pure Immanence* 29). Following them, in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben transforms modern history into an unpredictable succession of the thresholds of indiscernibility (*soglia d'indifferenza*) or zones of indistinction (*zona d'indistinzione*)[1], in which an ongoing deterritorialization of given political territories, disengagement of their engagements, and reconfiguration of their configurations take place. In the somewhat later *State of Exception*, he claims that such states of exception entered the public political sphere with the French Revolution and, in response to them, the sphere of private self-exemption with Kant's aesthetic. [2]

Since then, the clandestine non-juridical self-exemption counteracted the public juridical state of exception, enfranchising many more collectives and individuals in the continual refashioning of their identities. Inspired by this "revolutionary atmosphere," Kant put every human under pressure to pull him/herself out of the communal constraints that were established by determining judgments in order to accomplish individuality by way of a postponed reflective judgment. Individuality is, by definition, a state of exemption that cannot be shared with others or translated into regular states. Whereas determining judgments spontaneously apply a common rule as shared with the familiar others, this explains why reflective judgment, guided by the distant others, consistently exempts itself from this rule's application[3] . Since

1    See *Homo Sacer* 4, 9, 18, 27–28.

2    See *State of Exception*, 37–39.

3     See *Critique of Judgment,* 15–16; 134–39.

the law of reflective judgment exists exclusively in its inapplicability, it is doomed to an eternal itinerancy. It requires an unremitting evacuation of prejudgments, which is a demanding and interminable task.

I interpret this inextricable intertwinement of the public juridical state of exception and the clandestine non-juridical self-exemption that was introduced into Western history by the French Revolution as a traumatic constellation that nurtures modern literary works. Banned by this historical development into "zones of indistinction," their authors are violently separated from their familiar community and forced to search for a new, remote one on the world's looming horizon. However, such an opening toward the unknown and inarticulate others would be unimaginable without the previous establishment of commercial and communicational networks, as well as the invention of new technologies from the Renaissance onwards. Communicational, mercantile, monetary, and spiritual mobility foster and accelerate each other. To take just three well-known examples, Paul Gilroy emphasized the role of slave shipping in the establishment of Western modernity,[1] Benedict Anderson pointed out that print-capitalism enabled growing numbers of people to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways (36), and Arjun Appadurai clarified to what extent the rise of mass media increased the influence of imagination in the shaping of global processes: "Even the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities are now open to the play of the imagination" (54). This is how those who find themselves drawn into the "zones of indistinction" experience the need and gain the opportunity to exempt themselves into a spatial, temporal, cultural and/or political "elsewhere." By compulsively meeting this need and using this opportunity, literary works enter the process of worlding. This answers Thomas Beebee's fundamental question from his discussion of Nietzsche's skeptical stance about world literature: "[W]hom is world literature consoling, and in what way?" (Beebee 376). Literature opens itself to distant otherness in order to heal the traumatic experience of indistinction characteristic of its authors' dispossessed present.

However, contrary to the dominant renderings of this turning toward the distant others, literary authors do not identify with these inarticulate others without previously articulating them. There is no identification *with* the distant others without an identification of these others *as* familiar beings; a sort of self-assertion inheres to any self-exemption.[2] Since the distant and inarticulate others are, by

1   See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic.*
2   For the inextricable intertwinement of these two kinds of identification, see Borch-Jacobsen 164–172 and Fuss 11–16. For "idiopathic identification" that interiorizes the other within the self and "heteropathic identification" that goes out of one's self to align oneself with another, see Silverman 185.

definition, threatening spectral appearances, they must first be domesticated. It is only after they lose their *unheimlich*, namely, their uncanny or unhomely character, that the traumatized authors make themselves into the medium of these others' revelation or performance. This preliminary and surreptitious taming of the distant others results in an operation of "inverse ventriloquism" (Anderson 198). In contrast to the literary authors' sacrificial self-presentation — since they claim to be victimizing themselves for the others — the distant others do not speak through their selves, but their selves speak through the distant others. That which involuntarily "speaks" through them is, more accurately, these authors' traumatic constellations, which they hide in front of both the others and themselves. This means, as Eric Santner notes, that their covert sacrificial narratives are "unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place" (144) or, as Paul de Man states, that their passionate attachment to the distant others "veils a defacement […] of which it is itself the cause" ("Autobiography" 81). As I will try to show in the following, instead of unveiling this veiling that inheres to their analytical objects, the interpreters of the works of "world literature" compulsively reenact it. That is to say, they identify with their literary authors in the same domesticating way that these authors identify with the distant others. Instead of analytically disaggregating their authors' experience of unhomeliness, to consecrate their own experience of unhomeliness they turn these authors into its passive victims. Endorsing their subjects' "naturalist fallacy" (Alexander 13) in this way instead of dismantling it, they continue to naturalize an experience that is all but natural.

Giorgio Agamben's argument sketched above is a case in point. It came in the immediate shadow of 9/11, which triggered the West's ill-reputed "war on terror" that he articulates in his thesis of modern Western history as a discontinuous succession of states of exceptions. Even if the West was armed to the teeth, its fortified wholeness was subject to anxiety about the prospect of its durability, which drove it to repeat the gesture of the French Revolutionaries toward "strangers" and to deprive of legal protection what it regarded as "subhuman creatures," as its alleged enemies.[1] Agamben accordingly claims that it is only today's world that "fully develops" the rule of the states of exception, which characterizes Western modernity (*State of Exception* 13). However, he stresses that the First World War had already contributed substantially to its extension (7). My point is that Agamben

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1    For the thesis that the French Revolution's definition of the citizen establishes an external barrier against foreigners while it abolishes many internal barriers, see Arendt, *Origins* 299-300, Febvre 213–214, Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood* 46-47.

charts this genealogy of the present, apparently universal state of exception — or the historical narrative of its rise via the Holocaust — in order to present his rendering of bare life as its culmination point. Amidst the whimsical discontinuity of political states of exception, he thus establishes a transhistorical moral community of their victims and acts as their spokesperson.

In fact, his rendering of bare life as the ferment of revolutionary change continues, in the delineated atmosphere, to naturalize Walter Benjamin's consecration of *bloßes Leben* from the famous essay "Critique of Violence" ("Zur Kritik der Gewalt" 202–03), which itself emerged in the sinister atmosphere following the collapse of the Second German Empire. Benjamin's essay is not only haunted by war trauma, but also by the crisis of parliamentary democracy in the defeated Germany, as well as the phantom of the "final solution" that had begun to rise on the horizon. After all, when Agamben stated that "World War One (and the years following it) appear as a laboratory for testing and honing the functional mechanisms and apparatuses of the state of exception" (*State of Exception* 7), he might have had in mind the East-Central European post-imperial space in which, after the First World War, consecutive strikes, upheavals and revolutions induced a permanent state of exception.[1] In this turbulent region, the traumatic "zone of indistinction" was unleashed from its former relegation to the imperial borderlands, invading the public political space rather than just the scattered dispossessed groups and individuals, as had been the case in the aftermath of the French Revolution[2].

When Benjamin postulated in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940) that the "'state of exception' in which we live is the rule" ("Über den Begriff" 254), I claim that he compulsively acted out, rather than worked through, the specific traumatic experience of post-imperial Europe's victimized groups and individuals. This constellation visibly affects his argumentation, all the more so the more he hides its particularity. The breakdown of the imperial patterns of collective action paved the way for their ideological reordering by charismatic leaders who requested their followers to forgo their short-term individual interests in favor of allegedly common long-term benefits.[3] By knitting together various groups' frustrations into new political platforms, they managed to mobilize the masses for their skillfully

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1    See Berend, 201.

2    See Fritzsche, 12–54.

3    See Hanson, xv.

amalgamated nationalist, socialist, and religious agendas.[1] By adapting the old patterns of religious victimhood to the imperial victims' national and social injuries, and by galvanizing their adherents for war against their "perennial" tyrants, these leaders succeeded in establishing post-imperial Europe's, as it were, permanent state of exception.

Their unprecedented unleashing of "state violence" stimulates Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" to advocate revolutionary self-exemption as the method of salvation from such a state of exception. He legitimates this self-exemption, in a typical maneuver of transference to distant and inarticulate others, by postulating an allegedly prehistorical "pure violence." However, by treating this pure violence as an unquestionable state of exception, he surreptitiously exculpates the violence of the revolutionary self-exemption as its supposed resumption. This makes his argument into an involuntary mirror inversion of that of his political opponents. Whereas the engineers of the political state of exception promise a future bereft of differences, Benjamin, as the engineer of individual self-exemption, evokes an equally undifferentiated past. Like the first project's abolition of differences, Benjamin's abolition also relies on an endless postponement because the very violence that promises it repeatedly exempts itself from it. Since the distinction thus stubbornly reenters and subverts the promised indistinction, Benjamin's critique ultimately takes recourse to a weak messianic guideline that might be formulated as: "Persist in your search for indistinction even if you can never reach it!" In accordance with it, he introduces into his argumentation numerous distinctions such as the one between pure (or divine, or revolutionary, or bloodless) violence and state (or mythic, or fateful, or bloody) violence — or between legislative and executive power, justice and law, and revelation and representation, for that matter — only to deactivate them by a violence that itself escapes such a deactivation. In such a way, this violence comes to be exempted from the same contaminating differentiation which it imposes upon all others. Positing an ethical obligation toward it, Benjamin establishes a moral

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1    The ideologically extremely hybrid populist profile of these charismatic interwar leaders was already prefigured by the politicians of disaggregating empires toward the end of the nineteenth century. See, for example, Schorske's analysis of the "politics in a new key" (116–180), in which he says of Georg von Schönerer that he "constructed his ideology out of attitudes and values from many eras and many social strata: aristocratic elitism and enlightened despotism, anti-Semitism and democracy, 1848 *grossdeutsch* democracy and Bismarckian nationalism, medieval chivalry and anti-Catholicism, and guild restrictions and state ownership of public utilities. Every one of these pairs of values the nineteenth-century liberal would have seen as contradictory. But there was a common denominator in this set of ideational fractions: total negation of the liberal elite and its values" (132).

community of the victims of political and social distinctions in the same way that we have seen his follower Agamben do in his aftermath.[1]

In the post-imperial state of overall instability, uncertainty, and indeterminacy, Benjamin thus turns indistinction from a harsh fate imposed upon those relegated into its zone, into a godlike privilege for all creatures, a sort of a sacred state of exception. This results in a paradoxically passionate attachment to the inflicted dispossession. He titles his essay "*Zur* Kritik," or "*Toward* a Critique," because his critique, due to its endless deactivating meanderings in the name of this indistinction, amounts to an interminable abolition of all distinct identities, including that of the critic's own self. Inasmuch as this critique's horizon eschews ultimate identification, Benjamin assumes a distance from Kant's proposal made in *Critique of Pure Reason*, to authorize it by the critic's given present. Any such present is for him, an adherent of the Romanticist advocacy of victims, a traumatic constellation from which the critic is invited to exempt himself or herself in the name of those whom it bereaves of distinction. Anticipating Agamben, Benjamin therefore authorizes his own critique by the zones of indistinction, which he however, without using this specific term, disaggregates and transfers from the realm of collective political existence to the realm of individual memory. He speaks of individual "memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" ("Über den Begriff" 253), in which "danger" refers to the state of indistinction imposed upon this memory's subject. Endangered memory takes possession of the respective subject by catapulting him or her out of this historical state and relegating him/her into the now-time (*Jetztzeit*). Benjamin defines this now-time as an uncanny fusion of history's divergent epochs, the far-removed "chips" of which suddenly reverberate with one another, entering curious "elective affinities" (253). Pressed by this divine spark of similarity into an unexpected proximity to one another, the indistinction of some suddenly ameliorates the indistinction of others. Thus, the extraterritorial and extemporal now-time becomes the refuge for these frustrated subjects, which pulls them out of their traumatic constellations.

It is in this context of a spontaneous interlocking of indistinct individual mem-

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1 Benjamin thus resumes the gesture of French revolutionaries who, by positing a "moral community [of mankind] justified in terms of virtue" "set out to destroy the landmarks of the past, churches, castles, and the graves of the French kings at Saint-Denis" (Fritzsche 18) because they did not fit this moral community's parameters. By raising the revolutionary groups and individuals to the status of a morally authorized assembly, Benjamin obliterates the devastating character of their liberation. I therefore agree with LaCapra's claim that his essay is not so much exemplary, as Derrida reads it in "The Force of Law," but rather symptomatic (LaCapra 160–61). It acts out his specific individual and group trauma.

ories that Benjamin uncritically consecrates bare life (*das bloße Leben*), a concept that Agamben's thesis of the modern proliferation of the zones of indistinction then continues to naturalize. Considering that zones of indistinction nurture the first works of what is today called "world literature," Benjamin's idea of interlocking memory chips deserves a closer reconstruction here. By dispersing the zone of indistinction, it promises a more specific approach to the question of literature's worlding. According to Benjamin, no subject, due to his or her constitutively divided memory archive, fully belongs to his or her present time and space, but partially also to the distant times and spaces that meet in the one and the same non-time and non-space. Benjamin explains in his 1939 essay on Baudelaire how this functions, borrowing the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory from Bergson, Freud, and Proust. If voluntary memory connects a subject with his/her respective present, involuntary memory pulls him/her out of it into a plural and heterogeneous non-time and non-space in which s/he joins temporally and spatially distant subjects. Following this distinction between the voluntary disconnection (*Entbindung*) from the ancestors in the name of the present and the involuntary (re)connection (*Bindung*) with them in the name of the future, Freud stated in his essay "Moses and Monotheism" (1939) that the human psychic life contains not only that which an individual has him/herself experienced, but also the "pieces of phylogenetic origin" transmitted to him/her at the moment of his/her birth. He called this inborn relationship with the "experiences of earlier generations," this "inheriting of the memory traces" of "our ancestors" ("Der Mann Moses" 545), an "archaic heritage" (547). It draws the human being into an interminable chain of transmissions by reducing its distinction from the animal, for animals cannot really survive without inheriting their instincts from their ancestors.

Freud's idea of reuniting the human and animal beings in the subconscious dimension of survival (*Überleben*), as opposed to the conscious sphere of life (*Leben*) that separates them from one another, is very close to Benjamin's project of de-anthropomorphizing the notion of life through that of survival and living-on (*Überleben, Fortleben*)[1]. By opposing the then-dominant philosophy of life inspired by the Enlightenment attachment to the present, Benjamin, in the wake of Romanticist addiction to the past, resolutely reconnects human life with its immemorial 'animal' origins. In his interpretation, life establishes a dense network of relations between its creatures, which they unconsciously depend on since it escapes their conscious insight and control. This network comes to expression in all of its subjects — the animate ones such as humans and animal beings, and the inanimate ones

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1    See "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" 9.

such as languages and artworks — in the form of their constitutively escaping origin that subverts their autonomy and sovereignty.

This is where Benjamin's "bare life" — a counter-state of exception to the official political one, as it were — finds its field of operation. It circulates through this infrastructure of involuntary memory archives that relates its creatures to one another in a non-identifiable time and space, enabling their self-exemptions from their presents. At stake is an all-encompassing network of corporeal memory archives, which embraces not only humans, animals, languages, artworks, and all kinds of phenomena and objects, but also crosses spatial (such as geopolitical, cultural, and/or linguistic) and temporal (such as historical, epochal, and/or generational) borders. Benjamin's all-embracing bare life enables the most divergent memory archives of its constituents to establish concordances, resemblances and "elective affinities" with one another by means of spontaneous, instantaneous, and unpredictable "side leaps" out of their particular locations. In sharp contrast to goal-directed, unidirectional, and ordering history, this unconscious network of memory traces is dispersive, multidirectional, and vertiginous. One cannot trace it back to its origin because any origin proves to be a trace in itself, which leads to another origin, and so on. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin accordingly evokes in the German word for the origin, *der Ursprung*, the etymological meaning of "primordial leap" (*Der Ursprung* 226). This implies that creatures and phenomena have their source not in an identity but, on the contrary, in a leap out of it into an endless network of relations. They contribute to world-making from their very beginnings, even if they are unaware of or unwilling to accept this. Although Benjamin's concept of bare life has the character of an unfinished draft, considering its universalist ambition I would risk the thesis that the sketched interlocking of involuntary memory traces is how he imagines the process which we today call globalization or worlding (*mondialisation*).

Benjamin's and Agamben's concepts of an involuntary globalization rooted in an apparently universal bare life are well fitted to counter the dominant systemic models of today. Benjamin's understanding of globalization as an unpredictable interlocking of dispersed historical victims' memory archives, in particular, substantially differs from its triumphant understanding as a Western strategical project. Opposing such a model of globalization from above, the postcolonial theorist Walter Mignolo proposed a model of globalization from below. Whereas the colonial model of globalization "connects from the center of the large circle outward, and leaves the outer places disconnected from each other" (Mignolo 765), the postcolonial model of globalization imagines "Western civilization as a large circle with a series of satellite circles intersecting the larger one" (Mignolo 765). It "connects the

diverse subaltern satellites appropriating and transforming Western global designs" (Mignolo 765). Transferred into Benjamin's and Agamben's terms, globalization is conceived here as a mobile and heterogeneous network of relations within which the clandestine non-juridical self-exemptions or unconscious memory archives, through their interlocking, continuously subvert the public juridical state of exception or the official memory archive.

Even if he does not go this far, considering the preliminary and sketchy character of his idea, Benjamin in fact alludes to this ineffable network of relations as the ultimate potential horizon of any particular memory when he says that in any memory an "immemorial prehistory […] murmurs" ("Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" 640). By drawing memory into such an immemorial or murmuring zone, he wants to emphasize an ultimately indistinctive profile that resists all attempts to distinguish the subject to whom a particular memory "belongs." In Novalis's terms, no subject has a natural origin but only a retroactive and therefore artificial one (*Schriften 1* 253). In Freud's terms, there is something uncanny or unhomely (*das Unheimliche* means both)[1] in any memory archive that, under traumatic circumstances, unexpectedly steps out from its apocryphal, hidden existence.[2] Its sudden resurfacing disconcerts memory's distinctive reality in the form of an indeterminate "sense of a déjà vu" (*Empfindung des schon einmal Erlebthabens*; *Die Psychopathologie* 295). In Benjamin's closely affiliate terms, the necessary precondition for the sudden manifestation of the individual memory's transindividual latency zone is the traumatizing depriving of human subjects of their "I" (*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik* 40), "reflexive consciousness" (*Der Ursprung* 81), or "face" (*Der Ursprung* 218), all of which anchor them in their distinctive presents. The "expressionless" (*ausdruckslos*; "Goethes *Wahlverwandschaften*" 181), "undefinable" (*undefinierbar*; "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" 639), or "unapproachable" (*unnahbar*; 647) profile that they acquire through such a dispossession,[3] mobilizes operations in their suppressed memory archives. These gradually activate the hitherto dormant connections with the distant subjects' memories. Rising in the shadow of historical or personal catastrophes, in these defaced subjects the new and explosive "relation at a distance" thus wins the battle against the relation to familiar beings and phenomena

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1    See *das Unheimliche*

2    See "Das Unheimliche", 232.

3    This series of Benjamin's negating attributes — expression*less*, *un*definable, *un*approachable — indicates that self-exempting operations link the liberation with the annihilation of their subjects. In Dominick LaCapra's critical view, they threaten to "disarticulate relations, confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions" in a kind of "post-traumatic acting out" that is "caught up in a compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes" (La Capra, *Writing History* 21).

in their immediate surroundings. In the splintered world after the catastrophe of the First World War, Benjamin's marvelously abundant compensatory phantasy does not merely turn indistinction and dispossession into a privilege, but makes them celebrate the ultimate triumph.

This might be the reason why his and Agamben's visions of "globalization from below" have become so attractive for the alternative, postcolonial or post-traumatic conceptualizations of world literature. The latter criticize the large-scale systemic paradigms, which are characteristic of the colonial-imperial model of globalization, for reducing temporally and spatially distant literatures and cultures to a market-driven common denominator.[1] They use this "self-evident" criterion to establish geographical, cultural, and/or axiological hierarchies between world literatures and cultures in the same manner that, for example, money establishes a hierarchy between various commodities' values. Through such an all-equalizing systematization, they allocate to literatures and cultures their proportional distinctions, or determinate places, thus transforming their irreducible differences into the pure varieties of one and the same substance. This approach "from above" ignores the literary works' fundamental indistinction, which figures centrally in the alternative model of "globalization from below." As Haun Saussy, one of the adherents of the latter model, cautioned, literary experience resists accommodation, location, or mapping because it "negates determinate space and time" (292). Following this thread, in her 2013 book *Against World Literature*, Emily Apter proposed a plurality of "untranslatable" world literatures, an idea that was already underway when she published it, especially in the transdisciplinary field at the intersection of trauma and memory studies.[2] Works such as Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznaider's *The Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age* (2006)[3], Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), Gabriele Schwab's *Haunting Legacies* (2010), Azade Seyhan[4]'s *Writing outside Nation* (2011), Ottmar Ette's *TransArea: Eine literarische Globalisierungsgeschichte* (2012)[5], and Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Post-Memory* (2012) drew attention first to dispersed memories (in contrast to unified history) as the working field of modern literature, and second to the modern memory's affilia-

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1   I have taken issue with these paradigms in *Tracing Global Democracy*, 33–56, 133–178, which is why I have skipped this discussion here and concentrated merely on the alternative paradigms.

2   See *Against World Literature*

3   See Daniel Levy and Nathan Sznaider

4   See Seyhan.

5   See Ottmar Ette.

tive structures across the self-enclosed familial and national bonds. In an enlarged global arena that is nowadays structured by media networks and constituted through the flux of contacts between people and technologies, these authors claim that memories cross the perennial lines of difference, establishing correspondences and connections between isolated personal and group histories.

Let me take a closer look at some of these intriguing works at the intersection of trauma and memory studies before I take issue with Apter's proposal, which directly leans on Benjamin's concept of untranslatability. Focusing on the histories of victims, Michael Rothberg discusses "transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance" (11), the ways in which traumatic memories' unpredictable intersections initiate new alliances and collectivities. By opposing multidirectional with competitive memory, he highlights the former's "nonappropriative hospitality to histories of the other" (*Multidirectional* 25). He argues "that far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale" (6), by cutting across diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites, "has contributed to the articulation of other histories" (6). However, he realizes that his thesis of the nonappropriative opening of one traumatic memory toward its counterparts is contradicted by Freud's thesis of "screen memory", which states that, whenever we turn to other histories of suffering, we tend to suppress or obliterate our own history (13–14). Although Rothberg expresses his conviction that screen memories cannot prevent cross-referential acts of empathy and solidarity between memories, it should be recalled that Freud defined the *Deckerinnerung*, at least in its covering (*verdeckende*) version,[1] as linked with repression, displacement, and inhibitions[2]. Following him, Marianne Hirsch described screen memories as "[t]he images already imprinted on our brains, the tropes and structures we bring from the present to the past, hoping to find them there and to have our questions answered" (42). In their transference to the memories of the others, they "mask other images and other, as yet unthought or unthinkable, concerns" (Hirsch 42) by remaining open only to that in other memories, which offers them a consolation.

Whereas Rothberg's coalitional politics of multidirectional memories focuses only on the histories of victims, Gabriele Schwab's intercultural dynamic of memory also includes the histories of perpetration. She claims that the "shock of recognizing the atrocities committed by one's own people may prepare the ground for poten-

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1    According to Freud, there is also a more positive, or covered (*verdeckte*), version of screen memories.

2    See "Über Deckerinnerungen" 536–37, 551.

tial alliances with the victims" (27). It is easier for them to come to terms with their past if they displace this confrontation onto other histories of violence. Through an "engagement with other violent histories" (Schwab 29), the confrontation with one's own history becomes "psychically more manageable" (29). "I am indeed arguing that histories of violence can be put in a dialogic relationship with one another, thus creating a transferential dynamic for those who participate in, witness, or inherit those histories transgenerationally" (Schwab 29). This means that memories "are always already composites of dynamically interrelated and conflicted histories, […] conflicting fields" of "transversal encounters" (Schwab 30). Such palimpsestic rendering of memory takes into account the "increasing global interdependency, […] the fact that we live at the intersections of so many histories of violence that the trauma we experience may well be compared to a 'cumulative trauma'" (31). Schwab's principal thesis is that only "through the detour of displaced yet related memories of violence" can we engage in a proper working through of our own past or a "true politics of mourning" (31). She agrees with Judith Butler who asserts that "struggle must be waged against those forces that seek to regulate affect in differential ways" (*Frames of War* 52), namely, through an identitarian memory politics. Nevertheless, how does this activist ethical program accord with her thesis that "much of how we process violent histories is bound to operate on an unconscious level" (Schwab 30) because of our traumatic amnesia or powerful defense mechanisms based on our feelings of shame and guilt? Does the grade of our responsiveness to suffering at a distance come as a result of our personal willingness and readiness or, probably, the different grade and kind of room for maneuver that is allocated to us in the network of global interdependencies, in other words, from the state of affairs that we cannot be held responsible for? If the starting positions are unavoidably immensely different, do we not inappropriately level them down by confronting them all with the same ethical imperative? And does such an inconsiderate equalization not remind us of systemic approaches?

The same neglect of mechanisms that unconsciously screen a traumatized memory's opening toward other memories characterizes the argument of Marianne Hirsch, another instructive theorist of the plural networking from below. She realizes that intersecting memories tend to "occlude or erase each other" (20), confronting the researcher with the task of "turn[ing] competitive or appropriative memory into more capacious transnational memory work" (21), in order to prevent this from happening. Her proposal is to think "different historical experiences in relation to one another to see what vantage points they might share or offer each other" (24–25), or to juxtapose ones with others to reconfigure their apparent indifference. Hence, their

linking and superimposing is intended to provide them with alternative possibilities of knowing that would otherwise escape them. However, Hirsch is aware that memories offer resistance to such a broadening of their familiar horizon since they passionately adhere to it. To underpin this, at the beginning of her argument, she distinguishes between memory as a personally embodied knowledge and postmemory as a knowledge that is inherited at a generational remove and therefore transferred and traumatic (1–5). Whereas memory belongs to those who have lived an event, "post" implies a troubling continuity: we are distanced from that with which we are profoundly interrelated. Due to traumas, wars, exterminations, exile, and refugeehood, today people live in a world of ruptured continuities and broken heritage lines. Post-memorial work is engaged to counteract this loss of the once familiar past (32–33).

According to Hirsch, there are two ways to deal with this traumatic condition with which we are faced. The first is *familial* postmemory, a defense reaction that is at pains to reestablish an affective connection with the family past that was violently destroyed by history. This kind of postmemory endeavors to regain possession of the "living" relationship to others, for example through literature, photography, and testimony (32–33). The second way is *affiliative* postmemory, which is oriented toward establishing, via various technologies and social institutions, connections with distant, unknown yet affiliate beings in order to encompass a larger collective in a web of transmission (35–36). Although many people stick to the first option, tending to retrieve the sense of family and safety by projecting an image of family onto emerging affiliative institutions, for Hirsch such family pictures operate as screen memories that mask an unbearable visual landscape too difficult to look at. They are retroactive and wishful projections of the world before its destruction. Therefore, like Schwab, she opts for affiliative postmemory which exposes the disjunction, incongruity and incommensurability between the present and the past [1].

Despite their different distribution of accents, Rothberg's, Schwab's and Hirsch's arguments correspond in their prioritizing of the self's "nonappropriative" identification *with* the distant others over the self's "appropriative" identification of others *as* familiar beings. In the posttraumatic situation of enforced unhomeliness in which we live today, their thesis reads, experiencing the other as a permanent invitation to our self-exemption is a more appropriate option than experiencing him or her as an object for our self-assertion. In my view, there are two principal problems with this argument. The first is that it distinguishes between the "mythical" world *before* the apocalypse and the historical one *after* it, and the second is that it renders two kinds of identification as freely available alternatives. I believe that, on the contrary,

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1    See Hirsch, 51–52, 63.

the self's appropriation of the other and the self's transposition into the other are, from the very beginning of human phylogenetic and ontogenetic history, not free but compulsive and not separable but interdependent operations. In *Tracing Global Democracy*, I have discussed these operations in terms of phylogenetic history, under the labels of Roman imperial and Greek elitist cosmopolitanism, and in the frame of ontogenetic history, under the psychoanalytic labels of libidinal desire for the other-as-object and emotional identification with the other-as-model[1]. It turned out that, since one is conscious and the other preconscious, they do not "dialogically interact" as two autonomous operations but one operation acts as the other's suppressed enabler/disabler. Such a peculiar *disjunctive conjunction* between them calls into question not only their historical succession — before and after the apocalypse — but also the proclaimed autonomy of each of them. Since one kind of identification smuggles itself into the unconscious zone of the other, this indistinctive zone haunts, disturbs, and contaminates the respective identification's autonomy and distinction.

Hence, *pace* Hirsch, it is not so that memory comes first as the embodied knowledge of those who have lived through an event, and postmemory comes second as the traumatic knowledge of those whose continuity with the event has been violently ruptured. Living an event does not mean introjecting it without any social mediation on our part. Suffice to recall Lacan's warning that the total symbolic net envelops human life long before a human being enters the world[2] or Althusser's reminder that each human is always a subject, even before his/her birth, predestined to become such by his/her firmly ideologically structured family configuration.[3] No family offers a safe transhistorical shelter to its members without simultaneously imparting its historical restrictions upon them, which means that trauma already inheres to it rather than being simply inflicted on it by history. Even if personal memory is often engaged against historical traumas, this does not mean that its "affect, embodiment, privacy, and intimacy" (Hirsch 16) are protected from the influence of history. Despite the memorizers' projections of their personal oases of freedom, their memories are necessarily shaped by historical tensions, conflicts, and ruptures. This is how the self's preconscious identification *with* distant others contaminates his/her identification of others *as* familiar beings.

The same hybridization holds for the apparently nonappropriative identification with inarticulate distant others. Their defaced, spectral appearance must first be

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1    See *Tracing* 17–18, 20, 57, 83.

2    See *Ecrits* 279.

3    See Althusser, 128.

domesticated through the attribution of a familiar face and voice, in other words, the assignment of a home to their unhomeliness. By appropriating the distant others in such a preconscious fashion, the self makes his or her identification-*as*, or self-assertion, into the hideous prerequisite of his or her identification-*with*, or self-exemption. To give an example from my *Tracing Global Democracy*, Kant only identified with all the diverse members of *Menschenrasse* after he had made this human race into an embodiment of the divine *ratio*. Using the Enlightened ideal of rationality as a "self-evident" criterion, he then distinguished not only between the human and animal races, but also between rational and irrational human beings, such as women, children, and barbarians. In the final analysis, he abandoned all individual or collective subjects who proved themselves unable of meeting this ideal to all kinds of sufferings connected with this failure. He did not hesitate to consider them responsible for such "immaturity" (*Tracing* 14).

I interpret such a tacit and discriminatory introduction of one kind of identification into the other as the unconscious establishment of a zone of indistinction, which becomes a ferment that persistently haunts and disturbs the achieved distinction. Instead of relegating identification-*as* into the pre-traumatic realm of distinction and identification-*with* into the post-traumatic realm of indistinction — separating them from one another by a traumatic event, as Rothberg, Schwab, and Hirsch do — I thus make distinction and indistinction into closely interdependent incommensurables. They meet in a disjunctive conjunction of agencies and enablers that is, as I have spelled out at length in *Tracing Global Democracy*, genuine to all traumatic constellations.[1] Due to the imparity at their core, such constellations are merely *potential* generators of trauma. That which one group of their constituencies experiences as trauma is neither in nature nor in degree a universal experience. Put in the frame of a constellation, traumas are instead multilateral constructs, which come into being "in circumstances [people] have not themselves created and which they do not fully comprehend" (Alexander 4). How traumatized they will feel depends on how they, at a given moment, experience their situation located at the intersections of various axes of distinction (or homeliness) and indistinction (or unhomeliness). While people feel at home with regard to one group of the constellation's constituencies, they can simultaneously feel not-at-home with regard to another such group. This feeling, although sometimes knowingly devastating, is not a homogeneous given, but a complex and changeable variable.

This means that the concept of traumatic constellation prevents either homeliness or unhomeliness from becoming, each for its part, a universal condition of

1    See *Tracing* 5–6, 70–72.

all the world's constituencies. Homeliness, which generates identification-*as* or self-assertion, and unhomeliness, which generates identification-*with* or self-exemption, are instead taken to be closely interrelated but incommensurable projects of the world's commonality. If we conceive the world as a traumatic constellation, this disjunctive conjunction permeates each and every one of its innumerous and manifold constituencies. This is why, within it, one type of commonality cannot but be launched at the expense of another. In order for one constituency that pursues one type of commonality to acquire distinction, the other constituency that pursues the other type must be banished into indistinction and unhomeliness. In these terms, the world would be no longer interpreted as a consensual space, but a dissensual one that underlies (re)configuration from any of its equally asymmetric regional constellations, in the same way that these constellations are persistently reconfigured by national, social, and individual constellations as their internally divided constituents. There would be no *one* world, but rather, *many* nodes of its overall network that align with some against others in their political efforts to adapt the whole, or at least their particular segment, to their specific needs. To the degree to which one such node manages to acquire worldliness, it sentences other nodes to unworldliness.

This is the point at which my rendering of literature's worlding diverges from Emily Apter's advocacy of many incommensurable world literatures. She makes Benjamin's concept of untranslatability in his essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923), which was elaborated by a number of its commentators, into the main principle of literature's worlding. For Apter literatures and literary works, like languages and cultures, are untranslatable into one another. This is not because each of them is singular and unique, but because their common denominator is missing. In his earlier essay "On Language as Such and on the Languages of Man" (1916), Benjamin stated that the languages of men emerged after the collapse of the language as such, a breakdown that was accompanied by the fall from the linguistic mode of revelation (*Offenbarung*) into that of communication (*Mitteilung*). However, since *Mitteilung* means both "communicating" and "sharing with," all "languages of man" necessarily share with one another the "language as such" to which they once belonged. As this language does not "mean or express anything" and extinguishes "all information, all sense, and all intention" ("The Task" 81), it resists *communication*. If the translation wants to assure an afterlife for itself — and this is, after Benjamin, what it is all about — it must *mime* this language of truth as the generator of the untranslatability of human tongues. By miming the language of truth as the missing unifier of the languages of men, the translation "makes visible" the fleeting "reciprocal relationship between languages", their "kinship" and "convergence" (77);

it shows how "interrelated" they are "in what they want to express" (77); and it lets both its own language and that of the original "undergo a change", a "maturing process", which assures them afterlife and "abundant flowering" (77).

Benjamin thus endows the translation with the "special mission" (78) of "a transformation and a renewal" of both languages (77). We learn from his later essay "Doctrine of the Similar" (1933) that its ethical task is to enliven in alienated human tongues the remnants of the language of truth as repositories of the "most fleeting and refined substances" ("Doctrine" 68). In such a manner, translations raise their originals "into a higher and purer linguistic air" ("The Task" 79). Ultimately — and we are now approaching the only spot at which the concept of untranslatability appears in Benjamin's essay — "meaning attaches to them" so fleetingly that they "prove to be untranslatable" (82). What Benjamin wants to say is that their mode of intention (*die Art des Meinens*) goes far beyond the object intended by their producers or users (*das Gemeinte*). This can be compared with the way in which life goes far beyond its manifestations. Once drawn into the process of proper translation, human tongues cannot control their modes of intention because they are first "in a constant state of flux" and second continuously supplement each other (78). They do not envelop their content naturally, like the skin of a fruit, but artificially, like a "royal robe with ample folds" over the body of a king (79). Put in terms of Benjamin's other simile, they let their sense resonate as loosely as the wind makes "an Aeolian harp" resonate with its touch (82). It is precisely this highly elusive "mode of intention," or horizon of latency, that makes languages untranslatable, even if these languages' users ceaselessly translate them into "intended objects". In fact, with regard to this fleetingness connected with their horizon of latency, Benjamin's essay draws a systematic parallel between languages and artworks. To point out the degree to which the mode of intention genuine to artworks also goes far beyond the object intended by their authors and receivers, he already states in the first paragraph that "no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (75). Their sense transcends their meaning.

It is this parallel, I would say, that stimulates Apter to rethink world literature in the frame of translation studies. She insisted in *The Translation Zone* that literary works cease to belong to single, discrete languages, becoming fleeting and untranslatable to the degree to which they are forced by various historical traumas to enter "a perpetual state of in-translation" (*The Translation Zone* 6–7). However, Benjamin cautions that fleetingness is not equally distributed among artworks and languages, but depends on their ability to activate the "element that does not lend itself to translation" (79) of their originals. In fact, the originals prolong their life

only to the degree that their untranslatability, placed beyond the horizon of their producers, gets translated. Benjamin warns that the translational activity retains its "possibly foremost significance" if it is not focused "exclusively on man" but rescues from oblivion that which men "proved unable to translate" (76). It does not serve men, but rather life, the transmission of which artworks are better qualified to take care of than creatures (76), languages better than their users, and some languages better than the others that lead the undignified life of pure information (82). Not everything is "credited with life" (76), Benjamin tells us, but only that which has "a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history" (76). To have a history of one's own means to be able to assure "potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations" (77). Nobody will translate a work that has not "reached the age of its fame" (77), that is, has exempted itself from history and its determinate location into the extratemporal and extraterritorial now-time.

Untranslatable as it is, life establishes clear criteria of translatability for its manifestations. Only those that foster its uncanny or unhomely stream of becoming deserve this afterlife; those who fall as its victims do not. This means that with life — and the language of truth as its representative — Benjamin introduces a divine horizon that enjoys an unquestioned "state of exception." From this extraordinarily privileged position, this divine "state of exception" establishes a clear hierarchy of its manifestations within the human "regular state." Since Absent God can announce itself merely "in an indirect and negative way" (Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking" 146), the more indirect and negative a given manifestation comes to be and the more intense feeling of unhomeliness it induces, the higher reputation it enjoys in Benjamin's and Apter's view. This is why, in her earlier works, Apter favors, with Homi Bhabha, literature of exilic consciousness characterized by non-consensual terms of affiliation, hybridity, liminality, and in-betweenness[1]. Along the same lines, in *Against World Literature,* she focuses on literature that emerges from a translation failure, mistranslation, the *contresense*, the unsayable, the inexpressible, and the nonsensical (*Against World Literature* 9–11). Both she and Benjamin authorize only such a translation of life into its manifestation that fosters and proliferates life's interminable labyrinths. Inasmuch as such translation "belongs fully to no one" but life that negates all property, it is for Apter "a model of deowned literature" (15) or "screwed-up literature" that turns the world of properties upside down (18). In accordance with this, literature is celebrated to the degree to which it exempts itself from the given determinate into a distant and indeterminate world.

In sum, while it argues against the large-scale systemic projects of world

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1    See Bhabha 12-13; and Apter, "Comparative Exile" 92.

literature because they allocate literatures and works their determinate location, Apter's rethink of world literature is itself centered on another common denominator: an unhomeliness that is, though conceived in inverse terms, no less discriminary. Promoting unhomeliness into the universal condition of the world's constituencies, it maps the world not as a space of dissent but, typical of the weak messianic tradition, as that of a postponed consensus. Whereas the systemic common denominator of world literature operates in self-asserting terms, this alternative weak messianic denominator operates in self-exempting terms. This means that both, in the final analysis, deny the world attribute to literatures that follow opposed terms. Instead of dismantling the discriminatory politics of literature itself in the bifurcated process of its worlding, both systemic and messianic projects thus compulsively reenact it.

I introduce the concept of a traumatic constellation in order to avoid this repetition of discrimination. Instead of opposing to one another the identification of the other as the self (the identification-*as* or self-assertion) and the identification of the self as the other (the identification-*with* or self-exemption), traumatic constellation establishes a relationship of disjunctive conjunction between them. In such a way, they become closely interdependent incommensurables. This means that, by privileging one type of identification and by looking for allies and adherents in order to institute it, a given literary work necessarily operates at the expense of the other type of identification, which makes its liberating *politics* gradually slip into an imposed *police*. By "politics" and "police," I am referring to Jacques Rancière's well-known dissymmetry. In his terms, this tacit metamorphosis of politics into a police takes place while an emancipating activity institutes a platform of commonality[1]. Of course, such an often invisible transformation is by no means reserved for literature, but characterizes all political agencies. As I have tried to show, it smuggles itself into Benjamin's arguments and, in a compulsive reenactment of his theses, also into Agamben's and finally Apter's arguments in favor of a consistent self-exemption. The intention of the concept of traumatic constellation is to circumvent such an involuntary entrapment into alternative discriminatory patterns by instead examining what drives literature, in given historical and political circumstances, into accepting their bifurcating terms.

This means that, in my view, the task of the researcher of literature's worlding is not to subsume the dissensus that underlies it under consensus about *what world literature actually is* since this would amount to a *policing* or "democratic despotism" (Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* 20). I advocate instead the *politics* of

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1    See Rancière, *On the Shores* 11–20; *Disagreement* 21–42, 61–64.

research, which implies readdressing, reaffirming and reinstating this dissensus. Following Rancière's understanding of democracy, the disagreement between two paths of globalization — the one from above and the one from below — does not *precede* the problem-solving establishment of consensus, but *follows* it and ensues from it[1]. This is because, in this conception, the world is not a desired state, but a *permanent practice of highlighting the denial* inherent in its political representations, and literature is but one of these representations. Persistently enacting the right to have rights, the world is never accomplished, but must be continuously implemented, untiringly opening its public space up to its suppressed and otherwise missed possibilities, creating possibilities for the emergence of new forms of participation, new accommodations and new agencies within it. This is why world literature's systematic production of dispossessed alterity, as well as its consistent perpetuation of an inferior alternative, must not be obliterated, but untiringly disclosed.

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1    See Rancière, *Disagreement,* 27.

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