AGAINST FEAR:
OTTMAR ETTE’S
LifeStudies
AGAINST FEAR: OTTMAR ETTE’S LifeStudies

Vera M. Kutzinski

Resumo:

Escrito como uma introdução para a tradução ao inglês do livro Writing-between-Worlds: TransArea Studies and the Literatures without a fixed Abode, do crítico alemão Ottmar Ette, este artigo discute duas hipóteses fundamentais da obra de Ette: 1) a literatura está em constante movimento; ela é dinâmica e, especialmente no século XXI – o “século das migrações”, como denomina o autor –, move-se livremente através de todo tipo de fronteira, inclusive as nacionais. 2) Os textos literários decodificam artisticamente os padrões desses movimentos espaço-temporais e os armazenam em forma de um “saber-sobre-o-viver” ou “saber-sobreviver”. As ideias de Ette são apresentadas como ferramenta para a construção de uma coexistência pacífica, em oposição à cultura do medo e aos discursos de ódio que têm dominado o debate público nos Estados Unidos e em outros países.

Palavras-chave: Ottmar Ette; saber-sobre-o-viver; convivência; Estudos Transárea

Abstract:

Written as an introduction to the English translation of Ottmar Ette’s Writing-between-Worlds: TransArea Studies and the Literatures without a fixed Abode, this article presents the two fundamental hypotheses of Ette’s works: 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 national ones. Two, literary texts artistically encode the patterns of such spatiotemporal movements and store them in the form of “survival-knowledge” or “knowledge-for-living”. Ette’s ideas are presented here as tools to help building peaceable coexistence, in contrast with the culture of fear and the discourses of hate that have dominated the public debate both in the United States and abroad.

Keywords: Ottmar Ette; knowledge-for-living; living-together; TransArea Studies

1 Department of English, Vanderbilt University, USA

<< SUMÁRIO
“Fear is a vice that takes root,” Colin Dayan writes in her fascinating meditation on the larger implications of efforts in the USA to exterminate “dangerous” dogs.² The particular fear to which such killings respond is one of many manifestations of the politics of fear that have taken root in the society in which I have lived for more than thirty years now. If it is not the panic about pit-bulls, it is the fear of African American men, of illegal “Mexican” immigrants, or of Muslim refugees from Syria, all deemed potential sources of domestic “terror.” Now more than ever, most of the popular media in this fabled land of the free tar cultural “Others” with the ideological brush of fear and suspicion, exhorting feckless viewers to do the same. The outbursts of a certain Republican presidential hopeful, whose approach to winning an election is to exacerbate divisions among class, racial, and religious lines, have raised public expressions of fear in USAmerica to the highest pitch since 9/11.³ Demurring voices exist, but they are largely drowned out by the omnipresent white noise of non-sense cloaked as reasonableness.

The troubling talk of building walls and restricting immigration, even of sequestering USAmerican citizens of Muslim faith in internment camps, contrasts starkly with the visions of living-together we encounter in the voluminous work of Ottmar Ette, chair of Romance literatures at the University of Potsdam in Brandenburg, Germany. In his countless publications, Ette offers alternative, nuanced ways of thinking about human relations that cross established geographical and cultural divides. Yet, many

³ See Bernie Sanders on Donald Trump, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtriw4pRcPQ. The diction and the tone of the majority of the blog responses to Sanders’s suggestion that one needs to bring people together instead are just as disturbing in their pronounced lack of respect for others who are not likeminded as Trump’s anti-Muslim agenda.
of the texts he analyzes are entirely unknown to readers in countries like the USA. When working on Writing-between-Worlds: TransArea Studies and the Literatures without a fixed Abode, the English translations of Ette’s 2005 German monograph ZwischenWeltenSchreiben: Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz, I was often struck by just how many of the works that Ette repeatedly calls to our attention are not (yet?) available in English-language translation. Among them are Max Aub’s Manuscrito cuervo (1999), Juana Borrero’s Epistolario (1966-67), Albert Cohen’s Jour de mes dix ans (1945), Iván de la Nuez’s La balsa perpetua (1998), Jesús Díaz’s Dime algo sobre Cuba (1998), Sherko Fatah’s Im Grenzland (2003), Luis Fayad’s La caída de los puntos cardinales, Zoé Valdés’s Café Nostalgia (1997), and Cécile Wajsbrot’s Mémorial (2005). This is not even to mention prize-winning novels by Elias Khoury and Emine Sevgi Özdamar and poetry collections by José F.A. Oliver and Botho Strauss. As a result, English-only and other monolingual readers may not even realize how little they know about the diverse perspectives that writers from other parts of the planet, working in a host of “foreign” languages, have to offer on the subject of peaceable coexistence. These writers have much to tell us about how we can survive fear and the forms of social and physical brutality it breeds by creating and by passing on to us what Ottmar Ette has so fittingly termed ÜberLebenswissen, “knowledge(s)-for-living-together.” Among other vital things, they shows us that respect, an antidote to the social dispossession that fear brings with it, is radically different from tolerance, which too many tout as a social good. As Ette emphasizes,

[t]olerance constructs otherness so that it can simultaneously stop others from being and from coming into their own. Those who tolerate are, first and foremost, interested in safeguarding their own power,

4 Writing-between-Worlds is forthcoming in 2016 (Berlin: de Gruyter).
their own identity, and the logic of their own mechanisms of exclusion. Even in the closest quarters, there is no conversation, no real exchange, and no human living-together in mutual respect. In this way, tolerance [...] can become an insult. [...] Tolerance alone [...] is not enough to work against exclusion and aggression; nor can it prevent them in the first place. As mere condonation, tolerance can become a prelude to physical violence.5

Passages such as this one demonstrate how Ottmar Ette’s critical-theoretical work on the literatures of the world can function as a survival guide not just for humanists across the planet, whose academic disciplines seem to teeter on the brink of extinction like unruly canine breeds. Such work is a survival guide for anyone searching for constructive alternatives to the ever-multiplying forms of violence – economic, social, inter and intracultural, and epistemological – that mark so many people’s lives worldwide.

Who, then, is Ottmar Ette? A specialist in Romance literatures, Ette is esteemed 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.6 These, in addition to the writers I list above, are only some of the many different authors whose work find their way into Ette’s prolific critical writings. Yet, presenting his writings grouped in accordance with

5 Ottmar Ette, ÜberLebenswissen: Die Aufgabe der Philologie (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2004), 263. All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise indicated.
6 See Ottmar Ette, Weltbewusstsein: Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne (Weilerwist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2002), and Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung: Das Mobile des Wissens (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2009).
geographies that coincide with different academic fields does a disservice to what I find most compelling about Ette’s scholarship: its comparative ethos, the fact that it crosses national, linguistic, and disciplinary borders with such graceful 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. While this multi-pronged approach, which he calls “TransArea studies,” is a significant factor in all of his work, it is perhaps most clearly in evidence in his more recent critical writings on literary and cultural history, notably in his ÜberLebenswissen trilogy.

The volumes that make up this trilogy consist of (1) ÜberLebenswissen: Die Aufgabe der Philology (Survival-knowledge: the task [or surrender] of philology) from 2004; (2) ZwischenWeltenSchreiben: Literatures ohne festen Wohnsitz (Writing-between-worlds: literatures without a fixed abode) from 2005; and (3) 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.” At the same time, however, it is also 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”

---


8 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, and Hannah Arendt, among others. The uniqueness 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), 77–109.
or, as I prefer, “knowledge-for-living” (in which the notion of knowledge about living in always already implicit).\(^9\) 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 twin 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.\(^10\) Writing-between-Worlds and ZusammenLebensWissen build on these conceptual foundations to advance an alternative discourse about life and for living (together) through which the erstwhile philologies, or literary studies, can be reinvigorated as literary and cultural LifeStudies.\(^11\) In this way, they can “be opened up, made accessible and relevant, to the larger society.” For the humanists of all stripes, “[d]oing so is, simply and plainly, a matter of survival.”\(^12\)

Put differently, knowledge-for-living is the filament that interlaces Ottmar Ette’s conceptual terminology into the figure of the open-weave tapestry which frames each of the three monographs:

---

9 Translations into French (savoir-vivre) or Spanish (saber-vivir) are much less cumbersome. See also the beautiful Portuguese version of: SaberSobreViver: A (o) missão da filologia (Paraná: Editora UFPR, 2015).


11 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).

12 Ottmar Ette, ZwischenWeltenSchreiben, 270. The final chapter of this book was omitted in Writing-between-Worlds.
In Writing-between-Worlds, four lines from Botho Strauss’s 1992 lyric “Beginninglessness” (Beginnlosigkeit) accompany the first tapestry image to highlight the fact that this weave – the weave of the book itself – 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.\footnote{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.}
Strauss’s entwined double helixes must also 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. Strauss’s double helixes are 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 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. As ideological frames, nation-states obscure and suppress their own multilingual realities.14 Two, literary texts artistically encode the patterns of such spatiotemporal movements and store them in the form of knowledge(s)-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 (Fortschreiben) – and examine the effects that their dynamic interrelations have exerted locally (that is, on individual nation-states) 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 prestige that the nation has enjoyed in literary studies, along with the entrenched boundary between national literary canons and so-called world literatures.

Yet, Ette does not entirely discard the idea of the nation, acknowledging instead the continued existence of nation-states to probe how they function as 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. It is what Franco Moretti might call a “problem” in search of a “new critical method.” The Literatures without a fixed Abode, that is, literatures that do not belong to any one

15 Literatures without a fixed Abode is a concept quite distinct from “world literature,” for example, 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), 4. Mariano Siskind’s Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014) is a good example of just how difficult it has proven even for the next generation of literary comparatists to relinquish the idea (and the prestige) of “world literature” (see 27).

national context alone, are a theoretical problem because their very existence transects, traverses, and otherwise worries 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” 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.  

It is worth noting that Ette’s methods are not to be confused with Moretti’s “distant reading.” 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 perhaps 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) must remain a meaningless abstraction.

Nor is Ette’s theory about vectoral spaces in literature a backhanded way of returning to some wobbly concept

---

17 Ette and Kutzinski, Writing-between-Worlds, 0.
18 Moretti, “Conjectures,” 151.
of “world literature” that flows from the purported universality of human life.\textsuperscript{19} Clearly, thematic or formal similarities alone are not the most fertile grounds for literary comparisons. Ette finds it far more fruitful to pinpoint areas of both divergence and convergence in the literary representations of human ideas and experiences across the planet. In these literary representations, neither universality nor globalization simply spells homogeneity. Instead, each refers us to a vast, often violent, and certainly irreducible interplay of myriad mutable cultural, social, and political viewpoints. “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.\textsuperscript{20}

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.”\textsuperscript{21} And terms such as “life,” “survival,” and “knowledge” are never givens in Ette’s writings but constructs that stand for remarkably complicated exchanges and relations, be they historical, social, political, economic, or cultural, especially linguistic.

\textsuperscript{19} 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), 13.

\textsuperscript{20} Ette and Kutzinski, Writing-between-Worlds, 0.
\textsuperscript{21} Saussy, Comparative literature, 34.
Not taking one’s own 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’. A good 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 some German-language readers. Mark Twain’s famous complaints about long composite nouns in his 1880 essay “The Awful German Language” springs to mind here. “These things are not words,” he scoffed, “but alphabetical processions.” To be sure, modern English rarely accommodates the stacking up of words in the way that modern German does. That almost all of Ette’s key terms might qualify as linguistic “processions” does not exactly facilitate the task of translation. But it does force the translator 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.

I began translating excerpts from Ottmar Ette’s writings some years ago, but other projects and responsibilities kept getting in the way of completing Writing-between-Worlds. Thanks to these otherwise frustrating delays, I had more time than expected to ponder possible ways of bringing Ette’s vexing linguistic creations over into USAmerican English and, in the process, to reflect on how 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

---

22 Mark Twain, The Writings of Mark Twain (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1907), 277.

23 Ette’s critical-theoretical vocabulary would make a fitting addition to Barbara Cassin’s Dictionary of Untranslatables. It is 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), 576.
coinages into an English-language environment, either placing them in quotation marks or italicizing them (or both), was woefully inadequate. For one, doing so would needlessly clutter an already polylingual text in which words and locutions in French and Spanish have been left intact. 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 perhaps the best example here. By rendering the noun “Zwischenwelten” as “interWorlds” rather than “between-worlds,” I signaled 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, or many other languages, for that matter. I also found “InterWorldWriting,” which would have followed more logically from “interWorlds,” unappealingly static when compared to “Writing-between-Worlds.” Other prominent examples are the verb constructions “fortschreiben” and “fremdschreiben” – taking-language(s)-elsewhere and writing-other(wise), which I already mentioned above. They distinctive nuances in German quite simply elude English and have to be reinvented. “Fortschreiben” can mean “to continue to write” or “to add to;” it can also signify directionally, that is, vectorally, as in “to write away from,” or “to revise” with an added spatial dimension. “Fremdschreiben” emphasizes the strangeness of linguistic and cultural differences that accompanies 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 temporalities, places, and dimensions.
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 entire critical practice is intent on making thinkable, sayable, and writable what was 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. There is little point in simply handing readers a cache of ready-made critical-theoretical terms – in German, English, or any other language – which they can apply without further critical reflection. To following Ette’s own creative principles, any translation needs to be a thought-provoking mixture of the familiar and the strange in which intellectual excitement may, at times, even spring from (seeming) linguistic impediments. Such obstructions may also include translational inconsistencies designed to keep the target language as dynamic as possible without risking utter definitional confusion.

Like all of Ottmar Ette’s work, Writing-between-Worlds challenges humanists worldwide to consider carefully how they might reclaim discourses on life, living, and living together as grounds for their own intellectual and ethical 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 (this is certainly true is the USA). Relatedly, the momentous changes that are underway especially in Europe in a century that is proving to be another “century of migrations” require a great deal of thought about how one might be respectful, not just tolerant, of cultural differences, whatever those are. To survive, a society clearly needs to know more than what it takes to keep its residents breathing. Any society on this planet stands to benefit from understanding the exact differences between a language of mere tolerance
and expressions of respectfulness toward other persons.

That human societies need to cultivate more critical attitudes toward and within language is by no means a new idea; but it is one that bears repeating. “[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 (Republican) 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, once again, all around us, and it is not elsewhere but very much in our own homes, wherever those may be. So are wily demagogues. When slogans of fear and race hared fill the airwaves and the internet, and when real and imagined walls are being built to protect nation-states – the “homeland,” in USAmerican parlance – from unwanted foreigners, it matters enormously how we think and speak of ourselves in relation to other people. It also matters enormously that we understand better how those whom we “other,” often carelessly, think and speak 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, from where they will spread out to the rest of the world. Reflecting on what these impending changes might mean in the future, and not just in negative ways, involves being sensitive to the taxonomic discourses in which pundits envelop today’s migrant populations: economic migrants, political refugees, asylum seekers, terrorists – everything, it seems sometimes, but human

persons.

I want to end on a positive note with a brief passage from Vandana Singh short story “The Tetrahedron,” which speaks succinctly to the reasons why I attribute such importance to Ottmar Ette’s work on the literatures of the world. When Maya, Singh’s protagonist, finds a “door” into the titular Tetrahedron, an “object [that] extends in a dimension […] inaccessible to us” and thus strikes fear into the hearts of most other characters in the story, she undergoes an unexpected transformation. 25 Once inside the tetrahedron, her hands are no longer singular but multiple:

[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.”26

Maya’s transformation is a change in (self)perception that results from her newfound ability to see herself from multiple, and ever-multiplying, perspectives at the same time. Singh’s figure for understanding this mode of connectedness with pasts and futures is, like Ette’s, not a tree but a rhizome. I take Singh’s image of the ramifications of Maya’s hands as an especially resonant 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 work teaches us to see ourselves as we are in more than three dimensions and to read literature, and thus life, in the same initially disorienting way. Finding that “door” in the tetrahedron, which is

25 Vandana Singh, The woman who thought she was a planet: And other stories (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), 152.

26 Singh, The woman, 165.
tantamount to finding “dimensions curled up within us accessible only through imagination,” 27 can make all the difference to how we act in the world around us: with respect and thus without fear.