

*Let us accompany this movement of love, the gesture of this loving one (liebend) that is at work in the translation.*

*- Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel"*

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1896, an interracial romance was turned upside down when the one left behind was not another native woman, but the white man. For the past three months, he had been mesmerized by Nah-Badûh's semi-nudity, and when he was not busy guiding visitors through the *Aschantidorf*, he gladly partook in her African way of life. But now, Nah-Badûh and her 70 fellow Ashanti were hitting the road one last time. As a huge crowd of passionate lovers and secret admirers gathered to witness their departure from Vienna, the journey home became the last spectacle, a grand finale, of the Ashanti show.<sup>1</sup> Despite the hectic exchange of hugs and kisses, the 38-year-old man stood out in a number of ways. His skin was pale from consuming an odd mixture of alcohol, medications, and health products; his wide necktie hung loosely over a very colorful shirt; and wooden sandals—a touch of the distant Orient—adorned his feet. At this pivotal moment, however, he was unable to translate himself, that is, accompany his black girlfriend to Africa or express his utter sadness in sweet words of love. All he could do was say her name: “,Nah-Badûh - - -!” (Altenberg 70).<sup>2</sup> His name was Richard Engländer, but the world knew him better by his *nom de plume*: Peter Altenberg or, simply, P.A.

Altenberg made his intimate commute between Vienna and the recreated *Aschantidorf*, German and other languages spoken in that space the subject of an impressionist text, titled *Ashantee* and published in the spring of 1897, less than a year after the Ashanti had performed in Vienna's Prater with great success. *Ashantee* is dedicated to the poet's “schwarzen Freundinnen, den unvergesslichen ‚Paradieses-Menschen’ Akolé, Akóshia, Tíoko, Djôjô” in general and consists of a sentimental reminiscence of his romance with Nah-Badûh in particular (unnumbered title page).<sup>3</sup> More importantly, it illustrates in poignant dialogues and with astute observations the

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<sup>1</sup> The Ashanti show was a sensation, drawing thousands of visitors a day. The Viennese strongly associated Ashanti culture with the captivating power and exhilarating danger of black sexuality (Gilman 50). That interracial relationships, flirtations, and attractions were common in such *Völkerschauen* becomes clear in another example, that is, Carl Hagenbeck's Nubian show. Joseph Menges and Jacob Jacobsen, two impresarios working for Hagenbeck, used a strong language of psychological pathology to describe this frequent frenzy (115-118).

<sup>2</sup> All citations are from the original edition of *Ashantee* (1897). After the first edition, the publisher no longer printed it as a separate volume, but included most of it in later editions of Altenberg's other works, such as *Was der Tag mir zuträgt* (1902) and *Wie ich es sehe* (1904).

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Hugo Salus, Altenberg makes clear how physically and emotionally involved he is with the female members of the Ashanti show: “Am nächsten Tag war ich als ‚Führer durch Aschantee’ von einer ganzen Anzahl Damen von 3 Uhr Nachmittag bis 8 Uhr Abends so sehr in Anspruch genommen, daß ich erst im Restaurant Ihren Herrn Schwiegervater begrüßen konnte. Aber auch da wurde ich in einer Angelegenheit meiner ‚schwarzen Freundin’ von anderer Seite sogleich in drängenden Anspruch genommen [...]. Zu alledem bin ich selber durch meine Neigung zu einem Aschantee-Mädchen in ewiger Erregung und gerade dort höchst unfrei und schwer belastet und preoccupirt” (Kosler 80).

clash of civilizations.<sup>4</sup> The *Meyer Conversations-Lexikon*, which Altenberg quotes in/as the beginning of his text, identifies some of the prominent sites where Europeans have concocted (hi)stories of cultural and racial superiority. By describing the Ashanti as “echte, kraushaarige Neger” whose religion is “Fetischismus,” *Ashantee* and the lexicon both highlight what Europe believes are typical Ashanti or African characteristics (3). They leave no doubt that the Ashanti’s barbaric practice of polygamy (“Vielweiberei”) and human sacrifice (“Menschenopfer”) until the arrival of British colonialism has made them inferior to Western cultures (3, 4). In what follows, I will illustrate how Altenberg both undermines and speaks for this Eurocentrism.

This article will respond to what Marilyn Scott calls the “contradictory” and “troubled ambivalence” of *Ashantee* (55, 59). On the one hand, the split portrayal of the Ashanti—a Romantic idealization in the midst of colonial logic—has baffled scholars because it is difficult to reconcile within the text itself. The political and cultural crises of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna under the leadership of the Christian-conservative and anti-Semitic mayor Karl Lueger have offered a helpful context for approaching these incoherencies (Scott 51; Foster 339). In other words, the text serves as a symbol and symptom of an uprooted writer as subject-object, a marginalized Jew who has (been) transformed into a mimic man and is, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s words, “not quite/not white” (131).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, *Ashantee*, neither prose nor poetry, neither structured nor chaotic, has been considered a text resisting any coherent poetological analysis (Barker and Lensing 50; Dietrich 207; Gilman 36; Köwer 76; Simpson 317). What those instructive articulations do not address is how the text stages Altenberg’s “Grenzüberschreitung” or “Grenzverletzung” on the linguistic level (Besser 202; Dietrich 207). How does *Ashantee* stage the poet’s negotiation of self with the Other on the level of language? What is the pedagogical and performative relationship between language and culture, poetics and politics in this impressionist writing?

I shall be mapping by way of translation Altenberg’s confusing crossing of cultural and linguistic borders in the Ashanti show and in *Ashantee*. Translation here connotes in its ambivalent nature both movement and stasis, production of presence and self-effacement. To maintain the semantic and genealogical differences between *translatio*, *metapherein*, *Übersetzung*, and *traduttore/traditore*, I will use translation in

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<sup>4</sup> I am not using the term “clash of civilizations” in Samuel Huntington’s sense of contemporary global politics, although there is some commonality in our rejection of binary world structures of East and West, North and South. For more information about his use of the term, see Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> According to Andrew Barker and Leo Lensing, Altenberg’s cultural “Identitätskrise” sheds light on his inconsistent, self-denying attitude toward Jews and other subaltern communities (*Peter Altenberg* 26, 28). Elsewhere, Barker considers unresolved sexual orientations as a source of his anxiety of self (“The Persona” 135). Ian Foster argues that Altenberg’s perplexing depiction of the Ashanti reflects the split psyche of a marginalized European Jew living in an anti-Semitic environment. Altenberg identifies himself with the Ashanti as common subalterns in Viennese society, but perpetuates “Kolonialklischees” to distinguish himself from them because they are, as it were, the absolute Other (336). On a related note, Marilyn Scott presents the interesting argument that the Ashanti show fulfilled a vital performative-pedagogical function by positioning the Viennese against an exoticized and racialized Other. In the face of the Other, then, visitors fostered national unity, and the diversity among the Viennese appeared more negligible (51).

two senses of the word: *trans*-lation and *trans*-lation.<sup>6</sup> The former signifies the hybridization and transformation of subjects and objects in transit whereas the latter articulates their concurrent spatial relocation and cultural displacement. In both words, the hyphen marks a productive violence inherent in this work, which Jacques Derrida calls “loving,” because speakers of different tongues and representatives of distinct cultures commingle across time and space. By analyzing the relationship between languages in this intercultural text written primarily in German, but also containing words and sentences in English, French, and “Odschi,” the Ashanti language, my reading will demonstrate how this multilingual text puts language to work as a marker of difference and a vehicle for change. *Ashantee* exposes on the level of language the asymmetrical relationship between the West and the rest, the imperial metropolis and its colonial margins and reinscribes the Ashanti show’s “contact zone” by exploring a reconciliatory translation of bodies, cultures, and languages.<sup>7</sup> This poetological examination of linguistic interplay is to complement and, in a way, supplement ethical readings dominant in contemporary postcolonial scholarship. My tracing of Altenberg’s disorienting to-and-fro across cultural and linguistic barriers will begin with a study of *Völkerschauen* and then move on to *Ashantee*.<sup>8</sup>

## I

At the turn of the last century, artists and writers flocked to ethnological zoos and anthropological museums for artistic inspiration. A few examples suffice to make this point. Inspired by the sight of an exotic animal in the Parisian *Jardin des Plantes*, where *Völkerschauen* were also staged, Rilke allegorized the human psyche in “Der Panther.” Pablo Picasso, Carl Einstein, and some of the *Brücke* painters discovered their “primitive” turn to African and Oceanic forms of representation in ethnological exhibitions.<sup>9</sup> Kafka, too, owed his creation of Rotpeter, who walks the fine line between

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<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to delineate the genealogy of translation theories. Instead, I refer my readers to a select list of informative readings. Chapter one of Michael Cronin’s *Translation and Globalization* convincingly discusses the *translatio* of Christian relics in the early medieval period. For the German context, I recommend André Lefevere’s *Translating Literature* and Antoine Berman’s *The Experience of the Foreign*. Both Lefevere and Lawrence Venuti offer a resourceful overview of translation in *Translation/History/Culture* and *The Translator’s Invisibility*. *The Translation Studies Reader* edited by Venuti is particularly helpful for exploring the complex work of translation across time and space. A similarly provocative anthology is Alfred Hirsch’s *Übersetzung und Dekonstruktion*.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow the term “contact zone” from Mary Louise Pratt, who also relies on linguistics to explore the politics of transculturation in colonial travel literatures. She defines it as a vibrant battlefield where two historically separate cultures come to interact, clash, and negotiate with one another (6-7). As the first section of my article will illustrate, *Völkerschauen* such as the Ashanti show did not bring together representatives of two such distant cultures, although they thrived by staging a Prattian “contact zone.”

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Bailey’s reading of Joseph Roth’s *Juden auf Wanderschaft* demonstrates a similar concern with translation insofar as linguistic translation becomes the contested site of intercultural communication or non-negotiation. Her analysis of Roth’s “willed, cultural and linguistic silencing” in a bilingual text points to the latter whereas my focus on Altenberg, who uses translation to give a *différent* voice to himself via the Other, exemplifies the former (3).

<sup>9</sup> Nana Badenbergh. “Art nègre. Picasso, Einstein und der Primitivismus.” *Das Fremde: Reiseerfahrungen, Schreibformen und kulturelles Wissen*. Ed. Alexander Honold and Klaus R. Scherpe. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 203-30; L.D. Ettlinger. “German Expressionism and Primitive Art.” *The Burlington Magazine* 110 (781): 191-201.

living and dying, humanity and animality, human society and *variété* shows, to the Hagenbeck Company.<sup>10</sup> *Ashantee*, based on Altenberg's visit to the Ashanti show in 1886, was no exception in this respect. What, then, made the otherworldly space of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *Völkerschauen* so attractive to Altenberg and his contemporaries?

As the number of colonial and travel writings, journalistic reports and scientific papers printed and circulating in the West was increasing, impresarios learned to take advantage of "colonial fantasies" and exotic imaginings.<sup>11</sup> Their success depended on balancing foreignness with familiarity, exoticism with authenticity so that visitors were amazed, not alienated, by what they saw and heard.<sup>12</sup> They needed to reproduce the psychoaffective intensity of exotic travels and colonial conquests without the financial cost and health risks. To yield this translational effect, Carl Hagenbeck, the pioneer of modern zoos and *Völkerschauen*, packaged his "faithful" replicas of Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America, and the Arctic in an educational, entertaining, and exotic context, included animals, plants, and artifacts from the original habitat and had non-Westerners dressed in traditional costumes perform daily chores and special ceremonies. He collaborated with an international network of widely traveled explorers, established zoo owners, museum curators, and prominent anthropologists to have his business scientifically acknowledged.<sup>13</sup> In that performative space, then, visitors like Altenberg had the unique opportunity to simulate travel to overseas colonies and virginal places. In

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Barker recovers the neglected relationship between Altenberg and Kafka, Altenberg's "Der Affe Peter" and Kafka's Rotpeter, within the context of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese anti-Semitism. For more information, see Andrew Barker. "Franz Kafka and Peter Altenberg." *Turn-of-the-Century Vienna and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Daviau*. Ed. Jeffrey B. Berlin, Jorun B. Johns and Richard H. Lawson. S.I: Edition Atelier, 1993. 220-38.

<sup>11</sup> The term "colonial fantasies" comes from Susanne Zantop's seminal study of colonial desires in precolonial Germany. Susanne Zantop. *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> *Völkerschauen* operated on all the human senses, including the power of sound and vision, before the rise of ethnographic films in the 1920s. Eric Ames. "Wilde Tiere. Carl Hagenbecks Inszenierung des Fremden." *Das Fremde: Reiseerfahrungen, Schreibformen und kulturelles Wissen*. Ed. Alexander Honold und Klaus R. Scherpe. 2nd ed. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 113-36; Eric Ames. "The Sound of Evolution." *Modernism/Modernity* 10 (2): 297-325.

<sup>13</sup> Hagenbeck's tight connection with different institutions and individuals, such as the anthropologist-politician Rudolf Virchow, leads Balthasar Staehelin to conclude that *Völkerschauen* were "die Vermischung von Wissenschaft und Vergnügungsbusiness im Zusammenhang mit der Vermarktung der Exotik" (23). Andrew Zimmerman's *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, especially his first chapter, serves as another helpful reference. He writes the following about German anthropologists' dependence on *Völkerschauen* for objects of scientific investigation: "The history of anthropology has been written inside out. At least in Germany, it depended not so much on European scientists venturing out into the colonies as on colonial subjects venturing into a Europe that was dangerous, exciting, and potentially profitable for them, much as the colonies were for Europeans. In the years before the First World War, the majority of encounters between German anthropologists and the people they studied occurred in Germany, in circuses, panopticons, and zoos" (15). In this respect, *Völkerschauen*, as part of the European colonial system, reflected what Johannes Fabian calls "systemic collaboration" (*Language and Colonial Power* 74). Interestingly, Werner Michael Schwarz attributes a lack of scientists at Viennese *Völkerschauen*, including the Ashanti show, to Berlin's status as the center for German-speaking anthropologists (38). This, however, does not mean that the Viennese were not looking for similar exotic and erotic experiences as visitors elsewhere.

other words, *Völkerschauen* provided them with an “original” site for pursuing “colonial fantasies” and evangelical missions, searching for scientific data or new artistic inspirations. With the furthest corners of the world brought right into their homes, whether Paris, London, Berlin or Hamburg, visitors could now (safely) go wild without going native.

To enable this addictive game of play and prohibition, voyeurism and visibility, touch and taboo, being abroad and at home, Hagenbeck kept his visitors physically separate from *Völkerschauen* participants so that the inability to interact with the Other heightened the desire to do just that. Additionally, he prohibited the latter from acculturating to European conditions, such as cold weather, and visitors were instructed not to initiate conversations with those on the other side of the fence.

In reality, however, non-communication or non-contact across the man-made barricades was impossible to implement. Though the initial focus was on hiring foreigners with as little knowledge of European languages as possible, practice quickly showed that a certain degree of communication was necessary for organizing a show. Consequently, many *Völkerschauen* participants were capable of conversing with visitors to a limited extent (Thode-Arora 64, 114). This did not take into consideration the power of body language under such circumstances. And just as facing the Other was a mutual experience in which the gaze was always already reciprocated, so the rules were constantly violated and demarcations frequently trespassed, and impresarios, public officials, and scientists failed to stop the traffic of human beings, material goods, verbal and non-verbal contact across the color line. Visitors, both Western and non-Western, climbed over walls and fences and worked creatively to leave behind physical, linguistic and cultural borderlines (Dreesbach 12; Thode-Arora 115). In the worst incident, “Sitten-Wächter” had to restrain female visitors and adolescents, who were losing control over their sexual desires (Ames 326; Thode-Arora 118; Eißemberger 90; Zimmerman 36). With “forces that transgressed and destabilized the barriers that were intended to construct distinct spaces of identity,” *Völkerschauen* facilitated interracial relationships as well as the transgression of Western mores, posing a serious threat to European order and the symbolic virginity of those exhibited as unhampered copies—*trans-lations*, but not *trans-lations*—of exotic cultures (Ames 324).

Not all visitors experienced this desire for self-translation, and not everyone, who crossed one of the many borderlines in *Völkerschauen*, was undermining colonial ideologies. Some surely had wrong intentions or were simply curious. Nonetheless, the natural instinct to reach out, take risks, and cross the fence symbolizing the sacred color line, gave rise to a productive violence that temporarily unsettled the hierarchy of cultures in the age of European imperialism. The temptation to participate in that brief, but extraordinary work of translation was great, and Altenberg himself became witness to the promise of *trans-lation* and *trans-lation*, that is, cultural hybridization, linguistic creolization, and racial miscegenation while stepping in and out of the Ashanti show.<sup>14</sup> It was a world that had, in its transference from elsewhere to Europe, undergone change to

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<sup>14</sup> I do not intend to collapse the differences between the three synonyms into one concept. As Charles Steward demonstrates with his critical interrogation of the term “syncretism,” I believe that “hybridization,” “creolization,” and “miscegenation” need to be examined within separate genealogies. That would, however, take me beyond the scope of this article. Charles Stewart. “Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture.” *Diacritics* 29 (3): 40-62.

reflect white fantasies. In the midst of the imperial metropolis, it constituted a “Third Space,” a performative force field that “makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code” (Bhabha 54). Therefore, *Völkerschauen* such as the Ashanti show were neither faithfully native nor purely imaginative because the conventional order of linguistic and cultural signs had been disturbed and reshuffled in the interplay of “deterritorialized” European and non-European people.<sup>15</sup> *Völkerschauen* became an innovative laboratory for both Westerners and non-Westerners to explore, among other things, a pidgin-like *innovative and common* language while yearning for that rare love affair.

## II

In the episode titled “DER KUSS,” Altenberg points to the courage it takes to kiss the African Other, an action deemed scandalous since the beginning of colonial history.<sup>16</sup> He describes how a wealthy lady refuses to give a kiss to little Akolé for fear of contracting an African disease or smelling her unclean breath.

Akolé sah die Dame an, stand auf, ging auf sie zu, breitete ihre Arme aus,  
wollte sie auf den Mund küssen, weil sie schön war.  
Die Dame wich zurück.  
Das Kind schmiegte sich an mich an, tief beschämt.  
„Madame - -“ sagte ich, „ich bitte Sie, ich bitte Sie - - -.“  
„Nicht auf den Mund - -“ sagte die Dame verlegen.  
Ich nahm Akolé in meine Arme, küsste ihren geliebten Mund, dessen  
Athem wie der Hauch von Abend-Wiesen war. (26)

Altenberg’s kiss exposes the absurdity of the woman’s fears, yet his condemnation of the class-conscious, snobbish woman, who has no love for the colored child, does not stop here. In a sudden move of transformation from man- into motherhood, he addresses Akolé as follows:

„Diese Dame ekelt sich vor dir, Akolé. *Wie eine dumme stupide Mutter* benehme ich mich, welche den anderen Menschen nicht begreift. Verzeihen Sie mir, Madame. Ich war *wie eine stupide Mutter*, das Dümme, das Beschränkste, was es auf der Erde gibt. *Die Liebe eines Vogelgehirnes* ganz einfach.“ (27; my emphasis)

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<sup>15</sup> I am referring to Deleuze and Guattari’s insightful model of Kafka’s “deterritorialization” and “minoritarian” transformation of the German language by way of his Jewish subalternity. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. It is possible to make a similar argument of “deterritorialization” for Altenberg in Vienna in addition to his work of translation in *Ashantee*.

<sup>16</sup> Frieda von Bülow’s colonial novels, for example, encouraged German women to join the colonial cause and thereby prevent miscegenation from happening in the colonies. As a settler colony, however, German Southwest-Africa was dependent on interracial relationships in the absence of European women. Though ideologically condemned, miscegenation thus proved to be practically necessary. See for more information about the roles of German colonial women: Lora Wildenthal. *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.

Since the Ashanti girl does not speak German, the sarcastic remark is directed at the lady, who lacks, as Altenberg intimates, a motherly nature. By expressing *his* unconditional love for *her* child (both possessive pronouns refer to Altenberg), he catapults himself out of his male identity and performs a poetic self-*trans*-lation by which he becomes a woman and a mother. What Altenberg apparently wants to make clear here is the universal power of love, a biological instinct that is strongly associated with motherhood.<sup>17</sup>

Though Altenberg may have eased the pain and restored the pride of the rejected child by hugging and kissing her, one may question the ramifications of his translation practice across the gender line. On the one hand, it criticizes contemporary gender dichotomies by which men should not be women or behave like women, and vice versa. On the other hand, his identification of parental love with the mother denies fathers the ability to claim a similarly unconditional love for their children. This biological discrimination of gender and parenthood based on an essentialist understanding of love weakens his condemnation of cultures grounded in patriarchal authority. It perpetuates the traditional division between sexes and limits the role of women to the household and childcare.<sup>18</sup> A more effective critique of patriarchy and male violence occurs in the episode “RITTERLICHKEIT” where Altenberg seems to respond to Bôdjé, the Ashanti chief, with impatience and unspoken anger because the latter has just beaten Nah-Badûh with an “Ochsenziemer” for refusing to do her part in the show (58).

Moreover, Altenberg’s impression of Ashanti naturality—for example, the taste of pure nature as he kisses Akolé’s mouth—is a fantastic idealization of the Other whereby anything African is celebrated as originally whole and naturally beautiful. The image of Ashanti communalism is contrasted with the split society of Vienna, where pursuing one’s “*leibliche Existenz*” without meeting sociopolitical constraints is deemed impossible (Simmel 116). As such, the *Aschantidorf* and Africa exist in opposition to the European metropolis, and this binary structure maintains the distance between the West and the rest by simply exchanging the denigration of the Ashanti with an equally problematic glorification of their culture.

According to Altenberg’s logic, the Westerner bestows upon himself the noble duty (*Aufgabe*) to speak for the mute or incomprehensible colonial subaltern.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In “CULTUR,” Altenberg again hints at love for a child as belonging to motherly nature by illustrating how “little Akolé” disrobes herself to breastfeed a doll: “Plötzlich liess the big Akolé ihre Toga von ihrem idealen Oberleibe herabgleiten und gab dem Püppchen aus ihrer herrlichen Brust zu trinken” (29). She is celebrated as the epitome of nature, and one of the Viennese witnessing this scene describes the experience as “der heiligste Augenblick ihres Lebens” (29).

<sup>18</sup> For an illustrative discussion of discriminatory labor within Hegelian philosophy and with respect to love, I refer my reader to: Luce Irigaray. “Love between Us.” *Who Comes After the Subject?* Ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy. New York: Routledge, 1991. 167-77. Bram Dijkstra’s study of patriarchy and the marginalization of women at the turn of the last century is also helpful in this context. Bram Dijkstra. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> My translation of “duty” into *Aufgabe* highlights the important lesson that Gayatri Spivak has outlined in her poignant critique of Western historians, who have felt intellectually and morally called to lend their (homogeneous) voice to a (heterogeneous) group of either mute or unintelligible colonial female subalterns (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Among the many examples of such postcolonial critique, perhaps the most well-known one is Chinua Achebe’s virulent condemnation of Joseph Conrad for depicting African

„Neger sind Kinder. Wer versteht diese?! Wie die süsse stumme Natur sind Neger. Dich bringen sie zum Tönen, während sie selbst musiklos sind. Frage was der Wald ist, das Kind, der Neger?! Etwas sind sie, was Uns zum Tönen bringt, die Kapellmeister unseres Symphonie-Orchesters. Sie selbst spielen kein Instrument, sie dirigieren unsere Seele.“ (29)

By equating the Ashanti with sweet but mute nature, Altenberg silences their voice, homogenizes their historical complexity, infantilizes and feminizes their culture. He transforms them into a harmless *Naturvolk* that conveniently serves as an “object of investigation” for the Western intellectual (Spivak “Subaltern” 296). Their sole purpose is to inspire Europeans to (saving) action.<sup>20</sup> Yet in another episode, Altenberg curiously quotes “big Akolé,” another people show participant, saying the following angry words to a group of harassing Viennese visitors: “,Bènjo, bènjo - - - -!’ (Geh’ zum Teufel, packe dich.)” (38). Not only does Altenberg then contradict himself by representing the Ashanti mute at one place and very vocal at another, but his translation practice also lays bare the epistemic violence therein. How can “bènjo” be simultaneously translated into “Geh’ zum Teufel” and “packe dich”? Does not this translation, which is simultaneously a re- and paraphrasing, point to a linguistic splitting of the Other? It also illustrates how the German self and episteme are split as the German language fails to offer a single and equivalent translation of the Odschi word: bènjo. *Ashantee* thus reinforces with insecurity and self-alienation the troubling Manichean structure of East and West, North and South, mistranslating the savage bushman on one side of cultural imperialism into a Noble Savage on the other side of the political spectrum. It exemplifies the work of imperialist translations that are far from being fluid and flowing. By leaving self-indicting traces along the way, it demonstrates the tremendous difficulty—and according to Wolfgang Iser and Sanford Budick, even the impossibility—of translating one language into another, one culture into another without being unfaithful to the source or the copy.<sup>21</sup>

The catalyst for this violent translation of the exotic, female Other is boundless fantasy. It allows Altenberg, for example, to imagine Fortunatina, a young girl whom he guides through the zoo, as follows.

„Fortunatina und die Löwin - - -“ dachte er. Er wusste gar nicht, was es bedeutete, welchen Inhalt es habe. Wie eine Ballade fühlte er es, welche

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languages as “incomprehensible grunts” in *Heart of Darkness* (255). Altenberg, too, participates in this epistemic violence.

<sup>20</sup> This Eurocentric representation of *Völkerschauen* participants is not supported by historical research. As Andrew Zimmerman illustrates, they undermined the authority of impresarios and more than once gave cunning excuses to push their own agenda forward (23-34). This is a good place, then, to point out again the contradiction within *Ashantee*. For in other episodes, Altenberg contradicts his own previous statement about mute “negroes” by illustrating them in the act of singing and speaking.

<sup>21</sup> I refer my readers to the introduction to Iser and Budick’s *The Translatability of Cultures*. There, the editors discuss a particular crisis in postmodernity by which the Other is continuously included in the self but not confronted in its difference. Wolfgang Iser and Sanford Budick, eds. *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. In modernity, that is not the case. Here, the difference of the Other is either engulfed and subsumed into the self or devoured and then rejected.

noch Niemand gedichtet hat. Die Ballade ist da, will geboren werden von einem Dichter, ganz in das Leben hinaus gestellt. Im Kopfe eines Menschen befindet sie sich bereits, drängt zum Tageslichte, will Gesang werden - - - Fortunatina und die Löwin! (7)

The text suggests that this wild fantasy has crept into Fortunatina's daydream as well.

Fortunatina träumte: „- - - plötzlich, mitten in der Nacht, ertönt ein Gebrüll, welches gleichsam die ganze Natur erbeben macht - - -. Ein Schlag mit der Tatze ist im Stande, ein Rind zu fällen - - -. Man hat Beispiele, dass - - -. Afrika. Afrika. Kaltblütigkeit, Entschlossenheit haben oft im letzten Momente den kühnen Jäger - - -.“ (7)

By projecting foreign exoticism onto white innocence, this episode redraws the familiar erotic picture of the *femme fatale*. Irresistible yet deadly virgins are now within the metropolitan confines and in the African wilderness.<sup>22</sup> Simultaneously, Altenberg's fantasy is *trans-lated* into Fortunatina's dream, which, in turn, *trans-lates* his welcoming "Tageslichte" and "Gesang" into her ominous "Nacht" and "Gebrüll." Fantasy thus makes for an adorable love story, but one that is prone to radical manipulations. Its mode of operation is illustrative of tender imaginings that hold within themselves a potent formula for patriarchy and colonization, feminization and infantilization, exploitation and abuse.

This does not mean that Altenberg is oblivious of fantasy's blinding power. He makes clear in one episode that stage performances are a deceptive reflection of what the Viennese want to see, not who the Ashanti actually are.

„Die Priesterin“, sagen die Plakate, „wird von dem Fetisch-Priester in einen Zustand von Extase versetzt, in welchem - - -. Die „französische Colonie“ sagt daher bezeichnend: „faire la fétiche.“

[...]

Die Priesterin befindet sich bereits in Extase, macht horrende Bewegungen.

Akóschia - - -! Wie ruhig sitztest du - - -!

Faire la fétiche! (24-25)

Altenberg illustrates that the person appearing on stage is not Akóschia in her natural, calm state but a performed identity masking her real being. She plays a woman gone mad so that visitors see what they have come to expect. And in line with European desires, the

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<sup>22</sup> Sander Gilman argues that, in *Ashantee*, "[t]he attraction of the black was coupled with the sense of danger lurking within the pathological" (36). I want to qualify this observation by adding to this chemistry the juvenile element. Heinrich von Kleist's "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" stages this mixture by coinciding blackness, sexual potency, and juvenile vigor in Congo Hoango, a sixty-year-old slave who mysteriously transforms himself in the wake of the anticolonial revolution. H. von Kleist. "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo." *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*. Vol. 2. Ed. Helmut Sembdner. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001. 160-61. Again, Dijkstra's study of the bourgeois idealization of women has guided my understanding of Altenberg's simultaneous glorification and victimization of the female sex in Vienna at the turn of the last century

Ashanti religion, a fetish, takes the place of a spectacle, an overly dramatized performance that is decontextualized from its culture and practitioner. For Altenberg, it is not surprising then that Akóschia is absolutely different behind the stage, and only he has the privilege of seeing through her mask.

Conversely, fantasy may serve as a tool with which to look beyond the color line. The same Hofmeister, who has just dreamed of Fortunatina as a lioness, is therefore capable of saying the following:

„Mache nur nicht gleich solche *Abgründe zwischen Uns und Ihnen*. Für Die, für Die. Was bedeutet es? Glaubst du, weil das dumme Volk [the Viennese] sich über sie stellt, sie behandelt wie exotische Thiere?! Warum?! Weil ihre Epidermis dunkle Pigment-Zellen enthält?! Diese Mädchen sind jedesfalls sanft und gut. Komme her, Kleine. *How is your name?!*“ (9; my emphasis)

He makes the mistake of literally translating his German—*Wie ist dein Name?*—into English, which again marks a lack of cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Yet what he also demonstrates is how fantasy enables the recognition of what may lie beneath the skin.

A number of scholars have rightly pursued an ethical reading of *Ashantee*, addressing Altenberg's complicity in the perpetuation of colonial ideologies as well as his resistance to blatant racism.<sup>23</sup> They rightly demonstrate that ethics is a hidden, but ubiquitous term underlying postcolonial studies in particular and cultural studies in general. However, their historiographic and discursive analyses mostly focus on the content of the text. I argue that this ethical turn to *Ashantee* privileges a *politics* of translation that neglects the crucial *poetics* of translation, especially after Carl Schorske has attributed an “amoral *Gefühlskultur*” to *fin-de-siècle* Vienna (7). *Ashantee* does not explore an equivalence between Western and non-Western cultures for the sake of the Ashanti, but practices linguistic and cultural translation in the name of poetic self-transformation. Its primary desire is to mimic Odschi's foreign sounds.<sup>24</sup> Like other modernists turning their gaze east- and westward, Altenberg assumes the role of a *bricoleur*, innovatively appropriating Ashanti culture and language and integrating them in his poetics to describe familiar scenes in foreign ways or to write poetry in foreign languages. As Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued, however, this work is not smooth. For the *bricoleur* “uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. The characteristic

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<sup>23</sup> Uta Sadji's reading, for example, repeatedly searches for epistemological connections between the text and contemporary colonial discourses. Her research on *Ashantee* is unmistakably driven by an ethical desire to illuminate sites of colonial violence. Uta Sadji. “‘Sage mir, was der Wald ist, das Kind, der Neger.’ Peter Altenbergs *Ashantee*-Episode.” *Etudes Germano-Africaines* (11): 146-53.

<sup>24</sup> In “Lehre vom Ähnlichen” (an expanded version of “Über das mimetische Vermögen”), Walter Benjamin assigns language the “canonical” role for mimicry and transformation of the modern man: “Dergestalt wäre die Sprache die höchste Verwendung des mimetischen Vermögens: ein Medium, in das ohne Rest die frühern Merkfähigkeiten für das Ähnliche so eingegangen seien, daß nun sie das Medium darstellt, in dem sich die Dinge nicht mehr direkt wie früher in dem Geist des Sehers oder Priesters sondern in ihren Essenzen, flüchtigsten und feinsten Substanzen, ja Aromen begegnen und zu einander in Beziehung treten. Mit andern Worten: Schrift und Sprache sind es, an die die Hellsicht ihre alten Kräfte im Laufe der Geschichte abgetreten hat” (“Lehre” 209). This mimicry via language describes Altenberg's poetic project with Odschi.

feature [...] is [...] a heterogeneous repertoire, which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited” (16-17). Altenberg thus exhibits an extraordinary ingenuity in his manipulation of Ashanti culture and language, but *Ashantee* is, as imperialist translations always are, out of balance with itself. Its firm location in turn-of-the-century Viennese culture and European imperialism prevents a full appreciation of the richness of Ashanti culture and language.

How does *Ashantee* show this poetic commitment to translation? When Altenberg transcribes Akolé’s song in “AKOLÉ’S GESANG, AKOLÉ’S SUSSES LIED,” “Akkra” and “Vienna” form a mysterious partnership in the lyrics, which are incomprehensible to Altenberg’s readers and perhaps even to the poet himself. It is clear, however, that the episode as a whole performs the interplay of East and West by switching back and forth between Odschi and German. While “Ein schrecklicher Sturm in Garten. Auf dem braunen Teiche liegen tausend grüne Blätter und kleine schwarze Äste” frames the song in Odschi at both ends, “andelaína andelaína” is repeated throughout the song and at the end of the episode (39). I understand this bilingual song as the poet’s attempt to claim Odschi as his own and in its foreignness. His is a bilingual poem in foreign and familiar sounds. He has composed a hybrid song with two rhythms and refrains that complement and contrast each other. For Altenberg, no other genre is more appropriate for mimicking the naturalness and musicality of the Ashanti language. This symphony of languages resembles other works in his *bricolage*, including the postcards and photo albums, which return again and again to the same imageries and *topoi*: *süsse Mädels* courted by Viennese men, female beauty in idyllic landscapes, and the extraordinary in ordinary life.<sup>25</sup> There is an ethical dimension to this constant reinvention of self, but it has little to do with ethics per se.

How else does Altenberg employ fantasy and language for crossing borderlines?<sup>26</sup> In the episode entitled “DER NEGER,” he condemns as exaggerations American newspaper reports of “negroes” being burnt alive for supposedly raping small girls. Alternatively, he creates a fictional space, the freak show, where “[e]in kleines wundervolles einäugiges blondes Mädchen schleppt einen riesigen Neger überall mit sich” (36). On the one hand, this image disrupts the myth of the black rapist forcefully abducting his white victim; the small girl is much stronger than he is. On the other, this imaginary stage questions the trope of the white race’s biological superiority, as the girl is despite all other adorable characteristics a one-eyed monster. Critical of black and white mythologies, Altenberg proposes a different black-white relationship.

Da sitzen sie beisammen in der Loge des Circus. Etwas Magnetisches,  
eine Welt-Sympathie, die Condensatoren aufgestapelter Liebesströme der  
Natur: die Seele des Kindes, das Rückenmark des Wilden! (36; my  
emphasis)

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<sup>25</sup> An exemplary illustration of Altenberg’s poems, pictures, and paintings as *bricolage* is: Peter Altenberg. *Semmering 1912: Ein altbekanntes Buch und ein neuentdecktes Photoalbum*. Ed. Leo A. Lensing and Andrew Barker. Wien: Werner Eichbauer Verlag, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> I owe Renate Lachmann my understanding of fantasy as a means of breaking rules, unsettling traditions, and transgressing boundaries—in other words, fantasy as translation. Renate Lachmann. “Remarks on the Foreign (Strange) as a Figure of Cultural Ambivalence.” *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*. Ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 282-93.

Altenberg imagines them sitting together and becoming one under the aegis of originary nature, that is, love. They are fostering their cosmopolitan affection for one another not with preposterous sexual intercourse but with a safe and additive hybridization of their native tongues.

„Das ist ein Elephant - - -“ sagt das kleine Mädchen, „Ele-phant.“

„Schuo - -“ sagt der Neger.

„Schuo - -“ sagt das Kind.

Wie nahe sie sich gerückt sind: Schuo-Elephant, Elephant-Schuo. Eine gemeinsame Sprache sprechen sie bereits, Schuo-Elephant, Elephant-Schuo! (37)

Their newly born common language contains signs of its parentage where *Schuo* and *Elephant* are equivalent translations of each other. In their reversible configuration, *Schuo* and *Elephant* constitute a hybrid language in love that is both one and two. With the impossibility of distinguishing the original from its translation, this *lingua amoris* translates its speakers next to each other, and neither the girl nor the man precedes the other. In addition to functioning as a new communicative tool, it symbolizes the new proximity between the two characters, who have, from the Western perspective, been considered irreconcilable, if not oppositional.

But what if the black man, this “Neger,” does not speak an African language, but rather English? What if he is an Ashanti under the subject of British colonialism? Or what if Altenberg has performed another (mis)translation by *trans-lating* him from the U.S. to Africa, by *trans-lating* him from an American into an African? Then, *Schuo* and *Elephant* are utter mistranslations. *Schuo* has nothing to do with an elephant or, for that matter, with an African language, but should perhaps read: *Sure*.<sup>27</sup> This “sure” is a statement of affirmation in English, which he utters in response to the child’s comprehensible German talk (*Elefant* in German sounds unmistakably familiar to an English speaker). Ultimately, it is impossible to tell whether Altenberg is misunderstanding his own fantasy here. *Schuo* and *Sure* are perhaps meant to make up a bilingual phonetic game that misconstrues the words in translation. They could also be an interlingual slippage arising from Altenberg’s lack of intercultural sensitivity and linguistic competency. Nonetheless, this *irresponsible* writing of his, which is simultaneously a *miswriting*, or this *irresponsible* reading of mine, which is also a *misreading*, is *responsible* in the sense that the episode has provided both of us, the “excessive” translators, with two contexts: racism in the U.S. and British colonialism in Africa.<sup>28</sup> This ambiguous play with translations undermines any fixed order or

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<sup>27</sup> In Twi, the Ashanti language, the word for “elephant” is “sono.” This translation begins with an “s” as well, but sounds quite different from “schuo.” I have yet to find an African translation of “elephant” that resembles the word or sound that Altenberg offers in this fictional episode.

<sup>28</sup> In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida talks about “responsibility” in relation to “an essential excessiveness” by which the subject does not respond to the other as a safe unity. Instead, the singularity of the “I” must be split, disseminated, and gathered before answering to the other’s call, which has always already preceded the self (“Eating Well” 100, 108). In this respect, Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas share much in common. My playful readings of *Elephant*, *Schuo*, and *Sure* aim at the same kind of ethicality

homogeneity of cultures and languages by conjuring up the ubiquitous possibility of mistranslations. In its denial of translations lying beyond the scope of mistranslations, *Ashantee* creates an interstitial space where new relationships between languages, cultures, and works may be established. Here, linguistic miscegenation can take place in subtle and unexpected ways. This “loving” translation practice promises the exchange of vows between languages or, as the text elsewhere reads, between bride and groom: “Meine Hand hält ihre [Akóschias] Hand; die Finger vermählen sich, halten Hochzeit” (23).

### III

For centuries, scholars have evoked love as a metaphor for the symbolic work of translation because it aptly addresses the strong affinity and busy traffic between the original and its translations.<sup>29</sup> I want to pursue this point further by allowing Derrida to come into dialogue with *Ashantee*. For his theorization of translation as an act of love offers an empowering understanding of the translator’s experience in the Ashanti show and the text.

In “Des Tours de Babel,” Derrida builds upon Benjamin’s concept of translation as the original’s “Nachreife” and proposes that the task of the translator is to adjoin the original and its translation under the “hymen or marriage contract.” This ensures the text’s “sur-vival” [*sur-vivre*] (Benjamin “Die Aufgabe” 53; Derrida “Des Tours” 191). In translation, the original outlives itself and changes its shape into something that is both different and more.

[I]n the translation the original becomes larger; it grows rather than reproduces itself...like a child, its own, no doubt, but with the power to speak on its own which makes of a child something other than a product subjected to the law of reproduction (“Des Tours” 191).

Texts, like human beings, marry and procreate in translation. But in marriage, that is, in the work of translation, the original undergoes a transformative and generative self-aggrandizement as it is foreignized into a text in another language.<sup>30</sup> Since the

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grounded in linguistic translation, which, I believe, is not far from Altenberg’s sense of playfulness. See Derrida’s essay “Living On/Border Lines” for a more detailed discussion of the speaker’s commitment to an “irresponsible” linguistic playfulness (147).

<sup>29</sup> Goethe calls translators “geschäftige Kuppler [...], die uns eine halbverschleierte Schöne als höchst liebenswürdig anpreisen: sie erregen eine unwiderstehliche Neigung nach dem Original” (499; my emphasis). Despite claiming a very different cultural and linguistic background, Spivak echoes him by describing translations as “*the most intimate act of reading*. [...] To *surrender* in translation is more *erotic* than ethical” (“The Politics” 400; my emphasis). Gilles Deleuze also lifts his inseparable relationship with Félix Guattari, his schizoanalytic double and probing translator, to the level of “love” (7). A careful articulation of these three compelling statements is in order, but the location of Goethe, Spivak, and Deleuze within translation theories would lead me too far astray from my project in this article. On the metaphysical level, Sylviane Agacinski helpfully describes love within its “theme of sharing and of engagement” as a vehicle for attaching the self to the other and “supplementing” each other’s weaknesses (15-16). This effacement of subject-object or inside-outside differentiations mirrors the negotiation in the work of translation.

<sup>30</sup> My term “self-aggrandizement” refers to translations of original texts that have already acquired “Ruhm,” as Benjamin argues, and in translation become even more well-known (“Die Aufgabe” 52).

transmission of content is only secondary, as Benjamin and Derrida both state, the emphasis lies on a newly configured partnership between the translating and translated languages as they change their shape in union. What matters is a rearranged kaleidoscope resulting in a “Versöhnung,” or “reconciliation,” between languages that belong to one and the same kinship; that is, a common context in which equivalent texts constantly negotiate with and yet remain faithful to one another. Is not this act of love at work in the (mis)translation of *Elephant* into *Schuo/Sure*? Doesn’t this give rise to “Schuo-Elephant, Elephant-Schuo”—a hybrid language that is always already a (mis)translation and different from and more than either *Schuo/Sure* or *Elephant*? And doesn’t this (mis)translated language of linguistic miscegenation for intercultural communication speak with its own voice, which is larger than its ancestors’, as it addresses both the man and the child?

By creating a bonding between the original and its translations, translation as lovemaking responds to the anxiety of mistranslations and transformations everywhere—the absence of flawless and non-violent translations, the endless journey across linguistic borders, and the dangerous desire driving that trip forward.<sup>31</sup> Translations do not stand by themselves in isolation, but are firmly embedded within a tight community and a strong network of translations, all of which share with the original a special relationship. And this courage for risk-taking makes possible the creation of that miniscule point at which the translated and translating languages “promise” to become one.

A translation never succeeds in the pure and absolute sense of the term. Rather, a translation succeeds in promising success, in promising reconciliation. There are translations that don’t even manage to promise, but a good translation is one that enacts that performative called a promise with the result that through the translation one sees the coming shape of a possible reconciliation among languages (*The Ear* 123).

Such an equivalence between languages, however, is uncommon in the colonial and postcolonial eras, where the colonizer’s epistemological abasement of non-Western languages has resulted in a politics that continues to pronounce “the languages of Third World societies...‘weaker’ in relation to Western languages” (Asad 157). Translation between Western and non-Western languages does not resemble a marriage of two loving partners. Instead, it reproduces the enslavement of the colored inferior by her white master as institutions and ideologies predetermine the outcome of their imbalanced courtship.

Altenberg uses translation to resist such a hierarchy between Odschi and English, the colonizer’s language, by offering the following list of translations, which Ashanti boys learn in school.

song = lālā in ihrer Sprache.  
monkey = adún

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<sup>31</sup> I refer my readers to another text by Derrida, that is, *Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Here, Derrida offers a fascinating explication of Abdelkebir Khatibi’s stunning novel about love as translation, love between men and women of different cultures: *Love in Two Languages*. Trans. Richard Howard. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990.

mouse = kwákwé  
fly = adodón  
cat = alonté  
rat = obísji  
knife = kâklá  
Welche Sprache ist die schönere?! (16-17)

The list emphasizes Odschi's phonetic diversity, especially the stressed syllables. Altenberg's translation contrasts Odschi's musicality with the bare and monosyllabic English words whose odd discrepancy between the signifier and the signified (as its barren sounds refer to natural objects) seems to blame modernity for the Western distance from originary nature. Though the English language has been denaturalized, Odschi is still in a state of original nature and organic wholeness because African languages are untouched by the vices of Western civilization. Additionally, this list illustrates that Odschi does not consist of random, inimitable or incomprehensible speech sounds, but instead is melodious and complex, in some ways structured and certainly recordable. In fact, Odschi fulfills its transformative function by giving voice to "der tönend gewordene Mensch selbst, der ganze Mensch ausgedrückt im Laute, keine beliebige Musik. Wie ein dunkles Herz, welches zu sprechen anfinge—" (17). It is this sound of music that has also informed "AKOLÉ'S GESANG, AKOLÉ'S SUSSES LIED" in Odschi (see page 11). And just like English, French, too, is a language in trouble. The impresario of the Ashanti show speaks French, but when translated into German, he says something completely different: "„Les enfans [sic] ne comptent pas' sagte er, wie wenn man sagt: ‚Marsch, verschwindet, Ihr habt wenig Bedeutung - - -'" (5).<sup>32</sup> Hidden beneath the friendly enunciated words lies a statement that is, in fact, opposite in meaning. What the European speaker says does not correlate with what he means or how he says it.

Of course, this episode also permits another powerful content-based postcolonial reading. Altenberg's list of translations simplifies the complexity of the source and target languages by neglecting local particularities and linguistic differences. For example, what species of monkeys is meant by "adún"? Does it mean male monkeys or female monkeys? Why would it be important for Africans to make such differentiations? And why should the English speaker be aware of them? Raising these questions and others is an integral part of being a conscientious translator of languages and cultures. Additionally, Altenberg's celebration of Odschi's aesthetic beauty lifts the Ashanti language to the level of a Benjaminian "wahre...reine...höhere Sprache," which has transcended time and space since its origin in pure nature ("Die Aufgabe" 55, 57, 59). This understanding freezes Odschi in a non-time while European languages, one assumes, continue marching forth. Johannes Fabian calls this temporal discrimination between East and West "denial of coevalness" or "allochronism" (*Time* 31, 33). Considering the fact, however, that the Ashanti were British colonial subjects, it would

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<sup>32</sup> I have found no textual evidence that points to Altenberg privileging German as a "less" colonial language. What I mean by this is that German does not function as a neutral linguistic mediator between English, French and Odschi, or between the Ashanti and their colonial English-speaking masters. It is helpful to remember that, in 1897, German was also a colonial language, although German colonial administrators did not devise a strict linguistic policy for the colonies.

seem more appropriate to surmise that Ashanti culture and language had undergone radical transformations.<sup>33</sup>

My examination of Altenberg's poetics of translation probes this postcolonial reading. Postcolonial studies must make it its task to explore multiple ways of interrogating texts written in the age of Empire and thereafter. Postcolonial scholars need to negotiate between politics and poetics, content and form, time and space, the local and the global such that the two kinds of translations, oppositional and complementary, supplement each other. As Joseph Graham, the English translator of Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel," argues, translation as "a complement can...take the form of criticism" by which "[n]ot only...the missing [is] supplied, but what was implicit in the one becomes explicit in the other, the minor becomes major and the peripheral becomes central, in an elaborate counterpoint of terms and themes" (172). This mediation between the original and its copy, form and content, poetics and politics ought to be the ethics of postcolonial scholarship in general and translation practices in particular.

#### IV

Altenberg's love for Nah-Badûh motivated his work of *trans*-lation for a limited period of time, but it fell short of empowering him to make the ultimate leap—his *trans*-*lation* across the ocean and to another continent. The anxiety of permanently abandoning the comfort of his home to live in another world and continuously face foreign elements as untranslatable traces of intercultural and interlingual negotiation could have held him back in Vienna. Perhaps, uttering her untranslatable name in the final moment of their togetherness, in lieu of *Auf Wiedersehen, I love you* or "misumo," signaled this incomplete translation at the end of the Ashanti show (46, 48).

In *Ashantee*, Altenberg's poetics of translation goes beyond this measure by crossing the porous borders between cultures and languages. His work reaches out to languages spoken by other tongues and texts written by other hands at another time and in another place. That such infrastructures are a priority in his impressionist writing becomes clear when one examines its unclear margins. As I delineated in my introduction, *Ashantee* opens with a lengthy quote from the *Meyer Conversations-Lexikon*. It closes, without real closure, with Nah-Badûh's address in Accra, as if to invite readers to write or even visit her there.

Nah-Baduh  
Christiansborg  
Goldcoost, Accra  
King's street, Lômô-house  
West-Coost, Afrika (71)

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<sup>33</sup> For more information about the transformation of native languages under colonial rule in five different contexts, I recommend the following works: Eric Cheyfitz. *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*. Expanded ed. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997; Johannes Fabian. *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo 1880-1938*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986; Tejaswini Niranjana. *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992; Rafael L. Vicente. *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under early Spanish Rule*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988; Tzvetan Todorov. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.

Altenberg's outward gaze frames *Ashantee* so that its edges are not self-demarkating borders, but bridges or transitions to another text and place, to another text *as* place. *Ashantee* thus constitutes the liminal space between Accra and Vienna, Altenberg and Nah-Badûh, the lexicon and the letter yet to be written. It opens up to other poetics and people and compromises one's *Heim* with another's *Unheimliche*. His conflicting fantasies, however problematic they may be, make clear that his fellow Viennese are at times more alienating than the Ashanti and that the touch of the African Other can feel more soothing than a familiar white hand. In its movement of love, Altenberg's experimentation with languages and cultures poses challenging questions about identity and self-expression. This makes *Ashantee* a seminal example of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese modernism, where no one culture, language or "race" can claim all of Vienna and everything Viennese as its own. The text participates in the necessary obsession with interrogating and transcreating one's identity.

Out of Altenberg's poetics of translation emerges an ethico-political realm that is hard to ignore because it involves the "trac[ing] of the other in the self," a process that, for Spivak, constitutes "the politics of translation" ("The Politics" 397). *Ashantee* shows signs of this difficult negotiation. A meticulous comparison of Altenberg's original, English-language love letter for Nah-Badûh („EIN BRIEF AUS WIEN“) with its German translation (ÜBERSETZUNG VON „EIN BRIEF AUS WIEN“) illustrates where a translator in love, a lover's text in translation, needs to be situated. Though the translation, printed subsequently to the original, eloquently expresses what Altenberg was unable to articulate on that extraordinary October day, the original contains spelling mistakes, incomprehensible sentences, and statements omitted in translation. For example, "So we stopped sitting and I was like in a drunkenness [sic] of happiness [sic]" is to mean: "So sassen wir ruhig und ich befand mich wie in einer Trunkenheit von Glück" (46, 48). "Like a stranger she got towards me" is translated as: "...als wenn kein Fremder sich genähert hätte!" (47, 49). He then signs the letter with: "Jours [sic] Peter" (47). Altenberg practices a *différent* translation that is both deferred and different from the original. He neither privileges his mother tongue nor shies away from exposing his poor English. According to Derrida, this articulation of oneself in another tongue commits the speaker because

[t]here is commitment only in the language of the other, which I speak, of necessity, irresponsibly and fictively, in expropriation, but the language of the other is more contractual, contracts more, is closer to the convention, fictive origin, to the extent that I invent it and thus adopt, appropriate it, mythically, in the present act of each spoken word. The language of the other lets the spoken word have the word, and commits us to keep our word. In this sense, there is 'language of the other' whenever there is a speech-event. This is what I mean by 'trace' ("Living On" 149).

In a foreign language, then, words take the place of a consequential "trace"—a "residue" and a "dangerous supplement"—that does not slip out of one's mouth as weightless sounds. As such, Altenberg's awkward original letter may be the most heartfelt confession of love for Nah-Badûh. Additionally, as she knows little English, Altenberg

must rely on Monambô, another *Völkerschauen* participant, to help her understand it. The letter thus reads: “My dear Monambô”; “Dear Monambô”; “Oh dear Monambô” (46, 47). He depends on the generosity of another translator, on a fellowship of loving translators, while translating himself in a third language that belongs neither to him nor to her—a gesture that invites a third person to be witness to his commitment. These deterritorializing acts mark the first step toward filling the gap between the two of them, who literally live worlds apart. Yet competent translators inhabit this liminal space between bodies of texts, readers and writers, cultures and languages, however unsettling this experience may be. They constantly estrange themselves at the risk of being lost in translation. This surrendering of self is the remarkable task of Altenberg the Translator. Or shall I better translate him as: the Lover?\*

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