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Outgrowing Gastarbeiterliteratur: Germanness Redefined in the Poetry of Zafer Şenocak and Zehra Çirak

Ricardo Quintana Vallejo

Due to the massive migratory movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the borders that outline the definition of German national identity are now strikingly fluid. Efforts to define “Germanness” in terms of a single common language, religion, ethnicity, or restrictive literary canon fail to encompass—and at times even acknowledge—the complex identities, artistic productions, and experiences of cultural hybridity of at least 20 million Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* [migration background] and the 11 million people that compose the *Ausländische Bevölkerung* [foreign population] of Germany in 2018.¹ In the *de facto* multicultural nation that Germany is now, Zafer Şenocak, born in Ankara in 1961, and Zehra Çirak, born in Istanbul in 1961, use (and purposefully misuse) German to subvert the aesthetic expectations of classic German poetry. The unusual German structures and the themes of migration and cultural hybridity are both key features of the poems and means to skillfully rebel against the strict rules and definitions of syntactic and identitary Germanness. In addition to their forceful disregard for traditional punctuation and capitalization, they “employ a variety of [. . .] textual strategies such as allusion, code-switching, interlanguage, neologism, and syntactic fusion, [. . .] characteristics of postcolonial discourse.”² In

¹ Destatis, “Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit,” [Population and Employment] *Destatis Statistisches Bundesamt* [Destatis Federal Statistical Office] (April 15, 2019): 23, Accessed September 17, 2020, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/auslaend-bevoelkerung-2010200187004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

² Petra Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany from the Margins: “Other” German Literature of the 1980s and 1990s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 46. Fachinger uses these terms, borrowed directly from Bill Ashcroft’s *The Empire*

doing so, they “abrogate the ‘centrality’ of standard German and [. . .] inscribe difference.”³ In reshaping the German language, the poets use aesthetic means to symbolically open the boundaries of Germanness. This study builds on Petra Fachinger’s observation of the abolishment of standard German by illuminating why abrogation is necessary to German poets with *Migrationshintergrund* in the process of carving their space in the contemporary canon and in voicing their unique experiences of alterity and hybridity.

To illuminate the relevance and urgency of the poets’ language and themes, this study first describes the societal context in which Şenocak’s and Çirak’s poems were produced. The subsequent close readings of selected poems enable the analysis of language use as a deliberate engagement with, and subversion of, the prescriptive rules of German. In turn, this language play redefines what German poetry can be and shows how German poets have used their medium to represent contemporary struggles of belonging—an important task in a country where a substantial portion of the population must reflect on their own Germanness since the term has only recently started to encompass their experiences and cultural identity. Through contextualization and close readings, I demonstrate that Şenocak and Çirak use language play to enable readers to rethink the limits of how German language can be structured. Specifically, language play in their poetry can be a key site for the problematizing of identity, nationhood, and most importantly, belonging in a multicultural society containing xenophobic sectors that regard ethnic and cultural difference with contempt or distrust.

The history of Germany in the second half of the twentieth century accounts for how two poets born in Turkey can be read within the contemporary German literary tradition. A great influx of foreign workers during the 1950s and 1960s changed Germany’s body politic. According to Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, “temporary guest workers recruited to work in West Germany between

Writes Back to inscribe her own discourse in postcolonial studies, a framework I employ later in this study. Bill Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002).

³ Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany from the Margins*, 46.

1955 and 1973 became de facto immigrants, thus transforming the Federal Republic of Germany into an immigration country.”⁴ Klusmeyer and Papademetriou likewise assert that “between 1950 and 1994, approximately 80 percent of the increase in the West German population resulted from migration.”⁵ In 2006 the Federal Statistical Office reported “that nearly one-fifth (19 percent) of the population in [reunified contemporary] Germany had a migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*),”⁶ a number that excluded the “approximately 12 million ethnic German refugees and expellees, who came to Germany as a result of World War II and its aftermath.”⁷ In the early 1990s “the introduction of *jus soli* [right of the soil] granted former guest workers and their children greater access to German citizenship and, in so doing, transformed the boundaries of German nationhood.”⁸ As a consequence of the guest worker policy, “the continuing crisis of German identity since unification and the de facto settlement of Turkish and many other ‘Other’ Germans make it imperative to rethink Germanness.”⁹ The picture painted by these statistics is of a de facto immigration land, despite continuous reactionary efforts to define it otherwise.

The length and social impact of the guest worker program restated the emergence of what has been termed *Gastarbeiterliteratur* [guest worker literature]. This taxonomy “was coined in 1980, simultaneous to the founding of two publishing houses *PoLiKunst* (Politische Literatur und Kunst) and *Südwind Gastarbeiterdeutsch*,” which made accounts of guest workers’ experiences available to a larger public.¹⁰ These publications documented “experiences of culture-shock and problems of

⁴ Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, *Becoming Multicultural: Immigration and the Politics of Membership in Canada and Germany* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 1.

⁵ Douglas B. Klusmeyer and Demetrios G. Papademetriou, *Immigration Policy in the Federal Republic of Germany: Negotiating Membership and Remaking the Nation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), xii.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Triadafilopoulos, *Becoming Multicultural*, 3.

⁹ Tom Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), 32.

¹⁰ B. Venkat Mani, “Phantom of the ‘Gastarbeiterliteratur,’” in *Migration und Interkulturalität in neueren literarischen Texten*, ed. Aglaia Blioumi (München: Ludicium, 2002), 113. *Polikunst* was an association founded by foreign artists and writers to protect their interests and promote their work. To clarify, B. Venkat Mani is referring to the *Polinationaler Literatur und Kunstverein (Polikunst)* in the context of his analysis of Aras Ören’s literary work. It is relevant to note that Luise von Flotow describes *PoLiKunst* not as a publishing house, as does Mani, but as “an association founded primarily as a

integration, exploitation at work and social discrimination, domestic clashes due to conflicting social values, and financial and emotional hopes and aspirations of guestworkers in Germany.”¹¹ While originally useful, *Gastarbeiterliteratur* is no longer a fitting term because subsequent generations of migrants and their children now identify as Germans and feel the label marginalizes their artistic production, creating the undesirable effect of niche literature. *Gastarbeiterliteratur* thus falls into the category of inadequate labels. As Jennifer Marston William has likewise noted, “the past few decades have seen several unsatisfactory labels for the diverse body of creative works produced by minorities in Germany.”¹² William argues that although critics have come to “realize that multicultural writing has changed and enriched the German literary canon [. . .] the tendency to marginalize the works as ‘Other’ persists.”¹³ *Gastarbeiterliteratur* paved the way for a now-complex literary corpus that challenges its subcategorization and has broken into mainstream contemporary German art and literature. While many of the themes in the poetry of Şenocak and Çirak fall into Mani’s list of common themes, these authors also expand this list, pondering the German political situation at large. The works of Şenocak and Çirak have won multiple awards, are now included in syllabi across Germany and abroad, and populate the shelves of bookstores and libraries alike.¹⁴

movement of foreign artists yet also designed to represent their interests [. . .] which in an attempt to avoid the usual patronizing treatment (*Bevormundung*) accorded foreigners, restricted its membership to foreign writers/artists.” See Louise von Flotow, “Preface” in *Fremde Discourse on the Foreign*, ed. Gino Chiellino (Toronto, CA: Guernica, 1995), 8. Rita Chin further explains that *PolLiKunst* “aimed to use literature to build a grassroots movement of laborers brought together by the shared sociohistorical experiences embedded in the very language (*gastarbeiterdeutsch*) that guest workers used.” See Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 115.

¹¹ Mani, “Phantom of the ‘Gastarbeiterliteratur,’” 113.

¹² Jennifer Marston William, “Cognitive Poetics and Common Ground in a Multicultural Context: The Poetry of Zehra Çirak,” *German Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 173, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41494747>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Zafer Şenocak was awarded the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 1988 and was a featured author in the 2007 PEN World Voices Festival. His work was anthologized in the Contemporary German Writers series of the University of Chicago Press. He has been writer-in-residence at the University of Wales Swansea, M.I.T., Dartmouth College, Oberlin College, the University of California at Berkeley, and Lafayette College. His work is used to teach German worldwide by the prestigious Goethe-Institut in their “Migration and Integration” module. Zehra Çirak was also awarded the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 1989 and 2001, and she is the 1994 recipient of the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize.

Gastarbeiterliteratur is a particularly invalidating term for Çirak, who has expressly rejected this classification and the label “Turkish German,” as Marilya Veteto-Conrad explains in her 1999 article “Innere Unruhe” [Inner unease].¹⁵ Çirak finds this taxonomy synonymous with the flattening of culture implied in full integration and assimilation. Instead, Çirak argues for the celebration of a multitude of cultures intermingling and sharing spaces. In her poetry, she depicts the significance of everyday mundane experiences when lived in the body and subjectivity of the proverbial Other. The objects of everyday life become extraordinary in Çirak’s work as they signify the experiences and categorization of Otherness in daily practices and interactions, expanding the experiences of Germanness to include multiple cultures. Şenocak does not expressly identify or reject the label “Turkish German” but likewise opens the boundaries of Germanness to include bilingualism. Şenocak depicts bodies split between planets and cultures and brings attention to the pain this causes to culturally hybrid people. The poets focus on two different themes to voice their experiences of Otherness in their multicultural society. Çirak underscores the mundane, while Şenocak is more concerned with language itself.

Çirak’s celebration of multicultural conviviality in mundane life inscribes her into the project that Paul Gilroy proposes in the context of postcolonial studies as a national vision to welcome the changing composition of post-World War II European national bodies. Gilroy affirms that this project does not come from the top, “not the outcome of governmental drift and institutional difference but of concrete oppositional work: political, aesthetic, cultural, scholarly.”¹⁶ It emerges “from below,” as “a mature response to diversity, plurality, and differentiation. It is oriented by routine, everyday exposure to difference.”¹⁷ Çirak represents this routine in her poem “Stadtgrenze”

¹⁵ Marilya Veteto-Conrad, “‘Innere Unruhe’? Zehra Çirak and Minority Literature Today,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 53, no. 2 (1999): 59.

¹⁶ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

[City borders], where people in low-income suburbs use different exotic spices and find a common solidarity in the metaphor of salt which, Çirak explains, knows no national culture.

Şenocak's focus on language is reminiscent of *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal work in postcolonial studies. Şenocak, as Ngũgĩ once did, ponders how to use and rework the hegemonic language of a powerful majority culture to express his own experiences of pain and marginalization. Şenocak thus addresses Ngũgĩ's famous question, in his own context, about how a borrowed tongue (English, in Ngũgĩ's case), "can carry the weight of our African [or, in this case, a marginalized] experience."¹⁸ Şenocak pays tribute to Ngũgĩ's famous assertion that "language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture."¹⁹ The influential Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe explains how it is possible to express these marginalized experiences in a borrowed hegemonic tongue but adds that "it will have to be a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings."²⁰ In an analogous way, both Şenocak and Çirak dismantle some of the key rules of the German language, specifically punctuation and capitalization, to make it a new German. The strangeness that ensues enables the poets to bring attention to their own eccentric experiences of learning German as a second language outside the home. Şenocak, in particular, uses this strangeness to foreground the pain of bilingualism.

The fact that *Gastarbeiterliteratur* was once a useful term but now meets resistance is evidence that the identities of Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* are in constant flux. Stuart Hall argues that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."²¹ Because these identities are now a substantial part of the

¹⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey Heinemann, 1986), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, "English and the African Writer," *Transition* no. 75–76 (1997): 349.

²¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* no. 36 (1989): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666>.

German experience in general, Germanness is also in a state of flux. As expected, both poets depict Germany in contrasting strokes: at times a convivial intermingling of cultures, at times bigoted and longing for a pure and homogeneous nation that never existed.

To illustrate the poets' need to push against societal contempt, carve their space in German literature, and frame their experiences as a key aspect of Germanness, this study cites two examples of bigoted rhetoric that have gained momentum despite, and in reaction to, the success of these authors. These examples are from 1977 and 2016, and demonstrate the xenophobic efforts to assert a monocultural, homogeneous German national body politic where Germans with *Migrationshintergrund* are unjustly excluded from Germanness. The first is the West German stance officially adopted in a "1977 policy report of a joint commission of the federal government and the states on migrant workers."²² This report claimed that West Germany was "not a country of immigration" but instead a "country in which foreigners reside for varying lengths of time before they decide on their own accord to return to their home country."²³ The report identifies a national vision dissimilar from the reality of the guest worker program, which facilitated the permanent settlement of workers primarily from Turkey and changed the traits of the German body politic: "Germany did not practice a true guest worker policy during this period because policymakers never implemented a mechanism for ensuring the consistent rotation of foreign workers."²⁴ Thus, Triadafilopoulos asserts that by the end of the twentieth century, Germany had "developed into [a] de facto multicultural societ[y]," because by the time of the "recruitment stop" in November 1973, "German was host to some 2.6 million foreigners."²⁵ The second and more recent example of bigoted rhetoric comes from the right-wing

²² Klusmeyer and Papademetriou, *Immigration Policy in the Federal Republic of Germany*, xii.

²³ Peter J. Katzenstein, *Policy and Politics in West Germany: The Growth of a Semisovereign State* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987), 239–40.

²⁴ Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos and Karen Schönwälder, "How the Federal Republic Became an Immigration Country: Norms, Politics, and the Failure of West Germany's Guest Worker System," *German Politics & Society* 24, no. 3 (2006): 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23742736>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

political party *Alternative für Deutschland, AfD* [Alternative for Germany], the “third-largest group in the Bundestag,” the German Parliament.²⁶ In their online *Manifesto for Germany*, the AfD explains that because “identity is primarily shaped by culture,” it is the “statutory duty of federal and state governments” to “preserve German Culture, Language and Tradition.”²⁷ They further assert their stance against conviviality, explaining that multiculturalism—

is blind to history and puts on a par imported cultural trends with the indigenous culture, thereby degrading the value system of the latter. The AfD views this as a serious threat to social peace and the survival of the nation state as a cultural unit. It is the duty of the government and civil society to confidently protect German cultural identity as the predominant culture.²⁸

The AfD rhetoric nefariously distinguishes between German *culture* and imported *trends*. While the local culture is characterized as millenary and still, foreign cultures and traditions are simultaneously diminished as temporary and characterized as attacks. In the xenophobic view of the AfD, foreigners are rendered superfluous and dangerous Others, imposing banal trends that degrade Germanness. The xenophobic anxiety over loose demarcations of the national literary canon reveals the importance that nationalist right-wing ideology ascribes to rigid and conservative ideas of the canon. Indeed, as Ankhi Mukherjee argues, “the canon has historically been a nexus of power and knowledge that reinforces hierarchies and the vested interests of select institutions, excluding the interests and accomplishments of minorities, popular and demotic culture, or non-European civilizations.”²⁹ The AfD thus argues for the preservation of an exclusionary canon antagonistic to changes in the political body of the nation (and that considers artistic products created by Others to be trends rather than culture), not realizing

²⁶ Jefferson Chase, “AfD: What You Need to Know about Germany’s Far-Right Party,” *Deutsche Welle*, Sept. 24, 2017, <https://p.dw.com/p/2W7YF>.

²⁷ Alternative für Deutschland AfD. *Manifesto for Germany* (Stuttgart: AfD, 2016), 45–46, Accessed September 17, 2020, https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹ Ankhi Mukherjee. *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 8.

that, rather than replacing the canon, contemporary Other Germans expand it and, by adding myriad voices and experiences, celebrate it.

The contemporary German context is characterized by a tension between xenophobic sectors of society and a general conviviality. This context urges the literary foregrounding of the redefinition of Germanness to include and voice the experiences of marginalized Germans. Although one cannot imagine this context as a geographical border, such as the hybrid space between Mexico and the US Southwest, the definition of “borderland” by Gloria Anzaldúa proves helpful in imagining the cities of Germany as places where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”³⁰ The living space that Çirak describes in her poem “Stadtgrenze” underscores this intimacy when the different smells produced by exotic spices of culturally relevant foods intermingle. And, importantly to Şenocak’s imagery in his poem “Doppelmann” (Doubleman), Anzaldúa famously describes borderland as “una herida abierta” [an open wound].³¹ For Şenocak the wound is not a geographical space but a split in the tongue, a physical border between languages. The poets thus dwell in what Mary Louise Pratt terms a *contact zone*: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”³² *Borderland* and *contact zone* are useful concepts to imagine the spaces where the poems of Şenocak and Çirak occur. The setting is not in a stable or homogeneous nation-state, but a zone of constant negotiation with identity, power, and intimacy.

Turning attention to Şenocak, readers encounter the experiences of language and bilingualism that his dwelling in a contact zone beget. In Şenocak’s poems, the impossibility to feel whole when a

³⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007), 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³² Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 34.

person is split between languages becomes the key feature to understanding the experiences of Otherness and marginalization. The languages split tongue and body alike, rendering the reconciliation of multiculturalism with Germanness a challenging project.

Şenocak's "Doppelmann," available in different versions and titles, depicts the painful experience of code-switching cutting through the poetic voice's tongue. The one cited here is a longer version published in 1993 without a title (later versions are shortened to dismiss the first and last stanzas and include the title "Doppelmann").

*ich habe meine Füße auf zwei Planeten
wenn sie sich in Bewegung setzen
zerren sie mich mit
ich falle
ich trage zwei Welten in mir
aber keine ist ganz
sie bluten ständig
die Grenze verläuft
mitten durch meine Zunge
ich rüttele daran wie ein Häftling
das Spiel an einer Wunde³³*

I have my feet on two planets
if they set themselves in motion
they drag me along
I fall
I carry [bear] two worlds in me
but neither is whole
they bleed constantly
the border runs
through the middle of my tongue
I joggle it like a prisoner
The game on a wound

Rather than being merely a line on a map, the border cuts through the people who bear two worlds. It cuts the tongue because that is where languages reside and thus crystalizes the idea of a bilingualism that aches. The metaphorical site for expression is hurt by the wound of a culturally hybrid identity: a body divided. Neither Germany nor Turkey exist entirely in the speaker. The voice is partially heir to both world views, as they bleed into one another. The result is a split subjectivity and a feeling of almost belonging to the nation's social body. Being a "Doubleman" is an uneasy ordeal where a single subjectivity overflows and is unable to contain worlds that could perhaps fit better in two distinct subjects.³⁴

³³ Zafer Şenocak. "Untitled." *Der Deutschunterricht* 46, h. 5 (1993): 102.

³⁴ I capitalized the first-person pronoun "I" in the English translation even though it is not capitalized at the beginning of sentences in the original German. Because it lacks conventional capitalization and punctuation, the original German

Multiculturalism is thus a painful fact for the poetic voice. The voice cannot help but experience the split in body and its forms of expressions. Rather than a joyful experience of conviviality, multiculturalism appears as a violent imposition carried unwillingly on the backs and tongues of those who matter-of-factly bear clashing cultures. As multiculturalism is often the burden of the children of diasporas, the speaker cannot choose to be a “singleman.” Şenocak shows how multiculturalism is often a taxing duty not of the host majority but of people who must constantly balance between two planets and assert their belonging in the political home.

The striking image of the wounded body in pain, split by language itself, is framed in the aesthetic strangeness of the lack of capitalization at the beginning of sentences and in missing punctuation. The poet calls readers’ attention to these conventions of language by eliminating them, rendering them unnecessary for effective communication. A possible reading of this decision is the poet expressing that the strict and correct Germanness of capitalization and punctuation are unnecessary to communicate, that Germanness does not need the rigidity of rules to remain intelligible. Instead, the sentences lack clear beginnings and endings and thus bleed into each other, mirroring the worlds the poetic voice painfully inhabits.

Şenocak builds on the theme of pain that linguistic hybridity causes on the body in his poem “Spielsachen” (Playthings). The poetic voice asks a vague *Herr* why it could not have two mouths and two tongues:

*Sind das meine Beine Herr
warum gabst du mir nicht vier
ist das mein Kopf Herr
warum gabst du mir nicht zwei
sind das meine Augen
warum sind es zwei*

*hätte eine Nase nicht genügt
hätte ein Mund eine Zunge nicht genügt

sind das meine Münde Herr
sind das meine Zungen*

has a sense of strangeness. This strangeness is still conveyed in the English translation with the lack of punctuation. Further, I included two possible meanings for the word “tragen” in my translation to illustrate the complexity of the language of the poem and how it resists a single interpretation. Where “carry” may not necessarily have a negative connotation, “bear” does, which makes the sustainment of two worlds a more clearly painful experience. The poetic “I” seems to have no identity or ground of its own but rather is pulled and torn by the worlds that inhabit and wound it.

Are these my legs Lord
why didn't you give me four
is this my head Lord
why didn't you give me two
are these my eyes
why are there two

as if one nose wouldn't do
as if one mouth one tongue would do

are these my mouths Lord
are these my tongues³⁵

In the first line the poetic voice is not able to recognize its own body. The sensation of dissonance is consistent with that of “Doppelmann,” where both of the worlds carried feel incomplete and not entirely familiar. Here, there is an uncanny element about the body itself. If the voice had double the legs and heads, perhaps the dissonance would be solved. But since the subject has only one body, a sensation of foreignness ensues. “Spielsachen” imagines the body multiplying (rather than sustaining wounds, as in “Doppelmann”) to accommodate the hybridity of two worlds inhabiting one consciousness. The inferred idea of Germanness in this poem, imagined as a single national body, cannot accommodate the multiplicity of languages and cultures that exist within it, thus advancing a pessimistic evaluation of national identity. By the end, the voice is even confused about whether tongues and mouths, the sites of language, are part of itself.

A note on the translation is here relevant since the English version translated by Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright narrows the meaning of the line “hätte ein Mund eine Zunge nicht genügt.” She translates the antepenultimate line as “as if one mouth one tongue would do.”³⁶ An alternative translation, “would one mouth one tongue not have been enough,” slightly changes the meaning of the poem’s conclusion. This translation readily denotes the existence of double mouths and tongues, a metaphor of bilingualism, that the *Herr* does not seem to have planned, but that the poetic voice nonetheless has and is showing to the *Herr*. If this *Herr* is the societal expectation for citizens of the nation to have but one set of a mouth and a tongue, the poetic voice breaks away from the *Herr*’s

³⁵ Zafer Şenocak, *Door Languages*, trans. Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2008), 140–41. ³⁶ Ibid.

expectation and implies the possibility that the German national body can have more than one tongue despite the *Herr's* planning and expectation.

Şenocak continues to ponder the issue of multiplicity of cultures coexisting painfully in one person, a synecdoque of the national body, in the five-part poem “Flaschenpost” (Message in a Bottle). The striking insight of this poem in parts I and IV is that multiculturalism is not as painful for the unquestioned members of the host society, so-called ethnic Germans (which, the AfD warns, have a birth rate much lower than that “among immigrants”) —as xenophobic nationalists often claim.³⁷ This poem shows how multiculturalism is rather distressing for the Other Germans who learn conflicting cultures and traditions at home and in their larger social environments. The multiple—and often-conflicting—expectations and codes of conduct of these sites of development cause tears in the tongue, voice, and subjectivity. The poet portrays a split and confused person as well as a split and confused concept of Germanness that has not successfully intermingled languages and heritages. The failure to communicate is the key feature of the experience of non-belonging:

³⁷ Alternative für Deutschland AfD, *Manifesto for Germany*, 41.

<p>I es ist kein geheimnis heute wirft man seine flaschenpost ins meer</p> <p>das große meer ist klein auf der welt unterhält sich in geheimsprachen mit anderen meeren die sprachen sind seekarten ohne inseln in uferlosem blau verschwindender farbe rätsel sind in ihnen aufgegangen lieder sprüche wortfetzen auch befehle wie bleibe gehe liebe</p>	<p>I it's no secret</p> <p>today you throw your bottle message in the sea the great sea is small in the world converses in secret languages with other seas the languages are charts without islands in boundless blue of vanishing color riddles are dissolved in them songs saying scraps of word also commands like stay go love³⁸</p>
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The image of the bottle lost at sea is the archetype of a vital personal message: often the last word and hope of a castaway. The sea, vast but *klein auf der Welt* [small in the world], is the means through which that message travels. Vital messages exist in the sea of our language. They are not secret to those who can understand us; they are secret to other seas, other languages. The motif of split languages persists in this poem, as one single sea, no matter how vast, cannot cover the whole world. Seas are but small sites of possible communication within great unfamiliar oceans. While nouns are normatively capitalized, the lack of punctuation and capitalization at the beginning of sentences continues to destabilize the propriety of language.

Languages are portrayed as sea charts without islands; one may get lost in their immensity. The feeling of being adrift in an ocean of language without firm land on which to stand is possibly reflective of the early experiences of young migrant children in new social settings. It is possible that these are the experiences of the poets themselves, as Şenocak's family moved to Germany from

³⁸ Şenocak, 2008, 52-53.

Ankara, Turkey, in 1970, when he was nine years old, and Çirak's family moved from Istanbul to Germany in 1963, when she was three years old.

Taking this biographical context into account, the last stanza of the poem becomes particularly powerful. Although the words "bleibe, gehe, and liebe" [stay, go, and love] can be combined to create beautiful songs, they are here transfigured into imperatives. The word "Befehle" suggests a command that comes from a figure of authority, perhaps military, and therefore conveys a possible cruelty in these three words. The first two commands, bleibe and gehe, (stay and go), are contradictory messages that ethnically and culturally marginalized people experience in their mundane lives and at the levels of national and international rhetoric from political figures who uphold or reject multicultural conviviality. In the task of understanding Germanness, people with *Migrationshintergrund* are instructed to stay and go by different sectors of society which figuratively pull them in different directions, ultimately splitting their metaphorical bodies.

In the fourth part of the poem, the possible hopefulness of throwing the bottle to the sea is replaced by the unlikelihood of the message reaching its destination:

IV
man stirbt auf der Straße
auf der einem laut die Nachricht überbracht wird

man stirbt mit der Flasche unterm Armyou

ohne sie geöffnet zu haben
mit allen Worten die man hätte wollen

das Wort das dicht ist
behält man für sich allein

IV
you are dying on the street
where the news was delivered to you
aloud
are dying with the bottle under your
arm
that you never got to open
with all the words you had wanted to
say
the sealed word
you keep to yourself³⁹

³⁹ Şenocak, 2008, 54-55.

This stanza is impersonal, using the active-voice alternative in the original German that, similarly to the passive voice, diminishes the grammatical and semantic importance of the subject. “Man,” often translated as “one,” dies; “one” is given news, but not by anyone in particular. The one with the message, unable to deliver it, *is* the one who dies, with the message’s words still sealed, heard by no one. Here, to die and to keep silent seem synonymous, as though one could exist (at least in terms of the relationship to others) only through and within the seas of languages, as they mix. Whether it is an open wound along the tongue, or a wound that annihilates the person, language is a source of anxiety and non-belonging in the dimension of the migrant experience.

Şenocak’s exploration of the effect of bilingualism on the body and psyche enables the redefinition of Germanness to include several languages, tongues, and mouths that, although painfully tearing through the body, are an undeniable experience of alterity for many Germans. Shifting the focus away from language, Çirak foregrounds the manifold meanings of mundane objects. Çirak underscores the shifting connotations of bicycles, trains, or food items in marginalized experiences, showing just how different everyday life can be for Germans with *Migrationshintergrund*. Like Şenocak, Çirak disregards traditional punctuation and capitalization, thus opening the limits of intelligible German. Unlike Şenocak, Çirak depicts experiences of pain caused not by bilingualism but by socioeconomic marginalization and nationalist violence. This is the case of the poem “Kein Sand in Rad der Zeit” (No Sand in the Wheel of Time).

*Ich stehe in der U-Bahn an die Wand gelehnt
 schweigend schauke ich in der U-Fahrt
 fünf Jungs und zwei Mädels kommen auf mich zu
 schwankend im Laufe der Geschwindigkeit
 festen Blickes fixieren sie mich
 und grinsen sich immer näher
 ich versuche die sieben zu ignorieren
 die anderen Fahrgäste sind alle
 mit sich selbst beschäftigt
 die sieben stehen nun*

I stand in the subway leaning on the wall
 silently I sway in the metro
 five boys and two girls approach me
 faltering because of the speed
 firm grins are fixated on me
 and sneering ever closer
 I try to ignore the seven
 the other passengers are all
 busy with themselves
 the seven now stand

*kaum noch einen Schritt von mir
 der eine und die andere bolt aus
 zum Schlag
 noch einmal noch mal
 die anderen johlen begeistert
 jetzt bin ich Neger — Jude — Ausländer —
 Penner — oder anderswer
 nein sie sehen nicht was ich wirklich bin
 jetzt nur noch ein geschlagenes Ding
 ich höre noch ein kleines Kind
 das ängstlich Mama ruft
 und die anderen Fahrgäste machen sich
 bereit zum Aussteigen
 ich falle um
 ich bin ein Fahrrad
 mein Besitzer ist
 ein Neger — Jude — Ausländer
 der mit Vorausahnungen
 schon eine Station früher ausgestiegen war
 von nun an bin ich
 nicht mehr — nur ein Fahrrad*

hardly a step before me
 one and the others wind up
 to hit
 once again and another time
 the others jeer excitedly
 now I am a Negro–Jew–Foreigner–
 Bum–or some other
 no they do not see what I really am
 now just a beaten thing
 I still hear a little kid
 who anxiously calls mama
 and the other passengers
 make themselves ready to disembark
 I collapse
 I am a bicycle
 my owner is
 Negro—a Jew—a Foreigner
 who with premonitions
 already disembarked a station earlier
 from now on I am
 no more—only a bicycle⁴⁰

Çirak’s poem plays with the identity of the poetic voice as it degenerates and ultimately becomes an object. The poem starts with the voice as the subject of every line. The speaker stands, leaning on the wall, doing nothing in particular, and sees just a mundane scene of riding on the subway. But then, the five boys and two girls approach the speaker. Although the poem does not state it, readers are inclined to imagine these boys and girls being white, certain of their belonging to the German social body, their Germanness. They hit the poetic voice time and again for no other reason than its Otherness, reminding the poetic voice of its condition of non-belonging. The voice becomes first a “*Neger — Jude — Ausländer — Penner — oder anderswer,*” and readers hear these words as slurs that the boys and girls inflict during the attack. The physical cruelty of this violence tears the body apart while the slurs explain it. The seven children define beyond doubt what Germanness cannot encompass. They use

⁴⁰ Zehra Çirak, “Kein Sand im Rad der Zeit, Stadgrenze,” [No Sand in the Wheel of Time, City Borders] in *Fremde Flügel auf Eigener Schulter* [Stranger Wings on Your Own Shoulder], by Zehra Çirak (Hamburg: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994), 44–45. For the translation, see Erin Trapp, “Zehra Çirak and the Aporia of Dialogism,” in *Poetry and Dialogism: Hearing Over*, ed. Mara Scanlon and Chad Engbers (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 93–94.

their fists and screams to write their definition on the broken body of the Other. The poetic voice understands that violent pain on the body is a shared experience by those who are poor and historically marginalized. It becomes then a *geschlagenes Ding* [beaten thing], robbed of its personhood.

The other passengers are concerned with continuing their lives, unencumbered. They seem oblivious to the violence. Or, if they witness it, they do not care to prevent or address it. The train becomes a metaphor of the nation. It is always moving, with a wide array of people riding inside—perpetuators, witnesses, and victims. The poem warns of the danger of passengers who accept this vicious scene as normal. By listing the people who have historically been the victims of cruelty, the poem reminds the nation of its historical identity and implicitly asks whether brutality inflicted on Others' bodies is a desirable vision for the project of nationhood. In the last lines of the poem, the “I” is no longer a human, just an object meant to transport.

Çirak's foregrounding of mundane experiences as key sites to ponder the definition of Germanness importantly includes the representation of domesticity in her poem on “Stadtgrenze.” In this poem, Çirak draws attention to the significance of everyday household objects in migrant experiences:

Am Stadtrand die Klage:

*Meine Stadt ist voll mit Häusern
meine Häuser voller Leute
die ihre Kopfkissen einrichten
mit Bedürfnissen jeder Art
unsere Leute sind genug
uns genug die Unsrigen
für die Zahl der Teller
wir würzen nur exotisch
doch essen ein und heimisch*

On the edges of the city the complaint:

my city is full of houses
my houses are full of people
who arrange their head room
with needs of every sort
our people are enough
ours are enough for us
for the number of plates
we spice only exotically
however we eat alone and locally

*Das Salz kennt keine Nationalgerichte
wer will nun wem
die Grenzen*

Salt knows no national dish
who wants now to throw
the borders

in die Augen streuen?

in whose eyes?⁴¹

The poem is set at the edges of the city, probably a low-income suburb where a multiplicity of cultures share the tight spaces of large buildings and projects. In this space, one can smell all sorts of sweet, sour, and savory national dishes emanating from the windows and hallways. The poem starts with a disembodied complaint: those who are jarred by this multiplicity of smells; and further jarred by the people who arrange their *Kopfzimmer* [head space] in different ways, world views, religions, and structures of social organization.

Multiculturalism in this poem happens in the tongue. But, unlike Şenocak's poems, the tongue is not the place for language, but for culture conveyed through flavor. And although a wide variety of spices exist, people eat locally. The first line of the second stanza signals the possibility of finding common ground regardless of national ancestry. Indeed, *Das Salz kennt keine Nationalgerichte* [salt knows no national dish]. Unlike the division between the One and the Other in "No Sand in the Wheel of Time," "City Borders" finds a space to assert that the experience of people is more similar than categorizations and borders would suggest, regardless of their cultural origin. The final question, *wer will nun wem/ die Grenzen/ in die Augen streuen?* [who wants now to throw the borders in whose eyes?] is an assertion that borders between peoples are artificially created, dispersed by those who benefit from feelings of division and difference. The ways people prepare food, eat, and live, have more in common than imposed city borders might imply.

The portrayal of multiculturalism is cautiously optimistic, but not because the host society joyfully tolerates the multiplicity of cultures in this poem. Instead, it is because multiculturalism is shown as the shared experience of the different groups at the geographical margins of the city and

⁴¹ Çirak, "Kein Sand im Rad der Zeit, Stadgrenze," [No Sand in the Wheel of Time, City Borders] 51. For the translation, see Trapp, "Zehra Çirak and the Aporia of Dialogism," 189.

social margins of the nation. Germanness can include these people because their shared experiences eliminate the borders between them.

These selected poems portray the difficult processes of identification for migrant communities, as migrants struggle with violence, the pain of multilingualism, and partial belonging. The poets and their poems contain several worlds, and the scenes and struggles may not be common to all German people. However, these poems depict the lives and concerns of German citizens and residents intersected today by multiculturalism, expanding the delimitations of national identity. Germanness pondered and redefined in the poetry of Şenocak and Çirak can be an experience of pain and violence, but it is also one undeniably shared by many people who have lived in Germany for generations and irrefutably belong in the contemporary definition of Germanness.

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