

Unbeholden New German Literature: An Interview with Deniz Utlu

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Daniel Schreiner

Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

Introduction

An interview with Deniz Utlu, author of numerous essays and plays, as well as the recent novel, *Die Ungehaltenen* (Graf Verlag, München, 2014), and editor of the culture and society magazine, *freitext*. The interview was conducted in Berlin by Daniel Schreiner of the Universität Bonn shortly after the publication of Utlu's debut novel, and was intended at that time for research purposes and not for publication. *TRANSIT Journal* is publishing this English translation (as well the German-language text) of an abridged edition of the transcription three years after the original interview with the permission of both Deniz Utlu and the interviewer.

Interview

DS: In your text, “Land in Sicht,”¹ you talk about immunity from association and the right to one’s own traditions. What associations were you confronted with in your youth, and how did you free yourself from them? What was the process which enabled you at some point to consciously rise above them?

DU: I grew up in Hanover. The conflicts and discussions in Berlin were much more polarized because you experience a much tangible “minority” there—if you are so inclined.

¹ **Land, ho!**

I seek a third part, hidden in everything.

Headlands – with a population strewn throughout the world. Sovereign of local rites and norms. From the inheritance of forbearers.

A parallel world, a solar system – with its own resources and definition-majesty over that which is art and culture, over that which should remain.

Something invisible and omnipresent. Like a law defended before court, acted out across the world, held not only in the courts of law, but in attics and basements. A law, more valid for the individual than constitutions – decreed and ratified, followed and defined by judges and politicians.

A land whose borders cannot be inscribed on maps, there without a concrete space. Invisible and everywhere at once. Impregnable. Immune to all associations.

A land which only ceases to exist when no longer conceived.

(“Land im Sicht” is part of the cycle, “Spandau 2048: Minimals aus dem Magen des Molochs” and first appeared in Sezgin, Hilgal (ed.): *Das Manifest der Vielen. Deutschland erfindet sich neu*. Blumenbar Verlag, Berlin 2011. P. 23.)

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I was always political; injustice offends me deeply. But if I was critical during my school years, it was more a kind of abstract critique of capitalism which eventually led me to study Economics. It was then that I realized that there was more to it than that: It wasn't only capitalism—whatever that concept means in its isolation—it was forms of exclusion and injustice which are integrated into our economic system.

DS: I understand your text “Sieben Sekunden”² not only as a critique of the ‘anthill society’ and the lifelong conditioning we’re subjected to, but I also read it, by implication, as a spiritual text. Are you spiritual or religious? What do you believe in, or to put this another way: “To what narratives do you remain a slave?”

DU: I was a devout atheist my entire adolescence, almost ideologically so. I’m not anymore. I’ve reconciled with the Koran and other religious texts, including the Bible. For me there is a spirituality beyond religion. I come closest to this spirituality through lyric.

DS: Cue “Angry Birds”:³ In a conversation with Marianna Salzmann, you talk about the “tuberculosis” with which a city, a person, or even Germany can threaten

² **Seven Seconds**

Maybe it's really only seven seconds.

We behold the light of the world. We are naked.

Not black, not white, not worker, not professor, not clever, not dumb.

No migration background. We are. Seven seconds long are we. Seven seconds silent being, seven seconds free.

And then.

A doctor holds us in hand, a midwife, a nurse, a mother. We are seen.

Spoken to. Passed on.

Already the first glance that falls upon us, the first contact, tells a story. And the fall begins.

There was a time, a little time before. Before the fall. How did it feel? How long did it endure?

Two seconds? Seven? One day?

How long until it became something normal, something different?

We are educated.

Reeducated.

Everything receives a name; everything, a time. The thirtieth year. The fortieth year.

Caesuras in life.

Placing a napkin on your lap while eating.

Avoiding awkward silence.

Working. Day and night. Reading books. Learning formulas. Telephoning. Emailing.

Not. Distracting. Leaving. Everything. Only. Not. That.

Always straight ahead, always okay, always with thick skin.

How thick is it after seven seconds?

After seven years, seventeen, twenty-seven?

Sorting. What is necessary, what is not? What inhibits, what accelerates? What serves as springboard, what is burdensome?

Don't look where it hurts. That. Could. Distract. And. We. Don't. Want. That.

Don't feel. Don't listen: How does the breath of a child sound before the seventh second?

(“Sieben Sekunden” is part of the cycle, “Spandau 2048: Minimals aus dem Magen des Molochs” and first appeared in Sezgin, Hilgal (ed.): *Das Manifest der Vielen. Deutschland erfindet sich neu*. Blumenbar Verlag, Berlin 2011. P. 17)

³ when the world becomes a mason and builds wall around you,
when every approach is in the end only a run against a wall,

someone. Have you also been infected by this metaphorical illness? How does one defend oneself against it, and where does the door lead that you say you need to find?

DU: I was infected with this tuberculosis through the NSU debate. Not only from the debate, but from the fact of the matter itself, and how the media and politicians responded to it.

But there's another dimension, too. It makes a difference whether or not you walk through life dragging around additional weights. An acquaintance of mine whom I greatly respect once showed me a picture of a relative of his who still lived in the country where his family came from. The guy was unbelievably rich and enjoyed all kinds of privileges there: A young man who traveled around in jets—in private jets—like they were taxis and lived in palaces. My friend told me: “If I had grown up there, that would have been my life.” And then I understood for the first time what it really means to be carried by one's society and not crushed by it. My acquaintance didn't tell me this in complaint, it was much more an attempt to comfort me. And he succeeded in that. He was able to impress me just as much without a private jet through his attitude towards life: He was still the man he was despite those burdens, and he walked through life smiling, encouraging the people he met around him.

DS: I once spoke to the Germanist Yasemin Yildiz at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and she told me in Germany she was always asked, “Where do you really come from?” or told “You speak German pretty well.” While her approaches to her work in Germany were always hindered, those same topics and questions were greeted with open doors in the USA. Like Yildiz, many Turkish-Germans⁴ have to struggle against resistance and racist structures. Some are

when you ask a thousand times and a thousand times the answer is no,
when you want to sleep,
but no sleep is granted you,
one says in Turkish: they've breathed tuberculosis into me.
this city, this country, has breathed tuberculosis into me.
You've breathed tuberculosis into me.
My mother said it often.
My father became ill.

The Turkish word for tuberculosis doesn't sound like a technical term for an illness. The Turkish word sounds like a curse. When I hear it, I see my mother ball her fists and pound them against her head.

“Angry Birds” refers to the literary partnership between Utlu and the author and dramatist Marianne Salzmann. In addition to their collaboration on the play about the NSU murders, *Fahrräder könnten eine Rolle spielen*, they also cooperate through a fictional correspondence entitled “Wutvögel singen” ([translated excerpts](#) from this correspondence were published in *TRANSIT Journal* Volume 8.1; others have appeared in the Turkish literary magazine *Ada*). The original text cited here is available on Utlu's [homepage](#); see: <http://denizutlu.de/angry-birds/> (viewed on June 30, 2016).

⁴ Borrowing from the American terminological formation (for example, Mexican-American), I use here the term “Turkish-Germn” (“Türk-Deutscher”) instead of the more common “German-Turk” (“Deutsch-Türke”) employed in the media and other research. This is done deliberately in recognition of the discursive act present in the ordering of ethnic or national associations. There is a distinct difference in the implications of “German-Turk” and “Turkish-German”: the latter part of these descriptive pairs provides the more decisive association, the former serves as an addendum. This has larger implications for the level to which cultural or natural affiliation is or is not adjudicated; in this same vein, Tayfun Demir employs the term “Turkish-

conscious about where this comes from, others are simply weighed down by it — growing sick or becoming depressed. Are you conscious of this, as well? Are these isolated cases that get struck down by this “tuberculosis” or does it weigh upon an entire generation?

DU: I worked in a psychiatric ward during my year of civil service. Many of those patients were individuals affected by racism—that is certainly no coincidence. Racism can have both physical as well as mental consequences. But many people also grow through the experience; Mutlu Ergün and Noah Sow have their performance show, *Edutainment Attacke*, where they speak ironically about the phenomenon of PIC: “Privilege Induced Coddling.” They list off examples of people suffering from PIC or demonstrate it in their sketches. Someone gets jostled and just starts bawling: PIC. When you’re permanently jostled, either you go down or you stop crying. But that costs us a lot of time; it costs energy and years.

DS: In one sequence from “Angry Birds” you use the term *Integrationsverweigerer* (an immigrant who refuses to integrate). How does one become a good *Integrationsverweigerer*, and how should one position oneself vis-à-vis an *Integrationseinforderer* (someone who demands integration from immigrants)? Do you have some kind of primer?

DU: This sort of demand is ultimately a demand for conformism, a conformism which encapsulates everyone, and so is almost something terroristic because it also demands conformity from those who have already conformed. An irredeemable conformity. Those who deliberately oppose it are persecuted and remain unaccepted; they are sanctioned. One has to know what price will be paid. If you can live without taking the path of least resistance you can be an *Integrationsverweigerer*, otherwise it becomes difficult. But it’s also difficult not to be an *Integrationsverweigerer*, too. You are already an *Integrationsverweigerer* when you don’t cheer the loudest at a German football game. Simply because everything you do is always tested in regards to your loyalty. But no one can force you to support the German national team. No one has the right to come to any conclusions based on that about your personal identity, your preferences, or your loyalty. Period.

DS: You say that not only subaltern groups have to constantly reinvent themselves, but also the supposed cultural majority, as well. Does this also occur outside of metropolises like Berlin? Where does this go? Do you fear this relapse into nationalism we’re observing across Europe, or do you see it as a final glimmering and last defense against a new, globalized, meta-national conceptualization of nationality?

German Literature” (“Türkischdeutsche Literatur”), see: Demir, Tayfun: *Türkischdeutsche Literatur: Chronik literarischer Wanderungen*. Dialog Edition: Duisburg, 2008.

For a more comprehensive discussion, see: Schreiner, Daniel: *Vom Dazugehören – Schreiben als kulturelle und politische Partizipation. Mexikanisch-Amerikanische und Türkisch-Deutsche Literatur im Vergleich*. Promotion Universität Bonn; projected publication, summer 2017.

DU: Even if it were the final glimmering it wouldn't change the fact that each day thousands of people live in fear for their lives. Some are already dead—on the borders, in flight, or through direct acts of violence. I don't know if a new age of fascism is emerging in Europe. Many discourses in different countries are moving simultaneously to the right. One reason for this is that rightwing groups have managed to reinvigorate themselves, to find new methods, or to transform their ideologies. These ideologies remain primitive, but they are becoming primitive in a more contemporary fashion: For example, the role of women in these movements is changing.

DS: Coming from Bonn, I perceive the Berlin cosmos a bit differently than other cities in the Republic. But a lot of novels take place in Berlin, and the metropolis seems to allow for a different kind of consciousness. Is that so? Can something like a modern, pluralistic, multicultural community only function in Berlin, while people elsewhere don't follow along and maintain a very one-dimensional image of migrants?

DU: Urban space allows for possibilities, but it's not the case that coexistence can be reduced only to these spaces. Berlin is a place of culture production. And culture production offers a chance for this as long as it remains open for renewal. But that doesn't mean that village life couldn't also move in this direction or that it isn't already moving that way now. It simply requires different strategies, a different kind of poetry.

DS: In an interview with you on *Qantara*,⁵ Marianna Salzmann says that Germany's handling of the serial murders associated with the NSU and the strange circumstances surrounding them changed many things, and that a lot of your friends were sitting on packed suitcases. Do you see things the same way, or do you feel that things have changed again since then? Does an event like *Birlikte*⁶ in Cologne make any difference?

DU: Since 2009 we've been glutted with racist, Islamic controversies which have also caused a transformation in the relationships between peoples. This is no longer just a media discourse. It is also changing people's perceptions of particular groups through the radical and flagrant discrediting of Islam and also the related association of people who aren't religious at all. Suddenly Islam has become more than just a religion, but rather something like an ethnic identity. Regardless of whether you believe in God, whether you drink alcohol, whether you eat pork, or as far as I'm concerned whether you're circumcised—suddenly you're a Muslim. This has led to a greater strain on relationships with people who don't belong to these groups because their sudden vulnerability and also the number of actual attacks have increased so rapidly that people on the other side have been unable to develop a corresponding empathy or critical self-reflection. And then in 2011, in the midst of these virulent debates, we found out about the NSU murders: These people were

⁵ <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/interview-mit-marianna-salzmann-und-deniz-utlu-wuetende-voegel-singen-nicht> (Viewed on June 30, 2016).

⁶ The association "Arsch huh, Zäng ussenander" (Cologne dialect for "Ass high, teeth spread apart") organized the anti-racism *Birlikte* Festival (Turkish for "mutual") on June 9, 2014 on the tenth anniversary of the 2004 NSU Cologne pipe bomb attack. Since 2014, the *Birlikte* association has organized a weeklong, annual event in Cologne.

murdered for ten years and the intelligence service, the police, the politicians all have dirty hands. Yes, people were sitting on packed suitcases. And it wasn't panic, it was justified.

I can't pass a judgment on Birlikte. I wasn't there. But I think that memorial events are important, as long as they don't become instrumentalized or co-opted, which is a rare thing. Semiva Şimsek's speech at the official state memorial ceremony for the murders was a moment of real commemoration for me. I'm thankful to her for that.

DS: Let's talk about the "verdammter Vibrationshintergrund" (damn vibration background). As an academic, I have to make categorizations in my work — sort things into drawers in order to make comparisons. I know this, but I try to avoid it because differentiation is the first step towards exclusion. How can I avoid heteronomy? Can a term like "people of color" be applied to a German context in its stead? What sort of provisional terms can be applied for a postmigrant redefinition of "Turkish-German" literature? What does "postmigrant" mean to you, and does it really exist outside of the context of Berlin?

DU: I published Selim [Özdoğan]'s text about "Vibrationshintergrund" in *freitext*,⁷ and then named a literary series at the Ballhaus Naunynstraße after it. But I'm not sure how productive this whole discussion about terminology really is. We do construct reality through terms, but at the same time, we don't alter much by simply changing the words. To say "Migrationsgeschichte" (migration history) instead of saying "Migrationshintergrund" (migration background) doesn't engender much progress if the concept behind the language remains the same. "People of Color" for me was initially just an academic, analytical term, not a matter of identity. I also question whether this identitarian application is really helpful because it could also stand in the way of deconstructing concepts of identity. To avoid any misunderstandings: There are differences! I'm not speaking of cultural differences, but of racism. All of us are effected by racism because it is a system of evaluation which has developed over centuries and which we internalize through our socialization at an age when we're too young to resist it. That's true of all social groups. But the effects on these different groups are also different. If a PoC is denied an application for an apartment in favor of a white person, then the latter may have profited from the effects of racism. But over time this becomes detrimental to those who profit from racism, as well. When a part of your own wealth, your own successes, your quality of life is generated through the structural discrimination of others, that eventually compromises your relationships with both yourself and those around you, I'm quite sure of that. Without even noticing, you fall into an ontological abyss. In my opinion, a term like PoC can be useful in this kind of analysis. A term like "migration background" for example, would be less precise.

DS: Can one transfer the term "PoC" into the German context?

DU: It's a question of understanding the contexts and relations of power, discrimination, and violence. Experiences and theories from the Anglo-American context can certainly be helpful, but something Germany-specific has to develop. This is already happening.

⁷ The essay from Selim Özdoğan also appeared in 2009 in the weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*. See: <http://www.zeit.de/online/2009/20/oezdogan-vibrationshintergrund> (Viewed on June 30, 2016).

Conceptualizations change, as well, in their transmission into the German context. The word might remain identical, but the semantic space is inevitably different here than it is in the USA. I think this is productive.

DS: In your essay on hip-hop and revolution in *freitext* you draw parallels with the African-American Civil Rights Movement.⁸ That's of interest to me, because the Mexican-American literature in the 60s went hand in hand with the political Chicano *Movimiento*, and many of these authors were also activists and civil rights leaders at the same time. Where is the postmigrant uprising of Turkish-Germans? Has it already happened, is it still coming, or is the questioning of the alleged 'majority society' limited to student-intellectual-artistic circles with people like yourself? What needs to happen for it to develop into a broader consciousness of intervention against associations of 'foreignness.' In your opinion, what differentiates immigration countries like the USA and Germany from one another? Will we see a Turkish-German Civil Rights Movement, or is there no need for that when Turkish-German politicians like Cemile Giousouf (CDU) in the Bundestag already demonstrate the ability to change things from inside the "potato-German" political structure?

DU: The 80s and 90s in Kreuzberg, the subculture I was writing about in that essay, wasn't a movement. I understand the hip hop culture that developed there as a form of 'unconscious subversion' permeated with references to the African-American Civil Rights Movement. One of the youth groups called themselves the 'Black Panthers.' But Germany is dominated mostly (but not only) by a tradition of conformity. This tradition is also adopted by the minorities. Of course they add to this tradition, like for example, this identification with black role models from the USA, and also the experiences and narratives of their parents. The parents of many or at least some of the youth in Kreuzberg or Wedding at the time came for example from Turkey, another country in which the idea of conformity was and is still very strong.

DS: Building off of that, Uncle Cemo in your novel, *Die Ungehaltenen*, embodies a very particular archetype: the politically conscious, often leftwing mentor of the novel's protagonist—a figure one encounters in other works, as well. Did you yourself have an "Uncle Cemo" who told you stories about guest worker strikes in the Ford factories of Cologne in the 1970s?

DU: I do have a leftwing uncle, and although he isn't in Germany, Uncle Cemal was still inspired by him. There is a definite allusion to Niyazi from Aras Ören's poem "Niyazi in der Naunynstraße." We featured this poem once at the Ballhaus Naunynstraße adapted into the form of a *theaterparcours*. I conducted a lot of historical research at the time, particularly the migration history in Kreuzberg. I encountered a lot of Uncle Cemals at that time; they all had a thousand stories to tell, so it's a bit of an homage to that generation.

⁸ Utlü, Deniz: „Ins Herz. Versuch einer Jungs-Geschichte über HipHop und Revolte“. Veröffentlicht in: *freitext*, Heft 15, „Bis hierher lief's noch ganz gut“, April 2010 und Susan Arndt, Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Hg.) *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, Unrast Verlag, Münster, 2011.

DS: Elyas is educated, sensitive, but also cynical and has the ability to offer criticism (one exemplary quote from him: “Integration can only be analyzed on Youporn”). How much of yourself is there in Elyas, and where does his crisis originate? Is it only the death of his father and his experience of the phoniness of German society, or is there also something of the typical Berlin lost-in-the-big-city meets Holden Caulfield? How do things progress for him after the end of the novel?

DU: It’s definitely also about the big city and the feeling of being lost in it: the isolation. Elyas is very alone, and that intensifies his experience of loss. But the aspect of feeling lost has many layers: the big city, the fact that some experiences simply can’t be shared, etc. Aylin has her own facets in this experience, and she also handles her experience differently.

DS: Do the two wind up together?

DU: More important than their romantic relationship is that they find a level on which they can approach one another. It’s a question of solidarity.

DS: Hekim and Elyas are two very different characters who nevertheless maintain some similarities. What do they represent?

DU: Elyas isn’t an archetype. For me, he is very much his own individual person. And Hekim is only superficially an archetype for the generation who sought escape from this feeling of being lost in the street and through hip hop. Hekim is tender with Elyas. He likes reading poetry, but of course he is also hard and scrappy. He works in a kiosk—he is a tender and injured man. Elyas, Hekim, and Uncle Cemal might represent three different generations, but for me they were also friends and roommates in the years in which I worked on the novel.

DS: Are you familiar with Akif Pirinçci’s *Deutschland von Sinnen*⁹? What’s that about? What does the book do for you? Selim Özdoğan¹⁰ is of the opinion that Pirinçci simply doesn’t like other people. What do you think?

DU: I haven’t read the book. I did read *Felidae* as a teenager, and I liked it a lot. Oddly enough, it didn’t really bother me that he wrote this book. Sarrazin is a man who’s grown

⁹ Akif Pirinçci was the first bestselling Turkish-German author. His 1989 cat crime novel, *Felidae* (Goldmann Verlag), was translated into English and made into a film. Following years of failure, he has successfully reemerged as the author of crude, conspiracy-theory-laced nonfiction. His work, *Deutschland von Sinnen. Der irre Kult um Frauen, Homosexuelle und Zuwanderer* (Edition Sonderwege, Manuscriptum Verlagsbuchhandlung, Waltrop, 2014) and its successors have faced accusations of misogyny, racism, and homophobia.

¹⁰ Born in Cologne, Selim Özdoğan belongs to a middle generation of Turkish-German literature. Born in the 70s, he is roughly ten years younger than Feridun Zaimoglu, Zafer Şenocak und Akif Pirinçci, and ten years older than Deniz Utlu and Mutlu Ergün-Hamaz. Özdoğan employs numerous genres and is – in my opinion – falsely considered a writer of pop literature. Like Pirinçci with his cat crime novels, he belongs to the very few Turkish-German authors to achieve success with themes outside the Turkish-German nexus. His 2016 *Wieso Heimat? Ich wohne hier doch nur zu Miete!* (Haymon Verlag) represents a new literary benchmark for the author. Özdoğan’s approach here is also postmigrant and postnational. He understands his role as that of a cosmopolitan author, heavily influenced by American literary tradition.

very rich off his racism, and one who still has a political function in this country, now, today. So to be honest, if someone like Sarrazin can become rich through his racism, why shouldn't someone like Akif Pirinçci be able to do the same? We have to grapple with these things on a more fundamental level and not concentrate so much on the individuals.

DS: Thank you so much for the conversation!