

# *Who Said Heimat? I'm Only Renting*

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### Introduction

Throughout the Fall semester 2016, the Department of German at the University of Michigan hosted Selim Özdoğan as Max Kade Writer in Residence. During his residency, Özdoğan visited Professor Kristin Dickinson's seminar "Un/Translatability in Theory and Practice" to workshop student translations from his most recent novel *Wieso Heimat? Ich wohne zur Miete* (2016) (*Who Said Heimat, I'm Only Renting*). Students first read the novel and then selected individual chapters to translate. Over the course of several weeks, students then read, discussed, and edited each other's work together with the author. Overall, this project offered the exciting opportunity for students to engage in a collaborative translation practice which underscored the value of translation as an ongoing process rather than simply an end product. The selections presented here comprise several humorous, pointed, and poetic scenes from the novel.

*Who Said Heimat?* features the unlikely protagonist Krishna Mustafa, whose search for his cultural roots and a second *Heimat* in Istanbul ultimately turn both of these concepts on their head. Son of a hippie German mother and a pot-selling Turkish father, Krishna Mustafa is born in October of 1990. While this date coincides historically with German reunification and the official Day of Unity (*Tag der Einheit*, October 3), Krishna Mustafa enters the world in Istanbul, where his family lives happily until his sixth birthday. Skeptical of the Turkish education system, Krishna Mustafa's mother then relocates the family to Freiburg, where ensuing marital tensions lead his parents to divorce. Following his father's return to Turkey, Krishna Mustafa is raised by his single mother in Germany.

At times incredibly naive, Krishna Mustafa is not particularly invested in his cross-cultural heritage. It is only when his girlfriend Laura ends their relationship because she believes he has "not yet found his identity" that Krishna Mustafa embarks on a semester-long sojourn in Istanbul to 'rediscover' his Turkish roots. Yet this search is doomed from the start. Upon arriving in Turkey, Krishna Mustafa sets out to find Istanbul's famous mosques, but instead stumbles upon churches in the traditionally Greek and Armenian neighborhood of Pera. He is surprised to discover that there are Christmas lights (*Weihnachtsbeleuchtung*) adorning the entire length of Istiklal Caddesi—a major pedestrian zone and shopping street, where a simit vendor informs him that because Turks are not Christian, they are not bound to a religious schedule. Lights are festive and thus good for business—they stay up year round. Shortly thereafter, Krishna Mustafa attempts to meet his father at a local Starbucks, but finds himself being sent in a different direction by each passerby he stops to ask for directions. While in search of something quintessentially Turkish, Krishna Mustafa is confronted by the signs of global capitalism, with a Starbucks on every corner.

2 | Kristin Dickinson / *Who said Heimat? I'm Only Renting*

Following these comical first impressions, Krishna Mustafa's experiences in Turkey are driven largely by his own oblivious confusion and naiveté. Determined to find a mosque, he sets out for Sultan Ahmet, one of the most iconic landmarks of old Istanbul. In the sweltering heat, he makes a spontaneous decision to shave his dreadlocks, while opting to keep his beard. When the sun then beats down on his bare scalp, he picks up a prayer cap from a street vendor to protect his skin, unwittingly transforming his outward appearance from hippie to *hacı* (religious pilgrim) in a matter of minutes.<sup>1</sup>

Dressed as such, he finally finds his way to Sultan Ahmet where he decides to pray, although he does not know how. After moving his lips and bending to place his forehead on the ground several times, Krishna Mustafa ultimately opts for a bridge pose instead:

I lay down with my back on the floor, arrange my feet at my bottom, put my hands by my ears, and lift myself up into a bridge. We did that a lot as kids (thousands of times) and Laura always did that at yoga; surely God won't mind. I'm offering up my heart to him in place of my neck and my butt. I'm making a bridge between this world and that invisible world.

That sort of bridge was exhausting—when I come back down I'm out of breath. I get up, sit on my heels, and wait until my breathing calms down. (Özdoğan 23-24)

While Krishna Mustafa attempts to bridge this world and the next, the absurdity of this scene also leads the reader to ask what kind of 'cultural bridge' Krishna Mustafa both represents and puts into question. In her manifesto from 2000, "Against Between," Leslie Adelson addresses the prevalence of the bridge as a metaphor used to describe migrants in Germany. The image of a bridge "between two worlds," she writes, "is designed to keep discrete worlds apart as much as it pretends to bring them together. Migrants are at best imagined as suspended on this bridge in perpetuity" (267), and are rarely imagined as crossing to the opposite shore.

By choosing to practice yoga in the mosque, Krishna Mustafa literally embodies this all-too-common trope of the migrant as a figure suspended 'between two worlds.' Turning his body into a bridge, he nevertheless reveals the exhausting nature of this status, and the extreme vulnerability that literally bending over backwards entails. In fact, this passage pokes fun at the trope of the bridge on a number of levels. Rather than a typical bridging of German and Turkish cultures, the scene offers a comic 'bridging' of Krishna Mustafa's two names, which refer to the Hindu god and the surname of the prophet Mohammed (although his father did not choose the name for this reason), respectively. At the same time, it points to the western appropriation of eastern spiritual practices through reference to Laura, a character who otherwise essentializes Krishna Mustafa's Turkish 'roots.'

By relocating Laura's yoga practice to Sultan Ahmet, Krishna Mustafa unwittingly sets into motion his own comic, highly individualized form of Islamic spiritual practice. This explorative encounter with Islam flies in the face of the Islamophobic rhetoric used by a German journalist who interviews Krishna Mustafa later in the novel; misconstruing his every word, this interviewer comes to the false conclusion that Krishna Mustafa is training to become an ISIS fighter in Turkey. In a follow-up article, Krishna Mustafa is figured as the ultimate opposite of a cultural bridge: in the words of the interviewer, he is a home-

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<sup>1</sup> The pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam. Male pilgrims traditionally shave their heads at the end of the pilgrimage and subsequently grow a beard.

grown terrorist, or “a serpent that has now turned against the West and threatens all of our freedom.”

The novel offers one final comedic intervention on the discourse of the bridge. In chapter six Krishna Mustafa attends a summer festival run by the German organization, The Bridge. Asked by the chairwoman of the organization what he is doing in Istanbul, Krishna Mustafa replies:

I am searching for my roots.

There are no roots, she said. Life is a bridge for us, always driving back and forth until you run out of gas. You never arrive.

I never felt like I was going back and forth. And I don't have a driver's license either.

But I want to know what's under the bridge, I quipped.

Homeless people, she said. Under the bridge there are always the homeless, who no longer have a home, who fell down under the bridge. We, we are lucky, she said, as she took a sip of her champagne.

[...] I'd like to ask what it would be like if you took the ferry to the other side, or flew, instead of going over the bridge, but she waves to somebody that she knows, asks me to wait a moment, and then disappears into the crowd. (36-37)

Through the trope of the bridge, this scene reveals a certain double standard. Whereas the German expat understands the state of non-arrival as a sign of her own cosmopolitan existence in Istanbul, a generation of Turkish guestworkers in Germany were often described as never having ‘arrived’ in the German cultural realm, a metaphor which expressed their perceived failure to integrate properly. This reference to a double standard is strengthened by the fact that the chairwoman has been living in Istanbul for nearly 44 years, meaning she ‘arrived’ in Turkey at the tail end of the guestworker programs, which were halted in 1973.

Notably, even in her appropriation of non-arrival, the German expat still gets to have a *Heimat*. Even though she embraces a life in flux, she still positions herself *on top* of the bridge, in a state of relative security. When Krishna Mustafa asks what lies *under* the bridge, she immediately retorts “the homeless” (*Obdachlose*), or those who fell down and no longer have a home (*Heimat*). One of the few instances where the word *Heimat* actually appears in the novel, this passage underscores a certain fear not simply of losing one's home, but of losing the safety and security we generally associate with the word *Heimat*.

And yet Krishna Mustafa cannot help but associate the metaphoric name The Bridge with the actual Bosphorous Bridge in Istanbul. Rather than assert its iconic and clichéd status as a bridge between East and West, or between the Asian and European sides of the city, however, he wonders what it would be like if we just took the ferry. By referencing a simple part of everyday existence for many commuters in this megacity, Krishna Mustafa not only sidesteps his own role as an assumed ‘cultural bridge’ between Turkey and Germany, but also the fear of those cultural others who have fallen beneath the bridge and no longer have a home. As such the comical figure of Krishna Mustafa, who is often incapable of reading social cues or understanding the full context of a situation, offers us a critical perspective on the discriminatory practices he encounters in his everyday life—from being systematically searched on the train in Germany (Chapter 10), to being pegged

4 | Kristin Dickinson / *Who said Heimat? I'm Only Renting*

as a once well-integrated migrant child turned Islamic terrorist in training (Chapters 11 and 13).

This critical perspective that the character of Krishna Mustafa embodies, together with the many pointed references to bridges in *Wieso Heimat* also recalls the clichéd image of the translator as a figure who bridges two cultural contexts. While working on *Wieso Heimat*, students of German 472 ultimately arrived at a much more dynamic understanding of translation. One that—like the image of the ferry—brings us down to the level of mixing waters and moving currents.

## Works Cited

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