

# Translations from the Poetic Archives of Migration

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## Deniz Göktürk

In spring 2021, the seminar on *Archival Resistance in Modern German Literature* evolved as a small but intense research collective entirely online, utilizing Zoom, a course website on bCourses, shared documents on GoogleDocs, and a blog on the Multicultural Germany Project website. The participants of the seminar, Ardo Ali, Oliver Arter, Jezell Lee, Elizabeth Sun, and Qingyang (Freya) Zhou, were scattered in different time zones around the globe – in Berkeley, Melbourne, Berlin, New York, and Shenzhen. Our group translation of [“Die Rückseite der Dinge / The Other Side of Things”](#) is a product of this collaboration. This short, previously unpublished excerpt from Zafer Şenocak’s forthcoming novel *Eurasia*, presented here as a sneak preview in the German original and English translation, is a continuation of another fragment that was [previously published](#) in translation in *Transit*. The collaboration on a translation -- going through multiple iterations, negotiations and revisions as a group -- became a downright therapeutic activity that sustained us this semester: it allowed us to focus on teasing out nuances and unfolding possible new readings. In fact, all translations included in the current issue of *Transit* grew out of a spirit of collaboration – among faculty, current graduate and undergraduate students, as well as recent graduates who completed their Ph.D. at Berkeley. This collaborative mission has been programmatic for our electronic journal since its inception in 2005. *Transit*’s non-profit, open-access, and multimedia model of publication in itself constitutes a practice of resistance against market-driven forms of self-presentation, branding, and circulation.

In conjunction with work toward online publications, Elisabeth Krimmer (University of California, Davis, German Program) and myself jointly organized a series of conversations with contemporary writers titled *Archives of Migration: The Power of Fiction in Times of Fake News*. The series has been supported by the German Consulate General San Francisco and co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Pacific Regional Office and the Institute for European Studies at UC Berkeley. Engaging in conversation with writers who bring diverse perspectives to questions of societal polarization and the power of poetic imagination, the series has given us an opportunity to experience contemporary *literature in action* and to *think with writers* about questions of *truth and fiction* at this time of *social isolation*. Keeping writers and academics homebound and hooked on screens for over a year, the pandemic has deprived us of public events and in-person stimulation. Still, the lockdown has also been a time to read and connect, creating opportunities for long-distance collaborations, regionally between multiple institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area and across continents. As nation-states around the globe have been reinforcing their borders, this series of literary conversations has focused on border-crossing stories. Conversations with three transnational writers based in Berlin, Germany

– Sharon Dodua Otoo, Zafer Şenocak, and Yoko Tawada – about their recent works revealed how writers and readers activate, animate, and reimagine historical source materials, thereby complementing the historian’s use of archival documents. The [video recordings](#) of these events are available for viewing. The series will continue in fall 2021.

The seminar and the series of conversations with writers both address questions of archival practice and resistance against given collectivizing and compartmentalizing accounts of history: Who is remembered, who is forgotten? What constitutes an archive in the era of Google and social media? How do readers and viewers go about searching? Can poetry and fiction in their creative engagement with personal memory and family archives in multiple languages yield resistance to a language of categoric polarization? What role does imagination play in shaping scenarios of social cohesion and division? Clearly, these pivotal questions of our time cannot be answered by reading fiction alone. However, they can also not be answered without fiction. Working at the interfaces between aesthetic production, archival research, and political intervention requires a good grasp of the skills that we teach in the humanities: reading critically, translating precisely, and writing analytically. Creative engagement with personal and public memories lost and found in the dispersed multilingual archives of migration can inspire new forms of civic participation. In the following, I will briefly discuss the three conversations in the series “Archives of Migration” as a way of introducing the translations presented in this issue.

## Layers of Untold Stories

The kick-off event with Sharon Dodua Otoo, “[Layers of Untold Stories](#),” the English-language book launch for her much anticipated novel *Adas Raum* (2021) written in German, set the tone for the series. Jon Cho-Polizzi, who holds a recent Ph.D. from UC Berkeley and served as managing editor of *Transit* for many years, presented excerpts from his [sample translation](#) of *Adas Raum*, which is available on the publisher’s website. Otoo’s breathtaking novel cross-cuts between the lives of four women, each called Ada, in their different settings and times: a village woman who just lost her newborn in pre-colonial Ghana, a British countess who pioneered the invention of the computer with her exceptional mathematical talents in Victorian London, a Polish inmate forced into prostitution in the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp, and a pregnant black woman searching for an apartment in Berlin in 2019. All four Adas struggle with different kinds of injustice, violence, and miscommunication in their multilingual environments. The narrative voice in this novel is a fluid consciousness that slips into different human and non-human agents across the centuries, including an unborn baby, as well as objects such as a broom, a room, a door knocker, a passport, and the historic bracelet, which ties all the different stories together. The imagination of connectivity across time and space might well be Otoo’s key political intervention with *Adas Raum*. We are happy to follow the novel’s plea for solidarity across the boundaries of identities rigidly defined by race, ethnicity, or gender. While we have not included a translation of a text by Otoo in the current issue of *Transit*, there will be one forthcoming in the next issue.

Otoo’s workshops prompted posts for the Multicultural Germany Project’s blog by Elizabeth Sun, Ardo Ali, and Qingyang Zhou:

Elizabeth Sun and Ardo Ali: [Animating Untold Stories: Sharon Dodua Otoo](#)

Qingyang Zhou: [Against Categorization: On Inanimate Objects as Narrators in Sharon Dodua Otoo's \*Adas Raum\*](#)

## Unreadable Archives

The second writer in our series, Zafer Şenocak is no stranger to California. Having held writer-in-residence positions at various North American colleges, he came to Berkeley with a visiting appointment funded by the Max Kade Foundation back in spring 2003 when we co-taught a seminar on “Hybrid Cultures: Jews and Turks in German.” Our conversations date back to the early 1990s in Berlin when we organized a series of readings of Turkish writers at Literarisches Colloquium and co-edited an anthology of Turkish literature titled *Jedem Wort gehört ein Himmel: Türkei literarisch*. The work on the series and the collection increased awareness for the market forces of branding, which determine the reception of world literature. Thinking about translation and circulation became key to analyses of cultural representation in terms of obstacles and access to networks of publication, recognition, and value. In 2008, Zafer visited Berkeley again and participated in a panel with Homi Bhabha and Yoko Tawada. In 2016, he held the Gastprofessur für interkulturelle Poetik at Universität Hamburg and a group of long-term collaborators, translators and literary scholars gathered with him for a conference at the Aby Warburg Haus in Hamburg. The volume growing out of this conference, [Wortbrüche. Fragmente einer Sprache des Vertrauens](#), edited by Ortrud Gutjahr, will be published by Transcript Verlag this fall.<sup>1</sup>

Şenocak addresses questions of cultural memory, identity and diversity in his poetry, essays and fiction both in German and in Turkish. Convergence between an ongoing quest for the past in old documents and poetic creativity is a recurring topic in his writing. Hence, the trilingual conversation with him in English, German, and Turkish focused on “[Unreadable Archives](#).” Writing *In deinen Worten. Mutmaßungen über den Glauben meines Vaters* (“In Your Words. Speculations on the Belief of My Father,” 2016), a book about his late father whose appreciation for Islam fed on mystical traditions, poetry, and humanism, Şenocak reflects on the legibility of sources and refers to the documents and books that became illegible after Turkey’s transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet in 1928:

Jede Revolution hat ein melancholisches Nachspiel. So auch die türkische. Im Schatten Kemal Atatürks, der sich nicht zuletzt an die Schriftzeichen machte, die arabischen abschaffte und die lateinischen einführte, um seiner Kulturrevolution unmissverständlich die Richtung nach Westen vorzugeben, wurden die abgelegten Schriftzeichen zu Leichentüchern der alten Wörter. Die alten Bibliotheken unterschied nichts mehr von Friedhöfen. (43)

Every revolution has a melancholic aftermath. So, too, the Turkish. In the shadow of Kemal Atatürk, who took on the alphabet, discarding the Arabic and imposing the Latin, to orient his cultural revolution unmistakably towards the West, the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of my following thoughts on Şenocak’s works are elaborated in more depth in my forthcoming essays “Jenseits von Treue und Verrat: Zur ironischen Poetik der Übersetzer” and “Beyond Fidelity and Treason: On the Ironic Poetics of Translation.”

abandoned letters became burial shrouds for the old words. The old libraries could no longer be distinguished from cemeteries. (Translation of this quote into English by Landon Reitz)

Yet these illegible documents arouse the writer's fantasy:

Vater hatte keine arabische Schrift auf seiner Schreibmaschine. Die arabische Schrift gehörte der Hand. Die lateinischen Buchstaben sind öffentlich, die arabischen privat. Ich stellte mir vor, dass die Briefe mit den arabischen Schriftzeichen, die handgeschrieben, private Briefe sind, nur für den Vater bestimmt. Während die Schreibmaschinenbriefe, die sich auf seinem Tisch stapeln, jedermann immer zugänglich sind. (124)

There were no Arabic characters on my father's typewriter. The Arabic script belonged to the hand. The Latin alphabet is public, the Arabic private. I imagined that the letters with the Arabic characters – the handwritten, private letters – were meant just for my father. While the typewritten letters that piled up on the table were accessible to everyone. (Trans. Landon Reitz)

Precisely the mysterious secrecy of unreadable papers from the past becomes a source of poetic imagination and inspiration. Awareness of the materiality and sensual aspects of writing complicate an approach that regards old documents purely as sources of factual information.

In Şenocak's earlier novel *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (1998, Trans. by Tom Cheesman: *Perilous Kinship*, 2009), Sasha Muhteshem, the somewhat sluggish offspring of Turkish-Jewish-German ancestry, self-declared "grandchild of victims and perpetrators," whose grandiose last name (muhteşem: magnificent) is ironic in itself, inherits a box with his grandfather's notebooks – written mostly in Arabic script, also containing passages in Cyrillic.<sup>2</sup> Despite efforts to enlist help with deciphering the old handwriting, the notebooks remain illegible to the protagonist. The grandfather's implication in the deportations of Armenians in the eastern border town of Kars, intertwined with hints at a forgotten love story, remains an object of speculation. The novel stages various archival practices, contrasting, for example, Sasha's half-hearted attempts at uncovering his family history with his partner Marie's research toward a realistic documentary film about Talat Pasha in Berlin after the First World War. For Sasha, fiction uncovers a different kind of truth than the historians' quest to reconstruct facts from archival documents can achieve.

Ich besuchte regelmäßig die Archive der Stadt. Ich konzentrierte mich bei meiner Lektüre auf die dreißiger Jahre. Ich las in Zeitungen aus dieser Zeit, wollte mir ein umfassendes Bild von den Meinungen und Stimmungen machen. Geschichte hat immer eine verbrauchte und eine unverbrauchte Seite. An der verbrauchten Seite sind die Historiker am Werk. Sie versuchen zu rekonstruieren. An der unverbrauchten Seite wollte ich tätig sein. Ich verknüpfte die Fäden in meinem Kopf zu einem Roman, dessen zentrale Figur mein Großvater sein sollte. Meine

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* 13f and passim.

Aufgabe war es zu konstruieren, was nicht zu rekonstruieren war. Großvaters Figur war wie geschaffen für dieses Vorhaben. Vieles in seinem Leben war verdeckt geblieben. Sein Tod war mysteriös, letztlich unaufgeklärt. Ich hatte seine Tagebücher, die ich nicht lesen konnte. Wozu brauchte ich Archive? (51)

I regularly visited the city archives. My reading concentrated on the thirties. I read the newspapers of the period, trying to form a comprehensive picture of opinions and moods. History always has a used-up side and an un-used-up side. On the used-up side the historians labour. The attempt to reconstruct. I wanted to work on the un-used-up side. I knotted together the threads in my mind to form the idea of a novel with my grandfather as its central figure. My task was to construct what could not be reconstructed. Grandfather might have been a character invented just for this purpose. Much in his life had remained concealed. His death was mysterious, ultimately unsolved. I had his diaries which I could not read. What did I need the archives for? (Trans. Cheesman, 42)

Clearly, the writer Şenocak does draw on various private and public archives, so his protagonist's dismissal of archives does not necessarily reflect his own opinion; what he does share with Sasha is mistrust in absolute knowability and a belief in the power of imagination. His poetic work often plucks moments out of the past and stages them in the imagined present, configuring historic elements in new constellations. His recent volume of autobiographically inspired essays, *Das Fremde, das in jedem wohnt: Wie Unterschiede unsere Gesellschaft zusammenhalten* [The Foreign Dwells in Everyone: Differences Holds our Society Together], presents a spirited intervention in debates on societal polarization and cohesion. The book advances a plea to be attentive to small fissures, frictions, and discord in our own personal stories to avoid simplistic binary categories of collective identity such as "the West" vs. "the East," "Christian or Jewish" vs. "Muslim," "modern" vs. "traditional," or, more generally, "us" vs. "them." The subtitle of his book suggests that negotiation of different worldviews is key to coexistence and cohesion. Acknowledging "the foreign [that] dwells in everyone" is a necessary corrective to usurpation of power based on totalizing and homogenizing narratives.

Kristin Dickinson, Assistant Professor of German Studies at the University of Michigan who holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Berkeley and has worked extensively on "[German-Turkish cultural contact in translation](#)," joined us for the conversation with Şenocak and translated two passages from *Das Fremde, das in jedem wohnt* for this occasion: "[Empty Archives – Lost Letters](#)" and "[Church Bells in Istanbul](#)." In "Empty Archives – Lost Letters," Şenocak reflects on his family archive, specifically the letters that his late mother wrote to friends and family back home after her move from Turkey to Munich in 1970. A teacher educated in the modern Turkish Republic, she perceptively recorded in Turkish observations of life in the city, her neighbors, and German society. These private documents remain unreadable to a German readership and are missing from the cultural archives, resulting in one-dimensional narratives of migration. Similarly, reflecting on the Beyoğlu neighborhood, formerly called Pera, "Church Bells in Istanbul," traces with subtle nostalgia for past and present diversity in the metropole on the Bosphorus where the majority population was once non-Muslim. A lack of curiosity and

preservation results in a similar obliteration of cultural memory and disappearance of unheard voices and sounds that attest to a polyphonic past.

Şenocak is known as a regular commentator on culture and politics in newspapers such as *Die Welt*, *die tageszeitung*, and lately on radio on the channel [Deutschlandfunk Kultur](#). A recent essay published in *Der Tagesspiegel* is provocatively titled “[Die Rückkehr des Stammesdenkens](#)” [The Return of Tribalism]. We are pleased to include the yet unpublished short essay “Die Stunde des Zusammenfügens” in this issue of *Transit*, in the German original and English translation by Oliver Arter and Elizabeth Sun “[The Hour of Assembly](#),” which was written shortly after the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

See related posts on the Multicultural Germany Project Blog:

Elizabeth Sun: [Imagining the Other Side of Things: Zafer Şenocak and Hidden Archives](#)

Qingyang Zhou: [“Ich bin Diskursfeind“: Zafer Şenocak on Unreadable Archives](#)

## The Language of Dreams

The third writer who visited virtually this semester was Yoko Tawada. In a conversation with Elisabeth Krimmer and Jonas Teupert on “[The Language of Dreams](#),” she presented her latest novel, *Paul Celan und der chinesische Engel* (2020). Yoko Tawada, who publishes both in German and Japanese and has won major literary prizes in both countries, corresponds with the previous two authors through her work across languages, her explorations of multilingual memories, and the transnational scope of her stories. Addressing directly our mode of mediated interaction on screens and the odd experience of being simultaneously at home and on the other side of the planet, she started the conversations by stating: “We are not in the same time.”

The poetry of Paul Celan has been a key influence on the writing of both Zafer Şenocak and Yoko Tawada. Her novel, which was initially planned as an academic essay for a lecture series celebrating the centennial of Celan’s birthday at the Freie Universität Berlin, shifted into fiction in the course of her research with Celan’s manuscripts at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. The protagonist of the novel Patrik, introduced as “the patient,” is a young Celan scholar without an academic position who lives in isolation. Though tasked with writing a paper on Celan’s poetry for a conference in Paris, Patrik cannot bring himself to finish it. This focus on the mental and physical effects of isolation converges with both allusions to Celan’s hospitalizations and current experiences of lockdown. Its archival origins as well as its very contemporary resonances in times of Covid-19 make this text a perfect example of archival resistance, combining the work of memory and imagination with references to current political constellations. After all, haven’t we all become patients, in the course of this pandemic, losing the power to make our own decisions?

Conversation with Leo-Eric, a real or imaginary Asian friend of “transtibetan” appearance who also has connections to 1960s Paris, revolve around Patrik’s writer’s block and their mutual fascination with Celan, particularly the poet’s language experiments in his late work *Fadensonnen* (1968) as well as his speech upon acceptance of the Georg Büchner Prize *The Meridian* (1960). Based on the premise that poetry is a foreign language in itself, Tawada and her characters retrieve lost words and draw on Celan’s texts to address

questions of orientation through memory and threads of association, opening up the horizon to multidirectional movements and cross-border connections. This approach to Celan liberates him from a reception that reads his work exclusively through the lens of his biography in the shadow of the Holocaust. At the same time, “German culture” or “Chinese culture” are not posited as given fixed categories but as floating signifiers in a world of interaction. Tawada’s pandemic novel does indeed reimagine intimacy in a transtibetan world.

This planetary consciousness also shines through in Tawada’s essay [“Ten Years after Fukushima,”](#) presented here in translation by Elizabeth Sun. [“Zehn Jahre nach Fukushima”](#) constitutes a political intervention by the writer: it was given as a speech at a demonstration against nuclear power on 6 March 2021 at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Tawada already staged a Fukushima-inspired dystopian environment in her novel *The Emissary* (2018, trans. from the Japanese by Margaret Mitsutami), in German *Der Sendbo-o-te* (2018, trans. by Peter Pörtner). In her speech she asks: “What is the half-life of memory?” This resonates with Katja Petrowskaja’s essay [“Nichts stimmte,”](#) commemorating the Chernobyl disaster. Indeed, the fall-out of a nuclear disaster blasts our conception of archives as sites of preservation. It creates an anti-archive where readers disappear into ghostly existence. This foregrounding of the precarious material aspects of memory broadens the horizon to view migration in the larger scope of ecology, highlighting how categories of national identification are far from adequate to grasp hyperconnected life on our endangered planet.

Aaron Carpenter and Jon Cho-Polizzi’s [introduction to](#) and translation of Tawada’s “Bioskoop der Nacht” from her 2002 collection *Überseetzungen* as [“Night Bioscope,”](#) though not produced in direct conjunction with the series of literary conversations, align perfectly with the theme of “the language of dreams” in a planetary scope. A Japanese narrator living in Germany and dreaming in Afrikaans deterritorializes the experience of dreaming – and, by that token, writing and reading literature – from any claim of native belonging.

Conversations with all three writers on “the power of fiction in times of fake news” – on “untold stories,” “unreadable archives,” and “the language of dreams” – emphasized the importance of finding a new language. Fiction and fake news might both be lying, as Yoko Tawada pointed out, but facts alone do not say anything.

See related posts on the Multicultural Germany Project Blog:

Qingyang Zhou and Jezell Lee: [Pandemic Palimpsest: Yoko Tawada’s \*Paul Celan und der chinesische Engel\*](#)

Elizabeth Sun: [Traveling in Pandemic Times: Yoko Tawada and Poetic Border-Crossing](#)

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