

Foreword to 15.1: “Words and Lives in Transit”

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¶1 It is June of 1940, soon after the Nazis have taken Paris, and the first-person narrator of Anna Seghers’ *Transit* has been tasked by a friend with delivering a letter to the famous writer Weidel, who is staying at a hotel in the Rue de Vaugirard. The narrator, a double alumnus of internment by the Nazis (for being anti-fascist) and the French (for being German), does not know or care who Weidel is, though he will soon find out who he was. When he arrives at the hotel, he is informed that Weidel poisoned himself the night before and left behind a briefcase of papers that the receptionist wants removed from the premises immediately. He clears it away and begins to read the unfinished manuscript he finds within. The manuscript, he realizes, is in German, a fact that dissolves the carapace of his indifference. This is not the German barked by the Nazis, but rather *his* German: the German of maternal comfort and admonition (“Worte, die meine arme Mutter gebraucht, um mich zu besänftigen [...] mit denen sie mich ermahnt hatte”), of words he once knew and forgot (“die ich schon selbst gebraucht hatte, aber wieder vergessen”) or words that he doesn’t know but will thence come to use (“neue Worte, die ich seitdem manchmal gebrauche”).¹ For him,

1— Seghers, Anna, *Transit* (Aufbau, 2018), 27. This edition is based on a 1976 version published by Aufbau, and was later revised according to volume I/5 (2001) of the critical annotated edition of Anna Seghers’s works, *Anna Seghers-Werkausgabe*, published by Aufbau Verlag, and edited by Helen Fehervary and Bernhard Spies, in collaboration with Silvia Schlen-

the German language is both the raw material of sound and semantics, and an affective metonymy of his past (and self). This is a remarkable scene of linguistic repossession for a character who hates fascism and likes women, but has never before been moved by a work of literature. The novel, in turn, that featured this avowal of love to German was first published in English as *Transit Visa*, and in Spanish as *Visado de Tránsito*, both in 1944, while Anna Seghers lived in exile in Mexico City. The first edition in German, the language of its conception, would be published in 1948—a homecoming of sorts that mirrored that of its creator, who had begun drafting the work in passage from Marseille to Martinique in 1941, and who had just returned to Berlin in 1947.²

¶2 When we solicited contributions for this issue of *TRANSIT*, we were as much inspired by the novel’s boomerang trajectory away from German and back into it, as by the way language and migration featured within the fiction. Seghers’s narrator, unflappable as he meanders through a welter of other characters desperate to flee, stakes claim

stedt. However, this version is *not* itself a volume of the critical edition.

2— Olivia C. Díaz Perez, *Mexiko als antitotalitärer Mythos: Das Werk von Anna Seghers zwischen Nationalsozialismus, mexikanischem Exil und Wirklichkeit der DDR*, (Stauffenburg Verlag, 2016), 196. The English translation by James A. Galston was published by the Boston based Little, Brown & Co. In Mexico, the translation into Spanish by Angela Selke and Antonio Sánchez Barbudo was published by El Nuevo Mundo; Sonia Hilzinger, “Nachwort” (1993/2008) in *Transit*, 301.

to language while refusing allegiance to the nation-state. For its part, the circulation of the novel destabilizes categories of national literature and invites us to think about the journeys—forced or otherwise—of bodies and words, and the geopolitics that dictate the relationship between the two. What might it mean for a writer, language, or work of art to supersede the confines of a nation or to assert existence within one? How do works like *Transit*, with their tangled translation histories, demand us to question source-text sacrality? How do notions of “original” reverberate in the creation of art and the manufacture of citizenship alike? And how are belonging and exclusion negotiated in the realm of culture?

¶3 This first installment of the fifteenth issue of *TRANSIT* takes on these questions with a lineup of contributions that it is my privilege to introduce. In “Anna Seghers und das Elfte Reich,” Britta Lange weaves the polyphonic Berlin of her present together with an analysis of a lesser-known Seghers short story, “Reise ins Elfte Reich,” (1939) about a topsy-turvy fictional country to which refugees are granted entry only if they *don’t* have papers. Reading this work alongside Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt and other authors, as well as Seghers’ own *Transit*—where everyone (except perhaps the narrator) covets papers with existential hunger—Lange reflects on the history of passports and visas, and the literary satire of bureaucratic regimes. It is fitting that this piece should appear just as Seghers’s 125th birthday has seen a flurry of activity about her legacy in Berlin, including the Berliner Ensemble’s theater adaptation of *Transit*. For this issue, I have translated this piece from German into an English version, “Journey to the Eleventh Reich” and written a brief introduction to accompany it.

¶4 Lange’s work on the fictional remediation of papers converses naturally with Claire J. Kramsch’s “German in Transit: The Migrant Mindset,” in

which the latter explores several aspects of “migration” between languages. This piece itself “migrates” between an overview of scholarship on translanguaging and symbolic competence; lively literary analysis; and the author’s reflections on her relationship to German as a young student in postwar France who later made a career in the United States. In writing of the status of language beyond the meanings of individual words, Kramsch’s piece also shows how the pleasures of style can be part of any language learning process. It is a forceful reminder of the kind of scholarship possible when applied linguistics and literary studies meet—I especially point readers to Kramsch’s close analysis of a (very funny) French exchange in Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg*.

¶5 From the realm of words, we move to that of visual and performance art, with Veronica Cook Williamson’s “At Home, Together: KUNSTASYL at the Museum of European Cultures.” In this piece, Williamson takes us back to 2016, the wake of the so-called European Refugee Crisis, to an art project, daHEIM, coordinated by the Berlin-based art collective KUNSTASYL. She considers the role of museums and translocal participatory art in the negotiation of the relationship between the individual and the collective, a matter of particular salience for those fashioning a home from the most provisional means. Williamson’s article serves as a metacommentary on the media-archaeological nature of her own work, showing us how exhibitions circulate in visual and verbal remediation, and therefore also collective memory. Now that Germany’s federal government strives for a “Migrationswende” away from its welcoming stance in 2015–16 toward deportation, Williamson’s work also prompts us to consider what kinds of art about migration and exile might still exist in (and beyond) Germany’s museums today.

¶6 Behrang Samsami takes us into the intertwined histories of film and exile with his essay, “A Wan-

derer of the World—Lost and Discovered.” The “Wanderer” in question is Sohrab Shahid Saless, a filmmaker, if ever there were one, to thwart the strictures of nation and genre (for more on this, see Kumars Salehi writing about Saless for *TRANSIT* in 2019). Those of us in Berkeley had a chance recently to see a fine example of his intersectional cinema at a recent screening of *In der Fremde* (Far from Home) (1975), a film with a Persian title (*Dar Ghorbat*) and dialogue in German and Turkish, set in West Berlin, as part of the series *Fassbinder and the New German Cinema*, curated by Susan Oxtoby. In her introduction to the screening, Deniz Gök-türk observed that this film by the recently rediscovered transnational auteur presents a counterpoint to Fassbinder’s famous *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974). Samsami’s piece, which offers an overview of Saless’s work and reception, is also about the material vagaries of film history. This is only a little taste of what is available in his trilogy *Die langen Ferien des Sohrab Saless*—a play on the title of Saless’s own film about Lotte Eisner—published by Exil Verlag in 2023. When Samsami’s piece on Saless (and the screening) were first planned, we did not know that the United States Army would be visiting such devastation upon Iran, forging new categories of displacement, and showing us that the phenomenon of the Occident pathologizing the Middle East—documented, often wryly, by Saless—remains full of murderous vim.

¶17 This Orientalist violence plays out in the most quotidian of arenas, including in German schools, as Dılan Şirin Çelik tells us in her plainspoken and elegant “*DaZ—Deutsch als Zweitsprache* and the Politics of Silence.” Çelik writes of the linguistic price extracted both by the pressures of the German *Dominanzgesellschaft* and of Turkish ethnonationalism that has suppressed Zazakî/Kurdish languages. She also delves into the fine details of transcription and translation, and their ethical stakes, in her discussion of Dersim 1937/1938, a project

of the Ruhr-Universität Bochum that attempts to recover oral histories of survivors of the Turkish military massacre of Alevi Kurdish peoples in the Dersim province of eastern Turkey.

¶18 While Çelik provides us a powerful account of how media, translation and institutional memory intersect, Grégory Chatonsky and Yves Citton reflect on the changing nature of memory itself in a world of generative AI. Their essay, “The Fourth Memory,” posits a new category of retention that emerges when so-called “artificial intelligence” recursively generates so much of the content in which we find ourselves awash. How are progressive forces to understand this subsequent shift in our relationship to truth, and how can they better combat the fascist appropriation of this “alien realism”?

¶19 Complementing these rich contributions, we have a number of translations into English, with source texts that range in time from the 19th century to just last year, and in language over Dutch, German and French. Elizabeth Hwei Sun, former managing editor of *TRANSIT* from 2021–2024, and Thomas Siemerink have translated Safae el Khannoussi’s “*De erfenis*” (2025), a virtuosic short story, into an equally virtuosic English, “The Inheritance.” In their translators’ foreword, Sun and Siemerink position el Khannoussi in the landscape of contemporary Dutch letters, and discuss how themes of migration are reflected at a formal level in her works.

¶20 From Didem Uca, we have two short-form pieces by Rafik Schami, “*Das Buch der Zukunft*” and “*Bereicherung*,” translated respectively as “The Book of the Future” and “Enrichment.” These ask us to investigate the dynamic status of the “book,” and the politics that always surround writers who migrate into a new language. Uca’s foreword situates Schami’s biography and other work relative to these pieces, and reflects on the imbrication of technology, literature and migration.

¶21 This issue, we are lucky to feature Vera M. Kutz-

inski’s translation of an excerpt of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Examen critique du l’histoire de la géographie du nouveau continent*. Kutzinski was previously, along with Ottmar Ette, the series editor of “Alexander von Humboldt in English” (University of Chicago Press), which published four volumes of the Prussian explorer’s works between 2011 and 2019. This excerpt gives readers a sense of European discourse on the geography of the Americas and Humboldt’s views on Christopher Columbus. Earlier this year, Donald Trump erected a statue of Columbus on the White House grounds—a gesture of unambiguous white supremacy—just over a month after Bad Bunny, in a spectacular Super Bowl performance, reminded us of the Americas as a hemispheric entity. How does Humboldt, a Prussian writing in French, at once dependent on, and critical of, Spanish colonialism, take part in this ongoing discourse? I invite readers to profit from Kutzinski’s erudition in her foreword, which also offers a fascinating translation history of *Examen critique* into German.

¶12 Our main issue is rounded out with Kasturi Chatterjee’s brisk book review of Kate Zambon’s *Interrogating Integration: Sport, Celebrity, and Scandal in the Making of New Germany* (2025). Both book and review are all the more timely as FIFA 2026 looms over North America.

¶13 Finally, I draw readers’ attention to a special cluster of three pieces that emerged from the 33rd Annual Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference “[Selbst]Versuch” and were guest-edited by the organizers Sonja Thiel, Anna Lynn Dolman, Andrew Blough and Linus Mao. In “Re-Enacting the Holocaust in Maryan’s *Ecce Homo* (1975)” Achim Schmid offers a close reading of Maryan S. Maryan’s (born Pinkas Burszty) experimental film *Ecce Homo*, including the linguistic dimensions of this necessarily transnational memory-making process. Anton Vogt’s “wer ihn zu verwenden weiß: Pädagogik und Ästhetik der Isolation in Rudolf Arnhe-

ims *Rundfunk als Hörkunst*,” which reads Arnheim’s theories of radio, and contrasts them with those of Brecht, resonates with discourses of pedagogy, distraction and media today. Roxana Lisaru considers bodily poetics, post-socialist aesthetics and migration from the former Eastern bloc to Germany in her piece “Der Körper als experimenteller Ort der Extreme in Terézia Moras *Der einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent*.”

¶14 This multipronged issue would not be possible without the incessant effort of Co-Managing Editor Kayla Rose van Kooten. Apart from our collaboration in soliciting pieces and editing them, Kayla is responsible for the design of the website as well as the typesetting of each article. As the person with the deepest knowledge of past issues, she is our resident *TRANSIT* archivist. We are extremely indebted also to a group of peer reviewers and copy editors, who have lent us their time, expertise and eagle eyes. *TRANSIT* lives on the continued support of our faculty mentors Deniz Göktürk and Hannes Bajohr. Many thanks also to Nicholas Baer and previous managing editor Elizabeth Sun for their help throughout the editorial process. Please find the names of the members of the Editorial Board for this current issue on our website.

¶15 Before I conclude, I would like to reflect on the history of *TRANSIT*, which now, in its twenty-first year, has “come of age,” so to speak. The journal emerged in 2005, a few years after Germany had initiated steps towards a modest form of *jus soli* citizenship, and the United States, in the throes of post-9/11 jingoism, expanded an already elaborate surveillance and police state. Since then, the journal has participated in transatlantic discourses on migration, identity, interlingual and intercultural contact. As such, in its (web)pages we find a repository of evidence: for the shifts both towards pluralism and away from it, and for the grim fugue of militarized xenophobia. In the

United States today, the federal government calls for denaturalization, deportation and the reversal of birthright citizenship, while celebrating holy war in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the German far right criminalizes immigrants and shuttles words like “Remigration” into *Salonfähigkeit*. We have watched as criticism of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories and the ongoing genocide in Gaza is cynically instrumentalized to dismantle intellectual freedom in the United States and Germany (even as anti-Semitism remains alive and well in both contexts).

¶16 In these times, I do not know if it is worth the comfortless vindication we might feel in drawing parallels to Victor Klemperer’s *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (1947). In his dedication to his wife Eva, Klemperer looked back to an earlier time, a “damals, da wir in friedlichen Zeiten Philologie trieben.”³ The peacetime philology of which he speaks with ironic nostalgia is no longer a thing—not then, in a firebombed Dresden, not now, as we are always connected to war, if not directly, then by the fibers of our conscience and the internet. But this is our work: to trace the tectonics of our world back to a camera angle, an intertitle, the verse of a poem, or even a prefix, as Johannes von Moltke has recently done, when he links Klemperer’s invocatory “ent-” to the palingenetic “re-” of our moment.⁴ The ethical imperatives of Intercultural German Studies are more urgent now than ever, and we are grateful to the readers and contributors of *TRANSIT* for taking them up.

3— Viktor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (Reclam, 2020), 5. This annotated edition is based on the third print-run published by Max Niemeyer Verlag in 1957. The first version was published by Aufbau Verlag in 1947.

4— Johannes von Moltke, “Remigration, Reconquista, Regime Change: The Language of the New Right,” *New German Critique* 53, no.1 (2026): 161-178.

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