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Carolin Müller (Columbus, Ohio)

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CAROLIN MUELLER (COLUMBUS, OHIO)

Discussing Mobility in Liminal Spaces and Border Zones

An Analysis of Abbas Khider's *Der falsche Inder* (2008) and
Brief in die Auberginenrepublik (2013)

When the narrator of Abbas Khider's *Der falsche Inder* [*The Village Indian*] walks into a train station in Berlin, he perceives the space empty of people, trains and sound. His trance-like state of encounter is induced by a peculiar familiarity with a sense of void and disorientation that the concourse conveys. Moving through this space of transit, the narrator's perception commutes between what the space is and what it signifies to him. Befogged by his own solitude, he slowly walks to his train compartment where he finds a manuscript lying on the table. After opening it, he notices that it is the memoir by one Rasul Hamid who details his journey as a refugee from Iraq through Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, and Italy to Germany. Astonished by this discovery, the narrator realizes that Rasul's account resembles very much his own. It is the story of his own journey told through the voice of Rasul. Khider stages this confrontation within the frame narrative of the novel to reverberate the spatial vocabulary of a threshold through which the narrator passes to meet a version of himself. Rasul's collection of notes entitled *Memories* recounts the protagonist's experiences of indefinite liminality as a transit migrant who left his home and since »[lives] in an ongoing state of non-arrival«.¹ Vulnerable to the conditions of »refugeeness«,² he is left to negotiate his evermore unstable identity as he traverses different places and border zones, seeking citizenship and belonging somewhere, anywhere.

1 | Eleanor Paynter: »The Liminal Lives of Europe's Transit Migrants«. In: *Contexts* 17.2 (2018), pp. 40–45. doi:10.1177/1536504218776959.

2 | According to Marie Lacroix, »refugeeness« denotes a time of crisis in a person's life that reflects how the individual has been subject to unchecked and unaccounted power by the nation-state. Her analysis of refugees in Canada concludes that the refugee determination process alters the way refugee claimants understand their subjectivity and social world. This paper uses Lacroix's understanding of the term to allude to how different forms of discrimina-

Moving through threshold spaces is also a central theme in Khider's third novel, *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* [*Letter to the Eggplant Republic*], which traces the journey of a letter from exile Salim in Bengasi, Libya to his love Samia in Baghdad, Iraq. The story details the letter's travel through the informal postal service that keeps exiles connected to those left behind in the homeland while it also serves the Iraqi government as a sphere of control from afar. The narrative framework of the novel delineates different points of this journey. When the letter is moved through travel agency offices, secret police offices and border zones, it falls into possession of different messengers. In each chapter, their voices narrate different stages of its travel and give insight into the conditions under which passage becomes possible. Corina Stan³ convincingly describes these chapters as ›nesting stories‹ that infer the connections between lives of those implicated in the secret postal system.⁴ The cyclical arrangement of the messengers' reflections adumbrates the topologies of power relations and social structures of this secret system. It sketches how war, economic deprivation, and authoritarian rulership shaped the conditions of exile and transit spaces so that new systems of communication evolved that reconstructed the lives of participating individuals. To play their part, messengers perform different social functions in their roles as exile, taxi driver, manager, truck driver, policeman, colonel and wife.

Liminal characters in both of Khider's novels are always on the move and act in different ways that serve to support the system but also open up opportunities for solidarity. The very actions that solidify their marginal position can also help reproduce quotidian practices that become forms of agency and resistance. Tracing how different characters navigate across borders and different forms of oppression, this article investigates how mobility affects these characters' bodies and lives when they seek to establish a sense of identity and belonging in oppressive contexts. The perpetual movement from one place to the next and the uncertainties resulting from this movement create conditions under which identities can be destabilized and a feeling of belonging to a place can be dislocated. At the same time, migration through challenging environments in Khider's novels can also open up opportunities to recognize agency. Protagonists moving through threshold spaces not only transition from one place to the next. They experience differ-

tion based on legal status influence the way refugee characters perceive themselves and the world around them. It will help reveal spaces of creative expression that characters carve out for themselves in solidarity with others to invent new ways of becoming and representing themselves. Cf. Marie Lacroix: »Canadian Refugee Policy and the Social Construction of the Refugee Claimant Subjectivity: Understanding Refugeeeness«. In: *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17.2 (2004), pp. 147–166. doi.org/10.1093/jrs/17.2.147.

3 | This article draws significantly on the work by Corina Stan due to the novel's recent publication date and limited other scholarly work on the writing by Abbas Khider.

4 | Cf. Corina Stan: »Novels in the Translation Zone: Abbas Khider, *Weltliteratur*, and the Ethics of the Passerby«. In: *Comparative Literature Studies* 55.2 (2018), pp. 285–302, here: p. 292.

ent stages of liminality in pursuit of legitimacy. According to Agnes Horvath et al., »liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes«. ⁵ Folklorist Arnold van Gennep originally used the term to examine rites of passage. He found that people go through three phases of progression »from one culturally defined state or status to another«. ⁶ He called them »separation«, »margin« and »reaggregation«. In his »process approach« to rituals, Victor Turner elaborates van Gennep's second phase as the process of becoming in which the individual must undergo a series of crucial experiences in ritual processes that reintegrate that person into society.

Liminality and Movement

The notion of rites of passages has since van Gennep's and Turner's reading been expanded to include other variations of passage like immigration processes. ⁷ The margin phase resonates with experiences of undocumented foreign residents whose lives »[are] really like living underground. [They are] anonymous, without a name, without an identity, without an address«. ⁸ The conduct of life is contingent on participation in almost ritualized ways of being in hiding.

Movement through border zones is a form of passing from one state to another that includes suffering, which according to Arpad Szakolczai »[alludes] to both the destruction of previous stability and the possibility of failure«. ⁹ Suffering becomes the sacrifice in hope of a better life on the other side. Szakolczai traces the ambiguity of passage that is encapsulated in the concept of liminality to its Latin origin *limen*. The word expresses both the limit and its trespass. He argues that the

5 | Ágnes Horváth, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra: »Introduction: Liminality and the Search for Boundaries«. In: Horváth, Thomassen, and Wydra (eds.): *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*. Oxford/New York 2015, pp. 1–8, here: p. 2.

6 | Victor Turner: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [1969]. Ithaca / New York 1977, p. 166.

7 | See, for example *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture; Journal of Borderland Studies*; Michel Agier: *Borderlands*. New York 2016.; Kate Kirk, Ellen Bal, and Sarah Renee Janssen: »Migrants in Liminal Time and Space: An Exploration of the Experiences of Highly Skilled Indian Bachelors in Amsterdam«. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43.16 (2017), pp. 2771–2787.; Paynter Eleanor: »The Liminal Lives of Europe's Transit Migrants« (ref. 1); Anu Kõu et al.: »A Life Course Approach to High-skilled Migration: Lived Experiences of Indians in the Netherlands«. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41.10 (2015), pp. 1644–1663.

8 | Joseph, undocumented migrant worker from Ghana living in Tel Aviv, cf. Sarah Willen: »Toward a Critical Phenomenology of »Illegality«: State Power, Criminalization, and Abjectivity among Undocumented Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv, Israel«. In: *International Migration* 45.3 (2007), pp. 8–38, here: p. 9.

9 | Arpad Szakolczai: »Liminality and Experience. Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events«. In: Ágnes Horváth, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra (eds.): *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*. Oxford/New York 2015, pp. 11–38, here: p. 20.

indistinct dualism of »liminality can be particularly helpful in understanding the formative aspects of transitory periods« or crises in which the existing structures of life are weakened or suspended and individuals are left as »threshold people.«¹⁰ Thus, it lends itself as a helpful lens through which to examine the conditions and actions of threshold characters in *Der falsche Inder* and *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik*.

Victor Turner uses the term »threshold people« to describe »liminal entities that are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by the law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.«¹¹ These in-between positions construct a state of abjectivity for such individuals. In her research on undocumented migrants in Tel Aviv, anthropologist Sarah Willen introduced the term »abjectivity« to »investigate migrant illegality¹² not only as a form of juridical status and as a sociopolitical condition, but also as a mode of being-in-the-world.«¹³ She argues that the pathological social structure that produces migrants' illegality affects how migrants experience being in places where they lack the right to or the possession of legal recognition. Robert Gonzales and Leo Chavez elaborate her thesis explaining that »the liminal and unstable nature of abjectivity is both a source of life stress and a condition that allows for the possibility of change, which opens up a space for human action and resistance.«¹⁴ Migrants engaging with the stress of what Michel Foucault described as biopolitics¹⁵ not only discover the limits of illegality as »threshold people« when they fail to pass the »rites of institutions.«¹⁶ As threshold beings, they also engage in personal acts of resistance that can improve their lives.

10 | Ibid., here: p. 28.

11 | Turner: *The Ritual Process* (ref. 6), p. 95.

12 | Sarah Willen's article uses the term »migrant illegality« to discuss the conditions under which individuals are framed illegal. Inserting her wording in this text reflects the language of her article and does not seek to represent migrants as illegal beings. Instead, I follow Mila Paspalanova who details the significance of clarifying the meaning of »illegal migrant« over »undocumented migrant«. She points to the way that both terms are utilized to politicize »the human right to migration« as a criminal act. While acts can violate legal regulations and result in penal or administrative punishment, individuals cannot be illegal themselves, only undocumented. Paspalanova observes a shift in European and American politics in which migrants and refugees are frequently labeled »illegal« to insinuate a negative stigma to their migration and very diverse personal reasons for moving, disregarding the perilous journeys of flight migrants or trafficked humans. Cf. from Mila Paspalanova: »Undocumented vs. Illegal Migrant: Towards Terminological Coherence«. In: *Migraciones Internacionales* 4.3 (2008), pp. 79–90, here: p. 82. To recognize this distinction, this article utilizes the term »undocumented mi-grant« to describe individuals who pursue different migrations or are moved to different places by force.

13 | Willen: »Toward a Critical Phenomenology« (ref. 8), here: p. 12.

14 | Leo R. Chavez and Roberto G. Gonzales: »»Awakening to a Nightmare«: Abjectivity and Illegality in the Lives of Undocumented 1.5-Generation Latino Immigrants in the United States«. In: *Current Anthropology* 53.3 (2012), pp. 255–281, here: p. 259.

15 | Michel Foucault uses the term »biopolitics« to describe the development of techniques of control by the state that seek to police subjects' bodies and forms of life for the production of

Passage through Mediating Oneself

The characters in Khider's novels resemble such mobile agents who are constantly transitioning through different thresholds, struggling to establish relationships to communities, places, people, and themselves. From the very beginning in *Der falsche Inder*, protagonist Rasul Hamid is confronted with fragmented narratives about his origin that complicate his own understanding of home and belonging. The many different versions that try to explain his existence speak to the importance of storytelling as an act against the silencing of in-between people like Rasul whose identity is denied again and again. His darker skin complexion distinguishes him from those around him who rely on his body to render him Other to the community.¹⁷ »I remain so different that people tend to doubt my Iraqi origins [...] as if they'd seen a ghost«,¹⁸ he explains his own abjectivity. The uncertainty about his identity feeds his anxiety about not having any identity at all. In an effort to reassure himself who he is and where he belongs, Rasul reiterates different versions of his own origin story that were told to him by his family and friends. Recounting these stories can be understood as a means of survival for the protagonist. His struggle speaks to the different ways in which those who are denied to exist try to recover a version of themselves through storytelling in an environment that discredits the legitimacy of their bodies. Throughout his adolescence, Rasul's body is a reminder of his inability to produce identification, for example when he is repeatedly addressed by police officers who question the authenticity of his Iraqi-ness by asking him: »What do Iraqis like to eat? What songs are sung to Iraqi children? Which are the best-known Iraqi tribes? Only when I'd [Rasul] answered them all correctly and my Iraqi origins had been proven beyond doubt was I permitted to carry on.«¹⁹ Such encounters mark Rasul's conduct of life. He is constantly asked to reproduce a version of himself that can be believed by others because he is unable to visually authenticate himself.

As Judith Butler explains, justifying one's existence through self-narration is always a kind of »mediation that takes place outside of oneself, exterior to oneself.«²⁰ Butler's observation helps understand how that kind of mediation implies a

obedient citizens. Cf. Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*. London 1977.

16 | Pierre Bourdieu argues that »rites of institution« are central instruments of the governing apparatus. They »consecrate or legitimate an *arbitrary boundary*, by fostering a misrecognition of it as legitimate [...]« to establish important divisions in the social order. »[The] rite *consecrates* the difference [for example between the sexes and] institutes it«. The ritual institution determines the what and who of difference, leading to real transformations in the affected persons' lives. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu: *Language and Symbolic Power* [1981]. Cambridge / MA 1991, pp. 117–120 [emphasis in original].

17 | Abbas Khider: *Der falsche Inder* [2008]. 4th Ed. Munich 2013, here: p. 15. Translated into English by Donal McLaughlin as *The Village Indian*. London 2013.

18 | *Ibid.*, here: p. 9.

19 | *Ibid.*

20 | Judith Butler: *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York 2005, p. 28.

process of alienation for characters in *Der falsche Inder*. Characters like Rasul have to distance themselves from their own identity in order to construct a new version of it that can be communicated to others through narratives. Rasul, specifically,²¹ has to become the messenger of his own story and continuously mediate himself to his environment. Having to construct a version of himself that is legible by those around him places him in yet another threshold. In his analysis of this novel, Moritz Schramm convincingly argues that Khider shows how the figure of the ›false Indian‹, Rasul, signifies that any narration of life is at the same time a form of alienation.²² In a sense, the production of self through language contributes to the reproduction of Rasul's liminality. He seems to be caught in a vicious circle of indefinite abjectivity in which every act of identity construction is yet another step toward alienation. To cope with his entrapment, he turns to writing as a ritual of passage, as if to write himself out of liminality and into being. However, the novel's second chapter reveals that writing not only signifies an outlet for Rasul, but it also forms yet another snare that transports him into new marginal spaces. For example, Rasul records his memories in notebooks for which he develops a secret alphabet from Latin and Arabic letters and symbols.²³ To protect his story from unauthorized readers, he hides these notebooks until his father, who recently became a supporter of Saddam Hussein's regime, finds and destroys them. His situation further complicates when secret policemen arrest him for participating in the distribution of leaflets that are critical of the regime, which leads to his imprisonment.

Rasul's treatment of language and the way in which language serves as a mediator for what his body is made unable to communicate about his identity shows that writing has a critical potential but is also recognized as such and therefore punished by the authorities. Writing puts Rasul's life in danger and lands him in prison, but, at the same time, it is a powerful tool that allows him to express himself in oppressive settings. Rasul's relationship to language speaks to writing's subversive potential to criticize the dominant structures of Iraq's regime through the use and record of bold language. Language has a power that unsettles because it could possibly mobilize resistance. This form of mobilization and resistance is a common theme in narratives like Rasul's that follow the cyclical framework of Scheherazade's *Arabian Nights*. The sultana Scheherazade tells tales to her murderous husband in order to keep him amused and save herself from his cruel plan of killing her. Just like Scheherazade, Rasul recounts his memories over and over again to stay alive in view of danger and death.²⁴ The practice of storytelling assumes the power of what Jacques Rancière terms ›la politique‹, a form of rebellion,

21 | Arabic for ›messenger‹.

22 | Cf. Moritz Schramm: »Ironischer Realismus: Selbstdifferenz und Wirklichkeitsnähe bei Abbas Khider«. In: Søren R. Fauth and Rolf Parr (eds.): *Neue Realismen in der Gegenwartsliteratur*. Paderborn 2016, pp. 71–84, here: p. 82.

23 | Cf. Khider: *Der falsche Inder*. (ref. 17), here: pp. 26–27.

24 | Cf. Khider: *Der falsche Inder*. (ref. 17), here pp. 32.

in which the disenfranchised demand a say and act against ›la police‹, the executors of hegemonic structures. According to Rancière, political subjectivities can emerge in such moments of vulnerability where the disruption of established forms of oppression becomes a possibility and an exercise of protest and with that a potential pathway to visibility.²⁵

The self-reflexive practice of Rasul's memory-keeping can be understood as a strategy to survive the constant transitions from one liminal period of his life to the next. The discovery of poetry in the space of Baathist Iraq introduces Rasul to a new language that allows him to breathe in an otherwise restrictive system of control.²⁶ He considers himself both student and teacher in this process when he rediscovers the world and himself on paper. At the same time, his transition into refugeedom²⁷ after escaping Iraq as a political refugee shows how writing as a rite of passage into knowing oneself and developing truthful representations of one's situation is fraudulent and comes at a price. Paper is the required commodity to engage in the production of self. As a refugee, however, he lacks the means to purchase it. Instead he turns to stealing scraps of falafel wrap or magazine strips on which he assembles his thoughts.²⁸

Territorizing Abjectivities

The difficulty of acquiring paper can be understood as a signifier for the conditions of liminality that places like border zones impose on illegalized travelers like Rasul. In-between spaces like borders are liminal zones between nation states. As normative boundaries, border's ›real function‹, according to border studies scholars like Rosi Braidotti, ›is to ensure control over the mobility of population and goods, and thus [a border] acquires its function by being crossed‹.²⁹ Such mobility occurs not just on the margins of nation-states. ›Threshold people‹ like migrants, refugees and travelers move through a variety of border zones that can pose physical but also metaphorical obstacles. Faced with the economic constraints of being a refugee, Rasul has to perform further acts of illegality by stealing paper to sustain

25 | Cf. Jacques Rancière: *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis 1999, p. 14, 30.; Jacques Rancière: *Zehn Thesen zur Politik*. Berlin 2008, p. 32.

26 | Khider: *Der falsche Inder*. (ref. 17), here: p. 24.

27 | Peter Gatrell coined the term ›refugeedom‹ to describe a matrix that deciphers the interrelations between ›administrative practices, legal norms, social relations and refugees' experiences, and how these have been represented in cultural terms‹ to produce the state of being a refugee. Peter Gatrell: ›Refugees—What's Wrong with History?‹. In: *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30.2 (2017), pp. 170–189, here: p. 1. His 1999 work *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington / IN) originally draws attention to this new social category that could address the uncertainties and anxieties of being a refugee to, as he later writes, ›[acknowledge] the world that refugees made, not just the world that has been made for them‹, here: p. 10.

28 | Cf. Khider: *Der falsche Inder*. (ref. 17), here: p. 36.

29 | Rosi Braidotti: *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge/Malden / MA 2006, p. 90.

his urge to write. His persistent thievery shows that he remains in a marginal position despite his transition into a new society. His mobility as a transit migrant marks him alien to places and communities he visits. Similar observations can be made about the messengers who journey Salim's letter to Bagdad in *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik*.

Brief in die Auberginenrepublik begins with a reflection on the metamorphosis of the world in which the history of modernization produced prosperous and marginal places that shape the lives of its inhabitants unequally. The travel of Salim's letter to Bagdad is situated within such marginally evolved spaces, the darkest places on earth: Gaddafi City in Bengasi and Saddam City in Bagdad.³⁰ Like *Der falsche Inder*, this novel draws attention to the liminal spaces of society and the way in which these spaces are embedded in the capitalist structures that frame individuals' abjectivities: the simultaneous state of abjectivity and subjectivity. *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* highlights what it means to live in states of political emergency »when states turn in their people and [...] set about terrorizing their own citizens«.³¹

The novel makes palpable how the state creates food precarity and other economic precarities for its citizens as a form of control. People like taxi driver Haytham Mursi, who transports the letter to Egypt, are imbued in the system of illegal postal trade as a strategy to survive. Himself a citizen of Egypt, he is privileged as a mobile agent with a passport that carries him across borders. His recurrent journeys and purchases in Libya contribute to a more sustainable life for him and his family, but that life requires participation in the informal economy that is ruled by mafia and corruption. The paradox of his situation lies in the fact that Haytham is both subject to and upholder of the marginalizing structure. Treated as a second-class citizen in Bengasi by his boss Malik Gaddaf-A-Dam, he states:

I work like a donkey for him and have never done anything wrong. Have I deserved to be treated like this by this man? [...] I am much older than him. He should show respect of my age and grey demeanor. He treats me like a servant, and I am supposed to submit to that? [...] What right does he have to treat people like slaves? I curse this godforsaken plight! I swear by God that if poverty was a man, I would mercilessly murder him.³²

30 | Cf. Abbas Khider: *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik*. Munich 2015 [2013], here: p. 8.

31 | Anthony Downey: »Zones of Indistinction. Giorgio Agamben's ›Bare Life‹ and the Politics of Aesthetics«. In: *Third Text* 23.2 (2009), pp. 109–125, here: p. 118.; See Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford / CA 1998.

32 | My own translation. Original: *Ich schufte wie ein Esel für ihn und habe mir nie etwas zu schulden kommen lassen. Habe ich das verdient, von diesem Herrn so behandelt zu werden? [...] Dabei bin ich um einiges älter als er! Er soll gefälligst Respekt vor meinem Alter und meinen grauen Haaren zeigen. Er springt mit mir um wie mit einem Knecht und ich soll mich beugen? [...] Mit welchem Recht behandelt er die Menschen wie Sklaven? Ich verfluche die Not! Ich schwöre bei Gott, wenn die Armut ein Mann wäre, würde ich ihn erbarmungslos töten!* Cf. Khider: *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik*. (ref. 30), here: p. 25.

Haytham is betwixt and between his own power position and that of his boss Malik. Even though socio-culturally Haytham possesses a right to be respected as an elder of the community, within the secret postal system, hierarchies are reversed and subject to bequeathed power. Malik is a descendant of the Gaddafi family which is why he holds power over Haytham despite his age. In order to continue profiting from the corrupted structure, Haytham must accept the dislocation of his rights.

Temporary Solidarities and Communitas

Coming to terms with his marginalization in Libya allows Haytham to continue practicing his profession as a taxi driver. Driving across the border secures his economic prosperity and at the same time renders opportunities to engage in alternative forms of exchange about life as a guest worker in Libya. In conversations with his passengers, he reflects on his dual life and the corrupt politics of Libya and Syria. It is here that Khider's writing gives insight into temporary solidarities and the ›communitas‹ of the marginalized that evolve in the mobile space of the taxi as it transgresses the border zones between Libya and Egypt. Talking to the guest workers sitting in the car, Haytham asks:

›But wait! All of you are guest workers and no spies, I hope. For me, you all look innocuous, and I believe that you are even more afraid of the spies than I am. Correct?‹ We all laughed and the teacher said: ›In the unknown, all of us are foreign. The famous poet Amru-Al-Quais once wrote: ›Every foreigner is kindred to other foreigners.‹ In this car there is no Libyan. All of us are going home. No one knows the other! Do you really think that a spy would take such a long journey with guest workers just to find out what they gossip about the host country?‹³³

In the uncertainty of not really knowing each other, the travelers discover something they share. The teacher references ›home‹ as their common destination, and thus signifies that there is a place in which each of them has the ability to experience belonging, something that is not possible in their current liminal position. Journeying along the dusty Libyan roads is the passage required to reach the place and at the same time the practice through which every man in this car reveals his worries and frustrations about living in Libya as a guest worker.

Sharing these experiences yields a comradeship between the travelers. This kind of solidarity with each other's Otherness makes space to reveal the kinds of fears and marginalization that each of them encounters in the foreign land. For

33 | My own translation. Original: ›Aber Moment! Ihr seid alle nur Gastarbeiter und keine Maulwürfe, hoffe ich. Für mich seht ihr harmlos und ehrlich aus, und ich glaube, ihr habt mehr Angst vor den Spionen als ich. Stimmt's?‹ Wir alle lächeln, und der Lehrer sagt: ›In der Fremde sind wir alle Fremde. Der berühmte Poet Amru-Al-Quais dichtete einmal: ›Jeder Fremde ist für die anderen Fremden ein Verwandter.‹ Es gibt hier im Auto keinen Libyer. Wir fahren alle nach Hause. Keiner kennt den anderen! Glaubst du wirklich, dass ein Spion mit Gastarbeitern einen so langen Weg fahren würde, nur um zu erfahren, wie sie über das Gastland lästern?‹ Ibid, here: p. 34.

example, one of the passengers, Said, narrates having to suppress his passion for football while working as a waiter for beach café in Tripolis. Under Gaddafi's reign, new rules were introduced that anonymized players and their contributions to the game in order to de-heroize individuals. The rule was only changed when Gaddafi's son partook in the game. Najem, the Syrian passenger, points out the hypocrisy of such family politics:

›My God, in what kind of ludicrous countries do we live?‹ Najem continues. ›Here, the son of the leaders plays football with the masses however he likes, and here and there they will adapt the score. For you Egyptians it is not much different. For us in Damascus, Baschar, the son of president Al-Assad, will soon take the reign. His father is terminally ill and will soon be dead. I hope God will grill him in the place of eternal damnation! How should we call these regimes? Family-republics or inherited democracies?‹³⁴

Facilitated through the shared practice of storytelling as a rite to belong in this group of ›threshold people‹, the travelers enable each other to cope with this station of life, even if it is only for the purpose of moving across borders together. Victor Turner uses the term ›communitas‹ to describe similar experiences of community in his analysis of rites of passage. Spontaneous ›communitas‹ can »break in through the interstices of structure; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.«³⁵ In the liminal space of the border zone and inside the moving taxi, ›communitas‹ emerges among the travelling individuals. It allows these individuals to experience a togetherness that generates equality in their shared marginality.

Turner further argues that »[communitas] has also an aspect of potentiality; it is often in the subjunctive mood. Relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion their products rather than legal and political structures.«³⁶ For the fellow travelers, acknowledgement of their comradeship occurs when the teacher shares the poem by Amru-Al-Quais. The poem suggests that, in their shared Otherness, foreigners find a sense of solidarity and community. Ironically, the poem also insinuates that such camaraderie is connected to foreigners' shared experience of dying in a foreign land. In quest for hospitality, foreigners face hostility. The poem's verses recognize the parasitical nature that is ascribed to undocumented individuals like these men who seek to travel across the border into Egypt. Bodies like theirs are ›threshold beings‹ who can be made disappear through arbitrary decisions based on which humans deny

34 | My own translation. Original: ›Mein Gott, in was für drolligen Ländern leben wir?‹ fährt Najem [syrischer Passagier] fort. ›Hier spielt der Sohn des Führers Fußball mit dem Volk, wie er will, und die Ergebnisse werden schon mal entsprechend angepasst. Bei euch Ägyptern ist es nicht viel anders. Bei uns in Damaskus ist der Präsidentensohn Baschar schon fast an der Macht. Sein Vater Al-Assad ist sterbenskrank und wird bestimmt bald tot sein. Möge ihn Gott am Ort der Verdammnis grillen! Wie soll man diese Regimes nennen? Familien-Republiken oder Erbdemokratien?‹. Ibid, here: p. 36.

35 | Turner: *The Ritual Process* (ref. 6), p. 128.

36 | Ibid., pp. 127–128.

existence to each other in life and death. Jacques Derrida describes the erasure of the existence of those who demand hospitality as »the becoming-foreign of the foreigner, the absolute of [their] becoming-foreign«.³⁷

Death marks the ultimate denial of existence, which is something that these men collectively fear as they are moving through the border zone. Facing the potentiality of death brings these travelers together both literally and metaphorically. For example, when reaching the border to Egypt, Najem, the Syrian passenger, is denied entrance and detained by the authorities whereas the rest of the group can travel on. The men silently watch Najem disappear into the border police vehicle. Not only is Najem's entry into Egypt refused, it also denies him the right to exist at all in this space. Najem's disappearance confronts his fellow travelers with the threat that crossing borders poses to themselves, and how their journey might make them, too, invisible one day. Reacting in silence speaks to the voice that the individuals have already lost in face of the authorities at the border. Derrida's analysis of Antigone, who weeps her father's ungrave that does not allow him presence in the land from which he was expelled, even in death, becomes useful for understanding the silence of the travelers in *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik*. The absence of mourning in the presence of metaphorical death through Najem's disappearance into the police vehicle references the impossibility of mourning bodies who are already »without being seen by the eyes«³⁸ in hostile spaces. Even though their ways part at this crossing, there is a shared understanding among the men about their individual frailty, their captivity in strangeness. Khider's description of the men's conversations in the car suggests that each of the ill-fated travelers agrees with the truth of the poet's words. The poem can be understood as a metaphor in Turner's sense, which raises the potentiality of this travelling community to renew their otherwise diminished humanity as guest workers. What is striking about Haytham's narrative is that it shows a version of abjectivity in which being in the world as a ›threshold person‹ produces new kinds of liminality that form social entities which possess agency in ›communitas‹.

Communitas in Absentia

For Rasul in *Der falsche Inder*, ›communitas‹ only becomes possible on the metaphorical level and can never fully be achieved in person. Travelling with his notes and poems, he is forced to discard, destroy or leave his work with others, always in fear of the potential subversive power that his own words may exert against himself. In the final stage of his travel in a German refugee accommodation facility in Bayreuth, Rasul discovers that the words which he had left behind travelled by themselves through the hands of other refugees. Having arrived in Bayreuth, Rasul is surprised to find his words again on the walls of one of the shared living spaces.

37 | Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle: *Of Hospitality*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford 2000, p. 113.

38 | *Ibid*, p. 116.

Entitled »Chronicle of Lost Time« the poem reads:

In the seventh wound
I sit beside the graveyards
And await my coffin
That passers-by will carry.³⁹

In her analysis of the novel, Corina Stan convincingly argues that »the striking image of someone awaiting one's coffin speaks to the profound alienation of a refugee who feels like a living dead.«⁴⁰ It seems as if Rasul identifies that what he shares with the people who have written his poem onto the walls of the room is a common sense of alienation in refugeedom, a shared sense of indefinite liminality. Echoing off the walls, Rasul's words signify that there is something inside the words that resonates with their author. Being among others as a refugee only seems possible within »the interstices of social structure«,⁴¹ in the thresholds of language's ambiguity. Turner's notion of ›communitas‹ becomes useful to understand how being among and with each other is something amenable to refugees only as a legacy of suffering, inscribed through the words of Rasul's poetry in the living spaces in this Bayreuth facility. While Rasul and other refugees cannot write themselves into being, it is through the record of poems and thoughts on the walls of the spaces that they appear to each other and account for their suffering.

In a sense, the threshold space that encompasses their bodies and renders them marginal in the refugee accommodation facility becomes the sphere in which something new emerges: the voice of refugee experience. Homi Bhabha utilizes the term ›third space‹ to describe the potentiality of liminal spaces for witnessing and producing something new that appears.⁴² The re-inscription of Rasul's poem onto the walls can be understood as an act of making visible agency in suffering. Revealing its narrators and subjects as publishers of shared experiences of trauma, the poem communicates how Rasul's traumatized self is made legible through translation. Stan emphasizes that migrant characters in Khider's novel are born translated:

[...] there is no original, no single story, but many, related, albeit each unique; they speak to him, and through him, ex aqua. During the movement of migration, one incurs debts vis-à-vis those lost to watery graves, or on the road; one must continue to carry the memory of others, translate their stories into one's own.⁴³

Khider channels the multiplicity of narratives by weaving them into the journeys of each novel's characters. Passing through time and space, each novel's protagonist reveals much more about where he has come and struggles to be than what could be said about his inner conscience and decision-making processes.

39 | Khider: *The Village Indian* (ref. 17), here: pp. 59–60.

40 | Stan: »Novels in the Translation Zone« (ref. 4), here: p. 293.

41 | Turner: *The Ritual Process* (ref. 6), p. 127.

42 | Cf. Homi Bhabha: »Our Neighbours, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival«. Berlin/New York 2011, here: p. 6.

43 | Stan: »Novels in the Translation Zone« (ref. 4), here: p. 294.

Dualism in Writing

The organization of *Der falsche Inder* into eight chapters presenting variations of Rasul's life experiences suggests that life in liminality is always a reproduction of the same experience in another setting. Moving from place to place, the collection of memories provides a fragmented account of the traveling protagonist. All of these memories are dominated by violence and trauma. The assemblage of different versions of his narrative – different versions of the same trauma – speaks to the manifold ways in which marginalized bodies are pained. Writing his experiences into *Memories*, Rasul gives testament to the scars inflicted on his body. As an act of resistance against forgetting or moving on from what happened, he resists the fear that the scars of subjugation are ephemeral and may disappear. The frame narrative highlights this aspect even further when the unknown narrator discovers Rasul's manuscript in his train compartment. Through the manuscript and the act of reading it, the frame narrator shows how Rasul's stories are accessible and relatable to him as well. The close connection between frame narrator and protagonist is highlighted in the novel's epilogue in which the frame narrator shares that he has made similar experiences like Rasul. Through such multilayered narration of Rasul's trauma together with the frame narrator's experiences, the novel illustrates how people in threshold conditions and spaces encounter emotional strain that is recognizable across different geographies and personal stories. The novel suggests that there is something to be said about how affected individuals fight the condition of liminality and the corresponding trauma through storytelling, which functions as a form of resistance against forgetting. The importance lies not within the details of the story but more in the re-iteration of trauma occurring again and again.

At the same time, Rasul's words do not only give voice to trauma but also to emotions which exist beside suffering. Rasul states that he initially prepared his words to reassure himself that what he experienced actually happened. This includes the interactions with others along the journey, which shape the way he survives in mobility. It is particularly in encounters with beautiful women on his journey that Rasul seems to rediscover beauty as a source of strength. Inspired by women's bodies and through conversation, he describes that he reacquires the possibility to dream – an imagination that provides an outlet to the uncertain conditions of his life as a refugee.⁴⁴ For a short period of time, the suffering of his everyday life seems to disappear behind the curtain of passion and sensation. Even though personal contact with women is also a dangerous engagement due to Rasul's cultural Otherness in the places he travels, it is here that he appears to be most in contact with his own humanity as he reacquires the ability to translate his inner self through his female muses. While such transitory moments amidst passages of suffering create new ways of life for the protagonist in which quotidian practice like flirtatious writing is possible, they also exoticize female bodies to the benefit of the male protagonist.

44 | Khider: *Der falsche Inder*. (ref. 17), here: pp. 35–36.

Rasul's relationship to women and their bodies is clearly sexualized. The protagonist frames his creative space through imaginations of sexual relationships with female characters and uses that as a source of inspiration to imagine and play with words. His interaction with female characters shows that Rasul himself partakes in a hegemonial structure that creates liminal conditions for women around him. Mostly, female characters inspire the protagonist to write, only one woman becomes his partner. Having arrived in Libya, Rasul exchanges poetry with Suad, a fellow traveler in Jordan. Rasul constructs her as his muse by inviting her to write with him. While writing with Suad creates a strong companionship with Rasul in which he even confesses his love for her in a letter, this relationship does not unravel the power imbalances between them. It is Suad who shares all her work with him and it is Rasul who censors what he reveals about himself to her. The inequality of their authorship not only speaks to the dominance of Rasul's voice over Suad's but also highlights the environment in which their relationship develops, where there is no space of equality between men and women in the private and public life. Indicative for the futility of their relationship is that, at the end of his stay in Jordan, Rasul places the letter in which he confesses his love for Suad in a bottle and throws it into the ocean through which it will never reach her. Being washed away by the waves colors the emotional bond that he verbalized in writing meaningless. Suad remains only a source of inspiration and with that objectified to aid his route to survival. At the same time, she becomes the safeguard of his innermost thoughts when he continues his journey and leaves his poetry with her. This transfer of responsibility onto the female body further endangers her because she comes in possession of the words that could jeopardize her life. Nonetheless, Suad is also the reason for which Rasul's poetry continued to travel on through the hands of other refugees. After discovering his poetry on the walls of the Bayreuth refugee accommodation facility, Rasul realizes that it was Suad who divulged his intimate poetry to other refugees.

Besides her subjugated position in their relationship, there are limited ways in which Suad can act as a subversive agent, distinguishing her from other women in the novel. Suad appears as the only female character who not only is the source of Rasul's writing but writes herself, therefore hinting at a tenuous but existing potential for agency. Overall, however, women in this novel are secondary agents and servants to men, operating in the background to help fulfill men's needs. Rasul's interactions with women reveal that, for the most part, women function as objectified vehicles through which the protagonist seeks to achieve liberation from liminality. Coming into being through writing, hence, is not an innocent process for Rasul and exposes how he too creates new forms of objectification and new precariousities for the women around him. Women like Rasul's mother are important in certain situations of life in which the protagonist struggles to come into being but remain otherwise insignificant. It can thus be argued that women are transient experiences that are left behind once a part of the journey is completed.

Contingent Complicity

More so than *Der falsche Inder, Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* makes tangible how the operations of states in war zones create impossibilities of life. The opportunities to communicate with people in the homeland are limited for exiled Salim. Every form of contact bears a potential risk of exposure that could endanger his life. Salim's anxiety illustrates how contingent Baathist secret police can scrutinize his life from afar.⁴⁵ Despite being safe from immediate prosecution and imprisonment, his body continues to feel and his actions continue to be impeded by the power that the state has over them. The chapters describing the letter's journey through the hands of different messengers offer insight into the paradox spaces of this monitored communication among exiles and political refugees. Guest workers like Haytham, but also travel agency officer Majed Munir and policeman Kamal Karim ensure the continuation of the secret system. At the same time, each of their accounts elucidates how they themselves are ›persons in intermediate status.‹⁴⁶ As part of the liminal space of the secret postal service, they have no absolute right to place. Their ability to carry out the work as middlemen and Mafiosi is contingent on permission given from above. Only by relying on continued performances of the trafficking work each of them can guarantee their prosperity. For example, police officer Karim Kamal's sudden rise out of the chaos of Saddam City is contingent on his willingness to become and work as a secret police officer in the back of a factory building.

Throughout the book, Khider unveils evermore interrelations between the different middlemen to show how the system that promises the secret transfer of personal messages among exiles and refugees is actually orchestrated by the state as a means of control from afar. Haytham, Majed and Kamal contract themselves into different middlemen delivering and examining the letter. Participation in this informal economy compares to a signed contract that allows each of these characters to live in prosperity. When they are temporarily placed in positions of power, they ›raise a moral problem by virtue of their existence.‹⁴⁷ Giorgio Agamben coined the term ›denizen‹ to describe such contracted entities who are affiliated with a sphere of governance that grants them temporary rights and responsibilities in states of exception.⁴⁸ Meghan Benton elaborates that ›denizens are [...] subjects to laws that they have no say over.‹⁴⁹ As middlemen and profiteers

45 | Khider: *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* (ref. 30), here: p. 17.

46 | I borrow this phrase from Tomas Hammar: ›Dual Citizenship and Political Integration‹. In: *The International Migration Review* 19.3 (1985), pp. 438–500.

47 | Cf. Meghan Benton: ›A Theory of Denizenship‹. PhD Dissertation, University College London 2010, here: p. 9.

48 | Cf. Giorgio Agamben: ›Beyond Human Rights‹. In: *Social Engineering* 15 (2008), pp. 90–95.

49 | Benton: ›A Theory of Denizenship‹ (ref. 47), here: p. 9.

of other people's ills, Haytham, Majed and Kamal experience but do not act on the perverse ways in which the secret postal system construes the desperate senders and recipients. Contracted into this position of power by businessman Ali Al-Bhady, each of them makes use of human hardship both as commodity and advertisement. By showing the different ways in which these middlemen are implicated in the secret ring of messengers, Khider makes tangible that denizenship is contingent on trading lives that have become a commodity for upholding oppressive power structures. Highlighting the embedment of messengers in the system, *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* draws attention to how the liminal spaces of war and border zones require people to engage in newly ritualized practices of illegality. Participation in the postal system is both a way of staying alive and an extension of the state's disciplinary power structures. Thus, Haytham and others are able to reconstruct a version of their everyday life that makes survival possible for themselves only as long as they are complicit trickster figures to the disadvantage of further marginalized individuals like Salim. It seems as if the characters are all caught in an endless continuation of pathological social structures that link survival to further marginalization and control.

Alliance in Vulnerability

Brief in die Auberginenrepublik offers only few examples of characters confronting their own complicity. The reason for this may be that the spaces where the story takes place are not made for agency and solidarity to be visible. Agamben's notion of ›zones of indistinction‹ is helpful to understand the dystopian nature of the liminal spaces in the novel in which dispossessed individuals live »precariously under the rule of sovereignty and its power over the life and death of its subjects«.⁵⁰ ›Zones of indistinction‹ seek to annihilate the significance of the individual's body to the point where political community becomes impossible. The in-between spaces like border zones and informal economies in Khider's flight narratives present contemporary examples of a rule of law that renders citizens and former citizens insignificant and Other to (new) communities. Resisting the power of oppression in view of solidarity thus seems impossible.

It is only in chapter seven that Khider introduces a turning point when Miriam Al-Sadwun, wife of Ahmed Kader, colonel under Iraq's Baathist regime, secretly reads Salim's letter and tries to intervene after suspecting her husband's intent to arrest Samia. Miriam overcomes her inability to engage with the world outside her luxury contained home and decides to become an ally to Samia. She travels to Saddam City intending to find and warn her, but instead she encounters firsthand the chaos that authoritarian rulership has brought to a neighborhood so close to her

⁵⁰ | Anthony Downey: »Zones of Indistinction«. In: *Third Text* 2 (2009), pp. 109–125, here: p. 113.

own. Confronted with the realities outside her guarded community, she registers the drastic living conditions in Saddam City, grieving the connection lost for the correspondence's protagonists. Going against her position as a wife to a man of the establishment, Miriam demonstrates her own vulnerability, which in fact motivates her to perform an act of resistance.

Critical feminist social theory argues that »vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action«. ⁵¹ The fear for Salim and Samia's insecure future and her encounter with the chaos of Saddam City engender resilience in Miriam, who otherwise acts timid as Ahmed's wife. Her intervention in the secret postal system can be understood as the expression of her demand to end the increasing precarization of Samia's life through the state's impingement. This form of resistance feeds of her own experiences of objectification and sacrifice when she loses her social circle after marrying into her husband's police environment. As Butler et al. state in commenting on Marianne Hirsch, people who experience the pain of others can »mobilize vulnerability to respond to and take responsibility for traumatic and violent histories«. ⁵² Confronted with the hardship that her own complicity has caused her home, Miriam realizes that she can overcome her own helplessness and become an ally to Samia. After failing to return the letter to Samia, who had already moved out of Iraq, Miriam chooses to burn the letter, which leaves only a portion of the initial message on paper: »The verisimilitude of our story/history probably consists in that it is neither implausible nor plausible. It is simply a Mesopotamian tale [...]«. ⁵³

In her reading of the book, Corina Stan compellingly points out that »by making the letter say something else than it originally communicated, the official's wife mistranslates its meaning, in a gesture that cancels out its destructive potential«. ⁵⁴ The letter no longer contains Salim's voice or any trace of his confessions to Samia, which could be used by authorities to evince Salim's illegal journey to Bengasi, his illegal usage of the secret postal system or Samia's flight from Baghdad. Instead, the scrap of paper left of what used to make up a full correspondence record only insinuates the myth of Mesopotamia in which the value of human life is not determined by the actions of people but by hegemonic power of a few over many. The deduction of the specificities about Salim and Samia's story transform the letter into a reference about the general conditions of social life in Iraq and by that enfeeble Miriam's husband's intent to use the letter as means of extortion.

51 | Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay: »Introduction«. In: Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (eds.): *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham/London 2016. pp. 1–11, here: p. 7.

52 | Ibid.

53 | Translated by Corina Stan from Abbas Khider. *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* (ref. 30), here: p. 155. Original: *Die Glaubwürdigkeit unserer Geschichte besteht vermutlich darin, dass sie weder glaubwürdig noch unglaubwürdig ist. Sie ist eben nur eine mesopotamische Geschichte*.

54 | Stan: »Novels in the Translation Zone« (ref. 4), here: p. 298.

Der falsche Inder also illustrates that such acts of resistance are possible but for Rasul always take place in the shadows. Throughout his journey, Rasul relies on unknown helpers to escape prosecution as a refugee. After running from police, he finds shelter at the house of an old Turkman who acts in solidarity with Rasul and his fellow traveler Ahmed because he himself has experienced prosecution as an Alevite in Turkey.⁵⁵ Through their shared experience of life at risk in mobility, the men connect and form a temporary alliance that represents security and the ability to breathe. Rasul's experiences of kinship are always temporary and exemplify that his liminal condition as a refugee does not permit to make any lasting contacts with people. Like Miriam, who fears negative consequences from interfering with her husband's work, Rasul and his helpers are alienated beings, but they have agency. Through his storytelling and his writing, Rasul is able to record his traumatic experiences to declare that these existed. His writing is testament to and exposure of the cruelties inflicted on refugees' bodies throughout his journey. Miriam's burning of Salim's letter can be understood as a similarly functioning act of agency because after realizing that Samia no longer lives in Saddam City, the erasure of Salim's correspondence is an interruption of the disciplinary structure of the secret postal chain. What the reader is left with is a picture of ›threshold people‹ not as helpless beings, but instead as risk-takers and agents who try to withstand chaos.

Conclusion

This discussion of Khider's two novels has shown how the idea of transition looms large in the author's work. He introduces different characters' journeys through liminal spaces. These stories reveal what can be learned about the strategies of survival and coming into being through the narratives of subjects in migrancy. Different characters write and burn themselves into being. As ›threshold people‹, refugees and inhabitants of liminal spaces are required to become *tabulae rasae* to be formed by the marginalizing forces of nation-states. However, the narrations of Khider's protagonists illustrate how differently mobile agents navigate the liminal spaces in border zones and informal economies to negotiate their marginal social positions in pursuit of a new social reality. While participation in the informal postal service has become a way of dealing with economic constraints and political pressures for some, others record the conditions of the liminal in writing to produce accounts that can testify to their suffering and trauma.

Different forms of movement in the stories serve as indicators of how different conditions of mobility impact the ways individuals reconstruct their lives. In hope of a better life on the other side of action, characters like Rasul, Haytham and Miriam sacrifice in a range of ways. Their marginal position in liminal spaces and border zones exemplifies that participation and belonging are always contingent

55 | Khider: *Der falsche Inder* (ref. 17), here: p. 112.

on their performance of new social functions that uphold the duality of threshold spaces. As subjects to hegemonial rule they are bound to the rules and constraints of the system. Yet, it is precisely because they are mobile agents transitioning from one place to the next that they have the ability to overcome hegemonial rule, even if only temporarily or metaphorically, from their subjugated position into being.

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