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Who Said Heimat? I'm Only Renting: **An Interview with Selim Özdoğan** *TRANSIT* vol. 11, no. 1

Kristin Dickinson and Selim Özdoğan

Introduction

Interview with Selim Özdoğan, December 6, 2016.

Interview

KD: You received a Galata Fellowship from the city of Cologne to work on your most recent novel, *Wieso Heimat, ich wohne zur Miete* (2016), in Istanbul. What kind of preparation went into the writing of *Wieso Heimat* and to what extent did being in Turkey influence the final outcome of the novel?

SÖ: Well my plan was originally to apply for a fellowship (*Aufenthaltsstipendium*) in order to spend half a year in Turkey. I was never really planning on following through with the novel, but I knew that I had to put together a solid application in order to ensure that it would be accepted. And so I proposed to translate the essence of Turkish satire into a German novel. The political atmosphere in Turkey tied into this project: I submitted my application about a half a year after the Gezi protests which people were still responding to in humorous ways, with graffiti, memes, and political cartoons.

Then once I got to Istanbul, I thought, this is actually an interesting idea. And I began trying to understand how Turkish satire works, what kinds of patterns it follows, and how I might go about translating these into a novel in German. Once I started writing, it was easy to build everything that was happening around me into the novel. If I went to a demonstration or to the Prince's Islands, I could go home and write about it. In this way, parts of the novel are just reactions to daily life.

KD: How exactly does *Wieso Heimat* participate in the tradition of Turkish satire?

SÖ: Turkish satire employs an indirect form of humor. While this is in part cultural, it also has to do with the history of censorship in Turkey. Historically, authors could be jailed for openly expressing their political views; as a result, authors developed more subtle and often humorous techniques to describe contentious subject matters. Krishna Mustafa works within this tradition, in that he doesn't fully comprehend the events around him and never addresses an issue head on.

But *Wieso Heimat* also accommodates multiple voices and points of view that don't follow the traditions of Turkish satire. Although Emre is Turkish, his character is more typically "German," in that he directly addresses and makes fun of certain cultural

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practices, such as the recycling culture in Germany. Isa is very cynical; he doesn't see any hope for Turkey's future and he doesn't shy away from offending people. These competing voices are important for the multidimensionality of the story, which is an aspect of the novel that corresponds to my own world view: It's never the case that just one side of a story or an argument is true.

One criticism of *Wieso Heimat* has been that it doesn't take a clear position on the issues it describes. I take this rather as a form of praise. As a novel, *Wieso Heimat* works against easy lines of division (*Trennlinien*) and the idea that we need to, or even can, take a clear side.

KD: You utilize satire and humor in *Wieso Heimat* to approach and also break down identity formations. Have your experiences as a Max Kade Visiting Author at the University of Michigan given you any new perspectives on cross-cultural humor, or led you to reflect on the way humor functions in your novel?

SÖ: I've only been in the United States for three months, and I don't yet feel equipped to describe the tendencies of American humor. You can't consume humor from the outside; it's not something you can just learn from comedians, but rather through everyday occurrences and interactions.

What I can say is that certain *deconstructions* of identity that work within the novel might not work in the United States because identity is constructed differently here. We tend to understand identity as something that is predominantly national, and not in a constructed sense, but rather as something that has been predetermined (*vorgegeben*). When I say 'I'm German,' I necessarily set myself apart from the Dutch, the Belgians, the Luxembourgers, the Swiss.... But geographically, the United States is much larger, and has fewer neighboring countries than Germany. In the absence of so many borders, it's harder to see how blurry national ascriptions actually are and the statement 'I'm American' seems even more self-evident. I don't have the sense that one's name, for example, is as decisive a factor in the way you are publicly received as it is in Germany. That said, I am certain that identities are also constructed in the United States, I just don't feel equipped to describe *how*.

KD: *Heimat* is a term that can reflect on both personal and national identities. While the word only appears once in *Wieso Heimat*, to what extent was it central to your conception of the novel?

SÖ: I deal with so many other aspects of identity formation in the novel, I didn't feel the need to also come to terms with *Heimat* on top of that. In fact, I don't think *Heimat* works well as a concept. It's charged (*aufgeladen*) with meaning and diffuse at the same time. If we define *Heimat* as something that is spatially limited, as a place where you know the terrain, where you feel comfortable and safe, where you like to spend time, and where you have social contacts, then we may as well be talking about our smartphones. But no one refers to their smartphones as *Heimat*.

While *Heimat* is a very porous concept, it does often have to do with a sense of security—it's something that offers comfort, or a place where you feel like nothing can

happen to you. But this security simply doesn't exist and it has never existed. To varying degrees, we've only ever had illusions of security.

KD: But did you choose the title for a reason?

SÖ: Well, yes. The title works because of the contrast. You don't usually associate money with *Heimat*. But the fact is, if you don't own a house, you pay rent. And even if you do own a house, you pay for upkeep or taxes. So the reference to money estranges our understanding of the term.

KD: Let's talk about the question of security, or the connotations of *Heimat* that include feeling safe and comfortable. The situation in Turkey has changed dramatically since 2014 when you were working on this novel in the wake of the Gezi protests. In 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made the transition from Prime Minister to President. In the June 2015 elections, The People's Democratic Party (HDP) won 13.1% of the vote, passing the threshold necessary to secure seats in parliament; on the other hand, support for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) went down by 10%, causing it to lose its majority for the first time since 2002. Following the declaration of a state of emergency, the AKP regained its majority in a second election on November 1, 2015. In the months leading up to and following this second election, Turkey has been at the forefront of the refugee crisis, has experienced bomb attacks by ISIS, and has seen a significant increase in state violence against its own Kurdish population. Most recently the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016 has led President Erdoğan to consolidate his power under increasingly authoritarian measures.

Taking all of this into consideration, do you think you could have written the same novel, with the same kind of light hearted humor today? And how do you think *Wieso Heimat* speaks to the current political climate?

SÖ: While it is not my personal opinion, you could argue that without satire, hope no longer exists. And as long as people can work satirically, we can say that there is still hope.

In 2014 the political situation in Turkey didn't look good to me, but it also didn't appear hopeless. Whereas today, I can only describe the situation as hopeless. I visited many universities in Istanbul in 2014, and I could already sense a palpable atmosphere of fear among intellectuals at the time. This fear has since intensified and spread to all sectors of the population. 2016 has brought more deaths, more fear, more hopelessness—and less satire. But the political tensions that we see today in magnified form always existed; they have just been gradually increasing over the past few years. And while I wouldn't trust myself to write a novel like *Wieso Heimat* today, I think that everything I describe in the book is pertinent to the current situation.

KD: Does this statement also apply to the political situation in Germany? Does an ironic take on *Heimat*, for example, resonate with current debates regarding the integration of refugees?

SÖ: Yes, when we consider the political situation in Germany today and the emphasis on integration we can also say that only the dimension of the debates has changed. For me, identity construction begins with the nation state. Part of the problem is that we act as if the nation state is a natural mode of belonging and not a more recent historical development. Of course, it's only human to want to be part of a group. But in forming a group you also end up shutting other people out. And if we shut others out to a large enough degree, at some point, we stop viewing them as human.

As I mentioned before, *Heimat* is something we usually associate with comfort and security. And as soon as we don't feel safe, we are quick to blame others for our own discomfort or fear. But security is only ever an illusion. For me, the real question is: what are we willing to do, or how far are we willing to go to uphold our sense of security?