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Introduction to TRANSIT: Inaugural Issue Special Topic: Migration, Culture, and the Nation-State

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Authors

Göktürk, Deniz
Kaes, Anton

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This first issue of TRANSIT grew out of a conference titled “Goodbye, Germany? Migration, Culture, and the Nation-State”, which was held at the University of California, Berkeley, October 28-30, 2004. The conference was organized by the UC Berkeley German Department and the Goethe Institut - San Francisco, in collaboration with the Institute for European Studies, the Townsend Center for the Humanities, the Pacific Film Archive, and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. This event was part of an ongoing research focus on “Multicultural Germany” in Berkeley’s German Department, which includes a sourcebook publication entitled *Germany in Transit. Nation and Migration, 1955-2005*, forthcoming from the University of California Press in 2006, as well as a research archive and a lecture series.

The conference brought together participants from many different disciplines (not only from German Studies, but also from Anthropology and other social sciences, American Studies, History, Film and Media Studies, Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Women’s Studies), thus encouraging comparative perspectives. Contributors included Leslie A. Adelson, Ernst van Alphen, Paola Bacchetta, Sarah Bailey, Christian Buss, Mieke Bal, Pheng Cheah, Christina Gerhardt, David Goldberg, David Gramling, Encarnacion Guterrez, David Hollinger, Isabel Hoving, Claire Kramersch, Minoo Moallem, Todd Presner, Regina Römhild, Rob Schechtman, Hinrich C. Seeba, Kaja Silverman, Werner Sollors, Fatima El Tayeb, Chantelle Warner, and Yüksel Yavuz. Not all of their work has found its way into the inaugural issue of TRANSIT, and not all contributors to the issue were able to attend the conference. Nonetheless, the issue preserves the spirit of exchange across disciplines and the engagement with a variety of media that prevailed at the conference and that we hope to see continued in future issues of TRANSIT.

Over the past half-century, mass migrations have challenged and changed nation states on a global scale. The German example allows close exploration of many issues and problems associated with immigration, assimilation, and national identity. As “guest workers” and asylum seekers stay and become residents, the concept of a national community based on ancestral lineage and cultural heritage is irrevocably called into question. For some, the presence of roughly eight million foreign-born, including new immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, spells the end of Germany as they know it. In their view, Germany is not America— it will never be a “country of immigration.” For others, a multi-ethnic Germany means cosmopolitan openness, multicultural diversity, and a chance to make good on the country’s dark history in the first half of the last century. For them, Germany’s new face is already an undeniable fact. The long-debated new immigration law in Germany that took effect in January 2005 acknowledged for the first time that Germany has indeed become a country of immigration, even if against its will. The use of the untranslatable term *Zuwanderung* instead of *Einwanderung*, however, is indicative of difficulties in reaching a consensus on a more inclusive definition of Germanness. German citizenship is no longer based on descent; children born to foreign parents in Germany now have a right to German citizenship. On the other hand, just like everywhere else, legislation on immigration also seeks to crack down on illegal immigration, limit the number of people entering the country, and facilitate the deportation of asylum seekers. Yüksel Yavuz’ film *Kleine Freiheit / A Little Bit of Freedom*, which opened the conference, confronts many of these issues as it depicts the story of two young illegal immigrants in Hamburg.

Questions of immigration and border control often come to the fore in times of crisis. Therefore, it is particularly timely to look at “traveling concepts” such as “guest workers” and “green cards” and practices of selective incorporation in a cross-border

perspective. Comparisons beyond Germany and the USA, with the Netherlands, Britain, France, and other countries reveal not only differences in policies, but also striking similarities in the rhetoric of governmental institutions and populist media that consider immigrant populations either an economic necessity or a social burden. Questions of ethnic and national identifications and borders are being remapped today in the context of the European Union, and regional and minority identities are strengthened by the international human rights discourse. Issues of particularism versus universalism raised in earlier debates are still very much with us – and they are posed anew on the broader scale of globalization and transnationalization as discussed by Regina Römhild, Nina Glick Schiller and Boris Nieswand, as well as Pheng Cheah.¹ Two articles tackle the concept of multiculturalism from different perspectives: while Serhat Karakayali engages in a polemical deconstruction of “multiculturalism” in the German context, shifting the focus of discussion to racism, David Theo Goldberg emphasizes, in the case of the USA and South Africa, the provisional character of multicultural commitment that accommodates heterogeneity.

The inclusion of historical perspectives and a focus on language are of central importance for these discussions. Werner Sollors, who in previous publications has challenged identity politics in the US and initiated perspectives “beyond ethnicity” and “beyond multiculturalism,” presents a rich account of the history of immigration and multilingualism in Imperial Germany. Hinrich C. Seeba focuses on the role of language and myths of “origin” in the history of German national consciousness. Their historical accounts are complemented by Sarah Bailey’s analysis of Joseph Roth’s complicated relationship to the Yiddish language in his 1927 essay collection *Juden auf Wanderschaft*. Claire Kramsch deconstructs “nativist” notions of pure, national identities in her engaging plea for multilingual complexity as demonstrated in language memoirs. At the conference, Leslie A. Adelson spoke about a new grammar of migration in literature, focusing on Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s story “Der Hof im Spiegel” that imaginatively unsettles local entrapments of being either “here” or “there.”² Isabel Hoving argues convincingly that migrant literature in the Netherlands undermines the foundational Dutch myth of an “open society” and of “tolerance” as a recipe for co-existence. Meanwhile, Cecile Zorach’s analysis of Thomas Meinecke’s novels demonstrates that representations of immigration and multiculturalism in Germany are always already mediated by fantasies about the USA.

In addition to discussions of language and literature, we have included audiovisual representations of home and mobility that complicate binaries of “us” versus “them.” Mieke Bal’s enjoyable multimedia presentation about the consumption of sunflower seeds, accompanied by an appetizing crackling sound, shows that seeds are enjoyed as a taste of home by immigrants, but equally adopted by natives of Berlin as a new form of urban sociability. Questions of migration and memory are central themes in the films *Kleine Freiheit / A Little Bit of Freedom* by Yüksel Yavuz and *November* by Hito Steyerl.

¹ Pheng Cheah’s talk on Jürgen Habermas will be published in his forthcoming book *Inhuman Conditions* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

² Leslie A. Adelson’s talk has, in the meantime, been published in her recent book *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

In a forward-looking statement, Fatima El-Tayeb addresses the changing role of archives in the digital age and suggests new possibilities for the access of documents, the preservation of alternative histories, and creation of activist “Black European” networks.

We hope that TRANSIT will promote the study of mobility, migration, and cultural transfer and, in the process, develop new ways of presenting and disseminating research. We invite you to send responses and suggestions to transitjournal@berkeley.edu.

Deniz Göktürk
Anton Kaes

Berkeley, September 2005