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Introduction

Modern means of transportation as well as mass media have allowed for the emergence of what Arjun Appadurai calls "diasporic public spheres"—facilitating new forms of identity formation and transcending national space.[1] The fact that New Media such as Facebook make it possible for scattered populations to communicate in real time and around the globe seems to diminish the importance of a territorially defined homeland even further. In Senthuran Varatharajah's novel *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, two members of a cosmopolitan academic sphere jetting around the globe to attend conferences contingently "meet" in the unlocatable space of Facebook where they initiate a conversation that soon shifts to personal stories of displacement, flight, and asylum. The dialogue makes clear that these fugitive stories remain tied to their specific localities. Having fled from wars over territory and the independence of ethnic minorities, one from the Sri Lankan Civil War, the other from Kosovo, their lives have been rendered discontinuous, fractured in their narratability. The tension arising between the non-space of their encounter and the pertinence of space in their stories conveys this fracture that runs through the text and determines the itinerary of its very movement.

Throughout the text, story fragments resonate with each other, allowing for the articulation of an utterly fugitive experience. Facebook-dialogue provides the promise of this fugitive form of communication in which two stories relate to one another in their similarities without being reduced to simple analogies. Reflecting on the scattered form of the text, I argue that Varatharajah's novel does not primarily tell two stories of flight, but rather reflects the condition of possibility of telling a story in times of mass-displacement and homelessness. With the current crisis of refugees remaining suspended on the threshold of Europe, these conditions have reached a critical dimension calling for a reconsideration of Georg Lukács' famous definition of the form of the novel and its "transcendental homelessness." Pushing this form to its limits, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* works through the impasses of disrupted memory, the disorienting effects of displacement, and the experience of linguistic exile in order to arrive at new forms of belonging and writing beyond the nation.[2]

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[1] Cf. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[2] Cf. Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: University Press, 2000).

Form of the Novel I: Media and Communication

The emergence of new media has frequently led to the transformation of narrative forms, situated as they are within a broader media environment. Itself a mode of communication, literature is not only dependent on but also actively integrates contemporary media into its form, allowing reflection on the limits of different media.[3] In light of Niklas Luhmann's distinction between medium and form,[4] one can determine that literary forms make media specificities visible that otherwise remain within the background of our experience. In this sense, Varatharajah's novel both reveals the conditions and possibilities of Facebook communication, as well as transforms an associative dialogue into the driving force of the narrative form itself.

Similar to the email novel, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* abstains from a transcendental narrative voice that could introduce and contextualize its protagonists. Instead, they are differentiated only through the style of their narration, as well as through their use of typography. The fact that the philosophy student Senthil Vasuthevan does not use capital letters in his messages not only captures the stylistics of accelerated communication, but also democratizes his use of words: In contrast to the German capitalization of nouns and proper names, all words in the virtual space carry the same weight. While Senthil's writing is interspersed with poetic imagery and apophatic negations,[5] his interlocutor Valmira Surroi writes in a more prosaic and epistolary fashion providing concrete images and narratives. The stylistics of writing introduce key elements of difference and translation into the novel. These two languages, or rather these two ways of inhabiting the German language, complement each other in their attempt to capture the utterly inaccessible experience of fugitivity.

The most defining formal characteristic of both the email and the Facebook novel consists in their fragmentary nature. Increasing the frequency and speed of sending and receiving messages that culminates in a night of almost incessant writing, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* amplifies the "interruptedness" of the email novel.[6] The way in which Senthil and Valmira cut their interlocuter short, oftentimes pursuing their own story instead of directly responding to the other, leads to a multiplication and fragmentation of narrative threads. These threads resonate throughout the novel, building an intricate network of references that prevents the novel from dissolving as a whole. While this aspect expands on the long tradition of the epistolary form, the conceptual intervention of *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* is encapsulated in its communicative situation. Facebook is not only a messenger providing a communicative channel to addressees one already knows, it also fabricates an online social space in which contingent encounters are made possible and inevitable. The beginning of the novel coincides with the initiation of the conversation and

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[3] Daniel Punday uses the term "media ecology" in order to avoid a deterministic view of media and to convey that media are interrelated with each other as well as shaped by individual agents. For Punday, this media ecology is rhetorically constructed—a process in which literature is itself invested. Cf. Daniel Punday, *Writing at the Limits: The Novel and the New Media Ecology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

[4] Cf. Niklas Luhmann, "Medium and Form," in *Art as a Social System*, transl. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[5] Senthil sometimes evokes situations by negating them grammatically. This apophatic form expresses a certain impossibility of describing his fractured memory in positive images.

[6] Cf. Sabrina Kusche, "New Media and the Novel: A Survey of Generic Trends in Contemporary Literature," in *Turning Points: Concepts and Narratives of Change in Literature and other Media*, ed. Ansgar Nunning and Kai Marcel Sicks (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012).

immediately raises the questions of why one addresses an other, with which familiarity, and mediated by which technologies: "dein profil erschien gerade am rand, gelistet unter den *personen, die ich vielleicht kenne*. du kamst mir vertraut vor" [your profile just appeared in the margins, listed among the *people i may know*, you seemed familiar] (Varatharajah 9).[7] The fact that the conversation continues even after the protagonists find out that they have never met acknowledges an unpredictable interest in the other's story which ultimately facilitates an exchange built upon a basis in shared experience.[8] Throughout the novel the question of why Senthil and Valmira keep sharing the stories of their lives with each other remains latent in the background of the text, despite determining its very conceptual framework.

The protagonists are virtual passers-by, following individual trajectories that only meet tangentially on Facebook. The highly self-reflexive novel form provides an image for this peculiar communicative situation. Within the textual narrative, Valmira's description of graffiti on Williamsburg Bridge provides a concrete evocation of such dialogue in passing. The graffiti consists of the sentence "we will be ephemeral" framed by two pedestrians "und es sah aus, als würde einer mit dem anderen sprechen, während er über Kopf lag und ihm zuhörte, aber vielleicht sagt einer diesen Satz, oder beide sagen ihn gleichzeitig, nur aus verschiedenen Richtungen sprechend und in unterschiedlich gewendeten Wörtern" [and it looked like one was talking to the other while he lay upside down listening, but maybe one of them says the sentence or both say it at the same time only speaking from different directions and in different turns of phrase] (12). Resembling the diffuse mode of communication in the virtual public sphere, the subject of the utterance "we will be ephemeral" remains unclear: Who is speaking to or addressing whom, and who ultimately receives the message? This communicative ambivalence, however, is not presented as a threat to mutual understanding, but as the possibility of a collective utterance in which different speakers seem to touch upon the same issue *because* they speak in different idioms and from different perspectives. The "unterschiedlich gewendeten Wörter" [different turns of phrase] refer to the use of figurative language and, at the same time, evoke an ongoing activity of shifting and turning words around in the way a translator might do while probing different means of expression. According to Walter Benjamin, such a process touches upon a kernel of 'pure language' and the fleeting meaning between different languages that flashes up during the act of translation yet remains fragmentary when contained within one individual language.[9] In "Doctrine of the Similar," Benjamin associates this potentiality of pure language with the speed of written communication: "that swiftness in reading or writing […], the effort or gift of letting the mind participate in that

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[7] As there is no comprehensive English translation of the novel, I have included my own translations of the quotations.

[8] Initially, the protagonists have no insight into their own communicative decisions: "Ich weiß nicht, warum ich Dir das erzähle" [I don't know why I tell you this] (11). Nor do they seem to be able to respond to the other: "Ich weiß nicht, was ich zu Deiner Geschichte sagen soll" [I don't know what to say about your story] (38). Soon, this uncertainty is replaced by more intimate dialogue in which associations provide the missing links between the two stories.

[9] Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," transl. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings. Volume 1, 1912-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Cf. Judith Butler's reading of Benjamin in *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 99-113.

measure of time in which similarities flash up fleetingly […]" (68). The incessant online dialogue between Senthil and Valmira provides a fugitive form of writing in which two stories relate to one another through commonalities which do not reduce their differences.

Valmira points out that she did not immediately grasps the experience of fugitivity captured in the graffiti and the sentence "we will be ephemeral." Its meaning is deferred and arrives in translation when Valmira looks back, realizing "dass auf der Brücke nicht stand, dass wir *flüchtig sind*, sondern dass wir *flüchtig sein werden*" [that the writing on the bridge did not say that we *are fugitive*, but that we *will be fugitive*] (Varatharajah 12). The significance of this passage is captured by the polysemy of the German word *flüchtig*—meaning both ephemeral or fleeting as well as fugitive. This double meaning functions as a semantic hinge, creating a tension between the precarious conditions of a fugitive form of life and the promise of an ephemeral way of being—"dass wir *flüchtig sein werden*"—which might allow for new forms of transitory belonging. Both dimensions of *Flüchtigkeit* are intertwined and unfolded in the course of the novel, or rather: They flash up in the speed of its written correspondences.

Reminded of a postcard he received, Senthil responds to Valmira's description of the graffiti by providing another image for an undetermined communicative situation: "ich konnte die schrift, mit der sie [eine ansichtskarte] beschrieben worden war, immer noch nicht lesen; ich konnte die landschaft auf ihrer rückseite […] keiner region zuordnen […]" [i still couldn't read the writing on it [the postcard]; i couldn't place the landscape on the other side anywhere] (24). This exemplary passage illuminates the communicative realities of contemporary media in which the addressee may neither understand the messages received nor know from where one is addressed. The same is true for a digital media environment that at times confronts us with the illegibility of messages that cannot be attributed to a known sender: "bis heute kenne ich weder inhalt noch absender dieser nachricht […]; vielleicht bin ich nicht der empfänger, vielleicht ist das nicht meine adresse gewesen" [even today i know neither the content nor the sender of this message […]; maybe i am not the addressee, maybe this was not my address] (24). In variation of Jacque Derrida's claim "that a letter can always not arrive at its destination, and that therefore it never arrives" (Derrida, *The Post Card*, 33). Senthil's postcard embodies the possibility that a private message may arrive at a destination that differs from its intended address. This is exactly the status of the Facebook novel, presenting messages that do not address the readership. Conceptualized as a private exchange of messages, the text does not primarily attempt to expose and convey the conditions of refugees in Germany in order to evoke empathy on the side of the reader. The illegibility of some of its passages rather makes readers wonder what kind of message is reaching them in the first place and which messages might be lost on the way. In fact, the novel does not speak for refugees "in general," yet it evokes a sense of the multitude of people who, unlike Varathararah, remain unable to address us with their concerns as they flee towards Europe.

Later in the novel, the global movement of people is related to the movement of postal items. In a home for asylum seekers, Valmira collects postage stamps from the other inhabitants in an album: "über der ersten Reihe schrieb ich mit Bleistift die Namen der Länder, aus denen sie kamen […]" [over the first line I wrote in pencil the names of the countries from which they came] (181). In writing the names of the different home countries, Valmira tries to make sense of the experience of displacement she shares with the inhabitants of the home "und abends suchte ich manchmal auf [dem Globus] die

Länder, aus denen die anderen Bewohner kamen, […] und mit einem Stift, den ich über sie gehalten habe, fuhr ich die Stecken nach, die sie gekommen sein könnten […]" [and in the evenings, I sometimes looked [on a globe] for the countries the other inhabitants came from, […] and with a pen, which I held over them, I traced back the routes they might have taken] (181). Dating back to a time before widespread online communication, postal communication with the homeland carries the traces of the routes on which letters and people travel. Through its form, the novel investigates and participates in the historically specific relation between flight and media. Before the implementation of online communication, the delivery of messages depended on the possibility of locating people that might be on the move themselves.[10] The parallelism between the uncertain destination of letters and refugees is made explicit by Valmira who recalls: "Ich dachte, nur Postsendungen könnten zurückgeschickt werden" [I thought only mail could be sent back] (182). Facing the threat of being sent back to the homeland, refugees cannot conceive of communication as a linear mediation between two static places of arrival and departure.[11] There can neither be absolute certainty about whether the place left behind still exist or whether it was destroyed by war, nor can refugees be sure that they will ever arrive in a new livable environment. Without address, no message can be delivered. The way in which fugitivity unsettles the local relation between sender and receiver finds its formal correspondence in the Facebook novel, the very principle of which is a dislocated exchange of messages in a virtual space.

Dealing with the massive disorientation of flight as a child, Valmira hopes to find a valuable postage stamp so that she can buy a home for all the refugee families. However, all attempts fail: "und ich wusste, dass wir im Heim bleiben und keinen anderen Ort sehen werden, bis zum Ende" [and I knew we would stay in the refugee hostel without seeing another place until the end] (Varatharajah 184). The resignation in this sentence—assuming that they might never fully arrive in Germany—is mirrored in the language of mailing, underscoring once again the interrelation between flight and media: "ich dachte, dass *einen Brief aufgeben* heißen würde, vor ihm zu resignieren" [I thought that *to post a letter* meant to give up all hope concerning it].[12] Even though a letter or a post card might get lost on the way, miss its recipient, or become illegible over time, sending and receiving messages and images nevertheless constitutes an integral part of Senthil and Valmira's precarious re-construction of their past. Their messages cannot be considered letters of resignation, but rather they betray their will to claim a place in a world in which arrival remains suspended.

Memory between Displacement and Disorientation

Like every narrative form, the novel depends on technologies of memory. Senthil and Valmira's attempts to recapture the time before their flight are supported but also limited

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[10] An example of this are Kleist's letters to his fiancé Wilhelmine von Zenge that constantly comment on the question of how to receive responses while traveling.

[11] This corresponds with critiques of the common conceit that migrants are situated "between two worlds." Cf. Leslie A. Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

[12] *Aufgeben* in German means to surrender or give up while *einen Brief aufgeben* means to post a letter (183).

by the mnemonic effects of photography. Their parents brought photos in envelopes from the homeland; yet their sense of displacement is increased by these traveling images that cannot transport the old living environment to Germany. Talking about a family photograph, Valmira recounts asking her mother when coming back to Albania:

> ob sie mir die Stelle zeigen könne, auf der sie auf dem Bild zu sehen sind, und wir gingen zum Skanderbeg Platz in der Innenstadt und ich betrachtete den Boden, auf dem sie gestanden hatten und den ich auf dem Bild nicht sehen konnte, das meine Eltern in einem Umschlag mit nach Deutschland genommen hatten […]

> [whether she could show me the spot on which they can be seen in the picture, and together we went to Skanderbeg Square in the city center and I looked at the ground they had been standing on and which I could not see in the picture that my parents had brought to Germany in an envelope] (43)

Stelle can refer both to a physical site and to a passage in a text that is considered to be a *topos* or common place, conveying in one word the relation between memory and location.[13] The city square serves as a national *lieu de memoir* that is rooted in the soil on which the people in the photo were standing. Yet the ground is cut off in the picture, is not inside of the frame and, consequently, cannot be evoked in memory. The traveling photograph leaves behind the physical place which it documents and the presence of which guaranteed that the family photograph could be integrated into the frame of national memory. Separated from the proximity and surrounding of this *Stelle*, the displaced image interrupts rather than guarantees memory.

  Sites and places not only organize the linkage to the past but also the spatial orientation in the present. Upon Valmira's return to Pristina, the capital of Kosovo and the largest Albanian-speaking city outside of Albania, her parents remind her "dass wir uns *ketu ne vendlindjen tone*, wie sie sagten, dass wir uns *hier in unserem Geburtsland* anders als in Deutschland orientieren würden […]" [that here *ketu ne vendlindjen tone*, as they said, that here *in our native country* we would orient ourselves differently than in Germany] (Varatharajah 172). The refusal to give up their mother tongue, compelling Valmira to translate their utterance into German, is part of a larger project of resisting the eradication of Albanian memory. In defiance of the Serbian renaming of streets, people refer to addresses only by particular descriptions such as "*dera e kuqe*, *die rote Tür*" [*dera e kuqe*, *the red door*] (173). While the parents insist on belonging to what they call their native country, consequently orienting themselves in and through a specifically Albanian memory of displacement, Valmira struggles to produce locality in the first place.[14] Recounting a friend's comment "dass ich, wenn ich etwas erzähle, manchmal *hier* sage, auch wenn ich nicht an dem Ort bin über den ich spreche […] und dass es verständlich sei, weil es die Häuser und Städte und Länder, aus denen wir kommen, nicht mehr gibt" she testifies to a fundamental loss of any sense of *here* [that when recounting something, I sometimes say *here*, even if I'm not in the place I'm talking about […] and that this is understandable because the houses and cities and countries we come from don't exist anymore] (Varatharajah 73). The use of deictic expressions requires that one can relate the *here* to

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[13] Cf. Eva Geulen, "Stellen-Lese," in *MLN*, Vol. 116, No. 3, German Issue (Apr., 2001).

[14] On the complex production of locality and its erosion in times of mass migration cf. Appadurai, 178ff.

other points of reference such as one's homeland or the house in which one grew up, which is ultimately not possible for war refugees.

According to Immanuel Kant, geographic orientation is derived "only through a *subjective* ground of differentiation […]" (8). Consequently, the dispossession from one's prior ground, which serves as a differential measure of one's positionality, inevitably disorients the fugitive subject. The way in which disrupted memory complicates orientation in the world is then identified by Valmira as a shared experience that translates between her and Senthil: "und ich weiß, dass auch Du Dich so orientierst, auch Du erinnerst Dich so" [and I know that you orient yourself this way as well, that you remember this way as well] (Varatharajah 173). In the same passage, disorientation allows for a critical insight into the geography of borders. Drawing on her heightened sensibilities as a refugee, Valmira recalls, "dass ich nicht wusste, weshalb manche Grenzen gerade und andere ungerade waren. Ich erinnere mich daran, wie er [der Geographielehrer] Europa und jedes Land darin an die Tafel gezeichnet hatte und wie er nach der Stunde über sie wischte" [that I didn't know why some borders were straight and others were crooked. I remember how he [the geography teacher] drew Europe and every country in it on the board and how, after class, he wiped over them] (181). The way in which borders are drawn on maps is exposed in its contingency and ephemerality. While exerting their power in organizing national memory, borders might move or even be extinguished until "auf der Tafel war nichts mehr zu sehen" [nothing could be seen on the board anymore] leaving behind no traces in relation to which memory could orient itself (182).

It remains questionable whether online communication reinforces the dislocation of the *here* or, quite on the contrary, provides a virtual space that substitutes for the loss of a geographical sense of place. Opening the conversation on the second day, Valmira asks in the manner of online communication: "Bist Du hier?" [Are you here?] (28). While this use of *here* does not convey any local specificity and does not function as a deictic expression, it inquires whether the other is "present" in the virtual sense of being ready to respond. Nevertheless, the virtual interaction can be considered a way to produce locality, which, according to Appadurai, consists in "a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts" (178). The shift in the semantics of *here* indicates the emergence of a new mode of orientation situated in a digital and dialogical present rather than built on a lost national past.

The fragmentation of memory can be considered a threat to a refugee's sense of place and belonging; yet also allows for a critical intervention into the model of national memory, which, according to Andreas Huysen, "presents itself as natural, authentic, coherent and homogeneous." In contrast, the rupture of displacement that splits diasporic memory displays an affinity "to the structure of memory itself which is always based on temporal displacement […]" (152). If one considers the nation-form to be a structure that produces a community based on a homogeneous genealogy,[15] this structure constantly has to reproduce the illusion of a continuity between past and present. However, this notion of memory as an actualization of the past without loss is challenged by the experience of fugitivity. For Senthil, memory resembles much more an abyss than a reservoir of experience: "vielleicht fallen uns diese dinge nicht ein sondern wir in sie […]" [maybe these things don't fall into our mind, but we fall into them] (Varatharajah 80). The

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[15] Cf. Étienne Balibar, *We, the people of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, transl. James Swenson (Princeton: University Press, 2004), 11-30.

movement of falling unfolds in one of Senthil's dreams as "ein sturz, formverändernd wie die beugung, die verbiegung der namen während des falls […]" [a downfall, shapeshifting like the inflection, the deflection of names during the fall] (59). During this downfall, which can also be associated with the fall from paradise, forms are shifting and names are distorted. The association of remembering and falling suggests that memory transforms experiential content and one's sense of identity rather than preserving it. Instead of justifying the current state of the world,[16] memory opens up a rupture that disfigures the present for a fleeting moment, and "kurz darauf, in einem blinden augenblick, setzt sich alles wieder zusammen […]" [shortly after, in a blind moment, everything is reassembled] (59).

The possibility to embrace the fragmented character of a fugitive memory meaning both a fleeting or escaping memory as well as a memory of the experience of flight is clearly denied to the generation of Senthil and Valmira's parents. In Senthil's family, photography is part of the father's lament about loss. On a projector he shows "bilder, die hinweghalfen über den weg, den sie kamen und gekommen waren und die aus seiner sprache genommen wurden und nur gesten und kurze sätze übrig ließen, *hier*, *unser haus*, *das ist die veranda*, *das ist euer onkel*, *das alles gibt es nicht mehr*, *das alles haben wir verloren* […]" [images that helped to get over the way they came and had come and that were taken from his speech leaving only gestures and short sentences, *here, our house, that is the porch, that is your uncle, all this does not exist anymore, all this we have lost*] (145). The pictures are supposed to bridge the gap between present and past in order to get over the experience of flight; yet they can neither reverse time nor the route on which they traveled. The flight of the family being irreversible, displaying the photos depletes the language of the father who finds no expressions for his experience of displacement other than fragmentary topoi of loss—"*alles haben wir verloren.*" In pointing at the images as if the past still existed somewhere, he reifies his memory, which is itself not an act of remembrance but of forgetfulness: "ich weiß nicht, weshalb mein vater diese bilder mitgenommen hat; er sagt, alles wolle er vergessen. und vielleicht ist das der grund" ["i don't know why my father took these images with him; he says he would like to forget everything and maybe that is the reason] (145). Reminiscent of early reactions to photography such as Siegfried Kracauer's, the passage denounces the capacity of photography to capture experience, preserving instead mere spatial configurations of inanimate objects. As time elapses, Kracauer points out, the individuals depicted in photographs will soon be forgotten, ossified by photography as general types and indexes of bygone eras.[17]

Evoking the ethical dimension of photography, Valmira recalls the people that were missing after the war in Albania and how their remembrance was salvaged from forgetfulness: "Am Zaun hingen neben den Vermisstenanzeigen Plastikrosen […]. Mein Vater trat an jedes einzelne Bild heran, so stand er vor jedem Gesicht, und ich stand hinter ihm. An die Zeit vor unserer Flucht kann ich mich kaum erinnern. Nur Bruchstücke sind

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[16] Senthil's variation of Wittgenstein's famous dictum "die welt ist, einer gewendeten rede zufolge, alles, was der fall, ein fall sei" [the world is, due to a turning of speech, everything that is the case, that is a fall] (59) can be read as a reference to the Fall of Man as well as to the ephemeral construction of the world by memory that is negated throughout the novel.

[17] Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament*, transl., ed., and introduction Thomas Y. Levine (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

geblieben" [Plastic roses were hanging on the fence next to the missing person reports […] My father approached each individual picture, standing in front of each face, and I stood behind him. I can hardly remember the time before our flight. I've only retained fragments] (Varatharajah 125). The juxtaposition of the individual loss of memory with the loss of family friends illuminates the radical rupture that genocides inflict onto the memory of ethnic minorities both on a personal and transpersonal level. While Valmira's parents fall into a long silence repressing the memory of loss, the photos of those missing disintegrate over time: "Die Witterung hatte das Papier gewellt und die Schrift und ihre Gesichter verschmiert […] und kein Gesicht war mehr als Gesicht zu erkennen" [The weather had made the paper crimp and had smudged the writing and their faces […] and no face could be recognized as a face anymore] (127). Scholarship on the ethics of displacement oftentimes reflects on the face of the other and the way in which it addresses us as responsible beings.[18] The very material eradicating of the photographic traces, however, betrays the precarious status of the face and its capacity to reach us through media. Not to be able to recognize the faces *as* faces means both to forget those who are missing and to lose one's ethical sense that a human loss occurred in the first place.

Collective memory is not only subject to a natural process of decay against which it has to constitute itself, but is at the same time exposed to relations of power that dictate whose memory is worth preserving. The fact that the faces of the missing people are disintegrating in the rain has to do with the political agenda of the Serbian military to eradicate all traces of the Albanian population. Reluctantly, Valmira's parents recount "wie an Schulen und Hochschulen nur noch Serbisch gesprochen und gelehrt werden durfte […]" [how only Serbian was allowed to be spoken and taught at schools and universities] (Varatharajah 126). The oftentimes violent homogenization of language is part of the process in which a nation is constructed. Insofar as language is conceived as "a transindividual 'bond' that produces its own forms of identification" the enforcement of the official language of a country not only integrates a people in its homogeneity but also violently expels minorities from the national bond (Balibar 20).

The lines of power that traverse languages continue in the conflict between Valmira and her father who claims "immer, wenn ich *Kosovo* statt *Kosova* sage, würde ich den serbischen Anspruch auf das Land wiederholen" [whenever I said *Kosovo* instead of *Kosova*, I would reenact the Serbian claim on the country] (Varatharajah 152). Having mostly grown up in Germany, Senthil and Valmira immerse in the German language in a way that threatens to erase the memory of their homeland. Translating his mother's words into German, Senthil reflects "sie könnte es nicht auf deutsch gesagt haben, aber ich erinnere mich, als hätte sie es; ich erinnere mich nur auf deutsch" [she couldn't have said it in german. but i remember as if she had; i only remember in german] (209). Mediated through another language, the recollection of the past takes on a new form, which questions the veracity and reliability of memory itself. Emphasizing the linguistic character of all experience, Senthil asks: "wenn wir eine sprache vergessen, verlieren und vergessen wir auch das, was wir in ihr erfahren haben?" [when we forget a language, do we also lose and forget what we have experienced in it?] (209). If this is the case, the eradication of a language would be the most effective manner of cancelling out the memory of ethnic

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[18] On the Levinasian ethics of the face cf. Seyhan, 6; and Butler, 28-68.

minorities. However, refugees translate their experience into new languages and, according to Benjamin, it is precisely translation that guarantees the afterlife or survival of memory.[19]

Fugitive Language / Fugitive Lives

Survival and death permeate the language and memory of refugees to an extent that Senthil only begins to grasp in the process of sharing his experience with Valmira: "ich glaube, erst jetzt beginne ich zu verstehen, dass von anfang an der tod unserer sprache vorausging" [i think only now i begin to understand that death preceded our language] (Varatharajah 151). *Vorausgehen* is used in a twofold sense, meaning, in the first place, the temporal precedence of the genocides that led to the flight into exile and, consequently, into another language. This implies the second meaning "dass er [der Tod] die bedingung der möglichkeit und wirklichkeit unseres sprechens war, ist und bleiben wird […]" [that it [death] was, is and will remain the condition of the possibility and truth of our speech] (151). As the condition of possibility in a Kantian sense, death continues to be at the core and at the boundaries of their language. Senthil experiences how his speech is limited by his contingent survival and the fact that those who are dead in his place cannot speak anymore: "was ich […] sage, ist leer und nur ein zeichen einer vernichtung, der wir entkommen sind […]" [what i […] say, is empty and only a sign of an extinction we escaped] (151). The impossibility of ever speaking for the dead turns into an inability to speak for oneself. Placed in parentheses, the question "kann ich für mich sprechen?" [can i speak for myself?] (152). resonates with Gilles Deleuze's claim that "I need my mediators to express myself, and they'd never express themselves without me […]" (*Negotiations 1972-1990*, 125). In the French original, the mediators are called *intercesseurs*,[20] which derives from the Latin word *intercedo* also meaning to interrupt: One's speech must be interrupted by another's in order for one to be able to speak for oneself in the first place. The intercessors in Deleuze's sense can be fabricated by the imagination; political speech, in fact, often presumes to speak in the name of an imagined community. For the survivors of genocides, however, a speech in the name of their people carries the traces of extinction, necessitating mediators from other places. Before investigating the way in which Senthil and Valmira interrupt and mediate each other's discourse in the Facebook dialogue, I will sketch out what kind of shared experience makes it possible for them to speak in each other's name and to construct a collective "we" as the subject of their utterances.[21]

One of the central motifs in the novel is the parallelism of flight and language, or in other words: of spatial and linguistic displacement. Having been brought to Germany as children, Senthil and Valmira experienced migration in the passive form: "über die routen und abwege der sätze sind wir über grenzen geflohen worden" [via the routes and detours of sentences, we were made to flee across borders] (Varatharajah 151). For Jurij Lotman, the central event of a narrative is the transgression of a border that manifests itself not only

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[19] "Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (Benjamin, "Translator," 254).

[20] Cf. Gilles Deleuze, "Intercesseurs," in *Pourparlers, 1972-1990* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2013).

[21] A similar collective "we" is evoked by Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).

in a spatial but also social or cultural dimension.[22] The crossing of a linguistic border, however, cannot be conceptualized as a singular event. Migrants keep experiencing the crossing of borders in their very own speech. The way in which people talk to them due to their accent reinforces internal borders and modes of exclusion on a daily basis.[23] Valmira recounts the sales people in a supermarket addressing her mother with the informal pronoun "du": "Sobald sie ihren Mund öffnet und sie ihren Akzent hören, sprechen sie mit ihr, als wäre sie ein Kind" [As soon as she opens her mouth and they hear her accent, they speak to her as if she was a child] (Varatharajah 91). In fact, the flight across borders did not end in Germany but is rather shifted into speech. Sethil assumes that their flight continues asking "vielleicht sprechen wir, um an das ende dieser und jeder möglichen sprache zu gelangen, westwärts, achttausendvierhundertdreiundachtzig kilometer, über moskau und berlin […]" [maybe we speak in order to arrive at the end of this and every possible language, westward, eightthousandfourhundredeightythree kilometers, via moscow and berlin] (95). The physical deterritorialization of the westward migration continues in the linguistic displacement of learning a second language and of being othered by those who reinforce a community based on linguistic homogeneity. In this sense, the end point that Senthil envisions could be the end of displacement and the arrival in a language that one inhabits fully. However, the novel constantly brings into question whether one can ever be completely at home in any language.

The idea of the mother tongue plays an integral part in the construction of the nation as a home to all native speakers. When the teacher of Valmira's sister disavows that she has two mother tongues, Albanian *and* German, by insisting "jeder Mensch könne nur eine Muttersprache haben, so, wie man nur eine Mutter hat" [every person can only have one mother tongue, just as one can only have one mother] he denies her sense of belonging to the German people (192). Posited against this nationalist ideology, reflections about language acquisition in the novel denaturalize the concept of the mother tongue and challenge the idea that national identity can only be based on linguistic homogeneity. When describing how his brother dictated the German language to him, Senthil presents the process of learning a language as fundamentally heteronomous and deferred: "er stand hinter meinem rücken, während ich schreiben lernte, die linke hand auf der schulter, und sprach, und ich sprach und schrieb ihm nach, bis jedes wort wieder verrutschte" [he was standing behind my back while i learned how to write, his left hand on my shoulder, and spoke, and i spoke and wrote everything after him until every word slipped out of place again] (52). In these Freudian slips of the pen, the repressed quality of the parent's native language asserts itself. Belonging to the generation that had to leave the homeland behind, Valmira's father experiences the differential quality of the second language as foreignness: "eine Sprache würde man erlernen, indem man die Worte der anderen, indem wir fremde Wörter für die eigenen halten […]" [one learned a language by deeming the words of others—by deeming foreign words—one's own] (195). Based on a very different experience, Senthil's recollection of the fraternal dictation underscores that all words are foreign when we learn them, a foreignness which must be forgotten in order to maintain the illusion that one's mother tongue is a natural heritage. In this sense, the title of the novel *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* refers to a self-contained state before the increase of signs

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[22] Cf. Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, transl. Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977).

[23] On the concept of the interiorized border cf. Balibar, 1-10.

through language that can never be recaptured. Interspersed with words that will appear foreign to the majority of the German readership, the novel participates in the Babylonian proliferation of languages,[24] rendering strange the self-evident character of German in which most of the text is written.

In the eponymous passage of the novel, the moment before the proliferation of signs is associated with the life before exile. Back in the homeland and before Senthil was born, his mother recognizes an increasing military presence around their house and warns the father: "sie sagt, das sei ein zeichen. sie sagt, bevor diese zeichen zunehmen, vor der zunahme der zeichen sollte er gehen" [she says that is a sign. she says before those signs increase, before the increase of signs, that he should go] (81). Going into exile is prompted by signs that indexically point at an impending danger. At the same time, the indexical character of language itself is associated with going into exile. In his critique of Edmund Husserl's semiology, Derrida reminds us that all signs point at something absent, which is ultimately why meaning can never be present in language. In communicating with others, the subject goes "forth from itself into the word", the consequences of which "effectively exile this life of self-presence in indications" (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 40). Following Derrida's deconstructivist approach, the novel suggests considering the exile of the refugee as an exile of a *second* degree, allowing for a self-reflexive insight into the fugitivity of language in general. Senthil's statement about going to the end of language makes clear that the end of linguistic exile would have to coincide with the cessation ("Ende") of all possible languages, as language has never provided a home to him in the first place.[25]

The fleeting character of language is captured by the image of a letter from Senthil's uncle on the outside of which hand-written letters are visible: "sie drückten durch, als wollten sie aufbrechen und sich auf einen weg Machen […]" [they pushed through as if they wanted to break out and hit the road]. The writing appears as if it were attempting to travel all the way to unite the family in the presence of its letters; yet "wer sie schrieb, blieb ihnen nicht mitgegeben" [the person who wrote them was not attached to them]. In the middle of this reflection about the loss of presence Senthil speculates: "vielleicht ist das die art, wie sinn allein erscheint, unbeabsichtigt und unterwegs, […] als bewegung unter dem papier, verborgen, flüchtig […]" [maybe this is the only way in which sense appears, unintentionally and on the move, […] as a movement under the paper, hidden, fugitive] (Varatharajah 133). The written communication of families torn apart by flight foregrounds how language denies immediacy and presence as interpreted by Derrida. Meaning never appears in the here and now but is always emerging in a movement elsewhere. In this sense, Senthil's imperative "bis zur äußersten bedeutung der wörter müssen wir gehen" [we must go unto the outermost meaning of words] can also be understood as the attempt to resist reterritorialization in another national language and to follow the fugitive meaning of signs through different languages (Varatharajah 133). In fact, the lives of Senthil and Valmira

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[24] The most explicit reference in the novel (among many others) is the ArcelorMittal Orbit in London: "anish kapoor habe sich in seinem entwurf vom turm zu babel beeinflussen lassen." [anish kapoor's conception is said to be inspired by the tower of babel] (106).

[25] In an article for the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Varatharajah reflects on this issue as the condition of his writing. Senthuran Varatharajah, "Wir hießen Dahergeschleifte, Asylantenschweine, Affen, Neger," in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* January 9, 2018 (http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/was-ist-heimat-wir-hiessen-dahergeschleifte-asylantenschweine-affen-neger-1.3807623, last accessed February 24, 2018).

seem to follow that tangent as they travel though countries and languages without ever settling down.

The multilingualism of Senthil and Valmira propels the proliferation of meaning throughout the text, engaging in an open-ended play of signifiers. Valmira expresses the thought "dass in jedem Wort mindestens noch ein anderes liegt und dass sie zusammenhängen würden […]" [that in every word there is the root of another and that they would be related] (217). An example for the complex network of signifiers in the novel is the translation of the word "Baum," reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's paradigmatic example of signs par excellence. According to Valmira, the Japanese sign for tree resembles a cross while Senthil traces the word back to the Latin root *arbor* and its connotation of "Kreuz" [cross] (60-62). The signifier "Kreuz" is taken up in other passages of the text pointing towards meanings that are themselves on the move. Insinuating cross-linguistic connections, the foreign words in the text function as indicators of what Adorno calls "a hidden language that is unknown in the positive sense, a language that overtakes, overshadows, and transfigures the existing one as though it were itself getting ready to be transformed into the language of the future." Not by reducing the amount of signs, but rather by proliferating them can a common language become thinkable that "arises only in pieces and out of the disintegration of the existing one […]" (Adorno 291).

The fragmented character of the novel provides a formal equivalent to this future language. In sharing their experience of a disrupted past across languages, Senthil and Valmira work on a new form of dialogical articulation that interrupts linear narratives. Instead of giving a linear account of their lives that follows a progression from their birth to their flight and finally ending with their assimilation in Germany, they provide bits and pieces of significant moments that oscillate between the time before and after the flight. However, Senthil is aware that the absence of conventional narrative forms impedes his narrative: "ich weiß, ich komme nicht weiter. ich würde mich in details verlieren" [i know i can't move on, i'd lose myself in details] (Varatharajah 210). The question is whether the inability to synthesize the fragmented experience of displacement undoes the form of the novel as a whole, or whether fragmentation can be considered the generic force of the novel in the first place. With recourse to Georg Lukács' influential *Theory of the Novel*, I will conclude with an investigation into how the novel enacts a new form of alliance beyond national belonging mediated through the aesthetic form of the text.

Form of the Novel II: Homelessness

According to Georg Lukács, the novel is one of the art forms that "carry the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms" (39). The disintegration of homogeneous societies and the loss of frontiers that "necessarily enclose a rounded world" (33). is the historical condition of the form of the novel, which, in Lukács' famous words, is an expression of "transcendental homelessness" (41) While Lukács discusses the emergence of the novel in Europe after the loss of clear borders that delineate homogeneous communities—a state that might well be considered a fictitious ideal—Valmira comes from Kosovo, a place which has historically existed outside the borders and discourse of the nation-state, and seeks a home in Germany that is denied to her on a daily basis. Valmira describes this denial as a discursive mechanism: "Wenn jemand erfährt, dass ich nicht hier geboren wurde, fangen sie an, mich für mein Deutsch

zu loben, und sie fragen mich, wann ich wieder zurückgehe, zurück in *meine Heimat*, dort, wo ich *wirklich herkomme* […]" [When people find out that I wasn't born here they start praising me for my German and they ask me when I will return, back to *my homeland*, that place where I *actually come from*] (Varatharajah 191). This way of interpolating someone as a foreigner is in itself a violent reaction from individuals attempting to preserve their home against the intrusion of refugees. Yet the most pressing issue in the 21st century is not so much the "transcendental homelessness" of European subjects in a modern world of migration, but rather the very material homelessness of masses of displaced people that calls into question what it really means for a modern subject to be at home in Europe.

The refugee camp has become the locus of homelessness in the very center of Europe. Being held in suspense about their permission to stay, Valmira experiences the camp as a place of imprisonment rather than a temporary home:

> Am Eingang stand ein Wachhaus, […] und jeder, der uns besuchte, musste hier seinen Ausweis abgeben. Ich wusste noch nicht, dass *ausweisen* beides heißen kann, dass es bedeutet, dass wir unsere Identität durch ein Stück Plastik oder Papier beweisen, und dass es bedeutet, dass wir ein Land verlassen müssen, und vielleicht sind diese Bedeutungen nicht weit voneinander entfernt […]

> [At the entrance there was a watchtower, […] and everyone who wanted to visit us had to turn in identification. I didn't yet know that *ausweisen* could mean both: that it means that we have to prove our identity with a piece of plastic or paper, and that it means that we have to leave a country, and maybe these meanings are not that far from each other] (201)

Sich ausweisen means to identify oneself with a passport, the legal weight of which is contrasted with its light material; *ausweisen* can also mean to deport, which is folded back into the first meaning pointing to the absurdity that deportation might result from the absence of a petty piece of plastic or paper. The control of passports and the surveillance at the entrance turns the refugee camp into a liminal space of exclusion in the sense of Michel Foucault. Although located inside of society, the refugee is placed on "the inside of the outside, or vice versa" (Foucault 11). This threshold organizes society by assigning disposable people to a liminal position on the margins. The detainment at a place from which they might eventually be deported keeps the refugees separate from the population, which prolongs their flight instead of putting an end to their homelessness.

While Senthil's parents keep the key to their house in Jaffna which they bought "damit wir ein zuhause haben, zu dem wir zurückkehren könnten" [in order for us to have a home we could return to] (Varatharajah 227). neither a return to the homeland nor a complete arrival in Germany seem possible for Senthil and Valmira, who continually experience the movement of flight in their daily lives. Foucault's analysis of the historical figure of the *ship of fools* resonates with the condition of fleeing to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea: The refugee is "the prisoner of the passage. It is not known where he will land, and when he lands, he knows not whence he came. His truth and his home are the barren wastelands between two lands that can never be his own" (Foucault 11). A fugitive consciousness is determined by being cut off from the homeland without knowing where one will arrive. This state of endless passage is evoked at the end of the novel when Senthil and Valmira finally tell each other about their flight to Germany. Alternately beginning with the phrases "Wir kommen" and "wir gehen" their messages interlace coming and

going, arrival and departure, in a dialectical movement: In flight, departing and arriving infinitely preserve and prolong one another.

It remains ambiguous whether the end of the novel is actually the end or rather the beginning of their stories; Valmira claims both "Wir sind am Ende angekommen" [We have arrived at the end] (Varatharajah 240) and "Wir sind am Anfang angekommen, und keiner von uns wird hier bleiben" [We have arrived at the beginning, and none of us will stay here] (248). The novel ends with the commencement of their flight and makes clear that there is no clear beginning or end to the story of displacement. The chiasm of beginning and end disturbs the biographical form of narrative progression that is so essential to Lukács' theory of the novel.[26] In this sense, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* transgresses the limitations that constitute the novel according to Lukács exactly by defining a narrative form for the conditions of homelessness in the 21st century. Consequently, the novel is not about the life of an individual and its loss of a sense of place in a world of eroding borders, but rather about the shared experience of refugees whose presence in Europe takes into question the legitimacy of these very borders.

Before the backdrop of mass-homelessness, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* enacts the erosion of the biographical form while at the same time turning the novel into a diasporic form of writing. Without certainty about his origin ("die allerersten namen") or his destination ("die allerletzten dinge"), Senthil cannot conceive of his life in a coherent form: "wenn wir uns nicht mehr an die letzten, die allerletzten dinge und auch nicht an die ersten und allererersten namen halten können, dann gibt es vielleicht nur verstreute einzelheiten, und der zusammenhang wir zufälliger sein" [if we can no longer hold on to the last, the very last things, nor to the first and very first names, there might only be scattered details and their coherence will be more accidental] (Varatharajah 187). The experience of contingency threatens the form of the novel: The form has itself become homeless as it fails to integrate the scattered details into a larger whole. The lives of Senthil and Valmira are disrupted by the movement of migration which, for Valmira, translates into a feeling of physical scattering: "Als Kind dachte ich, auf allem, was ich berühre, bleibt etwas von mir zurück, und ich sei nichts als diese Verstreuung" [As a child I thought something of me remained on everything I touched, and I was nothing more than this scattering] (174). *Verstreuung* is the linguistic root of diaspora, the experience of which permeates Senthil and Valmira's writing. Instead of reintegrating the scattered parts into a new whole, the form of the Facebook novel transposes the fragmented life stories into a dialogue that constitutes a form of diasporic belonging across national backgrounds.

Sharing the experience of being a refugee in Germany, Sethil and Valmira's writing takes "displacement as basis of possible alliance" outside the model of the nation (Butler 29). Yet they do not constitute a group of exiles, a formation Edward Said defines through its "passionate hostility towards outsiders" (Said 51). While this kind of group solidarity produces new forms of exclusion, the alliance that *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* envisions is one of an utterly ephemeral nature and consciously refrains from erecting new boundaries between *we* and *them*. In fact, Valmira and Senthil maintain a distance from each other: "Wir können nur aus dieser Entfernung zueinander sprechen" [We can only speak to each other from this distance] (Varatharajah 120). Their virtual encounter provides

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[26] "The novel comprises the essence of its totality between the beginning and the end, and thereby raises an individual to the infinite heights of one who must create an entire world through his experience […]" (Lukács 83).

only a momentary form of belonging that leaves no traces: "von dir aber wird nur schrift bleiben und auch sie bleibt nicht […]" [only writing will remain of you and it, too, does not remain] (209). In negating the naïve idea of a home provided by transitory online communities, the novel shares the critical insight of exiles such as Adorno and Said who posit that homes are always provisional and that the state of not being at home might actually have become a moral requirement in a world administered by mass institutions (Said 54). The project of the novel in such a world can only be resistance to exclusionary forms of belonging; following Varatharajah's *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, the form of the novel itself remains homeless.

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