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## TRANSIT

### Title

Transit

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7247v4z9>

### Journal

TRANSIT, 9(1)

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### Publication Date

2013

### DOI

10.5070/T791022811

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# Transit

By Deniz Göktürk

Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

“Transit” is understandable the world over: the word means “passage” in many languages. One might think of crossing borders or of moving through a place; in transit we are all things but settled. In transit, we have already left a point of origin and have not yet reached our final destination; we may awaken in the morning in an entirely different location altogether. Movement need not follow the shortest possible route: rather, transit may entail stagnation and long waiting periods along the way. The novel *Transit* by Anna Seghers—composed primarily in 1941 while she was en route from Marseille into exile in Mexico—describes the difficulties of obtaining a transit visa and the impossibility of successfully traveling onward, even with a false identity and corresponding travel documents.<sup>1</sup> Both continuing travel and permanent residency are privileges that many refugees are denied.

A temporary abode while en route stands in contrast to the model of immigration into a nation state where migrants are provisionally integrated—at least within the contexts of labor markets, social welfare systems, and educational programs. The conditions and limitations of incorporating such newcomers through institutions continue to be a point of contention. Although migration has been an important demographic and economic factor in the Federal Republic of Germany since its inception, the naturalization of foreign migrants and their descendants was legally recognized and regulated only in 2000 and 2005, after several generations of German-born ‘immigrants’ came of age. A characteristic of such immigration (*Zuwanderung*) insists upon the distinction between ‘indigenous’ and ‘acquired’ identity—a concession to the long-standing political opposition against official acknowledgment of Germany being a nation of immigrants (*Einwanderungsland*). What began as “guest work” evolved in many cases into permanent residency, and in many others, led to repatriation or moves to other countries. High emigration (*Auswanderung*) rates, as well, demonstrate that migration is by no means a one-way street. Furthermore, the course of European integration and the corresponding freedom of movement mean that the regulation of border traffic cannot remain a solely domestic concern. Transit, with its coming and goings, encompasses multiple forms of both mobility and immobility.

In addition to passages across borders, transit—particularly for English-speakers—evokes associations of public transportation, of *mass transit*, the movement between one’s residence and work place. As opposed to the classic narrative of immigration as departure and arrival, the to and fro of commuter traffic is often much closer to the lived experience of the migrant. His/her attachment to multiple locations creates perpetual ambivalence towards making a home in one place and entrapment in provisional arrangements. In our shrunken world of endless cities and airports, it is perhaps the commuter, not the immigrant, who might figure as a prototype for modern mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Seghers, *Transit* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1993).

The underlying principle of transit is *trans*-lation.<sup>2</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar's novel, *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus*, tells the fanciful story of a childhood spent on the road, crisscrossing Turkey.<sup>3</sup> The title metaphor is based on a free translation of Aşık Veysel Satioğlu's popular folk song "*Uzun ince bir yoldayım / iki kapılı bir handa / gidiyorum gündüz gece*" ("by a long and narrow pathway / in a caravansary with two doors / I journey, night and day"). Transit appears, here, as *conditio humanae*.

Transit simultaneously implies both transport and transformation. People are on the move in search of better prospects, goods circulate through distribution centers and supply chains, and all along, the forms of communication and institutionalized control are also changing in the course of digitization. Our archives are continuously in motion. Like the spectator of a video installation, the digital reader places readings into ever-changing frames of interpretation. The combining and translation of fragments in ever changing perspectives and constellations correspond to tactics of orientation in transit.<sup>4</sup> Mass migrations since the 1950s have accelerated synchronously with the proliferation of electronic technologies such as computers, videos, and mobile telephones. High speed Internet and multi-local access to information have brought about new forms of business organization. While in the past migrants were attracted to work in large, industrial centers, many operational procedures are now simply outsourced to regions where they can be performed at lower wages with ever-increasing speed and ever-increasing volumes of data transfer. This mobility of production has changed the economies of sending countries, reducing both demand and labor migration.

At the same time, the transformation into a post-industrial global society has been anything but linear. The virtual reality created by digitization relies on material infrastructures. We do not simply float upon a cloud; even in the era of cloud computing, data must still be stored in specific, localized servers. Although mechanization and digitization have decreased the demand for fulltime, unskilled labor in nations with higher gross national products, offices and apartments in financial centers still need to be cleaned; children and the elderly need to be cared for; food must be prepared. While manual labor is increasingly eliminated from production and transportation, a post-industrial society maintains its demand for workers—in both its command centers and its factories. The service economy is then associated on the one hand with concentration of finance and wealth and on the other hand with the proliferation of precarious circumstances of a (post-)migrant workforce.

The video artist Ursula Biemann documents and analyzes contemporary topographies of mobility. Her *Sahara Chronicle* (2006–2007) is a collection of

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's Note: "Über-Setzen," ("translation"), literally "carrying over."

<sup>3</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992); Luise von Flotow, trans., *Life is a Caravanserai Has Two Doors I Came in One I Went Out the Other* (Long: Middlesex University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> The digital journal *TRANSIT: A Journal of Travel, Immigration, and Multiculturalism in the German-Speaking World* ([www.german.berkeley.edu/transit](http://www.german.berkeley.edu/transit)) aspires to provide an open, unfinishable publication form—endlessly changeable and expandable. An issue of a printed journal cannot be altered once published, whereas a digital edition provides the potential for ongoing expansion, open commentary, updates. Instead of a closed publication on one theme, there are continuing discussion threads, threads which can be reevaluated and multiple networks of connections between the various texts.

documentary videos on the transport networks of trans-Saharan migration<sup>5</sup>. The visual form of the exhibit reflects the fragmentary nature of our perceptions of movement. The multi-screen installation offers no overarching narrative, but thought-provoking contrasts between micro- and macro-perspectives, from the change of travel accommodations in a transportation hub in Agadez to digital images of the desert landscape from the perspective of a drone. One ironic counterpoint to the aerial gaze is the interview with the young Senegalese woman, Coumba Sow, in Mbour. In fluent French, she describes her perilous boat crossing to Spain: a nineteen-day endeavor, after which she was captured and deported by the Spanish Coast Guard. She now sells fish on the streets of Mbour to support her family. When asked whether the experiences of this journey in some way changed her life, she answers, “No.” The circular motion of this failed trip to the external borders of Europe relativizes the narrative of migration as a life-changing new beginning; instead one perceives the unequal distribution of resources, which compels humans to live in a perpetual state of transit. Meanwhile, spectators in the exhibition circulate among projection screens.

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<sup>5</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Mission Reports. Künstlerische Praxis im Feld—Videoarbeiten 1999–2011* (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2012). See also, <http://www.geobodies.org/art-and-videos/sahara-chronicle/>