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Fostering Transnational, Multilingual Collaboration: The Berlin-based Artists' Initiative *WeiterSchreiben.jetzt* *TRANSIT* Vol. 13, No. 1

Friederike Eigler

Introduction: Writing (beyond) Displacement

In the opening of her essay “We Refugees” Hannah Arendt succinctly describes the situation of those who are forced to leave their homelands due to persecution and threats to their lives.¹ The content and tone of the essay are shaped by the shock at the sudden loss of legal protection and the recognition that being “merely” a human without legal recourse ultimately implies that one’s very human existence is denied.² Arendt also mentions the humiliation that comes with the dependence on the assistance of others, and she is critical of the expectation of the host country that newcomers “forget” their previous lives and quickly adjust to their new living conditions. Beyond the existential lack of legal recourse, she lists additional losses that come with forced displacement: The loss of home and the routines of daily life connected to that home; the loss of job or occupation and the meaning one derives from it; the loss of language; the illegibility of (culturally specific) body language and expression of emotions; and finally, the persecution and death of relatives and friends left behind - and thus the collapse of one’s private world (Arendt, “We Refugees” 264-265).

“We Refugees,” written in the first-person plural shortly after Arendt’s arrival in the U.S. and published in early 1943, is informed by her own experience as a refugee. Arendt fled Nazi Germany in 1933, lost her German citizenship as a result of leaving the country, and ultimately reached the U.S. via France and Portugal in 1941. She wrote the essay while she was still stateless, a situation that persisted until 1951, when she became a U.S. citizen. Beyond an autobiographical dimension that is highly unusual for Arendt, her essay contains in a nutshell some of the arguments on the fundamental tensions between human rights and the nation state that she would later develop in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

Today, as we are witnessing a record number of 71 million displaced people worldwide ([UN Refugee Agency](#)), Arendt’s insights are timelier than ever. Seyla Benhabib ties the past to the contemporary situation in the introduction to her book *Exile*,

¹ Considering the broad circulation of her essay in recent years it is noteworthy that it did not receive much attention when it first appeared in 1943 and that it was negatively reviewed when it was reissued in 1978, a few years after Arendt’s death. The German translation appeared in 1986.

² Arendt coined the now famous phrase “the right to have rights” in her 1944 essay “The Jew as Pariah.”

Statelessness, Migration (2018) that explores the “intertwinement of lives, career, and thought” of 20th century Jewish intellectuals (xv):

The phrase through which she [Arendt] tried to capture the vulnerability of the stateless – ‘the right to have rights’ – has reverberated in the twenty-first century as well. As the world has experienced a refugee crisis of proportions unknown since World War II, the asylum seeker, the refugee, and the stateless have become prisms through which to explore the hypocrisies of contemporary liberal democracies and of the postwar state system which, on the one hand, affirms the universality of human rights – including the right to asylum – and, on the other hand, gives nations the sovereign privilege to control their borders and engage in practices in defiance of their obligations under international law. (5-6)

A small but vulnerable subsection of those seeking refuge, then and now, are writers and journalists. International support organizations for these individuals include PEN International, in particular its efforts to support writers in exile, and ICORN, the International Cities of Refuge Network that supports journalists and writers who face persecution and arrest (“About ICORN”). But smaller organizations at the national and European level have also sprung up. The Berlin-based initiative *WeiterSchreiben.jetzt* (ContinueWriting.now) is one such initiative. Recognized for its success in developing support networks for displaced writers in Germany, it is beginning to expand to other European countries (Reich “[Creating Networks](#)”; “Gemeinsam Handeln”) – efforts that have been featured in the German media and even in the *New Yorker* (McGrane).

The initiative *Weiter Schreiben*, the main focus of this article, responds to the daunting refugee situation in contemporary Europe by encouraging collaboration between established and displaced writers living in Germany. At the most fundamental level, the initiative thereby counteracts the “loss of language” that arguably affects writers forced to live in countries not of their choice in multiple ways: in their daily lives, their occupation – writing – and the meaning they derive from it (Arendt, “We Refugees” 264). The paths displaced writers are able to forge with the help of these organizations should not blind us to the unresolved issues that result in a state of continuous precarity for the majority of refugees. Put differently, despite the fact that some writers are successful in gaining asylum and establishing themselves professionally in the respective country of refuge, in no way can these individual success stories change the underlying systemic injustices analyzed by Arendt and Benhabib, among others. But by enabling writers who fled their homeland to continue literary production in Germany *Weiter Schreiben* sidesteps what Viet Than Nguyen has described as the paradox of the invisibility and hypervisibility of refugees – and instead opens up opportunities for establishing long-term visibility that is anchored in various kinds of community in their new places of residence.³

³ One of the most prominent writers in the U.S. to devote his creative and critical work to the plight of refugees, Nguyen references Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man* when he contends that to the general public refugees tend to be either invisible or hyper-visible (15). Nguyen’s account of his own plight – he fled Vietnam in 1975 at the age of four and was temporarily separated from his parents – in the introduction to the anthology *The Displaced* recalls Arendt argument about the precarity of citizenship: “I was born a citizen and a human being. At four years of age I became something less than human” (11).

The fact that this important initiative is not yet widely known provides the rationale for a detailed account of its approach, scope and impact. However the following description provides more than mere background information: It will highlight how the organizational features of *Weiter Schreiben* are directly tied to its successful fostering of transnational and multilingual communities. My subsequent discussion of the inaugural issue of the initiative's journal, the *Weiter Schreiben Magazin* (June 2019) and its focus on "Häuser Gärten Ruinen" [Houses Gardens Ruins] illustrates that these communities emerge through the conversation about – and the production and reception of – creative writing and other artistic endeavors. Specifically, the journal's emphasis on spaces and memories links the work of displaced writers and visual artists hailing from a range of continents and countries. It is this connection between the collaborative character of the initiative and the creative work produced by individual writers and artists that I examine throughout this article. The main case study is the exchange between the Syrian poet Lina Atfah (*1989) who escaped Syria in 2014 and the author Nino Haratischwili who was born in Georgia (*1983) and moved to Germany in 2003. The multiple forms of proximity that emerge between these two writers underscore the utter inadequacy of thinking in categories of national literatures. Inspired by Ann Rigney's work on transnational memory and the "conjunctures" Susan Stanford Friedman observes between "'New' World Literature and Migration Studies" (2018), I conclude by pondering some of the broader implications of the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative for the role of creative writing in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Berlin-based Initiative *Weiter Schreiben*

Weiterschreiben.jetzt was started in 2017 and grew out of the non-profit organization *Wirmachendas.jetzt* ("Wecandothis.now" or "Let'sdothis.now"),⁴ a support network of about one hundred women working in the arts, academia, and journalism that emerged in 2015 in response to the arrival of large numbers of refugees in Germany and other European countries. Part of their mission statement reads: "Together we aim to improve career prospects, educational offers and networking opportunities. [...] Together we are shaping a future in which immigration and diversity are seen as an opportunity and asset." The *Weiter Schreiben* project that was founded two years later illustrates the organization's principle of approaching refugees not as victims who are dependent on the help of others but as equal partners with their own expertise, histories, and perspectives ([Wirmachendas](#), "About Us"). Funded by a range of non-profit organizations and cultural foundations,⁵ *Weiter Schreiben* is the brainchild of Annika Reich, co-founder of the umbrella organization *Wir machen das* and herself a successful writer and activist (<http://annikareich.net>).⁶ Based on her contact with displaced writers, Reich conceived the initiative as a tandem project that facilitates professional contacts between writers who escaped war-torn or crisis areas (most prominently Syria but also Afghanistan and

⁴ These translations and all subsequent translation are mine unless otherwise noted. Here, the official translation on the website („wearedoingit“) does not capture the urgency that is communicated by the German name.

⁵ Funding sources include Deutscher Literaturfond, the Fondation Jan Michalski and the Allianz Kulturstiftung ("[Über Uns](#)")

⁶ See also the interview with Annika Reich "[Creating Networks with Established and Displaced Writers.](#)"

Iraq, among other places) and established German-speaking writer (“Aufbruch aus dem Angekommensein”). The latter include Nora Bossong, Tanja Dücker, Lena Gorelik, Olga Grjasnówa, Annett Gröschner, Antje Ravic Strubel, Saša Stanišić, and David Wagner, among others. Significantly, several of these German tandem partners experienced migration or displacement earlier in their lives as well. Examples are Stanišić who fled the post-Yugolavian war in Bosnia, Grjasnówa who hails from Azerbaijan, and Gorelik who grew up in Petersburg, Russia. The shared experience of adjusting to a new language and a new life in Germany is likely to have contributed to these writers’ interest in participating in the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative. At a conceptual and a material level the participation of these authors has the effect of blurring the lines between established writers and newcomers – and of breaking open traditional notions of “German” literature and notions of national literatures more generally. While the funding sources for the initiative remain mostly at the national level, the make-up of the tandems highlights the extent to which German language authors and the literature they write have become more diverse and transnational in the past decades.

The *Weiter Schreiben* home page lists many different forms of interaction and collaboration between tandem partners, ranging from joint explorations of Berlin and collaborative work on translations to informal email exchanges (“[Über Uns](#)”). Irrespective of the particular kind of interaction, the main goals of these tandems are to foster both personal and professional relationships and dialogue across languages and cultures, and, ultimately, to facilitate access for displaced writers to aspects of the German “Literaturbetrieb”, including publishers, translators, and venues for readings.⁷ To familiarize displaced writers with the German publishing industry, *Weiter Schreiben* has organized workshops that bring together publishers, editors, and established writers with displaced writers.

The professionally curated *Weiter Schreiben* website serves as an initial venue for making works available to a larger public in both the original languages (mostly Arabic) and in German translation. Every month several new texts are published online. Topics and genres are wide-ranging. While many texts address the traumatic experiences of war, persecution, flight, as well as the precarious situation in Germany, others are concerned with aspects of quotidian life in Germany and literary and mythological figures, among other topics. Through these regular online publications the initiative has gained visibility and a growing readership for the displaced writers, that is, *Weiter Schreiben* includes the crucial dimension of readership as in the phrase “weiter gelesen werden”⁸ (“[Über Uns](#)”).

Beyond the temporal dimension – enabling authors to continue to write – the spatial and figurative meaning of “Weiter schreiben,” captures the goal of expanding the perspectives in German public and literary discourses through the participation of writers from a range of countries from the Arabic-speaking world:

Allzu oft fehlen die Stimmen von Menschen, die hierher geflohen sind in der öffentlichen Debatte, meist wird über sie gesprochen und nicht mit ihnen. Die Autor*innen, die hier versammelt sind, lassen das nicht zu. Sie ergreifen selbst das Wort und erweitern so die durch den dominanten medialen Diskurs geprägten

⁷ The term “Literaturbetrieb” denotes the networks and institutions that make up the public face of literature in German society.

⁸ The phrase “weiter gelesen werden” means both “continuing to be read” and “being read more widely.”

Vorstellungswelten. Ihre Texte vertiefen den transkulturellen Dialog und durchkreuzen so Stereotype und Lesegewohnheiten. (“[Über Uns](#)”)

All too often the voices of displaced people/persons are missing in the public debate, mostly we speak about them and not with them. The authors who are represented here do not permit this. They make their voices heard and thus expand our imagination that is shaped by dominant media discourses. Their texts deepen the transcultural dialogue and disrupt stereotypes and reading habits.

In brief, the initiative’s objective is to foster multidirectional networks instead of one-directional support. Since it was started in 2017, *Weiter Schreiben* has expanded and now includes 46 writers (25 tandems), 13 translators, and well over 40 professional photographers, artists and illustrators ([WeiterSchreiben](#)). With the help of grants, *Weiter Schreiben* was able to sponsor an anthology (print) and a magazine (print and digital).⁹ In both online and print publications literary texts are regularly paired with visual art. In response to this successful intermedial approach, *Weiter Schreiben* has also begun to support art exhibitions from displaced visual artists and photographers (“[Veranstaltungen](#)”). Just like the writers, the artists hail from areas of crisis and include many who gained prominence in their home countries. Other venues for reaching the public are discussions and readings that are often combined with musical performances and organized in collaboration with a range of cultural institutions in Berlin and beyond (“[Veranstaltungen](#)”; “[Galerie](#)”). This performative dimension draws on Arabic and Persian traditions and has the effect of fostering a sense of (artistic) community among *Weiter Schreiben* participants as well as between participants and the audience.¹⁰

Arguably this performative dimension is an extension of the collaborative character of the initiative as it encourages acknowledgement and dialogue among participating writers and artists. I want to reflect for a moment on the significance of the (public) performative face of the initiative when seen together with the (private or semi-public) collaborative face. Both dimensions underscore a potential of creative work that Pheng Cheah calls “sociability” and that is central to what he considers to be the cosmopolitan “world-making” power of literature. It involves not only the conjuring up of other “worlds” through language but also the sharing of these imagined worlds (Cheah, *What is a World* 27). As such, transnational world-making is a materially grounded practice, that is, both reflective *and* constitutive of the material worlds we inhabit. According to Cheah, the engagement with and through literature has therefore the potential of enhancing “our sense of (being a part of) humanity, indeed even brings humanity into being because it leads to sociability” (ibid.). It is precisely this “sociability” that lies at the core of *Weiter Schreiben* initiative: The collaborative networks just as the public events generate a sense of community even if the larger political conditions, especially the inadequate EU asylum laws, are anything but conducive to such efforts and, indeed, call out for radical reform.

⁹ Beyond these joint publications, several authors have succeeded in publishing their own books. For a list of the many tangible outcomes of the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative, including publications, literary awards and grants, see “[Über uns](#)”; for the bios of participating authors, see “[Künstler*innen > Autor*innen](#).”

¹⁰ These observations are based on private conversations with Annika Reich and Lina Atfah, among others as well as on my attendance of several *Weiter Schreiben* events.

Artistic Explorations of (Vanished) Urban Spaces

In 2018, *Weiter Schreiben* sponsored the anthology *Das Herz verlässt keinen Ort, an dem es hängt* [The heart never leaves a place it is attached to]. It includes texts from a select group of tandem writers and gives insight, through a range of literary and autobiographical genres, into the productive interaction between displaced and established writers. Place-based memories play an important role in the anthology and in other publication venues of *Weiter Schreiben* as well. As I show below, many of these memories have transnational and transcultural relevance and provide fertile ground for interaction, affiliation, and “sociability” between writers with different backgrounds and from many parts of the world. Drawing on Rigney’s approach to transnational memory as a cultural activity that is multidirectional¹¹ and thus transformative and not merely preservationist (Rigney 609), I maintain that these place-based memories have “the potential to forge new connections between people and to cross borders” (610).

A case in point are the texts by the Syrian author Widad Nabi and German author Annett Gröschner that reflect on the exploration of urban spaces in Berlin and the evocation of place-based memories for both authors: Gröschner’s memories of no longer existing urban spaces in East Berlin and, triggered through the encounter with specific places Berlin, Nabi’s memories of the Syrian town of Aleppo (Muzur, Reich, *Das Herz* 29-41).¹² The title of Nabi’s autobiographical essay (32-38), “Das Herz verlässt keinen Ort, an dem es hängt,” was chosen as fitting title for the entire anthology. It evokes nostalgia for (lost) places yet the contributions themselves illustrate that this a decidedly “reflective” nostalgia (Boym 41). Contributors do not seek to restore the past but are aware of “the imperfect process of remembrance” and recall memories of the past to imagine, in collaboration with others, new futures.¹³ The imaginary geographies linking Aleppo and Berlin exemplify the extent to which the collaborative approach fostered by *Weiter Schreiben* has an impact on the kind of writing that emerges from these tandems.

Building in part on this initial exchange between Nabi and Gröschner, the umbrella organization *Wir machen das* funded an intermedial “Mapping Project” in collaboration with the International Literature Festival Berlin (“[Mapping Berlin](#)”). It includes six essays by Syrian and German writers on urban spaces in Berlin and Damascus and a sequence of four multicolor drawings co-created by two Berlin-based Syrian artists: the conceptual artist Khaled Barakeh Khaled and the filmmaker and photographer Guevara Namer. In each of these multi-layered artworks aspects of the Berlin and Damascus cityscapes are superimposed and result in new urban spaces. Examples include “Stasi Museum Berlin und das Ischtar-Tor mit syrischer Aghabani Stickerei” and “Weltzeituhr Berlin Alexanderplatz und Umayyad Moschee Damaskus.”

¹¹ Rigney borrows the term “multidirectional memory” from Michael Rothberg who has introduced it to highlight how memories resonate across distinct groups and borrow from very different contexts (Rothberg).

¹² See also [Gröschner](#); [Nabi](#).

¹³ I am drawing here on Svetlana Boym’s distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia: “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (Boym 41).

These titles retain the distinctive elements of each city but the artworks themselves transform these elements into new, imagined cityscapes. The playful mixing and matching of real existing locations creates imaginary worlds that have the potential of speaking to people across different backgrounds. In brief, from the perspective of new and old residents these artworks creatively engage with and thus break open Berlin's iconic cityscapes. Overall the "Mapping Project" showcases how both the verbal and the visual arts forge new connections between distant locations and traditions (Rigney 610).

This intermedial approach to specific locations and place-based memories is also taken up in [the inaugural issue](#) of the *Weiter Schreiben Magazine* (spring 2019)¹⁴ and its focus on "Häuser Gärten Ruinen." The contributing writers and artists were invited to reflect on or recreate memories of the houses, ruins, and urban spaces they left behind in their home countries (Syria, Afghanistan, Georgia).¹⁵ The correspondence between Lina Atfah and Nino Haratischwili, included in this magazine – and the collaborative tandem between these two authors more generally – are the focus of the remainder of this article.¹⁶

Lina Atfah and Nino Haratischwili

Similar to the work of Nabi and Gröschner the creative and reflective exchange between Lina Atfah and Nino Haratischwili is intimately connected to the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative. Beyond exploring how both authors benefit from their interaction, this section pays special attention to Atfah's poetry and to the role of translation and thus to the multilingual dimension of the initiative.

Atfah is an accomplished young poet who was born in 1989 in Salamiyah, studied Arabic literature in Damascus, and became involved in artistic circles that included poetry readings. In response to some of her politically explicit poems, at the age of seventeen she was accused of insulting the state and blasphemy. Together with many others, she was interrogated and forced into silence by the repressive Assad regime. In 2014 Atfah was able to escape from her war-torn country and found refuge in Germany. With the support of the *Weiter Schreiben* network, a range of translators, and a colloquium for poets in the Edenkoben Künstlerhaus, Atfah eventually regained her creative voice.¹⁷ Her translated poetry appeared on the *Weiter Schreiben* website but also in print, for instance in the anthology *Deine Angst – Dein Paradies* (2018) and, most recently, in her single-authored book *Das Buch von der fehlenden Ankunft* (2019).

¹⁴ The magazine was funded by a "Power of the Arts" grant, an initiative of the Philip Morris GmbH. The second issue appeared in February 2020.

¹⁵ Examples include the poem "Verlorenes Haus" by the Afghan writer Mariam Meetra with intertextual references to Virginia Woolf and Rose Ausländer (Meetra, "Verlorenes Haus" 14-6); a discussion of the control of women's mobility and the reclaiming of spaces for the education of girls in Afghanistan (Meetra, "Wo immer das Dach einstürzt" 19-24); and the focus on various stages of destruction and re-construction of urban environments in the artwork of the Syrian artist Tamman Azzan (Azzan 26-31).

¹⁶ With the help of Annika Reich, I was able to reach out to some of the tandem participants. All five writers I contacted responded with positive feedback and often shared details of their collaborations. I am grateful to all of them as well as to Annika Reich.

¹⁷ The colloquium in the [Edenkoben Künstlerhaus](#) was organized by its director Hans Till as part of the project "Poesie der Nachbarn" [poetry of neighbors].

Today, she lives in Herne, North Rhine Westphalia together with her Syrian husband (and translator of some of her poetry) Osman Yousufi.

Atfah's tandem partner Nino Haratischwili shares with Atfah the experience of adjusting to a new language and country, albeit under noticeably different circumstances. Born in 1983 in Tbilisi, Georgia, Haratischwili witnessed the break-up of the Soviet Union and Georgia's independence followed by civil strife and general upheaval in the 1990s. After studying film in Tbilisi and visiting Germany as part of guest performances with a Georgian theater group, she moved to Germany and studied directing at the theater academy in Hamburg (2003-7). Over the last decade, Haratischwili has established herself as a writer and director of theater plays in Hamburg.¹⁸ Her most successful publication to date is the 1400-page multi-generational family novel narrated against the backdrop of Georgian, Russian, and European history titled *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)* (2014). According to Haratischwili, by adopting German as her new language she achieved a distance to her (family) past that was necessary for writing this novel and for her creative work more generally.

Through the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative, Haratischwili and Atfah began corresponding in early 2017. They met in person for the first time after Haratischwili successfully nominated Atfah for the young author award [Nachwuchspreis] of the Hertha König Gesellschaft.¹⁹ This award brought tangible benefits for Atfah, most importantly the publication of her first single-authored book. *Das Buch von der fehlenden Ankunft. Gedichte aus Syrien* appeared in 2019 with Pendragon Verlag and includes her poems in German translation and in the original Arabic. As the subtitle suggests, many of the poems reference aspects of life in war-torn Syria as well as memories of the home and the people Atfah had to leave behind. But there are also poems that address other topics, including love, desire, and the (female) body. Her poetic language constantly shifts between the literal and the figurative realms, and some poems are explicitly self-referential, that is, they address both the potential and the limits of poetry, especially in response to violence and death. An especially searing example of the latter is Atfah's poem "Lin and Leila und der Wolf" that is dedicated to all Syrian children whose lives were cut short by "das Messer des Mörders" [the murderer's knife] a reference to the Syrian war and massacres committed against civilians. The following lines lament the inability of poetic language to adequately respond to the death of the two girls, Lin and Leila:

und das Gedicht steht lallend nur davor
wie Wahrsagerinnen ihre Steine werfen, wirft es Buchstaben
sie bröseln, werden Prosa (33)

and the poem stands babbling in front of it
just like fortune tellers throw stones, it throws letters
they turn into crumbs, turn into prose

¹⁸ Haratischwili writes in German and is the author of several prize-winning novels and plays ("Nino Haratischwili").

¹⁹ When Haratischwili received the 2017 Hertha Koenig-Literaturpreis, she nominated Lina Atfah for the young authors award (Börsenblatt).

Das Buch von der fehlenden Ankunft includes a second translation of the very same Arabic poem, underscoring the creative and interpretative dimension of any translation but especially of poetry – and reminding us of the multiple languages at play in this anthology. The corresponding lines in the second translation read:

spricht das Gedicht doch nur wirr von der Kindheit
schleudert Buchstaben hin wie Wahrsagerinnen die Kiesel
zerfasert, wird nichts als Prosa (35)

the poem speaks about childhood only in confusion
it throws letters like fortune tellers throw pebbles
unravels, turns into nothing but prose

In the first translation, the letters turn into the crumbs of prose [(zer)bröseln] while in the second version it is the poem itself that unravels [zerfasern] and turns into prose. Even the translations of the dedication that precedes the actual poem vary: The first version references victims more generally, whereas the second translation includes the last name “Atfah” suggesting that the two girls who were killed are relatives of the author. Despite these shifts in emphasis both versions speak of the inadequacy of (poetic) language in the face of extreme violence.

The translation of literature and especially of poetry frequently involves some level of collaboration between author and translator, yet this process is usually invisible to the reader. By contrast, the paratextual information in *Das Buch von der fehlenden Ankunft* highlights the collaborative approach to translation by listing a group of twelve translators, many of them writers themselves and participants in the *Weiter Schreiben* project.²⁰ Atfah has commented on how her involvement in these collaborative translation efforts has had an impact on her writing in addition to increasing her familiarity with the German language and cultural traditions.²¹

At a conceptual level, the involvement of several translators-writers and the inclusion of multiple translations of Atfah’s poetry underscores the extent to which “translation” is not merely auxiliary but central to much of the literature that receives support and appears as part of the broader *Weiter Schreiben* network. Arguably the creative and translational work enabled by *Weiter Schreiben* contributes to a new kind of literature, one that is less concerned with individual works and their (national) origins than with (transnational) networks and circulation (Walkowitz, 30). In *Born Translated*

²⁰ *Das Buch von der fehlenden Ankunft* lists Dorothea Grünzweig, Mahmoud Hassanein, Brigitte Oleschinski, Hellmuth Opitz, Christoph Peters, Annika Reich*, Joachim Sartorius, Suleman Taufiq*, Julia Trompeter, Jan Wagner, Kerstin Wilsch*, Osman Yousufi* (those marked with an asterisk* are also participants in the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative). For a critical assessment of this collective approach to translating Atfah’s poetry, see Weidner.

²¹ “Wirkt diese Erfahrung auch auf Ihr Schreiben zurück? Sie gab mir sehr viel. So erkannte ich etwa den Unterschied zwischen den Denkmechanismen des arabischen und des deutschen Schriftstellers – auf emotionaler, philosophischer und literarischer Ebene. Ich wurde auch auf Unterschiede im Geschmack arabischer und deutscher Leser aufmerksam. Am Ende hatte ich einen größeren Raum gewonnen, in dem ich darüber nachdenken kann, wie ich meinen Text erstelle und wie ich an ihm arbeite. Zudem gab mir der Umgang mit deutschen Dichtern und Dichterinnen viel Wissen und Kühnheit, um zu experimentieren und in neue Schreibwelten einzutreten” (Atfah, “Klimts Kuss”).

Rebecca Walkowitz writes “[r]efusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time” (6). At a small scale and within a particular local context, *Weiter Schreiben* is part of this transnational network as it actively promotes the production, translation, distribution, and performance of multilingual world literature.²²

At the same time, for individual authors this support is most palpable and consequential at the national level. Specifically, the *Weiter Schreiben* support network helped Atfah to establish lasting professional and personal connections and ultimately to enter the German *Literaturbetrieb*. (Beyond the translation and publication of her work, Atfah has been invited to read from her book at the 2019 Leipzig Book Fair and at several universities and public schools). When considering her public perception over the past few years, Atfah observes that she is no longer seen as a refugee focusing on her past ordeals but as a poet in her own right: “Am Anfang ...[lag der Fokus mehr auf] Flucht und Migration, aber heute habe ich das Gefühl, dass ich mich als Schriftstellerin in Deutschland vorstellen kann” (“At first, ...[the focus was more on] flight and migration, but today I feel that I can present myself as an author in Germany,” Atfah, “Weiter Schreiben”).²³ Atfah’s new found voice as a poet in Germany whose public persona is not exclusively tied to her personal accounts of flight and survival can serve as a model for the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative’s effective support of displaced writers and artists. In short, Atfah has become “visible” as a writer in her new place of residence, overcoming the paradox of “hypervisibility” and “invisibility” that Nguyen has diagnosed as a dominant public’s perception of refugees (Nguyen 15).

Shifting back to Atfah’s tandem with Nino Haratischwili, the 2017 *Laudatio* for Atfah and the correspondence between the two writers underscores the mutual benefits they draw from their interaction and each other’s writing. The *Laudatio* that Haratischwili presented when Atfah received the young author award of the Hertha König association addresses three interrelated aspects: biographical details of both authors; the significance of poetry under conditions of war and political repression; and the transhistorical power of poetic language, exemplified in the echoes of early 20th century Russian poetry in Atfah’s contemporary Arab poetry.

In the opening of the *Laudatio* Haratischwili juxtaposes the immediate connection she sensed when she first started corresponding with Atfah with the differences in their respective life circumstances. By contrasting the extreme experiences of war, repression, and displacement that Atfah lived through in Syria with her own experiences of civil unrest and economic crisis in the post-Soviet Georgia of the 1990s, Haratischwili avoids discursive appropriation of Atfah’s experiences. Instead, the recognition of the distinctive features of her tandem partner’s biography allows her to open up a third space of encounter. Specifically, Haratischwili relates the role of Atfah’s poetry vis-à-vis the Assad regime and the ongoing Syrian civil war to the role poetry of Anna Achmátowa and other Russian authors played for her grandmother’s generation during the Stalinist

²² This local context corresponds with Walkowitz’s insistence that this kind of literature is “not produced form nowhere for everywhere.” Instead, she emphasizes local “approached to translation and the politics of translation” (20).

²³ Some anthologies that focus primarily on autobiographical accounts of flight and survival run the risk of obscuring these writers’ literary accomplishments (see Nguyen; Haslinger and Sperr).

repression of the 1930s and 1940s in the Soviet Union. Haratischwili's remarks suggest that poets have the ability to speak not for but to those who are voiceless or who have lost their voice, turning poetry into a clandestine language that might help its readers to conjure up other worlds and to survive times of extreme hardship (84; 87). Through the German translations of Atfah's Arabic poetry, Haratischwili thus remembers her grandmother and re-covers Russian poetry in the context of 20th century Stalinist and Soviet history. "Ich begriff, dass diese Vergangenheit, von der ich annahm, dass sie zu meiner Großmutter gehörte, aber nicht zu mir, niemals vergangen ist.... Die Vergangenheit, von der ich annahm, sie wäre fort, ist niemals vergangen" ("I understood that this past that I assumed belonged to my grandmother but not to me had never passed.... The past that I assumed was gone, is never gone," 86-87). She thus asserts the continued relevance of these Soviet postmemories²⁴ for our present (including the brutal war in Syria) – and for understanding the significance of creative work then and now.

For instance, in the following excerpt from the *Laudatio* Haratischwili underscores the convergence of past and present by incorporating Atfah's poetic voice:

Lina war jetzt. Lina macht das Dort zum Hier. Lina war diejenige, die schrieb:
 „Sie kommen auf dem Land-, dem See- oder dem Luftweg
 Fliehen von Hauptstadt zu Hauptstadt, von einer Grenze
 zur anderen
 als seien die Landkarten Illusionen
 und als sei ihr Anteil am Leben die Flucht [...].“ (87)

Lina was now. Lina turned the there into here. Lina was the one who wrote:
 “They come via land, sea or air
 Flee from capital to capital, from one border
 to the next
 as if maps were illusions
 and as if their share of life was flight [...].”

The first lines are a quote from Atfah's poem "Am Rande der Rettung": Atfah references the refugees' endless flight routes but with the use of subjunctive she cautions against equating these individuals with their refugee status ("als seien die Landkarten Illusionen – und als sei ihr Anteil am Leben die Flucht"). Haratischwili's introductory comment, "Lina war jetzt. Lina macht das Dort zum Hier," bespeaks the collapse of geographical distance and temporality. This bleeding of distinct historical moments into one another is captured in the *Laudatio*'s title: "Das Verteilen von Herzsplittern" ["The Distribution of Splinters of the Heart"] is an intertextual reference to the early 20th century Russian poet Marina Zvetajeva who termed her own poetry „Herzsplitter.“ At the same time, the title is a commentary on the impact of Atfah's poetry today.

²⁴ The term "postmemory" (Hirsch) captures the continued affective charge of events that individuals did not experience themselves but that were communicated to them through the memories of others (here the grandmother).

Spatial Stories

The *Laudatio* marks the beginning of the encounter between Atfah and Haratischwili and is a powerful testimony to the transnational, transhistorical, and translingual impact of poetry. The published excerpts of their correspondence that first appeared in the above mentioned *Weiter Schreiben Magazin* (4-13)²⁵ further illustrates the interlinked creative and personal dimensions of the relationship they established through writing.

The thematic focus of Atfah and Haratischwili's written exchange on memories of past lives and lost homes was initiated by the journal's focus on "Houses Gardens Ruins." For a closer look at the role of specific places and locales in the larger context of conflict and displacement it is useful to draw on Michel de Certeau's essays on "Spatial Practices." His observation "where stories are disappearing, there is a loss of space" (123) highlights the linkage between narrative and space that is also central to the correspondence. De Certeau is concerned with the transformation and destruction of lived social spaces especially in urban neighborhoods and maintains that these processes manifest in the loss of stories. Following this line of argument, it is through stories that we conceptualize, remember and create spaces, that is, stories also have the power to (re-) create spaces that no longer exist physically. The spatial accounts of Atfah and Haratischwili do both: they register loss and destruction due to war, conflict, and economic upheaval in Syria and in Georgia, but they also preserve specific locales through writing.

Memories of individual houses constitute the core of the correspondence ("Aus dem Spalt"). Haratischwili remembers two houses she happened upon as a teenager and young woman in Georgia: A beautiful old house in a state of disrepair (7-8) and a mansion built in the early 20th century located in the storied neighborhood of Sololaki in city of Tbilisi (11-12). Atfah describes her family home in the Syrian city of Salmaiyyah that she had to leave behind when she escaped the Assad regime (9-10). Black and white photographs of Atfah's Syrian home and of the Georgian house in ruins are included in their exchange. The resemblance of these pictures is striking: in each case an aging building shows the passage of time and signs of neglect or willful destruction due to armed conflict (5, 8).

Fittingly, the accounts of Atfah and Haratischwili tie these houses to overlapping individual and collective memories. In other words, the houses become „inward turning histories, accumulated times...“ as de Certeau puts it (108). An example is Haratischwili's memory from the 1990s: both physically and figuratively the house in ruins corresponds with a general sense of disintegration and paralysis, following a period of social upheaval and civil war in the newly independent country of Georgia. According to the author, "das ganze Land glich damals einer Ruine" ("back then the entire country resembled ruins," "Aus dem Spalt" 7). On the other hand, Haratischwili relates the tree that grew within the deteriorating house to the creative energy that was also part of this transition period and that, on a personal level, ultimately enabled her to build something new (possibly a reference to her artistic work and to her decision to move to Germany) (9).

²⁵ It is now also available online as part of the "(W)Ortwechseln" project – together with correspondences between other tandem partners that were modeled after the [successful exchange](#) between Atfah and Haratischwili.

The significance that Haratischwili ascribes to the house in ruins, together with a photograph she sends along, triggers Atfah memories of a place at a different time and in another country. She writes that the resemblance to her own family home was so strong that she “recognized” the house she left behind in Syria (9). Similar to Haratischwili’s account of the Georgian house, Atfah’s memory of her Syrian home also has a broader collective dimension: family members moved into the house after their own home, located in a nearby village, was destroyed by forces of the Assad regime following a massacre of the villagers perpetrated by the IS (10).

In sum, both spatial stories turn discrete spaces into microcosms in which personal memories and collective histories are intertwined. In different ways, these houses bear traces of history and willful destruction but they also emerge as spaces of creative energy, i.e., of writing and poetry. Specifically, both accounts look at places that we are used to imagine as closed off domestic spaces, from the outside (Haratischwili) or from an outside space – a courtyard – enclosed by the house (Atfah). As a result, these buildings become porous or show cracks, both literally and figuratively. Allowing creative responses to emerge, the enclosed private spaces break open and make room for memories and stories that tie the private to the collective realms, and the present to the past. In each case, memories of specific houses attain an allegorical dimension that is tied to the beginnings of the respective author’s creative work.²⁶

Looking at the correspondence and the *Laudatio* together, they illustrate strong affinities between the two writers and their memories. In the *Laudatio*, Haratischwili describes the postmemories of her grandmother and early 20th century Russia that she associates with Atfah’s poetry. Atfah describes a comparable phenomenon as part of their correspondence: In response to Haratischwili’s “spatial story” that harks back to her youth in Georgia, Atfah regains access to the memories of her Syrian home and its multi-faceted meanings. As Atfah puts it fittingly and poetically: “Schreib mir, Nino, weil ich jedes Mal, wenn ich deine Worte lese, den Rückweg nach Hause finde” [“Write to me, Nino, because whenever I read your words I find my way home,” 9]. Similar to Nabi’s and Gröschner exploration of vanished urban spaces in Aleppo and Berlin, these figurative returns home are examples of what Boym terms “reflective nostalgia” as they include elements of mourning but are not closed off from the present. Rather, the written exchange creates imaginary connections between distant times and places – while also fostering ties between the two authors in the present. Indeed these spatial stories that both record and counteract the loss of real physical spaces only emerge as part of the dialogue the authors establish through writing.²⁷

²⁶ Atfah describes how she started experimenting with poetry while spending many hours sitting in the inner courtyard (9).

²⁷ According to the paratextual information in the *Weiter Schreiben Magazin* these place-based memories have entered into the published literary work of the respective author. The photo of the tree emerging from the ruins was incorporated into the book cover for Haratischwili’s novel *Das 8. Leben (für Brilka)* (9). And the Syrian home Atfah describes in the correspondence is featured in an autofictional narrative titled “Jedes syrische Haus hat einen Kassettenrekorder” that appeared on the *Weiter Schreiben* website.

Coda

With respect to the central roles of memory and space, the tandem arrangement between Atfah and Haratischwili can serve as an example for the dynamic memory practices Ann Rigney discusses in her seminal article “Transforming Memory and the European Project” (610). Calling for a reconceptualization of memory as a multidirectional cultural activity, Rigney maintains that memory “is an ongoing conversation about the past in changing circumstances through the generation of stories that can refigure, and not just express, the identities of the actors who encounter and appropriate them.” Significantly, in the context of *Weiter Schreiben* this cultural activity of remembering extends to displaced writers and artists who recently entered Europe from other continents and who negotiate, in different ways, the tension between “roots and routes,” between “living here and remembering/desiring another place” as James Clifford has put it (251, 255). As I have shown throughout, some of the most successful tandems (Nabi/Gröschner and Atfah/Haratischwili, among others) draw on memory in the manner envisioned by Rigney, that is, as an “imaginative resource” that has the effect of creating new forms of affiliation and new forms of creative work. At the same time, this work of remembrance across languages and cultures enables the writers to record their losses, the experiences of displacement and ongoing precarity, counteracting some of the multiple pressures Arendt laments in “We Refugees”, especially the expectation vis-à-vis the displaced to “forget” their past and abandon their former language (10).

The mutually beneficial outcomes of these tandems recall Azade Seyhan’s observation in *Writing Outside the Nation* from the year 2000: “In sharing their experiences of multiple – linguistic, geographical, historical – dislocations, the writers of the modern diaspora invite their readers to see culture ... in its interaction with other cultures” (14-15). Looking at both the displaced authors and the established “German” writers participating in the *Weiter Schreiben* project some of the most compelling work they produce is no longer tied to any single national or cultural tradition but is shaped by or actively engages with multiple local, national, and transnational traditions. The collaborative approach of *Weiter Schreiben* enhances the production, translation and dissemination of these texts (often paired with visual art). It is in this sense that the *Weiter Schreiben* initiative contributes to fostering a new World Literature,²⁸ one that is tied to the voluntary and involuntary movements of writers, languages, and texts.

²⁸ Future scholarship on the authors participating in the initiative may want to further pursue the central question Friedman poses in “Conjunctures of the ‘New’ World Literature and Migration Studies” (2018): “what shape does world literature take if the writers themselves are moving through space and time, along with the books they write and the stories they narrate?” (269). On World Literature, see also B. Venkat Mani; Cheah (2008; 2016).

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