An Introduction to Turkish-American Literature

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When did the first Turkish immigrants arrive in North America?¹ Are most Turkish-Americans Muslims?² Can you name the authors and titles of at least three Turkish-American literary texts?³ When Heike Schäfer in America and the Orient asked a similar set of questions, she did so under the assumption that “general knowledge” about Muslim cultures in the United States was often “limited” (xiv). While a great amount of research has been done on a variety of Muslim literatures in the United States, the literature of the Turkish immigrant community is still “unknown, unrecognized and under-researched” (Kaya 295). Consequently, this special issue on contemporary Turkish-American literature re-orient the scholarly focus on the literary productions by American authors of Turkish descent writing in the United States, while building on American literary-studies scholarship in the Orientalist and the transnational veins.

Bringing together analyses of select publications by first- and second-generation Turkish-American authors, this collection of essays represents a first concerted effort to map the fertile yet largely unexplored terrain of Turkish-American literature. After decades of extensive research on American and European literary encounters with the so-called Orient, which includes a variety of studies

1 Ilhan Kaya identifies three major waves of Turkish immigration to the US: 1. 1820-1920 (only 50,000 out of roughly 300,000 Ottoman citizens, who immigrated, were ethnic Turks and Muslims); 2. 1950s (many doctors and engineers immigrated in order to get professional training; they were mostly secular, nationalist promoters of the Republic, who founded Turkish organizations and kept close transnational ties with home); 3. Since the late 1980s, the most ethnically, ideologically, and sociologically diverse group has arrived in the United States (296-97).

2 According to Kaya, currently an estimated number of “350,000-500,000” Turkish-Americans live mostly in U.S. metropolitan areas (“Generations” 618). While Turkish-Americans of Islamic creed tend to “feel religiously othered” (631), Sephardic Jews and Armenian Christians with Ottoman ancestry, who often opt to self-identify as Jewish-American and Armenian-American respectively, benefit from Judaism and Catholicism being religiously mainstream in the United States. Generally, it can be said that first generation Turkish immigrants to the United States mostly used to self-identify as Muslims or Ottomans, whereas most second generation Turkish-Americans emphasize “their Americanness” (306).

3 In addition to the primary texts discussed in this volume, the following could be mentioned: Cihan Kaan Halal Pork and Other Stories, 2011; Elif Batuman The Possessed, 2010; Ertuvan Kanatsiz Please Let Me Keep My American Dream Alive, 2010; Benison Varon Cultures in Counterpoint, 2009; Maureen Freely Enlightenment, 2008; Üstün Bilgen-Reinart Porcelain Moon and Pomegranates, 2007; Özcan Tuncel When I First Came to This Country, 2007; Umut Ozturk America Hates Me, But I Still Love Her, 2005; Viviane Wayne Inshallah: In Pursuit of My Father’s Youth, 2002; Alev Lytle Croutier Seven Houses, 2002; K. Kamal Ayyildiz The Cistern, 1999; Shirin Devrim A Turkish Tapestry: The Shakirs of Istanbul, 1994.
on American travel writers in Turkey, academic interest, specifically in Turkish literature in English translation, was spurred only as a consequence of Orhan Pamuk’s rise to international fame as winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature. While the transnational turn in American literary studies has called for an inquiry of Turkish literary voices on matters American, e.g., novelist Elif Shafak, no comprehensive study of contemporary Turkish-American literature has been undertaken until now. Hence this special issue aims to shed light on the diversity and breadth of Turkish-American textual production. While contributing to the ongoing efforts to calibrate American literary studies as ever more ethnically diverse as well as to enhance the transnational angle, the greater goal of this issue, however, is to generate further scholarly interest in a body of work, whose size, complexity, and stylistic idiosyncrasy demands far more attention than one such limited collection of critical essays may accomplish.

The following essays investigate primary texts of various provenance and genre, including autobiography (Hanna Wallinger, Elena Furlanetto), novel (Gönül Pultar, Elena Furlanetto and Charlton Payne), drama (Ralph Poole), and animated comic (Defne Karaosmanoğlu), which successively cover the time span from 1930 to 2014, and hence trace Turkey’s corresponding development from Republic into a neoliberal, globalized, Neo-Ottoman country. The contributors to this issue critically address continuities, changes, and conflicts in Turkish-American narrative self-identification as well as in the fictional interactions between Turkish and other cultures in the United States. They also interrogate to what extent Turkish-American authors employ literary strategies such as self-Orientalization, or how characters continue to struggle with deep-seated prejudices against the Turks, which resulted from “the constant bombardment with anti-Turkish images” Americans had to face after WWI, and which were exacer-

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5 Elif Shafak is the most prominent example. In 2006, a Turkish censorship scandal, which was caused by the acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide by one of her characters in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, catapulted her into the international headlines. As a Muslim woman writer with an itinerant international biography, who wrote both in Turkish and English, addressed controversial sexual and political issues, and ended up prosecuted for offending Turkishness, her case resembled Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk’s, yet again stirring controversy about competing cultural concepts and political forces in Turkey. Critics and human rights activists, both national and international, rallied in her defense, and while advocating freedom of speech in Turkey, they virtually turned Elif Shafak into an international celebrity. As of now, Shafak is not only Turkey’s most successful literary export next to Pamuk, but also the representative transnational Turkish Muslim woman writer.

6 The rare publications in the field are mostly essay collections on the more general matters of Turkish history, literature, and language, such as Nur Bilge Criss et al. *American Turkish Encounters: Politics and Culture, 1830-1989*, 2011, or Tanfer Emin Tunc and Bahar Gürsel, eds. *The Transnational Turn in American Studies*, 2012. None of these volumes, however, focuses exclusively on Turkish-American literature. Some work has been done on American authors of Turkish descent, foremost by Turkey-based scholar Gönül Pultar, who must be considered a pioneer in the field of Turkish-American literary studies. In German academia, Elena Furlanetto, who submitted her dissertation on Turkish-American literature in 2015, follows suit. Both are contributors to this issue.
bated by anti-Muslim campaigns in post 9/11 U.S. media (McCarthy 158). They do so by carefully setting out the stratified and sometimes contradictory views of male and female, homo- and heterosexual, secular and religious characters from different social classes.

Following a diachronic trajectory, the issue offers a view on the historical development of Turkish-American literature. Hanna Wallinger’s essay on Selma Ekrem’s *Unveiled* (1930) suggests that the autobiographical genre is foundational in the formation of Turkish-American literature after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Ekrem employs Orientalist conventions to nostalgically contrast Turkey’s imperial past with American modernity in order to forge a persona as the first notable Turkish-American female writer. By aligning her Turkish origin with her American citizenship, the author self-confidently claims to know her ways around both cultures. As with other life writings by Muslim authors, *Unveiled* constructs “a selfhood that is intelligible in light of American paradigms of subjectivity,” while foregrounding differences between Ottoman and Turkish cultures, politics, and religion (Hassan 81).

Aiming to (re-)kindle interest in the self-proclaimed Turkish-American legend Erje Ayden, Gönül Pultar maps the various interpersonal and intertextual connections of 1970s New York’s Turkish *enfant terrible* and famous contemporary artists such as Frank O’Hara as well as between Ayden’s prolific and provocative work and literary masterpieces by Fitzgerald and Salinger. It is not only a coincidence that Ayden used to frequent the famous Chelsea Hotel, which changed from epicenter of Greenwich Village artists and their bohemian entourage into an exemplary “non-place,” a phrase coined by Mark Augé, in Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008). The hotel’s iconicity and history is indicative of the transformed cultural setting and climate in which Turkish-American authors and characters operate then and now. If the Chelsea Hotel in Ayden’s work functions as a spatial marker for assimilation, which is facilitated via creativity in the cases of like-minded strangers regardless of their national backgrounds, it barely provides a temporary refuge for the transient multi-nationals who occupy the hotel before either ending up dead or leaving post 9/11 New York.

Another hotel, Istanbul’s famous Pera Palas, features prominently as a setting in Sinan Ünel’s eponymous play, which, according to Ralph J. Poole, succeeds in presenting “historically and geopolitically underrepresented perspectives on the American stage” (98). In his discussion of *Pera Palas* (1998), Poole combines drama analysis and queer studies to pin down the extravagantly strange qualities of the playwright’s take on Turkish-American transnationalism, which is represented both by the characters’ various sexual misalliances and taboo-breaking performative practices and Ünel’s use of dramatic techniques such as time-space-compression through simultaneous actions as well as multiple and cross-gender casting.

In the fourth essay of this issue, Elena Furlanetto challenges the general definition of ethnic fiction and makes a strong case to open the notion of Turkish-American literature beyond the sphere of immigrant writing to works in English whose authors share the experience of temporarily living in the United States for extended periods of time and whose work is characterized by viewing their
native country of Turkey through an American lens. Examining in her article Hadibe Edip’s autobiographical volume *The Turkish Ordeal* (1928), Güneli Güns *On the Road to Baghdad* (1991) and Elif Shafak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), Furlanetto sketches out how contemporary Turkish-American literature may be conceptualized within the framework of transnationalism, by intertwining it with theories that conceptualize globalization as organic, interconnective networks of social and cultural association and exchange. She takes seriously the transnational turn in American Studies by pushing us to recognize and acknowledge how such processes of association and exchange do not just impact Turkish-American literature produced within the national territory of the United States but also American-Turkish works.

The issue concludes with Defne Karaosmanoğlu’s essay on viewers’ responses to Lev Yılmaz’s *YouTube* series of animated comics “*Tales of Mere Existence*” (2006-present) and with Charlton Payne’s conversation with Joseph O’Neill. Both writers not only hesitate to self-identify as Turkish-Americans, or as Americans for that matter, but, like other contemporary authors, they also defy ethnic categorizations in their works. In their essays, both Karaosmanoğlu and Payne attest not only to the fact that in today’s budding “postethnic literary,” to use a term by Florian Sedlmeier, pigeonholed poetics are greatly unpopular with the authors, but also point out that critics, too, struggle with thinking beyond ethnic terms and avoiding the “autobiographical fallacy” (Warren qtd. in Sedlmeier 21). While it is understood that one cannot automatically assume a qualifiable connection between the author’s ethnic background and her literary work, I don’t think that any argument made on the grounds of such a connection must always necessarily lead into a hermeneutic impasse, especially if it is sustained by an equal concern with a work’s form and content.

Yılmaz and O’Neill are especially relevant for this special issue because their refusal to claim any sort of “ethnic insiderism” as a “cloak of legitimacy and authenticity” coalesces in an interesting negotiation of national identity in their works, both with regard to content and form (Sollors, *Beyond* 13). Yılmaz highlights the temporary and hence mutable nature of identity claims by letting his animated comics evolve while the process of drawing is accompanied by a sarcastic and hence doubly distanced voice-over narration. In *Blood-Dark Track: A Family History* (2000), O’Neill, who became a U.S. citizen in 2007, traces both of his grandfathers’ parallel histories in Turkey and Ireland. Safely removed by generational distance, O’Neill’s narrative alter ego dissects evidence of both of his grandfathers’ perplexingly similar criminal histories in a detached mode, using the razor-sharp language of a crime investigator. He relays the circumstances of the author’s own existence, heritage, and ethnicity in a strictly historical, unsentimental manner. Sidestepping a more conventional employment of the autobiographi-
cal genre, *Blood-Dark Track: A Family History* complicates identity claims made via self-writing and defies ethnicity as an essentialist, timeless notion. O’Neill engages again with the Turkish-American question in his bestselling novel *Netherland*. Here appears Mehmet Taspinar, who is Turkish, from Istanbul, has lived in New York for a number of years, and who is “dressed as an angel” in a shabby “ankle-length wedding dress” and sporting a “pair of tattered white wings” (42). If an “angel is a messenger of God” (44), this one is but a pathetic crossdressing version of the fallen angel in post 9/11 New York. Like the other transients in the novel, this Middle Eastern impersonation of Luzifer, who was wrongly suspected as a terrorist, can no longer make a home for himself in the traumatized metropolis. Having stirred “a mildly christophanous sensation” only once, the mad and utterly lost angel in America, vanishes from the scene and the novel, never to reappear (160, 265). Identified by the transliterate reader not however by the novel’s narrator Hans van den Broek, whose narrative eventually turns out to be wrought with misinterpretations and misreadings, Mehmet, the transgender Turk, bears the heavy consequences of Hans’ failure to really see him, a blindness resulting from the contorted perspective that complacency as much as privileges of class, creed, culture, and complexion afford to the WASP banker from The Hague. The Turkish-American angle in *Netherland*, I suggest, is less sustained by the author’s Turkish family background as by the novel’s powerful evocation of the devastating effects which post 9/11 America’s anti-terror campaign had on intercultural relations both within and beyond its national borders.

In order to sketch the Turkish-American literary landscape, if in broad strokes, the editor and the contributors to this issue do not take “Turkish-American” to represent a timeless, static, or essential ethnic category, but understand the Turkish, the American, and hence the Turkish-American as social constructs, which are carved out of political, social, and ideological conflicts. In the literary realm, they are (re-) imagined, negotiated, embraced, or dismissed, which hence leaves them continually developing and changing. In no way does this special issue attempt to prescribe a list of criteria whose employment in a text would justify its consecutive labeling as Turkish-American. Instead it takes its conceptual cue from J. Hillis Miller, who compellingly argues in *Ariadne’s Thread* that realistic fiction has the “powerful, perhaps indispensable, social function” of sustaining and creating “the fictions of character and the characteristic lifelines of characters,” which themselves function as “fundamental cohesive forces keeping each community of readers together” (97). Yet, while it “helps to make and sustain such communities,” the text simultaneously and (in most cases) covertly, “demolishes the illusion of character,” in order to first confirm the reader’s suspicion that her faith in character might actually be illusory, but to then reaffirm character “in the face of its putting in question” (97-98).

Engaging with what Miller deems the “apotropaic” function of realistic fiction (97), the contributors to this issue investigate the meanings of Turkish-American literary texts, which can only ever be “performative, constitutive, not referential” (89). Their analyses investigate issues of migration and diaspora, of transnationalism, cultural amalgamation, and multilocality signaled by hyphenating Turkish and American literatures, which are both products and productive of the ex-
perience of living the Turkish-American way. They conceptualize what Werner Sollors calls the “active contribution literature makes, as a productive force, to the emergence and maintenance of communities by reverberation and of ethnic distinctions” (*Invention* xiv). And they offer a first look at a transnational “group of people who live by the same fictions, the same simplifications, the same hypostatized figures posited as substances” (Miller 97). Needless to say, there are many more facets of Turkish-American texts that remain unexamined, and as this issue demonstrates, the work has only just begun.

**Works Cited**


