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Serdar Somuncu: Reframing Integration through a Transnational Politics of Satire

Vielleicht stellt sich dann heraus, dass wir stets an die Einzigartigkeit glauben, aber selten merken, wie ähnlich wir uns sind. Vielleicht stellt sich dann heraus, dass wir beim Schwimmen gegen den Strom die Strömung als Widerstand empfinden, obwohl sie uns allen die gleiche Richtung gibt. (Somuncu, *Getrennte Rechnungen* 189)

Turkish German Comedy and Integration Debates

Founded by Şinasi Dikmen and Muhsin Omurcu in Ulm in 1985, *Knobi-Bonbon* is widely recognized as the first Turkish German cabaret in the Federal Republic. Dikmen and Omurcu focused on ethnic stereotypes, integration, and coexistence in their early programs, with an emphasis on the German misunderstanding of integration as cultural assimilation (Boran 202, 219). With a run of successful performances, *Knobi-Bonbon* established a momentum that has carried through to the present day, making Turkish German comedy a fixture on the German stage. Responding to the wave of nationalism and xenophobia that followed in the wake of unification, *Knobi-Bonbon's* shows became more confrontational and critical in tone. In defiance of post-wall German nationalism, Dikmen and Omurcu emphasized their right to both a Turkish and a German identity. After *Knobi-Bonbon* disbanded in 1997, both artists went on to have successful solo careers with provocatively titled programs such as “Wenn der Türke zweimal klingelt,” “Islam für Anfänger,” and “Integriert und intrigiert!” (Dikmen) and “Tagebuch eines

Skinheads,” “Kanäkman,” and “Die EUmanen kommen” (Omurcu). Never at a loss for material in the ebb and flow of German integration and identity debates, Dikmen and Omurcu also paved the way for a younger generation of performers who have increased the range and reach of Turkish German comedy.

In his essay “Kabarett und Satire deutsch-türkischer Autoren,” Mark Terkessidis suggests that Turkish German cabaret arrived on the German stage at a time when autochthonous political cabaret had lost much of its appeal in the culture industry’s push for comedy (295). The focus on comedy as a marketing strategy also had an impact on the packaging of Turkish German satire, perhaps most prominently in the case of Osman Engin. Like Dikmen and Omuncu, Engin uses exaggerated cultural stereotypes to criticize racism in Germany and draw attention to the mistreatment of immigrants. All three writers employ the tools of satire—parody, mockery, hyperbole, reversal, irony, and the grotesque—to influence their readers’ perceptions of themselves and their relationship to increasingly diverse socio-cultural contexts. Karin Yeşilada has argued that immigrant writers have given new life to the satirical genre, contributing to a “Renaissance der Gattung innerhalb der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur” (532). In her essay, “Schreiben mit spitzer Feder,” Yeşilada clearly favors satire as a literary strategy for criticizing xenophobia, racism, and discrimination (546), but simultaneously laments how satire’s salutary potential is blunted by marketing strategies. Osman Engin is a prolific writer who has produced a multitude of satirical short stories marketed by his publisher as “Geschichten zum Lachen,” a label that diminishes the social criticisms that are an essential part of Engin’s work. Yeşilada suggests that it is this focus on comedy, combined with Engin’s popularity and rate of production, that have caused him to be largely ignored by literary scholars, particularly those who work on migrant literature (554).

The blurring and blending of comedy and satire and the tendency to not take such synthetic forms seriously has also influenced scholarship on a younger generation of German performers of Turkish heritage such as Kaya Yanar, Bülent Ceylan, and Serdar Somuncu, whose popularity has not been balanced by any substantive critical attention to their work. What connects early Turkish German cabaret performers and satirist-comedians of more recent vintage is their palpable frustration with the cyclical nature of integration debates that reify cultural differences while obscuring similarities between Turks and Germans and the transformations that have already occurred in German society. To varying degrees these performers utilize forms of cabaret, comedy, and satire to poke fun at ethnic stereotypes, challenge taboos, and engage with controversial topics, while avoiding the trap of lament and self-pity that characterized the “Betroffenheitsliteratur” associated with immigrant writers in the 1980s (Yeşilada 551). In this essay, I will examine the work of one of these performers, Serdar Somuncu, and his evolution as actor, writer, satirist, comedian, and self-styled philosopher of transnational humanism in the context of recurring debates on integration, immigration, and citizenship in Germany. The term transnational humanism serves as my shorthand for Somuncu’s position that ethnic and national boundaries must be understood in historical terms, and that it is the responsibility of individuals across countries and cultures to recognize their role in inscribing difference.

The most recent iteration of the immigration/integration debate, sparked by the publication of Thilo Sarrazin’s inflammatory *Deutschland schafft sich ab* in August 2010, returned questions of integration and belonging to the forefront of the political and comedy stages. Public responses to Sarrazin’s book have been mixed. His revival of a genetic theory of race and presumed differences in intelligence as well as his essentialization of cultural and religious difference, evident in his contention that Muslims as a group and Turks in particular are

more resistant to integration than immigrants of other religious and cultural backgrounds, were met with indignant criticism from the left and enthusiastic admiration from the right. Although his theories and recommendations are not new, the manner in which he synthesized these ideas touched a nerve in German society and the polarizing effect he has had reveals the degree to which Germany is still struggling to redefine itself.

Sarrazin's views were initially denounced by German political leadership, perhaps most emphatically in President Christian Wulff's speech on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of German unification, in which he proclaimed that the future belonged to nations ready to embrace cultural plurality and progressive ideas. Wulff's most controversial assertion, however, was that in addition to Christianity and Judaism, Islam must also be recognized as part of Germany: "der Islam gehört inzwischen auch zu Deutschland" ("Vielfalt schätzen"). Muslim leaders in Germany and elsewhere praised Wulff's speech, but there was an outcry at home about his inclusion of Islam in the fabric of German society. Conservative politicians such as CSU party leader Horst Seehofer seized the opportunity to call for an end to immigration for Muslims and to claim that multiculturalism had failed, a sentiment echoed by Chancellor Angela Merkel ("Seehofer und Merkel befeuern Leitkultur-Debatte").

According to reports in *Der Spiegel*, the Sarrazin debate emboldened critics of immigration and Islam who saw their position strengthened by the questionable statistical evidence Sarrazin assembled on Muslim, explicitly Turkish, social deficiencies ("ARD-Umfrage zeigt Zunahme der Islamfeindlichkeit"). Sarrazin portrayed the growing Turkish population in Germany as a threat that would eventually make "Germans" into a minority in their own country. He accused the Turks in particular of producing large families and parasitically benefitting from Germany's social welfare system while contributing next to nothing to Germany's economic

growth. He has categorically rejected EU membership for Turkey, claiming that the “geografische und kulturelle Grenze Europas ist dabei ganz klar am Bosphorus zu ziehen und nicht, wie in vielen Statistiken, an der türkischen Grenze zum Irak und zu Iran” (“Was tun?”).

When evaluating the dimensions of the Sarrazin debate, it is instructive to consider what elements are really new and what is merely a rehash of over forty years of reluctant immigration policy. There are striking parallels, for example, between the *Heidelberger Manifest* of 1981 and Sarrazin’s theses about Muslim immigrants. The *Heidelberger Manifest* was drafted by a group of fifteen university professors whose main concern was that Germans were becoming foreign in their own country. The original document, later redacted for public release, was infused with anti-Muslim sentiment and included references to genetic differences between peoples, a fear of multiculturalism, and a condemnation of ignorant and illiterate foreigners.ⁱ In public debates of the 1980s, Turks were singled out as the demographic group allegedly most resistant to integration (Özdemir 289). This image as a “Problemgruppe” increased the antipathy toward the Turks in Germany and enhanced their reputation as the “meistgehaßte Minderheit” (Yeşilada 531). For the popular imagination it was not a big step to then conflate Turks with Muslims in a move of dual homogenization whereby Muslims became Turks, and “Turkish” morphed into a cultural monolith perceived as irrevocably distinct from and antagonistic to “German” society.

It is not my purpose here to provide a detailed history or psychology of debates in Germany that ignore the accomplishments of Turkish German citizens and seek to reinscribe an anachronistic, exclusionary conception of “Germanness” via an imagined German *Leitkultur* that never existed.ⁱⁱ Some familiarity with these debates, however, is critical to an analysis of Turkish German comedic performance that attenuates the difference between the foreign and the familiar by subjecting both to a radical politics of satire. The apparent “eternal return” of the integration

debate is particularly grating for Turkish Germans who came to Germany over thirty years ago. Şinasi Dikmen has given voice to those frustrations with a mixture of bitterness and humor, not only in his cabaret shows, but also in his most recent collection of stories, *Integrier dich, Opa!* (2008). Dikmen takes issue with the promiscuous use of the term “integration” and denies its applicability to the German-Turkish situation. Basing his judgment on the Latin meaning of “integration” as the reestablishment of the whole, Dikmen argues that the premise is flawed. The Turks cannot be *returned* to a state of Germanness, but they can and do recognize Germany’s constitution, obey its laws, and learn to speak the German language (Dikmen 158-59).

Serdar Somuncu takes Dikmen’s argument further, insisting on his rights and responsibilities as an informed German citizen, including an active role in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, while simultaneously affirming his Turkish heritage to legitimize his critical observations on German-Turkish relations. Somuncu’s satirical portrayals of “Germanness” and “Turkishness” discussed in greater detail below call into question the stability and relevance of categories of ethnic difference. During a performance in 2004, Somuncu ridiculed the coarse ignorance of German Neo-Nazis, but also noted that their inability to define “authentic” German identity signified a more widespread phenomenon:

Man weiß ja gar nicht mehr, wer man ist—hier in Deutschland. Wir sind ja unterwandert, von Kelten, von Alemannen, von Bajuwaren, von Hunden, Katzen, Türken--ja, alles in uns drin. Rote Haare, braune Haare, straßenbrunett, köterbrunett—und dann *deutsch* und heißen Genevieve oder Kevin—da ist nix Deutsches mehr dran. (*Serdar Somuncu liest Joseph Goebbels*)

Here Somuncu mixes images of a literally mongrelized Germanness with a barb at the stereotypically “German” perception of Turks as inferior (who in his satirical rendering are

categorically proximate to dogs and cats). The harshness of this comparison is mitigated by his persistent use of the first person plural (“wir,” “uns”) which closes the gap between categories of difference while opening up possibilities for a new understanding of belonging grounded in a collective responsibility to critically engage with the past and the present.

Turkish German Comedy: Reconceptualizing Germanness

As scholarship on Turkish German cultural production has responded to theoretical developments and trends in the social sciences and cultural studies, terms such as “intercultural” (Terkessidis) and “transcultural” (Welsch) have displaced “multicultural” as descriptors for the hybrid perspectives represented in Turkish German literature and performance. “Multicultural” has lost much of its appeal because of its perceived reliance on a definition of culture as homogeneous and closed, hardening rather than subverting tendencies toward cultural separatism and chauvinism (Welsch 70). “Intercultural” as conceptualized by Mark Terkessidis refers to a condition where cultural boundaries are both mobile and permeable. In Wolfgang Welsch’s usage, “transcultural” refers to differentiation and connections both within and across cultures (71). The term “transnational” has come to dominate social scientific discourse on migration and globalization, yet it is in its application to both consciousness and cultural production that I see its greatest utility for evaluating Turkish German comedy and satire. For Steven Vertovec, “type of consciousness” and “mode of cultural production” are two key areas where transnationalism becomes manifest. In his view, “type of consciousness” represents the “dual or multiple identifications” resulting from an “awareness of multi-locality” (6). “Modes of cultural production” refers to “cultural interpenetration and blending [...] cultural translation, and hybridity” (7). The blending of perspectives in this type of cultural production has the potential

to motivate changes in perception among those with a migrant background as well as the indigenous population of the “receiving” country. Vertovec refers to these changes in perception as “public transformation,” a prerequisite to acceptance of heterogeneous populations with ties to more than one cultural space and geographic region that in turn leads to “the reconceptualization of the model of the nation-state” (84) and—in the case of Germany—a concomitant reconceptualization of Germanness.

A reconceptualization of Germanness, combined with a reconsideration of what constitutes “Germanness” and “Turkishness,” and how they are linked, has been a target of Turkish German cabaret since *Knobi-Bonbon* and is a central theme in the shows of a younger generation of Turkish German cabaret artists and comedians, such as Django Asül, Fatih Çevikkollu, Bülent Ceylan, Kerim Pamuk, Serdar Somuncu, and Murat Topal. Among these performers, Serdar Somuncu stands out, not only for his unapologetic embrace of political theater critical of both German and Turkish social politics, but also for his assertion of a right and responsibility to engage with Germany’s past coupled with an insistence on differentiation and balanced comparison when discussing integration. He also digs deeper and more aggressively into questions of Turkish and German identity while also addressing larger issues of subjectivity and social relations in a media-saturated environment. In interviews, satirical stage performances, and in his writings, Serdar Somuncu repeatedly targets conservatives and German nationalists who continue to deny Germany’s status as a land of immigration, disparaging their chauvinism and their promotion of cultural clichés. Whether parodying Hitler, caricaturing gangsta rappers, or berating the public for its susceptibility to the seductions of media marketing, Somuncu simultaneously performs and lays bare the construction of identity as commodity. His ability to combine a dramatic style adapted from theater performance with the studied

spontaneity characteristic of stand-up comedy enables a play with identity, authenticity, and parody. Hitler the legend is pared away to reveal Hitler the ordinary and fallible human being. Gangsta rappers grandstand with violent and aggressive language, but are incapable of speaking proper German. Ordinary citizens revel in the moral failings of others while denying their own degeneracy and lack of individuality (*Der Hassprediger liest Bild*). And those who promote political correctness are milquetoasts too cowardly to directly express their intolerance (Lindemann).ⁱⁱⁱ

Serdar Somuncu: From Hitler to *Hassprediger*

Serdar Somuncu was born in Istanbul in 1968 and moved to Germany when he was two years old. After studying music, theater, and directing in Maastricht and Wuppertal, Somuncu began his career with occasional bit parts in German television shows, but did not gain popular recognition until 1996, when he launched his *Mein Kampf* tour based on Adolf Hitler's manifesto. Somuncu gave over 1,400 performances of *Mein Kampf* between 1996 and 2001 to audiences in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Holland, Lichtenstein, and the Czech Republic. During his tour of Germany, Somuncu decided to travel with a personal bodyguard after receiving death threats. Police surveillance of the performance locations became routine and on one occasion officers required Somuncu to wear a bulletproof vest. Although Somuncu emerged from all of his performances unscathed, the sense of persistent danger served as a goad for him to continue what he came to see as a battle against forgetting (*Auf Lesereise* 159-160).

Somuncu opened his *Mein Kampf* performances with an explanation of how he came to choose Hitler's text as a subject and whether it was an appropriate object of laughter. His answer to the question of humor and Hitler is that we should not laugh at Hitler, but that some passages

in *Mein Kampf* are risible, just as others are tedious, and still others shocking in their revelation of Hitler's antisemitic agenda. What these reflections lead into is Somuncu's contention that the ban on *Mein Kampf* in Germany has magnified the book's status and that public access to the text is a prerequisite for its demystification. After he was able to find a copy of *Mein Kampf* and read it several times, Somuncu settled on a set of excerpts roughly corresponding to the selections used by Austrian cabaretist Helmut Qualtinger in his interpretations from the 1970s (*Auf Lesereise* 40). In his performances, Somuncu fluidly shifts between dramatic readings from the text—occasionally incorporating linguistic exaggeration reminiscent of Chaplin's speech as Adenoid Hynkel in the *Great Dictator* to highlight Hitler's overblown prose—and a combination of amusing and sobering anecdotes, successfully mingling his acting prowess with incisive analysis to critique and disarm the fascination with Hitler and fascism.^{iv}

Somuncu's Turkish heritage catalyzed both resistance to, and interest in his *Mein Kampf* performances. In the book he wrote about the tour, *Auf Lesereise mit Hitler*, Somuncu notes how his Turkishness seemed to drive media attention when he announced the premiere performance in January 1996:

Die Sache schlägt ein wie eine Bombe. Als Erstes meldet sich dpa in Düsseldorf und schickt die Nachricht über Internet an den nationalen Verteiler. [...]Alle wollen die nur das Eine: Dabei sein, wenn ein Türke aus *Mein Kampf* liest. (*Auf Lesereise* 60)

Despite the publicity, the premiere attracted a surprisingly small audience dominated by members of the press (*Auf Lesereise* 71-72). As his *Mein Kampf* performance became better known, the media presence diminished and audience numbers increased. At the same time, threats against Somuncu's person and performances became more frequent. Neo-Nazi groups

protested against Somuncu's approach to the text, but found it far worse that their beloved *Führer* was being mocked and denigrated by a "Türkenschwein" (*Auf Lesereise* 287). The spectacle created by the mainstream media and the aggressive reactions of the Neo-Nazis was catalyzed by Somuncu's perceived violation of the expectation that Germany's past as well as any right or duty to come to terms with it was the prerogative of "Germans." Somuncu defiantly contradicts that expectation through his performances and in his book about the *Mein Kampf* tour:

Auch wenn wir Türken keinen Großvater haben, der in der NSDAP war, auch wenn wir niemanden in der Verwandtschaft haben, der eine braune Vergangenheit hat, so sind wir doch mitverantwortlich für die Aufarbeitung der deutschen Thematik, weil wir keine gemeinsame Gegenwart und Zukunft verlangen dürfen, ohne auch einen Besitzanspruch auf die Bewältigung der deutschen Vergangenheit zu stellen. (*Auf Lesereise* 247)

As his shows became more well known, Somuncu succeeded in getting audiences to recognize his talents as a performer and to focus on his approach to the material, rather than on questions of ethnic difference. Motivated by the success of his *Mein Kampf* tour, Somuncu added a new program based on selections from Joseph Goebbels' *Sportpalast* speech of 18 February 1943. Using the words Goebbels later chose to describe the event as "diese Stunde der Idiotie" as a point of departure, Somuncu set out to unpack Goebbels's rhetoric in the speech itself. He opened the program by alerting his audience to the importance of knowing what is actually in the text and understanding how it is constructed, not only to grasp the particularity of Goebbels' deceit, but also to become more vigilant and critical consumers of contemporary propaganda

(*Serdar Somuncu liest Joseph Goebbels*). Although Somuncu was not the first Turkish German performer to take a satirical approach to the National Socialist high command, he was the first to combine parody with detailed reflections on actual texts. Dikmen and Omurcu included references to Goebbels and the Nazis in some of their *Knobi-Bonbon* sketches, one of which was entitled “Wollt Ihr die totale Toleranz?” In this sketch, they derided the practice of holding candlelight vigils against racism in West Germany as a superficial response to deeply rooted social problems (“Kabarett und Satire” 296). What connects Somuncu’s performances with the *Knobi-Bonbon* sketch is their shared critique of how emotional appeals and moral hypocrisy can be employed as tools for a variety of political ends and why people continue to fall prey to them.

The interrogation of ideology’s corrupting influences in the contemporary context is the driving force behind Somuncu’s *Hassprediger* shows, centered on the *BILD Zeitung* in *Der Hassprediger liest BILD*, and on the rhetoric of dictatorship and terrorism in *Hassprediger – Ein demagogischer Blindtest*. In the latter, Somuncu adapts a tactic he experimented with in his Goebbels’ program, quoting passages from politicians, ideologues, and dictators and asking his audience to guess the authors. In *Der Hassprediger liest BILD*, Somuncu adopts the role of the hate-preacher to highlight how lip service to tolerance creates an illusion of harmony but does nothing to overcome fear and paranoia, something that could be better achieved by the direct expression of prejudice and ill-will: “Ich wünsch mir einfach ein wenig mehr Hass in dieser Welt. Alles ist so glatt gebügelt. Alles ist so einfach. Alle haben nur Angst vor der Angst vor der Angst.” With their foregrounding of “hate” and the excess that term implies, the *Hassprediger* shows represent a shift toward a more aggressive presentational mode that has been labeled “Aggro-Comedy” (“Auf Applaus” 30) to provoke what one reporter described as “Nachdenken durch Schock” (Kurze 14).

Comedy as Critique, German Political Satire, and Ethnicity as Performance

With his penchant for exaggeration, readiness to criticize and insult any and every group in defiance of tact and political correctness, and impassioned denunciation of the mind-numbing seductions of popular media and populist politics, Serdar Somuncu is firmly grounded in the tradition of German political satire, particularly that practiced by antifascist satirist Kurt Tucholsky. In his oft-cited essay “Was darf die Satire?” Tucholsky offers a description of the satirist and the art of satire directed at a specifically German public on the cusp of fascist dictatorship. In Tucholsky’s view, the satirist “ist ein gekränkter Idealist: er will die Welt gut haben, sie ist schlecht, und nun rennt er gegen das Schlechte an” (“Was darf die Satire?”). Somuncu, despite his repeated stage incarnations as a hate-preacher, reveals himself in his writings to be a satirist in Tucholsky’s sense. His anger and condemnation are directed at social and political ills past and present, but his vision for the future is one of positive change. Somuncu’s method also reflects Tucholsky’s understanding of satire as exaggerated, unjust, and indiscriminate in its attacks: “Es leiden die Gerechten mit den Ungerechten” (“Was darf die Satire?”). In contrast to Tucholsky, however, who succumbed to despair after concluding that the Nazi state had fallen so low as to be beyond satire’s reach, Somuncu confronts a very different Germany, one marked by its past and engaged in the process of redefining itself as a pluralistic society.

By targeting liberals and conservatives, intellectuals and proletarians, Germans, Turks, and *Deuschtürken*, Somuncu expands the “Doppelperspektive” —the ability to criticize and parody both German and Turkish prejudices—that Karin Yeşilada praised in Şinasi Dikmen’s satirical works (538). In fact, Yeşilada sees the rise of Turkish German satire as the realization of

a “*deutsch-türkischer Kultursynthese*” envisioned by Yüksel Pazarkaya: a synthesis of the rich tradition of Turkish satire—perhaps best known through the work of Aziz Nesin (1915-1995)^v — and the legacy of German antifascist satire (Yeşilada 556). Somuncu’s performances as Hitler and Goebbels are at once an extension of German antifascist satire and an intervention in perceptions of ethnic and cultural difference. Somuncu the “Türkenschwein” (*Auf Lesereise* 287) plays and parodies Hitler the racist dictator to engage “Germans” and “others” in reflections on “Germanness,” responsible citizenship, and German-Turkish relations. In his Hitler and Goebbels parodies, Somuncu also performatively overrides the division between Germans and Turks, reversing the customary direction of “ethnic drag” as described by Katrin Sieg whereby white male German actors masquerade as racial others. In *Ethnic Drag*, Sieg discusses both the subversive and affirmative potential of mimesis and masquerade in relation to social hierarchies of race, nationality, and sexuality. Ethnic impersonation and racial mimesis can take the form of “fascist drag” exemplified by Ferdinand Marian’s performance as Jew Süß in Veit Harlan’s antisemitic propaganda film, conceived as a warning to an audience considered too gullible to recognize what was touted as immutable and pernicious ethnic difference (Sieg 32). Sieg also discusses ethnic drag performed as parody where performers use techniques of estrangement to deconstruct “hegemonic images without supplying another truth” (Sieg 57). This type of parody contributes to what Sieg calls “a counteranthropology of sorts” (27) in which the ethnic subject as performer confronts the audience with the prejudices and stereotypes that undergird majority culture. Deniz Göktürk makes a similar point in her article on immigrant film comedies, “Strangers in Disguise.” Drawing on examples ranging from Marx brothers movies to Hussi Kutlucan’s film *Ich Chef, du Turnschuh*, Göktürk argues that these comedies turn the ethnographic gaze around so that “supposedly settled non-immigrants can be mocked and

unsettled, and themselves incorporated into somebody else's game," a game with the potential to "destabilize discourses and iconographies of power" (121).

The destabilization of ethnic difference and the power relations underlying presumed difference constitutes the implicit agenda behind Somuncu's *Mein Kampf* performances. In other shows, Somuncu mocks the whining and belligerent broken cadences of the stereotypical Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, essentially "caricaturing the caricatures" (Sieg 26) —the Turk is "talking Turk" —and creating such a large gap between his own quotidian standard German speech and the *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* he imitates that the audience erupts with laughter. The humor comes from the recognition of the stereotype and its incarnation in the person of a Turkish German performer whose ethnicity ironically authenticates and estranges the performance, enabling the spectators to laugh at the impersonation in good conscience. Whether mocking Hitler or *Gastarbeiterdeutsch*, Somuncu combines strategies of ethnic drag as parody with the performance of vituperative excess to subvert ideas of cultural hegemony that continue to influence the representation of the German past and the articulation of Germany's future while simultaneously highlighting the multiplicity of roles he can and does occupy on and off stage. Not the least among these roles—as actor, writer, comedian, transnational critic of cultural politics—is Somuncu's status as a German citizen. The disjunction between citizenship as a legal status and belonging remains an obstacle to integration that Somuncu strives to overcome by reframing the issue as one of reciprocal curiosity and the will to abandon the "Zwangsvorstellung, dass man nur unter seinesgleichen glücklich werden kann" (*Hitler Kebab*).

Kartoffeln vs Kanaken

In a collection of stories entitled *Getrennte Rechnungen*, Serdar Somuncu describes growing up as a Turkish youth in Germany. In “Heidewitzka, Herr Kapitän” he reflects on his parents’ uncomplicated attitudes toward cultural difference and their knack for making friends with Germans, contrasting their apparent equanimity with the tormented sense of split allegiance he experienced as a child:

Rückblickend betrachtet waren meine Eltern wahre Botschafter der
Völkerverständigung. Denn während wir Kinder auf der Suche
nach unserer Identität lange Zeit glaubten, uns zwischen den
beiden Kulturen entscheiden zu müssen, balancierten diese beiden
Menschen spielerisch – und unbewusst – auf einem schmalen Grat
zwischen Anpassung und Verkrampfung. (138)

Somuncu was able to move from an initially conflicted relationship to his identity as “ein Mischwesen, ein Mutant” (*Auf Lesereise* 146) to an acceptance of his simultaneous Turkishness and Germanness as a strength (*Der Antitürke* 152). In 1992 he applied for a German passport and became a dual citizen, a status he held until 2002 when he relinquished his Turkish citizenship. Tom Cheesman has noted the conflicting attitudes toward the embrace of Germanness among Turkish Germans, where some see it as a loss, while others forge ahead to create their own definition without feeling they have sacrificed anything (Cheesman 30-31). Whether Somuncu’s decision to give up his Turkish passport was provoked by changes to the German citizenship law or driven by a desire to combat a view that “Turks” cannot become “Germans” is not clear.^{vi} What is clear is that despite his decision, his identity as a German is still called into question.

In an n-tv interview with Leo (Leonore) Busch broadcast on 14 October 2010 in response to the integration debates sparked by Sarrazin’s book and provocatively entitled *Kartoffeln vs*

Kanaken, slang terms that evoke stereotypes of Germans and Turks, viewers were asked to respond whether they regarded Somuncu as German by clicking on one of four prescribed choices. Although there was an element of humor intended in this exercise, the fact that the categorization of Somuncu's identity was the subject of the survey was a clear indication that "Germans" are still far from embracing an expanded concept of Germanness. Somuncu sought to get at this issue directly by suggesting that Leo Busch ask her viewers "Wann ist man eigentlich Deutscher?" Instead Busch questioned Somuncu on a range of topics from Islam, xenophobia and 'Deutschfeindlichkeit' (a term referring to violence and animosity toward "Germans" perpetrated by "foreigners") to freedom of speech. In his definition of integration as "gegenseitige Annäherung" and his assertion that German history is not an ethnic domain, Somuncu's responses reflect a concept of Germanness that is not only inclusive but also marked by critical awareness and a desire for knowledge.

Based on Somuncu's reputation it is unsurprising that he would be chosen for an interview on Germans versus Turks or *Kartoffeln vs Kanaken*. After achieving notoriety for his Hitler and Goebbels performances, Somuncu went on tour with *Hitler Kebab* in 2006. Proceeding from the humorous juxtaposition of terms in the title, Somuncu plays on the reductive cultural iconography that equates "German" with Hitler and "Turkish" with kebab. In a sketch entitled "Leitkultur," Somuncu portrays his transformation into a "German" as a burlesque of the perils of integration complete with a comic embrace of cultural bias: "Früher war ich Türke – da war alles einfach. Dann wurde ich halb-türkisch, halb-deutsch und wußte nicht, ist das jetzt eine Bereicherung oder ist das eine Behinderung?" Unable to stomach the uncertainty any longer, he opts to become German: "Irgendwann habe ich gesagt, jetzt reicht's! Jetzt bin ich Deutscher. Und jetzt bin ich deutsch. Voll! Mehr als voll! Leitkultur gestählt, voll

integriert, ausgezeichnet mit dem goldenen Edmund Stoiber-Siegel für angepasste Kanaken” (*Hitler Kebab*). By ironically affirming his identity as an “eingedeutschter Kanake,” Somuncu confronts the cultural taboos silenced by political correctness or exaggerated playfulness with ethnic stereotypes, evident, for example, in the ethnocultural-comedy popularized by Kaya Yanar, whose SAT.1 television series, *Was guckst Du?* attracted some three million viewers (Kaiser).

In a performance of *Der Hassprediger liest BILD* in 2009, Somuncu mocks anyone who might have purchased a ticket to the show under the mistaken assumption that he would be similar to Kaya Yanar, while also reassuring the audience that he is not a “Schreckgespenst” but merely playing a role. Somuncu follows this reassurance with a string of loosely connected riffs on *Gastarbeiter* and Turkish macho stereotypes, Germans’ inability to speak Turkish, the material fetishes that pass for identity in market-driven society, the illusion of individualism, and the need for more openly expressed intolerance as opposed to anxiety and fear (*Hassprediger liest Bild. Bonus CD*). In performances that deride concepts of nativism and foreignness and lampoon German and Turkish stereotypes, Somuncu questions the fixity of “Germanness” and “Turkishness” using his own position—as “eingedeutschter Kanake” —to complicate both terms. But despite his ironic self-definition and his bid for inclusivity, Somuncu has not found an alternative semantics for cultural difference and continues to refer to Germans and Turks: “Deutsche setzen sich viel zu wenig wirklich mit Türken auseinander, da helfe ich, und da hilft die provokante Haltung” (Lindemann 25).

From Hypocrisy to Humanism

In a sketch from *Hitler Kebab* entitled “Das Kopftuch-Stringtanga Syndrom,” Somuncu begins with a complaint that Germans seem incapable of pronouncing and spelling his name and suggests a mix of stereotypical and incongruous signifiers as a mnemonic device: “Siegfried – Otto – Martha – Untergang – Nationalsozialismus – Vitamin C – Uterus.” The satirical appropriation of Germanic identifiers (Siegfried, Nationalsozialismus) at once exaggerates and familiarizes his assertion of a Turkish German identity. The joke acquires yet another layer when he reveals that his imagined interlocutor, the “German” who has asked him to spell “Somuncu,” has a name of Slavic origin but regards himself as unequivocally German. The idea of the name as a sign of foreignness is thus undermined and Somuncu uses this lesson as a segue to misconceptions about the headscarf held by both Germans and Turks. Not only are “Germans” ignorant if they automatically associate a headscarf with “Turkishness;” Turkish women who wear the headscarf are rolling back the achievements of a secularized Turkish state while justifying their actions with uninformed and hypocritical appeals to the Koran.^{vii} The Turkish woman in the sketch argues that she is obeying the Koran by wearing the headscarf, but sees no contradiction in her choice of underwear, a string tanga, because it is not expressly forbidden. In shows, books, and interviews, Somuncu has been outspoken in his antipathy to the headscarf, and in his 2009 book, *Der Antitürke*, used an adroitly negative comparison to capture anxieties and misperceptions of identity in both Germany and Turkey: “Ein Nazi repräsentiert Deutschland genauso wenig wie ein Kopftuchträgerin die Türkei” (107).

Somuncu has inspired the ire of conservative Turkish nationalists through his vocal denunciations of the headscarf and withering dismissal of Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul as effective politicians. Somuncu himself has noted that *Hitler Kebab* in particular outraged some Muslim Turks and on his website he offers a selection of criticisms and abuse he

has received. Although Somuncu's radical secularism and irreverence in *Hitler Kebab* serve as the target for hate mail, the figurative skewering of "Germans" and "Turks" in the title is also an allusion to shared complexes and commonalities: a fear of being reduced to a stereotype, feelings of inferiority coupled with exaggerated pride, and a desire for acceptance combined with an insistence on sovereignty.^{viii} Shared complexes in turn are evidence of a shared humanity that can be obscured by stereotype, prejudice, and the reification of ethnic difference. In an interview in March 2005, Somuncu argues that his humanity and not his Turkishness drives his performances and piques his interest in a variety of topics: "Ich bin kein türkischer Schauspieler oder türkischer Kabarettist, ich bin in erster Linie ein Mensch und habe eine Meinung zu allen Themen" ("Aufklärer ohne Tabus").

Somuncu's insistence on being a "Mensch" above and beyond "Turkish" or "German" labels forms the foundation of *Der Antitürke*, in which he offers his observations on German-Turkish relations and advice on how to improve them. In *Der Antitürke*, Somuncu condemns the idea of a German *Leitkultur* that engenders a top-down, one-way approach to integration and instead extols the benefits of reciprocity in acknowledging and accepting cultural transformations that have already occurred. It is relevant to point out that the term *Leitkultur* as originally defined by the Syrian German political scientist Bassam Tibi referred to a "consensus of values shared by the different communities in Europe" (Dunphy and Emig 20). It was not until Friedrich Merz, then CDU faction leader in the German parliament, adopted the term in 2000 to designate a specifically German *Leitkultur* that the debate began about models of integration without the idea of a common European "cultural basis" (Dunphy and Emig 20). The idea of a common European "cultural basis" in itself is no panacea, however, for one could argue

that debates about what constitutes “European” and how this affects Turkey’s bid for EU membership also create barriers to the embrace of Turkishness within German borders.

From Imagined Monoculturalism to Informed Cosmopolitanism

In Somuncu’s view, any position that is grounded in a concept of cultural superiority can only lead to further rifts and misunderstanding: “So lange jede Seite darauf beharrt, einzig die deutsche oder die türkische Kultur im Mittelpunkt zu stellen, so lange bleibt dieser Prozess sinnlos, und beide Seiten leben statt miteinander weiter aneinander vorbei” (*Der Antitürke* 30). Preconceptions about cultural superiority are nourished by stereotypes and prejudices. Somuncu reserves particular criticism for Turkish performers who adopt stereotyped representations of Turks for personal profit as well as those who seem to mistake clichés for identity:

Es gibt sogar Türken, die Türken so spielen, wie sie glauben, dass Türken sind, damit andere, die nicht wissen, wie Türken eigentlich sind, denken, dass Türken so sind, wie sie gespielt werden von Türken, die selbst nicht wissen, wie sie eigentlich sein müssten. (*Der Antitürke* 34-35)

Somuncu makes no secret of his own role in reinforcing cultural stereotypes in parts he accepted as an actor in the past, but simultaneously distances himself from that past by incorporating both his complicity and his talent for parody into his stage performances. In order to promote what he calls “interkulturelle Verständigung,” Somuncu exhorts Turkish German artists to embrace what were previously seen as “German” themes while also remaining attentive to the details of Turkish German daily life. Only then will they be free of the “Migrationsthematik” that has served both as their claim to fame and their categorical confinement (*Der Antitürke* 39).

Although Somuncu sees positive developments among *Deutschtürken*, i.e. those of Turkish heritage living in Germany unperturbed by any sense of divided identities, he is critical of the Turkish government, which too often tends to view its citizens abroad as political capital (*Der Antitürke* 85). Somuncu's critique is bolstered by studies such as Eva Østergaard-Nielsen's *Transnational Politics: Turks and Kurds in Germany*, in which she observes that the Turkish government seeks to instrumentalize its citizens in Germany as "a powerful advocate for Turkey in western Europe" (121). Somuncu's own "transnationality" emerges out of his familiarity with and interest in Turkish politics and history in conjunction with his claim to "Germanness" through citizenship and engagement with the German past and present. He urges his readers to recognize the interconnectedness of German and Turkish relations as well as their responsibility to become informed cultural and political consumers to combat the ignorance that permeates official policy promoting religious and cultural tolerance:

Zur Toleranz gehört eben nicht nur, dass man bedingungslos
hinnimmt, was der andere will, sondern auch, dass man fundiert
und sachlich dagegen argumentieren kann, wenn man es selbst
nicht will.

Ich wünsche mir von den Deutschen manchmal etwas mehr Mut
zur Intoleranz and mehr Willen zur Aufklärung von
Wissenslücken. (*Der Antitürke* 110)

Instead of parroting politically correct views or uncritically accepting what they hear, Germans, Turks, and *Deutschtürken* should educate themselves about history, traditions, and religious practices. In the process, cultural aversions and anxieties as well as fantasies of cultural superiority would be defused (*Der Antitürke* 126). Somuncu is deeply critical of what he sees as

the hypocrisy behind the repeated rejections of Turkey's overtures to the EU, particularly when economically weaker countries and younger democracies such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania have gained entrance (*Der Antitürke* 81-87). He is also dismissive of the ostensible concerns expressed by the German government and the European Union for ethnic minorities in Turkey, concerns that he argues are mobilized whenever the question of Turkey's EU membership comes up, but which are not backed up by any concrete policy of support for minority interests. Somuncu concludes *Der Antitürke* with his vision for Turkey and Germany: "mein Ideal von einer Türkei, die aufgeschlossen und europäisch, aufgeklärt und fortschrittlich ist [...] mein Ideal von einem Deutschland, das weltoffen, tolerant und selbstbewusst im Umgang mit seinen Mitmenschen ist" (150). In advocating informed, critical intolerance combined with a firm commitment to democratic principles, Somuncu weds humanist convictions with satirical performance. While his stage persona mocks, rages, and belittles the ignorance of politicians, *Volk*, and popular media, his writings attest to his mission of combating cultural relativism and ethnocentrism.

Somuncu's Transnational Politics of Satire

In his shows since *Hitler Kebab*, Somuncu has developed a more aggressive performance style, weaving together insults to the audience, violent rhetoric, and vulgarity into a variety of *Aggro-Comedy* that appears to sacrifice substance for spectacle. In his *Hassprediger liest BILD* performances, Somuncu incorporates tirades against sensationalist journalism, market-driven consumerism, failures of political leadership in Germany and Turkey, and what he sees as widespread German resistance to integration evident in an equally widespread German inability to speak Turkish. Spouting a relentless stream of expletive-laced polemic mixed with moments

of insightful social critique in his role as the hate-preacher, Somuncu explores the limits of satirical performance. The question arises whether the audience can discern his position if he rails against everything and anything. But perhaps that is precisely his point: to confront his audiences with the task of winnowing real concerns from vulgar bluster in the hopes of sharpening or awakening their critical faculties in the process. Instead of looking to him for a position on a variety of issues, viewers must determine their own.

Somuncu's disdain for political correctness and his vitriolic irreverence have attracted a considerable fan base. There is no want of spectators for his *Hassprediger* performances, which are regularly sold out. While his capacity to be both unpredictable and unsettling keeps his audience's attention, he is careful to point out that there is a difference between the persona(e) he produces on stage as Serdar Somuncu the actor/comedian and who he is off stage. In response to news media critiques and online comments made by viewers about his *Hassprediger* shows, Somuncu's website concludes that he has achieved just the effect that political satire should strive for: "Harte und zuweilen erbitterte Debatten und letztlich doch eine realistische Abbildung der Meinungsvielfalt im Dickicht ideologischer Verfänglichkeiten" ("Lob und Kritik"). While a diversity of opinion is clearly important, Somuncu's indignation and outrage, both theatrical and actual, target those whose claims are uninformed by knowledge and who either succumb to or perpetuate generalizations that have little foundation in existing social reality.

Somuncu's aggressive performance style can also be read as an emphatic rejection of the image of the "abject Turk" or Turk as victim in what Mandel has termed the "abjection paradigm" (184). What Somuncu offers instead is an indictment of the oppressive social forces and media influences faced by everyone.^{ix} The intolerant hate-preacher is also the antithesis of the self-ascribed victim role Somuncu sees as central to the German malaise in confronting the

past (*Auf Lesereise* 205). Somuncu insists on his right to be “unberechenbar” and “unbequem,” the very qualities that he recognizes are associated with anti-Turkish prejudices inscribed in German integration debates:

Der schlechteste Ausländer aber ist und bleibt der Türke. Der
Türke ist unberechenbar, fremd, eigensinnig und hinterhältig – fast
eine Art Ersatzjude.

Der Türke steht für Renitenz und Anpassungsunfähigkeit, für
Grüppchenbildung und Parallelgesellschaft. Der Türke ist
integrationsresistent and inkompatibel. Er hat eine andere Religion
und eine andere Sprache, und sein Wesen hat etwas Invasorisches.

Kommt einer, kommen alle! (*Der Antitürke* 23)

While Somuncu draws an ironic parallel between Turks and Jews in the above passage and in his stage performances (referring to himself as a “halb übermäßig mittelschwer integrierten, intrigierten Deutschkanaken Ersatzjuden” in *Der Hassprediger liest Bild*), the comparison is hardly new. Whether or not one finds it compelling is another question. Ruth Mandel is ambivalent about the parallel and sees it more as a tool of provocation (130). While both Jews and Turks occupy an “outsider” position, there are obvious differences in how they have historically been perceived. For the assimilated German Jews in the Third Reich, it was their success at blending in that Nazi ideologues regarded as the greatest threat. In contrast, the contemporary Turkish Germans are not seen as masters of disguise, but rather as either incapable of integration or as hybrids who will never be recognized as German (Mandel 131).

Somuncu’s approach and the trajectory he has followed in his performances from Hitler to *Hassprediger* can be understood as a response to the *Volksaufklärung* of the Third Reich that

has left its traces in German attitudes toward what is accepted as familiar or foreign.^x In his role as hate-preacher, Somuncu vehemently denounces popular media even as he immerses himself in it to achieve the necessary level of *Hass* for his performances. He ridicules the hypocrisy of political correctness that incites “Germans” to be tolerant of foreigners and “others,” while those same “Germans” are still uncomfortable with the word “Jew” (Mandel 127-28) or with jokes about homosexuals. The desire for normalization—even if channeled through the soccer patriotism evident in World Cup tournaments—is the desire to be liberated from this discomfort, but for Somuncu that liberation must come from within, from the courage to confront the past and its legacy literally head on: by activating one’s capacity for self-criticism and remaining steadfast in examining one’s prejudices, anxieties, and conscience.

As is evident from his writings and performances, Somuncu’s vision extends beyond German society. He is vociferously critical of a shift toward Islamic fundamentalism in the Turkish state as well as the revival of religious orthodoxy among some Turkish migrants in Germany. He is an adamant supporter of a secular Turkey and has been scathing in his denunciations of President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Erdogan for undermining the division between religion and the state. Regarding the religious turn among German Turks, Somuncu faults both the Turkish government for its treatment of Turks abroad, and Germany for its failure to make Turkish immigrants feel accepted as part of German society. He describes the embrace of Muslim orthodoxy by some Turkish immigrants as a move motivated by frustration and a sense of homelessness: “Der Glaube ist schon längst zum Accessoire einer desillusionierten Migrationskultur verkommen, der Prophet ist ein Popstar einer orientierungslosen Einwanderungsgeneration deutsch-türkischer Heimatloser” (*Der Antitürke* 122). In a segment from *Hassprediger liest BILD* entitled “Resttürkenabrechnung,” Somuncu

exploits his own pulpit as hate-preacher—or *Hassias* (“hate savior”) as he is known by his fans—to draw attention to the uncomfortable gray zone between social criticism and prejudice. Noting that “die Halbwertzeit eines eingebürgerten deutschen Türken währt nicht lange,” he belittles those German Turks who suddenly rediscover their faith and honor and expect German society to support them and recommends they return to their “Mullah-Reich” (*Hassprediger liest BILD. Bonus CD*). By creating a stage persona whose claim to fame is the expression of unabashedly intolerant views, Somuncu plays on the unvarnished prejudices that persist despite and because of official integration policies.

Integration, if that is even an appropriate term, cannot focus on transforming “foreigners” to make them like “us.” It must be conceptualized as a reciprocal process of familiarization and estrangement achieved in part through resistance to populist fear-mongering and cultural clichés. While the extremity of Somuncu’s performances in the *hatenight* and *Hassprediger* shows may be intended to inspire critical self-awareness, it is difficult to gauge whether his fans get that message or are merely entertained by provocation. It is not in any one appearance that the trajectory of Serdar Somuncu’s performative interventions into recurring debates about identity and integration is revealed, but rather in the full spectrum of his production as cabaret artist, comedian, actor, pundit, and author that we see the evolution of Somuncu’s transnational politics of satire and its implications for German-Turkish relations. In his writings and performances, Serdar Somuncu confronts his audiences with the need to educate themselves about their own past in a broader, global context and to abandon narrow and exclusive fantasies of identity that are out of step with social and cultural reality.

ⁱ The manifesto is not a thing of the past for right-wing nationalist organizations in Germany.

Both the original and the redacted version of the manifesto are reprinted in full on the website of the *Schutzbund für das Deutsche Volk* and the *Mittelfranken* faction of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* refers to the manifesto's relevance for current integration debates on its website.

ⁱⁱ Joyce Mushaben contends that the image of German identity touted as the prerequisite for acceptance in German society is one that “few indigenous souls are especially ‘proud’ to embody” (19).

ⁱⁱⁱ Somuncu's views parallel criticisms expressed by journalist Dilek Zaptcioglu, who argues in *Türken und Deutsche* that political correctness is an indirect product of racism and hinders unselfconscious interaction between groups and individuals (57).

^{iv} Although Somuncu makes no direct reference to Chaplin, his aspiration in playing Hitler follows the same principle Burkhardt Lindner discerns in Chaplin's performance: “Hitler zu spielen, statt ihn als sakrosanktes großes Bild zu verehren, ist der erste Schritt dazu, ihn zu entzaubern” (93).

^v Nesin was a careful observer of human behavior and regarded his own brand of satire as “Volkssatire,” which intended to give the people an outlet for their frustration with their oppression and their inability to directly influence their situation (Nesin 302).

^{vi} Prior to 2000, it was possible for Turkish Germans who had become naturalized German citizens to reapply for Turkish citizenship under a law passed by Turkey designed to retain some political connection to Turks living abroad (Østergaard-Nielsen 108).

^{vii} I have consciously chosen the spelling “Koran” to be consistent with the orthography Somuncu uses in his writings.

^{viii} Somuncu returns to this idea of shared complexes in *Der Antitürke*: “Wir leiden vor allem unter denselben Komplexen. Zwischen Minderwertigkeitsgefühl und Größenwahn versuchen wir ständig aufs Neue, einen Mittelweg zu finden, der sich Identität nennt” (7-8).

^{ix} Ruth Mandel refers to the “abjection paradigm” in German representations of Turkish life in Germany. In her description, the “abjection model upholds the stereotype of Turk-as-victim, be it oppressed, veiled woman, arranged marriage, or voiceless exploited worker” (184-85).

^x The ministry headed by Joseph Goebbels during the Third Reich was responsible for *Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*. The term *Volksaufklärung* also refers to movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that sought to educate the populace on topics ranging from medical hygiene, literacy, and the eradication of superstition to practical advice for farm and hearth. Under Hitler, *Volksaufklärung* became synonymous with the ideological indoctrination of an entire population in support of the Third Reich’s hegemonic and genocidal goals. For more on popular enlightenment before Hitler, see Böning et. al.

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