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Serdar Somuncu: Turkish German Comedy as Transnational Intervention

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Ethno-cultural comedy of the type popularized by Kaya Yanar (of *Was guckst du?* fame)¹ is a comedic form that centers on the ethnicity of the performer, where ethnicity and cultural difference provide the substance of the performance. The ethno-cultural identities performed are at once a construct for the stage and a staging of ethnic stereotypes as constructions through exaggeration and parody. This style of performance seeks to ridicule ethno-cultural clichés by enacting them. Ethno-cultural comedy does not actively dismantle cultural and ethnic stereotypes, but instead uses magnification to fix the audience's gaze on their absurdity. Kaya Yanar has made a career out of manipulating ethnic stereotypes of Indians, Italians, Arabs, and Turks, transformed into a set of stock characters whose foibles he repetitively rehearsed on his comedy show. Because of his own heritage—Yanar is of Arab and Turkish descent—he implicitly lends a veneer of authenticity and acceptability to his performances that counterbalances the giddy exaggeration of the ethno-cultural caricatures he plays for laughs. In her study *Ethnic Drag*, Katrin Sieg has examined the relationship between mimesis and masquerade, disputing the assumption that mimesis is affirmative while masquerade is subversive (Sieg 11). Yanar's performances straddle the divide between mimesis and masquerade and constitute, I would argue, neither affirmation nor subversion, exemplifying Kader Konuk's assertion—as presented in her analysis of staged speech—that mimicry in itself is not subversive, but has subversive potential if it refuses the validity or authority of that which it is imitating (Konuk 68). While Yanar's ostensible aim is to render ethnic stereotypes harmless, his comedy does little to stimulate reflection or encourage dialogue.²

¹ Kaya Yanar's *Was guckst du?* program on the German channel SAT.1 attracted some three million viewers (see Andrea Kaiser, "Noch 'n Türkenwitz," *Zeit Online* 8/2001) and garnered Yanar both the German television prize and German comedy prize.

² In his study of ethnic humor, Leon Rappoport has come out as an advocate for its potential to undercut rather than encourage prejudice. He argues that stand-up comedians have succeeded in weakening the negative effects of ethnic stereotypes by rendering them ridiculous, and also makes the obvious if not trivial point that the purveyors of ethnic

In contrast, the Turkish German actor, author, cabaret artist, and comedian Serdar Somuncu utilizes his acting skills and critical insights to create programs designed to subvert the image of the Turkish German performer as a “professional ethnic,” and combat the reductiveness inherent in the term “ethno-cultural comedy.” Ruth Mandel uses the term “professional ethnic” in her book *Cosmopolitan Anxieties* to describe Turkish-heritage members of a cultural elite in Germany forced to “reinvent themselves as *ethnic* elites” in order to gain recognition from the German culture industry (Mandel 186). These “professional ethnics” are “complicit in ethnic stereotyping, a kind of mimetic staging in order to target specific audiences and cater to explicit tastes” (Mandel 86). In my use of the term, Kaya Yanar can be seen as someone who has styled himself as a “professional ethnic” insofar as he has capitalized on his heritage to justify and disarm his stereotyped representations of a variety of ethnic groups. In that sense, he represents the complicity in stereotyping described by Mandel, although with the presumed goal of working to undermine prejudice.

While the terms “professional ethnic” and “ethno-cultural comedy” may have limited application to the performance styles of Serdar Somuncu, they nonetheless serve as a useful point of departure for a discussion of the problems of categorization and tokenism that plague actors and comedians with migrant backgrounds, as well as the academics who study them. The clash and conflict in terminology and categorization is brought into even sharper relief if one juxtaposes the terms “ethno-cultural comedy” and “transnational.” The former term seems to represent more of an accessorizing of ethnicity for fun and profit, while the latter could be seen as a concession to academic fashion, albeit not without merit for analyzing Turkish German

humor are playing with stereotypes, not producing them. See Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 122, 151.

cultural production.³ Since the focus of my argument is on Serdar Somuncu's strategies for performing transnational interventions in German *Leitkultur* and identity politics, I will begin by briefly situating the term "transnational" in the context of other conceptual terms that have been used to address similar or related conditions, before turning to its application to Somuncu and his work.

In studies of Turkish German cultural production, terms such as "intercultural" (Terkessidis) and "transcultural" (Welsch) have displaced the now fraught term "multicultural" as descriptors for works that offer hybrid perspectives. "Intercultural," as employed by Mark Terkessidis, designates a condition of a culture-in-between, a condition in which cultural boundaries are seen as fluid rather than fixed. For Terkessidis, the implementation of his theory of "interculture" would effect changes in social organization in order to eliminate the barriers that obstruct opportunities for self-realization (*Interkultur* 131, 165). "Transcultural," as defined by Wolfgang Welsch, describes the condition of contemporary cultural relationships by highlighting the differentiation and connectivity within and across cultures (71). The term "multicultural" has fallen out of favor because it proceeds from a concept of culture as homogeneous and self-contained (Welsch 69-70; Blumentrath et. al. 16). In his compact analysis of *Cultural Hybridity*, cultural historian Peter Burke looks back to scholarship of the 1930s and beyond to demonstrate that ideas about globalization and cultural syncretism are not new, and that cultural purism is a construct. Burke then turns his attention to the conceptual problems inherent in the term "hybridity," and teases out the qualitative differences in what he sees as an overabundance of terminology to describe similar phenomena (34). Despite its current

³ I am deliberately using "Turkish German" without a hyphen to underscore the condition of mutual influence rather than synthesis between the two positions. "Turkish German cultural production" refers to work created by Turkish Germans in a conscious effort to reflect on and interrogate ideas of Turkishness and Germanness as well as their points of divergence and contiguity.

prominence, Burke does not address the term “transnational,” which has come to dominate social scientific discourse on migration and globalization.

For my purposes, the greatest conceptual utility of the term “transnationalism” lies in its reference to both consciousness and cultural production. In his concise monograph on transnationalism, Steven Vertovec distinguishes six broad areas of application for this concept. Here I will only mention the two that are most relevant for my analysis: “type of consciousness” and “modes of cultural production” (*Transnationalism* 5-8). “Type of consciousness” according to Vertovec refers to the “dual or multiple identifications” resulting from an “awareness of multi-locality” (6). The “refusal of fixity” or rejection of allegiance to a single, nation-oriented identity is evident in the contemporary self-presentations of cabaret performers who have ties to Turkey, particularly those who have knowledge of the Turkish language. The second area—“modes of cultural production”—overlaps with “types of consciousness” insofar as it refers to “cultural interpenetration and blending ... cultural translation, and hybridity” (Vertovec 7). This type of cultural production, infused as it is with the multiple identifications of its producers, has the power to effect changes in perception not only of those with a migrant background, but also of the “receiving” country’s culture. These changes in perception are what Vertovec refers to as “public transformation,” which contributes to an increasing acceptance of heterogeneous populations with ties to more than one culture and place as well as to “the reconceptualization of the model of the nation-state” (84).

In regard to Turkish German relations, the transnational identifications and activities of Turks in Germany have influenced debates about dual citizenship, Turkey’s bid for membership in the EU, the meaning of *Leitkultur*, and the validity of soccer patriotism, to name only a few. The controversy sparked by Thilo Sarrazin’s book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (2010), as well as

the responses to President Christian Wulff's speech on the occasion of the 20th-anniversary of German unification in October 2010, are signs that strong conservative forces in the *Vaterland* refuse to recognize the social changes already effected by immigration and its attendant transnational symptoms. It is precisely these conservative forces that Serdar Somuncu opposes along with what he perceives to be an anachronistic concept of the nation and the cultural clichés it promotes. Although space considerations preclude a discussion of the history of Turkish German comedy here, it is important to note that Somuncu's work did not arise in a vacuum, and that he and other performers of his generation are indebted to the achievements of Şinasi Dikmen and Muhsin Omurcu, co-founders of the first Turkish German cabaret, *Knobi Bonbon*, in Ulm in 1985.⁴ *Knobi Bonbon* was active from 1985 to 1997 and utilized exaggerated cultural stereotypes of both Turks and Germans to critique the treatment of Turkish immigrants in Germany.

Serdar Somuncu was born in Istanbul in 1968 and moved to Germany when he was two years old. He studied music, theater, and directing in Maastricht and Wuppertal and was the founder and director of the Kammerensemble in Neuss. Although he was active on the German stage as both actor and director, and also visible in small roles on German TV, it was not until 1996 with the launch of his program, *Mein Kampf*, based on Adolf Hitler's two-volume tirade, that he achieved widespread recognition. 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, with readings in German, English, Dutch, and Turkish. The premiere in Bern was cancelled by Swiss authorities because of concerns that it would further inflame the public outcry following media revelations of the so-called "Nazi-Goldaffäre," based on evidence that Nazi functionaries had stashed large quantities of stolen Jewish wealth in

⁴ For a detailed discussion of *Knobi Bonbon* and the history of Turkish German cabaret, see Terkessidis, "Kabarett und Satire," and Boran, "Eine Geschichte des türkisch-deutschen Theaters und Kabarettts."

numerous Swiss bank accounts (Somuncu, *Auf Lesereise mit Adolf* 322). While on tour in Germany, Somuncu received death threats and decided to travel with a personal bodyguard. Police were on-site during his programs and on one occasion found the threat level acute enough to require him to perform in a bulletproof vest.

Somuncu's initial motivation was to try to determine why *Mein Kampf* is banned in Germany and how this ban has served to raise the book's status and foster its mystique. After he was able to find a copy of *Mein Kampf* and read it several times, Somuncu developed a program designed to reveal the incongruities and logical fallacies in Hitler's book, without denying its evil intent, and to inspire his audiences to think about the consequences of demagoguery and the blindness of its followers. In the process, he hoped to remove the aura of fear and awe associated with *Mein Kampf*—attitudes that have only been strengthened by its illegal status in Germany and several other countries. Somuncu's thesis is that only when the text is available for public scrutiny can it truly be demythologized, together with the figure of Adolf Hitler himself. In his performances, Somuncu read selections from the text, interspersed with his own critical commentary and anecdotes from his experiences on the tour. Audiences responded with much laughter to some of Hitler's formulations, particularly when Somuncu appropriated a parodic style reminiscent of Chaplin's *Great Dictator* to exaggerate Hitler's already turgid prose to the point of linguistic incoherence, but they were quiet and reflective when confronted with passages justifying anti-Semitism and alluding to mass murder. Neo-Nazis also attended his performances, but those with fascist sympathies were not always as easy to spot as the skinheads with bomber jackets. Somuncu refers to members of this less visible group as "Hightech-Nazis," but remarks that he was usually able to identify them in the audience based on their comments during the discussions that followed each performance (*Auf Lesereise* 96).

In his anecdotes during performances, as well as in the book he wrote about his experiences, Somuncu remarks how his identity as a Turk or *Deutschtürke* complicated his relationship to *Mein Kampf* and to Germany's fascist past. He reports being stunned by the media response to his announcement of 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. (...) Es kündigen sich u.a. an: der NDR, der WDR mit mehreren Teams, SAT.1, SFB, SWF, BBC London, die Süddeutsche Zeitung und der Spiegel in Hamburg. Alle wollen die nur das Eine: Dabei sein, wenn ein Türke aus *Mein Kampf* liest. (*Auf Lesereise* 60)

The premiere drew only a small audience, despite the publicity it had received, and was dominated by the press with banks of microphones and hovering cameramen nearly obscuring Somuncu on stage (*Auf Lesereise* 71-72). As his performances became better known, the press frenzy abated and the audience numbers rose. So too did the threats against Somuncu's person and his program, threats that were clearly connected to his Turkish background. Neo-Nazi groups who protested Somuncu's performances and vowed acts of violence not only resented his approach to the text, but found it doubly insulting that their revered chancellor's reputation was being defiled by a "Türkenschwein" (*Auf Lesereise* 287). This epithet evokes associations to the ostracized "Judenschwein" of the Third Reich, and also speaks to the issues of citizenship, belonging, and collective responsibility for the present and the past that inspired Somuncu to embark on the reading tour in the first place. The collapsing of what was a pseudo-scientific, "blood"-based racism in Nazi ideology into prejudice grounded in what is perceived to be immutable cultural difference is evidence of what Ruth Mandel has described as "racism derived

from cultural determinism” (Mandel 90). What is striking about the reactions to Somuncu’s *Mein Kampf* performances in the mainstream media and from the extreme right is that both follow the same pattern of expectation: namely, that coming to terms with the legacy of National Socialism is the prerogative of “Germans.” This is an expectation that Somuncu consciously thwarts by aggressively asserting his right to German history in addition to German citizenship.

Inspired by the reception of his *Mein Kampf* tour and consumed by a passion to continue his self-assigned *Aufklärungsmission*, Somuncu branched out into performances of selections from Joseph Goebbels’ *Sportpalast* speech of February 1943. Adopting the words that Goebbels used in his diary to describe the event as “diese Stunde der Idiotie,” Somuncu set out to deconstruct Goebbels’s rhetoric, and with it Goebbels’s reputation as a brilliant propagandist. What can be distilled out of Somuncu’s *Mein Kampf* and *Sportpalast (Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg?)* performances is the question of why so many people fell under the sway of such poorly formulated, logically flawed, and frequently preposterous articulations of ideology—and, perhaps more importantly, why they still do. Somuncu would return to this question and its continued relevance with missionary zeal in his *Hassprediger* programs, focusing on the *BILD Zeitung* in *Der Hassprediger liest BILD* and on the rhetoric of dictatorship and terrorism in *Hassprediger – Ein demagogischer Blindentest*. In these performances, Somuncu moves away from comic dramatizations of the absurd to a more aggressive presentational mode designed to elicit what one reporter described as “Nachdenken durch Schock” (Kurze 14). He also refines his focus on the connections between the German past and the present, using himself as the field where these continuities play out in his references to himself as a “Deutschkanaken, Ersatzjuden” (*Hassprediger liest BILD – Bonus CD*). Somuncu’s ironic use of “Kanake” in multiple variations, including the compound form “Deutschkanake,” also draws attention to the artifice of

ethnicity as a category that implies qualitative differences in cultural value. In purposefully creating hybridizations of the term, Somuncu employs “Kanakanke” in a more complex way than Feridun Zaimoglu originally did in *Kanak Sprak*, which both popularized and revalued the slur as an assertion of pride and resistance.⁵

Before Somuncu became known as a proponent of *Aggro-Comedy* (“Auf Applaus” 30), he combined his experiences performing Hitler and his confrontations with stereotypes into the program *Hitler Kebab*. As is already evident in the title, Somuncu plays on the reductive reification of culture—Hitler = German, Kebab = Turkish—to confront his audiences with their anxieties, fantasies, and prejudices. Somuncu is fluent in Turkish and German and obtained dual citizenship in 1992. In 2002, however, he decided to relinquish his Turkish passport. Whether this decision was motivated by the provision in the revised citizenship law disallowing dual citizenship (with exceptions only in extenuating circumstances), or driven by a desire to combat a view that “Turks” cannot become “Germans” is not clear.⁶ Regardless of the motivation, Somuncu’s decision to be solely a German citizen is reflected in a sketch entitled “Leitkultur” in his *Hitler Kebab* program. In this sketch, Somuncu describes the confusion he went through on his path toward integration: “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?” Finally, he claims he was fed up: “Irgendwann habe ich gesagt, jetzt reicht’s! Jetzt bin ich Deutscher. Und jetzt bin ich deutsch. Voll! Mehr als voll! Leitkultur gestählt, voll

⁵ See Feridun Zaimoglu, *Kanak Sprak: 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (Hamburg: Rotbuch Verlag, 1995). Note that Zaimoglu has since distanced himself from the term “Kanak” as “a subcultural badge of identity.” See Tom Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007) 32.

⁶ The retroactive withdrawal of dual citizenship for Turkish Germans went into force in 2005. It is important to note, however, that the loss of German citizenship is no longer automatic when applying for citizenship in another country, as long as the individual files the appropriate request with the German authorities. The reverse scenario, retention of foreign citizenship when applying for German citizenship, is generally not allowed. See: http://www.bmi.bund.de/cln_174/SharedDocs/FAQs/DE/Themen/Migration/Staatsang/Doppelte_Staatsangehoerigkeit_Mehrstaatigkeit.html?nn=107810

integriert, ausgezeichnet mit dem goldenen Edmund Stoiber-Siegel für angepasste Kanaken!” (*Hitler Kebab* CD).

In proclaiming his identity as an “eingedeutschter Kanake,” Somuncu deploys that position to expose the cultural blind spots and taboos that are otherwise glossed over by political correctness or obscured by the exaggerated playfulness with ethnic stereotypes evident in the comedic style popularized by Kaya Yanar. Somuncu has dismissed Yanar as an artist, arguing that his fame stems not from his talent but from his success at capitalizing on his heritage (*Der Antitürke* 40).⁷ Somuncu’s goal is to inspire change in thought processes, not only in how “Germans” think about “Turks” and how “Turks” think about “Germans,” but also in how “Germans” and “Turks” perceive themselves. His embrace of his own “cultural diglossia”—Peter Burke’s term for a condition of bicultural, bilingual hybridity (111)—gives him the freedom to mock concepts of nativism and foreignness as well as license to critique and parody German and Turkish stereotypes with equal vehemence.⁸

Hitler Kebab has been described in the German press as an “explosive[n] Mischung aus politischem Kabarett und melancholischer Selbstreflexion” (Tabeling). Although Somuncu varied his material somewhat for each performance, the sequence of sketches on the Sony BMG CD release of 2006 moves the audience through linguistic and cultural differences, satirical take-downs of *Leitkultur*, integration, Germany’s continuing fear and fascination with Hitler, and Turkish and German pride. He derides Turkish women who insist on wearing the headscarf,

⁷ Somuncu is not alone in his dismissive view of Kaya Yanar. When Muhsin Omurcu, co-founder of the first Turkish German cabaret, *Knobi Bonbon*, was asked in an interview about his opinion of Yanar, he replied laconically: “Ich habe keinen Fernseher.” <http://www.stadtkind-hannover.de/?s=Omurca&x=0&y=0&=Go>, accessed 18 August 2010.

⁸ Somuncu’s insistence on a hybrid identity for himself, combined with his reputation for quick-witted, critical responses in interviews, has also made him a favored interlocutor in the debates about integration following the publication of Sarrazin’s *Deutschland schafft sich ab*. For one compelling example, see his 14 October 2010 interview with Leo Busch, broadcast on n-tv: <http://www.n-tv.de/mediathek/sendungen/buschatn-tv/Kartoffeln-vs-Kanaken-article1717321.html>

Germans who feel that their culture is superior, political debates about integration, and nationalism of all stripes. In the midst of all this derision, however, Somuncu offers some keen insights into his own path toward finding his identity, including reflections on discrimination he has experienced (from his assignment to an *Ausländer*-only class of students on his first day of school to being type-cast in small *Gastarbeiter* and *Kanaksta* parts as an actor), as well as incisive observations about what Turks and Germans have in common.

After submitting to roles as a “Quotenkanake” (also the title of one of the sketches in his *Hitler Kebab* program), Somuncu explains that he was ready to take up the challenge of playing Hitler and thereby do his part toward working through the German past. Yet the multitude of *Mein Kampf* performances left their traces, and he claims that he played Hitler “bis zur Selbstverleugnung, bis zur Selbstverstümmelung”—to the point that he would find himself spontaneously saying “Hitler” on the street or whenever the name popped into his head (*Hitler Kebab* CD). His comic style of presentation, accompanied by a talent for manipulating his voice and facial expressions, is merely a mask for the message he is trying to impart: both the “Quotenkanake” and the mythologized image of Hitler are exaggerations that are packaged and sold, yet they prevent us from recognizing our common humanity. In an interview from March 2005, Somuncu used himself as an example to illustrate this point: “Ich bin kein türkischer Schauspieler oder türkischer Kabarettist, ich bin in erster Linie ein Mensch und habe eine Meinung zu allen Themen” (Tabeling).

Somuncu’s insistence on shared humanity above and beyond “Turkish” and/or/versus “German” labels also permeates his 2009 book, *Der Antitürke*. Here, Somuncu argues that the stereotypical views that Germans and Turks have of each other are like walls between the two countries. He criticizes proponents of a *Leitkultur* that is conceived as monolithic, dominant, and

superior, and demands a reciprocal process of integration that acknowledges and accepts the cultural transformations that have already occurred. It is also germane to acknowledge, as Graeme Dunphy and Reiner Emig do, that the term *Leitkultur*, as it was originally conceptualized by the German Syrian political scientist Bassam Tibi, referred to a “consensus of values shared by the different communities in Europe” (Dunphy and Emig 20). It was Friedrich Merz, then CDU faction leader in the German parliament, who appropriated the term in 2000 to designate a specifically German *Leitkultur*, launching a debate about models of integration and moving away from the idea of a common European “cultural basis” (ibid.). But the idea of a European “cultural basis” is also fraught, and could instead be viewed as a crisis of European culture, a condition Kevin Robins maintains has been highlighted by the unbalanced relationship between Turkey and Europe. Robins argues that Europe is attempting to preserve and conserve what was once seen as a universal culture while denying the sources of its supposedly endogenous heritage (80-81). A critique of this repression or denial of cultural influence, and of the way that it is paired with an ostensible politics of integration, figures prominently in Somuncu’s *Der Antitürke*. In Somuncu’s view, stubborn insistence on maintaining the preeminence of one “culture” 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 [integration, KB] sinnlos, und beide Seiten leben statt miteinander weiter aneinander vorbei” (*Der Antitürke* 30).

Somuncu reserves particular criticism for Turkish performers who opportunistically cater to stereotyped representations of Turks as well as those who have become entirely estranged from who they are by appropriating clichés as if these were of their own making: “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 also admits to his own complicity in the promotion of stereotypes and takes responsibility for his decisions in the past to accept roles that reinforced those stereotypes. It was not until his mother chastised him for selling himself like a prostitute (*Der Antitürke* 36) that he vowed to never again play a part that reduced him to “Kollega nix verstehen,” a line he delivered in the TV series *Lindenstrasse* for which he claims he was paid 800 DM per word (*Hitler Kebab CD*). What is necessary for true intercultural communication and understanding, Somuncu argues—and this reflects his own evolving approach—is for Turkish German performers to demonstrate their self-determination within German culture while also transforming and differentiating the popular view of the “Turk”:

Der in Deutschland lebende Türke muss aufhören, sich als Deutscher zweiter Klasse zu sehen. Dieses Deutschland gehört zu einem nicht geringen Teil auch den Türken. (...) Die Türken müssen lernen, ihre Ansprüche an Deutschland selbstbewusster zu stellen und dabei ihr eigener Anwalt zu sein. (*Der Antitürke* 143)

In *Der Antitürke*, Somuncu displays his range as a performer, intellectual, and writer. The book addresses a breadth of topics from discussions of relations between Germany and Turkey, migration debates and EU membership, to historical accounts of Turkey’s position in Europe. In his description of the historical evolution of Turkish culture as a blending of productive cultural encounters with East Asia, Somuncu writes against a Turkish self-hatred that Tom Cheesman and others have described as “rooted in a sense of civilizational inferiority” (Cheesman 31) by revealing the external influences that were essential to Europe’s alleged civilizational superiority

(*Der Antitürke* 53-54). This reversal of perspective is compressed in Somuncu's choice of the paradoxical title, *Der Antitürke*, which effectively rejects stereotyped perceptions of Turkishness without dismissing Turkishness itself. While Somuncu points to positive developments among *Deutschtürken*, i.e. those of Turkish heritage living in Germany who have embraced and transformed both identities, he is critical of the Turkish government, which seems to view its citizens abroad as property to be deployed for a variety of political agendas (*Der Antitürke* 85). This assessment of Turkish government policies is shared by Eva Østergaard-Nielsen in her study *Transnational Politics: Turks and Kurds in Germany*, where she observes that the Turkish government sees its citizens in Germany as "a powerful advocate for Turkey in western Europe" (121). Turkish Minister for European Affairs Egemen Bagis tellingly manifested this position in an October 2010 appeal for integration, in which he exhorted Turks in Germany to learn German and adapt to the customs of the country, but simultaneously urged them to see themselves as "Botschafter der Türkei" ("Türkischer Minister").

Somuncu's familiarity with Turkish politics and history, coupled with his identification with Germany, are evidence of his "transnationality," yet he provokes his readers to take the issues further: "Haben die Konflikte in der Türkei wirklich etwas mit uns zu tun? Haben wir sie mit verursacht, sind wir mitverantwortlich, gar schuld an ihnen? Und was hat das alles mit dem Zusammenleben von Türken und Deutschen zu tun?" (*Der Antitürke* 95). Not only does Somuncu want his readers to recognize the interconnectedness of German and Turkish relations, he also wants them (us) to become more informed cultural and political consumers. He criticizes an official policy of religious and cultural tolerance that is grounded in ignorance:

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 und mehr Willen zur Aufklärung von Wissenslücken... (*Der Antitürke* 110)

Instead of insisting on forced tolerance and accepting what they hear at face value, Germans, Turks, and *Deuschtürken* should inform themselves about history, traditions, and religious practices. In the process, cultural aversions and anxieties could be lifted, and demands for one-way integration would be defused (*Der Antitürke* 126). Somuncu concludes the book with his ideals for both Turkey and Germany: that they become open, cosmopolitan, and progressive societies confident in their interactions with their citizens (*Der Antitürke* 150). In advocating informed, critical intolerance borne of dialogue, engagement, and knowledge as well as a firm commitment to democratic principles, Somuncu can be seen as the purveyor of a new enlightenment as a bulwark against both cultural relativism and ethnocentrism. This message, however, can most readily be discerned in his writings and interviews, and is only visible in fragments in his comedy routines.

In his most recent programs, Somuncu has taken a more aggressive approach to his enlightenment mission, insulting his audience, escalating the violence of his rhetoric and the level of vulgarity in his performances—earning the label *Aggro-Comedy* (as a parallel to *Aggro-Rap*)—to the point where one could ask whether he has sacrificed substance for spectacle. In his *Hassprediger liest BILD* program, he routinely used the first half of his stage time to rage against popular media, consumerism, self-deluded individualists and intellectuals, the political leadership in Germany and Turkey, and “unintegrated” Germans, defined as those with no

knowledge of the Turkish language. Emitting a steady stream of seemingly random, expletive-laced polemic mixed with moments of insight into the depth of reflection and social critique he exhibits elsewhere, Somuncu seems to be experimenting with different modes for conveying his ideas. His unpredictability and resistance to categorization have garnered him a loyal following of fans, and he regularly performs to full houses.⁹ In response to criticisms of his more rabid performances, both in the news media and in comments made by viewers online, Somuncu's website concludes that he has achieved just the effect that contemporary political cabaret should strive for: "Harte und zuweilen erbitterte Debatten und letztlich doch eine realistische Abbildung der Meinungsvielfalt im Dickicht ideologischer Verfänglichkeiten."¹⁰

Moving from Hitler to *Hassprediger* with several books, the *Hitler-Kebab* program, and an internet satire show (*Hatenight*) in between, Somuncu has transformed the Turkish German comedy and cabaret scene by relentlessly confronting Germans, Turks, and *Deuschtürken* with their own preconceptions, anxieties, and delusions. Somuncu's affirmation of his simultaneous Germanness and Turkishness enables and justifies his participation in the cultural and political discourse that unites and separates Germany, Turkey, and the EU. His style of performance harnesses hybridity in Homi Bhabha's sense of estranging "the cultural sign" (Bhabha 58). Somuncu at once appropriates and estranges "German" cultural artifacts such as *Mein Kampf* and the *BILD-Zeitung*, and creates what Bhabha has called a "space of negotiation" that is "neither assimilation nor collaboration" (58). What Somuncu is trying to negotiate through his performances is an expanded view of and critical reflections on what constitutes Germanness, Turkishness, and social/cultural belonging.¹¹ Whether his audiences are inspired by the latest

⁹ See interview with Serdar Somuncu and Oliver Polak, "Es gab Bomben und Morddrohungen," *Welt kompakt* 14 April 2010, 10.

¹⁰ See <http://www.somuncu.de/?a=317>.

¹¹ In his use of comedy to promote an expanded view of identity and belonging, Somuncu enacts what Deniz

variant of his message of tolerance-through-intolerance to reflect on their own preconceptions or are simply entertained is an open question. At the end of a performance of *Der Hassprediger liest BILD*, Somuncu—in the role of the hate preacher—foams at the audience: “Meine Intoleranz ist maßlos geworden – ziellos! Sie trifft ins Schwarze oder ins Nichts. Ich weiß nicht mehr was ich damit anfangen soll...” (*Der Hassprediger liest BILD* -Bonus CD). He then—as Serdar—graciously thanks the audience for their attention amidst wild applause and cheers.

Serdar Somuncu has gained a reputation as the “Bad Boy der deutschen Humorlandschaft” (Borowszyk), “Bullterrier des deutschen Kabarets,” and “Prophet der Provokation.”¹² He has assumed an unquestioned place in the German comedy scene and is using his status and popularity to experiment with ways to push audiences into becoming critical and self-critical consumers of cultural politics. Somuncu may be the most compelling example of the hybrid as the identificatory model for Turkish German performers, not only because of his demonstrated ability to engage with Germany’s Nazi past as well as contemporary signs of bigotry, ignorance, and nationalism, but also because of his insistence on the advantages of his mixed identity.¹³ Somuncu’s performances, interviews, and writings demonstrate the interface between integration debates, popular media, and Turkish German cultural production and have transformed the cabaret/comedy/political theater stage into a site of transnational intervention that demands reciprocity and informed critical engagement.

Göktürk has described as a kind of comic potential in “the transnational and transethnic imagination” that “can suggest liberating rhetorical positions beyond territorially grounded notions of identity and belonging, and can destabilize dominant practices of inclusion and exclusion.” See Deniz Göktürk, “Strangers in Disguise: Role-Play beyond Identity Politics in Anarchic Film Comedy,” *New German Critique* 92 (Spring-Summer 2004): 103.

¹² Quoted on the back cover of *Der Antitürke*.

¹³ As Dunphy and Emig note in their introduction to *Hybrid Humour*, while hybridization may generate confusion, it also allows “migrants to merge their cultures into a personal cultural mélange and celebrate hybridity as their actual identity” (9). This celebratory quality of hybridity is also noted by Tom Cheesman. In distinguishing different approaches to identity among the growing middle-class Turkish German population, Cheesman refers to those who “celebrate their hybridity and cultivate styles of transnational individualism” (14). It is important to recognize, however, that this approach is one among many, and that to proclaim that all Turkish Germans embrace and celebrate hybridity would be tantamount to a new homogenization of what is an intrinsically heterogeneous experience.

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