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## Analytical Alternatives:

### AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. LESLIE A. ADELSON

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Prof. Leslie A. Adelson is the Chair of the Department of German Studies at Cornell University and author of the award winning study of feminism and German identity *Making Bodies, Making History* (Nebraska UP, 1993). Adelson has recently translated and edited the first major English-language publication of essays by Turkish-German critic Zafer Senocak *Atlas of a Tropical Germany* (Nebraska UP, 2000). On the occasion of a talk entitled “Back to the Future and Beyond ‘Two Worlds’: Turkish Lines of Thought in Contemporary German Literature and Memory Work”, delivered at the University Cincinnati, Susanne Buckesfeld and Susanne Lenné were given the opportunity to have the following conversation on changing questions of identity and critical terminology, on migrant literature and on the present state of German Studies.

**FOCUS:** Can you give us a short summary of your academic career?

**Adelson:** I began graduate studies with the intention of writing a dissertation on concepts of subjectivity in the late eighteenth century. It wasn't until I finished my course work that I decided to write a dissertation on something very contemporary instead because I had become very interested in the work that Botho Strauss was doing in the 1970s. So I wrote a dissertation on the early prose of Botho Strauss, which – although the author later became famously controversial – wasn't very well known at the time. After that I was increasingly drawn to women's literature and feminist theory, partly because certain notions of the feminine also circulate in Botho Strauss's work in important ways, and also because I felt that the scholarship emerging on Strauss failed to address those particular aspects. So, oddly enough, I came to feminist theory via my work on Strauss. As I deepened my work on feminist theory and German literature in the post-war era, I grew dissatisfied with certain commonplaces informing that intersection, and I started looking around for material that would allow me to challenge them. In particular I was interested in diversifying

the notion of “woman” in post-war German literature. At the same time I was interested in German-Jewish studies since 1945 and especially since 1965, but the staid dichotomy of “German/Jewish” seemed less than helpful for the kind of cultural analysis I wanted to pursue. All this led me to more multicultural concerns generally and finally to Turkish-German narratives.

**FOCUS:** That partly answers our second question: What spurred your interest in German literature by and about minorities in the historical and socio-political discourse?

**Adelson:** What I have just given you is the trajectory of my academic development in terms abstracted from my personal intellectual development. I would additionally say that the influx of Turkish migrants has changed the landscape of contemporary German culture and literature in some significant ways that haven’t yet been fully grasped by analytical paradigms for looking at contemporary literature. This intrigues me. One of the difficulties I find in my work on this particular project is that many people who are interested in Turkish-German literature are not necessarily interested in theoretical questions. And many scholars interested in theory do not necessarily have any interest in “minority” literature. I am trying to bring these two different fields of scholarly inquiry together. One of the larger questions that concern me is: What are the cultural effects of Turkish migration? Or, put in more general terms: How can we better understand the cultural effects of international migration at the turn to the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**FOCUS:** Your book *Making Bodies, Making History* (1993) focuses exclusively on West Germany in the seventies and eighties. Could a similar analysis with gender and race at its center have been carried out on women’s writing in the East? Where do you see parallels and differences?

**Adelson:** That’s a good question. I focused on West German literature because that’s my area of specialization. If I were a specialist in GDR literature, I would have a better answer to your question. I don’t think the same kind of analysis could have been done on East German literature, partly because that particular book focuses not just on women’s writing in the German sphere, but on specific questions of embodiment and ac-

countability with regard to both West German studies and Western-style women’s studies at the time. The whole discourse on accountability in West German culture vis-à-vis the Nazi past was significantly different from the discourse in the East, for obvious reasons. The official doctrine of the GDR was shared by many intellectuals in the GDR, who took as their point of departure a very different understanding of the relationship between “the other Germany” in broad historical terms and the Third Reich. How exactly women’s writing in the GDR played out in relationship to those particular questions, I couldn’t say off the top of my head without rereading the relevant texts with an eye to such a comparison.

**FOCUS:** You conclude your book with the assertion that “[t]he ongoing process of German ‘unification’ will undoubtedly shift the ground of figuring identity in a German context many times over as we turn toward a new marking of time.” Did these shifts indeed take place and, if so, how would you characterize some of these in terms of the production of German cultural identity?

**Adelson:** I think they have taken place and I think they are taking place as we speak. It is a very fluid field. Certainly, in the wake of unification, there has been a new generation of writers. Since 1990 we have seen many public and private debates about German identity. Partly also because of a shift in the federal government we have seen a new attitude toward Germany’s place in the world, toward Germany as a nation.

At the same time I would have to say that I don’t think there are any pat answers about German identity or identities since 1990. There are many arguments, questions, and concerns, both nationally and internationally, but this field is in no way decided. I was about to say: “If I were to write that book today,” but it occurs to me that I wouldn’t write that book today. The notion of identity no longer strikes me as particularly useful in analytical terms. I think that it served a certain purpose about ten years ago, but I think that people use the word “identity” too often today without really interrogating what that term is meant to do analytically. Especially in the field of migrant culture and “minority” literature, scholars invoke the word “identity” more frequently than I consider helpful. Too often it is taken as both uncritical starting point and unquestioned ending point for the analysis. In other words, the mistake is to assume: I am writing about Turkish literature. This must therefore mean that Turkish

identity is the main question that propels this literature. And then I will conclude by saying this is what this book shows us about Turkish identity.' The work that I am doing now is geared very much towards finding alternatives to an analytical emphasis on identity.

On the other hand, even though I don't think "identity" is a particularly useful analytical term, it doesn't mean that other people aren't talking about it in ways that are politically important. The discussions about identity go on, as I am sure you know. One thing that has been consistent in discussions of German national identity is that the dichotomy between East and West continues to inform journalistic and scholarly discourse. And yet this discourse is also subject to change over time. Other factors are rendering that particular dichotomy less significant. This has to do in part with the trend towards globalization, as unified Germany is part of a global economy that is itself in a state of constant transformation. That changes the way we talk about German-German relations and the continuing influence of immigration – again, only in part.

**FOCUS:** In *Making Bodies, Making History*, you claim that earlier discussions of individual conscience are no longer adequate for the time period between 1968 and 1989. With renewed literary attempts in the 1990s to come to terms with the Holocaust, how would you describe the function of the body in more recent works by authors such as Bernhard Schlink (*The Reader*, 1997) or W.G. Sebald (*The Emigrants*, 2000)?

**Adelson:** Many people now argue – I have just read a piece by Katharina Gerstenberger, where she makes this point – that there is less interest on the part of younger writers in coming to terms with the Holocaust and the Third Reich. So the assumption that the interest in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is constant would have to be questioned. Of course, this arena has always been characterized by many different attitudes. But more so since unification, there has been a move away from more familiar orientations toward the guilt and trauma of the past. On the other hand and on the national level, you also have the obsession with the national monument to the murdered Jews and the Holocaust in Berlin. Certainly in terms of official governmental discourses, the sense of responsibility vis-à-vis that past is constant. And Germany is unique among modern nations in that regard.

In terms of how those recent literary texts that remain concerned with the legacy of the Holocaust treat the question of embodiment ....

Again, I like to work very closely with texts. Because I have not looked at those texts with these particular questions in mind, I do not have a detailed answer at my fingertips for this, but I would say that in general the status of the body changes over time. When I wrote *Making Bodies, Making History*, I focused on the question of embodiment, not because I was interested in celebrating the body as a site of identity or even as a site of resistance, but because I was looking at the body as an imagined site in literary texts, where discourse and history meet in complex ways. Of course, bodies in literary texts are just imagined, they are not real, not actual bodies. So even talking about bodies in literary texts is a highly mediated procedure.

Of the two authors you mentioned, Sebald is especially interesting, because even though there are bodies in his work, we get a much more heightened literary consciousness of the mediatedness of historical embodiment. In other words, you will not read Sebald's texts to get a sense of this person embodying a particular historical development or a particular historical problem. But we have this incredible layering and a sense of looking at bodies and their historical trajectories from around many corners. Schlink is quite different because with Schlink, the bodies you see are the bodies you get. This indicates that different writers take very different approaches to similar questions. For me, Schlink is much less interesting a writer than Sebald because Schlink's writing style is much more conventional.

**FOCUS:** You lament the fact that at the time of the publication of your book in 1993 no novel by an Afro-German woman existed. How do you comment on a book such as *Dabeim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben* by Ika Hügel-Marshall, which was published in 1998?

**Adelson:** I have recently taught *Dabeim unterwegs* in my undergraduate class on minority writings in Germany. *Dabeim unterwegs*, which by the way has just been published in English translation under the title *Invisible Woman*, is a very important book in many ways. As far as I know, it is the first book-length Afro-German autobiography of the post-war German period to be published in Germany by a writer who is German, or conceives of herself at least in part as German. Around the same time Hans Massaquoi's *Destined to Witness* (1999) appeared in the United States. It appeared the same year in German translation under the title "Neger, Neger,

*Schornsteinfeger*". Although Massaquoi's autobiography is written from a much more distanced perspective, one would have to mention this account along with Ika Hügel-Marshall's *Dabeim unterwegs*. I say "distanced" here in the sense that Massaquoi has not lived in Germany in a very long time and he is not seeking to intervene in contemporary German life or letters, whereas Hügel-Marshall is. Her writing is, I would say, more straightforwardly autobiographical than literary in style. The important aspect of this book is the content of the story that she has to tell. What one sees when reading this book is the enormous difficulty that she experienced in finding a voice for her story, and that is extraordinarily significant. To my knowledge there still is no novel per se by an Afro-German writer, although there may be one in the drawers somewhere that is making its way to a publisher. Eventually there will be one, I am sure.

**FOCUS:** In your recent article "Touching Tales of Turks, Germans, and Jews: Cultural Alterity, Historical Narrative, and Literary Riddles for the 1990s" you state that "[t]he notion that Turks writing in Germany could articulate something that is not yet otherwise already known [...] is still relatively foreign in German Studies" (*New German Critique* 80 [2000]: 118). In what way do you see yourself forging a new path in German Studies?

**Adelson:** It is difficult to formulate an answer to that question in one sentence. I indicated before that I am interested in developing an alternative critical terminology for thinking about migrant's literature, especially the literature of Turkish migration, that would not rely on terms such as "identity" or "home." For political reasons, certainly, those issues have been foregrounded in what scholarship there is in this arena of "minority" literature. But I would see my own work as developing a model of analysis that is not primarily concerned with the question of "belonging," especially if "belonging" is understood through the lens of national identity. What I am really trying to get at is a way of thinking about the cultural legacy of migration or the cultural intervention that migration engenders in ways that focus on the literary text. My assumption is that the literary text, if it is good, tells us something that we do not already know before we read it. And this would be my criticism of some of the existing scholarship in this field: that the focus on "belonging" and "identity" tends to make scholars who approach this material assume at the outset that these texts and writers speak from a position of exclusion and thus express a

fairly predictable criticism of German culture as exclusionary. It is not that this is entirely wrong, but after you have said that for a while, it gets old and does not give us tools to analyze specific literary texts that may be quite different among themselves. My sense is that this focus on questions of exclusion and belonging vis-à-vis migrants' relationship to mainstream German culture has kept us from perceiving the more interesting aspects of some of the literature coming out of the sphere of migration. I see myself as trying to contribute something new by looking at what I think is really interesting in these texts and developing an alternative critical repertoire for even beginning to think about them.

**FOCUS:** How is Claudia Brodsky Lacour's notion of a "line of thought," to which you express your indebtedness in your "Touching Tales" article, related to your own method of argumentation?

**Adelson:** This term – as I have adapted it from Brodsky Lacour's brilliant study of Descartes as a specifically modern philosopher – helps me achieve two goals. First, it helps me conceptualize the ways in which story lines that seem to be about very different historical periods, cultural references, or personal experiences intersect. For example, in the article you mentioned, I look at the interlocking narratives of Turkish migration to Germany and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany vis-à-vis the Nazi past. Second, I use the term "lines of thoughts" to articulate the emergence of something new in contemporary German literature. I am trying to provide a critical vocabulary to account for something that did not exist before and that cannot be captured in terms of familiar terms of reference or representation, but only through more elusive processes of abstraction. Brodsky Lacour's arguments about Descartes's relationship to modernity helped me understand more clearly what I needed to say about the difference between seeing Turks as a social referent and seeing "things Turkish" as a set of abstract historical processes informing contemporary German literature.

**FOCUS:** As you may know, the Tageszeitung in Berlin (TAZ) used to publish a weekly bilingual supplement, entitled *Persembe*, which was produced by both Turkish-Germans and Germans. Would you consider this project as one of those "touches" you refer to in your article? Is this a trend that promises success in going beyond the "two worlds" model that

you critique in your manifesto "Against Between" (in *Unpacking Europe*, 2001)?

**Adelson:** This is also a very good question. I think I want to be very cautious in applying the term "touching tales," because my work on that term really focuses on narratological phenomena in literary texts. For that reason, I would be reluctant to broaden it to journalism or documentaries. The potential danger in applying it to something like *Persembe* would be that we wind up re-inscribing the assumption that you have Turkish culture on the one hand and German culture on the other. And what I am trying to do with the term "touching tales" in literary analysis is to articulate a very different understanding of cultural contact, one that is much messier than the stereotype of national identities or cultural divides. However, I would also say that a journalistic innovation such as *Persembe* signals something new. But this does not necessarily mean that people have a new language that adequately describes that newness. People tend to resort to familiar categories just because they do not know how else to think about something they haven't encountered before.

One of the things that I argue in my work on the cultural effects of Turkish migration is that Turks and Germans in Germany today share more culture than is commonly presumed. The common assumption is that Turks and Germans are literally worlds apart and that they will always stay worlds apart. I don't believe that this is true. But I will have to write a lot to make that argument persuasively, because many people see these "worlds apart" as an absolute given.

**FOCUS:** Here in the United States, particular current relevance has been attributed to your translations of Zafer Senocak's essays on politics and culture, which appeared as *Atlas of a Tropical Germany* (2000), in the context of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath. How do you respond to that?

**Adelson:** It is interesting that you should mention that because last August – before the September 11<sup>th</sup> events – I was interviewed for an MLA radio program that is distributed through National Public Radio. This particular segment will be devoted to minority writing in Europe. The discussion with me comprised only a third of the final program. The other sections will address Arabs in France and Africans in Italy. This program will not be aired until the summer of 2002. If I had been interviewed after September 11<sup>th</sup>, I probably would have stressed other things. Certainly I would have talked about the question of Turks in Germany

Certainly I would have talked about the question of Turks in Germany partly with an eye to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

I think the translations of Zafer Senocak do take on a heightened sense of urgency in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> in some ways but not in others. Greater urgency derives from the fact that those essays are in part about the place of immigrants from a country that has a rich Muslim history. What roles do or should these immigrants have to play in a new Germany and in a new Europe? One thing that is especially important about Senocak's essays is that he really does foreground shared aspects of Turkish and German culture without downplaying real or potential conflict.

On the other hand, the Turkish case is complicated by the fact that Turkey is a secular country and – in its own self-perception – decidedly Western and European. At the same time there is a majority Muslim population in Turkey. But the relationship within Turkey between Muslim life and state governance is very conflicted and extremely complicated. The Turkish population in Germany may be largely Muslim, but there are also many secular Turks in Germany. This diversity in the Turkish community has to be accounted for. It would be wrong to say that in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> the Senocak essays take on greater significance because they all address a Muslim culture. Things are not that simple. There are significant Muslim influences at issue in some of the essays, but there are also other influences that are very significant, especially given the modern Turkish history of secularization.

**FOCUS:** Within the last few years much has been said about changes in the field of German Studies in America. How do you, as chair of the Department of German Studies at Cornell University, respond to such developments?

**Adelson:** This is a question that I would be inclined to ask job candidates. I have a few different things to say about this. One is that the department that I now chair has, for some time, been recognized as being at the forefront of what for a while now has been a very rigorous move towards more interdisciplinary study of German literature. This is a move that I have found intellectually very exciting and rewarding and I think, in institutional terms, it also has future potential. However, there are many different approaches to interdisciplinary studies of German literature. There are

that students take isolated courses in different disciplines, all of which relate to the study of things German. So you can take courses in political science or history or economics. That approach is especially useful for someone who might eventually be going into Foreign Service or international business or international law. Another approach, which is more akin to what we do at Cornell, is to have a department that is primarily literature-centered, but with many different interdisciplinary ties that shape our interactions with other departments and additionally inform the type of research we conduct or the courses that we ourselves offer. Each faculty member at Cornell does interdisciplinary work that enriches the practice of textual interpretation, again with primary interests in reading literature, film, and in some cases philosophy. A much more radical approach to interdisciplinarity is represented by the German Department at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. They actually bring other disciplines into the German Department. That is a more radical step and a very interesting project. Its future successes remain to be seen. Will their graduates be able to get jobs in more traditional German literature departments? Such graduates may be especially appealing to other departments throughout the country as institutions look to hire new people who can build stronger bridges between German departments and other units of a given university or college.

The need to make stronger connections with other units is something that many German departments are struggling with, because German enrollments generally are not growing. I think Ohio is a little bit different in that regard because of such a large population of descendants of German immigrants. You have a built-in pool of students with a personal interest in that language. That does not really apply to other parts of the country that much. Overall many German departments are struggling with dropping enrollments. At Cornell we actually have not had that problem. We have held steady or better; our enrollments have actually grown by 6% over last year. Whenever enrollments go down, institutional questions arise. Should these departments be maintained? If they are to be maintained, should they be reduced in size? Partly for administrative reasons and partly for intellectual reasons, every German department, whether it wants to be a traditional German literature department or not, needs to think of ways to build bridges to other sectors of the university. German departments will not survive if they serve only a very limited pool of German majors.

Of course, there has been a huge German influence on the very structure of university life in the United States and on intellectual developments far beyond German literature – just think of Freud and Marx, to name two especially well known examples. Developing English-language courses on German topics and thinkers of broad interest and influence is one way German departments can draw on strengths that they have. Film courses also harbor great opportunities – perhaps more so than literature today. This would mean expanding some German departments beyond what they have traditionally done. This does not mean, nor should it mean, that all German departments should do the same thing. One has to recognize that different departments have different strengths. And these different strengths appeal to different kinds of students. Every department should build on the strengths that it has, but it should also build new strengths with an eye to new kinds of institutional needs that a German department might help to serve.

Having said that, I also think that in the future we are going to see even more focused attention on literature in some ways. There have always been some criticisms levied against cultural studies, not all of which have been warranted. The charge that cultural studies ignore literature is true of the weakest representatives of cultural studies. The kind of cultural studies that generated genuine intellectual excitement and institutional renewal from the late 1980s through the 1990s will be complemented and/or challenged by new critical paradigms that have yet to emerge. My sense is that there will be a renewed, although perhaps unconventional focus on literature.

**FOCUS:** We thank you for this interview.

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