

Postmigrant remembering in mnemonic affective spaces

Senthuran Varatharajah's *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* and Pooneh Rohi's *Araben*

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Introduction

In his astute discussion on postmigration, literary scholar Roger Bromley argues that postmigration can serve as “a useful concept for exploring the conflicts and contradictions, the dialectic of belonging and unbelonging, the split subjectivities, which, in many cases, are a feature of postmigrant belonging” (2017: 36). This suggests that, for postmigrant individuals, belonging is not necessarily a straightforward concept, and that processes of forming a sense of belonging may be disrupted or strained in the individual's relationship with their surroundings. Two texts which illuminate this condition in detail are the German novel *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* (Before the Increase of the Signs, 2016) by Senthuran Varatharajah and the Swedish novel *Araben* (The Arab, 2014) by Pooneh Rohi.¹ Both texts depict protagonists whose migratory journeys are over, and who look back on their trajectories of travel and settling in in Germany and Sweden respectively, while, at the same time, addressing the tensions in the protagonists' lives in relation to the societies they live in. *Araben* weaves together two storylines, that of a man only called the Arab who fled from Iran to Sweden, and that of Yasaman, a young woman who, as it turns out, is the Arab's daughter. *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* is presented as a Facebook conversation between two people in their mid-twenties who arrived in Germany as children with their parents; Senthil from Sri Lanka, and Valmira from Kosovo. In Senthil and Valmira's conversation, and particularly in the Arab's strand of *Araben*, memory plays an undeniably strong role in influencing the ways that the protagonists negotiate their sense of belonging. The Arab's parts of Rohi's novel comprise one single day, and Senthil and Valmira's Facebook conversation

1 The translations from *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* are by me, for the translations from *Araben*, I am indebted to Dr Ian Giles for his generous help. Translations are for reference only.

takes place within one week; embedded into the set frames of these time windows are analepses in which histories of marginalisation and othering unfold, which become significant to the protagonists' realities in the narrative present. The protagonists, however, react differently to these experiences of marginalisation, as the Arab turns inwards, and Senthil and Valmira towards each other. Focusing on the protagonists' different reactions to past and present, this chapter follows two vectors of enquiry: firstly, it traces the affects that emerge from the protagonists' processes of remembering with respect to the present; and secondly, it displays the protagonists' conflicts as embedded into, and induced by, the societies they live in. The examination of the protagonists' affective experiences in close relation to societal structures seeks to shift the focus away from relating the protagonists' struggles to migration, and instead towards scrutinizing prevalent exclusionary mechanisms in the societies themselves.

When attempting to trace the affective resonances between past and present, affect offers itself as a critical angle for the textual analysis, but it can prove to be a somewhat unruly category to be comprised in one binding definition. Put simply, affect can be understood as the power to affect the world and be affected by it in turn. Affect circumscribes our capacity to think through and feel, to act in and react to, this world, and the encounters we have with others. In this sense, affect reaches beyond the physical boundary of the skin and includes all those forces that pass between bodies. This makes affect simultaneously corporeal and intellectual, as well as situational and relational: not only human encounters become affectively charged, but also the situations and places where these encounters take place. With regard to the texts considered here, this amounts to asking which affects emerge in those spaces and situations where memory is produced in relation with the present. These affects, in turn, make it possible to gauge the impact of memory on the protagonists' lives, and to examine, to paraphrase the anthropologist Regina Römhild, the societies in which the protagonists live from the margins these societies have themselves created (2017: 69).

The texts' protagonists are postmigrant characters insofar as their migratory journeys have reached their conclusion and they have settled into the societies of their so-called host countries. In this respect, the term postmigrant is understood as a temporal phrase, but it also holds an epistemological dimension in the sense that it encapsulates the question of when and how "someone ceases to be thought of as a 'migrant' or in terms of their supposed ethnicity" (Bromley 2017: 36). When, as Bromley suggests, the term migrant is used to categorise someone from the outside, it becomes problematic, as it is "often mobilised as part of aggressive identity-ascriptions and processes of othering" (Petersen/Schramm 2017: 6). These identity ascriptions are particularly questionable considering that, as Römhild contends, European societies in general "are characterised through and through by the experiences and effects of coming, going and staying" (2017: 69), so

that migratory experiences shape not only the lives of those migrating and their descendants, but have an effect on any given society as a whole. Nevertheless, as Römheld further argues, “in the established discourses, which revolve around ‘immigration’ and ‘integration’, migration is still treated as a separate problem as if the ‘majority society’ (conceived as its opposite and automatically assumed to be national and white) had nothing to do with it” (ibid.). According to Römheld’s observation, postmigrant societies are by no means societies that consider migration and pluralisation normal or uncomplicated; rather the opposite in fact, as Islamic studies scholar Riem Spielhaus clarifies when she identifies those societies as postmigrant which struggle with the effects of past and present migration movements, and “with the pluralization of their populations” (2012: 97).² In this light, I understand the term postmigrant, or postmigrant society, not as positively utopian, but as a term that implies all those negotiations and conflicts that arise in the whole of any society whose discourses insist on a separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Rephrasing Bromley’s earlier mentioned epistemological dimension of the term postmigrant, the question would then be why someone does not cease to be thought of as a migrant, and why people are continuously judged by their supposed ethnicity.

Remembering: Turning inwards

In *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, Senthil and Valmira present themselves as intelligent young people who have strong affiliations with the German places Marburg and Berlin, but also with places such as New York, Tokyo, Oslo, London, Toronto, Boston and Montreal, where they visited their diasporic families, or spent longer periods of time. Navigating their mobile lives confidently, Senthil and Valmira share a sense of belonging to Germany, while they, simultaneously, transnationalise a perceived notion of a homogeneous German national identity. Looking back on similarities and differences in their respective lives, Senthil and Valmira compare their experiences of settling into German society in a process of remembering that consist of conscious and deliberate acts, as memory is constructed and, at the same time, questioned, in dialogue. In *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, memory is presented as the workings of attention and focus, whereas in *Araben*, memory occurs as a force with very different dynamics than that of a conscious reconstruction. The Arab is overwhelmed with a flood of memories that he, although he would like to, cannot control, and the reiteration of similar phrases such as “it flows to him” (Rohi 2015: 155),³ or that the memories are “like an ice cold

2 “mit der Pluralisierung ihrer Bevölkerung”.

3 “det strömma till honom”.

shower" (ibid.: 28),⁴ illustrates that the force of these memories is irrepressible. Yet, these memories instigate conscious reflections in which the Arab makes connections between his life in the present and his past. Although these two processes of remembering are so different in nature, memories are, in both cases, instantiated from the vantage point of the narrative present to make sense of present realities through reflections on past events. Before examining in more detail how memories emerge or are constructed, and how they affect the protagonists' self-understanding, I shall first turn to the question of where remembering takes place. These spaces are more than just a backdrop, as they facilitate the emergence of particular affects, and thus become themselves imbued with affect; in an adaptation of literary scholar Frederik Tygstrup's term "affective spaces" (2012: 204), they become mnemonic affective spaces.

As previously stated, the Arab's parts of Rohi's novel comprise one single day. Outwardly, nothing much happens on this wintry Tuesday just before Christmas: from morning until evening, the Arab travels through Stockholm, changes from commuter trains to the underground and back to the train and looks out of train windows onto the snowy cityscape, without an obvious purpose or destination. Yet, within this apparently arbitrary outward journey, an inward journey unfolds in the form of memories which, seemingly without any order or control, overwhelm the Arab. The train journey becomes an inward journey of reminiscence, and the anonymous public spaces of the trains turn into one single mnemonic space that gives these memories room to surface. Although the Arab appears turned inwards and towards the memories of his past when he sits "absorbed, almost inapproachable" (Rohi 2015: 20),⁵ the first paragraph, introducing the Arab through free indirect discourse, suggests otherwise: "The Arab, who is probably a Turk or a Kurd or a Persian, is like a piece of garbage [...] he thinks himself" (ibid.: 7);⁶ and, when we learn that, "He laughs for himself about the thought" (ibid.: 7),⁷ the Arab's reflections reveal a complex and intricate entanglement of past and present, self-attributions and ascriptions by others. The fact that the Arab considers himself a failure while he is involuntarily flooded with memories suggests that this self-perception is triggered by the past. Yet, as the Arab finds this thought ridiculous, he distances himself from this perception, which implies that he, instead, engages with the ways in which he assumes to be perceived from the outside. This outside, as it is presented through the Arab's consciousness, sees him not only as a failure, a piece of garbage even, but also as one of many, as a man

4 "som en iskall dusch".

5 "[f]örsjunken, nästan okontaktbar".

6 "Araben, som nog egentligen är en turk eller kurd eller pers, kan liknas vid en avfallsprodukt [...] tänker han själv".

7 "Han ler för sig själv vid tanken".

without a name and an identity, as one of an undifferentiated mass of 'Arabs'. This view is reminiscent of dominant exclusionary discourses that tend to stereotype and construct anyone as 'other' by way of racialised differences. In the anonymous space of the trains, we see an anonymous man, whose anonymity, however, is undercut, since he is anonymous, yet othered, and who is, moreover, acutely aware of being othered despite his absorption.

As the anonymous space of the trains is in motion, it is a transitory and contingent space, a liminal zone, which highlights not only the contingency of memory itself, but the uncertainty that the Arab experiences while he himself is confronted with his relation to the past, and his surroundings in the present. While, within the Arab's outward journey, time follows the linear temporal sequence of changing trains, and precise arrival and departure times, within his inward journey, the linearity of time is suspended, as the remembered past unfolds in associative leaps without linear order or coherence, so that present and past become juxtaposed, and can be read next to each other. In the Arab's, as well as in the reader's perception, they exist simultaneously in the same time zone, and past events come into view, "clearer than the platform he walks on" (ibid.: 55).⁸ Hence, the places and events of the Arab's past spread into a network before the eyes of the reader, who can follow closely how failure is produced in the intersections of past, present, self-perception and ascriptions from the outside.

The windows into the Arab's past further reveal that a sense of failure is generated inter-relationally, and that it is closely linked to a hegemonic notion of masculinity, which Raewyn Connell defines as "the configuration of gender practice [...] which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2005: 77). In a conversation between Yasaman and her mother (in one of Yasaman's parts of *Araben*), the mother tells Yasaman: "Your dad earned good money when he led the factory. We lived a great life. House, car, money [...] Every week he came home and put the entire salary on the coffee table [...] And I could use the money as I wanted" (Rohi 2015: 218).⁹ Yasaman's mother bemoans the loss of a time in which she lived a comfortable life because of the money her husband earned and placed at her disposal. For the Arab, being "Mr. Engineer" (ibid.: 133) entails what we can call a "patriarchal dividend" in the sense that he gains "a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command" (Connell 2005: 82).¹⁰ However, as this role is socially, culturally and inter-relationally constructed, it "will come under pressure when it becomes impos-

8 "tydligare än perrongen han går på".

9 "Din pappa tjänade jättebra med pengar när han ledde fabriken. Vi levde ett jättebra liv. Hus, bil, pengar [...] Varje vecka kom han hem och la hela lönen på soffbordet [...] Sen fick jag använda pengarna som jag ville".

10 "Herr ingenjör".

sible for men to win the bread" (ibid.: 90). Indeed, when the Arab is sent to prison in consequence of his involvement with the Communist Party, he loses his job as an engineer, which, concomitantly, jeopardises his marriage as he cannot win the bread any longer, and it precipitates a crisis for his masculinity: "He couldn't bear that she saw him for the man he was. That he had become" (Rohi 2015: 135).¹¹ Failure emerges here in the tension between husband and wife: the Arab is not only emasculated in his own eyes, but his loss of masculinity is confirmed by her gaze, and the Arab knows that he has failed his wife as a man.

Through yet another window into the Arab's past, we learn that his immigration to Sweden is motivated by the Arab's aspiration to recuperate his sense of masculinity: "Over there, everything would start over. Another life, a second chance. A house, a car. Freedom [...] He would give this to her" (ibid.: 131).¹² By regaining his masculinity and the status he has lost in Iran, the Arab hopes to win back the love of his wife by proving to her that he can be the provider that she expects him to be. However, the Arab's new reality in Sweden is not congruent with his dreams: his engineering degree is not recognised in Sweden, and although he studies engineering in Stockholm and subsequently finds work with the telecommunications company Ericsson, he is soon made redundant, even though, as the Arab says to himself, "you're the most qualified" and "Olsson, Petter, Moberg and Ålind were all employed after you" (ibid.: 256).¹³ Considering that these names are stereotypical Swedish names, the Arab's dismissal rather appears to be the result of discriminatory racist practices than personal failure, and systemic barriers impede the Arab's chances to realise his expected role as a man.

Be that as it may, the Arab comes to realise that he has changed: "His belly bulged out and was taut against his belt. He had aged [...] He was someone else here. Another man" (ibid.: 163).¹⁴ The Arab has lost his former sense of masculinity on an inter-relational, societal and embodied level, which is, once again, confirmed by his wife, who divorces him once it becomes clear that he cannot provide for her anymore. During his reflections on the train, the Arab recognises that even his life-long credo is a fallacy: "The one who sacrifices most and lives the hardest life reaps the profit in the end" (ibid.: 96).¹⁵ Divorced and alone, estranged from his children, unemployed and on benefits, there is no profit to reap, and all the Arab is left with is "the shame that he has brought upon himself and his name"

11 "Han klarade inte av att hon [...] såg på den här mannen som han var. Som han hade blivit".

12 "Där borta skulle allting börja om. Ett annat liv, en andra chans. Ett hus, en bil. Friheten [...] Han skulle ge det till henne."

13 "du är en med mest kompetens"; "både Olsson, Petter, Moberg och Ålind [kom] in efter dig."

14 "Magen putade ut på honom och spände mot bältet. Han hade blivit äldre [...] Han var en annan här. En annan slags man."

15 "Den som offrar mest och lever svårast får utdelningen på slutet".

(ibid.: 202).¹⁶ This shame is increased by the fact that the Arab tries to keep up appearances, as he travels with a briefcase that “contains nothing but a few white sheets of paper” (ibid.: 86).¹⁷ While we learn that the train journey’s purpose is to make it look like the Arab is on his way to, or back from, work, he questions himself: “His face is reflected back. He sees himself. So old now. So worn out [...] Is it possible that he was wrong?” (ibid.: 192).¹⁸ The Arab’s life is mirrored back at him in the same way that he sees his face reflected in the dark train window, and he admits to himself that he not only sees himself as a failure, but that his life is a fake. Through the network of sites that the analepses into the Arab’s past create, we can follow the trajectory of failure; how failure is produced, and how it dominates the Arab’s reminiscing in the narrative present. Hence, failure affectively develops the narrative architecture of the Arab’s part of *Araben*, and “the related emotions”, to borrow Carrie Smith-Prei’s argument, “offer us windows on contextual configurations, be these social or political” (2015: 70). On the one hand, these contextual configurations become evident in the clash between a particular perception of masculinity and restrictive exclusionary immigration policies (at least at that time), and, possibly, racist exclusionary work practices; on the other, they are made visible in the ways in which the Arab establishes relations between his own life experiences, now remembered, and those of the (native, white) Swedes around him.

At the beginning of the text, the Arab feels stereotyped by his surroundings, and towards the end of the text he ‘stereotypes back’:

These people who haven’t seen dictatorships, imprisoned teenagers and endless corridors lined with isolation cells, or heard the screams of tortured students [...] who instead have seen welfare states and pensions, stood in queues without any pushing [...] Had faith and felt safe. Is this reality? (Rohi 2015: 198)¹⁹

This direct comparison between the Arab’s violent past and contemporary Sweden highlights the extent in which his reality deviates from a perceived typical native Swedish reality. Moreover, in the Arab’s view, his reality remains unrecognised by those Swedes whom he stereotypes, and instead, he is seen as a threat to the

16 “skammen som han dragit över sig och sitt namn”.

17 “endast rymmer några vita ark”.

18 “Hans ansikte reflekteras tillbaka. Han ser sig själv. Så gammal nu. Så sliten [...] Kan det vara så att han haft fel?”

19 “De här människorna som inte sett diktaturer, fängslade ungdomar och oändliga korridorer med isoleringsceller eller hört skriken från torterade studenter [...] de som istället sett välfärdsstater och pensioner, ställt sig i kö utan att trängas [...] Haft tilltro och varit trygga. Är detta verkligheten?”

welfare state he describes so cynically. This is implied when the Arab assumes the viewpoint of a derogatory perception of 'others' that he ascribes to the woman opposite him on the train: "a potential wife-beater and rapist who also quite possibly talks too loudly in the library and probably brings his own packed lunch to the café and is likely to be a scrounging benefits recipient" (ibid.: 9).²⁰ This woman comes to stand for the majority of white, native Swedes who, in the Arab's anticipation, construct him as someone who does not know the rules, exploits the Swedish welfare state, and is potentially a criminal. The Arab juxtaposes this perspective with his own opinion not only of Sweden, but of the whole North, which seems to him like "a narrow-minded, lousy little town in the European expanse [...] Like a remote backwater" (ibid.: 253).²¹ From the Arab's viewpoint, the ostensible remoteness of the North is responsible for the insularity of the Swedes, who, with their supposed lack of experience and diverging realities, will never be able to understand him, and this incompatibility of conflicting realities interferes with the Arab's sense of belonging. The narrators' focalisation of the Arab and the use of free indirect discourse allow the reader to share the Arab's reflections and emotions; and, when the Arab distances himself, and simultaneously the reader, from the perceptions he presumes the outside have of him, the text invites the reader to assess the Arab on his own terms, while it, at the same time, grants the reader a view on Swedish society from the Arab's marginalised position.

Through the prism of the Arab's disillusioned perspective of himself and his life in Sweden, the train can be seen as a liminal zone that is suspended in time, and the train journey becomes a metaphor for a life pending in non-belonging. When, as Sara Ahmed asserts, "being-at-home is a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*" (2000: 89, original emphasis), and when belonging is equated with a sense of being-at-home, the fact that the Arab feels, and is made to feel, a failure, would explain that he does not feel he belongs. Yet, the ending of the text suggests otherwise. Ahmed suggests that home, as "the lived experience of a locality" (Brah 1996: 192), is experienced with all senses as it "involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*" (Ahmed 2000: 89, original emphasis). Whilst the Arab travels through Stockholm, he repeatedly comments on the weather, and insinuates that the appreciation of the Swedish winter is yet another national cliché that he is supposed to adopt: "You have to love the winter in this country" (Rohi 2015: 200).²² This comment distances the Arab from a stereotyped Swedish appreciation of winter, but when his train journey

20 "han, potentiell kvinnoemisshandlare och våldtäktsman som även är en potentiell högratäre på biblioteket och kan tänkas medha matsäck på kafé och vara parasiterande bidragstagare".

21 "en inskränkt liten byhåla i det stora Europa [...] Som en liten avkrok."

22 "Man måste älska vintern i detta land."

comes to an end, the Swedish winter inhabits the Arab on his walk home, and he, in turn, fully inhabits his own appreciation of it. The Arab and the space around him leak into each other: “but it is so wonderful to look at the snow and love it [...] The cold invades him without him noticing [...] He feels how it takes over his whole body” (ibid.: 281).²³ Through the Arab’s appreciation of the Swedish winter, failure, which hovered affectively over the Arab’s train journey, yields to a feeling of gratitude, and, at least in this instance, failure and shame are transcended in the Arab’s sense of connectivity and embodied fusion with the cold, which becomes synecdochical for Sweden, and the narrator concludes, “In this moment, he is a grateful man” (ibid.: 281).²⁴

Remembering: Turning towards each other

The mnemonic affective space in which Senthil and Valmira construct their memories in *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* is also, although in different ways, a liminal and contingent space: it is online and virtual, their encounter is not embodied, and their conversation is non-committal insofar as they could leave it at any moment without any consequences. Weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the online and the offline world, Zygmunt Bauman argues that in the offline world, “I am *under control*” because I am “expected [...] to obey, to adjust, to negotiate my place, my role”, whereas in the online world, I am “*in control*”; in addition, an online existence promises “liberation from the discomforts, inconveniences and hardships” (2016: 104, original emphasis) that characterise the offline world. In this sense, the online world grants Senthil and Valmira the freedom to share the hardships of their respective pasts without the regulating forces of the offline world, and with remoteness from the exclusionary discourses which the Arab negotiates in direct contact with his surroundings. While the Arab turns inwards towards his past, and outwards to engage with these discourses, Senthil and Valmira turn towards each other; they are in control, as they can manage and direct their reflections in this alternative online space. However, when Valmira states, “We can only talk to each other from this distance” (Varatharajah 2016: 120),²⁵ and Senthil confirms this with “I know” (ibid.: 121),²⁶ it suggests that it is not only the remoteness from an exclusionary society, but also from each other, which grants

23 “men det är så härligt att se på snön och älska den [...] Kylan tränger in utan att märkas [...] Han känner det ta över hela hans kropp.”

24 “Han är i detta ögonblick en tacksam man.”

25 “Wir können nur aus dieser Entfernung zueinander sprechen”.

26 “ich weiß”.

them the freedom to share and work through memories that are, potentially, painful.

Senthil alludes to the advantages of the online world when he, in a direct reference to Wittgenstein's limits of language, says, "nobody will know from which edges we speak" (ibid.: 30).²⁷ On the one hand, these edges can be viewed as the margins of society from which Senthil and Valmira observe this very society; on the other, this reference reflects Senthil's doubts to capture the significance of their memories with words. At the same time, Senthil uses language to express the contingency of these memories when he says, "I remember",²⁸ only to correct himself immediately afterwards to "I think I can remember" (ibid.: 210),²⁹ suggesting that the events he is recalling might have taken place in the way he recounts them – or slightly different. Discussing the social function of narrative memory, Mieke Bal asserts that the meaning-making process happens in dialogue, as "narrative memory offers some form of feedback that ratifies the memory" (1999: x). As Senthil and Valmira reiterate particular phrases and images to define their memories, they make use of this function: they make their memories tangible not only in their own imagination, but also in that of their interlocutor, and thus ratify their memories and give them reliability in dialogue. In addition, Senthil and Valmira's mutual reassurances imply that there is a certain knowledge of truth within these contingent memories that does not require words anyway. Senthil says, "you know it" (Varatharajah 2016: 129),³⁰ when he assumes that Valmira knows what he means without him having to explain it, and she echoes this notion with, "You know it, I don't need to tell you" (ibid.: 191).³¹ This knowledge of truth is that, although their experiences differ, they produce the same affects. Words might be insufficient to express Senthil and Valmira's experiences accurately, but the unspoken understanding of shared affects grants their memories veracity. Not every detail of what they remember might be correct, whereas the affects are: the truth lies in what these experiences felt like.

Senthil and Valmira not only compare their own experiences, but also mirror their parents' professional histories. Valmira says about her mother, "she wanted to become a neurologist" (ibid.: 75),³² and that she has worked in doctors' surgeries for thirteen years, but as a cleaner; and Senthil responds with, "my mother has

27 "niemand wird wissen, von welchen rändern wir aus sprechen". (Senthil consistently writes German with lower-case initials, thus self-consciously flouting orthographical conventions.)

28 "ich erinnere mich".

29 "ich glaube mich erinnern zu können".

30 "du weißt es".

31 "Du kennst es, ich muss es Dir nicht sagen."

32 "Sie wollte Neurologin werden".

worked as a cleaner for almost twenty-five years.” (ibid.: 84).³³ Although Senthil and Valmira do not explicitly mention it, there is a tacit understanding that their mothers’ careers did not become diverted for lack of ambition, but rather because of exclusionary politics which consider asylum seekers such as their mothers only fit for unskilled work. Moreover, Senthil talks about the “council flat” that they “were allowed to move in” (ibid.: 90),³⁴ and Valmira remembers the time when she “was allowed to go to school” (ibid.: 74).³⁵ The reiteration of the verb to allow – in German *dürfen* – emphasises that Senthil and Valmira are at the mercy of the German government, as their mothers’ work, where they live and what they learn is contingent on German immigration regulations. Harald Welzer asserts that, “[c]ommunicative memory denotes a willful agreement of the members of a group as to what they consider their own past to be, in interplay with the identity-specific grand narrative of the we-group” (2008: 285). From this perspective, Senthil and Valmira seek agreement on their respective pasts in communication and relate their memories to the we-group, in their case German society. In consideration of Astrid Erll’s argument that “memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present” (2011: 8), Senthil and Valmira’s way of remembering serves a particular purpose in their lives in the narrative present: in dialogue, they find recognition for a past that is usually disregarded or marginalised by the predominantly white majority of their so-called host country.

In *Araben*, it is the devaluation of the Arab’s degree, the loss of his wife and job, and the ensuing unemployment which produces a sense of failure and shame, whereas in Senthil and Valmira’s case, shame emerges in the generational gap between the protagonists and their parents. Valmira remembers “the shame” (Varatharajah 2016: 92) about her mother’s lack of German when she was speaking to the officials in the Home Office,³⁶ and Senthil relates that he turned a corner before reaching “the house that my mother cleaned” (ibid.: 243) when he walked home from school with friends.³⁷ In these instances, shame becomes tied to a perceived lack of (linguistic) integration and to social status, even though the cause for this shame (the cleaning job) seems to be brought about by discriminatory policies and practices. Shame, however, also inscribes Senthil and Valmira’s own experiences. Recounting a memory from nursery, Senthil describes how he drew “people with dark skin”,³⁸ and how the nursery teachers pressed a pink crayon between

33 “seit fast fünfundzwanzig jahren arbeitet meine mutter als putzfrau.”

34 “Sozialwohnung”; “beziehen durften”.

35 “die Schule besuchen durfte”.

36 “die Scham”.

37 “das haus, das meine mutter putzte”.

38 “menschen mit dunkler haut”.

his fingers, instructing him, “this colour is called *skin colour*, they repeated it, *this colour we call skin colour here*” (ibid.: 94-95, original emphasis).³⁹ In this context of institutional racialised discrimination, Senthil’s ostensible difference from native, white Germans is simultaneously emphasised and refused on the embodied level of the skin. With using the words ‘we’ and ‘here’, the nursery teachers speak for the whole of German society and assume this society to be overwhelmingly and normatively white. Senthil’s racialised difference is pitched against this norm, and negated: his difference is recognised, but merely as an aberration from the norm, while he, simultaneously, is asked to accept this norm as the status quo and abide by its rules despite his alleged difference.

The fact that Senthil and Valmira are children of asylum seekers adds to their marginalisation, and when it intersects with being othered for their appearance, it elicits a racialised xenophobic rhetoric in their peers. Thinking of her class in school, Valmira remembers that she was called “*filthy beggar* and *dirty asylum seeker*” (ibid.: 93, original emphasis),⁴⁰ and Senthil recalls how some children referred to him and his brother as “the sons of the bogeyman” because there is “dirt” on their skin “that rubs off when you touch us” (ibid.: 94).⁴¹ These practices of othering mark Senthil and Valmira as different, and when this difference is associated with dirt that could potentially ‘contaminate’ the we-group, “the threat posed by strange bodies to bodily and social integrity is registered on the skin” (Ahmed 2000: 46): the separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ works affectively via the skin. Seen this way, Senthil and Valmira are made into Kristeva’s abjects, for “what is *abject* [...] is radically excluded” (Kristeva 1982: 2, original emphasis). The association of otherness with dirt is used to construct Senthil and Valmira as a threat to the immediate members of the white, German we-group, and, by extension, of the whole German body politic. On their path through nursery and school, Senthil and Valmira are purportedly integrated into German society, while they are actually stigmatised, and remain excluded for their embodied otherness.

When Senthil and Valmira change from the past tense to the present tense, it demonstrates that their lives in the narrative now are, despite their belonging to a German student community, still affected by exclusionary discourses and practices. Valmira tells Senthil that her lecturers at university often take her for “an exchange student”,⁴² and further, that one lecturer complimented her on her “*flawless German*” (Varatharajah 2016: 192, original emphasis).⁴³ Armin Nassehi’s notion of a “paradox of the visible” (2014: 2) is instructive in relation with Senthil’s

39 “diese farbe nenne man *hautfarbe*, sie wiederholten es, *diese farbe nennen wir hier hautfarbe*”.

40 “*dreckige Bettlerin* und *schmutziges Asylantenkind*”.

41 “die söhne des schwarzen mannes”; “schmutz”; “der abfärbt, wenn man uns berührt”.

42 “eine Austauschstudentin”.

43 “*fehlerfreien Deutsch*”.

comment on the lecturer's patronizing attitude,⁴⁴ "we are only granted broken German" (Varatharajah 2016: 191).⁴⁵ Nassehi defines this paradox as a conscious oversight, which paradoxically leads to an explicit way of seeing, as visible differences produce a particular kind of attention that is usually mistaken for information from which conclusions are drawn: because someone is visibly different, it is impossible, for instance, that they have a full grasp of the German language. Nassehi summarises whether those perceived as 'other' become "positively or negatively discriminated, makes no difference under aspects of logic" (2014: 2).⁴⁶ This paradoxical way of seeing can be understood as one technique of othering that fetishises Senthil and Valmira. According to Ahmed, stranger fetishism implies that white Westerners produce the stranger as a figure, or a fetish, by recognizing the other as different, and fixing them in a juxtaposition of proximity and distance (2000: 3). When Senthil and Valmira become fetishised in this way, their otherness becomes ontological, as their being is determined from the outside by their status as 'other', or strange. The slide of these processes of othering from the protagonists' past into the narrative present emphasises the continuity of these processes, with a somewhat bleak outlook for the future, as it suggests that such practices will not cease, and that Senthil and Valmira will always be thought of in terms of their supposed otherness.

Conclusion

We have seen how, in *Araben* and in *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, histories of marginalisation and othering unravel within the protagonists' memories, and how such histories work affectively as they produce a sense of failure, and shame. For the Arab, this failure is transcended when he feels grateful in a moment of reconciliation with the Swedish cold, and Senthil and Valmira's conversation equally ends on a positive note. Towards the end of the text, Valmira states, "We arrived at the end" (Varatharajah 2016: 240).⁴⁷ In a temporal sense, this indicates that they have worked their way backwards through their memories until they arrived at the moment of their respective departures from Kosovo and Sri Lanka to Germany; and, within the context of their conversation, they have arrived at a point where they can accept the shame (and pain) inherent in their memories. When Bal discusses traumatic memory, she argues that the threatening quality of memory can be alleviated when another person bears witness, and that listening, or dia-

44 "Paradoxie des Sichtbaren".

45 "nur gebrochenes deutsch wird uns zugestanden".

46 "positiv oder negativ diskriminiert, macht unter Aspekten der Logik keinen Unterschied".

47 "Wir sind am Ende angekommen".

logue, can aid to “narratively integrate what was until then an assailing spectre”; and, as Bal continues, “a second person is needed for the first person to come into his- or herself in the present, able to bear the past” (1999: xi). Disregarding the question of whether Senthil and Valmira’s memories qualify as traumatic or not, Bal’s words facilitate an understanding for Senthil and Valmira’s need for each other in this conversation to state the truthfulness of their affectively shared experiences. By stating that this is what their histories felt like, and having it confirmed by their interlocutor, the shame does not necessarily disappear, but Senthil and Valmira find recognition, at least vis-à-vis each other, which allows them to come into themselves. It is not surprising then, that these marginalised memories can only emerge in similarly marginal, or liminal spaces, considering that they run contrary to those discourses that usually sustain this kind of marginalisation. In this sense, the protagonists’ histories are pitched against what sociologist Erol Yildiz calls “the prevailing knowledge of the dominant society” (2018: 29),⁴⁸ and the liminal zones of the online world in *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, and the trains in *Araben*, are transformed into spaces of resistance in which histories of marginalisation find recognition. By revealing these processes of marginalisation and othering to the reader, both novels demonstrate that, indeed, postmigrant belonging can be pervaded by conflicts and contradictions, and grant the reader a view on German and Swedish society respectively from the margins these societies have created for the protagonists.

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