

Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen: Approaching a postdigital diasporic poetics

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* (2016) by Senthuran Varatharajah is a conversation on Facebook of two characters, both of whom are heirs of the diaspora (from Sri Lanka and from Kosovo) in Germany. It experiments with various forms to break free from multiple limits and imposed cultural assignments and also presents diverse manifestations of the relationship between the current diasporic condition and the postdigital. Therefore, it serves as an intriguing exponent for the exploration of this relationship. First, the representation of the diasporic condition is reassessed once it has been modified by the impact of these new, postdigital practices. And second, the role of digital media and of postdigital practices is especially relevant to the aesthetic representation of the diaspora, reaching beyond a traditional notion of the diasporic condition. For this reason, the function of select postdigital characteristics will be explored as component elements of a new diasporic poetics.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora, postdigital, transculturality, globalization, Senthuran Varatharajah, social network, postdigital literature

INTRODUCTION

Can we conceive of diaspora today without digital media? Their extensive and daily presence has wrought changes since the so-called digital era of the 1990s. My hypothesis is that a new relationship is emerging between a present postdigital condition and diaspora. To understand this, I will show how the diasporic condition is imagined, apprehended and represented and how it is modified in such a way that it transcends a traditional notion of diaspora.

Senthuran Varatharajah's 2016 German novel, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*,¹ depicts various forms of the relationship between the postdigital condition and diaspora and therefore sheds light on their interrelation. It consists entirely of a dialogue between Senthil Vasuthevan, the son of Sri Lanka refugees, and Valmira Surroi, the daughter of Kosovo refugees, both in Germany, on Facebook Messenger (a private chat function on the platform). It takes place over the course of a week. The forms of representations of the diasporic condition correspond with its current

¹ The word *Zeichen* has many meanings that are relevant for this book. The title could therefore mean 'Before the increase of characters/omens/signs'.

perception of the concept of diaspora, moving beyond a traditional notion. First, it highlights the question of how best to exploit the similarity and correspondence between diaspora and postdigital practices. Given that the basic condition of 'diaspora' is dispersion, the simultaneous multiplicity of locations, existence of networks and transnational de-territorialized movement are characteristics that are also generated by communicative practices through digital media in the current postdigital era. Second, the representation of the diasporic condition is reassessed once it has been modified by the impact of these new, postdigital practices. This impact results from the very change which these practices provoke in the connective structure, in communication as a nexus, a unifier of the collective dimension of the diaspora, a diaspora already framed in postdigital globalization. And third, the role of digital media and of postdigital practices is especially relevant to the aesthetic representation of the diaspora. The novel is also particularly interesting because it evidences a new poetics that illuminates the role played by the postdigital condition in contemporary aesthetic forms of representing the diasporic dimension.

RELATIONSHIP WITH A TRADITIONAL NOTION OF DIASPORA

The novel's title, *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*,² refers to the words that the mother of the main character, Senthil Vasuthevan, says to his father, both Tamils, just before fleeing the war in Sri Lanka (Varatharajah 2016: 81). It is, therefore, what drives the movement of flight and the immediately preceding moment, or the moment previous to the alternative to flight, which would be death. Throughout the novel, the characters allude to this element of flight and to the lack of a language to express an existence conditioned by death, as the true nature from which they constitute themselves beyond an origin based on identity or space of another type. The use of the mother's words for the book's title suggests a reading of the novel as a response to her that includes her voice; in other words, as an enunciation that begins in this 'other' who is his mother, and therefore whose beginning lies elsewhere, beyond the main character and the very writing itself. This writing shows that his being cannot be understood without this flight remembered by others, because he was still a baby at the time and cannot remember it himself, but he has a different relationship with these events. His relationship is mediatized. It is marked not only by forms of communicative intergenerational family memory, but also by a different, postdigital form of establishing communication and connection with the past, with others and with space and time, and thus of inhabiting the condition of diaspora.

Senthil's relationship with the diasporic condition is one inherent to a different present in which the young main characters lead postdigital lives, and this is reflected in the form of the novel. It remediatizes and represents the internet communication by transmitting it in the traditional format of the paper book in which it is written, constituting an example of the novel's postdigital nature because the postdigital³

² It also has a metaliterary sense. Literally, the title is placed just before the signs – the words on the following pages of the novel – start to proliferate and this is therefore a literal allusion to the title's function, but it also evokes the empty space that cannot strictly be represented, which occurs before events happen, before the increase in signs, and is thus an attempt to describe in words the silence that forms the point of departure for the word. I quote from the novel by using the 'VZZ'. I thank Jennifer Butt for the translations of the original quotes into English.

³ In line with Cramer (2014) and Cox (2014), I do not use 'post' according to a logic of periodization, as in post-history, where it would indicate that something had been overcome or had ended, because we are currently at a time of unprecedented computerization and digitalization (Cox 2014). From a pragmatic perspective (Cramer 2014), the term 'post-digital' refers to a condition and a period marked by the

condition implies the naturalization and standardization of digital codes and practices once they have ceased to be novel and have been incorporated into all areas of daily life. This is reflected, for instance, in the adoption of digital logic in practices that were previously termed analogue, such as writing on paper, and which are now analogue–digital hybrids.

The communication that Senthil and Valmira establish is inherent to the postdigital condition for several reasons, as we shall see below. This new communicative form shapes a diasporic condition that they both share and which does not correspond to a traditional notion of diaspora. In a world in which the usual space–time coordinates have been reformulated or modified by the internet or by postdigital practices, other options emerge for communication and the consequent conception and construction of identity, and these differ from those of imagined national communities (Anderson [1983] 2006: 6–7) based on territorially anchored media such as newspapers, literature, mail or transport.

However, postdigital also implies unprecedented mass digitization of all pre-existing cultural elements, media and communicative forms, in a metamedium (Manovich 2013: 83 and 101–06). As with everything else, the diaspora too is passed through the postdigital sieve, recontextualized and resignified. This mediatized transformation of the relationship with a traditional diaspora shifts between recycling physical, pre-digital elements and coordinates and transforming them through a different logic of datification and virtuality. Between the material and the immaterial, between the analogue and the digital and between physical reality and its computer-generated representation, the ways of conceiving oneself change.

In sum, the two notable aspects of the postdigital era are: (1) the existence of a new communication environment that offers an alternative virtual space, a non-place, not susceptible of territorialization, and (2) feedback and hybridism between this environment and the analogue or pre-digital physical and material dimension. Said feedback entails a remodelling of the relationship with the inherited physical diaspora or with the imagined diasporic community. I shall start with this second aspect, that of the relationship with the imagined community, to show the diasporic condition that is articulated through this new postdigital communication in virtual space.

A MODIFIED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY

In some of the passages in the novel, Senthil's relationship with other Tamil refugees – almost all relatives of his – is depicted as occurring on the internet. This recycles the pre-digital notion of diaspora as the existence of people displaced from the same point of origin who now inhabit various foreign places and who, through their shared connection to a common point of origin and with each other, form a unit or

everyday presence of digital technologies. The utility of post-(Latin 'behind, after' – in both the spatial and temporal sense) lies in the capacity it endows to (1) name something that occurs behind the digital condition and is a consequence produced by and inseparable from it and (2) designate a later state, rather than an event, following the break with the analogue world induced by the digital revolution. This locates us, therefore, after the perception of digital media as new, but, as in *post-apocalyptic*, with an understanding of the postdigital as a condition in which the digital has not been superseded (Cramer 2014) but has advanced from a point of rupture to a continuous state. Cramer mostly uses the term to refer to a condition or set of aesthetic and artistic trends that share two things in common: (1) they can only exist once the new media have ceased to be 'new' because they have become ubiquitous and every day, and (2) they involve ways of overcoming the dichotomy between analogue and digital for this same reason. Thus, one of the fundamental characteristics of the postdigital condition is the analogue–digital continuum, because now, in the postdigital era, technology has permeated everything, is embedded and embodied everywhere (Hine 2015) and is no longer separable.

group. The 'image of communion'⁴ among them is based on the original common experience of displacement from a common point of origin (Safran 1991), cultural elements, memories maintained over time, the story of displacement, pain, resistance and adaptation, as noted by Clifford (1994). Furthermore, the community is conceived of as limited and horizontal, as a means to bolster the idea of the original fraternity of its members (Anderson [1983] 2006: 6–7). However, in contrast to other communities, the diaspora expands outwards from the original centre, is de-territorialized and crosses numerous borders or territories; consequently, it is imagined as transcultural or transnational. Diasporic subjects institute relationships between the various places they inhabit and the centre, whether physically or recreating it elsewhere – even on the internet. This simultaneous existence of subjects ascribed to different physical locations and the connection between them enables an imaginary visualization of this community as a network spanning the entire globe.

And just as the internet incorporates other pre-digital knowledge, so too it incorporates geopolitical and territorial coordinates, together with the racial, linguistic or religious categories that often explained the notion of diaspora and anchored it to a shared place of origin or cultural essence. Hence, the characteristics of the transnational diaspora are reproduced, and the internet as a global cross-border network seems to mirror the diasporic structure in that both are networks and both form de-territorialized networks. This digital medium replaces other media in its function as a cohesive and intermediary element for members of this group scattered across the planet. Thus, the routes between the physical locations inhabited by members of the community are invisible in space and so brief that the nodes in the network immediately overlap. Senthil is connected to his cousin in Oslo through their posts on networks such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube (Varatharajah 2016: 174–75). With Ahila, his girlfriend in New York, they share memories of cultural products such as the films and songs of a Tamil actor; however, they have acquired these memories not from a Sri Lankan TV channel via satellite, but from the virtual space of the internet. The Tamil origin with which they have formed an affective bond since infancy does not exist in a physical space but in the cloud. This circumstance presages the beginnings of the paradoxes and peculiarities specific to a medium that is fuelled by its relationship with the pre-digital era or with the physical subjects it connects, but which at the same time possesses other characteristics. In the digital era, the internet was simply another – albeit faster – means of connection, functioning as an intermediary between people, and also constituted a cyberspace, an additional space overlying everyday life, in which information was stored, like a prosthesis (in the sense of McLuhan and Powers 1989: 34). However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a series of technological changes transformed the internet into an integral, constant and permanent part of our daily lives. Many everyday activities have been replaced by others performed between the physical reality of the device and the virtual reality of the software. The designs, logic and fragmentary, modular nature of the software used for information processing have been adopted in new ways to connect with reality, generating new realities in analogue–digital practices.

Thus, although it may be possible to reproduce the territorial and categorical coordinates that enable us to imagine a relationship between material and physical elements on the planet, their reincorporation in postdigital terms is not simply a matter of replacing analogue media by digital media, or even of superimposing them in a kind

⁴ In Anderson's classic definition of 'imagined communities' ([1983] 2006: 6), these are imagined because each member, without meeting or knowing the others, imagines the communion of all of them.

of complementary 'digital diaspora' outside the oppressive national hegemony, as defined by Grassmuck and Wahjudi (2000). Neither Senthil nor Valmira rejects their relationship with other members of the diaspora, nor do they completely eliminate their bond with their families' origin or territory of departure, which they themselves have inherited, but they do oppose a traditional conception of diaspora in two ways, as it is shown below: (1) they do not allow themselves to be defined by this provenance or origin and (2) they recontextualize and resignify these relationships, in the same way as the coordinates poured into the internet.

TOWARDS A POSTDIGITAL DIASPORIC CONDITION

Senthil's and Valmira's existence is not, therefore, as marked by the relationship between place of origin and abroad, nor by a double consciousness (Du Bois 1903) or belonging, by the dichotomy of here and there, as might be the case for their parents' generation; instead, it is marked by the condition of displacement and constant movement in their cosmopolitan lives. It is with good reason that a paratextual biblical quotation at the beginning of the novel alludes to the non-response, the lack of a response (from Jesus) about a place of origin. In the postdigital world, identity is conferred not by where the subject is located but by shared experiences; thus, Senthil and Valmira experience the same lack of a point of origin linked to a central space or culture from which emanates the power that constitutes and defines them. They do not even have a distant relationship with this originating centre or an opposition to it with which to shape their identity, which at heart would be a paradoxical dependence on the same. They make no subversive postcolonial gestures. Nevertheless, the movement of flight appears as an initiatory and constant element in their existence, as shown in the analysis of the title.

The diasporic condition depicted by Senthil and Valmira in their writing is not that of an imagined community to which they belong or with which they identify, but rather that of an individual existential condition shared with others, wherever they come from. While this notion may be based on leaving one original, physical space to arrive at another, in reality it rests not so much on the idea of being located at a point between these two fixed poles (Sri Lanka or Kosovo and Germany) as on that of liberation from the predetermined classifications and impositions of a categorial identity with which they relate because they are ascribed to these two poles or to a diaspora community intermediate between the two. Although the fact of displacement, of movement from a place or predetermined category, is never questioned, these places (the original homeland and the foreign, adopted one) are not the elements that confer identity on Valmira or Senthil. In essence, the characters cannot be ascribed to these places and reject this categorization. What characterizes Senthil and Valmira is that they are associated with one or the other place and the kind of relationship they ought to have with these cultural spaces is imposed on them as a result of inhabiting displacement due to family legacy or by external forces. For example, they are perceived time and again as foreigners in their own country, Germany. However, through their 'own' practices, Senthil and Valmira show that although these categories and impositions of identity are recycled and perpetuated in the postdigital world, in the contemporary conversion to an analogue-digital hybrid state, the fixed forms of relationship with previously stable spaces and categories that fixed identity have also changed because the codes, logic and practices of the medium that constructed them are not the same. As Hirsch has noted for the Holocaust post-memory, the 'diasporic experience' is the condition of exile from the space of identity and is a characteristic

aspect of post-memory (1997: 243). Similar to this, Senthil's and Valmira's lived experience is that of not being tied to pre-established categories; instead, they are constituted and characterized by multiple ephemeral contacts and constant circulation among the things they encounter. As one would expect in the postdigital era, they are characterized more by their circulation than by their ties to any roots and they establish other forms of relationship that are not pre-established. Mediated by the press or by television, links had already existed previously with these imaginary spaces of the diaspora, based on global geopolitical coordinates which locate the transnational community, or on mediated forms of uniting with the story of the past, but such relationships are now new and resignified due to the characteristics of digital media and postdigital practices.

In the ambivalence and hybridism between the material–real–physical and the immaterial–virtual–digital, spatial coordinates and other categories persist because they are remediatized through digitization, but they are also resignified or even suspended by the atterritorial nature of space of the digital medium, which employs other codes and does not correspond to the same physical criteria. This postdigital communication environment impacts in the representation of a diasporic condition in four specific characteristics.

ASCRPTION CATEGORIES

Feedback between the virtual and analogue is mutual. The pre-digital rules for constructing categories and hierarchies have been transferred to the digital order in which Senthil and Valmira move, but there is also a flow in the opposite direction; the constraints of the digital order, as the new centre of power, also exert an effect on the physical body.

Thus, the impossibility of writing in Tamil on a computer that replaces the letters with empty boxes (Varatharajah 2016: 235–36), the automatic correction of Valmira's name (with the auto-correct function), imposing others (2016: 189), and the poor translations generated by Facebook's and Google's machine translation systems (2016: 224) are just some examples of the failures or gaps in the systems and codes that exclude and rank according to neo-colonial or hegemonic geopolitical categories. These restrictions and hierarchies also have consequences for postdigital hybridism with physical reality, as they are embedded in the actions of the hybrid real world. For example, Senthil recalls: 'als ich vor meinem erasmussemester mich um den studienplatz bewarb, wurde ich auf dem formular nach meiner *ethnicity* gefragt, und neben den leeren kasten stand *south asian*; ich musste etwas anklicken' ('when i applied to study for my erasmus semester, the form asked for my *ethnicity*, and next to the empty boxes it said *south asian*; i had to click on something') (Varatharajah 2016: 186, original emphasis, translation added). The virtual world imposes his ascription and belonging, and in the physical and material world, the action of clicking becomes an act that indexically unites the medium and his body. The postdigital order presents global coordinates of compartmentalization with criteria that reduce pre-programmed reality to what is permitted by an algorithm with a limited number of recycled cultural categories. Digital reconnection with himself and his identity perpetuates Senthil's ascription to this externally imposed human category, a category with which he does not define himself and that turns him into a foreigner with respect to others. Not only is the digital environment incomplete and therefore far from encompassing a global totality, but it also reproduces discourses and centres of power. Throughout the novel, Senthil and Valmira repeatedly demonstrate that they do not correspond to that language that

others use in order to classify them as foreigners in the place where they live or that defines that place, Germany, as the foreign territory in which they, the diaspora, go about their lives.⁵ Neither do they locate themselves in the opposite position, but instead exist in a suspension of certainties about themselves.⁶ Similarly, their names are labels for other subjects that have the same names and are also on Facebook (Varatharajah 2016: 221–25), thus dismantling the construction of an identity based on categories of all kinds. In fact, more than a language of categories, what they both share is the attempt to represent *Sprachlosigkeit*, the absence of a language.⁷ This aspect is the novel's underlying philosophical principle, the idea that language can only allude to something that is absent, in line with Wittgenstein and Derrida,⁸ and not to the presence of the meaning itself. In short, they refuse to be pinned to pre-established or imposed concepts of familiarity or strangeness and reveal the arbitrariness and contingency of these once transferred to the postdigital realm.

HYBRID PRACTICES AND SPATIAL CATEGORIES

Echoing his way of relating to categories of ascription, Senthil's relationship with spatial categories shows a similar ambivalence. The digital medium, and internet in particular, connects the material subject not only with physical but also with virtual spaces. The diaspora maintains an affective, physical or imaginary bond from a distance with the place of origin, but the intermediary between both points is now the internet. However, this latter is not a mere channel, a line, conveying signs through the air from there to here; rather, it is a 'carrier of message', as indicated by Wetzel ([2017] 2019: 442), and carries out the functions of transfer, storage and calculation ([2017] 2019: 443). In other words, in the basic union of telecommunications and computerization, connections have been reorganized into a channel that is simultaneously a storeroom and space for virtual – but also vital – action, generating new hybrid everyday practices that remodel spatial relationships. Thus, technology facilitates space–time compression and the reorganization of relationships between places, now imbued with ambivalence between location and dislocation, with coordinates that remain in suspension. In contrast to the world globe that Valmira used as a child to trace the journeys of other refugees seeking asylum in Germany (Varatharajah 2016: 181–82), Google Maps is now the medium through which to

⁵ For example, Senthil is asked to talk about his 'heimatland indien' ('native country of India') (Varatharajah 2016: 186, translation added), when he is not from there, but the text is fragmented, and we do not know if he accepts or rejects this ascription. Similarly, Valmira observes: 'und sie fragen mich, wann ich wieder zurückgehe, zurück in *meine Heimat*, dort, wo ich *wirklich herkomme*. Du kennst es, ich muss es Dir nicht sagen' ('and they ask me, when am I leaving, when am I going *back home*, where I *really come from*. You've experienced this, I don't have to tell you') (2016: 191, original emphasis, translation added).

⁶ These are not equivalent to ascriptions to postcolonial identities in resistance. As Varatharajah says about himself, there is no concept that defines him: Der Begriff der Identität hat für mich allenfalls philosophiehistorische Bedeutung, wie etwa in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie. Ich bezeichne mich weder als Deutscher noch als Tamile, auch nicht als Deutschtamile. Dieses Fehlen eines Begriffs beschreibt, was ich bin. Und es entspricht der Sprachlosigkeit, aus der heraus geschrieben wird ('For me, the concept of identity has at most a philosophical– historical meaning, as for example in classical German philosophy. I describe myself neither as German nor as Tamil, not even as German–Tamil. This lack of a term describes what I am. And it corresponds to the speechlessness out of which I write'). (Varatharajah cited in Uthoff 2017: n.pag., translation added)

⁷ As the author himself has observed: 'Sprachlosigkeit kann aber auch die Permanenz einer fehlenden Verfügbarkeit bedeuten – die andauernde Abwesenheit einer Sprache' ('Speechlessness, however, can also mean a permanent lack of availability – the persistent absence of a language') (Varatharajah 2018: n.pag., translation added)

⁸ See the detailed analysis by Teupert (2018: 14–15).

imagine the globe and the spatial relationships between points, as in the following interaction between Valmira and her mother:

Wir saßen auf dem Sofa, und ich zeigte ihr wie Google Maps funktioniert, und wir gingen nach Prishtina, und von oben sahen wir die Plätze, wo ihre Schule und die Häuser ihrer Freunde früher gestanden hatten, und mit ihrem Zeigefinger berührte sie den Bildschirm ('We sat on the sofa, and I showed her how Google Maps worked, and we went to Pristina, and we saw from above the places where her school and her friends' houses used to be, and she touched the screen with her forefinger'). (2016: 228, translation added)

In this postdigital scene, the digital representation of space and corporeal physicality are intertwined through three actions: going, seeing and touching. From the comfort of the couch, with its connotations of intergenerational familiar object, they move towards Pristina in the opposite direction to when they fled the war. In this hybrid digital-analogue practice, their interaction with the device produces a kinetic landscape, because now it is space itself that moves⁹ in total contradiction to the laws of astrophysical motion, with the zoom function. Thanks to their 'von oben' ('from above') position and their action on this space, they adopt an omniscient position that enables them to fly above it. Here, it is that which is distant that moves visually towards the subject, towards the family nucleus, whose own limit is a screen. This produces the impression that it is oneself who is present in the other space and that this is incorporated into one's own home. The distance between the two points, the physical and material home and the approaching space that is represented, is blurred until almost disappearing in the transparent membrane of the screen and consequent invisibility of the medium. Access to Pristina, this remote but familiar place, is made possible because it can be geolocated by a GPS system using geospatial coordinates to adapt an external space to the relationship with another specific geolocated point, in this case that of Valmira. This functions because the world's coordinates are remediatised, but at the same time customized, adapted to the subject, who is also incorporated into this space and becomes the centre around which the representation of the entire global space moves and adapts. This depiction of the subject observed within space overlaps, as in the scene, with an omniscient eye from above that is also mobile and movable in space. Thus, the relationship between two particular places that are identified by their position in relation to the prefixed coordinates of a whole remains here in suspension in the case of Google Maps. In the pre-digital era, the possibility of establishing a point in space as a particular place was based on its relationship with a whole and with the coordinates which organized that whole, while visually this relationship was given by the subject's point of view and a vanishing point on the horizon, in other words, by the limits of perception and the organization of the known (Koschorke 1990: 243). The whole was thus indexed, signalling a point beyond the horizon. However, the zoom and the subject's dual gaze (immersed and external), as well as movement, make it possible to repeatedly remodel or substitute the horizon, the limits from which to order the whole and its parts, as occurs with the changing elements that bring parts of Pristina closer to the characters. Where is the beyond of a whole identified by the horizon if it is always changing or even disappears as such? As

⁹ Reworking Paul Virilio's phrase, Bergermann observes that now with Google Maps 'kinetisiert man Erdrepräsentationen' ('we kineticize representations of the earth') (2012: 252, translation added). See Bergermann (2012) on these and other characteristics of Google Maps, together with other properties of the software.

Bergemann indicates, this is 'Ein neuer Horizont, der die Frage nach dem Partikularen und dem Ganzen suspendiert, weil nun alles besonders, aber alles auch allgemein zugänglich ist' ('[a] new horizon that suspends consideration of the particular and the whole, because now everything is both specifically and generally accessible') (2012: 253, translation added). The relationship between local particular elements, which is what endows them with a specific identity, and also in relation to the globe, is diluted in a spatial overlap and in the flexibility of the framework in which they are inserted. The criteria of distinction and separation (and consequently, of identification) are challenged by current technology, which dislocates what was previously clearly located and creates a spatial and temporal compression that juxtaposes spaces and alters the separation that distinguishes them. Symbolically, this intimates that the affective bond forged through memory and the imagination with the places in Valmira's mother's past life is no longer entirely based on the present spaces now being accessed. The particularity of these spaces has been suspended, just as her relationship with the place of origin is that of the customized presence of this remote space in the family environment rather than a presence marked by external cartographic categorizations or by diasporic dichotomies of the here and there. The subject as centre is a characteristic feature of the logic and structure of the internet in the postdigital era.

CONFIGURATIONS IN THE VIRTUAL POSTDIGITAL SPACE

The ambivalence between the subject's virtual presence and real absence that underlies the overlap of physical and virtual space in this passage is also characteristic of the new relationship with space that consists not only of these hybrid practices, but also of the fact that virtual (immaterial) digital space and material physical space are often simultaneous. Thanks to their mobiles, the characters can be at a conference and on Facebook at the same time, and can connect anywhere, any time. From the virtual space in which they hold their conversations, they refer to a physical. But they are on the internet, in a space whose virtual properties are subject to logical and mathematical limits (Flusser 1993: 263) that are no longer reduced to the physical and material limits of a planet to which the imaginary of the global is anchored. Here, Senthil and Valmira are particular entities, but in an unlimitable space and can be distinguished as such by their relationship and their common diasporic experience, as well as by their differences, but not because they occupy a place anchored to a preconfigured space. What they occupy is not a place in that space, but a time in which they are virtually present, sometimes synchronously and at other times asynchronously. The illusion of a direct route between particular elements or parts and the whole, which as Latour (2012: 93) points out, is typical of Google Maps is also suspended. Instead of a parcelled whole in which they or their positions or categories can be included, there is a virtual space constructed by the act of dialogical writing through the topological (i.e., abstract) relationships between elements that they connect in a volatile or ephemeral way. They only exist in this virtual network performatively and in the traces (neither material nor territorial) left by their connections written in the 'empty space' that unites them, as Senthil explains when he states 'ich habe ins leere geschrieben' ('i have written into a void') (Varatharajah 2016: 50, translation added). From this also emerges the paradox of being at the same time in a continuous space that unites them and in two separate physical places. This continuous, empty space renders the digital medium itself visible and imaginable, larger than them, and with which they in turn relate. In it, physical agents and places are reconstructed and remediatized, but their categorial moorings

remain in parentheses in the face of connections and logics of relationship that are no longer subordinated to but detached from a physical or material basis and can circulate unhindered by either local or global coordinates or limits.

Thus, the Facebook algorithm is what enables and conditions their encounters, due to the similarities it detects between their two profiles based on data obtained from their movements and contacts connected to the physical world. This is therefore a situation characteristic of the postdigital era (between virtuality and reality), and it drives the entire novel: 'dein profil erschien gerade am rand, gelistet unter den personen, die ich vielleicht kenne. du kamst mir vertraut vor. / du scheinst auch in marburg studiert zu haben. / vielleicht sind wir uns dort begegnet' ('your profile just appeared in the margin, in a list of people i might know. you looked familiar. / you also seem to have studied in marburg. / maybe we met there') (Varatharajah 2016: 9, translation added). Facebook suggests the possibility of having met in real life, which is then revealed as a possibility that does not exist outside virtual life. They agree on the non-encounter that allows them to connect and converse beyond the convention whereby they would have to be in the same place to meet. In this way they maintain the distance that is reflected in their form of dialogue, because even when they seem to refer to the same thing, each speaks of something different from a stance of mutual respect for the other's experiences without judging these from their own. They become particular entities because of the way they interweave their worlds with contingent and fragmentary associations, characteristic of the logic of software revealed by Facebook. Using this formula, they associate words to create their own meanings beyond the pre-established relationships of conventional language. Thus, they convert elements in virtual space into particular entities based on the interrelations they establish based on them. The ascription of something as alien, other, is not pre-established by an order in their writing and it is this writing that endows them with an identity while intertwining them in continuous displacement and movement against pre-established borders and limits, as Senthil points out:

vielleicht sprechen wir um an das ende dieser und jeder möglichen sprache zu gelangen, westwärts, achttausendvierhundertdreiundachtzig kilometer, über moskau und berlin und über die routen und kadenzen und abwege der sätze auch, denn es gibt keinen geraden und keine gnade in der grammatik; bis zur äußersten bedeutung müssen wir gehen, und nichts werden wir dabei gesagt haben ('maybe to get to the end of this and every possible language, we'll have to speak westwards, eight thousand four hundred and eighty-three kilometers, over moscow and berlin, and across the routes and cadences and deviations of sentences, too, for there are no straight lines in grammar and no pity either; we'll have to go to the farthest meaning, and we won't have said anything in the process'). (2016: 95, translation added)¹⁰

They expand signifiers and meanings, but this is not a simple subversion. When a neologism such as 'asyllandheim' (2016: 38) appears, it is not only a matter of modifying the signifier and its meaning by replacing 'Asylanten' with 'Land', ethically subverting the political meaning underlying the term 'Asylantenheim' (i.e. the imposition of a lack of country or home), because the text continues, transforming the new term by expanding

¹⁰ On the absence of capital letters in Senthil's writing, Teupert (2018: 3) relates this stylistic mannerism to rapid communication in the digital space and also adds that it democratizes the use of words, since it endows them all with the same weight in virtual space. In addition, this breaking of the orthographic rule can also be considered as a subversive reappropriation of the German language.

its meaning and once again interweaving it with other terms, with semantic ramifications: 'es hat lange gedauert, bis ich verstanden habe, dass das wort *asyllandheim*, dass nicht nur meine eltern immer noch benutzen, das nach *schullandheim*, nach ausflug und ausgelassenheit klingt, eigentlich *asylantenheim* heißt' ('it took me a long time to understand that the expression *asylum country home*, which my parents and others still use and which sounds like *school country home*, like excursions and fun, is actually called an *asylum seekers' home*') (2016: 38, original emphasis, translation added). With these connotations, the space of exclusion that is the hostel for asylum seekers also becomes something that is separate from normal everyday life, but in a positive way, like a school in the country used for school trips, like an excursion or the notion of being carefree. The language itself, whose limits have been subverted by crossing words in a neologism, serves to connect with other terms and expand the initial meaning. The freedom with which language in the novel arranges the elements marks it as 'not being subject to conventions', since it decontextualizes and resemanticizes them through the new unpredictable connections it establishes. Conventional references do not disappear entirely but are bracketed or displaced.

The postdigital subject can throw off identitarian or linguistic labels and seek correspondences based on other shared characteristics, since everything depends on the modular combination, which is characteristic of the software logic that has been assimilated into the practices of thought and action with knowledge. In the postdigital condition the virtual now contributes to the construction of naturally incorporated life experiences. Their existence as eternally displaced persons which configures a volatile and mobile identity is not unreal because it happens on Facebook or in an aterritorial space, but it is free of pre-determined categories.

LEVELLING AND RECONTEXTUALIZATION

This is largely due to another characteristic of postdigital practices, namely the levelling of the elements in an environment that has incorporated them in the form of equivalent data. The hegemony and dominant position of legacy is also displaceable, being decontextualized and re-contextualized for the purposes of combination.

Thus, the link with the past, with memory, with the story shared by members of the diaspora, with the notion of an origin from which they have been decentralized, is articulated differently in these two representatives of post-memory. Senthil and Valmira try to put into words what are really gaps, shadows and memories heard and transmitted through objects or incomplete photographs that once out of context cannot attain a full meaning. In the task of recontextualization, the internet functions as an intersubjective archive between both characters and as a large global memory archive in which those of their families are also inserted. Faced with a lack of information, Senthil searches on the internet:

Senthil Vasuthevan 04:49 / als du am ersten tag von den kuppeln auf der nationalbibliothek gesprochen hast, habe ich mir die fotos angesehen, die google mir zeigte, bilder neben und unter bildern, verstreut über dem monitor. sie erinnerten mich an die auf dem dach der bibliothek jaffnas, auch sie kenne ich nur aus dem internet; kein trübes licht würde von diesen kuppeln auf deine hände fallen, und auch heute nach ihrem wiederaufbau würde es das nicht; sie sind nicht aus glas. vor zweiunddreißig jahren, bevor sie und die siebenundneunzigtausend bücher und palmbblattmanuskripte in ihr verbrannt wurden, war sie die größte bibli-

othek asiens. auf wikipedia las ich, dass einhunderttausend albanische bücher und auch die einrichtung in den lesesälen zerstört worden seien [...] und auch wir erinnern uns an nichts ('Senthil Vasuthevan 04:49 / that first day when you talked about the domes on the national library, i looked at the photos on google, pictures beside and below other pictures, scattered across the monitor. they reminded me of the ones on the roof of the jaffna library, these too i only know from the internet; no dim light would fall on your hands from those domes, not even today after they've been rebuilt; they're not made of glass. thirty-two years ago, before it and the ninety-seven thousand books and palm-leaf manuscripts in it were burned, it was the largest library in asia. on wikipedia, i read that one hundred thousand albanian books were destroyed and the furnishings in the reading rooms too [...] and we don't remember anything'). (Varatharajah 2016: 128–29, translation added)

Institutional archives of destroyed cultural memories can be accessed from the new, enormous digital archive. In reality, however, they no longer exist as such, not even once they have been reconstructed. Current knowledge and transmission via the internet allow no more than a simulation. The remains, images and information on the destruction appear virtually in the computer's own familiar space, overlapping the remote and the nearby. However, in this intimate familiar space of internet access, they are no longer really remains that can be ascribed to something that belongs to oneself or to others, because as with all culture transcoded into data, they are all at the same level. This is demonstrated by the phrase that equates all the images on the screen. Dispersion characterizes the decontextualized remains of the library in Pristina, although they coincide in the same virtual space in which Senthil saw the photographs of the library in Jaffna. They overlap and mingle in this particular node and in his mind. Only the story recontextualizes and restores meaning to the images. Senthil's father's story of the disappearance of Tamil memory, which Senthil subsequently reproduces, bears witness to the loss of knowledge, and in another passage the stories transmitted by her parents to Valmira relocate the scene. Both are stories into which Senthil and Valmira irrupt. The internet does not connect these spaces and stories directly to each other, but Senthil's Facebook text does bring them together, providing a new meaning from the present, including the present encompassing his conversation and relationship with Valmira. Thus, he imagines her in Jaffna, in the library, expressing the idea of an impossibility: that the light shining through the dome touches her hands, since this dome is not made of glass. With this, he also refers to her story at the beginning of the novel about her visit to the library in Pristina (2016: 23–24). The spatial distance between the two worlds disappears in the overlap of the same image of Valmira, but now in Jaffna. However, this is only the imaginary proof of the impossibility of its performance in a lost reality that is no longer tangible. This is alluded to by the fact that her hands, symbol of the tactile, are at the centre of the overlap between the two images. The new sense from the present, constructed between the two, is an ephemeral connection in this global framework. It is a connection between the virtual, the imaginary and the real, the present and past, proof of a hybrid postdigital space in which the digital realm affects the real characters, but these also act on digital fragments by recontextualizing them.

CONCLUSIONS

The new diasporic poetics in *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* articulates not only the

characteristics and ambivalence of postdigital hybridism, but also its possibilities beyond the material and physical world, to express possible new ways of understanding oneself as a diasporic subject, in movement and free of pre-determined categories, questioning the idea of belonging or that of a diasporic community subject to dichotomous, exclusive and excluding impositions. Thus, the notion is constructed of a diasporic condition through a language that is characterized by the displacement of signs through their transformation via represented postdigital practices. Moreover, both the internet as an aterritorial space and its associated analogue–digital practices become aesthetic resources for expressing this condition, because they are thematized as facilitators of this transformation of language and identity, and their mediating characteristics are adapted to the form of writing itself (without pre-determined categories, modular and fragmentary but dialogical). Senthuran Varatharajah displaces the earlier conceptualizations of diaspora from its pre-determined form and meaning, thus contributing to the creation of a postdigital diasporic poetics.

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