



Two Names, A Thousand Places

Red Thread Journal 6 | Melis Cankara, Seçil Yersel, Sema Aslan

Melis Cankara: Thanks to *Manifold*, about a year and half ago, I became aware of the Sila Gurbet project, and since then have been closely following some of its productions. Concepts of space, home, migration, belonging, language, harmony, memory, emotion and body form the backbone of the project. Undertaken by Sema Aslan and Seçil Yersel, the project seeks to find an answer to the question of what kind of space a name creates - as an element of identity - in the company of these concepts. We talked to Sema Aslan



Seçil Yersel-Sema Aslan, video still from “Sound, Smell, Colour, Form”, 2022

and Seçil Yersel about the Sila Gurbet project, right before the opening of their exhibition *Kendi Coğrafyam: İsmim Sila / İsmim Gurbet* [My Own Geography: My Name is Sila/My Name is Gurbet] on February 10th 2023 at Kiraathane. First of all, I would like to learn how this long-running work was initiated. How did the Sila Gurbet project come about?

Seçil Yersel: The state of homelessness is something that I have encountered in different ways in my life and that I have to come to terms with. Although I was born and raised in Istanbul, there is this feeling of alienation that always accompanies me when I wander around the city; I have always had this sense of distance, getting surprised and being unable to get used to it. As in many projects I have been involved in, the starting point was perhaps the search for an answer to a question that corresponds to a specific need. The perception of space and the individual and collective ways of experiencing the space have always been at the heart of my work, both in my photography works that follow the fragments of space squeezed in-between across the city as well as in the neighbourhood-scale works I have done within the Oda Projesi [Room Project] artists' collective. Sema expressed her initial ideas about the Sila Gurbet project in an e-mail in 2014, and then we started exchanging correspondences. We were both excited to listen to the stories of the people who were named "Gurbet" [in Turkish, being afield/being away from home in a foreign land] and "Sıla" [in Turkish, yearning of an expatriate/homesickness] in our quest to cast out the notions embedded in these two names away from their dictionary definitions as well as the first connotations that spring to mind. At that time, I was living in Istanbul. The idea of living in Berlin stood aside as a remote possibility.

Sema Aslan: In my case, I can say that the idea originates from a personal experience. When I was born in Berlin after a difficult labour, my father named me: Kurtuluş [in Turkish, salvation/emancipation]. At first glance, the term emancipation or salvation may be intended to point to the difficulty of labour. On the other hand, considering the year and the period I was born into, my name possibly bears traces of a specific leftwing political organisa-



Sema Aslan, Sıla Gurbet project, sticker action, Istanbul 2022

tion as well. But I do know that my parent's relationship with the political movement was relatively loose, not extended over many years or, let's say, interrupted at some point. Therefore, the reason why I was given this particular name is still a bit of a mystery to me. The thing here is that after carrying it for eight years, my name was changed one summer day in Turkey, by a court decision. When I returned to Berlin at the end of that summer, I was now Sema [in Turkish, sky/heaven]. Shortly after that, my family left Germany for good, moving back to Turkey. Here is how I re-

late to this story: I have memories of my childhood. These memories acutely cut off the period I lived under the name of Kurtuluş from the period when I was Sema. It makes me feel or believe as if Kurtuluş in Berlin were a completely different person from Sema in Istanbul... This continues to be a fundamental self-searching for me: Did the distance between these two people (the person I once was and the one I am now) arise from the burden of names and their charged meanings, the interference of geography/space with my physical and mental boundaries, or the mere effect of transition from child-

hood to adolescence? Why isn't the distance closing even after all these years? Even as an eight-year-old child in Berlin, I could walk away without fear. How on earth I spent my young adult period in Istanbul as if I was always a little dormant? "As soon as we fall asleep, the space weakens and falls asleep too," says Bachelard. He suggests that space loses its fibres, bonds and geometrical consistency in this dormant state. Bearing in mind the fact that cities have their own dynamics, I have to note that I can still find my way safely and easily in Berlin, where I lived for a very short time (the city of my wakeful childhood), whereas my relationship with urban geography is not like that in Istanbul, where I spent most of my life. There is one Kurtuluş and one Sema that lies behind all these. These two names are diametrically opposed to each other in terms of their emotional charge. So, as we were pondering this story, namely, exploring the contingent relationship between the name and the place, we came up with the idea to focus on two names with their spatial connotations, investigating the connections/disconnections of those names with the place... We became curious to uncover more stories of that kind. At this point, Seçil and I decided to talk to women named Sila and Gurbet.

Melis: While there are other names such as Hasret, Özlem, Vatan, Toprak [in Turkish respectively, Yearning, Longing, Homeland, Earth] that can be indirectly related to migration, how did you decide on the names Sila and Gurbet, which were borrowed into Turkish language from Arabic (perhaps we can also consider these names immigrants in a sense), why did you choose these two names?

Sema: Sila and Gurbet were the names we chose, not because they evoke or may be associated with migration, but because they point to strong ties with location. In fact, the project did not seek to put migration issue in the spotlight. Migration infiltrated the stories, perhaps inevitably but spontaneously. This is a powerful nuance the name reveals as soon as it turns into a concept. We have seen that the concepts of *sila* and *gurbet* are largely present in the emotional memory of Turkish society with reference to the Turkey-Germany labour migration agreement. A woman whose family has no recent or distant

migration history tends to use the words Germany, *Almancı* [German-Turk], migrant almost in her very first sentences, and even establishes a reverse connection with this past by saying “There is no *Almancı* [German-Turk] in our family, we have no relationship with Germany”. She relates to an experience that is not her own. This is a very strong emotional reference that we cannot generalize and attribute to all interviews, but we come across with this reference quite often, and I believe this is very impressive. The exception to this -again avoiding broad generalizations- has been encountered in the narratives of Kurdish women. Here, the articulated notions of *gurbetlik* (being an expatriate) and *sıla hasreti* (longing for home/homesickness) were mostly used to discuss various lives in Turkey, employment, education, and with reference to the evacuations of villages that took place due to the conflict in the [Kurdish populated South East Anatolian] region. Another response we can cite in relation to the migration context was that the women who bear the names Sıla and Gurbet living in Germany started by saying that they did not have any emigration experience. Although migration itself was not among the key words in our work, this example illustrates the reflex that connects the project to the migration flow between Turkey and Germany.

Seçil: Since our subject was not migration per se, we did not seek to look for other names related to migration. As we set sail on this particular journey, we started off with the questions, “Where is Sıla, for you?” [What is homeland to you], “Where is Gurbet for you?” [What is foreign land to you?], “How are these concepts defined?”, and additionally, we wanted to explore how these two concepts are reshaped through the lives of women that embody and carry the names “Sıla” and “Gurbet” on top of their dictionary definitions and sociological connotations. In our conversations, we also asked our interviewees, “What is your take on giving names such as Vatan [in Turkish, Homeland] and Toprak [in Turkish, Earth] more often to men, while giving names Sıla and Gurbet more often to women?” In fact, this question, connects all these concepts, their history and their use in daily life. The linkages between the roles deemed appropriate for men and women in society and the shaping and making sense of space and geography are quite interesting; it is also quite telling that the perception of geography and gender roles affect and shape each oth-

er. The space-setting and emotion-evoking aspects of “sıla” and “gurbet” have always been attractive to us. But there was also a danger; the concepts of “gurbet” and “sıla” are attributed and pre-charged with certain meanings and connotations in many fields such as history, sociology, literature and cinema. One example is the song *Gurbet* released in 1973, with lyrics written by Özdemir Erdoğan.

“Kime desem derdimi ben bulutlar
Bizi dost bildiklerimiz vurdular
Bir de gurbet yarası var hepsinden derin
Söyleyin memlekette bir haber mi var?
Yoksa yârin gözyaşları mı bu yağmurlar?
Söyleyin memlekette bir haber mi var?
Yoksa yârin gözyaşları mı bu yağmurlar?”

[“Clouds, to whom I shall tell about my troubles.
Those we knew as friends shot us.
There is also the wound of gurbet, deeper than everything.
Tell me, is there any news from the country?
Or are these rains coming from my lover’s tears?
Tell me, is there any news from the country?
Or are these rains coming from my lover’s tears?”]

Pain, suffering, sorrow, melancholy, distance, deprivation, lacking, reunion, roads, migration, homeland...Among others these are that themes that the notions “sıla” and “gurbet” evoke. As we explored these two concepts, their reflections in contemporary stories have opened up new avenues for us.

Melis: For some reason, from the beginning, I thought that the concept of migration was included in the project. Maybe I thought so because the concept of migration is intrinsically related to movement. Because, *sıla* and *gurbet* are two words that are etymologically related to movement rather than place. While the origins of *gurbet* define the act of departure/separation and

sıla reunion/meeting, it is also a fact that they are not used independently of the place in everyday language. Thanks to your project, the relationship between these two words caught my attention: For a reunion to happen, there must first be a separation. In order to be separated, there must be an object or place one is attached to. What is your take? Which one comes first? Would there be *sıla* (home/town-land) if there were no *gurbet* (homesickness)? Could the meaning of “memleket” [in Turkish, homeland], which was attributed to *sıla* at a later stage, possibly originate from here? Have you ever thought about the relationship between these two words in terms of how they create each other and expand one another’s semantic circles?



Sıla ve gurbet kelimeleri insanın bir tür koparılmışlığının, yalnızlığının karşılığı.

Seçil Yersel, Sıla Gurbet project, stickers action, Berlin 2022

Sema: “What is migration? It is actually a movement.” This sentence belongs to one of the women we talked to. In our conversation, she completed her sentences by addressing the movement of people, plants and objects altogether. What we saw in most stories was that this movement had a destination. When I look at it from this perspective, taken together with the idea of creating a space, establishing a space for oneself, this concept reveals a “domestic” side despite the movement practice embedded in its nature. Apart from the power of movement, this concept encompasses another capability, namely: Being able to build a time and space. To build a house inside the house perhaps; or to have one room in the same house being *sıla* and the other being *gurbet*... I also think of children, childhood: Children spending time under a table in isolation from time and space, the tablecloth serving as a folding screen or drawing a border to the outside world... The child’s ability to be tight-lipped with their “spontaneity” in that sheltered area at that very moment... And from that moment on, of course I think of things inside my head, voices in my head. When I ask myself the question “When is it that we are at home?”, my answer is always as follows: When I can hear my own head voice. This is like reuniting with yourself, being able to reunite with yourself. Perhaps this is why *gurbet* and *sıla* remind us of a place before movement in this project; it is because we are focused on ourselves, our own story, our own space. Needless to say, I am referring to a plural self here.

Melis: What kind of a path did you follow after you decided to work together? Can you talk a little bit about the different stages of your project that you have accomplished so far?

Seçil: The project started and continued without any external support and funding. It has spread over a long period of time at our own pace and possibilities. Our priority was to carry out interviews one way or another. Each stage of the project was actually shaped around the sentence, “We are looking for people whose names are *Sıla* and *Gurbet*”. Once we found these people, while communicating our request for an interview, we kept saying that we were working on the relationship between women and space. We wanted the an-

swers to our questions to emerge right at that very moment; we wanted our interviewees to immediately ponder on *gurbet* and *sıla* at that first encounter. We did the transcription of interviews ourselves. We have explored various ideas for the end-product, such as publishing a book, doing an exhibition, or even staging a performance. We started publishing some of these interviews in the e-journal *Manifold*,¹ not in entirety, but only some selected sections. In this way, many [women named] Gurbets and Silas, who had not come together before, started talking to each other. This resulted in a biographical work and fiction around the theme “sıla gurbet”, featuring independent stories connecting to each other.

Sema: Seçil had moved to Berlin during this period. We reflected our spatial distance to the project. Reaching out to women from Germany and Turkey by considering our own spatialities, I think, created the opportunity to look back at ourselves and our togetherness in every conversation. We reached out to women named Sila and Gurbet, through our friends, neighbours, relatives and also on social media. We informed them about the general frame of the project, and invited them for a conversation. To the extent possible, we chose not to share detailed information about the project. We didn’t know anything about most of the women before. So, there was a state of not knowing each other and getting to know each other. We only took audio recordings of the interviews. We excluded details of women’s identities from the project. Every now and then, information about their age, occupation, education, ethnicity and the like came up during the interviews.

Melis: We see street tags for Berlin and Istanbul that accompany your texts published in *Manifold*. Did these tags emerge as a reflection of spatial distance? What was the purpose of these tags?

Sema: From the very beginning, tags make me think of firecrackers (a child’s toy that was common in the 80s Turkey and exploded when rubbed on the ground). When a firecracker goes off in the street, you look back for a moment, then continue your way. We partly wanted to evoke this effect on peo-

ple coming across with the project. That's how these tags became a part of the project. A sudden encounter with the concepts of "Sıla" and "Gurbet". Perhaps one of the purposes of street tagging was the possibility of prompting everyone to think about their own *sıla* and *gurbet* after this sudden and unexpected encounter. Another possibility is, perhaps it was a means to overcome the spatial distance between Seçil and me. In some cases, the relationship between the place where the tags were put and the facet/background of that place was telling a story in its own right. At such moments, the spatial distance between us seemed to turn into a game. We kept on turning to ourselves, and looking at our own story, the project, the concepts of "sıla" and "gurbet".

Seçil: The words *gurbet* and *sıla* have circulated across Berlin and Istanbul, and they continue to spread further from time to time. How do these words resonate on a street in Berlin and on a street in Istanbul? What is the extent of diversity and abundance of meanings and associations that emerge from encountering these concepts in these two cities? As I look at the photos of tagging, I feel that every word acquires a new meaning at the place - and together with the place - we come across it. As we looked at these concepts our point of departure was women's bodies, but we also wanted to look at them as they are on the street. I approach the surface or the facet of a city as a text field. I believe we added two words to this text field. The rest are the meanings added by those who have encountered them, and included them in their lives.

Melis: If we consider the space that the tags occupy in a city and the small sparks they want to ignite, the metaphor of firecracker becomes a very interesting and meaningful one; likewise it is quite interesting to chase a word to figure out how it resonates in urban space. In fact, it would be really nice to talk to someone who became aware of your project just through these tags; it would help us understand the impact of street tagging. Alright, what were the concepts you thought to address while determining your interview questions?

Were there any new concepts that caught your attention in the narratives of the interviewees during the interview process?

Sema: We had a backbone right from the very beginning. We were going to look at the stories about the naming process. To what extent women remember these stories, to what extent associations emerge when they think about the stories. I think one of the concepts we came across around this time was “rooting”. This is because the semantic landscape of “sıla” included the notions of place-(home)land (perhaps naturally). Rooting, of course, opens up a wide space. Some of the women who underlined the distance through the concept of rooting, sought to address rooting, defined it, and even constructed their root, perhaps precisely because of the act of remembering and thinking involved during the interviews. From this point of view, rooting can possibly be read as a concept and action not only about the past/our past, but also about the present/our present and future (inspired by Hannah Arendt). In a video recorded by Seçil and included in the exhibition, we see a tree reflection in a puddle. One of the first examples of the image of a tree with its roots underground, for example, in literature appears in *Odysseia*. When Odysseus finally arrives at his house, he says that no one can move the bed he has made. No one can move it because he made the bed around a thick-leaved olive tree. In fact, the bed (actually) is carved inside the olive tree.² But there are also trees whose branches look like roots. Among our interviewees, there are women who think about travelling as much as rooting; therefore, another emerging concept might be “to travel”. Or, another interpretation is, “not rooting.” What comes to my mind is Agnes Varda’s *Vagabond* (Sans Toit ni Loi). There is also the issue of language. This was one of the topics contemplated and expressed by women both from Germany and Turkey, although not everyone raised it. I am talking about an articulation that emphasizes the proximity and imminence of the relationship between feeling at home (sıla) or abroad (gurbet) and the language.

Seçil: In our first question, we asked the interviewees to describe “gurbet” and “sıla”. This first question was intended to help them put a distance be-

tween their own existence and the concepts of “gurbet” and “sıla” that they knew, heard, even listened to or watched. The question was the one that made them smile, while sometimes unsettling, exciting and thought-provoking. Over time, other questions were added to our repertoire of starting questions. One of them was “How would you describe Sıla and Gurbet in terms of sound, colour, texture and form?” With this question, we aimed to achieve a kind of abstraction of these concepts, which were connected with their own lives until that moment. And we have observed that there are many other concepts and equivalences that transcend dictionary definitions and predicted meanings. And if we are to take our departure point from here, we can open up to other geographies and possibilities. When I look into the stories of the women, I see that the names Gurbet or Sıla have provided them a space for coming to terms with things. I also thought that maybe if their name was İpek [in Turkish, silk], they wouldn’t have questioned their own existence and the relationship they built with their home and hometown. Among the women we interviewed, many of them had actually questioned the ones who gave their name, asking them “Why did you name me Sıla or Gurbet?” Many of them have felt the parallels or tension between their names and the way they live their lives, we can even call it the weight of their names.

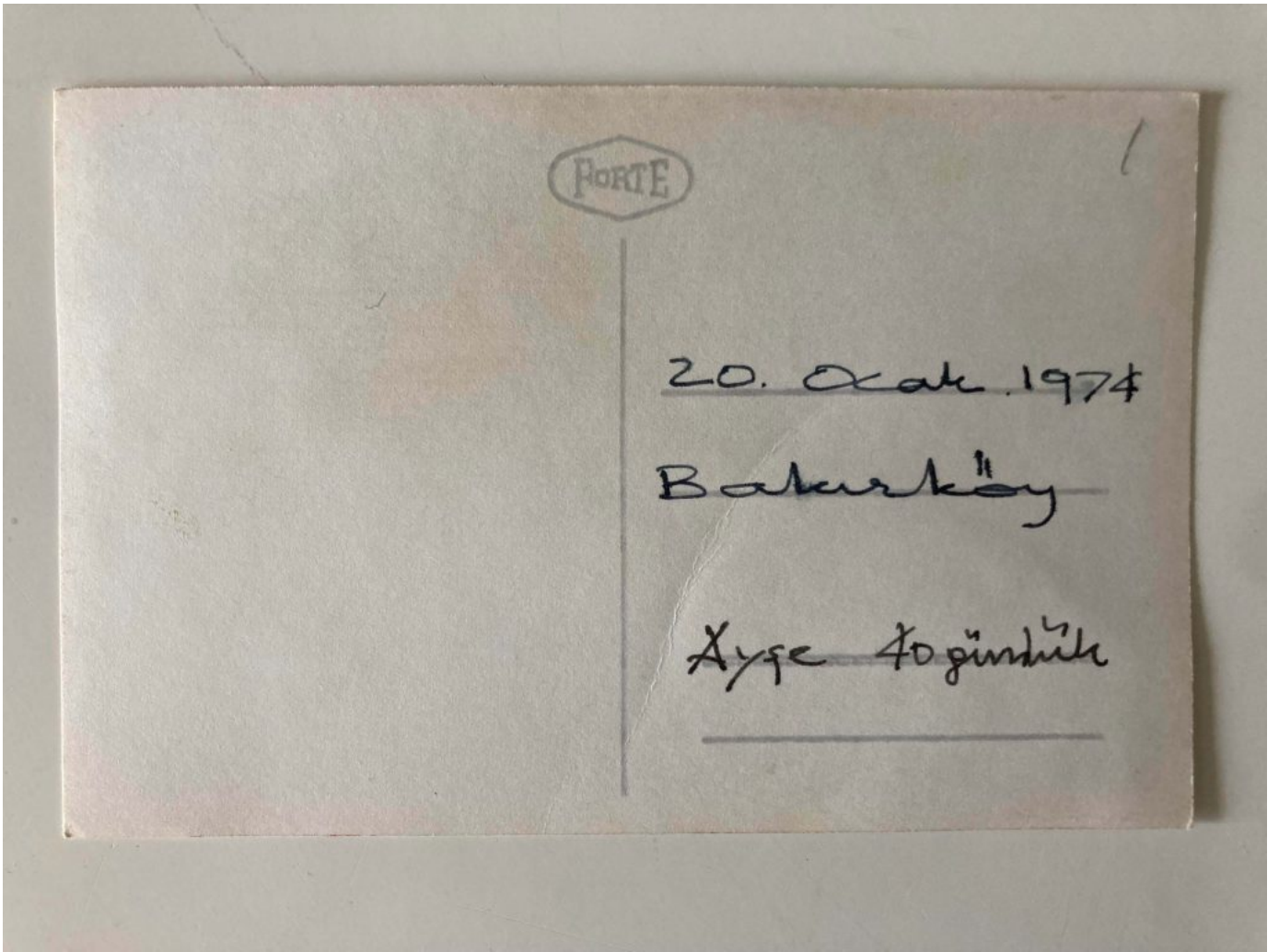
Melis: As far as I remember, the interviewee descriptions of *sıla* and *gurbet* included more visual qualities. It was as if there were fewer depictions that included sound, taste, texture, and smell. Am I wrong? Although scent has a very strong connection with space and memory, it seems that only one person was talking about it in the interviews. I don’t know if this is the case for gurbet, but to me *sıla* definitely has a smell. Have you noticed other themes their descriptions concentrated on?

Seçil: At the end of the interviews, we asked women to send us a photo that reminded of *sıla* and *gurbet*. The effort to fit the meaning in an image can sometimes be more a more difficult and intense exercise as compared to a lengthy conversation. As a starting point to have a conversation about Sıla and Gurbet, we set out with people’s own descriptions, then we proceeded

with the [perceived] meaning in their lives, we looked at the roots of the word and its generally accepted definitions and uses. Sometimes we reached out to their representations in movies and books. At one point, after such a highly autobiographical articulation, we wanted that person to make a kind of abstraction and to describe *gurbet* and *sıla* as a sound, smell, colour, form. The interviewees either found it difficult to respond to this question or answered rather quickly. For instance, one interviewee came up with the following description: “For me, the sound of *Gurbet* is that of silence. Its colour is brown, as it involves detachment. It smells of earth. Its form is absolutely endless plains. *Sıla* is rather hard, it’s not something I allow inside myself a lot. The words *sıla* and *gurbet* correspond to some sort of detachment and loneliness”. Whereas another interviewee made the following description: “It is the colour red that came to my mind instantly, maybe the city of Amasya came to my mind, maybe our village. Our village is an Alevi village, the colour red is dominant, but on the other hand, we do not carry the Alevi identity very much. As for the scent, it smells like rain, a damp smell that comes right after rainfall; maybe this is because of the city of Samsun, it rained all the time during our stay with my mother. The form is a difficult one, maybe it’s like a shadow. It has a mechanical sound, like the sound of a radio; my grandmother always listened to the radio in every house, I love my grandmother too. A folk song is playing on the radio, perhaps *sıla* or perhaps *gurbet*, it plays on the radio.”

Melis: For *Manifold*, you have gone through a writing process where you made these conversations talk to one another. How did this writing process contribute to the project? Has this process opened up a new avenue for you?

Sema: *Manifold* has opened up an experimental space for us. It was not our intention to decipher the meanings behind similar and dissimilar emphases in the stories. In fact, it was not even our intention to seek answers. Since we didn’t have such an intention from the beginning, we do not have any “result” in that sense. But there is a rhythm, there is this rocking from one story to another; an expansion and contraction that can be expressed in terms distancing, approaching, remembering, being surprised and withdrawing to one’s



Seçil Yersel's archive (From Yersel's family album, her father's note to the photograph from her infancy)

own boundaries. These last two words are supposed to be antonyms—which is a bit of a cloudy area. But on the other hand, they are sometimes used interchangeably. Or, as articulated by one of the women we interviewed, perhaps they refer to another kind of longing, “to be far away and not to be far”. Just like *Heimweh* [in German, longing for home) and *Fernweh* [in German, distant longing].

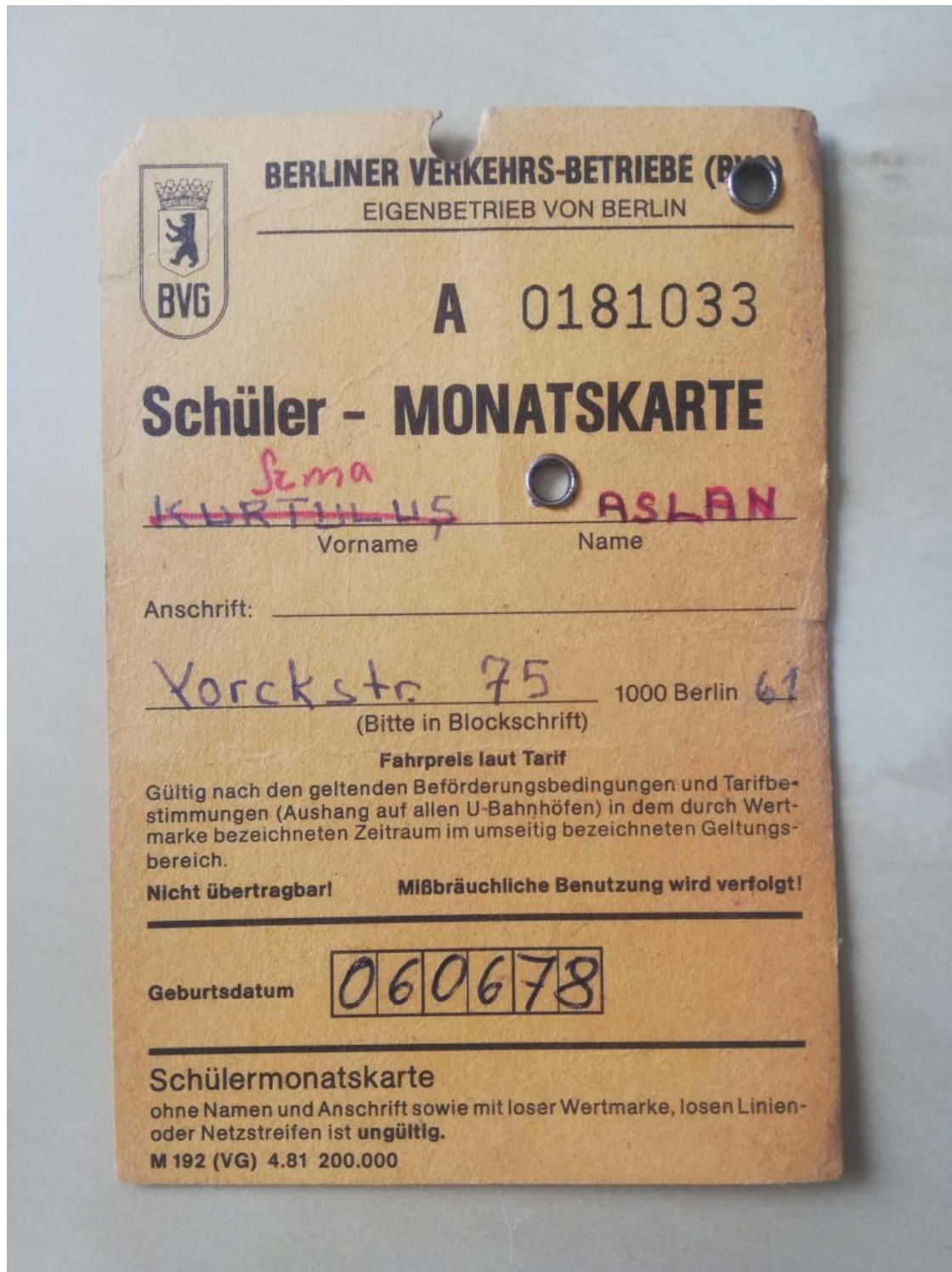
Melis: Perhaps the reason for this contrast, which you describe as a cloudy area, may be both words sharing a hidden spot. It is as if longing or yearning escaped from all dictionaries, came and settled in *sıla* and *gurbet*, pouring all its meaning and weight into these two words. I now realize this as you say it. The more you ponder upon it, other similarities, contrasts and new layers will emerge, just as in your project process. So how did you decide to hold an ex-

hibition? Could you talk a little bit about the exhibition process and the content of the exhibition?

Seçil: Since the inception of the project, we always had the idea of having an exhibition, even before we knew what pieces and fragments would make up the exhibition. We envisioned a fiction that could somehow go beyond the domain of writing. The exhibition opened at Kiraathane Istanbul Literature House under the title *Kendi Coğrafyam: İsmim Sila / İsmim Gurbet* (“My Own Geography: My Name is Sila/My Name is Gurbet”) consists of several pieces: There is a narrative emerged from the conversations of Gurbets and Silas, who speak to one another with our voice-over. This is a narrative by multiple actors with a complex structure. It is not quite clear which is Gurbet, which is Sila, or who is who in whose story. I believe this allows us to embark upon the sphere of emotions/affections. While one listens to these voices, a geography of *sila* and *gurbet* is being formed. On one screen, there is a video that shows different juxtapositions of the photographs that represent *sila* and *gurbet* for the women we interviewed. These are the photos we asked from them during the interviews. The other screen shows the photographs of the tagging we did on the streets of Istanbul and Berlin simultaneously with Sema. While these two screens and the voice-over installation operate in a single space; in the next room, there is another video which shows women’s descriptive accounts of *gurbet* and *sila* in terms of sound, form, smell and colour.

Melis: As I understand from your words at the beginning of the interview, this project has a very personal departure point for both of you. I have the feeling that works originating from an internal matter, changing its form over time, and spanning over years do have a transformative impact on its creators/authors. While accompanying the stories of Silas and Gurbets, have you revisited your own stories? I wonder what kind of transformation this whole process has brought to you, in retrospect.

Sema: Throughout the project, I came to realize that I was interested in the way a person thinks about their own story. How can I think of my own story?



Sema Aslan's archive (The monthly subscription card for transport corrected due to the change in name)

We have observed the performative aspect of the thinking process during these interviews. In other words, the act of thinking happening real-time. It's as if self-reflection has a fictional power, that's what I have felt.

And I thought that it is not easy to focus, that I do not have ready-made answers, that my relationship with space is constantly transforming and yet I am always looking for a place, that I cannot “fuse” one thing with another, that the story of Kurtuluş is not just mine, but that the others have a Kurtuluş too... I noticed all these at once. I have often thought that if I was asked the same questions, I would not be able to answer them. I assumed that perhaps I would not be able to attempt this kind of thinking, that I would not be able to find this deep and motivating force in myself. Of course, I found that sometimes I get very attached to my story from the past, which had a place of its own, and sometimes I pull up stakes and settle in my head, I just want to settle inside my head.

Seçil: We prepared the interview questions, conducted the interviews and transcribed them. Being actively engaged in all these processes has been a very intense experience for both of us. As I listened to each of the interviews, I thought about how interconnected each woman is, how connected each of us is. I realized that besides being a Seçil, my homelessness was also related to being a woman. As the project that started in Istanbul has continued when I moved to Berlin, *sıla* and *gurbet* have carved a place for themselves in my life, on top of my readings of these notions. In Berlin, I put *gurbet-sıla* tags along the streets and parks I walked through everyday. In this way, I created a continuum of memory as well as a pathway for not getting lost for myself (and also for others without knowing it). Now I know that Istanbul and Berlin are also connected to each other through these tags. Throughout the project, at each and every stage, I turned to Nurdan Gürbilek and kept reading her book *İkinci Hayat* [Second Life]. Here is an excerpt from the book: “Humans are born into *Heimat* [in German, homeland] with a baggage, with the burden of *Geheim* [in German, secret], which they cannot easily throw off their back. Our personal story is already blended with the stories of others as soon as we are born.”³

Melis Cankara, Seçil Yersel, Sema Aslan

Translated by **Burcu Becermen**

1 manifold.press/indeks/sila-gurbet-projesi

2 Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia: When are We Ever at Home?*, Fordham University Press, 2016.

3 Nurdan Gürbilek, *İkinci Hayat (Second Life)*, Metis Publishing House, 2020, p. 57.

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