

THIN ATTACHMENTS: WRITING BERLIN IN SCENES OF DAILY LOVES



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ABSTRACT

Thin Attachments brings personal memoir to bear on an affective geography of Berlin. In scenes of daily loves, the city's queers and Sufis, saints and strangers, lovers and research-partners cross paths at work, in cafes, at mosques, online, and in bed. Queer, migrant, and the religious are returning figures that coagulate in private rituals of be/longing and scenes of public intimacy. Insofar as thin stands for spectral depth and emotional traffic, it performs the task of engaging politics of time, sex, and religion in the city not in antagonistic terms but as critically coincident. Similarly, attachment in this work is that figure of affect, which brings us tad closer to the knowledge of how we might long and belong in shared unfamiliarity; of how ostensibly straight pasts and queer futures, sex and saints in Berlin constitute continuums otherwise implausible; of how delicacies of religious ritual echo precariousities of queer love. The result is a body of non-linear fragments that discover the sparse and surprising ways in which longings of places and people intersect and in so doing summon the city as though it were a crafty djinn, shapeshifting between its material, virtual, and imaginal forms.

KEYWORDS

queer affect, intimacy, belonging, Sufi, migration

Before the scenes

This is a first iteration of *Thin Attachments*, an on-going work on affection and the city.¹ In a mode of auto-theory, this writing delves into urban intimacies and inquires after the intimately urban. It constellates charged, porous, and haunted scenes of everyday longing and desire in the city of Berlin. As tenuously drawn as these are inextricably experienced, the fragments gathered here dwell in the promise that beyond its intimate textures, mining for affect in the city advances a localized interface of what is sensed with what is known (Gordon 2008). Queer, migrant, and the religious are returning figures in this work that coagulate in private rituals of be/longing and scenes of public intimacy.

Writing affect is a mode of inquiry (Gibbs 2015). A response as long as it is an affective attunement coterminous with radical alterations in my access to the city, first set into motion in 2016, six years after I had moved to Berlin and the year I started research with the Sufis of my neighborhood. It is predominantly borne of anxieties of the field, but it is most likely to have been nurtured in the numerous and now partly-lost conversations around those concerns, and which at the time I was having with friends, colleagues, research-partners, lovers, and strangers – at work, in cafes, at the mosque, online, and at times also in bed. A lot got blurred in the process, not least the lines I was carefully drawing between home and field, the work of life and fieldwork, between Saturday nights at the Sufis and weekend shenanigans in the *Kiez* (hood).

Inasmuch as attachment in this work refers to possibilities of contact and modes of attunement, thin does not denote weak or watered-down relations. Instead, it is a figure of potential; thin signals a scene's aptitude for spectral depth, affective input, and emotional traffic. Amid bare conditions of porosity, thin reminds us that there is a clearing outside linear time, that every now and then, an opening is created for feeling and knowing, knowing by feeling. In a similar vein, to the extent that Berlin stands as the primary setting, it also stands in for the urban whose boundaries are never sharply drawn. Trafficking specters of religion, sex and migration, Berlin in this work is a highly charged, impressed upon, ever-transient though material ground for affect, a vicarious geography that is felt beyond the here, summons multiple nows at once.

Fractured experiences of the urban are telling also of a migrant's queer labors of inhabitation, where the unfinished business of home-making must continually fluctuate between estrangement and permissiveness, negotiate both longing and belonging.² What is queer in this work is tied to questions of location. Yet it is not a thing that stems solely from place, in this case the city of Berlin, but inter-affectively generates a sense of place. It follows that queerness is not located, or for that matter, locatable, in one place any more than it is situated elsewhere; that it is not in any way more here than there, more now than before; that it is tied to the logic of cities and secularities in a way that it is unmappable in religious or non-metropolitan life-worlds; or that it is given to Berlin more than it is to Karachi, because the figure of queerness that *Thin Attachments* pursues is captured in the embodied-affective work of relating to habituated affects of a locality and thus also to one's location in it.³ In this regard, constellating affect's endurance in the city through the question of politically-inconsistent, thinly-configured, spectral attachments is to privilege felt labors of be/longing that willfully or not, mess with place's spatial logic, tweak its temporal orders, insist against the tyranny of straight place, or queer away "the sedimented conditions that constitute what is in place in the first place" (Gordon 2008, 4). And in its place, lay the ground for other ways of doing place, disrupting and intervening in its crystallizing pasts and presents, introducing awkward rhythms and less than ordinary repetitions in hope for other futures of place.

Nowhere in this work are such queer labors of/in place more sharply given than in cross-temporal and inter-corporeal intimacies that transact in dark rooms of religious ritual. Migrant Sufi longings for saintly contact gesture at the city's cruising cultures; cite distinctly-religious channels for erotohistriographies of another kind (Freeman 2010); and summon into presence Berlin's unlikely, immaterial or hidden religious topographies (Burchardt and Becci 2013).⁴ It reminds us that even privately conducted, doubly-interiorized rituals, targeted at mystical interiorities and practically confined to mosque interiors, bear the potential to profuse and kink spatiotemporal logics of the urban.⁵ In other words, Sufi hauntologies routinely brush against settled ideations of Berlin insofar as saintly traffic renders a place critically intimate with other times (Kasmani 2017; Rohy 2006; Taneja 2017); dilates its geography into imaginal elsewhere (Mittermaier 2011); and attests to the numerous "worlds that intermingle" in the city's folds, "but whose differences are never fully dissolved" (Lim 2009, 133).⁶ Attachments and affections serve to trace continuities, otherwise implausible. Its thin registers perform the task of engaging politics of time, sex, and religion in the city not in antagonistic terms but as critically coincident.

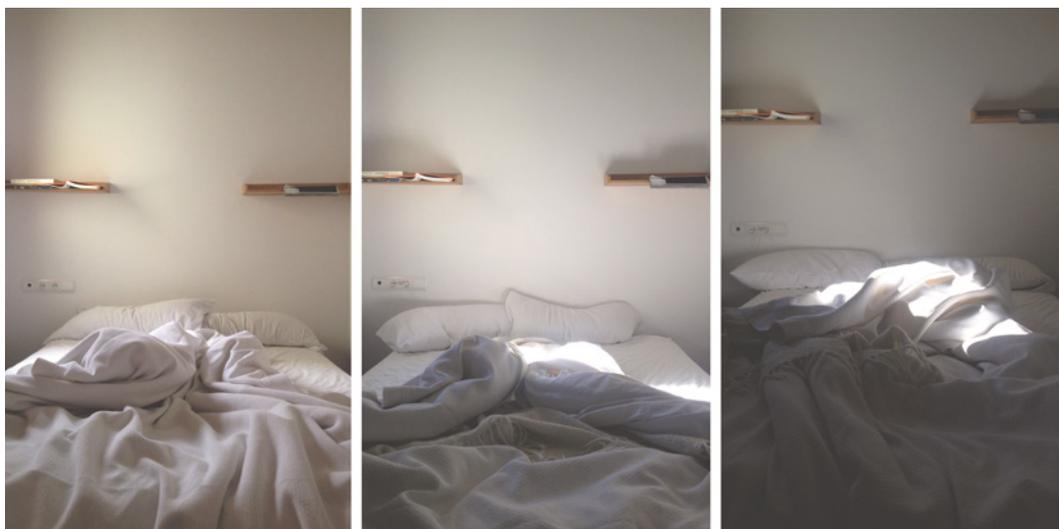
The most conspicuous of devices that this writing references is *flânerie*.⁷ Just as the advent of photography and film has fundamentally altered our perceptions of the city, new media makes similarly fresh demands of the *flâneur*. Virtual fora and online spaces continue to add new grammars to urban interactions; GPS-aided dating apps render the city dense with alternate and overlapping grids of desire, accelerating, at times impairing affective contact. As a form of city writing and in a modality of auto-theory, scenes of daily loves embrace the queer, variously mobile, and remotely intimate experience of the urban including modes of perception and patterns of consumption that result from advanced technological means to the city.⁸ However, the desire to write the city queerly through a register of feeling is not entirely met by listing gay amorous liaisons in the city, rich in affect as these might be in their own right. To constellate the sexual within myriad attachments of the urban is to discover how longings of places and people intersect in surprising ways; how intimacies are caught in episodic but abundant scenes of return that unfailingly summon the city as though it were a crafty djinn—elusive yet present, shapeshifting between its material, virtual, desirous and imaginal forms.

Thin Attachments brings personal memoir to bear on the material and affective geography of Berlin. It affords the “impropriety of the autobiographical gesture” (Gordon 2008, 41) only to render the author as another intimate figure in the field, around whom an assortment of attachments of the urban can gather. The scenes I describe are ultimately fraught, whether as sites of power and knowledge extraction or as interactive fields of their negotiation. Attachment in this work is that figure of affect that brings us a tad closer to the knowledge of how we might long and belong in shared terrains where none may exist (Ahmed 1999); of how ostensibly straight pasts and queer futures, men in Istanbul and saints in Berlin, constitute continuums however fragile; of how delicacies of religious ritual echo precarities of queer love. The result is a body of non-linear fragments, as subjective as these are and incompletely objectified, that constellate an always-in-emergence urban archive of public intimacy.

The work’s tryst with thin is confessedly derived from Ann Armbrecht’s account of ritual, place, and pilgrimage (2009). Her provocative yet sparsely elaborated idea of thin places remains a seductive force in this project. However, to the extent that ostensibly private feelings in this work continue to bear upon social and political formations of belonging in Berlin, it can firmly be situated in the tradition of the Public Feelings Project (Berlant 1997, 1998, 2011; Cvetkovich 2012). After

all, this writing is clearly influenced by Kathleen Stewart's writing on Austin (2007). Yet in its cross-meditations on sex, religion, and migration, it springs off every so often to pursue paths queer or less given than some of its forerunners.

In its barest sense, *Thin Attachments* can be understood as an unfinished project on be/longing in Berlin. At its poetic best, a love letter to the city, without end. Either way, it is a constellation of singular yet conversant scenes: daily loves in whose bloom stirs a migrant's longing to belong, and in whose telling, lurks the promise of reading Berlin otherwise.



Scenes of daily loves

No time for questions

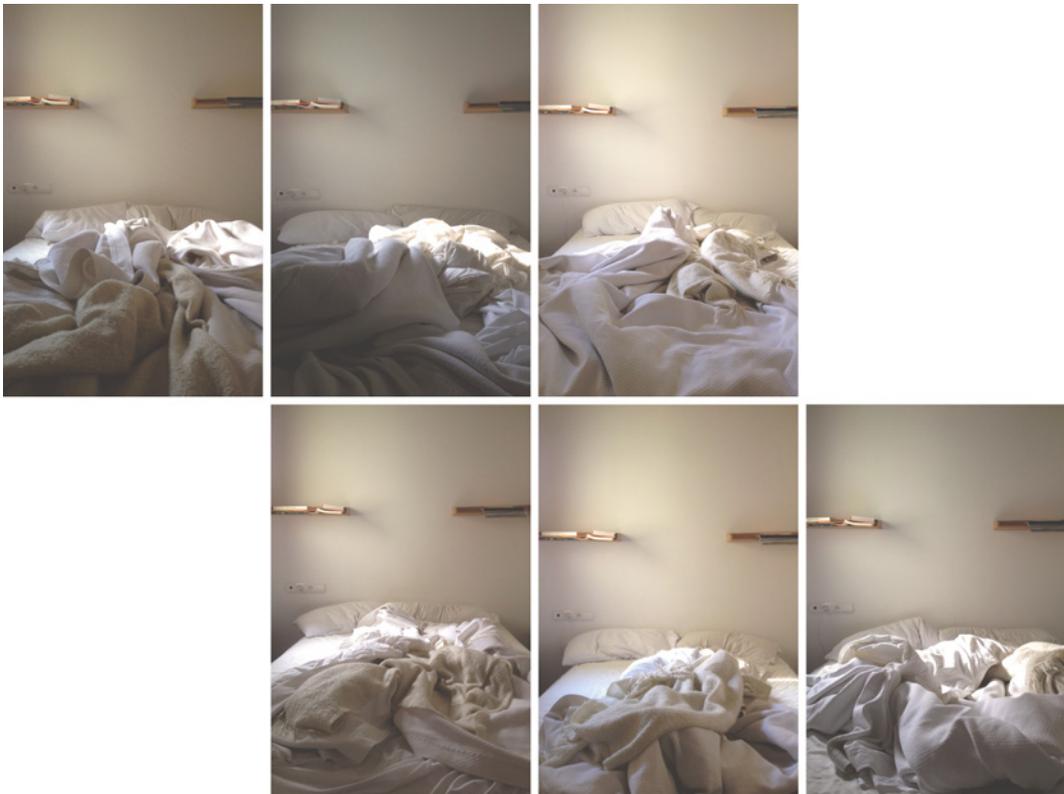
The first time he had noticed him was while he was reading his paper at the conference. He saw how a whole room of participants separated him from him. He noticed him the second time, when sitting in the last row he had raised his hand during the Q&A. But the time for questions was over. For the rest of the afternoon, he wondered what question he might have had about his research. He forgot to ask him even as he lay beside him, all night, snoring away like a cow in his hotel room.

Longing for love, in circles

A lyrically-buoyant circle of men has come to a still. Chants and recitations, odd screams and intermittent howls are no more. But the air is pregnant with its resonances. There is a sense of nascent repose. Smells of fragrant oils linger

on, even if in less pungent forms as sweat softens the contours of men's bodies, mostly men in their twenties who until moments ago were oscillating on their feet, singing hallowed praises, swaying rhythmically left to right and back to left, their forearms locked with one another. But no more. Tired, sweaty, overcome with feelings, the men are now seated on the carpeted floor, gasping. The puff and pant of heavy breathing is fairly audible; their bodies not upright like moments ago but curled up such that their heads almost meet the ground. Forty-minutes of an intense ritual are over in a room in Neukölln, longer than it is wide and oriented obliquely towards Mecca.⁹

A 5-minute walk from where he lives, is a mosque. He goes there every week, where 25-30 men gather around a Sufi master, who leads them into *zikr*, the Sufi performance of mindful remembrance of Allah. Some of these men tell him that there are other persons in the circle, ones he cannot see. And that when, with their eyes shut, they sing and chant praises of saints and holy men, holy men and saints appear, intimacies take hold, even if only in passing.



Not I but he

Berlin conjures up his past like no other city does. He's lived here for eight years but the specters that keep returning to it are from all over. So, he decides to write them into his text, making it porous, as porous as he finds the city. Writing Berlin, in his case, is stirred by resonances of multiple places, thickened by present pasts. He will one day notice similar hauntings in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's short story *Der Hof im Spiegel*, a labyrinthine entwinement of people and places, "something approximating postnational intimacy," in the words of her translator (Adelson 2005, 1). He will find comfort in the poems of Aras Ören that chronicle in the setting of a single street, *Naunynstraße* in Berlin-Kreuzberg, a far greater story of be/longing and survival, migration and arrival (1973). These will assure him that "Berlin is written in many languages, in many different places, and circulates at times far from the city itself" (Yildiz 2017, 206).

Eventually, he too will come to see how he is implicated in the scenes he describes for what is the migrant's act of writing the city if not an engaging with the city as a complicated home. But for now, when he refers to himself in the third person, not I but he, he follows Kathleen Stewart's technique of gaining distance from one's own subjectivity while recording at the same time the privileges and particularities that inhere in his cis-gendered ways of inhabiting Berlin. The texts he writes are not about him, though he is integral to their compositions. In a way, these act like artist Nina Katchadourian's Lavatory Self-portraits in the Flemish Style (2010), which are not selfies, as she claims, but other portraits of the self.

City Inside Out

He has been reading Diane Chisholm. Her reading of the gay bathhouse points to the ways in which the labyrinthine logic of cruising for sex mimics the architecture of the city in the way that it "interiorizes the passages and meeting places of the external city" (2005, 45); makes contact among city-goers safe yet retains, in fact magnifies, its cruising potentials and desirous contours: a kind of expanding, even testing of the *Erwartungshorizont* of the city. He loves this German word he had recently picked up. It literally means the horizon of expectations. But such inversion has extraneous impacts. Men emerging from the interiorized urbanity of the gay bathhouse return to the city transformed, with deeper knowledge, both of their bodies and the city, a kind of knowledge that renders them ever more skilled and adept at cruising the city. It all sounds expectedly familiar to him. In fact, even before reading this work, he had already begun thinking of whether or not what the young men did during *ziker* could be read in terms of a form of cruising, cruising for saints, as he had noted down in his field notes.

Knopfaugen (button-eyes)

He sees him again, this time after months. He is 3.2 km away. He closes the app on his iPhone without clicking. His heart longs for him still, he realizes.

“I’m so exciting” (insert French accent)

In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson writes: “Fucking may in no way interfere with the actual use of language” (2009, 8). Yet he thinks of the cute Parisian chemist who in the thickest of French accents kept saying to himself “I’m so exciting” as they fucked. In that moment he had clearly held himself back curbing the urge to correct his grammar. And even though he must have reacted with some manner of smile, he had seriously deliberated whether or not to intervene in that exchange of passion and to tell him that grammatically speaking he would have had to be excited, not exciting. He had thought of the pros and cons of such an intervention. He marvelled at his ability to be cerebral when it wasn’t really necessary; to articulate a whole line of thought while having sex; of arriving at a decision, which he was meanwhile able to meditate upon; and equally at his generosity to suffer while making room for other pleasures to take hold in its stead. How strange that language could affect him to this extent, he would wonder a few days later. To himself, he would then say with a smile: “I’m so exciting!”

My Ungeheuer (monstrous) Neukölln

What Anjali had pointed out with regard to his Berlin fieldwork with the Sufis had stuck with him. He had struggled to fully grasp it even in the highs of that post-conference moment at Farina and Will’s home in Ann Arbor. If he remembers well, she had read his casual description of not having known the Turkish Sufis while living in the same neighborhood all these years as a kind of a disappointment with himself. How can it possibly not be also about you, Anjali had said with her signature ease even though her pentagon-shaped frames in bright red wouldn’t let a word go passed without charge. Come to think of it, his floral socks were equally impelling, whose daintiness, he imagined, had many a head turn too. Barely had he basked in the thought that he was overtaken by a feeling he couldn’t describe: was it the realization setting in that the Turkish Other in the German context was possibly a site for reading his own otherness? A kind of a mirror, not in the sense of reproducing sameness but a site of reflexive extraction. Or was it just hope that by watching himself watch others, objectifying himself alongside others, odd-fitting contradictions about himself would inevitably be revealed.

Späti (late-night shop)

There is a woman he sees almost every day. From where he usually sits outside this café on the street where he lives, there is just a line of three potted plants that separate the café from the *Späti*, where she sits, sipping tea. And just now as he is jotting down these lines, a man from across this plant line reaches out to him. Hasan from Morocco introduces himself and inquires a little bit about him too. “*Ich komme aus Pakistan*”, he says in German. In this moment, his eyes meet the eyes of the woman but they do not exchange greetings. “They will kill my father,” Hasan’s next words leave him stunned as he quotes Benazir Bhutto out of the blue from a TV interview aired on the BBC sometime in the late 1970s. Affected as he is, he immediately thinks about how a mere sound bite was enough to recollect an entire history. Hasan raises his hand towards his heart, shaking it to tell him how those words still stir his emotions. He also tells him that he lives right above the *Späti*. Even after he thinks the conversation is long finished, Hasan keeps interrupting his daily ritual of writing, offering German cultural trivia like how to end an email in German: MfG, he recommends from across the plants, *Mit freundlichen Grüßen* (with friendly greetings)!

The Potted Line

When Hasan asked him if he could join him at his table, the potted divide felt a lot more real to him. Mixed as it is here in this neighborhood, dog-owning, breakfast eating, coffee drinking *yukis*, or “young urban kreative internationals” as The Guardian (Dykhoff 2011) once described Berliners of Neukölln, hardly mingle with those that leisurely hang outside *Spätis*, speaking Arabic, Turkish, Romanian and what not. Yet certain intimacies were inevitable, for instance, on other days, when looking out from this café, framed by its window front, he sees passers-by, possibly his neighbors. Ones that are routinely caught in fleeting passages: For example, this woman dressed in *shalwar-kamiz* dragging a wheeled bag of groceries. Every time he sees her, he tries to quickly piece together the finer details of the cursory scene like the length of her *kamiz* or the precise cut of her garment, all cues that he thinks will lead him to assess whether she might be Pakistani or Indian, possibly even Bangladeshi. He is of the conviction that Pakistanis dress better but that’s beside the point. These neighbors, he notes, never stop at cafes, they hardly peek in. They just keep walking on.

Right across is another café, tad fancier than this one, where the coffee is 20 cents more expensive and candles in dark interiors peek out of large windows, even during the day. Tables are hard to get, especially outside even though unlike a Parisian cafe, there isn’t much going on to gaze upon. A *Kinderwagen* (stroller)-pushing mother stops by to chat with a dog-owner. A scene of likely white intimacy, he thinks. Breakfasts continue. The light drizzle too. The leisure of

cafés is palpably different from leises of a *Späti*, it suddenly dawns on him. He is immediately reminded of his hatred for Zucchini cakes, which so often announce the hipsterness of cafés. There is one like that on the other street where the coffee costs 50 cents more, where Ashram-pants upend the outline of headscarves; vegan sandwiches frown at kebabs of the *Kiez* (hood). Annoyed by the thought, he returns to the scene that is now, back to where cheese platters, breakfast spreads, and bread baskets stop at potted lines; so does the eclectic style of mismatching furniture. But not always are potted lines legible, he thinks. By night on the same street candle-lit bars glimmer unlike game-rooms whose fluorescent glow outs them as men's-only migrant spaces. He never goes there.

In the thick of it, bare

For Heather Love, thinness of description involves “exhaustive, fine-grained attention to phenomena;” close but not deep reading (2013, 404). His own interest in thin insists on what is there in a scene, rather than what is not there. Curbing the urge for thick description is his way to chip on the edifice of anthropological truth and make room (he hopes) for other modes of thinking: Modes that do not simply rest on the been-there, seen-that-ness of the anthropologist; and thinking that is not entirely in service of positivist coherence and certitude. Thin, he thinks, lets us in into an already porous scene, it allows us to dwell in its passage as much as it eases a veering off to other scenes. It describes what's going on as opposed to explicating what's 'really' going on. Thin attachments it follows are attachments that don't stick, that do not last. Yet they bear a spectral depth; their charge lives on, returning, unfolding in other forms, arresting us ever so tenuously. Thus, to write in scenes is as much to capture the event of passing as it is to hold on to that which passes: intimacies of a scene that would not have arisen in the first place had it not been for this particular time and place.

Worlds of the Unknown Crying Man

As he walked through the door, he met him first in the mirror. Little did he know he was walking into the silhouette of the Unknown Crying Man. Affected as he was by the encounter, he couldn't quite recall the exact features of his face though he knew he had seen a face like his. After all it had flashed repeatedly across TV screens in 2001, when the Unknown Crying Man was accused of practicing debauchery, of offending religion. But there were 52 of them, caught. The Egyptian authorities had cracked down on a boat of merrymakers on the Nile. At the trial, 52 faces hid behind white tissue, covered in fear in fact, the

fear of being identified. The Unknown Crying Man stood out because he was doubly arrested; the camera's eye had caught him crying.

He knew what crying felt like. He was familiar with etiquettes of hiding. He had also twice tasted the fear of being identified. But this city wasn't Cairo, neither Karachi. And the year they met in the mirror, no longer 2001. Sixteen years on, he was a loosely-defined flâneur in Berlin and he was a melancholic dandy in Istanbul. So, on his second visit to Istanbul, he tried looking for the Unknown Crying Man. Some knew where he lived but none had seen him. If word on the street was anything to go by and if one were to buy into the life that artist Mahmoud Khaled (2017) had now imagined for him, the Unknown Crying Man was a recluse, confined to his Bauhaus-inspired home in socially-upward Cihangir, surrounded only by pictures of Giovanni Bragolin's famous kitsch images of crying children.

Only meters away from the home of the Unknown Crying Man, is an abandoned park. There, just the previous night, resting on the edge of a rock, he faced the Sea of Marmara. As he shared beers with Ahmet, he had felt the weight of the city surging behind them. Yet Istanbul sprawled to their left and to their right. From where they sat, they saw it in Asia; they saw it in Europe. He was unfailingly bewitched by cities that afforded vistas on to themselves, convinced as though of their own charms. Berlin, he knew, had no such airs. He had often described it as *malang* (mendicant) among cities. That night, the view of Istanbul that he liked so much felt so terribly burdensome. How does one turn away from a city as present and self-aware as Istanbul, he would say to himself without uttering these exact words. The rest of the time Ahmet and he would speak of a whole assortment of things: of ghost-like fathers; of the intimacy of strangers; their cocky preference for anthropology over sociology; of the nature of divine; and of *majzubs* (the divinely-attracted). All this while he feels a restlessness, perhaps for the reason that he was once again gradually coming to terms with multiple cities in one.

This neighborhood of dandies in Istanbul from where the city could admire itself in its own reflection was a far cry from the working-class neighborhood of the newly rising district of Esenyurt where he had met the Sufis a few nights prior to this one. So far it had taken him two hours to reach. But when he did arrive, a metro-train and two bus rides later, translator in hand, he found over 150 men chanting names of Allah, reciting praises of saints, immersed in sonic atmospheres, like the ones he had observed in Berlin. Here too, men were known to cry but for radically different fears. But they too, like the Unknown Crying Man were arrested, charged, moved to tears. It was both strange and peculiarly familiar to him.

*Maidan-e-hashr*¹⁰

They had spent time in Sehwan and in Paris but never in Berlin. So, when Delphine visited him for the first time, she asked him to take her to places in the city, which he liked. On the first day, he took her to a place he doesn't like. Unlike him, Berliners love the *Tempelhofer Feld*, a former airfield and now a flat stretch of nothingness. A place so devoid of trees and rid of any promise of shade that it reminds him of every description of the Day of Judgement, ones he had heard in Friday sermons during his childhood: when the sun would be at a distance of one and a quarter of a spear, when one would run for cover but to no rescue. On an afternoon in June, together, they looked for shade in the park and then moved on.

Writing now, not here

His writing saunters in and out of Berlin with little outcry. It also dwells in *Jetztzeit*, a chewed-over, here-and-now account of how places come to 'thicken' in their experience as migratory settings (Aydemir and Rotas 2008), turning dense ever so slowly in the traffic of dreams, memories, imaginations, and anxieties. So, he seeks in his writings the accumulated weight of these presents, just as much such writing "constellates multiple histories that do not usually get told together" (Yildiz 2017, 214). He writes, he realizes, only to re-engage with the city as text.

What doesn't stick, flees

Bir, iki, üç, dört ... or so counted the young men in Turkish, all as one, keeping score as they took turns doing push-ups. In this almost empty room in Neukölln, there was hardly much left, just the fervor of voices reverberating off its now bare surfaces and cold fluorescent lights that dodged contours of well-toned bodies. The setting, drab with a palpable ease, was almost pallid, yet none of this was routine. Vivid or spirited, too green or painfully yellow, words that he would've once used to describe this room were no longer imaginable. The Koranic calligraphy that had long adorned the walls was now buried in multiple coats of white paint. The last cycle of sonic chants and haptic rituals was already a faint memory. And even if the elderly sheikh, a mystical guide to these young men, was still in audience, an earlier mood of reverence was no more. In fact, the rolled-up carpets on which the men now sat had been removed only minutes ago, as if whose coiling had spectrally unfurled an air of playfulness. One after the other, amid bouts of praise and cheer, the young men showed off their physical prowess doing push-ups, their biceps taut against a naked concrete floor. In this moment, even the sheikh, who until now only smilingly watched, knew well that at some point,

he too, would have to take the floor. How remarkable were these moments, he had said to himself as he observed the space of the mosque gradually transform from a room of prayer to that of leisure, recording it photographically over the span of an evening.

The last features of the mosque had been dismantled, the boxes were ready to be moved. The concrete floor now bore traces of color. Faint but stubborn vestiges of the carpet had stuck to the floor; a memory far easier to arrest than the many immaterial trails lost to the eye of the camera. As leisure took hold in the room that day, departing from its air were rhythms of the body, sounds of joy and fear, and possibly the saints too who were known to haunt the room week after week. And yet, of all the traces of a mosque that the room now bore, this moment of leisure and laughter was most fleeting, he had thought; thin, least likely to stick to its surfaces, less likely still to be carried along in boxes. Much in line with Ann Armbrecht, he would later ask himself: how do we hold on to knowledge, especially once something comes to an end? (2009, 176).

Roast beef, rolling eyes!

There were days when he was reminded how German, imperfect as it was in his case, had settled into his ordinary ways of speaking. One has lived far too long in *Deutschland*, he once declared to his friends on Facebook, when one replaces intransitive verbs with *machen* (to make), unfortunately in English and to its further detriment when one inadvertently closes one's sentences with an open-ended word like *or*, just as Germans use *oder*. And then that *kleinen* (little) moment of horror, when he wondered if one day he too would sound like the refrain from Tracey Ullman's parody of Angela Merkel: "*Oh mein Gott, I'm rolling my eyes*" (2017).

He stood at the counter at Rewe asking for 100 grams of roast beef. Though he had done so in German, he had caught himself, like so many times before, germanizing his English words. He had learnt to make these little adjustments for the benefit of his listeners. He hadn't arrived at this decision consciously. It had as if of its own will crept into his ways of being in the city. It had often lent his German a certain kind of authenticity, the kind that comes with not pronouncing English words in any English way. So, on that day, as he stood before the counter, he asked for *Roast Beef* when in fact he had meant roast beef. Despite his German enunciation of the word, the German man at the counter picks the wrong sort of meat, the one he hadn't asked for, as if his generous gesture of germanizing was entirely lost on him. Disappointed, he uttered the same words once again, this time pointing to the roast beef ... to which the guy responded, *das ist aber Roast*

Beef! (but that is roast beef). This time he just rolled his eyes, and though he did roll his eyes in English, he was confident it couldn't be lost in translation. *Endlich*, he was *eine kleine* bit happy! (finally, he was a little bit happy).



Losing thread

He didn't quite register it at first. Only moments after, in the thin slice of space where his body briefly withdrew from his, he noticed a red line on the bed, a thread of a witness to rising intensities in a sun-filled room. How could he not sense it as it separated from his wrist, a rush of disappointment crossed his mind. It had been with him for four years and ten months to be precise. What's more is that in days leading up to this, he had thought about it. He had wondered how he would interpret it when the thread would finally part with him. It was old and brittle at the knots. It was showing signs of weariness. He thought about the fakir who had crafted it with multiple threads, prayed over its every knot and made him wear it as a parting gift when he left Sehwan. It had become a living memory of his first fieldwork, though it was meant to tie him to *Lal*, the Red Saint of Sehwan. He thought of his father who disapproved of it from day one, insisting year after year that he take it off. It had now left him of its own will. Weeks after, he still thinks of the meanings its undoing will take. Is this a call for him to return to the shrine of Sehwan, he wonders? He doesn't know what to make of it, so he asks Delphine. He wants her to say what he can't bring himself to say: that *Lal* is calling him. But when he asks her, she tells him: "You're now free!"

Missing Bani

He watches the leaves fall. From where he usually sits outside this café on the street where he lives, the scene is pretty much the same. Breakfasts continue on both sides of the street. A woman walks past dragging a wheeled bag of groceries, another familiar scene within the scene. She, however, is not Pakistani. The wind is colder, the sun scarcer than it was just a month ago. It is only late August. He watches the leaves fall. He doesn't smell autumn. Not yet. But then he was never sure of his olfactory aptitudes in the first place. He misses Bani. When she left for Karachi less than a month ago, he couldn't really understand why someone would want to leave Berlin in the summer. Precious, he now sees it slipping away. He writes her a message on Whatsapp. He's anxious to hear what she thinks of his prologue to *Thin Attachments*. He usually bounces his ideas off her, mostly because she has an oddly superior talent for sifting through academic bullshit. She tells him she loves the title. He's now sure she hasn't read it beyond the title. He misses her even more. He watches the leaves fall.

The teary moons of Istanbul

When she caught him crying in a church, he didn't know how to explain his tears. It was their first week living together and they had decided to spend it in Istanbul. It was there she had named him the maker of dreams. And dream-like it was. January and icy cold. They were young and full of hope in a city of new beginnings yet each one of them scarred, each one of them burdened with dreams of their own. On an afternoon stroll one day, when he had briefly drifted from her, he had found some comfort inside a church. Places of worship had always had a way with him. As he sat on the old wooden pew, alone, he felt searing towards him what had passed and the gush of what was yet to come. On the muddled borderlands of sensing and (not really) knowing, his eyes teared up. He couldn't contain the surge. He may have cried like a baby.

Twelve years, 9 months and some 10 days later he was back in Istanbul, this time by himself. When he found himself at the home of the Unknown Crying Man, he knew he too had cried in Istanbul. Then a week or so later, without actually wanting to, he stumbled upon the same church. He did not go inside. He did not cry this time. But in returning to the scene years later, he had come closer to his past and to Istanbul, a city where, as he would eventually read on a plane back to Berlin, "*jeder hatte ein bisschen Mond in seinen Händen*" (everyone had a little bit of moon in their hands). In the company of Özdamar's writing, he would begin to see why in 2005, in Istanbul, their dreams had appeared like planets within reach; why many moons later the future still shined here as if it stood at arms-length. "The moon was so big as if it only lived in the Istanbul sky, loved just

Istanbul, and polished itself each day for this city alone. Wherever it looked, all doors would immediately open to let it grow into them. Wherever one grasped, one caught hold of the moon.” (Özdamar 2005, 68, author’s translation).



“I decided to fly to Australia. I left my boyfriend (emoticon: sad face).” Late one night in a Whatsapp message from Bali, his Italian neighbor informs him of the breakup. He sounds composed but hurt, defeated almost. The next morning, he meets his neighbor’s ex to receive the keys to the apartment, who explains to him which of the keys are to which of the doors, which of the plants require more water, which not. He’s never been good with plants, so he nervously listens, trying to catch every detail even though he’s clearly distracted, all this while, wondering, why the stranger he thinks he’s never met looks oddly familiar. As they walk out, his neighbor’s ex hands the keys over. He sounds composed but hurt, defeated almost. Turning the corner of the street, he hears him say: Please don’t tell him about us!

Thinking through thin

To bring memoir to bear on geography is to consider how time binds the narration of one life to the many affective mappings of a city. In pursuing the matter of *Thin Attachments*, he points to tentative mappings as much as to shapes of relating intimately in the city that do not transact in values of density or tightness; these are intimacies that dwell in their infirmness and which even in their nursed, stretched out or temporally drawn illuminations betray what is futural in the logic of be/longing; or which flourish, or at times only endure with little or no optimism in what Berlant calls “intimacy’s long middle” (2014, 22). Thin is what survives in and of relating on a map without investing in the stability or coherence of objects that comprise those relations (Edelman 2014, 30). It speculates less in objects that map than in affectivities and affections that make up modes of relating to those objects, whether those are acts of pursuing or disinvesting, the condition of being drawn or desiring withdrawal.

See you?

From the moment he opened his eyes on that Saturday morning, he knew something was amiss. Even though he had imagined it otherwise, his body had drifted away from his through the course of the night, a tad further apart than it was possible on a 140m-wide bed. He made him coffee in the morning. They took it

in the kitchen, commenting, how unremarkable its taste was. When he walked out of the door, he kissed him ever so lightly on the lips, touching only to un-touch them again. See you soon, he said, as though it was an inadvertent speech act. He didn't believe him, not one syllable, but he knew that it was the right thing to say in that moment. Later that evening, he stood in a circle with Sufis as they sang praises of saints and holy men. He wondered, like he often did in the circle, how one could see with eyes closed. "He sees you, you don't see Him, we're all together, it's love," a Sufi follower had once explained to him. That night, as he closed his eyes – eyes he was told were *Knopfaugen* (button-eyes) – he too saw, as Sufis would, though not a saint but him. It ought to have been love indeed. And when, at the end of the ritual, the sheikh raised his hands in prayer, he raised his hands too. After a long time, he had caught himself praying, this time for him and him. That week they drudgily chatted on Whatsapp. Then on Friday, he received the break-up message. A prayer in the city had not come true.

Endnotes

1. Thin Attachments is an independent line of work resulting from the author's joint project with Hansjörg Dilger and Dominik Mattes. It is carried out in the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre, *Affective Societies* at Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). It was first presented at a workshop *Migration and Discrimination* organized by Cornell University (2017) in Berlin, and most recently at the *Capacious* conference (2018). This writing is indebted to its research partners and interlocutors, allies and reviewers.

2. While migration is relevant to the author's experience of the city, the work does not assume a stable category of the migrant or that access to socio-economic privileges and political-legal frameworks are equally available to all migrants.

3. For queer in the suburban, see Tongson (2011); for a critique of Affect Studies' US-centering drive and Queer Studies' geopolitical flattening, see Arondekar and Patel (2016).

4. My queer reading is not entirely reflective of the politics of the Sufi group. My participation in the ritual, however, makes queerness not external to the field but co-constitutive of it. For a discussion on the author's fieldwork, see Mattes et al (2019).

5. For place-making and belonging in Berlin vis-à-vis Sufi rituals of remembrance, see Dilger et al (2018).

6. I refer to Lim's (2009) concept of immiscible temporalities with regard to supernatural agency and translation of non-coinciding temporalities in fantastic cinema.
7. For a queer reading of Walter Benjamin, see Chisholm (2005), Introduction.
8. For remote intimacy or non-simultaneous transmission of sentiments through tele-mediating devices as a praxis for queer of color suburban residents, see Tongson (2011).
9. Neukölln is a district in Berlin known for its multi-cultural residents.
10. The ground where Muslims believe they will be resurrected on the Day of Judgement

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