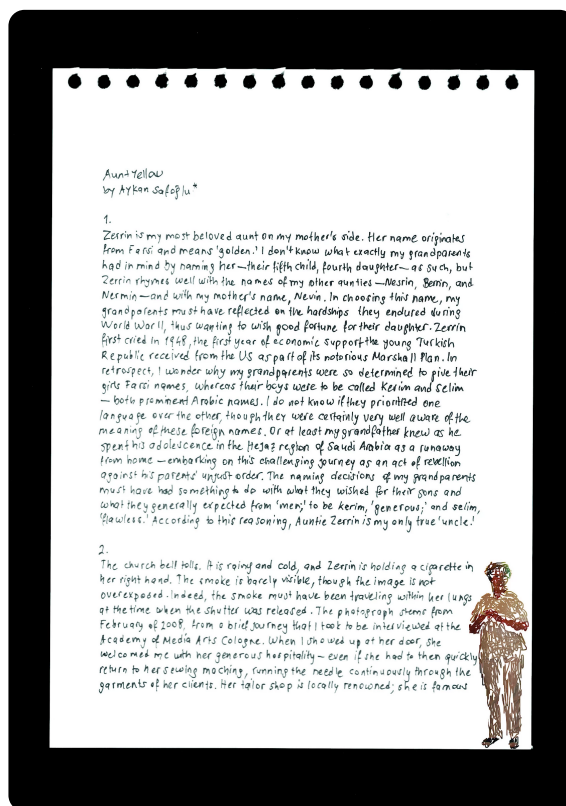


Aunt Yellow

Part of Class and Redistribution

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for delivering her clients' orders on time. Here, she is pictured during her smoke break in front of her tailor shop in Paffrath—a small village in the region of Cologne/Düsseldorf. At the moment of exposure, she had been in business for more than thirty years; on a day-in-day-out basis, she tailored the clothing of her customers, mostly local Germans. When you entered the shop—besides the many calendar pages exhibiting touristic sites from Turkey—one would notice the framed pricing lists on the walls showing how much it would cost for my aunt to refit the clothes of her customers to their unique desires. I always thought that the customers secretly knew what my aunt knew all too well: their desires would always betray physics over time, leaving them estranged from their 'good old' material conditions. Before the clients, with some reflection, could admit to this fact—which occurred only rarely—they surrendered to their estrangement, and then quickly sought comfort from my aunt. When they knocked on my aunt's door, she would not ruin the magic, never disclosing that she—in fact—does not have the skills to undo time. Without much talk, she would turn the 'old' with her magic wand, into a familiar 'new' with each alteration that came a new way of being. Rather than my aunt, it was the political conditions that demanded such submission. The many governments that ruled in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1920s and '80s—whether Social Democrats or Christian Democrats—mastered an ability to maintain the status quo by branding the 'outdated' as something 'refreshing.' The era of the German economic boom was nothing other than repressive; the collective aspirations and rhythms of subcultures were rendered a hopeless dystopian genre. As long as the governments promoted economic stability with little change, stagnation could be tolerated. From the packages of the products that my aunt regularly sent me as gifts, and the pages of my high school textbooks, I always had an image of Germany as highly saturated, so much so that the country reminded me of the colors of a desert during sunset. In this desert of saturated colors, I imagined, time was eternal—reminiscent of Zerrin's clients. The more this 'regime of saturation' dominated the real needs of society, the more political leaders combated voters by promoting 'conservatism and order.' In pointing to the crisis, these leaders allowed the capitalist conditions of despair to remain intact. It was in 1996 when I first witnessed this silent war, the historicity of this political game, as I was



Spending two weeks beside my aunt, practicing German, Zerrin had to send me an official invitation since I needed a tourist visa to be able to travel to the land of 'highly saturated' freedoms. I helped her during those two weeks by receiving customers and their requests, impressing them with my German skills. What a lovely little Turkish boy, they thought I was making much effort to speak with excellent grammar. Yet I also understood, while conversing in my *Machdylsch*, this grammar of maintenance and the conservative wish to go against their desire for the new. Their thirst for drastic change seemed inextinguishable but remained taboo.

3.

This unspoken rule became even more evident when my mother sent me to Germany to spend the next summer with my aunt. The more this community and their mysterious manners grew on me, the more my accent improved—also due to my aunt's increasing number of customers. The daughter of the Italian family that lived just across from the shop—in a former farmhouse—became my pen pal. I remember exchanging lengthy letters with Tiziana that could easily pass as love letters. In these frequent teenage exchanges, we were, however, not any different from my aunt's clients. Although we knew very well that we identified something else, we could not afford to go against conformity, compelling us to tick our desires. We combined this game with our campaign for the 'familiar yet new' became a luxury. I think my aunt, unable to hide her sadness as we heard of Lady D's passing on the German radio, indirectly motivated and empowered me to later end our distant 'affair.' It's not that my aunt was a believer in the royal order, but she could acknowledge and celebrate a civic Diana who stood by her will and went against conformity in pursuit of collective happiness. It was then that, for the first time, I grasped what the labor of my aunt constituted as a 'guest worker' in the capitalist society of Germany. She had silently invested all her emotional and mental energy, over decades, to inspire her customers to become attuned to their inner frequency. Such a frequency of life might liberate from suffering and provoke emancipation, no matter how binding the saturation. That was the only tool Zerrin could use to enable political change, as she was a 'guest worker' and they have never been granted the right to vote in Germany.



In that photograph, I now see a smoking Zerin with her back to Titiana's house. She always smoked gracefully and continues to do so. With the Marlboro she bought from the vendor next to the entrance of her shop, she smoked her shifts away. In the summers of 1996 and '97, I also secretly smoked, not to impress Titiana, but to impress the boys hanging at the playground. And when I returned to Cologne in the winter of 2008, I captured my aunt in front of this vendor with my Nikon camera. She looks at me listening, knowing perfectly well what the customers also know all too well. But she seems to have entrusted me behind the camera with a future transference about why things did not work with Titiana, and ensures me that she won't yet break the spell of secrecy about what had come between us.

4. When I called Zerin last month to conduct an interview on her life experiences as a 'guest worker' in Germany, I started with a question on consent: could she wish to remain anonymous? Shedding my doubts, she quickly assured me by saying: 'Don't be afraid. Enquiries like these I find pleasant!' When we deepened our conversation on her relationships with customers, she sighed for a second. In one breath, she named many encounters about which she was fond, but I could grasp a hesitancy in that 'sigh,' a moment of resistance in not wanting to recall unpleasant memories. Later, she told me that Heidi Klum's parents were among her loyal clients; and, naturally, some excitement was introduced into our conversation, a sensation she then carefully weaved into her subsequent objective observations. She has compassion for her German clients for their unjust actions, even for their racist resentments, which she believes followed from the traumatic past of the country. Hers are poignant and accurate observations on the societal dynamics in Germany. To me, these revelations almost mimic a sociological analysis, a quality—figure—she has acquired and altered during her meticulous and continued labor in the service sector. She trained herself in this rigor to attentively listen to others' needs and desires, to repair the collective. She remembers the Turkish Airlines flight that brought her to Germany in 1973; the chic dresses of the stewardesses and their beauty, which she still finds worth flitting. They



were serving coffee and cigarettes, she adds, and I—a heavy smoker—make a goofy joke, expressing my envy, which she then leaves uncommuted.

5. She recalls her first year in Cologne, extremely isolated. She set foot in Germany, not through a labor agency, as many did back then, but upon marrying my uncle Musa—a 'guest worker'. She had zero German skills. Their plan was to stay in Germany only until my uncle had gathered enough savings to finance their marital life in Istanbul. Yet life never flows according to a plan, she reflects. When she could no longer stand their one-room apartment in Kimsfort, she voiced her will to be more engaged in life—and so she obtained a work contract. Her first job was on the assembly line at the Ford factory. She was among a group of migrant women who were sewing together car seat covers. I asked if she had made friends after her very first week of shifts in the factory, and her answer resembled the 'staircase' scene from Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* [Fear Eats the Soul]—in which older German cleaning women gossiped about the new migrant staff members. Like the quiet, young women in that scene, Zerin mostly listened prudently to her colleagues while smoking in the bathroom—as going to the toilet was the only possible excuse to smoke. In closely observing the dynamics of the group during those smoking breaks, and the emotional intensities that usually followed from hard labor, she decided that she would benefit more from deep listening than from verbally engaging. These brief conversations were—according to Zerin—always bound to misinterpretation and physical exhaustion, and would have affected her commitment to the collective if she had become more verbally involved. Although the factory was extremely loud, it mesmerized me now that she assigned more validity to her hearing than her seeing to navigate her sense of justice. She trusted her ears, not only to understand a language that was not yet hers, but also to acquire remedies for the harsh conditions that this capitalist setting was demanding. In an environment where no radical change was enacted, and only a few mistakes were forgiven, listening also became a vital strategy to refrain from drama, thereby protecting her working conditions and emotional safety. However, it took her very long to establish long-lasting friendships, and when she did, both parties enjoyed



reciprocity. She still reminisces about how she filed her resignation at the factory, and, while walking out, she was stopped by her only friend at the time, who wanted to join her. No matter how hard she tried, my aunt recalls, it was impossible to convince her friend not to quit. A steady job on the assembly line at the Ford factory did not matter without a good friend. Suddenly, I realize why she completely ignored my previous comment on smoking: her smoking-time was an earnest methodology for understanding the nuances of living.

I'm also certain that smoking must have always paused time for Zerrin, carving out an interval that was especially well deserved after a sweaty shift. As much as it allowed her mind to rest, it also accommodated her need to finally assess and reflect on the effects of her instant labor. One could argue that she was like a camera during her shifts, gradually exposing her rolls of film as the assembly line proceeded. And while smoking, she was finally developing her films. The act of smoking slows down our pace of inhaling and exhaling, detaching us from capitalist time. What broke during her shift could be reassembled in the smoking intervals. There again, she could retrieve her memories, dreams, and reflections from the assembly line, reassembling them through deep listening, and developing them, ultimately, into a single row of images that many call a life experience. I believe a migrant's soul lives twice: once in the moment as things happen, and once again as incidents are told or reported to those who live faraway. By doing so, we grieve the past. And in those moments of ebb, after the flow, one always recalls and reorganizes lived experience. My aunt smoked for that, her daily strategy of resistance, refusal, and pleasure—but also of grieving her motherland while in Germany. A deep regret reveals itself as I hear my aunt's voice on the phone now. I was admitted into the Academy of Media Arts Cologne but decided not to accept their offer. I could have learned so much as an artist from her insightful listening practice, her 'Smoke Cinema,' if I had chosen to move to Cologne to live beside her. But thinking in retrospect, I must admit that my aunt played a crucial role in my future reasoning to find a solid ground in Germany, and this soothes me now. I wonder how different my life could have been if I had listened to her



more attentively in the summer of 2008. That summer marks the end of my pre-migration time as I moved to Germany in the fall of 2008.

6.

My friend Belgin holds a pink fan in her hand; it is a very hot day in July 2008. I am once again in Cologne, this time in the company of Belgin and Cihan—two fellow activists from our queer organization Lambda Istanbul. We were invited by the City of Cologne to attend Pride Week events as Istanbul has been a sister city to Cologne since the late 1990s. The three of us were supposed to represent our community and the obstacles faced by LGBTIQ citizens of Turkey on the long road to emancipation. We strolled the city, attending many bureaucratic meetings and boring political activities. At such gatherings, I could also sadly attest to the many prejudices and ignorances, related to Turkey, that were projected onto us by our German colleagues. I remember that it was surprising for me that our conversation partners claimed to know more about us than we knew ourselves—addressing us as 'you' in plural, which led me to question what exactly constituted this 'you' to which they referred. Their 'you' was a stranger to me. In some correspondences with our German counterparts, it also became clear how rigid their conception of gender was, and how little they knew about Istanbul, despite their righteousness in asserting how we were meant to be. Compared to the resilience of my aunt, who always listened to outspoken resentments and hostility by preserving her coolness—I must confess—I could not always contain my temper against this colonial backdrop. Luckily, when we had breaks from this ongoing institutional cascade of bureaucracy, we walked along the shore of the Rhine and picked on the spot. Ford was the main sponsor of Pride Week, and they organized a lottery in honor of the events, awarding a car to a lucky Pride attendee. I remember questioning if and how emancipation could be reduced to such an exclusive expression. In retrospect, all that spectacle seems to have left so little room for inner reflection, not allowing pride attendees to dwell on the epistemic of their emotions. Everyone was seemingly more interested in celebrating an 'outstanding' coming-out-of-the-closet, and hence of despair and self-pity, rather than interrogating what had locked us up there in the first place. I am because I am visible was a popular mantra



thus setting the tone of the events. It was as if his colonial-theatricality had commissioned us, queers from Istanbul, to show up at the parade and radiate 'our' gay message into the universe, 'WE HAVE ALSO COME OUT'—hereby relegating us again to the historicity of 'also.'

Out, loud, and proud, we were just tourists. This was Belgin's first time abroad, but for me, Cologne was familiar. I was proud to guide Belgin through the city. The Rhine took us to the Cologne Cathedral, and I remember speaking with Belgin about the black-and-white photographs I had once seen of the immense destruction to the city after the bombardments of the allied air forces. We spontaneously decided to take a train from the central station to Pfaffrath. It was my idea to pay a surprise visit to my aunt Zerrin, always fond of surprises and never disclosing the dates of her holidays to Turkey prior to her arrival. When we showed up at her tailor's shop, my aunt welcomed us with tears in her eyes. She tenderly invited us to lunch, 'Generous' and 'fallow.' We objected to her kindness, but she insisted, and we surrendered. During lunch, Belgin spoke of the daily violence that transgender women encounter in Istanbul. My aunt listened quietly as we all chain-smoked. Zerrin then took us to her little garden at the back of her shop. A prominent cherry tree now grows there from a seed that she once threw away during one of her smoking breaks. With the taste of cherry and the smell of coffee, we rested in the shadow of that almost-four-meter-tall tree. Later, Belgin happily pointed out the plantain in the green meadow that lies in front of the tailor shop. And when she told us that it is good for the stomach, I was pleased to hear it as much as my aunt, both of us hopeful that it could undo the harms of smoking. It must have been late afternoon when we left to return to the city. On the way back, I realized that I had just come out to my aunt, as one smoke-listened to us the entire time. Belgin snapped her fan open like the shutter of a camera—I still dream about this today—thus taking a photograph of this revelation. It felt like we were going back to Cologne on the seats of that Ford car but its seat covers were none other than my aunt Zerrin must have seen in side all of her customers' closets—she who, against all conventions, likes to wear pants rather than skirts. Now I see how many different meanings the erotic can allude to when it is not overwritten by the excesses of exclusive.



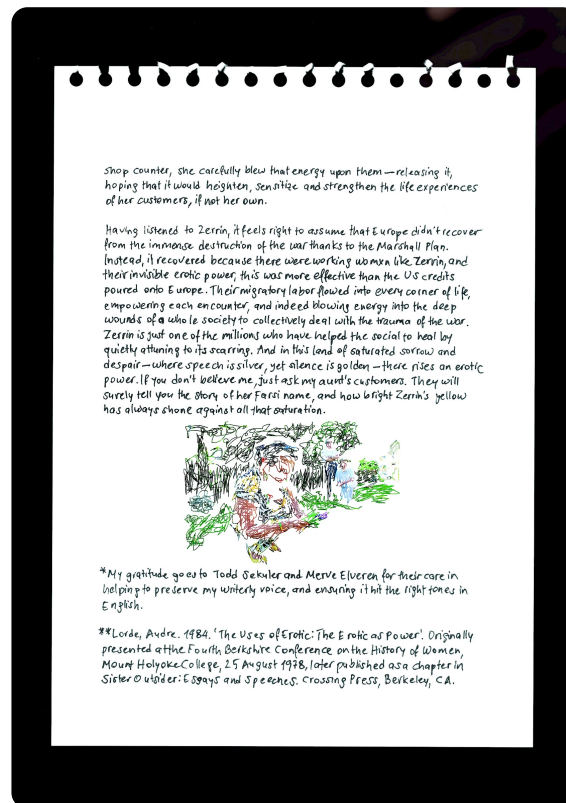
expression—as that beautiful hot afternoon swings eternally between Belgin's fan and my aperture.

7.
I recently listened to a recording of Audre Lorde reading aloud her essay, 'The Use of Erotic: The Erotic as Power.'¹⁰ Addressing the women in the audience, Lorde elaborates on the erotic *as* form of power in this beautiful public speech. In her essay, she uses a visual metaphor to embody her concept of the erotic: margarine. Indeed, I was so inspired by her little metaphor that I researched the history of this mass producer. During World War II, when milk products were no longer affordable, a war on patents broke out. The milk and dairy producers did not want this industrial, mass-produced vegetable fat to compete with butter and, potentially, replace it on the market. Lorde beautifully elaborates on her metaphor:

'During World War II, we bought gaudy plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. I find the erotic such a kernel within myself.'

Lorde 'patents' the erotic as an ultimate power for women that heightens, sensitizes, and strengthens the human experience. Listening to her, I am convinced that my aunt Zerrin was doing none other than that. She was also trying to release that kernel from its intense and constrained pellet. In her smoking breaks, Zerrin may have contemplated how she could let that energy flow through her. And then, later, she blew that energy into her commissions upon returning to her sewing machine. By turning moth-eaten robes into 'golden' nightgowns, she was not only altering the look of the garments, but also attempting to convince their owners of a different way of living together. With each new commission and client she received at her





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