



## **Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza. Two Supra-National Writers**

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**Abstract:** This article offers a comparative analysis of the work by the German-Romanian author Herta Müller and the Dutch-Moroccan writer Hafid Bouazza and addresses it from a transnational perspective. The research focus lies on their persistent challenging of the interpretation of their work as that of ‘migrant authors’, the place and power they grant to literature, their ‘outcast’ identity (‘nest foulers’ in their so-called ‘host’ community), their poetic use of language, their insistence on ‘detail’ as a metaphor of resistance, and their play with different narrators and ‘Doppelgängers’. Via these strategies, so I will argue, Müller and Bouazza (re)claim literary autonomy. While no other descriptions – such as diasporic, exilic, migrant or ethnic writers – seem to fully apply, this article proposes the use of ‘supra-national writer’ to render justice to the rich and powerful writing and imagery that marks the work of both authors.

**Keywords:** Herta Müller, Hafid Bouazza, supra-national / supra-nationaal, migration / migratie, literary freedom / literaire vrijheid

At first sight, Herta Müller, the German-Romanian laureate of the Nobel prize for Literature in 2009, and Hafid Bouazza, the Dutch-Moroccan writer famous for his rich imagery and archaic wording, seem to have little in common. Müller's literature focuses predominantly on communist dictatorship, oppression of the individual in the Romanian totalitarian society, manifestations of national exploitation, migration and forced exile, the effect of two mother tongues on her writing, and the traumatic experience of a five-year long stay in a Soviet camp. Bouazza's writing can be characterised as a continuous play with the readers, confronting their presumptions about and expectations of a so-called migrant writer. It constitutes an experiment with the legacy of the Dutch language, containing moments of transgression or negotiation of national borders, and a game with form and narration, which draws on and diverges from the Western literary tradition.

Despite their differences, however, there is notable overlap in their shared stance as 'supra-national writers'. They consistently position their work in the tradition of a rather universal literature, a type of writing that transgresses national concerns or cultural traditions. Both authors want to be read as writers, regardless of their ethnic background and share a resistance to what they claim to be an unjustified reading of their oeuvre as well as an insistence on a direct confrontation with the past and the reality of the societies they live in. Their poetics resides in a universe of difference, ignoring any urge towards reconciliation, unity or closure. Their similarity lies perhaps also in the stubbornness with which they create and defend their position within the literary field.

In *Writing outside the Nation* Azade Seyhan offers a justification for the juxtaposed reading of Chicano/a and Turkish-German forms of cultural expression and intervention. 'I believe,' she argues, 'that comparative readings of texts of different cultural traditions offer an enhanced appreciation of their respective positions by allowing them to be reflected through one another. This process of reflection and counter reflection also accentuated differences in historical course, critical agendas and modes of expression.'<sup>1</sup> It is this process of reflection and a mode of understanding that transcends language borders without erasing cultural differences that drives my analysis. My comparative reading of Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza's work, which is a first, wants to move beyond a national or multicultural framing to explore their writings through a supra-national lens. To that end, I will draw on concepts proposed by Azade Seyhan and Salman Rushdie and argue that both Müller and Bouazza create and draw on a supra-national space of literary freedom. Both authors engage in a meta-literary reflection on the position of the author and literary work and they share a continuous play with their readers and critics through their literary texts. This article shows the coordinates of the imaginary space Müller and Bouazza share and analyses the following aspects that unite the two writers: the origin of their literary work and the inspiration they draw from other international writers, the question of their engagement with their home community or home country, and the attitude of this home community towards their literature. The text then discusses the specificity of their language and their attempts to break the national boundaries of that same language and position themselves in relation to concepts of minor language and dominant language, before turning to questions of identity and narratological strategies. The text ends with a broader description of 'supra-national writers' and concludes with the affiliation of Müller and Bouazza to this community of writers.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 17 and following.

## Müller and Bouazza

Herta Müller (1953) is a Romanian born writer and a member of the German-speaking community of the Banat region. She was born in a small Swabian village called Nițhidorf and at the age of fifteen she moved to the city Timișoara. This move influenced her world-view profoundly, as it allowed her to get in touch with a cosmopolitan environment as well as with Romanian language and literature. While studying philology at university, she met the *Aktionsgruppe Banat*, a group of dissident writers from the German community. Despite their moderate views, the members of the group attracted the attention of the Romanian secret police, the *Securitate*. Müller too faced a range of threats and public humiliations and was fired from her job as a translator for a factory. Former Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu allowed the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) to arrange for the migration of ethnic German citizens to the FRG. While ethnic Romanians had practically no chance of emigrating, Herta Müller and her husband Richard Wagner managed to leave the country in 1987. They did not consider their departure a voluntary act, but a forced exit from their country, because government repression made it increasingly difficult to live in Romania. This migration transplanted Müller in the unfamiliar West-German society with little other than a shared language. Today, Herta Müller lives in Berlin. Müller writes extensively about her Romanian experiences in her essays, for example in *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, or in interviews,<sup>2</sup> and a substantial number of literary critics also commented on her Romanian past.<sup>3</sup>

Müller started writing poems and short stories in the Seventies,<sup>4</sup> but she made her literary debut with *Niederungen* [*Nadirs*], a collection of short stories published in 1982, which was the subject of heavy critique and censorship because of her negative portrayal of the local community. In the FRG she published *Reisende auf einem Bein* [*Travelling on One Leg*] in 1989, a text that discussed the departure from ‘the other country’ and the arrival in a new, hostile country. Her 1992 novel *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* [*The Fox was Ever the Hunter*] was originally written as a screenplay and focuses on people’s lives under the communist regime and on the Romanian 1989 revolution. *Herztier* (1994), translated as *The Land of Green Plums*, is a complex novel about friendship, fear and betrayal in communist Romania. *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* [*The Appointment*] was published in 1997 and describes through a female narrator the tram ride to the headquarters of the Romanian secret police, the subsequent interrogation, and the efforts to exercise self-control. Finally, *Atemschaukel* [*The Hunger Angel*], published in 2009, is Müller’s last novel to date and

<sup>2</sup> See H. Müller, *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2009), but also H. Müller, ‘Die Securitate ist noch im Dienst’, *Die Zeit*, 23 July 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The Romanian critic Graziella Predoiu analysed the Romanian past of the author and the link to other Romanian German writers extensively in her study *Faszination und Provokation bei Herta Müller. Eine thematische und motivische Auseinandersetzung* (2001). Brigid Haines, one of the first critics to write on Müller’s work in the Anglo-Saxon world, also offers useful information on Müller’s Romanian background. See *Contemporary Women’s Writing in German* (2004), edited together with Margaret Littler, but also the more recent *Herta Müller* (2013), edited together with Lyn Marven. Valentina Glăjar’s two articles ‘The Discourse of Discontent: Politics and Dictatorship in Herta Müller’s *Herztier*’ (2014) and ‘The Presence of the Unresolved Recent Past: Herta Müller and the Securitate’ (2013) are significant with regard to the relation between Müller and the Romanian Secret Police.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough analysis of Müller’s early work, see Julia Müller, *Sprachtakt. Herta Müllers literarischer Darstellungsstil* (2014).

represents the fictionalisation of the experiences of Oskar Pastior, a German-Romanian poet. It describes the experiences of a young Saxon man sentenced to five years in a Ukrainian labour camp. Müller also published four collections of collages and a number of critical essays.

Hafid Bouazza (1970) was born in Oudja in Morocco. His father moved to the Netherlands in the 1970s as a so-called guest labourer. His son Hafid arrived in the country in 1977, at the age of seven, together with his mother and his siblings. They settled in the village of Arkel where the Bouazzas were the only newcomers. Hafid started to write poems in Dutch as a teenager. While studying Arabic language and literature in Amsterdam, he worked as a rubbish collector and as dishwasher. His literary debut consisted of a collection of short stories, *De voeten van Abdullah [Abdullah's Feet]* (1996), that are mainly set in Morocco. Critics read them as partly autobiographic literature, eagerly giving way to a 'migrant' interpretation. The texts are surrealist experiments combining an interest in budding sexuality with intertextual references. In 1998 Bouazza published the novel *Momo*, which presents the story of a hypersensitive and imaginative boy in a hyperrealist Dutch environment. The 2001 essay *Een beer in bontjas. Autobiografische beschouwingen [A Bear in a Fur Coat. Autobiographical Considerations]* can be read as a reflection of Bouazza's poetics. He challenges the notion of autobiography and the importance of the writer's biography for the reception of his literary work. In a complex play with various narrators, this literary essay talks both about the love for literature and the importance of literary forefathers. That same year, Bouazza published *Salomon*, a novel set in the Netherlands and presenting a blurred line between reality and fiction. The adult in *Salomon* can be read as the metamorphosis of the boy in *Momo*, sharing his hypersensitivity. The 2003 *Paravion* is considered as Bouazza's literary triumph to date. It describes how the male members of a traditional community emigrate to the mystical city of *Paravion*, a city bearing a strong resemblance to Amsterdam. *Spotvogel [Mocking Bird]* is a short novel published in 2009 about writer's block intertwined with a parody of a story similar to that of Romeo and Juliet. His most recent novel, *Meriswin*, published in 2014, is the fictionalisation of his addiction to alcohol, which provoked a hallucinatory crisis. The novel describes a drinking spree, the main character's hospitalisation, his relationship with a woman and her childhood, all filled with fantasy and mystery.

## Topographical Hump

Henriëtte Louwerse reasons in *Homeless Entertainment. On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing* (2007) that he is 'an heir to an international, or perhaps supra-national cultural heritage, a heritage which includes Shakespeare, Nabokov, Borges and Poe'.<sup>5</sup> Bouazza makes a similar claim in his *Een beer in bontjas*. In this work, dressed up as autobiographical notes, Bouazza outlines his view on the reception of his texts and on literature in general and the reader is invited into his literary *heim*,<sup>6</sup> into his literary *home*. Bouazza repeats what has become his mantra: he demands to be read as an author, without the topographical hump read into his work by most critics:

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<sup>5</sup> H. Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment. On Hafid Bouazza's Literary Writing*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 234.

<sup>6</sup> Louwerse, *Homeless Entertainment*, p. 33.

If I were to believe most critics, then I am a Moroccan writer. But I do not believe most critics. According to other, well-disposed people, I am a Moroccan-Dutch author. But that label sounds uncomfortable. It hobbles around in a slipper and a clog – and that makes walking bloody tricky. Then there are the careful people (they are a minority) for whom I have coined the title D.A.M.D.D.N. That is the only politically correct designation, but it will not make you very popular. It sounds like a rare disease.<sup>7</sup>

The acronym D.A.M.D.D.N. stands for Dutch Author of Moroccan Descent with Dutch Nationality and underlines Bouazza's position: literary critics should just settle on the term *author* or *writer*, because, as he argues: 'Authorship does not spring from the first trauma, but from the first discovery of literature'.<sup>8</sup> No author finds inspiration only in his or her biography, i.e. by experiencing an act of migration and a difficult integration in a new society. This act of migration may produce homesickness and a sense of alienation, Bouazza continues, but it does not necessarily prompt the urge to write, let alone the production of good literature. Only the encounter with the experience and the style of other authors turns experience and the power of imagination into actual writing. Bouazza is not to be read as a *migrant author* because, he claims, at the core of his literature lies his engagement with the imaginary and with language.

In a similar vein, Herta Müller challenges the reading of her work by critics as being defined by her 'Fremde Blick', her alien gaze, resulting from her experience of migrating to Germany. She argues, by contrast, that this alien gaze is the result of living under dictatorship, where constant surveillance creates a double reality, rather than of her migration and her outsider identity. Her gaze and her language<sup>9</sup> were transformed by the totalitarian regime that taught her that a permanent shadow operates behind the visual reality. Müller writes:

The Alien Gaze came into being in this everyday life. Bit by bit, silently, mercilessly on the familiar streets, walls and objects. [...] The Alien Gaze is old, already brought along from the familiar. It has nothing to do with the immigration to Germany.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Als ik de meeste critici mag geloven, ben ik een Marokkaanse schrijver. Maar ik geloof de meeste critici niet. Volgens andere, welwillende mensen ben ik een Marokkaans-Nederlandse schrijver. Deze aanduiding klinkt echter ongemakkelijk. Zij loopt tegelijkertijd op muil en klomp – en dat loopt verdomd moeilijk. Dan heb je nog de voorzichtige mensen (die zijn in de minderheid), voor wie ik de titel N.S.M.A.N.N. heb verzonnen. Dat is, maatschappelijk gezien, de enige juiste aanduiding, maar je maakt er geen vrienden mee. Het klinkt als een zeldzame ziekte.', in H. Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas. Autobiografische beschouwingen*, (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2001), p. 9 and following, transl. in Louwse, *Homeless Entertainment*, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> 'Het schrijverschap ontstaat echter niet bij het eerste trauma, maar bij de eerste ontdekking van literatuur', in Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas*, p. 11, transl. in Louwse, *Homeless entertainment*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Müller sees language as equally transformed by this totalitarian gaze, saying that in every language there are other eyes in the words: 'In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen in den Wörtern', in H. Müller, *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird* (Merzig: Gollenstein, 2009), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> 'In diesem Alltag ist der Fremde Blick entstanden. Allmählich, still, gnadenlos in den vertrauten Straßen, Wänden und Gegenständen. [...] Der Fremde Blick ist alt, fertig mitgebracht aus dem Bekannten. Er hat mit dem Einwandern nach Deutschland nichts zu tun', in Müller, *Der König verneigt sich*, p. 135. All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

Müller brought her alien gaze with her from the country she does not name, perhaps in order to symbolise that the national particularities of the dictatorship that she lived in are irrelevant. Living in fear and total surveillance are universal features of living in a dictatorship. Her foreign gaze has everything to do with her biography and not with literature, according to Müller,<sup>11</sup> seemingly taking a position diametrically opposed to Bouazza's. But as shown later, Müller too is influenced by a number of other international writers. She claims that literature helped her understand her environment, her fears and gave her comfort.<sup>12</sup> She considers that biography and literature are separate realms and that the drive to write originates from an encounter with great literature and not necessarily from the author's biography. The only art that is connected to the alien gaze, Müller continues, 'is how to be able to live with it'.<sup>13</sup> And yet, Müller turns this gaze into literature; she chooses to share her experience through a literary form. Her writing is charged with a sense of responsibility, with a drive to share the suffering that she endured. However, her literary texts do not simply register historical experiences. Rather, they are experiments with narration, with language, with figures of speech, with techniques of fragmentation and alienation, with collage.

In her Nobel Prize lecture held in Stockholm in 2009, Müller elaborates on the place she grants literature, thereby criticising dictatorships around the world as well as the systems of 'half democracies' in Europe since 1989:

Literature cannot change all that. But through language, it can – even though in retrospect – invent a truth that shows what happens inside and around us, when values derail. Literature talks with everyone individually – she is personal property that sticks inside the head.<sup>14</sup>

While not granting literature all power, Müller does recognise its capacity to bring comfort and draws poetical inspiration from a series of writers, for example from the French-Romanian surrealist writer Eugène Ionesco, remembering his message: 'So let's live. But they don't allow us to. So let's live in the detail'.<sup>15</sup> This statement 'is to be read as a political but also as a poetic manifesto, but in any case as a reaction against totalizing systems, whether literary or political, which stifle the individual and erase difference',<sup>16</sup> Brigid Haines asserts. She continues by saying that Müller consciously places her work in the tradition of other twentieth-century writers, such as Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Imre Kertész, Jorge Semprún, Ruth Klüger and

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Müller, *Der König verneigt sich*, p. 144 and p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Müller, *Der König verneigt sich*, p. 55, H. Müller, *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer dieselbe Onkel*, (München: Hauser Verlag, 2011), p. 230 and H. Müller, *Hunger und Seide* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1995), p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Müller, *Der König verneigt sich*, p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> 'Literatur kann das alles nicht ändern. Aber sie kann – und sei es im Nachhinein – durch Sprache eine Wahrheit erfinden, die zeigt, was in und um uns herum passiert, wenn die Werte entgleisen. Literatur spricht mit jedem Menschen einzeln – sie ist Privateigentum, das im Kopf bleibt'. <http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1312> [accessed 23 September 2016].

<sup>15</sup> 'Leben wir also. Aber man läßt uns nicht leben. Leben wir also im Detail', in Müller, *Hunger und Seide*, p. 61, transl. in B. Haines and M. Littler, *Contemporary Women's Writing in German. Changing the Subject*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> Haines and Littler, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, p. 103.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn.<sup>17</sup> This list can be supplemented with other writers, musicians or performers Herta Müller admires. She has repeatedly claimed that she praises the songs of the Romanian singer Maria Tănase or the music of Romanian rock bands, but also the poetry of the avant-garde writer Gellu Naum and of the Romanian-German writer Oskar Pastior. She dedicated essays in *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel* (2011) to Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, and Max Blecher's *Adventures in Immediate Irreality*, but also to E.M. Cioran and Theodor Kramer, in order to prove her point on the relationship between the individual and the collective, on the idea of the nation, and on otherness, the power of the observation of the self and identity. Müller, as Bouazza, draws inspiration from literature as well, not only from the trauma of living in a dictatorship.

## Engaged Writers = 'Nest Foulers'

Both Bouazza and Müller have a sense of literary and political responsibility. Bouazza wants to show the Dutch public the richness of the Dutch vocabulary by infusing his language with archaic words and flowery imagery; Herta Müller insists on unmasking the truth about Romanian communist society. Both also hold very negative opinions about their 'home' communities. While Bouazza debunks the danger of radical and political Islam and the disadvantaged position of women in Muslim communities, Müller settles accounts with the ethnocentrism and backwardness of the Banat Swabian community, the *Securitate*, collaborationism and the passive attitude of the Romanian intelligentsia during the communist era.

Both Müller's and Bouazza's relationship to their country of origin is a strained one. Müller has been named a 'Nestbeschmutzerin', a 'nest fouler' by her home community, first for her book *Niederungen* but also for her statements in interviews and collection of essays, where she drew attention to the collaborationism of ethnic Germans with the communist regime.<sup>18</sup> She states that there were secret agents amongst the Swabian community, who continued their work even after their emigration to the West and who kept on harassing her after she left Romania.<sup>19</sup> Müller therefore clearly rejects the idea of a romantic, idealised homeland. Bouazza's work is characterised by a similar provocative stubbornness. Early 2002 he published two articles in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, 'Nederland is blind voor moslimextremisme' ['The Netherlands Are Blind to Muslim Extremism'] and 'Moslims kwetsen

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<sup>17</sup> Haines and Littler, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> In her essay '*Lügen haben kurze Beine. Die Wahrheit hat keine. Das wahre Engagement in der Fälschung*' included in *Hunger und Seide*, Herta Müller makes a direct accusation concerning the collaboration of Ethnic Germans, denouncing a doctor for signing false documents, lying about the true reason why revolutionists died. While Müller generalises on other occasions, this time she calls the doctor by his true name. Cf. Müller, *Hunger und Seide*, pp. 108-14.

<sup>19</sup> In the essay '*Cristina und ihre Atrappe. Oder was (nicht) in den Securitate-Akten steht*', Müller makes claims about the collaboration of the Swabian community while in Germany, saying for example: 'The most important 'partner' in Germany for actions of defamation was the Association of the Swabians from the Banat'. See 'Der wichtigste <Partner> in Deutschland für Verleumdungsmaßnahmen war die Landmannschaft der Banater Schwaben.', in Müller, *Immer derselbe Schnee*, p. 65.

Nederland' ['Muslims Hurt the Netherlands'] where he criticises multiculturalism and Dutch political correctness, calling for the protection of freedom of thought and of Western values in general.<sup>20</sup> He considers the interaction between Islam and the West as a clash of civilizations, one in which there is little hope for consensus since they are, so he claims, based on fundamental differences and opposing systems of thought. For these reasons, the Dutch journalist Bas Heijne used the term 'nestbevuiler',<sup>21</sup> 'nest fouler', to describe Bouazza's relation to the 'nest' of Islam.

For both Müller and Bouazza this image of 'nest fouling' brings about the – somewhat welcomed – exclusion from the assumed home community. Bouazza's attitude towards Islam is perhaps surprisingly generalising and a little too sweeping, considering his objection towards a generic cultural reading of his literature. Although Bouazza rejects being part of a Muslim community, he claims the right to comment on the 'nest' of Islam, by militating for a critical interpretation of the Qu'ran and Islamic religion. The question of his affiliation to this culture is nonetheless answered quickly, notably by himself: 'OK, I am a migrant. But it is twenty-five years later now and my interest in the Qu'ran and Islam have become a purely literary one. I act against the Qu'ran as a book of law, but I want to be inspired by its beauty. But time and again I have to defend this choice to think independently, even to Dutch people.'<sup>22</sup> His interest in culture is one of detachment. Nonetheless, it is via his outspoken opinions and his novel *Paravion* (2003) that Bouazza assumed a dominant role in the Dutch literary field. Liesbeth Minnaard argues that these socio-political criteria may have played a part and not just on literary quality: Bouazza just happened to be the right voice at the right time.<sup>23</sup> It seems therefore that his journalistic interventions have contributed significantly to his fame but distract from his wish to be recognised solely for his literary qualities, as Bouazza's following claim illustrates: 'One cannot pin down a writer based on his topics, one must judge a writer according to his style!'<sup>24</sup> The topics that the writer chooses are irrelevant as long as there is stylistic refinement.

Bouazza shares with Herta Müller the claim to freedom and pleads for homelessness and rootlessness in the final pages of *Een beer in bontjas*:

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<sup>20</sup> See H. Bouazza, 'Nederland is blind voor moslimextremisme', *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 February 2002, and H. Bouazza, 'Moslims kwetsen Nederland', *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 March 2002. Only recently Bouazza commented on the assaults against women in Cologne during New Year's Eve 2015-16, explaining the relation between God's will, sexual power and the schism between men and women in the Islam and calling again for the protection of democratic values. See H. Bouazza, 'Wat een sukkel zijn die mannen', *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 January 2016.

<sup>21</sup> B. Heijne, 'Een moskee is geen cultuur, het is folklore', *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 June 2003.

<sup>22</sup> 'Goed, ik ben een migrant. Maar het is nu vijftientig jaar later en mijn interesse in de koran en de islam is zuiver literair geworden. Ik ageer tegen de koran als wetboek, maar wil me laten inspireren door wat er mooi aan is. Maar die keuze om individueel te denken, moet ik steeds opnieuw verdedigen, ook tegenover Nederlanders.' in Heijne, 'Een moskee is geen cultuur'.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. L. Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch. Literary Interventions*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), pp. 123-42.

<sup>24</sup> 'Je kan een schrijver niet vastpinnen op zijn thema's, je dient een schrijver te beoordelen op zijn stijl', in Barend Wallet, 'Je dient een schrijver te beoordelen op zijn stijl', *Vooy's* 22 (2004).



Between my native ground and my roaming place, the hall of mirrors of my imagination stretches out and there you can find my reflections, you are always cordially invited. I don't have any visiting hours. There we will meet, dear reader.

Long live rootlessness! Long live homelessness! Long live freedom! Long live the imagination!<sup>25</sup>

While Müller cannot find any comfort in language, because language too is dominated, the idea of an imaginary homeland in language is possible for the Dutch author, precisely because his Dutchness is claimed through language. Bouazza repeatedly argued that he is a *Dutch* author: 'I am a Dutch writer, because I write in the Dutch language and therefore I have the same rights and obligations as any other Dutch writer.'<sup>26</sup> In other words, he uses this claim about language as a strategy of resistance towards the biographical interpretation of his work. Minnaard states: 'A central strategy of resistance in Bouazza's work concerns the Dutch language. Bouazza strongly criticises the disparagement and neglect of the Dutch language and culture by the average Dutch (wo)man. He claims that contrary to this, he himself loves and cares for this language, *his* language.'<sup>27</sup> Despite Bouazza's efforts that almost take the form of reading instructions for his literary writing, critics failed to judge this literature purely on literary terms. When his latest novel *Meriswin* was published, where the oriental references are completely absent, critics did not bring up Bouazza's background. Yet, also in this case, the connection appears, albeit indirectly. Erik Spinoy asserts that there is no *orientalisation* in the book, no migrant origin or differences between cultures,<sup>28</sup> before concentrating on the intertextual web of the book and the flowery use of language. One might even argue that the interpretative focus on Bouazza's work is now replaced by another equally biographical lens: his struggle with the addiction to alcohol.

Nevertheless, both are engaged with the art and unique language of their home culture – Bouazza as a translator of Arabic poetry, Müller as a promoter of the Romanian language. She translates Romanian expressions directly into German and while losing their original sense in Romanian, they gain a sense of alienation in German. Therefore, she is engaging with bilingualism and interlinguality. Bouazza wants to broaden the common perception of the Arabic world, introducing in Dutch a surprising body of poetry that tries to reduce the Islamic grip on it and to draw attention to other facets of that culture. Müller does what Azade Seyhan calls to 'redress the ruptures in history and collective memory',<sup>29</sup> to show that the *Securitate* did

<sup>25</sup> 'Tussen geboortegrond en zwerfplaats strekt zich de spiegelhal van mijn verbeelding uit en daar kunt u mijn reflecties vinden, u bent altijd van harte welkom. Ik heb geen bezoeken. Daar treffen wij elkaar, goede lezer. Leve de ontworteling! Leve de thuisloosheid! Leve de ongebondenheid! Leve de verbeelding!', in Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas*, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> 'Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver, want ik schrijf in de Nederlandse taal en daarom heb ik dezelfde rechten en plichten als welke andere Nederlandse schrijver ook.', in W. Kuipers, "Ik ben een Nederlandse schrijver". Hafid Bouazza wil geen model-marokkaan zijn', *De Volkskrant*, 1 May 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Minnaard, *New Germans*, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> E. Spinoy, 'Bouazza's hellevaart', [http://www.dereactor.org/home/detail/bouazzas\\_hellevaart/](http://www.dereactor.org/home/detail/bouazzas_hellevaart/) [accessed 23 September 2016].

<sup>29</sup> Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, p. 13.

indeed threaten the simple, innocent people or that murders were covered up as suicides – for example in *Herztier* and *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* –, that a significant amount of German-Romanians were sent to labour camps in the Soviet Union after the Second World War out of an idea of ‘Kollektivschuld’, a collective guilt, that rendered all Germans guilty of the effects of the war – for example in her novel *Atemschaukel*. Their literary and non-literary interventions prove an engagement with the dominant and the less dominant culture and a highly reflexive attitude, not least on the level of language.

## Poetic Language

Both Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza experiment with language. At the core of Müller’s language lies the clash between German dialect, standard German and Romanian as well as her rejection of the conviction that language coincides with homeland. She calls the encounter of the three languages the ‘lyrical balancing act of transformation’<sup>30</sup> because all languages involved in this clash are ultimately transformed. She argues that words create images and one sees the world differently according to these images. The presence of multiple languages causes ‘interference’, that is, at the point at which languages meet, ambiguous poetry arises. She exemplifies this, comparing for instance the verbs used for the movement of the wind:

In the village dialect you say: The wind GOES. In high German, as spoken in schools, you say: the wind BLOWS. And for me as a seven-year-old, that felt as if the wind got hurt. And in Romanian you say: the wind HITS, *vîntul bate*. You could immediately hear the sound of the movement, while the wind would not hurt itself, but others.<sup>31</sup>

Müller uses these images in her literature as literally as possible. She also writes in her essay *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird* [*Home is That Which is Spoken*] that language can never be one’s *Heimat* [homeland or home], as long as the language is threatened. That which is spoken is momentary; it has no frontiers and can free itself from occupation.

Müller’s collage-poems offer apt illustrations of her linguistic views. They are made up of words cut from newspapers or magazines accompanied by fragments of persons or objects, often misshapen or mutilated. The collages are works of dislocation and fragmentation, of the impossible unity of the body and of the rejection of a unifying, totalising interpretation. Her last collection of collage poems, *Este sau nu este Ion* [*Is It or Is It Not John*] (2005) is written in Romanian. Müller moves between the minor language of her dialectal German, to the dominant languages of Romanian and German. Müller was never in a position of either minority or majority, always occupying both positions. While manipulating the possibilities of these two languages and attempting to free the meaning of her words (as is shown beneath with

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<sup>30</sup> ‘der lyrische Spagat der Verwandlungen’, in Müller, *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird*, p. 20 and following.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Im Dialekt des Dorfes sagte man: Der Wind GEHT. Im Hochdeutschen, das man in der Schule sprach, sagte man: Der Wind WEHT. Und das klang für mich als Siebenjährige, als würde er sich weh tun. Und im Rumänischen sagte man: Der Wind SCHLÄGT, *vîntul bate*. Das Geräusch der Bewegung hörte man gleich, wenn man schlägt sagte, und da tat der Wind nicht sich, sondern anderen weh’, in Müller, *Der König verneigt sich*, p. 24.

‘Herztier’), she is simultaneously freeing language from its national borders, underpinning the supra-national cultural identity.<sup>32</sup>

Müller and Bouazza seem to agree that their literary work aims at transforming the memory and experience into a literary space and – in their case – in a constant struggle for liberation. Herta Müller talks repeatedly about her poetics. She calls it ‘die erfundene Wahrnehmung’ [the invented perception], signifying the writing process as a form of therapy. In the act of remembrance, the memory tries to reconstruct what happened with accuracy but, Herta Müller writes, this is impossible: ‘the truth of the written memory must be invented.’<sup>33</sup> The process moves from experience to memory and from memory to writing, involving a ‘necessary’ movement towards fictionalisation. Müller calls her books, following this argumentation, ‘autofictional’, revealing her fictionalised relationship with memory and the act of remembrance. One is always at the intersection of the past [*Vergangenheit*] and the present [*Gegenwart*]. Müller mixes the two suffixes, producing the alienating words *Vergangenwart* and *Gegenheit*.<sup>34</sup>

Exemplary for Müller’s style is also the way she uses metaphors in an attempt to free the word from its meaning, by hyperbolising its multiple significances, for example in the novel *Herztier*. *Herztier* means literally ‘heart-beast’ and is being used in the novel on a number of occasions, constantly deferring its meaning. The grandmother of the narrator uses the sentence ‘rest your heart-beast, you’ve played so much today’, meaning ‘try to be at peace’. At a later point in the novel, the narrator says to the grandmother ‘rest your heart-beast, I said to her’.<sup>35</sup> The first time the metaphor can signify the joy of a child to play around, but the second time, when the grandmother has already lost her mind, ‘heart-beast’ becomes a symbol for the soul or for death. The narrator repeats the word at her grandmother’s funeral, stating that the ‘heart-beast’ of the father now rests in her, introducing a supernatural element to the metaphor. As the novel progresses, the ‘heart-beast’ takes on a material form and is concretised in the image of a mouse. There it stands for the embodiment of the human soul: everybody carries a ‘heart-beast’ in them; everybody has an animal side to their heart. When the narrator moves to the city, the ‘heart-beast’ presents itself under the terrifying form of the totalitarian regime. This shift – from the village to the city, from the regional to the political – is a topos in Müller’s literature. The image of the ‘heart-beast’ as a soul is now further charged with political fear. We find this, for example, in the following scene that takes place after an interrogation by the secret police: ‘Our heart-beasts were fleeing like mice. They were dropping their furs and disappearing into the void. If we talked a lot, fast one after the other, they would remain in the air longer.’<sup>36</sup> In the city, the female narrator comes in contact with four other students. They become friends, read forbidden literature together and are being questioned by the secret police. The ‘heart-

<sup>32</sup> T. Cooper, ‘Herta Müller: Between Myths of Belonging’, in *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe. A Compendium*, ed. by J. Beunauer and B.Z. Török (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009), p. 492.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Die Wahrheit der geschriebenen Erinnerung muß erfunden werden’, in H. Müller, *In der Falle* (Göttingen: Wahlstein, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Müller, *Der König verneigt sich*, p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Ruh dein Herztier aus’, in H. Müller, *Herztier* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2010), p. 40 and p. 244.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Unsere Herztiere flohen wie Mäuse. Sie warfen das Fell hinter sich ab und verschwanden im Nichts. Wenn wir kurz nacheinander viel redeten, blieben sie länger in der Luft’, in Müller, *Herztier*, p. 89 and following.

beasts', now symbolising their endangered souls, can only be reassured if the friends talk, i.e. if their friendship survives the threat of the political police. Towards the end of the novel, their friendship breaks apart. The next appearance of the 'heart-beast' finds the female narrator alone in the student home, watching a transparent man standing in front of the refrigerator with his 'heart-beast' for the narrator to witness.<sup>37</sup> This might be the personification of Ceaușescu, alluding to the rumours of his many illnesses, a common knowledge in the eighties in Romania. In Müller's literature, there is always a conflict between the individual and the highest evil, personified as the dictator. The metaphor of the 'heart-beast' similarly moves from childhood to the soul to the political dimension and culminates in the image of the dictator.

As mentioned above, Müller brought her 'Fremde Blick' with her from Romania. This 'Blick', or the eye, is a charged one. The eye, according to the literary critic Norbert Otto Eke, produces images that are no longer innocent, true, but 'ver-rückt', playing with the word *verrückt*, meaning mad, and deconstructing the word, turning it into dis-placed. Müller's images are *occupied*, they are not free.<sup>38</sup> The 'heart-beast' undergoes a similar transformation, from a metaphor of the childhood to one of occupation, controlled by the dictator and reaching a place of madness. What started out as innocent ended up being controlled by fear and madness. Müller employs literary techniques to free her words and turn her literature into one of resistance to these occupied images and political trauma, creating a work of poetic surrealism.<sup>39</sup> These images – together with other images in the novel, such as the nut, the green plums and the fox fur – describe Müller's style and her resistance to interpretation. The nut, the green plums and the fox fur are simultaneously elements of the individual and of the danger from the secret police agents or the dictator. They do not receive a coherent interpretation, but exist in a play of constantly deferred meaning.

Bouazza's experiment with language is different from Müller's. They both write in the language of their respective 'host' cultures, but transform it to make it fit their own purposes. Bouazza uses an almost forgotten mannerist form of Dutch, which contains so many archaic words that his writing becomes at times unreadable. Similar to the poetry of the *Tachtigers*, a generation of Dutch poets from the late nineteenth century, Bouazza's sentences are long and complex and express a cherishing of the myriad of forgotten opportunities that the Dutch language offers, so he claims.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, translations of Bouazza's literature are scarce.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> 'I saw his heart-beast. [...] It could only be his own, it was more hideous than the bowels of all the animals of this world.' The original quotation is: 'Ich sah sein Herztier. [...] Es konnte nur sein eigenes sein, es war häßlicher als die Eingeweide aller Tiere dieser Welt', in Müller, *Herztier*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. 'nicht mehr unschuldige, wahre, sondern ver-rückte, das heißt von Diskursen durchzogene, besetzte Bilder.', in N.O. Eke, 'Schönheit der Verwund(er)ung. Herta Müllers Weg zum Gedicht', in H.L. Arnold (ed.) *Text + Kritik. Zeitschrift für Literatur. Themenheft Herta Müller*, 7, 155 (2002), 64.

<sup>39</sup> 'Was sie hier beschreibt, ist nichts anderes als die Geburt eines poetischen Surrealismus als Folge politischer Traumatisierung', in S. Beyer, N. von Festenberg, V. Hage, T. Rapp and E. Schmittner, 'Im Zeichen des Kaderwechsels. Der Schriftsteller Richard Wagner über Herta Müller und die gemeinsame Zeit in Rumänien', *Der Spiegel* 42 (2009), 149.

<sup>40</sup> Bouazza is against using 'simple' Dutch. He claims for example that in the Calvinistic Netherlands the norm seems to be that of a meagre language, whereas he wants to use a more generous language. Cf. 'Soms heb ik de indruk dat in Nederland de norm van karigheid overheerst: hou het bescheiden, hou het beperkt, dan is het goed. Op school leer je dat al: zeg het zo simpel mogelijk, want dan kun je ook geen fouten maken. Misschien hangt dat wel samen met een soort domineescultuur, een calvinistische levenshouding. [...] Ik zoek naar een vrijgeveige, een genereuze literatuur. Die vind je trouwens ook al bij schrijvers als Gorter en Couperus, die dan kennelijk net zo veel Arabisch bloed hebben als

## Questionable Identity and Detail

The starting point of Hafid Bouazza's literature appears to be his Moroccan heritage, but his play with different unreliable narrators renders a purely autobiographical reading impossible. Still, his work is replete with references to the biographical and the characters often have the same name as the author or a variation of it. I will only give one example from the short novel *Spotvogel* [*Mocking Bird*], yet Bouazza employs similar strategies in *De voeten van Abdullah*, *Een beer in bontjas* and *Merwiswin*. *Spotvogel* is the parodic story of a crippled Romeo and Juliet and at the same time the description of writer's block and a journey back 'home' in search of emotional balance and belonging. In this text, the actual topic is writing itself. The reader does not learn the identity of the first-person narrator, who insists on not being mixed up with Noral, the character from the love story, whose actual name is Noraldino. The first-person narrator comments about Noral: 'You can't really call him reliable'.<sup>42</sup> Repeatedly, an omniscient narrator corrects the I-narrator by means of bracketed comments. The woman who cares for him refers to him by using the sentence: 'Hafid is searching for redemption' and the reader is tempted into thinking that the name of the first-person narrator is 'Hafid', were it not that towards the end of the book this same narrator claims that 'Hafid is searching for redemption' is an expression, an idiom, as if 'Hafid' himself became a piece of linguistic culture. With Bouazza, pinning down identities is always a hazardous pursuit, as he persistently engages in intertextual and narrative playfulness.

Like Bouazza, Herta Müller makes ample use of metaphors and focuses on details to show that identity is always laden with ambiguity. While Bouazza constantly uses mirror images of the narrator, the identity of Müller's characters is broken down into fragments and details. In *Herztier* for instance, the female narrator counts everything in an attempt to resist the fear inflicted on her by the secret police. She even recounts the parts of her body, saying: '1 forehead, 2 eyes, 2 ears, 1 nose, 2 lips, 1 neck'.<sup>43</sup> Irene, the main character in *Travelling on One Leg*, is accompanied by her *Doppelgänger*, whom the narrator calls 'the other Irene'. Irene pauses often and reflects upon the existence of this other person, who seems to have sneaked in without her knowing it. She is constantly insecure and does not know which Irene is acting. In *The Fox Was Ever the Hunter*, the secret police cut one by one pieces off a fox fur that was used by Adina, the main character, as a rug in her living room. Through this cutting, Adina herself feels torn into pieces. Commenting on this novel, Beverly Driver Eddy calls the figure of speech 'particulation', which is 'less a shorthand for identification than a dissection of a setting or a person: a body or a setting is dissected as if its various components operate independently from one another'.<sup>44</sup> In that same novel, Adina visits her former lover in a state of desperation:

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ik.', in R. Appel, 'Nederlands is als water en wind. Schrijver Hafid Bouazza over taal en literatuur', *Onze taal* 5 (2003), 119-20.

<sup>41</sup> *De voeten van Abdullah* has only been translated in English, French and Czech and *Paravion* in German and Serbian.

<sup>42</sup> 'Betrouwbaar kun je hem niet noemen', in H. Bouazza, *Spotvogel* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2009), p. 80.

<sup>43</sup> '1 Stirn, 2 Augen, 2 Ohren, 1 Nase, 2 Lippen, 1 Hals', in Müller, *Herztier*, p. 145.

<sup>44</sup> B. Driver Eddy, 'A Mutilated Fox Fur: Examining the Contexts of Herta Müller's Imagery in *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*', in *Herta Müller*, ed. by B. Haines and L. Marven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 92.

Adina looks at the clock on the wall, she lays a bill on the table and clutches her face. Here are my eyes, she says, here is my forehead, here my mouth. She unbuttons her coat, and that is my nightgown, she says. And here a clock is hanging on the wall, and here a spoon is lying on the table, and outside a day is standing before the door, I am not crazy, it is now eight o'clock, it is eight o'clock every day [...].<sup>45</sup>

Müller uses this strategy throughout her literary work in an attempt to show how, through this insistence on details, her characters are able to hold themselves together. As long as the person or the setting is not complete, the danger can be held at a distance. Bouazza is also interested in detail, but in a different way. He uses a multitude of epithets and descriptions for different sorts of shoes, dresses, movements of the wind, colours, to only name a few. One can argue that this strategy is equally one of resistance, a similar attempt to defer meaning, and one of reclaiming literary freedom.

## Supra-National Writers?

The writers that Müller and Bouazza invoke for their own literary work are either in exile or outcasts of the societies they live in: Vladimir Nabokov as a Russian immigrant in Berlin and the United States or Paul Celan as a Romanian-born German poet, survivor of a Nazi labour camp and an exile in Vienna and Paris. They have written, as Müller states, at the 'point zero of existence'.<sup>46</sup> In each case, the national framing is just the starting point, never the endpoint to judge the quality of their work. This opens again the question in the title: what would the concept of 'supra-national writers' imply? Salman Rushdie, a writer well-known for transgressing national borders, talks in the introduction of his essay collection *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) about writers exiled from India, who in the process of remembering what is lost, 'create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands'.<sup>47</sup> He continues arguing that 'any member of this post-diaspora community [of Indian writers in England] [has] the right to draw on its roots for its art, just as all the world's community of displaced writers had always done'.<sup>48</sup> Rushdie understands this space as, on the one hand, the lost homeland and its representation and, on the other hand, as an imaginary space in literature. The questions of this imaginary community are not to be answered but to be asked, because in the position of displaced authors as simultaneously insiders and outsiders, they can

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<sup>45</sup> 'Adina sieht auf die Uhr an der Wand, sie legt einen Geldschein auf den Tisch und greift sich ins Gesicht. Hier sind meine Augen, sagt sie, hier meine Stirn, hier mein Mund. Sie knöpft den Mantel auf, und das ist mein Nachthemd, sagt sie. Und hier hängt eine Uhr an der Wand, und hier liegt ein Schlüssel auf dem Tisch, und draußen steht ein Tag vor der Tür, ich bin nicht verrückt, es ist jetzt acht Uhr, und es ist alle Tage acht Uhr [...]', in H. Müller, *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2009), p. 195. Transl. in Driver Eddy, 'A Mutilated Fox Fur', p. 92.

<sup>46</sup> 'am Nullpunkt der Existenz' in H. Müller, *Immer derselbe Schnee*, p. 126.

<sup>47</sup> S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 15.

offer a ‘stereoscopic vision’.<sup>49</sup> This vision is necessarily incomplete, but the ‘broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed’.<sup>50</sup> Showing the broken pieces of glass, the fragments, the displacement, the irregularities, the love of words is what this literature is all about. Rushdie calls his literary forefathers ‘parents’, claiming that for international writers it is

perhaps one of the most pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own – selected half consciously, half not – include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong.<sup>51</sup>

The borders of this international literature are neither political nor linguistic, but strictly imaginary.

Azade Seyhan recognises in *Writing outside the Nation* the existence of narratives that ‘originate at border crossings [and that] cannot be bound by national borders, languages, and literary and critical traditions’<sup>52</sup> and calls for new forms of inter/transcultural dialogue. Discussing the relation of identity to alterity, the notions of hybridity and in-betweenness or of a ‘third geography’ of cosmopolitanism, stating that from the site of the fire caused by multiple migrations, ‘the phoenix of a transnational, bi- and multilingual literature has arisen’,<sup>53</sup> thereby asking, what happens ‘when the domain of national language is occupied by non-native writers?’<sup>54</sup> Immediately, this new literature needs a different critical language, one that has not arisen yet, because descriptions such as *diasporic*, *exilic*, *migrant* or *ethnic*, while each applying to the work of Müller and Bouazza, all need accompanying remarks.

Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza are not members of a diasporic community defined as a close group that longs for the forgotten homeland. They are neither writers in exile banned from their countries, nor did they choose to migrate. Müller considers herself a writer in exile, but, as Cooper suggests,<sup>55</sup> with her emigration to Germany, the writer entered a state in which her mother tongue was the dominant language. Müller and Bouazza both vehemently challenge the idea of a unitary home or homeland and the question of their belonging or their defining writing can only be answered through a careful approach. The question of identity lies at the

<sup>49</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 20 and following.

<sup>52</sup> Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Cooper, ‘Herta Müller: Between myths of Belonging’, p. 475: ‘Her ambiguous status as an outsider, in several senses, raises the question to what extent the notion of the exile, because it rests on an assertion of exclusion, necessarily lends at least tacit validity to disputed notions of belonging. A writer who published first as a member of a linguistic minority in Romania and later as a recognized novelist and poet in Germany, Müller deviates from the model of the literary exile exemplified by Vladimir Nabokov, Czesław Miłosz, or Milan Kundera. Whereas these writers left the communities of their mother tongues and in some cases chose to write in a new language, in leaving Romania for Germany Müller left a community in which she was a member of a linguistic minority and entered a state in which her mother tongue was the common language. She thereby constitutes a counterpoint to the classic model of exile.’

core of their literature: they reject identity as the expression of a national/cultural community, trying to break the borders of this national/cultural community. This journey is more often than not paved with a confrontation with nationalist milestones. They both experience the claim upon their nationality as a burden, yet simultaneously take advantage of it and use and transform the clichés in their oeuvre. They transgress borders in different ways, although their difference seems to create a common ground. Bouazza's borders are imaginary: they are the borders of consciousness, of national oriented assumptions, of the power of language and the imagination. Müller's borders are so real, so razor-sharp, that they seem to become hyperreal and therefore also, in a certain way, imaginary. The country of origin remains unnamed for both: Müller talks about 'das andere Land' [the other country] in *Reisende auf einem Bein* and Bouazza about the town 'Paravion' in his eponymous novel, both implying the necessity of movement, of a traveller's existence to be able to get to or away from that country.

## Conclusion

Azade Seyhan finally uses the term *transnational literature* which she describes as 'a genre of writing that operates outside the national canon, addresses issues facing deterritorialized cultures, and speaks for those in [...] "paranational" communities'.<sup>56</sup> While the first two characteristics do apply to Müller and Bouazza, their work rejects the quality of being a spokesperson for a certain community. The concepts *transnational* therefore does not fully apply to their literature: they borrow concepts from the *diasporic, exilic, migrant, ethnic* and *transnational* literature, while retaining their individuality as writers or as supra-national writers, as is argued here and as Louwarse states about Bouazza.<sup>57</sup> Their narratives share an act of reflection, of critical attitude, of experiment, of resistance to interpretation, an alternative space of both language and the act of writing.

Moreover, what they share is the fact that their literature is uncomfortable and that their message can only be transmitted through a feeling of tension and struggle. Bouazza 'challenges both the clichés of cultural essentialism and the facile, utopian fantasies of multiculturalism. What he presents instead is the genuine multicultural condition: convoluted, uncomfortable, full of misunderstanding but with the potential for "shared difference"'.<sup>58</sup> Bouazza shows the gaps without trying to fill them. Müller also prefers to leave the open spaces free of interpretation. As Thomas Coopers has argued, '[f]ar from reifying visions of integral cultural identity, her fiction, collage poetry, and essays subject such visions to continuous interrogation, suggesting a new understanding of the location of exile not as a space outside but as a space between'.<sup>59</sup> Müller's literature is not fixed, it is an 'articulation of experiences of movement, mixture and instability'.<sup>60</sup> They both refuse any form of belonging and prefer to continue the play.

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<sup>56</sup> Seyhan, *Writing outside the Nation*, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Louwarse, *Homeless Entertainment*, p. 234.

<sup>58</sup> H. Louwarse, 'Nymphs and Nymphets. How Hafid Bouazza Evokes Nabokov to Demand Artistic Freedom', *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 3, 1 (2012), 10.

<sup>59</sup> Cooper, 'Between Myths of Belonging', p. 475.

<sup>60</sup> Cooper, 'Between Myths of Belonging', p. 476.



Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza share the act of movement towards memory and imagination, they challenge the alien gaze imposed upon them and insist on the right to own their personal literary universe. They also share the self-profiling stance as writers first and foremost or as supra-national writers, redeemed from the restrictions of qualifying adjectives, such as migrant, or foreign. They are actors in the play of their critical reception and their role as actors must be taken into consideration when (re)evaluating their literary personae and when attempting a critically detached reading of their work. Herta Müller and Hafid Bouazza create on a common, yet very different, supra-national ground of literary freedom, meta-literary reflection and careful positioning, sharing in continuous play and an uninterrupted dialogue with their readers and with critical reception. Their supra-nationality travels constantly from “das andere Land” into “Paravion” and beyond.

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## About the Author

Alexa Stoicescu studied German and Dutch philology in Bucharest, Antwerp and Amsterdam. She wrote her PhD on the concept 'Heimat' in the work of the German-Romanian Nobel prize winner Herta Müller and published on 'home' and 'homelessness' in the literature of the Dutch author Hafid Bouazza. Her research topics include postmodernism, nihilism and the Dutch and German avant-garde. She currently teaches Dutch language, literature and culture and German language at the University of Bucharest and translates Dutch literature into Romanian.