"Meine *eigene* Geschichte": Identity Construction Through Reading in Abbas Khider's *Der falsche Inder*

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In an age of global readership, B. Venkat Mani asserts that modern stories of "minoritized readers" – people whose access to literacy and textual culture is impeded by discriminatory racial, linguistic, and educational politics – "remind us of the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of the reader at the borderlands of translation, within a space where the national collides with the extranational, where nostalgia for the homeland defines the diaspora, where, to borrow from Gloria Anzaldúa, the vernacular grates its bloody back against the cosmopolitan" (146). In several modern novels that portray migrants as minoritized readers, Mani explicates how the migrants' acts of reading are presented as border crossings, acts of linguistic violence, and moments of identity formation. Mani's work draws our attention to the ways reading – a cultural practice we often use to cross physical and imaginary borders, enjoy as well as test the limits of language, and explore other identities and ways of being – can be staged within a work of literature to critique the application and conceptualization of reading within a given society.

Following Mani's example, this article analyses the motif of reading in Abbas Khider's first novel, *Der falsche Inder* (2008, *The Village Indian*, 2013). In the novel, an unnamed frame narrator reads a manuscript written by a young man, Rasul Hamid, that recounts his personal migration story from Iraq to Germany. The novel's frame narrative structure simultaneously thematizes Rasul's self-depiction as a reading migrant and the frame narrator's reading of Rasul's manuscript. This double perspective on reading serves as an intervention in the contemporary discussion on reading and migration in two different, but interrelated ways. First, Rasul as the main protagonist occupies physical and cultural spaces at the borders of nation states, political ideologies, languages, and literary traditions while experiencing the economic, physical, and emotional precarity of forced migration. These conditions are reflected in what and how Rasul reads, which in turn affect his identity and self-depiction in his manuscript. As a reading migrant, Rasul's practices foil the prevailing popular notions of reading that are based largely on the celebrated fictional readers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century novel[1] and celebrate the cultivation of subjectivity, imagination, escapism, and empathy. Such reading practices are often predicated on the security, safety, and even the boredom of a stable middle class life; in contrast, Rasul's reading as an act of self-determination becomes a necessary practice for survival. Secondly, the frame narrator – a man with his own personal experience of migration – reads Rasul's account and perceives the story as his own. The

[1] For such canonical 'reading heroes' see, for example, Marx and Wuthenow.

frame narrator acts as the editor of Rasul's manuscript, a position that is both the first reader and the final author of the text. As such, he exercises a reader's power to shape the figure he encounters—an inversion of the power often granted fictional characters over their readers.

At the center of the novel is a tension between the migrant's subjective reading of the world he experiences and the objectifying reading of the migrant, a tension that is extended through a correlation between the novel's fictional characters and its author. The flyleaf of a later edition of *Der falsche Inder* calls a reader's attention to this fact by juxtaposing summaries of the novel and Khider's biography that employ similar phrasing: the novel is about the flight of an Iraqi, who was imprisoned under Saddam Hussein and eventually fled war and oppression, while Khider was born in Bagdad and fled after a conviction on political grounds and a two-year prison sentence.[2] These broad similarities distract from the more subtle ways in which Khider writes himself into his novel and its fictional characters. Interpreting novels through the lens of their authors' biographies, while generally avoided in contemporary literary criticism, has appeared increasingly more often in the contemporary public discourse and scholarship on German-language novels written by authors with recent migration backgrounds. When critics and scholars point to an author's personal or familial history, usually to substantiate the author's literary depictions of migration as believable or authoritative, they encourage an overly-biographical interpretation of the novel that is more concerned with finding the 'reality' hidden in the novel than exploring the ways in which literary practices reimagine and express lived experience to engage, critique and shape social realities. Through such reductive interpretations and labeling, as seen, for example, in the use of the term *Migrationsliteratur* and in the selection criteria for literary prizes such as the former Adelbert von Chamisso Prize, the author and their works are pigeonholed into a particular sector of German literature.[3]

Der falsche Inder challenges this often fetishized and author-centric notion of authenticity in migration narratives[4] by portraying an author, a frame narrator, and a

[2] See, for example, the fifth edition of the novel: "Dieses Romandebüt handelt von der Flucht eines jungen Irakers, der unter Saddam Hussein im Gefängnis saß und vor Krieg und Unterdrückung flieht, sich in mehreren Ländern als Hauslehrer, Gelegenheitsarbeiter, Kellner durchschlägt… Abbas Khider, geboren 1973 in Bagdad, floh 1996 nach einer Verurteilung aus 'politischen Gründen' und nach einer zweijährigen Gefängnisstrafe aus dem Irak. Von 1996 bis 1999 hielt er sich als illegaler Flüchtling in verschiedenen Ländern auf, seit 2000 lebt er in Deutschland." Abbas Khider. *Der falsche Inder*. 5th ed., btb Verlag, 2013.

[3] Author Olga Grjasnowa, for example, has argued that the term *Migrationsliteratur* is racist and paternalistic as it refers simply to the works of authors who are different, who do not belong, who are not *biodeutsch* instead of, as could reasonably be assumed, referring to works that engage the topic of migration (135). Brent O. Peterson sees a similar move in the selection criteria of the (now discontinued) Chamisso Prize, which, he argues, implied a "biocultural orientation" as the criteria assumed a modeling of cultures as "intact, homogeneous, bounded and authentic" to which individuals are born (83). The prize's presumption of "migrant authors" as biologically authentic representatives of cultural exchange relied on a literary-critical perspective that an author's biography provides the ultimate interpretive framework, which is no longer considered valid (Peterson 84). Past recipients of the Chamisso Prize, Ilija Trojanow and José F.A. Oliver, however, have argued that, in fact, the decision to discontinue the Chamisso Prize was paternalistic as it assumed that the type of authors it supported no longer need support and the issues it helped to raise no longer need attention; they also contend that the critique that the prize ghettoized a particular literature does not hold water. It is also worth noting that Abbas Khider was awarded the Chamisso Promotional Prize in 2010 for *Der falsche Inder* and the Chamisso Main Prize in 2017 for his complete works to that date.

[4] In using the term "migration narrative," I draw on Brent Peterson's distinction between "migration

protagonist who share and, to some extent, write the same narrative. By giving his novel multiple points of origin and several potential authors, Khider suggests that the authenticity of migration narratives need not rely on one authoritative writer, figure, or experience. In fact, although writing is a prevalent theme throughout the novel, I argue that *Der falsche Inder* actually problematizes notions of authenticity in the authoring of migration narratives through a thematic and poetic focus on reading and readers. By only depicting acts of reading Rasul's manuscript—never any acts of writing it—the novel demonstrates a reader's power to construct the narratives and the figures they read about. If reading has the power to construct figures and their identities, however, will the novel's main figures also be susceptible to re-creation when the novel is read? The novel, I argue, is acutely aware of this issue and exploits it in order to expose and critique the interpretive power of the reader, especially in the construction of migrant figures and their narratives.

Reading as Identity Construction

In his manuscript, Rasul's identity formation is often actualized in and expressed through acts of reading. The second of eight chapters that chronicle his forced migration, "Schreiben und Verlieren" ("Writing and Losing"), relates the story of Rasul's literary awakening, when, for the first time, he reads a book not assigned for school: a collection of poems by Rasul Gamzatov. "Nachdem ich es gelesen hatte, packte mich sofort der Vogel, der Büchervogel," remembers Rasul ("After I read it, I was seized by the bird, the reading-bird," 23). In this moment of reading, his life-long literary obsession begins: "Ich las wie besessen […] Und eines Tages kam ich auf die Idee, selbst Gedichte zu schreiben" ("I read as if possessed…And then one day it occurred to me that I should write my own poems," 23). Conspicuously, Rasul's literary obsession begins when he reads the poems of another Rasul. The coincidence of the shared first name goes unremarked by the narrating Rasul; however, it ties him – a fictional reader and fledgling poet—to a renowned real-world poet and presages a literary destiny. Rasul Gamzatov was born in the Caucasus mountains with a bard for a father, from whom he learned to compose poetry. Gamzatov wrote in his native Avar language and his works were often translated into Russian and celebrated in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation. Rasul Hamid reads an Arabic translation of Gamzatov's Russian poems, and he remembers this moment as the spark that lit his poetic ambitions. By including this scene in his manuscript, Rasul constructs a literary identity that is based in acts of reading and translation and defies the bounds of linguistic and national traditions through a conflation of a textual construct with reality caused by a shared name.

The reading mania unleashed by these poems alienates Rasul from his immediate familial and national contexts, a situation that recalls the charge from late eighteenth-century Germany that excessive reading (*Lesesucht*) disturbs domestic peace.[5] His reading of forbidden books outside of school separates him from the official state ideology and national consciousness, while his ability to read at all creates conflict with his father, a recent convert to Saddamism. Rasul returns home one day to find his books and writings

literature" and "migration narratives." In the German speaking context, the term *Migrationsliteratur* often references works by authors who migrated to Germany (or even whose parents or grandparents migrated to Germany), whereas "migration narrative" refers to literary works that explicitly thematize migration.

[5] See Schön 46-49 and Wittmann for an overview of the *Lesesucht* debate.

thrown by his father into the wastewater pooling in front of the house: "[w]ie Leiche an der Front lagen sie da und schauten mich entsetzt an" ("They lay there like corpses on the front lines and looked at me horrified," 27). The war simile and image of betrayed comrades convey the life-or-death stakes reading has for Rasul, and they portray Rasul's relationship to books as more intimate than his relationship to his countrymen, who, thanks to the government, have mutated into "Fantasiekreaturen": "Oder wie hätte es sonst sein können, dass ein Staat das Lesen und Schreiben außerhalb von Schulen und Universitäten in kriminelle Handlungen verwandelte, so dass mein Vater es für angebracht hielt, meine Bücher und alles, was ich bisher geschrieben hatte, zu vernichten" ("fantasy creatures…Or how else could it be that a government could turn reading and writing outside of schools and universities into criminal deeds, so that my father thought it appropriate to destroy my books and everything that I had written," 27-28). Even though Rasul's father only destroyed permitted reading material (Rasul kept his forbidden books hidden, and his illiterate father could not and probably did not care to distinguish between sanctioned and unsanctioned books), Rasul's relationship with his father is irreparably damaged. Rasul's ability to read and thereby threaten established political and familial institutions marks Rasul at a young age as an outsider in his family and a fugitive in his country, foreshadowing his eventual flight.

Rasul's incessant reading leads to obsessive acts of writing that are framed in his manuscript as acts of identity construction as well.[6] After he frames his identity through anecdotes about skin color, geographical positioning, and confused lineages in the first chapter, he moves away from these external factors in the negative assertion that begins the second chapter — "In meiner Familie gab es keinen Schriftsteller" ("There are no writers in my family," 24). This direct statement discounts any biological or environmental basis for his writing, which he instead presents as an internal compulsion ("Das Schreiben hatte immer etwas mit meinem Innenleben zu tun, das mich unaufhörlich dazu zwang" ["Writing has always been connected with my inner life, which constantly compelled me to write," 24]). His *Lesesucht* leads to a *Schreibwut*, in which he becomes "eine echte Schreibmaschine" ("a real writing machine," 24).

Rasul's *raison d'écrire* moves through three stages. First, he understands that writing captures his feelings in words; then he believes his writing can — through active engagement — change the world, just like a revolutionary; finally, he is convinced that he can better understand himself through his writing. He discovers the world and himself by withdrawing from the world and diving deep into himself: "Ich verriegelte fast täglich die Tür meines Zimmers, blendete die Außenwelt aus und tauchte in mich hinein, um jedes Mal ein weiteres verborgenes Stück meiner selbst an die Oberfläche zu ziehen" ("Almost daily I barred the door to my room, blocked out the outside world, and dove into myself to bring another hidden part of me to the surface," 24). By bringing concealed pieces of himself to the surface, he constructs his identity by nuancing the *Oberfläche*, which, until then, had been characterized only by his skin color. In the next chapter, "Priestertöchter" ("The Priest's Daughters"), the image of self-writing and the notion of surface come together in his constant struggle to find sufficient writing surfaces — falafel wrappers, state documents, prison walls, a lover's body — whenever erotic desire spurs him to write at home, in prison, and on the run. As he roams across countries, drifts from job to job, and

[6] See Barthold for an analysis of the performative instances of authorship meant to legitimize the migrant author in this novel. See also Hofmann and Jensen/Müller-Tamm.

leaves one lover for another, his desire to write oscillates in intensity but remains the one unifying act in all of his experiences. Meanwhile, the changing materiality of his writing surfaces — their variation in ephemerality and permanence, intimacy and publicity, legibility and illegibility — reflects the ever-changing stakes and precarity of his migratory self-identity.

Rasul's self-construction through writing culminates in writing his manuscript, titled *Erinnerungen* (Memories). His desire was always to write his own "Geschichte" (latent with both the meanings of 'history' and 'story'), but he struggles because of his "fürchterlich schlechtes Gedächtnis" ("awfully bad memory," 25). For Rasul, memory and writing have an intimate relationship; they require and determine each other, such that his writing becomes a means for internalizing life into an increased consciousness, a process that Sarah Fortmann-Hijazi sees reflected in a play on words with the manuscript's title, *Er-innerung*, literally an internalization of the (masculine) self (225). However, Rasul admits that his memory is full of holes which leaves only ragged, unordered, and diffuse narrative shreds (25). This admission undermines the authenticity of the so-called "wahre Begebenheit" ("true events," 25) of his narrative. Writing often functions as a memory-support, but not for Rasul: the materiality and symbolism of writing fail him when, for example, his penciled notes are smudged and become illegible and his secret alphabet, created to circumvent government surveillance, becomes as mysterious to him as hieroglyphs (26). Rasul, however, views his forgetfulness as a positive competence ("eine Fähigkeit," 25) and a form of mercy ("Gnade," 25). His ability to quickly forget the worst events of his life – combined with an ancillary ability to gild any remaining memories – is a functional survival strategy. On the one hand, his forgetfulness undermines his story's ability to accurately represent reality; on the other hand, it represents the necessity for physical and psychological survival that Rasul confronts every day. The constant loss of his writings through fire, confiscation, erasure, misplacement and forgetting gives him the opportunity to reconstruct his story, re-write his history and refurbish his memories after every moment of loss. In the relative safety and stability of asylum in Germany, digital writing seems to offer a more effective means for preserving his writing, when, for example, he gets upset after losing a manuscript on a bus but is reminded by a friend that it is all saved on his computer. However, when Rasul says that he rewrites everything new that he had previously written and lost – "So als schriebe ich all das Verlorene wieder neu" (31) – the subjunctive mood makes the statement speculative, a possible simile, suggesting that his rewriting is merely a simulation. Meanwhile the sentence's ambiguous construction allows for the possibility that Rasul either reproduces word-for-word or rewrites anew the lost material. His constant rewriting is both a consequence of his survival and a necessary condition for it. As to the authenticity of his narrative, even if the facts relayed in his narrative are unreliable, his manuscript's portrayal of his authorial function accurately depicts the reality of his condition.

Rasul's version of authorship, predicated on the realities of migration, is continually delayed, forestalled, erased and repeated and, therefore, rendered as acts of rewriting and rereading his past experiences and previous texts. Its portrayal recalls Friedrich Kittler's conception of authorship around 1800 as a deferred effect of rereading indecipherable texts that had been unconsciously composed in delirium. Kittler finds examples of this type of authorship in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der goldne Topf" and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, where the reading of hieroglyphics, unknown medieval languages, and coded

alphabets incites the protagonists to author not only their own stories but also their futures (108-123). In contrast to the delirious or dream-like state of Anselmus' and Heinrich's readings, Rasul's rereading of his past memories and previously written texts is based in exile, imprisonment, and sexual arousal. Rasul's catalysts for writing are material and corporeal thereby reflecting more closely the conditions of forced migration rather than the imagined conditions of a romantic German author in the nineteenth century. *Der falsche Inder* reconfigures these esoteric notions of romantic authorship for the material and psychological realities of writing while migrating, effectively disrupting prevailing conceptions of romantic authorship and readership that rely on privileged notions of physical and financial security.

Rasul's self-construction as a migrant and as a writer continues to obscure literary, linguistic, and authorial boundaries in several scenes in which he depicts himself reading. One such scene in his manuscript's fourth chapter, "Sprechende Wände" ("Talking Walls"), combines the conditions and setting of the scene with a specific text, in this case a poem, that conjures a network of intra- and intertextual referents to nuance Rasul's authorial and migratory identities. Rasul, along with other asylum seekers from around the globe, shelters in an asylum center in Bayreuth after being detained by German police. Among the mélange of inscriptions and paintings that cover the walls of the otherwise sanitized and clinical government-run short-term residence, Rasul finds and reads a poem well-known among the residents for its hopelessness, entitled "Chronik der verlorenen Zeit" ("The Chronicle of Lost Time," 64). The poem renders him speechless partially because of the intimate feelings it evokes but also because he recognizes that "[d]as Gedicht stammte von mir" ("the poem originated with me," 64). Conspicuously, Rasul does not claim outright authorship of the poem he supposedly wrote; instead, he claims that the poem started with him and assumes that it must have been picked up by a friend, a fellow migrant, who carried it to this asylum and wrote it on this wall. The poem's lack of an author, its untraceable transmission, and its unusual medium – graffiti on a wall – fall outside the scope of the conventional literary market. Without these conventional markers of authority that serve to guide or even limit possible readings and interpretations, the asylum seekers in this building, including Rasul, read the poem as part of their own stories and carry and redistribute the poem, perhaps even as their own.

After reading the poem, Rasul promised to use its title for his first published collection of poems, which the narrating Rasul confirms eventually happened. *Chronik der verlorenen Zeit* is also the title of Abbas Khider's first published collection of poems (Mühling). This intertextual reference conflates the identities of Rasul and Khider, connecting Rasul's identity to facts beyond the novel's narrative and inserting Khider's authorial figure into it. Just as the poem's presence on the wall blurs the line between literature and lived experience, the explicit reference of its title to the literary biography of both the novel's protagonist and its author obscures conventional boundaries between text and context. The reading, citation, and rereading of the poem create a recursive effect for the migrant figures of the novel – whether it is the asylum seekers reading their experiences of helplessness, Rasul being reminded of his composition of the poem, or Khider infusing his past authorial and migratory experiences into the identities of his fictional migrant figures – that does not distinguish clearly between lived experience and the narration of that experience. The specific, situated reading of the poem invokes memories of larger, similar migration experiences among the migrants who read it, while potentially conflating

the experiences of multiple migrant figures in the eyes of the novel's reader. As we will see, the novel as a whole reproduces a similar experience based in the specific conditions of the act of reading Rasul's manuscript.

Reading in a Loop

The periodic form of Rasul's manuscript generates a 'looping' mode of reading that reflects the conditions and processes of Rasul's self-manifestation. Seen through modern social theories of the loop and the generic narrative arc of the *Bildungsroman*, this dramatized mode of reading exposes and negotiates the ideological valences of the loop as a literary device. As a relatively poor child from an economically and politically unstable country, there is a desire and an expectation set up by the genres of formation and migration narratives that Rasul escape his disadvantaged surroundings and climb the social ladder through a move to Western Europe. Thus, the traditional quality of the *Bildungsroman* is evoked if by a generic horizon of expectations. However, the form of Rasul's manuscript exaggerates and iterates the traditional looping narrative of social integration from the *Bildungsroman* into a narrative form that exposes the inadequacy of ideological concepts such as self-improvement, social assimilation, and *Bildung* for Rasul's narrative of migration.

The manuscript's eight chapters, each of which tells an autonomous version of Rasul's migration, resist being consolidated into one linear plot line; they contain almost no corresponding events, do not refer to each another, and foreground different themes. Each chapter ends with Rasul in Germany, and every subsequent chapter begins with Rasul in Baghdad. This narrative loop becomes so predictable that the trajectory of each chapter from Baghdad to Germany is predicated upon an eventual return to Baghdad. In contrast, Rasul's migratory path never redoubles on itself. Not until the end of the manuscript, when he moves from Berlin back to Munich, does he ever arrive in the same place twice: "Früher kehrte ich nie zum selben Punkt zurück. Ich ging immer weiter […] Dieses Mal aber kehrte ich nach München zurück, um endlich mein richtiges Studium aufzunehmen" ("Previously I had never returned to the same place. I always moved on…This time, however, I returned to Munich to finally begin my proper studies," 150). Only in the relative stability that asylum in Germany offers can Rasul choose to return somewhere – for a forced migrant, a loop back 'home' remains impossible.

The constant return of the narrative to Baghdad represents neither a longing to return nor a diasporic nostalgia for the homeland. Instead, Rasul is always constructed as an outsider, a transient figure whose transience has no beginning or end, a point reinforced by the manuscript's looping form. Rasul recognizes his endless journey, when, on his way to Sweden, he is arrested in Germany: "Hier also sollte meine Reise ihr Ende finden. In Wahrheit aber fand sie gar kein Ende, sondern nahm nur neue Formen an" ("My journey should have come to an end here. In truth, however, it was not over, instead, it just took on new forms," 97). With this line and the looping form of his narrative, Rasul undercuts the conventional, and often celebrated, migration narrative of a harrowing journey capped by the arrival and successful social assimilation in a new country.

The tension between the novel's looping form and its portrayal of a migratory trajectory from political persecution to supposed safety replicates a tension characteristic of post-war German society. The loop, as Diedrich Diederichsen conceives it, became the

central formal model of cultural production after the Second World War even as *Weiterkommen* (progress) was the slogan for post-war West Germans and their conception of social interaction (17). Diederichsen reminds us that the 'loop' was integral to the structure and goal of Germany's central *Bildungsromanen*: Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (24). These novels about social advancement and its failures incorporate looping narratives and physical movement. The first condition of *Bürgerlichkeit*, for example, is a parting from the bourgeois world, a willing movement away from the family home into the world that is then followed by a period of social conditioning and an eventual return to bourgeois society. This genre-defining looping structure of social development warps as its circularity comes to be seen as fateful or even as a sign of failure. The loop becomes something humans are cursed to as *Bildungsfiguren* are increasingly disenchanted by the world and are forced to return to dead-end middle-class careers (Diederichsen 25). The post-modern configuration of the loop takes a slightly different but revealing form: "Der Loop ist nicht einfach die ewige Wiederkehr. Die setzt einen Prozess voraus, der schließlich wieder von vorne beginnt, in schlechter Unendlichkeit" ("The loop is not simply perpetual return. It posits a process that ultimately begins again from the start in a maligned eternity," Diederichsen 17-18, my translation). The focus is then displaced from a disappointing conclusion to an eternal beginning that precludes any conclusion. This version of the loop precludes any possibility of *Weiterkommen* as it gives a concrete form to maligned eternity.

The form of these iterative narratives reflects elements of Rasul's precarious situation and his fragmented sense of self. Without *Weiterkommen*, one loop cannot be chronologically or teleologically distinguished from another, making all of the loops appear simultaneous. The basic construction of the chapters in Rasul's manuscript similarly erases any meaningful sense of time or progress since they all cover the same time period but share only starting and ending locations. Consequently, the figure of Rasul does not progress or develop toward social integration in a new land, because, as soon as he reaches Germany, his manuscript takes him back to Baghdad. The figures of Rasul constructed in each chapter effectively overlap and exist at the same time, representing figurations of Rasul as a migrant that are possible at all times. These multiple possible iterations of the self presented by Rasul sustain the tension between the developing individual and society, which is traditionally subsumed by a first-person narrator who narrates in the past tense from a position of completed social integration. Since there is no secure moment in time from which Rasul can create a master narrative loop, the novel suggests that Rasul never integrates socially. The narratological approach of the novel is then not to create a single coherent narrative, but to express multiple narrative possibilities and multiple iterative identities for Rasul. Just as the continual retelling of the story denies his migration narrative a teleological form, the looping figurations of his self eliminate any possibility of a teleological trajectory to his self-development and identity-construction, forming instead *eine schlechte Unendlichkeit*.

The task then of forming a sense of development and constructing an identity for Rasul falls onto the reader. Within the manuscript, Rasul's social position and personal identity are continually structured by the racist preconceptions of others, xenophobic policing strategies, nativist governmental policies, and impenetrable bureaucracy that he encounters at every turn in his migratory experience. But in the larger scope of the novel, the reader is led to formulate Rasul's identity. The individual narratives, Rasul's looping

chapters, frame his story into eight separate stories about the same person that then require the reader to overstep these narrative boundaries in order to coalesce Rasul's multiple narratives and identities into a coherent figure. Such a process of reading is exemplified through the frame narrator's reading of Rasul's manuscript and the frame narrative that constructs that manuscript into a cohesive account. The novel's frame narrative, as I will show in the next section, centers the act of reading and the reader within the novel's construction and exploration of authenticity and identity.

Reading the Frame Narrative

Der falsche Inder manipulates conventional boundaries between text and context to conflate the world of the reader with the fictional world of the novel's protagonists. According to David Herman, stories trigger readers to draw more or less oblique connections between the storyworlds they are reading about and the contexts in which they are reading them. As they read and interpret a story, readers engage two mental models: one model utilizes representations within the storyworld, while the other draws analogies from the world in which readers try to make sense of a given story (Herman 331). "Contextual anchoring" is then the term Herman uses for "the process whereby a narrative, in a more or less explicit and reflexive way, asks its interpreters to search for analogies between the representations contained within these two classes of mental models" (331). Leslie Adelson has shown how Herman's contextual anchoring can be applied to migration narratives by exploring the interpretive work such texts and their story logic force readers to undertake in order to make decisions continually about what constitutes text and what constitutes context. This boundary work (Adelson's term) causes readers to engage actively in the "transgression of boundaries assumed to separate the actual and the virtual, the fictional and the real" (Herman 338, also qtd. in Adelson 50). Adelson uses this framework to argue that the labor of reading the boundary between text and context yields interpretive possibilities (55).

Der falsche Inder foregrounds this type of boundary work through its frame narrative that uses acts of reading to first construct and then transgress textual and contextual boundaries. The novel begins in a train station and continues in an express train, both liminal spaces that suggest geographic and political border crossing. The explicit offer of travel at the beginning of the novel coincides with the conventionally accepted ability of novels to transport their readers out of their reality and into a fictional world. The narrator and the reader begin the novel traveling and, very soon thereafter, reading together. The paradoxical symbolic meaning of the railway "as an embodied, transitional space emblematic of both the emancipatory hopes and the destructive nightmares of [the modern] epoch" has often been exploited in stories of migration and scenes of reading (Presner 3).[7] However, the intercity express train in *Der falsche Inder* poses as a rather bourgeois setting on a domestic route connecting two wealthy and important German cities, Berlin and

[7] Railway stations and train travel stage encounters between Germans and *Gastarbeiter* in Sten Nadolny's *Selim oder Die Gabe Der Rede* (1990); in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's "Im Zug" (originally published as "Leben im Dazwischen" 2008) train travel transgresses and actualizes borders while also figuring historical transformation; and Katja Petrovskaja's novel, *Vielleicht Esther* (2014), opens in Berlin's new main train station, an embodiment of and portal to all that was lost in the twentieth century. For an analysis of the famous reading scene in *Anna Karenina* that takes place on a train, see Ong.

Munich. The train's scheduled course that crosses no national, linguistic, or cultural borders stands in contrast to the looping, atemporal, imaginative travel experienced by the reader of Rasul's manuscript. The opening of the novel and the setting of the reading scene in the train create the initial tension between constructing and transgressing boundaries that increases as the reading scene and the novel's narrative form unfold.

The setting of the reading scene separates the narrator and his act of reading from his immediate context. The narrator is eventually surrounded by three people — a girl listening to an MP3 player, a boy typing away on his laptop, and a capricious blond woman prattling on her phone. The woman picks up an envelope labeled in Arabic script from an empty seat and drops it into the narrator's lap assuming it belongs to him. This assumption along with the narrator's negative comment about "viele Damen in diesem Land" ("many women in this country," 9) suggests that the narrator does not appear German while his fellow passengers do. Surrounded by modern media, the narrator's analog reading practice is presented as a romanticized and nostalgic act that further sets him apart from the virtual preoccupations of his fellow passengers.[8]

The literal boundaries evoked by the train and the narrator's surroundings are all in anticipation of the narrative boundary established in the transition from the frame narrative to Rasul's manuscript. Page eleven of the novel is the title page for Rasul's manuscript: the author's name, Rasul Hamid, is printed in the top-center of the page above the bolded title "**Erinnerungen**." Below the title there is a quote attributed to Gottfried Benn: "Es gibt nur zwei Dinge: die Leere und das gezeichnete Ich" ("Only two things exist: the emptiness and the portrayed I," 11); and the rest of the page is blank. Title pages traditionally function as a framing device that marks everything that follows as part of the text by delineating it from the outside world. However, by listing an author's name – a figure of the real world – title pages also point outward effectively indexing the text as a creation of this real person and therefore as part of the real world (Wirth 105). The three elements on this particular title page exaggerate and exacerbate the simultaneous performative and indexical functions of a title page. In naming Rasul as the author of the manuscript, it establishes him as a figure beyond the diegetic level of the manuscript; he is more than just the figure of the ensuing text, he is a person in the same world as the frame narrator. The close association of Rasul's name with the manuscript's title suggests that the manuscript is autobiographic; however, the Benn quote, easily identified with a google search as the last two lines of his poem "Nur zwei Dinge" (1953), is a self-conscious commentary on the nature of memories and the fluid relationship between the author and his self-portrayal in the text. The manuscript's title page thus points to every level of the novel: it suggests that Rasul exists as an author in the world of the frame narrative as well as a figure in his manuscript, it flags the fictional nature of the manuscript's narrative and it places the manuscript in conversation with the real world by quoting a historical poet. Instead of clearly demarcating narrative levels, dividing fact from fiction or delineating text from context, this title page conflates them all.

Although the title page of Rasul's manuscript implies that Rasul exists as a figure

[8] Barthold reads this scene as the beginning of the Arabic migrant's self-styling as author as it invokes the long-standing culture-critical discourse of entertainment media consumption as unreflective immersion as opposed to the high-cultural activity associated with the poetic and intellectual quality of writing, especially handwriting (74). That the narrator's authorial persona, as well as Rasul's, is generated by an act of reading supports my argument for the privileged place of reading in the novel's depiction of authorship.

in the diegetic level of the frame narrative, the only figure we are introduced to at that narrative level is the anonymous frame narrator. This figure, I argue, also establishes a boundary, a frame, from which he simultaneously points inward and outward. The key is the story of the found manuscript, which makes the frame narrator into a reader, an author, and an editor. By finding Rasul's manuscript randomly, the frame narrator's relation to Rasul and the manuscript is undefined, seemingly arbitrary. When he reads the manuscript, therefore, he has more in common with the reader of the novel than with Rasul. In fact, in the portion of the novel where the manuscript is (re)produced for the reader, the frame narrator and the novel's reader collapse into the same viewpoint as they both read the manuscript. Thus, the frame narrator functions to connect the reader, who stands outside the bounds of the novel, with the innermost diegetic level of the novel. However, when the novel returns at the end to the frame narrative in a scene that closely mirrors the opening one – in effect closing the loop of the frame narrative –, the frame narrator packs up the manuscript into an envelope, presumably to send it off to his publisher. Exactly this path – from finding a manuscript to sending it off for publication – demarked the function of an editor in the editorial fictions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Wirth 110). The label of editor fits the frame narrator well as he is the first reader of the manuscript and effectively its second author since he defines its final form for publication.[9] Thus, the frame narrator becomes a link in the chain of authors between Rasul, who writes his autobiographical migration narrative, and Khider, who supposedly formed this novel from his own experiences.

The events and dialogue of the frame narrative further establish this authorial and editorial position of the frame narrator. After reading Rasul's manuscript, the frame narrator wonders what he should tell his girlfriend about his trip: "Ob ich [meine Freundin] erzählen soll, was ich während meiner Reise erlebt habe? Ich meine die Sache mit dem Manuskript. Aber was soll ich sagen? Dass ich ein Manuskript gefunden habe, in dem meine eigene Geschichte zu finden ist, geschrieben von einem Fremden namens Rasul Hamid?" ("Should I tell my girlfriend what I experienced during my trip? I mean the thing with the manuscript. But what should I say? That I found a manuscript, in which my own story can be found, written by a stranger with the name Rasul Hamid?" 153). In this moment — a scene reminiscent of Rasul in the asylum center — the narrator claims to have read his own story in the manuscript of Rasul Hamid. In the manuscript's content, he finds details that no one except he could know and only a few descriptive errors: Rasul "hat nur ein paar Namen und Beschreibungen einiger Ereignisse verändert. Das ist aber ohne Bedeutung" ("Rasul changed just a few names and descriptions of a few events. That is, however, without meaning," 154).

Ironically, it is the form of the manuscript with which the narrator most closely identifies. He admits that he often tried to set his story down into literary form, but every attempt failed: "Schon lange hegte ich den Wunsch, meine Fahrt auf dem Geisterschiff, meine Odyssee, niederzuschreiben. Nie habe ich es geschafft. Immer wieder, seit mindestens fünf Jahren, versuchte ich einen Anfang. Und immer wieder hörte ich auf, weil ich nicht überzeugt war, weil mir die Erzählstruktur fehlte, weil ich einfach nicht zufrieden war. Ich wusste immer genau, was ich schreiben wollte, aber eben nicht wie!" ("For so long now, I have fostered the desire to put down my journey on the phantom ship, my odyssey, in writing. Over and again these past five years, I tried to begin. And over and

[9] See Wirth 26.

again I quit, because I was not convinced, because the narrative structure eluded me, because I simply was not satisfied. I always knew exactly what I wanted to write, but just not how!" 154). In Rasul's story, he finds then 'his' exact form and style, first quite literally — "Sogar die Schrift gleicht meiner bis aufs letzte Pünktchen. So klein und fast unleserlich, und dazu auch noch mit Bleistift" — and then stylistically:

> Und dann auch noch die Idee, der Aufbau, die Struktur der Erzählung. Genau mein Stil. […] Immer wieder habe ich versucht, eine Form zu finden, bei der man jederzeit und überall mit dem Lesen anfangen kann. Jedes Kapitel ein Anfang und zugleich ein Ende. Jedes eine eigene Einheit und doch unverzichtbarer Teil eines Ganzen. Alles in einem Werk vereint: Roman, Kurzgeschichte, Biografie und Märchen … Das war doch verdammt noch mal meine und nur meine Idee! Und jetzt taucht da wieder einer der vielen Dämonen in meinem Leben auf und will mir alles nehmen: mein Leben, meine Idee, ja sogar meine Seele? (154)

> Even the handwriting matched mine down to the last period. So small and almost illegible, and in pencil, too. And then the idea, the construction, the narrative structure as well. Exactly my style…Over and again I tried to find a form that would allow someone to begin reading at any point. Every chapter a beginning and also an ending. Every chapter a single unity and also an indispensable part of a whole. Everything united in one work: a novel, short story, biography, and fairy tale…Damn it, that was my and only my idea! And now one of the many demons in my life is emerging again to take everything from me: my life, my ideas, even my soul?

The narrator feels so uniquely tied to the combination of biographic details and literary form that he accuses Rasul of stealing his life, his ideas, and even his soul. The trope of the found manuscript effectively erases the labor of writing, so much so that the fictional construction of the author and authenticity of the manuscript rely on idiosyncratic questions of literary style — a notoriously romanticized concept difficult to quantify or prove — to establish these characters' identities. Of course, there is also the possibility that the frame narrator here ventriloquizes Abbas Khider's reflections on the style and poetics of his migration narrative. Because there is no definitive information about the creation of the manuscript, let alone a definitive authorial scene of writing, it is impossible to tell whose story and whose form it really is. Thus, these three figures – Rasul, the frame narrator and Khider – are so intricately interwoven in the form and narrative of the text that they can neither be differentiated from one another nor extracted from the novel's form and narrative.

In essence then, these authorial figures and their shared narrative only take shape in the reading of the novel and the manuscript it contains. The exclusion of any portrayal of the act of writing the manuscript shifts the responsibility for shaping and defining these figures onto the reader of the novel. Although the frame narrator is conflated with the novel's reader as they read Rasul's manuscript together, the former takes on an authorial function when he sends the manuscript to be published and loses his affinity with the latter. Regardless of the reader's actual life experience – whether they, too, have a migration experience or not – they cannot lay any claim to the close relationship between *Geschichte*

and *Stil* that Khider, the frame narrator, and Rasul share. Readers are thus removed at the last moment from the figurative constellation of Rasul/frame narrator/Khider once that illusion of close association with the frame narrator is broken.

Conclusion

In *Der falsche Inder*, representations and conceptualizations of reading function simultaneously to erect and transgress narrative and identity boundaries. The novel demonstrates how any act of reading moves a reader into the world of the text and, at the same time, indexes the text outside of itself in the reader's world. The breaking down and confusion of the various narrative levels through the framing devices that are ostensibly supposed to separate them – including the frame narrator's act of reading, the manuscript's title page, and the looping form of the manuscript chapters and frame narrative – obscures the boundary between text and context, specifically the boundaries between the narratives and identities of the novel's three authorial figures. Thus, any notion of an 'original' narrative, an 'original' migration experience or an 'original' author is destabilized.

By frustrating these boundaries through acts of reading and looping narrative forms, the novel highlights and enacts the sort of constructive and interpretive boundary work that it demands from its readers. When readers use their personal context to interpret narratives, just as the frame narrator does when he reads Rasul's manuscript, they bring their own contextual identity, knowledge, and assumptions to the reading process and inevitably construct the literary figures they read about in that light. By focusing on the constructive work of reading, the novel delegitimizes notions of authenticity that place the burden of expressing migratory experiences on authors and migrants and ignores the role of the reader in interpreting and actualizing such narratives. When readers do not acknowledge the contextual frameworks they bring to the reading of narratives of migration and rely on the authority of an author with a lived migration experience, they risk reading the text more as a historical or biographical relic and not as a complex work of literature that has the ability to engage, critique, and shape social attitudes. As *Der falsche Inder* demonstrates, the identity of the migrant figure is not static, it is continuously developed in a complex interplay between writing and reading, narrative and form, self-determination, and social construction.

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