Sensory Perceptions and the Migrant German Experience

BY
JOSEPH J. KOGLIN
B.B.A., Marquette University, 2004

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Defense Committee:
Elizabeth Loentz, Advisor
David Weible
Alfred Thomas
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Summary

Migrant artists have become increasingly important contributors to modern German culture, particularly in the fields of film and literature. From the late 20th century through the early 21st century, the cultural presence and influence of migrant artists in Germany has evolved. Earlier works by migrant artists often relied upon stereotype to present a generalized portrayal of the migrant identity in Germany, whereas a number of later works have individualized the migrant identity by focusing upon the unique, individual aspects of the migrant’s character.

This paper analyzes the work of three contemporary migrant artists in Germany – Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada, and Terézia Mora – to show how each author has utilized the literary portrayal of sensory experiences to individualize the migrant identity. Özdamar’s short story “Der Hof im Spiegel” uses sensory experiences to connect Turkish and German aspects of the narrator’s identity. Özdamar’s narrator has multiple dimensions that are influenced by the cultural and social exchange prompted by her migration, which are indicative of her narrator’s unique migrant identity. In her collection Wo Europa anfängt, Tawada uses sensory perceptions to delineate the migrant identity along national lines. Tawada’s interpretation of the migrant identity suggests that the transnational figure has multiple modalities and means of perceiving that remain separate from one another, yet contribute equally to the formation of identity. Finally, in her novel Alle Tage, Mora’s protagonist Abel Nema uses sensory perceptions to connect to the world, while also using sensory information to attempt to mask his innate foreign identity. Mora’s novel presents a migrant character whose identity remains inescapably foreign from those around him, both in the transnational environment and in his homeland.
I. Introduction

Transnational voices – the artistic production of migrant individuals who have traversed national boundaries – have become an important part of contemporary German culture, including film and literature, in the past twenty years. Various factors have contributed to the emergence of migrant artists, not least the reunification of Germany in 1990, the immigration law revision acts of 2005, the German nationality law passed in 1999 that made it easier for foreigners living in Germany to establish citizenship, and the modern trend of globalization. Several migrant German-language authors have won prestigious international and German literary prizes in the past twenty years. Romanian-born German writer Herta Müller, for instance, received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2009, and she was selected as a shortlisted candidate for the German Book Prize in the same year. Serbian-born writer Melinda Nadj Abonji, meanwhile, won the German Book Prize in 2010. Numerous foreign-born artists have received the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for exceptional works of German-language literature, including Emine Sevgi Özdamar (1991) and Terézia Mora (1999). Indeed, migrant authors in Germany have reached an accepted status within the modern cultural sphere of Germany.

The precursors of today’s German-language migrant literature were first published in the 1970s, and were primarily the work of so-called guest workers, or Gastarbeiter, who were recruited from other countries to work in Germany from 1955 through 1973. Termed Gastarbeiterliteratur by the West German media, authors of such literature, like Syrian-born author Rafik Schami, described the struggles of everyday life in a politically hostile Germany.¹

¹ Gastarbeiterliteratur works include: Der Rote Hahn (Jusuf Naoum, 1974), Nicht nur gastarbeiterdeutsch (Franco Biondi, 1979), Das Schaf in Wolfspez (Rafik Schami, 1982), Der Scharfschütze (Naoum, 1983).
Early migrant authors, such as Shami and Franco Biondi, often focused on political problems specific to the migrant experience (Shafi 196). In the 1980s and early 1990s – as the sons/daughters of migrant guest workers began to reach adulthood – literature by younger migrant Germans, like Turkish-born authors Zafer Senocak and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, began to focus on issues that were not as specific to the migrant identity or political in nature, such as gender or generational conflicts. As works by migrant authors increasingly confronted non-migrant topics alongside an examination of the migrant’s experience in Germany, Ausländerliteratur came to be the critically accepted term for discussing works by migrant authors (Shafi 196). Increasing numbers of migrant writers, as well as increasingly complex production by migrant authors, soon led to the critical term Migrantenliteratur as the appropriate category for literature written by migrant authors in Germany. The shift from Gastarbeiterliteratur to Ausländerliteratur to Migrantenliteratur attempts to reflect a less restrictive approach on the critical view of literature by migrant authors, yet such terms continue to distinguish between a German center and a distinct foreign influence (Shafi 197).

For this reason, I have chosen to use the term transnational when discussing works by migrant authors, as this term seeks to remove origin as a basis for understanding the literary value of works by migrant authors. By removing origin as a focal point for categorizing works by migrant authors, the term transnational allows for a more flexible critical interpretation of works by migrant authors, allowing for critical interpretations outside of the migrant experience.

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As migrant artists have become more accepted in Germany, their artistic works have shifted from a largely generalized portrayal of the migrant identity, often related to socio-political issues, to a more personalized portrayal of the migrant identity. One indication of this shift is the move to focus on more subjective and personal experiences of the migrant individual. In this paper I analyze how three prominent German transnational authors – Emine Sevgi Özdamar (born 10 August 1946 in Malatya, Turkey), Yoko Tawada (born 23 March 1960 in Tokyo, Japan), and Terézia Mora (born 5 February 1971 in Sopron, Hungary) – have utilized the literary portrayal of sensory perceptions to elicit an individualized look at the transnational identity, thus advancing understandings of the migrant experience in Germany beyond identity politics. In particular, I will focus on Özdamar’s short story “Der Hof im Spiegel” (2001), Tawada’s collection of poetry and short stories Wo Europa anfängt (1991), and Mora’s novel Alle Tage (2006). These three authors are relevant for a number of reasons. First, each has published in German and has achieved success in Germany in terms of literary accolades (e.g. Özdamar and Mora have each won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, and all three artists have won the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize). Second, each author has portrayed different interpretations of an individualized migrant identity in her works, which I will discuss in further detail. Finally, each of the three authors was born in a different country and, in comparison to their similarities as migrants to Germany, each has a different cultural and national background than the others.

The works I have selected for my analysis all narrate a highly personalized migrant identity, yet in each work the author portrays this identity in a unique way. In Özdamar’s “Der Hof im Spiegel”, the first-person narrator has a cohesive identity that connects elements of her
Turkish homeland and her life as a highly integrated Turkish-German woman. Tawada’s book *Wo Europa anfängt*, meanwhile, suggests the migrant identity is fragmented, largely along national borders, and that the migrant’s perspective shifts depending on where she is. Tawada also utilizes first-person narration in her work, which – as is also the case in Özdamar’s work – allows for greater insight into the migrant narrator’s emotions and feelings, and thus offers a more personalized portrayal of the migrant identity. Mora’s novel *Alle Tage* uses third-person perspective to narrate the story of a migrant protagonist who is estranged everywhere he is, including in his homeland. Mora’s novel suggests there is an inherent foreignness to the migrant identity, which is enhanced by her choice of using third-person narration. In contrast to the use of first-person narration in the works by Özdamar and Tawada, Mora’s choice of narration does not allow for immediate access to her protagonist’s perspective, thus contributing to an enigmatic portrayal of the migrant identity.

I will begin by introducing the broader discussion of identity politics and its relation to artistic works in a general sense. From there, I will discuss the influence of identity politics on transnational literature, and why transnational literature in Germany moved away from the use of identity politics in the late 20th century. I will then discuss the significance of sensory perceptions to the migrant identity. Finally, I will analyze selected works by Özdamar, Tawada and Mora, with the purpose of highlighting how these authors have individualized the migrant identity in Germany through the use of sensory perceptions in their work.
II. Defining identity politics and its significance in artistic works

Philosopher Cressida Heyes defines identity politics as follows:

Identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations. (Heyes)

Common categories that serve to distinguish social groups within the framework of identity politics include: gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, or religion. An individual can certainly embody more than one identity category within a given society. As an example of this, consider an African-American woman, who faces potential social marginalization along lines of both gender and race in the United States. Minority experiences as a woman and as an African-American are both socially relevant minority experiences within the United States, yet both of these minority experiences are also recognized as being separate from one another. An intersectional approach to analyzing identity would be appropriate for discussing how one is marginalized as a culmination of various identity categories that one possesses, as intersectionality studies the relationship between different categories of social marginalization. Typically when discussing identity politics, however, one isolates and analyzes just one experience of marginalization (Heyes). By focusing on just one minority experience, the potential social and political manifestations that that particular minority experience embodies become clearer. Focusing on just one minority experience also presents a problem, however, in that an entire group of minorities are generalized as experiencing marginalization in the same
way, thus not acknowledging personal differences that serve to individualize a person’s identity.

In artistic works, identity politics from the artistic perspective seeks to understand how being cast as a minority by a society’s dominant social group has shaped the minority individual in two major ways: 1) the individual’s understanding of her role in society as a minority, and 2) how this marginalization has affected the individual’s personal belief structure (Calhoun 203). In this way, minority literature becomes a means of distinguishing and providing voice to a minority group or individual from the otherwise predominant political group in a given society. Moreover, identity politics highlights certain stereotypes that may be contributing to the minority group’s marginalization. Artwork that focuses on the shared minority experience seeks to broaden awareness of social categorizing – and potential victimization based on minority status – to the artist’s audience.

III. The early migrant experience in Germany: 1955-1980s

In 1955, the first large numbers of foreigners were recruited from Italy to work as laborers in West Germany. In subsequent years, agreements were reached with many countries – including Spain (1960), Greece (1960) and Turkey (1961) – to bring foreign labor to West Germany to assist with the economic recovery in the country. As foreign laborers came to represent an increasing portion of the minority population in Germany, the West German media adopted the term Gastarbeiter to represent any immigrant laborer to Germany during this time, regardless of nationality or ethnicity. Many of the foreign Gastarbeiter stayed in West Germany after their temporary visas had expired; up to 2 million Turkish immigrants eventually established permanent residency in Germany, becoming the country’s largest minority group.
(Adelson 7). *Gastarbeiter* and their descendants soon came to represent the largest immigrant group in Germany. Legally, many of the first-generation *Gastarbeiter* were not able to obtain permanent residency or citizenship, but were forced to live in Germany on temporary visas. Socially, the German immigrant populations were considered less than equal Germans, manifested through stereotypes and ethnically- and nationally-charged prejudices. Culturally, German citizens and *Gastarbeiter* were also not on equal footing; by working for German firms and alongside German laborers, as well as living in German cities and neighborhoods, *Gastarbeiter* lived in their everyday lives in West German society, but their strongest cultural ties – including language, religion and family – often remained in their country of origin (Adelson 7). The *Gastarbeiter* thereby experienced a sense of marginalization along political, social and cultural lines.

Early literary and filmic works by migrant artists in Germany attempted to portray the minority *Gastarbeiter* experience, often as a reaction to German micro-politics at that particular historical moment (Burns 4). The works themselves sought to heighten social awareness of the minority perspective. For example, political debates regarding the citizenship status of immigrant laborers in West Germany intensified during the early 1970s. Immigrants saw themselves as participating in the German educational system and, most importantly, supporting the burgeoning manufacturing industry in Germany, and thus believed they were entitled to certain political rights, beginning with German citizenship (Soysal 2). As the West German government realized that *Gastarbeiter* were not going to return to their respective countries after their temporary work visas expired, legal rights for foreign laborers became a relevant political issue (Soysal 2). For the general German public, meanwhile, the perceived
weakening of a dominant – primarily white – Christian German culture at the hands of growing migrant populations became a primary social issue (Adelson 82). The German school system, for example, became overburdened with a sudden increase in student populations as a result of the children of the *Gastarbeiter* movement attending German schools. During this time, derogatory stereotypes came to describe migrant groups at large, primarily in response to the heightened social and political attention *Gastarbeiter* were receiving.

The writings of Italian-German author Franco Biondi (8 August 1947) exemplify artistic work prompted by the political and social debates regarding *Gastarbeiter* in Germany in the 1970s. At 18 years old, Biondi moved with his father to West Germany in order to work various *Gastarbeiter* jobs. Biondi eventually achieved a degree in psychology and published a variety of short stories, poetry and novellas beginning in the late 1970s, including the collections *Nicht nur gastarbeiterdeutsch* (1979) and *Die Tarantel* (1982). Biondi’s early writings suggest the *Gastarbeiter* minority in Germany was often a victim of German stereotypes – including the stereotype that all migrant Germans were uneducated and poor laborers – and that there was social and political inequality facing migrant, primarily minority, populations in Germany. Biondi’s work is thus an example of identity politics in West German art at that time, which attempted to lend voice to migrants in Germany.

IV. Moving beyond identity politics: establishing an individualized framework for discussions of the migrant identity in Germany

An inherent problem with identity politics is that it overemphasizes the influence of stereotype and victimization on the formation of individual migrant identity, while ignoring elements of one’s personhood that exist outside of stereotype. In the 1980s and early 1990s, a
new generation of literature and film began to appear in which identity politics did not remain such a central theme. Partly in response to earlier depictions of the migrant identity, later transnational German artistic figures sought to remove identity politics as their central narrative concern in order to highlight more human aspects of the migrant experience (Burns 5). As an overarching artistic focus, identity politics can misrepresent the migrant experience as one of perpetual victimhood within an oppressive society. There are certainly other relevant personal issues experienced by minority individuals that help shape their identity in profound ways.

Turkish-German author Feridun Zaimoglu’s book *Kanak Sprak* (1994), for instance, sought to highlight the socio-economic disadvantages of being a poor migrant in Germany by collecting “actual” stories told by a younger generation of Turkish-German citizens, the sons of first-generation Turkish-German *Gastarbeiter*. The stories in Zaimoglu’s piece are told in a stylized hybridized language using elements of both Turkish and German, the so-called *Kanak Sprak* ethnolect, and largely focus on the pervading poverty of Turkish-German neighborhoods. Of the characters who are central to the book, Zaimoglu argues, “Die Kanakster und Kanaksta haben, wie eine türkische Wendung geht, das Leichentuch zerrissen, und die kalten Mumien lernen jetzt leben, mit knackenden Gliedern und schlackerndem Bewegungsapparat” (Tuschick). Zaimoglu’s book portrays a migrant population that is not overtly concerned with victimization, but rather suggests that the migrant population is in the process of defining itself. Thus, society’s attempts to define the migrant identity through stereotype or other such marginalization are invalid.
Other transnational works have also focused on aspects of the migrant experience that go beyond blatant victimization, including filmic works like *Kurz und schmerzlos* (Short Sharp Shock, 1998) by Turkish-German director Fatih Akin. In such works, critical structures of migrant identity predicated on collective national lines are replaced with more individualized critiques that allow identity to develop on a person-by-person basis. In other words, identity becomes an individual process, which could be the culmination of any variety of personal experiences, including: gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, memory, or locality. Akin’s film, for example, suggests that identity from the migrant perspective has a truly personal constitution, being the result of a variety of cultural influences and traditions, which is ultimately embodied in three unique male characters of his film who each contain their own unique migrant identity.

Transnational works that focus less directly on identity challenge the works’ audience to ignore common stereotypes when reflecting upon the migrant experience. Critic Pelona Petek argues that viewing each new piece of migrant art through the lens of identity and multiculturalism is all-encompassing and generic, to the extent that it minimizes the effect of the artist (Petek 178). Looking too intently for evidence of identity politics within migrant or minority works risks the incorrect assumption that the greatest concern of all of these artists is political and social equality, primarily along national lines. Furthermore, a narrative that is explicitly in reaction to group identity politics risks perpetuating group stereotypes by promoting such ideas to the narrative’s audience.
V. Sensory perceptions and the migrant identity

Emphasizing sensory perception has become one means for transnational authors to individualize what it means to be a migrant in Germany, and thus deemphasize the effects of group dynamics on the individual’s identity. There are several factors that contribute to the effectiveness of sensory information in separating the migrant individual from the group. First, sensory information, at its very core, serves the purpose of connecting the individual to her external environment. The physical senses are how humans experience the external world, and the same experience can be interpreted differently from one individual to the next. In the “foreign” landscape one is more consciously engaged in the process of sensing, due to the migrant’s need to familiarize herself with her new environment. Second, when internalizing one’s external experiences through sensory perception, one is connecting the physical realm with the metaphysical realm. When one hears music, for example, one determines whether the music is pleasant or unpleasant through a series of emotional responses – which are often influenced by learned cultural filters – triggered by the physical act of hearing the music. The link between physically sensing and human emotions portends a major problem with the use of group identity politics in establishing a migrant identity, in that the identity is more a collection of innate, emotional behavior as it is how one is perceived of being by someone else. Indeed, an individuals’ identity is influenced both by one’s self-identification – how one perceives one’s self – and the perception of others. When one relies upon stereotype or other such third-party behavior – often triggered by outward observances – to categorize another person’s identity, one sacrifices the migrant individual’s emotional autonomy. Third, sensory perceptions are without boundaries. The migrant uses the same senses prior to migration as she does after.
However, emotional responses to physical perceptions – emotions that are often influenced by the cultural changes that migration entails – can naturally change and have become subject matter for the transnational artist.

Memory is an aspect of identity that is directly affected by sensory perceptions, just as sensory perceptions aid one in storing memories. Particularly in the case of the migrant, to whom notions of homeland can only be recalled, memory retains a special importance. Moreover, personal relationships that may not be so easily replaced in the country of destination are often maintained, in part, through memory. Of the relationship between memory and active sensory perception, cognitive researcher Diane Pecher writes, “a growing number of researchers in the field are proposing that mental processes such as remembering, thinking and understanding language are based on the physical interactions that people have with their environment” (Pecher 1). Memory, reliant upon the cognitive processes of remembering and thinking, is thus assisted by the sensory images that one experiences, retains, and recalls. To the migrant, sensory experiences retained from the country of origin are triggered as memories when similar senses are activated in the new country.

By creating references for the individual to the outside world, sensory information allows one to understand one’s environment, immediately or otherwise, in a more complete manner (Pecher 2). Thus, sensing has a threefold dynamic in impacting: 1) how one recounts the past, 2) how one perceives the present, and 3) how one establishes expectations for future experiences. This dynamic is certainly not unique to migrants, but rather takes on a heightened importance. For non-migrants, understanding the outside environment is a slow accumulation of experiences. The migrant, however, has a special need to acclimate to her environment with
a relative suddenness. Additionally, the migrant must adapt her sensory perceptions to accommodate her new environment, given that sensing can indeed be impacted by cultural and social origins (Vinge 73).

The portrayal of human sensory experience in artistic works, then, assists in dramatizing internal human affairs by portraying emotions through universally familiar means, namely external sensory experiences. To the transnational artist, sensing is used to dramatize human emotions, with the further aim of highlighting how human struggles may have been influenced by one’s migration. The full extent to which senses are utilized and what narrative ends they serve varies widely from artist to artist. In the following pages I will discuss how three prominent German authors have employed the portrayal of sensory experiences in their work, and how incorporating sensory experiences has helped each artist offer a unique and highly individualized depiction of the transnational identity.

**VI. Creation of a new Heimat in Özdamar’s “Der Hof im Spiegel”**

“Jeder hat in einer Stadt seine persönliche Stadt,” reflects the migrant narrator of Özdamar’s 2001 short story “Der Hof im Spiegel” (Özdamar 17). Here, the narrator, a Turkish immigrant who relocated to Germany a significantly long time ago – although it’s unknown exactly how long she has lived in Germany – is particularly interested in declaring her own personal space and personhood as being distinct from her surrounding community and its members. The narrator, who remains nameless, offers reflections on her observations of her German environment throughout the story. As well, she reflects on the memory of friends and family she left behind in Turkey, while at the same time using the telephone to maintain these relationships while she establishes her permanent life in Germany. The narrator’s experiences
in Turkey and in Germany are shown as impacting her sense of identity equally, however with different emotional outcomes.

Metaphorically, the notion of crafting a “persönliche Stadt” refers to an individual’s experiences that cannot be replicated by another, such that one’s ultimate collection of experiences are entirely unique in nature. In turn, one’s experiences are reflective of and inherent to one’s personal identity. For this short story’s migrant narrator, regardless of her origins, she will construct her own identity. “Der Hof im Spiegel” explores the individuality of the transnational experience, and how the migrant intuits a particular understanding of Heimat through the assemblage of past and present events. The interplay between past and present experiences surely impacts non-migrants as well, however for the migrant this interplay is notably different in that the past often occurred in a different country, so that there is a certain physical distance that makes the past less readily accessible. In the course of this short story, physically sensing and internalizing her environment is a necessary experience by which the narrator assembles her past and present into one unique identity while establishing a new home in Germany. In this section I will examine how Özdamar’s migrant narrator in “Der Hof im Spiegel” constructs a personal understanding of Heimat, how the narrator’s notion of Heimat impacts her identity, and how the narrator’s use of senses contribute to her individual identity.

How does one define the term Heimat? This proves to be a slippery question to answer. Most directly, the term refers to a person’s notion of home, or feelings that invoke home to a person. There is an inherent abstractness that is connoted when using the term Heimat, in that Heimat is a self-creation that is predicated on one’s individual needs. Peter Blickle acknowledges the multiplicity of this term:
The difficulties *Heimat* poses when it comes to describing its referent or referents become clear, however, when one puts the question to educated, self-analytical German speakers. They tend to acknowledge at once that there is more than one Heimat – they know that the word has become a relative term – and yet, somewhat uneasily and without being able to define it exactly, they will admit to reserving a place for Heimat among such terms as *self, I, love, need, body, or longing*. (Blickle 4)

It must be accepted that the term *Heimat* is multifaceted, and perceptions of the term can change from person to person, as well as change for the same person over the course of his lifetime. Further, from Blickle one infers that *Heimat* refers most strongly to an inward emotion, and that physical images alone best serve to invoke human emotions of *Heimat* rather than explicitly define what *Heimat* is. The term is indirect, yet refers to a sense of belonging, a sense of familiarity, and an otherwise abstract notion of what is home to an individual.

Using the German term *Heimat* with respect to a foreign born author, in this instance Özdamar, is a difficult assertion given the politicized nature of the term. In its various German connotations – for example, *Heimatstadt* (hometown), *Heimatland* (native land), or *Heimatliebe* (patriotism) – the term *Heimat* has come to evoke politically-charged images of a native German identity or native Germany – or native Austrian or Swiss identity, given the respective context in which the word is used (Boa, *Heimat: A German Dream*, 1). The National-Socialist party famously abused portrayals of *Heimat* and *Volk* in propaganda works of the 1930s and 1940s – such as Leni Riefenstahl’s films – to unify the German republic. Interestingly, the images in Riefenstahl’s films alone had the ability to invoke a proud feeling of *Heimat* for
some patriotic Germans. The sensory experience of simply viewing images that were seen by the general public as being inherently German – for example, picturesque rural German landscapes – was powerful enough to affect patriotic emotions. Therefore, to apply the term Heimat to a migrant German can be disconcerting for readers, for the migrant would seem to have little of Germany within her natively. However, to this end Elizabeth Boa asserts, “In a mobile age local loyalties may attach to a first childhood Heimat or a second or third Heimat as an adult” (Boa, Heimat: A German Dream, 7).

While Boa’s comments are made with respect to German citizens who have changed localities within Germany, I believe the statement applies equally to one who has traversed national boundaries and established a longstanding residency within Germany’s borders. Although the term Heimat has been politicized, it still refers to circumstances that are relatively comfortable, familiar, and eventually innate to an individual. The transnational migrant experience naturally requires a reestablishment of Heimat, for a new environment is inherently foreign, and thus unfamiliar, at the outset of a migration. In this short story, Özdamar’s narrator is not new to her environment, but rather has integrated to German culture over a significant period of time. She speaks the German language, works a typical German job, maintains a romantic relationship with a native German, and interacts naturally with her German neighbors. Yet at the same time, her Turkish past remains a part of the narrator’s identity while she simultaneously functions in her German Heimat.

The relationships the narrator has with loved ones in Turkey are the most direct element of the narrator’s past that still contributes to her identity in Germany. Indeed, the narrator exhibits greater emotional depth in her relationships with Turkish loved ones, which
she maintains in the story through fairly intimate telephone conversations. The narrator most prominently uses the telephone to converse with her mother, father, and close friend Can:

Auch ich hatte seit Jahren, wie Glenn Gould, immer mit meinen Eltern oder Freunden telefoniert. Als ob die Vögel, die sich auf die Telegraphenmasten setzen, die Liebe dieser Menschen aufpicken und in ihren Mündern und mit ihren Füssen zu mir bringen könnten. (Özdamar 15)

The narrator’s initial comparison with Glenn Gould – a 20th century pianist who was famously eccentric as an individual – suggests her awareness of being unique in her own right. As she speaks over the telephone, the narrator’s senses are pervaded by voices of her close acquaintances, which are capable of transporting love and other emotions between the two speakers. These voices and the emotions they convey even assume tangible form to the narrator, embodied in visions of birds carrying packets of emotion to and fro. That the narrator objectifies the emotions felt when telephoning is indicative of the importance her past holds. Moreover, the aural sensation of speaking over the telephone defies the physical boundaries that separate the two speakers in reality. In effect, the narrator is able to speak to her loved ones, and thus be impacted by them, as if no boundary separates them at all. Indeed, the relationships maintained over the telephone have personal implications that strongly impact the narrator’s character and emotions throughout the short story.

By maintaining emotional closeness with her Turkish loved ones, the narrator suggests that her past remains a part of her identity while living in a new Heimat in Germany. Although she has relocated physically, emotionally she has not fully separated herself from her previous country. The symbiosis of Turkey and Germany, in this context, individualizes the narrator’s
identity in comparison to others in Germany, particularly in comparison to other Turkish migrants, who have been portrayed by some Turkish-German artists – including Zaimoglu in *Kanak Sprak* – as living in Germany, however in largely migrant social neighborhoods that perpetuate Turkish culture. The narrator of “*Der Hof im Spiegel*” instead lives and works in relatively German spheres from a cultural, political, and social context. The most significant facet of Turkey that impacts the narrator’s identity in her present German home, in an especially personal sense, are the relationships she cultivated in the past.

Just as she is different from migrants who interact largely in social circles comprised of other migrants, the narrator perceives herself as being different from her German society as well. In instances involving her German environment, sight becomes a relevant sensory experience: “Wenn man in der Bahnhofshalle in einem Cafe sitzt, rennen vor einem Menschen als Masse, zu den Zügen. Sie sehen so aus, als ob sie unter ihren Füssen ein elektrisches Laufband vorantrüge” (Özdamar 21). Germans, to the narrator, rush in masses, fairly indistinguishable from one another. Their very movement is automated, as they are rushed along by an external force. The narrator, meanwhile, remains separated from these masses, observing from her isolation in a café. Through this passage Özdamar reflects on the individuality and self-perceived autonomy of her protagonist’s identity as being outside of group dynamics. Further, this passage distances the narrator from stereotypes of what could be a “typical” German who is caught up in the daily rhythm of German life.

It is unsurprising that sight is largely the medium through which the narrator observes her German environment, while reflections of Turkey are strongly induced through aural sensations via the telephone. Sight is immediate, and usually requires a physical proximity to
one’s object of observation. Often, the most accurate information relayed through sight is the information that a person observes directly, which the narrator is able to do while presently living in Germany. Sight is thus relevant to the narrator’s observations of her German environment. At times, however, visual sensory observations made in Germany also trigger memories of the narrator’s past. At these moments, a visual cue reminds the narrator of her Heimat in Turkey, and she reflects on the differences and similarities between her past and present.

In the following instance, the narrator references her past and present simultaneously as the result of sensory information obtained through sight: “Auch in dieser Stadt hier liebe ich die Brücken... Auch diese Brücken sind ein Teil meines persönlichen Stadtplans, wie auch Heinrich Heines Geburtshaus, das Bambi-Kino und der Hauptbahnof” (Özdamar 21). For the protagonist, bridges are a part of her “persönlichen Stadtplans”, or collection of experiences that help define her identity. Naturally, bridges, like the telephone, metaphorically connect various aspects of a person’s life. In the narrator’s case, the bridges seem to connect Turkey and Germany, or her past and her present. At one end of the bridge is the narrator’s past, including her Turkish loved ones and homeland; at the other end is her present Germany, signified through explicit references to city landmarks that have worked to impact the narrator. In this instance, sight has a twofold dynamic: while the narrator is specific in naming landmarks in Germany that have become important to her, visual reflections on Turkey remain abstract.

Mirrors symbolically frame the mutually dependent relationship between the narrator’s Turkish past and her German present. Often, the narrator describes gazing into the mirror while speaking on the telephone with her Turkish acquaintances. At one moment, the narrator
describes speaking to her mother about her brother’s sudden death after his wedding night, the narrator in Germany and the mother in Turkey: “Als meine Mutter mir das am Telefon erzählte, sah ich im Spiegel am Küchenfenster eine Biene entlangkrabbeln. Vielleicht hatte meinen Bruder eine Biene in die Zunge gestochen” (Özdamar 20). Through the act of gazing into the mirror, the narrator encapsulates her “now” and “then” simultaneously. This is reflected in multiple ways. Firstly, the act of speaking with her mother in Turkey while, at the same time, she looks at herself and her environment in Germany combines the Turkish and German elements of her identity into one moment. Secondly, the narrator projects an image from her present – the bee crawling along the kitchen window – onto an imagined image of her brother’s recent death.

The episode of seeing the bee, and subsequently imagining her brother’s death as being an allergic reaction to a bee sting, has further implications regarding the sense of touch. As a sense, there is a certain intimacy associated with touch, in that one must be within arm’s length in order to activate the sense. The narrator, however, cannot be close enough to her Turkish environment to sense this environment with touch directly. Instead, she uses the mirror as a portal to combine her location in Germany with that of Turkey, allowing elements of both environments to interact and thus make touch possible. Even in these interactions she does not activate her own sense of touch, but rather allows other aspects of her Turkish and German environments – her brother and the bee – to perform the act. Thus, there is a certain dampening relative to the intimacy of touch, suggestive of the dampening of the intimacy the narrator has with her Turkish environment while existing in her new Heimat.
Touch through the mirror appears with respect to the narrator’s German environment as well as her Turkish environment. As she does frequently in the short story, the narrator speaks with her mother on the telephone while looking into her kitchen mirror, this time gazing out into the shared courtyard of her apartment complex and into the window of her neighbor: “Ich kitzelte im Spiegel den Rücken der jungen Nonne, damit sie unten im Hof plötzlich anfang zu lachen” (Özdamar 30). This instance highlights the comfort the narrator experiences in her German environment. She is close enough, emotionally, to her German environment that imaginings of tickling her neighbor, the nun, feel somehow familiar. Still, as in the dream of her brother and the bee, the actual experience of touch is distant and imagined. The mirror allows her to envision these moments of touch, yet because they occur in the mirror they are not physical and they are not real.

Regarding the voyeuristic aspects of the episode with the nun, critic Leslie Adelson comments, “Observational habits connote an emotive investment in social relations with her neighbors, especially the Germans among them, without denoting any relational substance” (Adelson 46). To relate episodic experiences of touch in the short story to the narrator’s identity is to realize that the narrator does not wholly belong to either Germany or Turkey; her identity is rather a unique mixture of her experiences in both environments, an individual removed from complete belonging to either environment. The indirectness of observing through the mediated image of a mirror contrasts earlier moments in which the narrator references exact locations in Germany that have become a part of her understanding of Heimat. Importantly, the narrator’s exact references to German landmarks are impersonal and bear little relational impact. Together, indirect observations of her neighbors in the mirror and
references to direct interactions with German buildings and places signal the rather impersonal closeness the narrator has with Germany. As Adelson observes, there is much in the way of social interaction, yet little value to developing meaningful relationships. Even the narrator’s relationship with her German boyfriend is unusual, in that he rarely surfaces in the narrative and is mentioned as often traveling, and thus being absent.

In describing the mirrors that adorn her apartment, the narrator explains, “Die drei Spiegel sammelten alle Fenster und Etagen und den Garten des Nonnenhauses aus drei verschiedenen Perspektiven” (Özdamar 26). The narrator is able to alter her sense of sight – and imagine instances of other sensory information – by viewing her environment in the reflective surfaces of her apartment’s mirrors. Similar to the effects of other visual media, such as film or photography, that allow for different visual perspectives, the narrator uses the mirrors to view herself and her environment from angles that she couldn’t otherwise see from directly, and to view herself in her environment from an outsider’s perspective. A complexity is implied through such symbolism.

Just as the apartment’s mirrors offer different visual perspectives to the narrator, the narrator’s cultural and social experiences – experiences both from her time in Turkey as well as in Germany – offer different perspectives relative to her creation of a comfortable and innate Heimat. There is a certain complexity to the narrator’s identity that cannot be determined by analyzing the narrator as a Turk or a German singularly. Moreover, the narrator has proven that her identity cannot be replicated by another person nor be defined by stereotypes or external observation. This complexity of character is metaphorically captured in the mirrored images the narrator describes in her apartment, images that contain: elements of past and present,
voyeuristic images of her neighbors in the courtyard, self-voyeuristic observations, imagined encounters. Ultimately, Özdamar’s migrant narrator is portrayed as having multiple personal dimensions but one singular, individualized identity.

VII. Sensory information and the foreign experience

While Özdamar’s short story “Der Hof im Spiegel” focuses on the individualization of the migrant identity, Tawada’s collection of short stories and poetry Wo Europa anfängt (1991) explores the duality of identity for the migrant. In her collection, sensory information and language indicate that the migrant experience generally is fraught with foreignness, both from the migrant and the non-migrant perspective. From the non-migrant vantage point, Tawada hints that interactions with a migrant person emphasize the point that cultural and social habits are apt to change between individuals, particularly between people hailing from different localities. In interacting with a migrant, the non-migrant experiences a sense of foreignness not with the environment at large, but rather in the disturbance of uniformity in his environment. The migrant, in contrast to the non-migrant, experiences a sense of foreignness with the environment at large, and thus submits more readily to cultural exchange between the manners, customs and society of her new and old country in order to make the environment less foreign. Tawada’s work suggests the migrant is likely to adopt cultural and social habits that are native to her new country in addition to, not as a replacement of, the cultural and social habits of her country of origin. The multiple cultural experiences presented in Tawada’s writing are typically framed within national boundaries, and thereby show the migrant identity as having multiple modalities rather than a single amalgamation of experiences (Anderson 64).
Tawada’s literary career itself suggests that an individual can exist in multiple spheres of identity, as she has published to a significant level of success in both Japan and Germany (Hijiya-Kirschenhereit 129). In *Wo Europa anfängt*, Tawada’s migrant narrators are often explicitly aware of the cultural differences that national borders can demarcate, which is different than Özdamar’s protagonist in “Der Hof im Spiegel” – who reflects little on the cultural differences between Germany and Turkey, but rather combines elements of her past and present simultaneously to create a singular, individualized identity. Tawada’s narrators in *Wo Europa anfängt* are often aware of their foreignness, and thus separate their experiences as a migrant to create different forms of identity. In this section I will discuss how Tawada activates perceptions of foreignness through sensory information in the collection *Wo Europa anfängt*. Furthermore, I will investigate how Tawada’s use of sensing suggests the migrant individual can maintain multiple, distinct identities at the same time.

*Wo Europa anfängt* begins with a short story, “Das Leipzig des Lichts und der Gelatine”, which is dated shortly after German reunification. Tawada penned the story in Japanese and first published the work in Tokyo; later, Peter Poertner translated the short story to German. Knowing that the work was originally intended for a Japanese audience is helpful in understanding the thematic presentation of the story, which deals largely with migration and the feelings of foreignness that can accompany such experiences. The story’s narrative describes an Asian-German migrant who is traveling from her home in the former West Germany to Leipzig, with the intent to sell an unnamed ware. This story has an obvious political bent relative to the recent unification of East and West Germany, as well as a commentary on the migrant experience. Indeed, Tawada’s narrator has multiple migrant experiences. First, her
narrator has already completed an East to West migration, living as a migrant from Asia in West Germany. Second, her narrator is now migrating from West Germany to East Germany. Tawada uses the story’s historical placement to create a complicated narrator who is a migrant on multiple different levels, and thus experiences foreignness in multiple different ways. Due to her assumed – and largely separate – roles as an Asian, a migrant Asian, and a migrant West German, the narrator’s identity is complicated such that it is impossible for the narrator to occupy a single identity (Gerstenberger 221).

In “Das Leipzig des Lichts und der Gelatine”, Tawada often uses her narrator’s reactions to sensory information to highlight their foreignness. The short story begins with the narrator observing a woman selling drinks from a two-spouted copper kettle, while she waits for an official to return to his vacated office at an old customs checkpoint between East and West Germany. The narrator is confounded at the sight of the kettle, something which she has never before seen: “In Südostasien erzählt man sich Geschichten von Schlangen mit drei, fünf, sieben oder neun Mündern, aber nie von Kesseln mit zwei Tüllen” (Tawada 9). The image of the two-spouted kettle invokes memories of fables from her southeast-Asian homeland, such that she views her German environment through the cultural eye of a southeast-Asian. These fables still intrigue the narrator and allow her to perceive her German environment from the perspective of a foreigner. The visual image of the two-spouted kettle, an unfamiliar sight, provokes the narrator’s feelings of being a foreigner in Germany.

Tawada’s narrator goes on to describe the woman selling drinks as: “Eine fleischige Frau in schwarzen Stiefeln und einem Kleid mit Sonnenblumenmuster, keine Asiatin, aber bestimmt aus dem ‘Osten’” (Tawada 8). The narrator, here, uses visual stereotypes from her perspective
as a West German migrant to characterize the woman selling drinks. Not only do the woman’s wares look foreign, but the woman herself looks foreign. In contrast to the narrator’s reaction to seeing the kettle, in which the narrator describes foreignness from her Asian perspective, the woman’s visual appearance triggers the narrator’s West German identity. Eventually, the woman also recognizes the narrator as a migrant West German, marked not by visual cues but by the narrator’s choice of words and verbal associations: “Weil ich etwas, das ich nicht kannte, verglichen hatte, wusste sie sofort, dass ich aus dem ‘Westen’ kam, obwohl ich keine Europäerin oder Amerikanerin war” (Tawada 9).

Christina Kraenzle writes, “her [Tawada’s] focus on language and territoriality tells another story altogether, where regionalisms and nationalisms flourish. Tawada thus suggests the fallacy of the notion of a world without borders” (Kraenzle 171). Through her interactions with the woman selling drinks, Tawada’s narrator proclaims that national boundaries – with distinct cultural differences – do exist. As the narrator crosses these national boundaries, reactions to sensory observations imply that the narrator has multiple different identities that have been influenced by her transnational migrations. For example, when the narrator sees the woman’s kettle, she recalls a fable from her youth in Asia, thereby portraying the narrator’s Asian identity. The narrator’s West German identity is similarly implicated through sensory observations; using her perspective as a West German, the narrator identifies the woman’s appearance as being stereotypically East German. Cultural borders, based on national lines, thus retain relevance to Tawada, and contribute to the idea that the migrant individual has an identity that can be perceived differently in different nations and under different cultural contexts.
Later in the short story the narrator uses her identity as an Asian woman to reflect upon the German language. When her companion en route to Leipzig refers to the product she would like to sell as a “Drucksache”, the narrator admits, “Bei dem Wort ‘Drucksache’ stellte ich mir einen Berg von ueber und ueber mit Druckbuchstaben beklebten Papierbuendeln vor” (Tawada 24). Even as a fluent, near-native speaker of the language, the narrator reacts to certain German words from the perspective of a foreigner, or perhaps a naïve child. Here she has imagined a wonderful mountain of paper bundles. Had the narrator heard this word from the perspective of a German, rather than as a migrant, the word would have had little effect outside of its literal German meaning. Yet the narrator alienates herself by understanding the word unfamiliarly, in effect dividing her identity into separate bodies of German and foreign association.

In addition to “Das Leipzig des Lichts und der Gelatine”, Wo Europa anfängt presents a small collection of poetry, fourteen pieces written originally in Japanese and translated to German. In the poem “Ein Gast”, Tawada uses sensory information obtained through touch to comment on her foreign identity and her translation from the East to the West:

Von jenseits des Urals her
grüsst es in der Sprache des Wassers
Du drehst am Hahn
und es rinnt jetzt in deine Hand
das Wasser eines fremden Landes. (Tawada 37)

Reading this piece as a poetic self-analysis by Tawada, it is difficult to ascertain what aspect of foreignness Tawada comments on: her role as a German woman or as a Japanese woman. Does
one approach the Urals from the west or the east? Indeed, as in much of her work, the perspective is murky and prone to change depending upon how one positions one’s self. Either from the west or the east, the Urals are traditionally seen as the border between Europe and Asia. The vision of crossing the Urals is thus emblematic of the narrator’s multiple identities, as an Asian and as a European.

Fluid states of being are central to Tawada’s literary texts, (Gersternberger 221). In the case of “Das Leipzig des Lichts und der Gelatine”, the narrator seamlessly alternates between interpreting sensory information from the perspective of a West German woman and from the perspective of an Asian woman. In the poem “Ein Gast”, Tawada symbolizes feelings of emotional and personal fluidity through imagery of water and the sense of touch: “es rinnt jetzt in deine Hand / das Wasser eines fremden Landes” (Tawada 37). The act of touching water itself is suggestive of Tawada’s belief in the fluidity of one’s identity, or the idea that one’s identity has the ability to change in relation to one’s experiences. Tawada’s poem suggests that, in a foreign country, the water that runs over one’s hand is foreign. As a migrant, one is inescapably immersed as a foreigner, such that the very objects one touches exposes one’s differences. Tawada’s poem suggests that assimilation is not only not desirable, so as to retain the multiple identities that one has established elsewhere, but not possible. Thus, one reads Tawada’s work as a commentary on the various modalities of identity that she has developed through travels and migration.

Tawada incorporates visuals in Wo Europa anfängt to reinforce concepts of plurality, and to engage the reader’s visual sensory perceptions in the process. In the published volume, each of the fourteen poems is visually presented to the reader in both languages, which is
representative of the duality that the author feels. In this case, sensory perceptions are elicited beyond Tawada’s actual narratives. By visually presenting her poetry to the reader in both languages, Tawada challenges the author’s subservience to language and justifies her own belief that an individual can occupy multiple spaces of identity (Anderson 52). In the context of Tawada’s authorship, one language does not suffice, for words – and the emotions visualized through her poetry, more importantly – can be lost in translation. It would seem that each language is representative of a different element of the author’s identity, thus both are presented to give each element of her identity a fair representation. In addition to the dual-language presentation of Tawada’s poetry, four photos are spread throughout the book, each photo an iteration of the same image that is magnified to a different degree. The result is that each of the four photos appears to be a different image than the others. As a symbol for identity, the photos suggest that one person can have multiple understandings. Just as different elements of a photo can be viewed as a separate image, different elements of a person’s constitution can be taken to comprise separate identities. To add a further twist to this dynamic, the photos are printed on transparent paper, allowing the viewer to see each photo from two different orientations; there are subtle differences when viewing the photo from the opposite orientation.

VIII. Inescapable foreignness from the migrant perspective

Mora’s novel Alle Tage describes the German migrant experience from the Eastern European perspective. Geographically closer to Germany than both Tawada and Özdamar, Hungarian-born Mora focuses less on cultural assimilation and cultural difference, and the corresponding effect of cultural and social influences on one’s identity, than the
aforementioned authors. Instead, Mora’s Ali Tage focuses on the personal history that can drive one to migration, the foreignness one perceives when living as a migrant, and the natives’ perception of migrants as being foreign. Furthermore, her novel dramatizes feelings of isolation that can result from one’s migration, whether the migration is the result of positive motivations, such as personal desire to explore, or negative motivations, such as political dangers or civil war. Rather than use sensory information to illustrate a colorful interpretation of a transnational identity – an identity that is shaped by experience and memory and perspective from both one’s native country and one’s country of migration – Mora’s use of sensory information shows a migrant protagonist with a relatively generic identity as a foreigner. Through use of sensing, Mora’s protagonist, Abel Nema, connects to the world on a surface level, yet at the same time he displays modest emotional depth. Moreover, Abel cultivates few human relationships and exhibits little emotional reflection throughout the novel. Through Abel and his superficial connection to his environment – Abel’s sensory experiences become partially impaired in the course of the narrative, which contributes to his inability to fully interact with his surroundings –, Mora suggests that the migrant experiences a sense of foreignness everywhere.

Alle Tage tells the story of Abel Nema, a refugee of the Balkan War who escaped to a city known only as B. – presumably Berlin – shortly after his graduation from high school. In addition to being a war refugee, Abel carries emotional scars, both from a father who deserted his family while he was just a young boy and later from being rejected when he approached his boyhood friend about a same-sex romantic relationship. In his homeland, Abel was fairly unable to develop any lasting relationships, suggesting that loneliness may have played a role in his
migration. After arriving in B., Abel begins the study of languages, eventually learning to speak ten languages without a trace of an accent. In order to remain in Germany, Abel stages a show-marriage with a German woman, Mercedes, and eventually develops a friendship, of sorts, with her one-eyed son, Omar. Abel meets others while in Germany, including a gypsy musician named Kinga and a nightclub-owner, Thanos. However, he develops few real relationships predicated on emotional closeness. The most emotionally stirring relationship for Abel in Germany is a brief affair with a teenage boy, Danko, who carries heavy emotional scars of his own, and seemingly comes to Abel because his father beats him at home. By the novel’s end, Abel is the victim of a brutal attack by a group of vagabond teens, which leaves him physically bruised, amnesiac and deprived of his former gift with languages.

The novel begins at chapter zero, entitled “Jetzt”. The first words read: “Nennen wir die Zeit jetzt, nennen wir den Ort hier. Beschreiben wir beides wie folgt” (Mora 11). From this point on, the novel’s narrative unfolds almost entirely in the past, circling back to its first lines only in the novel’s final chapter – entitled “Ausgang” – in order to bring the narrative to a final conclusion. Mora’s intent in structuring the narrative with such a temporal sequence is to explain the weight of past events and memory on the migrant’s emotional development. In the case of Abel, the audience discovers that two major events have traumatized his mental stability: the departure of his father, and the outbreak of war in his homeland (Albrecht 266). These two ill memories remain with the protagonist throughout the novel, shaping his identity in the process. Mora’s message concerning the inescapability of one’s past, and the corresponding impact past events have on an individuals’ identity, are represented through her narrative structure.
Critic Terry Albrecht writes: “Her [Mora’s] characters are determined by experiences of loneliness and displacements, their cultural experience originates in mental and physical destruction” (Albrecht 263). Abel is certainly afflicted by loneliness and displacement, a symbiotic relationship that begins prior to his migration from Eastern Europe. With his father having left the family, Abel appears vulnerable, hesitant to enter into close relationships for fear of exposing himself to abandonment and hurt in the future. His only real friend as a child, Ilia, rejects Abel’s proclamation of love when the two are teenagers, leaving Abel friendless, isolated and yet more incapable of opening himself up to others. Loneliness thus perpetuates itself within Abel from childhood on, causing him to feel alone prior to migrating from his hometown. When Abel does eventually migrate west, his displacement – and the terrifying war that incited his departure – leaves him further alone, this time as a foreigner. Mora suggests that Abel left his hometown lonely and in search of closeness with another person, namely his father, but the migrant experience leaves him yet more alone.

For Abel, as a migrant in Germany, the combination of his traumatic past and his displacement to a foreign country affects his ability to develop human relationships. This inability to interact with others contributes to Abel’s recurrent loneliness. Indeed, there is an ingrained solitariness to Abel’s character, in addition to his being a foreign migrant, which prevents him from developing legitimate relationships in Germany. His solitariness is compounded by his inability to express emotions to those who would be close to him, preventing Abel to develop honest human relationships.
Abel’s inability to express emotions causes others to rely upon sensory information and physiognomy to infer insights into his character. Mercedes, for example, uses her olfactory senses to scrutinize Abel on their wedding day:

Denn was wirklich wesentlich war in dem Moment, war etwas, was die Braut Mercedes nicht hätte benennen können, das wie ein Wartezimmer roch, wie Holzbänke, Kohleofen, verzogene Schienen, ein in die Böschung geworfener Pappesack mit den Resten von Zement, Salz und Asche auf einer eisigen Straße, Essigbäume, Messinghähne und pechschwarzes Kakaopulver, und überhaupt: Essen, wie sie es noch nie gegessen hat, und so weiter, etwas Endloses, wofür sie gar keine Worte mehr hat, stieg aus ihm hoch, als träge er ihn in den Taschen: den Geruch der Fremde. Sie roch _Fremdheit_ an ihm (Mora 23).

Abel’s scent does more than offer a suggestion as to Abel’s most recent doings – what he had for breakfast or what type of soap he used. In his scent Mercedes finds intimacies of Abel’s homeland, olfactory experiences that are at once unusual to the German woman yet describe the environment that Abel hails from. Mercedes can surely detect elements of Abel’s entire past through a single sensory experience. In so doing, Mercedes uncovers elements of Abel’s history that contribute to his character, despite his unwillingness to talk about himself. Abel’s scent is an inescapable history that he carries with him, marking him as a foreigner despite his best efforts to be unrecognizable.

The five dominant physical senses relay certain information regarding an individual’s emotional constitution. Odors, in particular, assist one in recalling past experiences and associated emotional responses (Heath 40). A similar effect is at work in Mercedes’s recognition
of various scents on Abel’s person. In the case of the novel a form of communication occurs, in which Mercedes is informed of Abel’s past. Through scents, Mercedes recognizes traces of Abel’s history that he is otherwise unwilling to share with anyone. What is more important is that Mercedes does not recognize some of the scents on Abel’s person, powerfully exposing his foreignness that he takes great care to not divulge.

While Mercedes uses sensory information to unmask Abel’s foreignness, Abel strives to use others’ sensory experience to hide his foreign traits. Visually, Abel is an average looking man who wears a long black overcoat throughout the novel. The coat, in this context, works to hide any perceptions of foreignness that one could deduce through his physiognomy. His outward appearance further attests to his emotional reclusiveness. The coat metaphorically shields Abel’s emotions and personal history from others’ presumptive stares. Thus, Abel attempts to hide his foreignness and protect his emotional fragility by masking his physical appearance. However, this coat is just a coat. It is a cover that can be removed, a non-permanent mask under which his naked person is still foreign in comparison to his German environment.

Abel also uses language to hide his foreign identity. As a side effect of an accident involving natural gas, Abel acquires unmatched skills in learning languages, yet loses his sense of taste. Physical trauma can induce changes to one’s sensory perceptions, such as a blind person who develops a heightened sense of hearing (Heath 41). In the context of Alle Tage, it is significant that Abel loses his ability to taste. Tasting is an intimate sense that allows for cultural connections that are submitted strongly through local cuisines. By way of external circumstances, Abel sacrifices his ability to taste, and thus an important sense that could
connect him to his homeland while living as a migrant in Germany, for an ability to hear and reproduce languages. A sense that works towards remembrance is replaced with a sense that Abel uses to cover his past. Indeed, the very tool that one uses to taste – the tongue – has been transformed into a tool that produces languages without a trace of local dialect, by feeling the shape of languages with his tongue. The use of languages – perhaps more importantly, that others perceive Abel’s speech as being perfectly without dialect – thus becomes a means for Abel to mask his identity as a foreigner.

Regarding his ability with languages, Mercedes remarks, “Nie zuvor habe ich meine Muttersprache, die nicht seine ist, so perfekt gesprochen gehört, und das, obwohl er kein Wort mehr sagte, als unbedingt nötig” (Mora 25). Despite his extraordinary gift, Abel rarely speaks more than he absolutely must. Abel’s use of language, and his hope of hiding his personal history therewith, are but a fallacy that his silence exposes. No matter how perfect Abel’s words sound to others, they lack a regional accent, and thus lack place. Further, the content of his words are empty, leaving him as foreign as one who has no real ability to speak languages at all.

Alle Tage ends with Abel being physically abused and mentally exhausted. A violent beating renders him virtually incapable of any speech save the most modest of utterances. At one time a fluent speaker of ten languages, an individual who would be impossible to finger as a migrant based upon sensory perception alone, Abel’s mental abilities submit to his traumatic personal history, leaving his foreign nature exposed in the process. At the novel’s end, Abel’s favorite sentence is the most ubiquitous of German phrases: “Das ist gut” (Mora 662). With these words, Abel embraces his status as a foreigner, revoking his attempts to conceal his
migrant identity through the use of sensory information. Indeed, Abel’s foreignness is an immediate part of his identity, which cannot ultimately be hidden through any combination of sensory information.

IX. Conclusion

German literature written by migrant authors has undergone a transformation in terms of how the migrant identity is presented. Originally conceived of as Gastarbeiterliteratur, due to the influence of migrant laborers who immigrated to West Germany during the post-war industrial period in the 1960s, early migrant authors sought to comment on political problems from the migrant perspective in Germany. As migrant literature and film evolved in the following years, so too did the complexity of the output. While earlier migrant works often relied upon stereotype and a commentary on group dynamics, thereby presenting a rather generalized migrant character, a number of later works have individualized the migrant identity by focusing upon the migrant’s unique personal history.

In the works of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada, and Terézia Mora, sensory experiences have been a means to individualize the migrant’s experience with her environment, and thus present a less generalized portrayal of the migrant identity. Özdamar’s work “Der Hof im Spiegel” uses sensory experiences to connect the narrator’s Turkish past and her German present, leading to a singular identity that is entirely unique in constitution. The multiple dimensions to Özdamar’s narrator are indicative of the unique personal history that one accumulates in one’s lifetime, especially influenced by the cultural and social exchange prompted by her narrator’s migration. In comparison to Özdamar’s portrayal of a cohesive migrant identity, Tawada’s protagonists often possess an inherent duality. In the collection Wo
Europa anfängt, Tawada uses sensory perceptions to delineate the migrant identity along national lines. The collection shows a migrant identity that has multiple modes of perception that are influenced by cultural and social information cultivated both before and after migration. Tawada’s interpretation of the migrant identity suggests that the transnational figure has multiple modalities and ways of perceiving that remain separate from one another, yet equally contribute to the formation of identity. Finally, Mora presents a migrant character whose identity remains inescapably foreign from those around him, both in the transnational environment and in his homeland. In her novel Alle Tage, Mora’s protagonist Abel Nema uses sensory perceptions to connect to the world, while also using sensory information to attempt to mask his innate foreign identity. Mora’s novel suggests that the migrant identity cannot escape foreignness, either in one’s homeland or in one’s country of migration.
Cited Literature


