

# literatur für leser:innen

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Gegenwartsautor:innen

Herausgegeben von Brigitte Prutti

Mit Beiträgen von Karin Bauer,  
Simone Pflieger, Julia K. Gruber, Olivia Albiero  
und Heidi Schlipphacke



PETER LANG

# Inhaltsverzeichnis

## Brigitte Prutti

Editorial: Gegenwartsautor:innen \_\_\_\_\_ 103

## Karin Bauer

„Jede Schicht ein Kunstwerk“ Postmemoriale Autofiktion und Autorschaft  
in Herta Müller *Atemschaukel* (2009) \_\_\_\_\_ 107

## Simone Pfleger

Becoming Disposable: Bodies In-Sync and Out-Of-Sync with Method Time  
in Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti* (2009) \_\_\_\_\_ 123

## Julia K. Gruber

So wie, wie wenn, als ob: Literarische Tiere und Tierliche Tropen  
in Eva Menasses *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene* (2017) \_\_\_\_\_ 139

## Olivia Albiero

Fluid Writing: Identity, Gender and Migration  
in Sasha Marianna Salzmann's *Ausser sich* (2017) \_\_\_\_\_ 159

## Heidi Schlipphacke

Lesbian Camp and the Queer Archive: Angela Steidele's  
*Rosenstengel: Ein Manuskript aus dem Umfeld Ludwigs II.* (2015) \_\_\_\_\_ 175

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## Fluid Writing: Identity, Gender and Migration in Sasha Marianna Salzmann's *Ausser sich* (2017)

### Abstract

This article offers a reading of Sasha Marianna Salzmann's *Ausser sich* which focuses on the „fluidity“ of the novel as thematic and narrative aspect in relation to questions of identity, gender and migration. My reading shows how Salzmann has crafted a narrative that unfolds at the intersections of multiple transitions in the protagonist's life. In *Ausser sich*, the reader follows Ali's family's migration from post-Soviet Russia to Germany; Ali's own search for their past and twin brother in Istanbul; and the gender transition that the protagonist undergoes. My analysis highlights how these thematic aspects are reflected in the form of the novel, its queer narrative voice, and the use of multiple languages. Guided by ideas taken from queer and feminist narrative theory and informed by the concept of „fluidity“ explored within a sociological, postcolonial and postmigrant context, I show how Salzmann's „fluid writing“ resists binary classifications to account for the shifts described.

### Introduction

Towards the end of Sasha Marianna Salzmann's debut novel *Ausser sich* (2017), the character protagonist Ali Tschepanow listens to their mother who, for the first time, openly talks about her past and the moment when she gave birth to Ali and her twin brother Anton.<sup>1</sup> But while pretending to be present and carefully listen, Ali describes how they „exit“ their physical body and start observing the unfolding scene from above: „Ich ging raus aus mir. Mein Körper blieb starr vor Valja sitzen, während ich aus mir herausprang, nach draußen, ich war außerhalb, das Zuhören konnte mir nichts mehr anhaben“ (AS 263).<sup>2</sup> In this sort of levitation, Ali experiences one of the many transitions that *Ausser sich* thematizes. Still seemingly present in the room, Ali takes distance from their physicality and a body that has undergone changes their mother resists to acknowledge. „Moving outside of oneself“ captures the experiences that several thematic threads in *Ausser sich* share. In its everyday usage, „ausser sich sein“ describes a heightened emotional state caused by a strong emotion, which makes one feel they are pushed beyond their corporeal boundaries. Thus, the title of the novel already introduces a gesture of transgression, which later applies to the self, their identity, their language, and their home. Indeed, *Ausser sich* reads as a commentary to transformative experiences: identity search, gender recognition, and migration.

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1 In this article, I am referring to the protagonist of the novel as Ali. The abbreviated form for „Alissa,“ „Ali“ is the name the protagonist uses for themselves, before explicitly asking to be called Anton. Because the novel moves from using the pronoun „she“ to „he“ for Ali and shows Ali's uncertainty during the transition, I will use the pronoun they/them when speaking about the character. This pronoun takes into consideration the transition Ali embraces and does not confine them within one gender.

2 All quotes from *Ausser sich* are referenced in the text with AS followed by page number(s) and are taken from the following edition: Sasha Marianna Salzmann: *Ausser sich*. Berlin 2018.

Salzmann's work follows the story of Ali and the Tschepanow family. Originally from Russia, they (mother, father, Anton and Ali, together with the maternal grandfather) moved from Moscow to Germany in the 1990s to escape anti-Semitism and guarantee a better future to the younger generation. Ali and Anton's bond grew with the years, but, after an incestuous encounter with his twin sister, Anton disappears without leaving any trace—except for an anonymous postcard with the word Istanbul, which Ali believes came from Anton. This explains why the reader meets Ali in the Turkish metropolis, where they attempt to find their brother and, ultimately, their own identity. The novel depicts Ali's gender transition and their desire to take up Anton's name after it becomes clearer that the brother cannot be easily located. As the novel unfolds, the reader learns about Ali's own search for their past and twin brother in Istanbul; the identity change that the protagonist undergoes; and Ali's family's migration story.

This article highlights how *Ausser sich* translates the lack of fixity presented at its core into narrative and formal features. Salzmann plays with the form of the novel (a two-act text with dramatic elements), the use of a queer narrative voice (alternating between a third- and a first-person narrator), and an empowering use of multiple languages (not always accompanied by a translation). Guided by ideas taken from queer and feminist narrative theory, and informed by the concept of „fluidity“ explored within a sociological, postcolonial and postmigrant context, I show how Salzmann's „fluid writing“ weaves together pressing questions of identity, gender and migration, and resists binary classifications to account for the shifts that such experiences bring with themselves.<sup>3</sup>

### **Sasha Marianna Salzmann: A Voice of Resistance in German-language Literature**

Several thematic elements in *Ausser sich* resonate with Sasha Marianna Salzmann's personal and professional biography.<sup>4</sup> Playwright, essayist and novelist, Salzmann and their family came to Germany as refugees from Moscow in 1995, when Salzmann was 10 years old. Their career was launched with award-winning plays, such as *Weißbrotmusik* (2009), *Muttermale Fenster blau* (2012) and *Muttersprache Mameloschn* (2013). Salzmann is writer-in-residence at the Maxim Gorki Theatre. Together with author Max Czollek, they have led several projects that showcase the changes in the German literary and theatrical scene and ask to rethink how we understand German society.<sup>5</sup> *Ausser sich* (translated into English as *Beside Myself*), Salzmann's first novel, was composed during a residency at the Tarabya Cultural Academy in Istanbul and it was shortlisted for the German Book Prize. Their recently published

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3 I would like to thank the DDGC Writing Group for providing a welcoming and supportive virtual community, where the initial draft of this article was composed. I would also like to thank the editor of this issue, Brigitte Prutti, for providing feedback and asking crucial questions throughout the review process.

4 For a full biographical and literary profile of Sasha Marianna Salzmann see the author's website: Sasha Marianna Salzmann, <http://sashamariannasalzmann.com/en/vita/> (20.08.2021).

5 Some of these projects include Studio Я (2013-15), „Disintegration. A Congress of Contemporary Jewish Positions“ (2016), the „Radical Jewish Culture Days“ (2017), and „Days of Jewish-Muslim Guiding Culture“ (2020).

second novel, *Im Menschen muss alles herrlich sein* (2021), further articulates some of the thematic threads of *Ausser sich* in a multigenerational story of oppression, migration and new beginnings.

In the last two decades, German-language authors have increasingly drawn attention to the significance of origins, identities and belonging, proposing alternatives to fixed notions of these concepts within German language and society.<sup>6</sup> In their performances and writings, Salzmann, who identifies as non-binary and Jewish, engages with questions of identity and multiple positionalities, openly challenging the pressure on marginalized groups to remain invisible. In their work, Salzmann creates spaces for radical conversation and „Desintegration,“ an act of resistance and affirmation.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, Salzmann joined other thirteen authors in the volume *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*, to which they contributed an essay titled „Sichtbar.“<sup>8</sup> Taking issue with a limiting notion of „homeland“, the authors address how their belonging in German society is challenged but also voice their resistance to expectations about individual and collective identities. Salzmann’s work adds a strong voice to the transnational and transcultural scene of German-language literature, foregrounding the trauma of departures and displacement, but also poetically exploring the possibilities that arise in the fluidity of transitions.

### Fluidity: An Analytical Framework

The concept of fluidity has often been used to talk about writing, in particular from a feminist perspective. Fluidity can describe the experiences that are narrated, the genre chosen to represent them, and the subject that does the telling. Pascale LaFountain, for instance, uses the idea of fluidity to offer a feminist reading of Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Der Fall Franza*. LaFountain shows how „[f]luidity has been a foundational philosophical metaphor for women’s writing and writing on sexuality since long before modernity“ and how the concept has often been associated with „positive attributes [...] as a desired positive space of freedom, power, and becoming“<sup>9</sup>. In LaFountain’s analysis, fluidity signifies both metaphors of water, liquids, and (bodily) fluids, as well as „a metaphorical poetics of the fluid as an alternative form and space that subverts patriarchal language.“<sup>10</sup> In line with LaFountain’s work, I argue that

6 A full overview of transnational and transcultural literary developments in German-language literature is beyond the scope of this essay, but Salzmann’s work resonates in its thematic focus and linguistic richness with works by Alina Bronsky, Olga Grjasnowa, Saša Stanišić, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and Yoko Tawada. Other scholars working on Salzmann have highlighted these connections. See for example: Brangwen Stone *Refugees Past and Present: Olga Grjasnowa’s *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* and Sasha Marianna Salzmann’s *Außer sich**. In: *Colloquia Germanica*. Themenheft: Imaginaries of Eastern Europe. 10/2020, No. 1, pp. 57-74.

7 For a reading of *Ausser sich* as „literary approximation of the Desintegration paradigm“, see Maria Roca Lizarazu: „Integration Ist Definitiv Nicht Unser Anliegen, Eher Schon Desintegration“. *Postmigrant Renegotiations of Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Germany*. In: *Humanities* 9/2020, No. 42, pp. 1-16.

8 All the fourteen essays of *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* have been translated into English between 2020 and 2021 and are now available at „TRANSIT, *Your Homeland is Our Nightmare*, Special Issue, 2021. In: TRANSIT, A Journal of Travel, Migration, and Multiculturalism in the German-speaking World, <https://transit.berkeley.edu/tag/eure-heimat-ist-unser-albtraum/> (10. 01.2022).

9 Pascale LaFountain: „Darkness, Waiting, Without Speaking“: Fluidity, Subjectivity, and Utopian Space in Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Der Fall Franza*. In: *Utopian Studies*. 27/2016, No. 1, pp. 77-92, here p. 78 and p. 79.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

fluidity can offer a productive lens to look at *Ausser sich*, a text that challenges questions of identity and belonging at its core, affirming possibilities that account for the multiplicity that the novel describes. Fluidity distinguishes both the bodily changes that affect Ali's gender transition and the experiences of their family's migration, as well as the narrative and poetics of the text.

But „fluidity“ has a long history outside of literary and narrative discourses, and this larger context informs my understanding of the term. In particular, I am drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquidity as a key feature of modernity. In his 2000 *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman states that „fluidity“ or „liquidity“ are „fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity.“<sup>11</sup> Bauman describes fluids as substances that „neither fix space nor bind time“ and „travel easily“. <sup>12</sup> Fluids therefore become a key image at times of mobility and transitions, which are marked by the instability and change that these processes entail. In Bauman's work, fluidity accounts for the melting of solid structures, „things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity“. <sup>13</sup> Such process affects individual behaviors and societal relations, leaving them „bare, unprotected, unarmed and exposed“. <sup>14</sup> The insecurity and precarity characteristic of liquid times reinforce a heightened sense of distrust towards 'foreign bodies,' which are often perceived as a danger or threat. <sup>15</sup>

And yet, the liquidity of our times can also create the space for opposing that fixity that has long been recognized as the paradigm. In this regard, my reading resonates with Sarah Ahmed's postcolonial interpretation of migration and home. As Ahmed states in *Strange Encounters*, „transnational journeys of subjects and others invite us to consider what it means to be at home, to inhabit a particular place, and might call us to question the relationship between identity, belonging and home“. <sup>16</sup> Ahmed shows how too often „strangers are the ones who, in leaving the home of their nation, are the bodies out of place in the everyday world they inhabit, and in the communities in which they come to live“<sup>17</sup>. This reading highlights a sense of vulnerability, but also of possibility, that ensues from rethinking the experiences of being at home and migrating. Highlighting the fallacy behind the term „stranger,“ Ahmed proposes to reconsider the experience of migration as „estrangement,“ which „indicates a process of transition, a movement from one register to another“<sup>18</sup>. Ahmed's idea of estrangement, transition and transgression expands the concept of fluidity, and invites the reader to resist binary, and, at time dangerous, classifications.

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11 Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge 2000, p. 2.

12 Ibid., p. 2.

13 Ibid., p. 13.

14 Ibid., p. 4.

15 Bauman employs the term „insecurity“ throughout *Liquid Modernity* and convincingly shows how insecurity in liquid times permeates all spheres of existence, from individual experiences to work and community. Bauman pushes this idea even further in his later work *Wasted Lives*, where he theorizes that our „liquid modern, consumerist culture of individualization“ has created the „problems of (human) waste and (human) waste disposal“. He states that „[t]hey saturate all the most important sectors of social life, tending to dominate life strategies and colour the most important life activities, prompting them to generate their own *sui generis* waste: stillborn, unfit, invalid or unviable human relationships, born with the mark of impending wastage.“ Zygmunt Bauman: *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Cambridge 2004, p. 15.

16 Sara Ahmed: *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London, New York 2000, p. 78.

17 Ibid., p. 78.

18 Ibid., p. 92.

A final concept guides my understanding of *Ausser sich* as a fluid work that centers on experiences of transitions rather than ascriptions. A term that was first used by Berlin artistic director Sherim Langhoff in 2004, „postmigrant“ emerged as „a self-labelling gesture“ and „a discursive tool to voice a cultural critique and political protest“.<sup>19</sup> The „post“ in the word, which has since been largely employed in cultural debates, attempts „to end the perpetual ‘migrantization’ of people of colour and of people with actual or ascribed migrant backgrounds“<sup>20</sup>. Postmigratory art challenges the distinction between a majority „we“ and a marginalized „Other,“ recognizing „the increased visibility, empowerment and ‘coming to voice’ of citizens of migrant descent in public arenas such as politics, media, academia, culture and the arts“<sup>21</sup>. „Post-migrant“, which now „includes different empirical, analytical and normative dimensions“, seeks to critically interrogate concepts of migration and national homogeneity recognizing that migration is an inherent aspect of every society rather than an attribute of few individuals and groups.<sup>22</sup> In its multiple definitions, „postmigrant“ ultimately attempts „to get rid of binaries“ and „othering ascriptions“.<sup>23</sup>

In their self-affirmation, Ali can be read as a postmigrant subject: Informed by their own experiences of migration and their family background, Ali searches for their space, affirming the possibility of moving beyond labels in their personal journey. In her compelling reading of the novel, Maria Roca Lizarazu shows how „Salzmann’s politics and poetics of non-belonging [...] can be seen as part of this larger ‘post-migrant’ trajectory, insofar as they question binarisms and notions of stable belonging in favour of multiple and shifting attachments“.<sup>24</sup> In line with this reading, I propose an interpretation of *Ausser sich* that highlights the fluidity of the narrative and its text, suggesting how they become a reflection of postmigrant writing.

In this light, fluidity distinguishes the experiences of the younger generation in *Ausser sich*, which refuses to be confined between restricting classifications of origins and identity. Anton disappears barely leaving any trace behind, a transgressive move that is never fully explained in the novel, but seems to signify the desire to break with the current situation. Differently from their mother, Ali attempts to distance themselves from the concept of „Kontingentflüchtling,“ and their desire to move out and freely between Istanbul and Germany can be read as an attempt to distance themselves from the expectations of the parents and the larger Jewish-Russian family. As the queer child of parents who left Russia, Ali rejects the traditional and at times oppressive behaviors of the older generation(s). Resisting impositions, as well as the idea of a patriarchal home, Ali acts to move in their personal search of their identity. Rather than negating their Jewish-Russian origins, Ali claims the possibility of embracing multiple identities without renouncing any side of who they are. *Ausser sich*’s „fluid writing“ thematizes these ongoing transitions and ultimately translates the lack of fixity onto the formal and narrative level.

**19** Moritz Schramm/Sten Pultz Moslund/Anne Ring Petersen: *Reframing Migration, Diversity and the Arts: The Postmigrant Condition*. Routledge Research in Art and Politics. New York, London 2019, p. 3.

**20** *Ibid.*, p. 4.

**21** *Ibid.*, p. 6.

**22** *Ibid.*, p. 8.

**23** *Ibid.*, p. 60.

**24** Maria Roca Lizarazu: Ec-static Existences: The Poetics and Politics of Non-Belonging in Sasha Marianna Salzmann’s *Außer Sich* (2017). In: *Modern Languages Open*, 1/2020, No 9, pp. 1-19, here p. 15.

In *Ausser sich*, fluidity carries both a literal and metaphorical meaning. On the one hand, it frames Ali's gender transition, which, on the corporeal level, is allowed by injections of testosterone. Ali first „encounters“ testosterone when their friend Katho asks for help for an injection. The experience, which is described in detail, shows Ali as they „sprühte das säuerlich riechende Desinfektionsmittel auf Kathos Pobacke“ and as they look „um zu sehen, ob die Flüssigkeit ganz aus der Spritze raus war“ (AS 122). The liquids mentioned in this scene accompany the transformation that Katho wishes for themselves and encourages Ali to follow through with their decision. As the novel continues, Ali observes how Katho's body is undergoing a change and decides „Ich will auch mit Testosteron anfangen“ (AS 235). Furthermore, fluidity metaphorically signifies Ali's movement between countries (Russia-Germany-Turkey-Germany), as well as their wanderings through Istanbul, as they search for their brother Anton. Istanbul becomes a labyrinth of new experiences and acquaintances, through which Ali attempts to find their brother and ultimately meets people that reinforce their decision of embracing the identity they wish for themselves. But the significance of fluid writing also emerges on the textual and narrative level through the use of a hybrid genre, a queer voice, and multilingualism. In what follows, I examine how these elements engender fluidity by showing how form, language, and content all contribute to a text that replicates some of the transitions its characters experience.

## **A Two-Act Novel: Formal and Narrative Fluidity in *Ausser sich***

At the formal level, *Ausser sich* escapes clear-cut genre classification. Part family story, part migration account and part coming-of-age novel, it also displays features of a drama. Indeed, in line with dramatic conventions, it opens with a list of characters („Personen“), which are all briefly introduced, except for Anton—which reflects his absence for most of the novel. *Ausser sich* consists of two parts that are labeled „Eins“ and „Zwei“ respectively. „Staging“ the dual relationship between the twins Ali and Anton, the novel therefore reads as a two-act drama, in which each of the siblings' voices occupies a central position for one act. Salzmann builds interesting symmetries between the two acts, which tie the form of the novel to the similar experiences of transition and movement described in it. While the first chapter of Part One is titled „nach Hause“ and describes the family's first visit to Russia after their move to Germany, Part Two opens with a chapter titled „zu Hause.“<sup>25</sup> And yet, what seemingly suggests an arrival reveals how unstable the idea of „home“ has become, since it cannot be pinpointed to one, specific location—at least not for Ali—and even the most familiar places conceal some threats.<sup>26</sup> Going or being home is at the core of the novel, and a question connected to the idea of belonging.

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**25** The connection between movement and home is visible from these parallels in the titles. The first sentence of the first part reads „Ich weiß nicht, wohin es geht, alle anderen wissen es, ich nicht“ (AS 11). The sentence that opens the second section, instead, highlights the feeling of being taken to places expressed by Anton, who is remembering his trips to Russia as a child: „Ich werde immer wieder mitgenommen, keiner fragt mich, und ich würde auch nicht nein sagen“ (AS 279).

**26** Anton remembers being called „Judensau“ and „Schwuchtel“ by his childhood friends during one of his visits at home in Russia. He recalls his friends explaining „dass ich eine Judensau bin, weil ich eben als diese Judensau aus dem Land durfte und sie hier bleiben mussten [...]“ (AS 283).

The dramatic quality of the novel also emerges in its use of vignettes (or scenes), which transport the reader across time and places in a family history that spans four generations and multiple locations in Russia and Germany. Through the accounts of the grandparents and parents, from whom Ali attempts to learn about their past, *Ausser sich* portrays experiences that have profoundly marked the family, such as arranged marriages, domestic violence, alcoholism, war, and anti-Semitic discrimination, as well as courageous choices and achievements. At the same time, the prosaic form of the novel allows for a story that abounds in details, thoughts and events, which reveal hundred years of this Russian-Jewish-German family. Annette Buehler-Dietrich suggests that the novel uses a montage technique, which accounts for the temporal and spatial jumps built into the plot.<sup>27</sup> And indeed, Ali's own memories of her brother are compared to juxtaposed slippery foils that both complement and contradict one other. The resulting images are indecipherable, they „ergänzten und widersprachen sich, ergaben neue Bilder, aber sie konnte sie nicht lesen, auch Kopfschütteln brachte nichts“ (AS 138). The montage mimics the process of remembering as well as the difficulty of coherent and cohesive storytelling by replicating it in the narrative form. The temporal and spatial jumps, as well as the accounts of different characters, perform the limits and possibilities of remembering and narrating. To further emphasize the fragmentary nature of their memories, Ali compares them to the teeth of the elder woman that they used to see at the train station of Tschertanowskaja: „Ali fehlten so viele Erinnerungen, ihr Gehirn sah aus wie das Gebiss jener Alten, die an der Metrostation Tschertanowskaja gebettelt hatte“ (AS 139). This image, which connects Ali's present with their past life in Moscow, translates corporeal gaps into mnemonic and narrative ones.

The process of storytelling is not only complex, but also a painful physical experience for Ali, as well as for Anton. When Anton decides to open up and talk about his own family story and past, he thinks: „All diese Geschichten waren ekelhaft. Man sollte sie nicht erzählen, man sollte irgendwas erzählen, ist doch egal, was stimmt, nichts stimmt, nichts, wie kann man überhaupt etwas über sich sagen“ (AS 339). Feeling vulnerable and disgusted by his own past, Anton questions the validity of talking truly about the self and echoes Ali's doubts about the possibility and significance of narrating one's story coherently.

In a story in which the process of narrating is often questioned, the narrative voice becomes unstable, which reflects the search for oneself that lies at the core of *Ausser sich*. Ultimately, the form of the novel and its narrative structure allow Ali to embrace a fluid form of storytelling, one in which different personas come together: „Ich erdenke mir neue Personen, wie ich mir alte zusammensetze. Stelle mir das Leben meines Bruders vor, stelle mir vor, er würde all das tun, wozu ich nicht in der Lage gewesen bin, sehe ihn als einen, der hinauszieht in die Welt, weil er den Mut besitzt, der mir immer gefehlt hat, und ich vermisse ihn“ (AS 275). This statement about devising new characters comes right before the second act, and seems to explain the poetic

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**27** See Annette Buehler-Dietrich: Relational Subjectivity: Sasha Marianna Salzmann's Novel *Außer sich*. In: *Modern Languages Open*. 1/2020, No. 12, pp. 1-17, here p. 10. Buehler-Dietrich suggests that Salzmann's work „constantly decenters the reader by way of its montage structure and its use of different narrators“ (p. 10) and that the structure of the novel achieved through montage allows to „create a link between disparate times, places and characters“ (p. 11).

choice of introducing a new narrative voice, one which allows Anton to speak—or at least mimics his voice. By following Anton through the same places of Istanbul that Ali has visited, the second act complements Ali's experiences, but leaves the reader wondering whether it is Anton speaking or whether Ali has taken up their brother's voice. This second act embraces the possibilities of a narrative that allows for multiple facets of one's identity to exist, and resonates with Roger Bromley's reading of post-migrancy, which he defines as „in many ways, *performative* – manifested through new forms – hence perhaps its resonance with theatre“<sup>28</sup>. The narrative voice fluctuates and changes, not only on the physical but also on the narrative level. Through a new pronoun and the affirming of their identity, Ali embraces a form of storytelling that frees them from their family's past. While Ali is eager to hear the stories told by the grandparents, they do not abide by what is expected from them as the immigrant child from a Russian-Jewish family that moved to Germany. Their telling reflects the flexibility offered by different narrative persons, which introduce the readers to various sides of this family story. The reclaiming of possibilities beyond the fixed classifications of male/female, migrant and/or Other invites a type of writing that is open to accommodate a queer narrative voice, which in turn portrays the complexity of what the characters experience and witness.

## Queering the Narrative Voice

Susan S. Lanser's offers a three-part definition of a queer narrative voice:

(1) a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality; (2) a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality; and (3) a voice that confounds the rules for voice itself and thus baffles our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative“.<sup>29</sup>

The narrative voice of *Ausser sich* aligns with Lanser's description and contributes to queering the perspective from which the story is told. This move is anticipated already in Ali, the name of the narrator and queer protagonist in the novel. The abbreviation for Alissa, „Ali“ accommodates the gender fluidity that the protagonist reclaims for themselves. As a consequence, this name does not preclude any possibilities for Ali. Ali reflects about the significance of their name in the novel: „Mein Name fängt mit dem ersten Buchstaben des Alphabets an und ist ein Schrei, ein Stocken, ein Fallen, ein Versprechen auf ein B und ein C, die es nicht geben kann in der Kausalitätslosigkeit der Geschichte“ (AS 274). Because of its initial letter, the name „Ali“ stands for a beginning, but also for the anticipation of what logically follows, that is, the next letter of the alphabet. And yet, Ali's story does not follow pre-established, causal relations. The letter A does not lead to B or C, but turns into a different version of itself. Alissa uses „Ali“ to talk about themselves and later asks to be called by their brother's name, Anton—a decision textually reinforced by the use of the pronoun „er.“ As a queer subject, Ali embraces the possibilities that strict, causal categories often inhibit and defies their family's expectations by deciding how they want to be named and narrate their story.

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28 Roger Bromley: A Bricolage of Identifications: Storying Postmigrant Belonging.“ In: *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 9/2017, No. 2, pp. 36-44, here p. 40.

29 Susan S. Lanser: Queering Narrative Voice. In: *Textual Practice*, 32/2018, No. 6, pp. 923-937, here p. 926.

Ali's transition translates textually in a narrative voice that oscillates between a first- and a third-person, and shifts from Ali to Anton in the second act of the novel. Up to the chapter titled „Katho,“ which describes Ali's relation with Katharina/Katho and the latter's gender transition with the aid of testosterone, the narration is told from a third heterodiegetic narrator that uses Ali as focalizer. At the end of the chapter, however, a shift in the narrative voice coincides with Ali's verbalization of their need to embrace the first-person pronoun:

Ich weiß nicht mehr, wie dieser Sichtwechsel kam und wann. Warum ich beschlossen habe, diese Folien und Bilder in meinem Kopf zu ordnen, warum ich angefangen habe, mich als mich zu denken, zu sprechen, sogar zu schreiben, aber ich kann mich an den Zeitpunkt erinnern. Das war, als mein Urgroßvater, zwei Jahre bevor er starb, eine dünne Mappe aus seinem Sekretär zog und vor mir auf den Tisch legte. Oder nein, falsch, es war als ich anfang, darin zu lesen, da war Schura schon tot und ich zurück aus Istanbul. (AS 142)

In a statement that once again betrays the fallacy of memories („Oder nein, falsch“), Ali remembers how hearing and reading their great-grandfather's story pushed them to think and write using „I.“ This conscious change is reflected in the following chapters, which alternate between a first- and a third-person narrative. Ali talks about themselves in the first person, but a third person-narrator follows their movements in Istanbul and their experience of the coup d'état at the end of the novel. The fluidity and ambiguity of the first-person is increased by the fact that „I“ is used to signify both Ali, the first-person narrator in the first part of the novel, and Anton, who functions as the narrative voice of most of the second part. What makes this double first-person voice particularly interesting is the ambiguity around the „I,“ which loses its fixed referent. The ensuing uncertainty is heightened by the fact that Anton has been narrated as a missing character for most of the novel until we get to hear an account from his perspective. The doubt remains whether Anton's account is actually told from the perspective of the brother or whether Ali is recounting the events performing as Ali/Anton. Some surprising overlaps between the two acts, including the places Ali and Anton visit and the people they meet and interact with (Aglaja and Katharina, for example), seem to favor the second interpretation, one in which Ali narratively embraces their identity as Anton.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation is further supported by the chapter titled „15. Juli,“ in which, during a phone call with their mother, Ali hints at their new identity by asking: „Willst du nicht wissen, was mit meiner Stimme ist, Mama?“ (AS 343). While this question refers to the physical changes in Ali/Anton's voice, the narrative voice seems to echo a similar transition.

The queerness of voice contributes to the fluidity of the novel. By destabilizing an authoritative narrative discourse that expects the voice to be clearly pinpointed, *Ausser sich* presents the reader with a narration that oscillates between first - and third-person, masculine and feminine pronouns, and allows the narrative speaker to embrace the identity they claim for themselves.

## Language Fluidity, Identity and Gender

Language also contributes to the fluidity of *Ausser sich*, both at the level of text (the language used in the novel) and the events narrated (the characters' relations

<sup>30</sup> Buehler-Dietrich also remarks how Ali „decides to seemingly blend with him [Anton]“ (p. 9), but also highlights how rather than simply becoming Anton, Ali-Anton constitutes „a third, non-binary person“ (p. 4).

to language). As noted by Maria Roca Lizarazu, *Ausser sich* is a multilingual text „dotted with words and expressions from Russian (printed in Cyrillic script), Turkish, Romanian, and Yiddish (the latter transliterated into Latin script)“.<sup>31</sup> These multilingual inserts that are interjected throughout the novel are occasionally translated; more often, a summary translation is offered, which the reader not versed in those languages needs to trust. A feature of many transnational and transcultural texts published within the German-language context, the multilingualism points to the affirmation of the complex individual identities of the narrated subjects. In *Ausser sich*, the multilingualism displayed in the text that seamlessly transitions between languages seems to suggest that Ali's personal story cannot be conceived as a monolingual account. Such simplification would not reflect the family's cultural background and the different facets that contribute to Ali's own identity. The multilingualism of the novel reinforces the rejection of fixed notions and expectations about the self. Roca Lizarazu's interpretation again proves useful. Engaging with Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, she states that, while „the [monolingual] paradigm asserts that the self can only be truly and authentically expressed in one, namely the native, language“, *Ausser sich* shows „that the self can actually only be expressed in *multiple* languages, which interact with and transform each other, and that we can indeed form diverse and shifting affective attachments in/with different languages“<sup>32</sup>. Ali and their family members use different languages to tell their stories and display different relations to the language of their country of origin and their new home, which range from poetic attachment to utmost rejection.

Indeed, language serves not only to communicate, but also to frustrate and deceive. In Istanbul, after reading the word „Flüchtlinge“ in a newspaper sitting on Uncle Cemal's table, Ali regrets their ability to understand multiple languages and misses the times „in denen sie noch kein Türkisch konnte. Und auch kein Deutsch. Sie fragte sich, ob es nicht einfacher wäre, verblödet und *sprachlos* in Russland zu sitzen und Liebeslieder auf den Präsidenten zu singen“ (AS 29, my emphasis – O.A.).<sup>33</sup> While not knowing any other language besides the politicized one of Russia could function as a temporary protection from the external world, Ali does not feel at home even in their own native language. As a consequence, stories told in Russian raise their suspicion and resistance. When Ali listens to their great-grandfather talking about his past, they comment: „ich misstraute der bildreichen Sprache, in der er erzählte, weil ich meiner Muttersprache grundsätzlich misstraue. Weil sie so viel besser ist als die Welt, aus der sie kommt, blumiger und bedeutsamer, als die Realität je sein könnte.“ (AS 167). The great-grandfather's poetic use of Russian causes Ali's mistrust because this language does not reflect the Russia they know and left, which seems to pale in comparison. When language deceives, hurts or offends, Ali's responds with the desire not to hear or be able to understand. In this light, their reaction to Anton's disappearance resonates as a refusal to interact with a language that can betray and to retreat from what others have to say: „Ab da hörte Ali nichts mehr. [...] Die Ärzte diagnostizierten

<sup>31</sup> Roca Lizarazu: *Ec-static Existences*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> A similar thought returns in the second act, where Anton states: „Ich wollte irgendwo sein, wo ich nichts wusste und nichts verstand und die Sprache nicht konnte, und die paar Freunde, die meine Sprache sprechen, würden still sein. Das Geld reichte bis Istanbul“ (AS 303).

Hörsturz, wie lange er anhalten würde, konnten sie nicht sagen, Ali hatte keine Angst, dass er bliebe, sie hatte Angst, dass er irgendwann weggehen würde. Das kam nach drei Wochen.“ (AS 97). Ali’s sudden deafness protects them from the utterances of the external world, to which they respond with their own silence.

Ali’s complex relation with their origins, sexuality, and gender is also reflected in the way they interact with language. Ali is portrayed as a queer character, whose identity consists of multiple sides and stories: They are the child of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents living in Germany; gender non-conforming against their parents’ expectations; and transitioning to take up their missing brother’s name. Because of this intersectional identity, which is challenged by their family, Ali faces complex experiences: the uncertainty of belonging to a masculine rather than a feminine pronoun; the frustration of not being recognized; the resistance towards their gender choice. While listening to their mother talking about her past with self-awareness, Ali comments:

Immer wenn ich merke, dass es für Menschen eine Vorstellung von Welt gibt, auf die sie ohne Zweifel bauen, fühle ich mich allein. Ausgeliefert. Sie sprechen davon, Dinge mit Sicherheit zu wissen, sie erzählen, wie etwas gewesen ist oder sogar wie etwas sein wird, und ich merke dann immer, wie sehr ich nichts weiß von dem, was als Nächstes passieren könnte. Ich weiß ja noch nicht mal, als was ich angesprochen werde, wenn ich Zigaretten kaufen gehe – *als ein Er oder als eine Sie?* Mein Gesicht überrascht mich jeden Morgen im Spiegel, und ich bin skeptisch gegenüber jeder Prognose. (AS 261, my emphasis – O.A.)

This statement highlights Ali’s hesitation in coming to terms with themselves, while navigating a delicate transition in their life. The desire of not being confined comes with uncertainty and a recurring sense of surprise, which is heightened by the way language is used to label them in daily interactions, from the most mundane ones like buying cigarettes to airport security checks, where their identity is questioned based on the picture that their passport shows, insinuating that, also because of the discrepancy in how Ali looks, they may be a „Frauenimport[...]“ from Russia (AS 16). Because of this fluid and complex relation to the self, Ali struggles and hesitates to make final statements about the „I“, which they express as follows: „Ich dagegen fühle mich unfähig, verbindliche Aussagen zu treffen, eine Perspektive einzunehmen, eine Stimme zu entwickeln, die nur die meine wäre und für mich sprechen würde. Ein festgeschriebenes Я“ (AS 275). In this statement, the multilingualism, expressed in Ali’s use of the Cyrillic Я to talk about their individuality, captures their affective attachment to their native language, but it also points to the challenge of finding a „defined“ (and possibly fixed) expression of the self. Roca Lizarazu comes to the conclusion that „this ‘I’ is thus not presented as a stable, sovereign and clearly bounded, but as open, porous, fluctuating and transforming“.<sup>34</sup> While experiencing the difficulty of conceiving of an „I“ that captures their complexities as an individual, at the end of the first act in the novel, Ali claims their gender identity and the reader witnesses a shift to the use of the personal pronoun „er.“

Indeed, languages also become the expression of a possibility in *Ausser sich*. Ali’s decision to start a gender transition on the bodily level is accompanied by a new encounter with language, almost an unconscious one in which words come to Ali and help them formulate their desire:

34 See Roca Lizarazu: *Ec-static Existences*, p. 11-12.

Irgendetwas in mir hatte gesprochen, und ich folgte diesen Wörtern, die aus mir herausflogen wie Vögel. Ich ging davon aus, dass sie wüssten, wohin. Zugvögel haben einen Kompass im Schnabel, der sich nach dem Magnetfeld der Erdkugel richtet, sie wissen Dinge mit geschlossenen Augen, sie wissen alles, solange man ihnen nicht den Schnabel bricht. Also vertraute ich ihnen, ließ sie fliegen und folgte ihnen und dachte, dass es richtig sein müsste, richtiger als alles, was ich mir hätte ausdenken können, hätte ich mich hingeworfen und nach Worten gesucht. (AS 235)

In this passage, Ali reflects on the words they pronounced to vocalize their decision to use testosterone as Katho had done. Expressing it aloud allows them to give voice to their desire and to make it known to the people around them. In comparing the words they used with migratory birds, Ali connects the reclaimed language with the experience of migration. In Istanbul, away from home while looking for Anton, Ali embraces a life-changing decision for themselves. Ali acknowledges a desire that has been known to them for a long time, but speaking these words allows them to find a point of orientation similarly to the compass that aligns with the magnetic field. Ultimately, the words that fly out of Ali's mouth carry bigger implications for the queer identity of the character. Language names and defines, but can also free from the constraints imposed by societal expectations. The ability of speaking one's voice functions as an act of resistance to social and family norms and hierarchies. Ali thinks and conceives of themselves as „er“ later in the novel and the decision of affirming their gender change in language reinforces the idea of moving beyond rules and expectations. *Ausser sich* already contains in the title the idea of movement outside of oneself, or beyond oneself. This transgressive and liberating move takes place as the character Ali faces their desires, their identity and their relation to their family, and their overcoming of social and national borders.

### **On the Search: Migration, Identity and Belonging**

*Ausser sich* not only describes the experience of claiming personal and gender identity, but also presents a narrative of migration, which resonates with several features of Salzmann's fluid writing. It describes multiple departures and arrivals, travels, as well as reunions and final exits. The meaning of „belonging“ and „home“ shifts throughout the novel, which seems to renounce any unique definitions of the concepts. Sara Ahmed's suggestion to rethink our understanding of migration and home proves helpful here. According to Ahmed „migratory subjects [...] reclaim space and identity in their refusal to inhabit a particular space, in their very transgression of the law of home“<sup>435</sup>. In line with this idea, Salzmann's novel shows how the story of the Tschepanow family is riddled with transitory living spaces, moves from rural Russia to the capital, from Russia to Germany, from Germany back to Russia, and finally to Istanbul. All these experiences affect the lives of the characters and leave marks on who they are and where they want to be. While Ali's mother Valja decides to take the family to West Germany to offer their children a better future, she also recognizes that „Migration tötet“ (AS 297). Valja seems to attribute the husband's suicide to the family's relocation to Germany and the experiences associated with being „Kontingentflüchtling“ (AS 108). Indeed, Germany becomes an oppressive space for Kostja,

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35 Ahmed: *Strange Encounters*, p. 84.

especially after his divorce from Valja. His discontent is further expressed in his hate for the German language, which he blames for his own destiny: „vor allem wollte er nie, nie wieder die deutsche Sprache hören, die ihm nichts als Ärger eingebracht hatte“ (AS 253). During a final visit to Russia, he vandalizes his apartment and, after returning to Germany, he puts an end to his own life. As Kostja's tragic destiny shows, migration can lead to traumatic experiences for the individual.

*Ausser sich* also highlights the connection between home, borders and corporeality on multiple levels. Ahmed describes the physicality of the experience of migration as „skin memories,“ which she defines as „memories of different sensations that are felt on the skin. Migrant bodies stretch and contract, as they move across the borders that mark out familiar and strange places“. <sup>36</sup> For Ali's father, skin memories turn into physical and mental malaise and the impossibility of accepting the new life in Germany. In the case of Ali, skin memories are associated with ideas and expectations that others attach to or project onto their skin and corporeality. For example, the encounter with the border authority at the airport, reinforces the questioning of Ali's body, identity and belonging.

For Ali, home does not signify a fixed location, but is ultimately connected to the figure of the mother and the conversations the two of them have often revolve around the question of whether Ali feels at home or will return home. On the one hand, Ali is conscious that their umbilical cord „ins Nichts führt“ and attempts to detach themselves from it (AS 86). On one occasion, they openly confront their mother's life choices and –in Ali's words– „empty life“: „Ich bin nicht wie du, ich bin kein Tier, das vor sich hin grast und alles annimmt, wie es kommt. Ich will nichts von diesem Leben, in dem es alles gibt, aber niemand etwas will. Ich will nichts von diesem Schnickschnack, den ihr für die Erfüllung eures Lebens haltet, weil ihr sonst nichts habt, woran ihr glauben könnt“ (AS 118). Ali refuses to blindly adhere to their family's values and ideas and looks to find their place beyond the past of their Russian-Jewish family. But when Ali experiences the violence of the coup d'état in Istanbul, their first thought is going back to their mother Valja: „Wenn ich das überlebe, dann gehe ich zu Mama, ich will mit ihr reden. Sie weiß nichts von mir. Und ich nichts von ihr. Und zu Emma und Danja und Schura und Etja, zu allen, die noch leben, ich will sie so viel fragen. Ich kenne sie nicht einmal.“ (AS 358). Returning home is connected to the desire of wanting to learn more about a family history whose gaps Ali still wants to fill. And yet, the possibility of going back is tied to the idea of being recognizable and accepted by those that one has left behind: „Zurückkommen, wohin zurück, in die liebenden Arme einer Frau, die ihn wahrscheinlich nicht erkennen würde am Bahnsteig. Er musste an Valjas Frage denken, ob er ausgewandert war und es selber nicht gemerkt hatte“ (AS 344). Migrating here connects to radical change and the undeletable marks that such experiences leave. These are different for Ali and their parents, highlighting how experiences of migration differently affects the postmigrant subject. While both are marked as „foreign“ upon their arrival in Germany, the parents struggle with (Valja) or succumb to (father) the traumas of not feeling at home. In Ali's case, migrating is tied to the experience of moving outside of one's body, or at least the one that others recognize.

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36 Ibid., p. 92.

*Ausser sich* portrays the idea of feeling at home not only on the individual level but also in one's family stories. Ahmed's work highlights how the long-term implications of migration manifest themselves on the stories that are told: „Migration is not only felt at the level of lived embodiment. Migration is also a matter of generational acts of story-telling about prior histories of movement and dislocation“. <sup>37</sup> The stories that Ali collects from their family members (the great-grandparents, as well as the grandparents) revolve around experiences of migration and change, which are often painful because marked by forced displacement and violence both inside and outside of the house. However, hearing about their family's past allows Ali to connect with them. In particular, the stories of their great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents affect the way Ali perceives themselves and understands their relationship to their home and country. After hearing and reading the memoirs of great-grandfather Schura, in which Ali learns about the history of the eldest living generation in the family and the anti-Semitic discrimination they had to endure, Ali decides to tell their personal story using the first person. <sup>38</sup> Even if it remains hard for them to affirm themselves as a „stable“ I, Ali embraces the possibility of speaking about and for themselves.

Until the end of the novel, after being on the move and not feeling at home in Germany or Russia, Ali struggles to understand the connection to one's country. They first develop thoughts in this regard when they interact with their host in Istanbul, uncle Cemal, and hear him saying that „Wenn man eines [ein Land; O.A.] hat, kann man es nicht verlassen. Das schleppt man immer mit. Also, was soll das“ (AS 361). Because of their story of relocation and their conflictual relation to the idea of „home,“ Ali finds themselves unable to come to terms with such a visceral connection to one's home or country: „Das alles konnte ich nicht nachvollziehen damals, ich hatte keine Ahnung, was das heißt, ein Land zu haben. Ich hatte keine Ahnung, was das heißt, einen Putsch zu erleben.“ (AS 361). Being unable to imagine such an affective attachment to a country also relates to the impossibility of comprehending what it may mean to lose it to political oppression, such as during the coup d'état Ali witnesses. After leaving Russia and Germany, Ali experiences Istanbul as a place of search and discovery. While they cannot locate their beloved brother Anton, they leave Turkey with the awareness that their past has left a mark on who they are and that their understanding of home is the result of four generations of migration.

*Ausser sich* suggests a fluid understanding of home and belonging, one which presents transitions, arrivals and returns as everyday experiences for the characters. While these experiences do not follow linear paths or lead to certain results, they show how having a home means knowing where someone comes from through the stories their community tells. The experience of thinking about home and family complements Ali's search for their identity. Anton's disappearance and Kostja's death emphasize the vulnerability of family relations, but at the same time motivate Ali's desire to talk to the older generations in their family. This process involves coming to terms with some difficult parts of the Tschepanow history. To showcase this experience, *Ausser sich*

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**37** Ibid., p. 90.

**38** During a visit to their grandparents in Niedersachsen, Ali gets to hear the story of their family from the great-grandparents Schura and Etinka and finally receives Schura's memoirs, „die er angefangen hatte in den Computer seiner Enkeltochter zu tippen, abzuspeichern und zwischendurch auszudrucken. Zehn Seiten nur. Mehr als das habe ich leider nicht. Und ich wünschte, Etinka hätte auch geschrieben“ (AS 181).

includes multiple story lines which Ali collects during their interviews to their family members. Each chapter introduces the reader to a new vignette of this family story. The formal qualities of the novel and its narrative form accommodate this analeptical return to the past and create a narrative that, in its fluidity, brings together the present and past of the family.

## Conclusion

*Ausser sich* portrays a story of change, transition and discovery. By featuring a queer narrative voice in a work in which novelistic features intersect with dramatic ones, *Ausser sich* represents an example of fluid writing, which reflects the story of its protagonist Ali. Through a creative and empowering use of language, Salzman crafts a narrative which reflects Ali's multilingual and transgender identity. Moving between first- and third-person narrator and a feminine and masculine pronoun, the novel accompanies narratively and linguistically Ali's personal transition. Started as a search for Ali's missing brother, the novel ultimately helps Ali affirm their identity, which, in turn, unleashes their interest in their family history. In metaphorical terms, Ali's desire to cut that umbilical cord that leads nowhere represents their need to embrace their gender without confining themselves within the family narrative of the previous generations. The novel shows how painful some transitions can be and how the search that Ali embarks on asks them to come to terms with traumatic events of their present and past. Ali's story resonates with postmigrant and postcolonial experiences that challenge fixed ideas of origins and home and captures Ali as they consider their connections to their family and country. Ali oscillates between the need of taking distance from their family and immersing themselves in the stories of the past. *Ausser sich* ultimately indicates a movement outside and beside oneself and allows Ali to find a voice in a text that translates shifts and transitions on the formal and narrative level.

