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SAVVAS KYRIAKIDIS
ALEXANDRA TRACHSEL
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SARAH ELLEN ZARROW

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College

Str. Plantelor 21

023971 Bucharest

Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro

Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



BRIAN HAMAN

Born in 1978, in USA

Ph.D. in German Studies, University of Warwick (2012)

Thesis: *Perpetuum Mobile? Literature, Philosophy, and the Journey in German Culture around 1800*

New Europe College Fellow, International Program, grant awarded by the Romanian Agency for Higher Education and Research Funding (2016-2017)
Postdoctoral Associate Fellow, German Studies, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Warwick

Other fellowships and grants:

Warwick Postgraduate Research Scholarship, Doctoral funding, University of Warwick (2008-2011)

Overseas Research Students Award Scheme, University of Warwick (2008-2011)

Early Career Fellowship, Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick (2012)

DAAD Short-Term Research Grant, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (2010)
Fulbright Fellowship, University of Vienna (2004-2006)

Attended conferences and symposia in United Kingdom, United States,
Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Romania

Articles and book reviews published in British and American journals

“NICHT VERGANGENES, WAS DAS HERZ NOCH REUT”: EXILE, MEMORY, AND THE SEARCH FOR HOME IN HEROLD BELGER’S WRITINGS

Abstract

The article considers the German-language writings of the ethnic German Kazakh writer, Herold Belger, and explores whether his literary output can be understood as a model for moving beyond the postcolonial struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy in favor of intercultural encounters. Belger’s enunciation of cultural diversity and differences at the margins of Soviet cultural life gestures towards a relational and fluid conception of identity, one that eschews dogmatic nationalism. Various theoretical perspectives, such as Bhabha’s third space theory, Rothberg’s multidirectional memory, and Boym’s notions of nostalgia, shed light on Belger’s essay “Aul” and novel *Das Haus des Heimatlosen*.

Keywords: Russian-German literature, Herold Belger, exile, hybridity, memory, Kazakhstan

I. Introduction

In an interview with the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (Kazakhstan) two years before his death in 2015, Herold Belger was asked about his unique personal background as someone with the ability to inhabit and indeed embody three distinct cultures – German, Kazakh, and Russian. A self-designated *Zögling* of each culture, he described himself in the following manner:

Die Verflechtung dreier Kulturen stellt meinen größten Reichtum im Leben dar. Ich sage allen: Ich trage drei Säcke auf dem Rücken mit mir herum – einen russischen, einen kasachischen und einen deutschen. Wenn du einen davon wegnimmst, wird mich das innerlich verarmen lassen. Was mich für andere vielleicht interessant macht, ist wohl in erster Linie, dass

ich als ethnischer Deutscher im kasachischen Umfeld aufgewachsen bin, dass ich Kasachisch beherrsche und auch schreiben kann. Wenn man davon etwas entfernt aus der Persönlichkeit, dann werde ich nur noch ein mittelmäßiger Deutschstämmiger sein, der Russisch sprechen und schreiben kann. Jede dieser Kulturen bedeutet sehr viel für mich. Ich bin in einer deutschen Kultur geboren, großgeworden in der kasachischen, die letzte Kultur jedoch war die russische.¹

Although a Kazakh prose writer, essayist, publicist, politician, and literary critic, Belger was not strictly Kazakh by any geographical measure as his interview indicates. In fact, he was neither ethnically Kazakh nor Russian, but rather German, and in spite of his initial “outsider” status he is considered by Kazakhs to be one of their most important writers of the twentieth century (and indeed one of the country’s most important writers of any century).

Born in 1934 in Engels, the capital city of the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1918-1941), Belger and his family were amongst the approximately 1.4 million ethnic Germans who became subject to Stalin’s 1941 mass deportations following Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Officially viewed as politically unreliable, scores of ethnic Germans were sent to Central Asia, particularly to present-day Kazakhstan. Following their deportation to a Kazakh aul, Belger and his family were the only ethnic Germans in the immediate area; they spoke virtually no Kazakh and had as many possessions. It is quite remarkable, then, that Belger, who is revered as one of Kazakhstan’s most important writers, had no knowledge of the country, its language, people, and customs for the first seven years of his life. Although his early efforts focused on translations between Russian, German, and Kazakh, he worked for the majority of his life as a writer, literary critic, and chronicler of Russian-German literature. His mother tongue was German and he identified himself throughout his life first and foremost as ethnically German. Only later did he acquire Kazakh and Russian at school and through his upbringing in a Kazakh aul. Following Kazakhstan’s independence in 1991, he became an advocate for minority rights and even the restoration of the Volga Republic. His substantial body of work, which includes over forty books along with hundreds of translations, newspaper, and journal articles, marks him as an important writer of Kazakh letters. In this respect he is viewed by many of his compatriots as something of a *Kulturträger*, or an individual who

fosters the transmission of cultural history and ideas. In addition to his not insubstantial literary output as well as his numerous prestigious honors, which include the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (2010), Kazakhstan's Order of Parast (1994), he was as a founding member of PEN Kazakhstan and even served a brief stint in the Kazakh parliament (1994-1995).

In his fiction and literary criticism, Belger relentlessly examined the psychological scars stemming from punitive displacement and exile, which was characteristic of the ethnic German minority experience in post-WWII Soviet Union. Consequently, his work offers insights into the many complexities of linguistic, geographic, and cultural interstices that resulted from this exilic condition. As a means of entering into his work as well as providing a theoretical signpost for the analysis, we might consider the following question: Can Belger provide a model for moving beyond the postcolonial struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy in favor of intercultural encounters? Following his expulsion, he continued to use German and Russian to navigate his cultural dislocation along with his status as an ethnic German outsider in Soviet-controlled Kazakh Central Asia. Consequently, I argue that his commitment and contributions to Kazakh language and culture urge us to reconsider essentializing dichotomies of home and exile or self and other in favor of a fluid conception of identity, one in which externally-imposed cultures (i.e. Russian and Kazakh) cross-pollinate with his German ethnic background to produce a striking hybrid. This cross-pollination becomes immediately apparent in his literary criticism in which he often assumed a comparative approach, reading canonical Kazakh authors such as Abai Qunanbaiuly with German writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Russian writers such as Mikhail Lermontov. Therefore, I would like to propose that Belger's repudiation of modernity's disjunctiveness deconstructs language and national boundaries and such transgressive 'border crossings' destabilize culturally embedded taxonomies of differentiation. Can Belger, for example, be understood to have inhabited what Bhabha described as a space "in-between the designations of identity"? If so, does "this interstitial passage between fixed identification", as Bhabha has argued, "open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (*The Location of Culture* 5)? In an attempt to answer such questions, I employ Bhabha's notion of hybridity as well as his third space theory in order to suggest that the enunciation of cultural diversity and differences by a writer at the margins of Soviet cultural life

gestures towards a relational and fluid conception of identity, one that eschews dogmatic nationalism.

II. Volga Germans – Historical Overview

Despite the significant geographic and linguistic distances between Kazakhstan and Germany, the two countries share considerable historical, cultural, and ethnic ties. The roots of these ties were established in the eighteenth century, when some thirty thousand Germans colonists emigrated to the Volga River region at the behest of Catherine the Great (formerly, the Prussian Princess Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg). In her July Manifesto of 1763, she invited foreigners to settle in Russia, offering generous incentives such as exemption from military service, self-governance, tax breaks, financial aid, and 30 hectares of land per settler family as well as freedom of language (particularly German) and religion.² Much like today's migrants from Syria, Iraq, North Africa, and elsewhere, eighteenth-century Germans left their homes and indeed their homelands, which were plagued by chronic political instability and military conflicts, in search of economic opportunities, religious freedom, and general safety and stability. With the still-visible scars of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and intra-religious infighting between Catholic Austria and Protestant Prussia along with the lingering traumas of the Seven Year's War (1756-1763), waves of German families from states such as Baden, Württemberg, the Palatinate, West Prussia, and Danzig emigrated to the Volga River region over the course of the next one hundred and fifty years. This region was initially settled between 1763-1769; Mennonite colonies were established in the Ukraine between 1789 and 1809; and migration of German speakers to the Black Sea area occurred between 1805-1856.³

However, the very circumstances that these early settlers sought to escape would ensnare their descendants in the twentieth-century, when millions of ethnic Germans endured mass expulsion from the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and other German colonies within Russia. During the 1930s the status of Russian Germans decreased significantly, with purges in 1937 and 1938 resulting in the arrest of approximately 38,000 Russian-Germans and eventual execution of about 29,000 of those arrested (Pohl 274). The Soviet government also eliminated all German national districts, schools, publications, and

changed nationality laws so that legal nationality became based solely on biological descent rather than on ethnicity or self-identification. The status of Russian-Germans reached its nadir in the 1940s, particularly after the mass deportations of 1941, which occurred between 15 August and 25 December. During this period, some 856,168 Russian-Germans were sent to collective farms and forced labor camps in Kazakhstan and Siberia (Pohl 274). The official Soviet line was a fear that extra-territorial German minorities within the Soviet Union would be loyal to their ancestral homelands and thereby undermine Soviet war efforts. As a result, virtually the entire Russian-German population of the European areas of the USSR in 1939 ended up as special settlers east of the Urals by 1946 (Pohl 275). After 1941 Russian-Germans were immersed almost exclusively in a Russian-language environment and legally the Soviet government considered them to be Germans by nationality. In the late 1950s the West German government offered citizenship to German minorities. Although conditions for ethnic minorities within the Soviet Union would gradually improve over the next decades, mass emigration to Germany began in 1987 with the lifting of freedom of movement restrictions by Gorbachev. By 1993 the German government introduced an annual quota of 225,000 Russian-Germans allowed to emigrate, but by the late oughties the numbers of so-called *Spätaussiedler* (late German emigrants or re-settlers) had declined significantly. In 2006 the German government estimated 600,000 Russian-Germans in Russia and 230,000 in Kazakhstan. Unlike large numbers of his fellow ethnic Germans, Belger and his wife chose not to re-locate to Germany, but were committed instead to remaining in Kazakhstan as Kazakh citizens.

III. Terminological Considerations

Diasporic peoples and cultures *in transit* have come to define recent political and social conversations within Germany and indeed across Europe. Within the cultural sphere, especially as it relates to “Deutsche Literatur”, such conversations have yielded a dizzying array of terms and typologies as communities of readers, writers, scholars, and citizens engage with the evolving, and at times tumultuous, nature of cultural production. Various emphasizing interculturalism and multiculturalism whilst highlighting categories such as “Nation”, “Heimat”, and “Identität” such descriptively varied typologies include: Ausländerliteratur;

Gast-, Immigranten-, Emigrations-, Migranten-, or Migrationsliteratur; Minderheitenliteratur; deutsche Gastliteratur; Literatur ohne festen Wohnsitz; Literatur der Fremde; deutsche Literatur von außen; and Literatur mit dem Motiv der Migration. To further complicate matters, a number of scholars have argued for what they describe as “die andere Deutsche Literatur”, or German-language writers writing at geographical, cultural, and often historical peripheries. Included amongst this designation are “Russian-German” writers, or what in German are referred to as “Russlanddeutsche” and “Deutsche aus Russland”, whose body of work comprises “sowjetdeutsche Minderheitenliteratur”. Here the emphasis is not on Russian migrant authors in Germany (i.e. Russisch-Deutsche) such as Wladimir Kaminer or Austria in the case of Vladimir Vertlib, who have no historical connections with German minorities in Russia, but rather ethnic Germans from Russia or formerly Soviet Central Asian countries such as the Kazakh-born writer Eleonora Hummel (who now lives in Germany). It is into this latter category that Belger’s writings fall.

The terms “Exil” and “Exilliteratur” are similarly problematic. There are literary texts by authors in exile from Nazism (for example, during the period between 1933 and 1945) and those by authors who did not return to Germany following the end of the Second World War.⁴ More recently, scholars have argued for the notion of an “Eastern European Turn” in contemporary German-language literature. In a 2015 special issue of *German Life and Letters* Brigid Haines introduced a collection of essays that examined works by contemporary authors, ones which are products of post-Wende German-speaking countries and post-communist Europe (145). The phrase “Eastern European turn” denotes Eastern European writers who have emigrated to German-speaking countries as well as the turn towards Eastern Europe by German, Austrian, and Swiss writer. Rather problematically, however, scholars include Herta Müller within this recent “turn” despite the fact that she fits neither category due to her German ethnicity, and so a gap in the scholarship presents itself. By focusing on Herold Belger’s literary output on the periphery of Eastern Europe, the current article aims to broaden the accepted understanding of the aforementioned “turn” to include twentieth-century ethnic Germans who were active in formerly communist European countries.

IV. Theorizing Memory: Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional Memory and Svetlana Boym's Memory as Nostalgia

Discussing memory within the context of German history necessarily involves an ongoing and complex engagement with private and public forms of remembrance as well as the not insubstantial weight of history. One of the core questions of the article asks how we think about the relationship between different social groups' histories of victimization. Does the remembrance of one history, for example, erase others from view? In his book *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* Michael Rothberg has proposed a conceptual model for moving beyond such a hierarchal framework of memory, the core aspect of which is his understanding of *multidirectional memory*. As he writes in his introduction: "Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (3). Rothberg is attempting to weave the transhistorical into the transcultural and transnational by arguing that narratives of memory, victimization, and trauma should not compete within the public and scholarly realms. Rather, dialogical acts of remembrance exist along a shared spectrum of multidirectional memory that embed and become in turn embedded in other histories. But all of this begs the obvious question - what is memory? How can we define it? The secondary literature on the subject is vast, but Richard Terdiman, whom Rothberg cites, has offered a pithy formulation, namely that "memory is the past made present" (Rothberg 3). There is, then, a certain contemporaneity about memory – the ever-present past and the ongoing individual and collective negotiations involved in remembering – in other words, the relationship between the agents and the sites of memory. Closely aligned with memory is identity and Rothberg argues that a direct line connecting the two cannot be made. Rather, in his words,

our relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly, and never without unexpected or even unwanted consequences that bind us to those whom we consider other. When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed [...] it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice. (5)

As cultural artifacts that speak to the exilic conditions of ethnic Germans within the former Soviet Union, Belger's literary writings reflect a comparativist approach to conceptualizing difference in which the border-traversing power of memory informs his own complex negotiations of identity.

Conversely, a companion of memory is nostalgia and Svetlana Boym has written at length about its various forms and implications. Just as we sought a definition of memory, we can rely here on the Greek roots of the word nostalgia: *nóstos* ('return home') and *álgos* ("longing"). As Boym argues, nostalgia is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own phantasy" (*Nostalgia and Its Discontents* 7). In the introductory remarks to her book *The Future of Nostalgia* she further articulates her understanding of nostalgia, which is variously "a symptom of our age, an historical emotion" (xvi); "a new understanding of time and space that made the division into 'local' and 'universal' possible" and in this respect thoroughly modern (xvi) ; it is a yearning both for a different place and a different time (xv); nostalgia is both retrospective and prospective involving "individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (xvi); an idea or emotion that can work laterally as it envisions possible utopian alternatives in the present (xvi). Nostalgia is, in other words, the seemingly paradoxical attempt to reconcile longing with belonging – when loss is replaced by a rediscovered or renewed identity one steps out of the universal human condition and into the specifics of national communities with their particular histories, cultures, languages, and spaces. However, Boym rightly warns of the negative consequences of what she describes as "outbreaks of nostalgia" (xvi) in which imagined, idealized pasts are constructed, confusing reality with fantasy. Unfortunately, we are recent witnesses to such outbreaks of nostalgia and its attendant and characteristically empty slogans and instrumentalized populist discourse. If, as Boym has written, the twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia, then perhaps the twenty-first century, having begun with nostalgia, might end with utopia – or worse. Nevertheless, the salient point for our consideration of nostalgia's function within Belger's fiction is to highlight the extent to which his characters distinguish, embody, repudiate, or indeed balance between restorative and reflective nostalgias.

V. Home and Hybridity in Homi Bhabha's Third Space Theory

Within Belger's fiction the notion of *Heimat* or "home" is linked inextricably with memory and nostalgia. Since studies of *Heimat* are equally if not more vast than those that treat memory, the following comments are meant to be suggestive rather than comprehensive and therefore will serve merely to introduce relevant key concepts for the subsequent analysis of Belger's literary works rather than to offer an exhaustive account of this much-discussed idea. The word *Heimat* dates back to fifteen-century German dialects, gained currency perhaps unsurprisingly during the nineteenth century as a consequence of the French Revolution and a burgeoning German national consciousness, and has ballooned in use since the 1970s, when politicians began invoking it, the media featured articles about it, museums commemorated it, and theorists attempted to define it. As Peter Blickle recounts in his study *Heimat A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*, some 400 books published between 1995-2002 had the word *Heimat* in their title (154). It has been imbued with a range of meanings from aggressive nationalism to ossified conceptions of German identity suspended in the eighteenth century, and from the nation state to regional localities within those national borders. Conversely, the weakening of place-belonging is also an aspect of the "disembedding" which Anthony Giddens has described as characteristic of Late Capitalism, and it is the postcolonial reconfiguring of generic ideas of space, place, and time (which are often interrelated with notions of *Heimat*) that I would like to consider here briefly.

In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural difference employs the conceptual vocabulary of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and the third space. For Bhabha indeterminate, liminal spaces offer possible sites for disrupting and indeed displacing deeply embedded colonial narratives as well as their practices and structures. In its most basic form, Bhabha's "Third Space Theory" argues that identity is realized through the act of articulation or enunciation, which takes place in language. More precisely, Bhabha writes: "The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in a passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious".⁵ In other words, the locus in which this act of linguistic negotiation and translation takes place is understood as a "third space", one that is interpretative and interrogative

and thereby capable of blurring existing boundaries as well as calling into question established categories such as culture and identity. He continues:

For a willingness to descend into that alien territory – where I have led you – may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *intemational* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (*Location of Culture* 38)

Belger's status as a transnational writer calls attention to the fact that literature and indeed culture exist as hybrid forms in a state of flux, and it is in an *intemational* culture that a hybrid third space makes possible an ambivalent site where cultural representations and meanings lack fixity. In his earlier essay, "The World and the Home", Bhabha uses Freud's concept of the uncanny to describe a characteristically (post)modern sense of "unhomeliness" in the world. According to Bhabha, the displacement occasioned by a condition of "unhomeliness" presents a rupture in which borders become blurred: "In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (141). Nevertheless, despite the disorienting effects of this rupture in which certainties are called into question, "another world becomes visible" (141), one in which ambivalences and ambiguities offer possibilities for the creation of new meanings beyond essentialist notions of cultures and, by extension, cultural identities.

VI. Belger's Fiction: *Aul* (2002) and *Das Haus des Heimatlosen* (2009)

The Kazakh aul occupies a central place of importance in Belger's writings. It is usually translated into English as "village", but its earliest meaning referred to a nomadic gathering. Only later did it come to mean a more or less permanent settlement of houses united by a collective economy. In 2002 Belger penned an essay on the subject of the Kazakh aul in which he described its history and organizational structure but lamented

its diminished significance and seemingly irreversible disappearance in Kazakh culture. Reflecting on his experiences of displacement as a six-year old in exile, Belger reveals that “aul” was the first Kazakh word to become part of his vocabulary. It was to be an auspicious introduction to the language since “aul” would become synonymous with “home” in his later literary writings. Describing the first glimpses of his new homeland, or what Bhabha might characterize as the liminality of the migrant experience, Belger recalls: “It was quiet. It was deserted. It was expansive. There were no people. This was an unknown and hitherto unseen world. Both huge and incomprehensible. ‘Aul’ said our wagon driver [...] “*Kasachisch Dorf*,” my father translated. *Aul*: my first Kazakh word would echo in my soul”.⁶ Displeased with the dictionary definition of an aul as a village, grouping of nomadic tents, or a settlement in the Caucasus or Central Asia, Belger offers an extended meditation in which the aul begins to resemble a third space between and indeed within competing national contexts:

And yet...and *aul* is not simply a collection of houses or *yurt* tents. It is not simply a small or large settlement. It is primarily people, united by a place of residence, who are of a kindred spirit, like mentality, way of life, morals and behaviours, who live in close, continuous contact with one another, bonded through labour and hard graft, who have a propensity for one another, who share the same or similar morals, culture, community, and social circle, who pursue the same or similar aims, strivings, Weltanschauung and spiritual order. An aul is a kind of world in itself. With its own infrastructure. An economic, social, psychological, and ethno-cultural infrastructure. It is a community with a complex root structure. [...] The *aul* is home. The aul is a big family. The aul is your own kin on one land, under a single sky. The *aul* is your conscience, your love, your cares, your pride, your green landing stage and your comfort and joy. The *aul* is the rudiments of motherland. (*Selected Works* 11)

With his emphasis “on the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group”, Belger’s description echoes Terry Eagleton’s oft-cited notion of culture (*The Idea of Culture* 34).

Moreover, Belger’s act of enunciation expands the notion of the aul from a fixed modality to a fluid and liminal space, one (in Bhabha’s words) “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation”

(*The Third Space* 211). In this “in-between” space, identities are formed, reformed, and constantly in a state of becoming, and Belger writes of this very process of the layering, shifting, and at times shedding of identities as a result of his childhood experiences in his new home:

It became a part of me. I knew every home, every resident, every last shrub in the district, every path in the Terensai gorge and thicket of the riverside woodland, every boulder in the Tas-otkel ford. The *aul* became mine and I was accepted as a part of the *aul*. All my disparate childhood impressions of the Volga, about the playground at the Engels summer school, about my parents’ village of Mannheim, about the canton centre of Gnadenflur, from where, in early September of those troubled years we were sent away in accordance with that sinister and scandalous Decree of 28 August 1941, from where we faded away, blending into the distance, into the irretrievable and so we fancied at times, unreal world, while the Kazakh aul seemed to be the real beginning of my life, the starting line for a grand run, as I dreamed it’. (*Selected Works* 17)

Is this not what Bhabha describes when he writes of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation? As he puts it, “The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorientating” (*Location of Culture* 9). Belger here experiences the disorientating unreality of both past and present, with his earlier and characteristically German milieu resembling a fading snapshot of a life lived elsewhere whilst his present circumstances in the aul assume a hazy, dream-like patina. Despite the internalization of both locales as a result of his displacement, his is clearly a divided consciousness. Thus, the aul in Belger’s personal history functions (in Bhabha’s idiom) as a borderland space “in-between the usual designations of identity”, a place that “open[s] up the possibility of a cultural hybridity”, which stands in stark contrast to Soviet nationalist discourses with their essentialist politics of inclusion and exclusion (*Location of Culture* 4). Significantly, the aul is transnational insofar as it enables (and seems to encourage) the integration of multinational groups (in this case, ethnic Germans) as well as pre-national and indeed pre-modern, which is to say that it predates the modern concept of the nation state along with the accoutrements of modernity such as industrialization, urbanization, and secularization. In this respect, auls should be understood as intermediary spaces in which

home for Belger was embodied perhaps less as a geographical fixity and more as a fluid process of endlessly constructing, deconstructing, and re-constructing the self in borderland communities.

If Belger's recollections of his early days in a Kazakh aul allow him to reconstruct a remembered past, then his fictional worlds in a novel such as *Das Haus des Heimatlosen* (2009) offer the possibility to re-write himself. The allusion here, of course, is to Franz Fanon's bold assertion of the individual's agency in shaping its identity despite the weight of past traumas: "In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself".⁷ By combining autobiography with fiction, *Das Haus des Heimatlosen* exists as a work of autofiction, one in which Belger attempts to plumb the murky depths of memory in order to better understand the emotional landscape of displacement and exile. The basic plotline involves an account of an ethnic German family's traumatic forced exile from the Volga River region to the Kazakh steppe and the subsequent intergenerational attempts to assimilate into Kazakh culture under Soviet rule. Structurally, the novel is comprised of three separate parts, each centered on the experiences of one person in particular (although the three narratives do indeed overlap). And so the first part, which corresponds to the experiences of Belger's father, is entitled "David"; the second part draws from the violence visited upon Belger's father's brother and bears the title "Christian"; and the final part or "Harry" recounts Belger's experiences growing up in a Kazakh aul before concluding with his eventual entry into university. Given the novel's relative obscurity, even amongst Germanists, a brief plot summary might prove beneficial to the reader. In this manner, such a prefatory summary will offer an interpretive *terra firma* of sorts upon which to engage with specific passages, ones which are illustrative of the liminality of the migrant experience and point to the extent to which the notion of a third space can and often does disrupt homogeneous notions of national identity.

The first third of the novel concerns David's exile to a distant Kazakh aul. Married to a Russian woman whom he is forced to leave behind, David, an obstetrician by profession, is made to perform his duties within a rather large area encompassing a number of disparate auls. His encounters with local Kazakhs—the communication and inevitable miscommunication that results from mixing German, Russian, and Kazakh along with the otherness of the respective cultures—reflect vast and, initially at least, insurmountable cultural and linguistic differences. Additionally, he must simultaneously balance the demands of an oppressive state power whilst

navigating these differences, and in this way David embodies the migrant act of survival amidst conditions of cultural displacement and social discrimination. As the novel transitions from the first to the second part, the reader is introduced to Christian, David's younger brother, who has barely survived extreme trauma as a member of the "*Trudarmee*" or Labor Army. It was customary to fill the ranks of the *Trudarmee* with men from entire German colonies, all of whom were forced to work in labor camps following their deportation to various settlements in the Siberian taiga. Although rich in ethnic German history and culture, particularly German songs, Christian's physical and spiritual emaciation and eventual silencing and death come to symbolize the trauma of dislocation and the interrupted transmission of ethnic and national traditions as a result of those traumas. Amidst the backdrop of such bleak conditions, the final third of the novel, which focuses on the childhood and teenage years of Harry, stands as a beacon of hope. Drawing from his own experiences, Belger imbues his character "Harry" with the burdens of memory as well as possibilities for renewal based on those memories. Among other things, he (Belger) highlights the discrepancy between young Harry's acceptance within the Kazakh aul and the overt, state-sanctioned institutional discrimination that he faces within the larger framework of Soviet bureaucracy and society as a consequence of his outsider status. Throughout the course of the novel, the aul functions as a place that offers various opportunities for cultural hybridity in which cultural differences can be entertained without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. For David the aul becomes instrumental for negotiating his German identity against the backdrop of two competing foreign cultures; for Christian the aul proves merely incidental to his identity and ultimately a liminal place between life and death, the transmission of culture and its eventual cessation; and for young Harry the aul is neither incidental nor accidental, but rather essential – a heterogeneous arcadia against the backdrop of an exclusionary Soviet metropolis in which he wishes to study at university.

In the opening chapter of the novel, which highlights the migrant act of survival, David struggles to orientate himself amidst condition of exile. Here Belger underscores the ongoing reciprocal process of interdependence and differentiation between David's ethnic German self and the Kazakh "other" of the aul by juxtaposing the two. When seen from David's eyes, the aul appears wild, impoverished, and even primitive despite the interjection "Schöner Aul [...] Gibt kein besserer" by his Kazakh companion:

Ärmliche graue Häuschen bildeten zwei Reihen. Sämtliche Dächer waren mit Grassoden bedeckt. Über die Grasschicht hinaus wuchsen Wermut und Disteln. In der Abenddämmerung wirkte die Straße ungeheuer breit. Jedes Haus hatte Aufsatz einen Schuppenanbau, der oben in einem runden, kuppelförmigen Ausatz aus Weidengarten endete. In der Aulmitte zog sich eine Baumkette hin. Gleich hinter den Bäumen erhob sich ein großes Holzhaus mit Blechdach. Die Schule, ahnte der Wanderer. Der Aul lag in einer Senke. Zwei, drei Kiometer entfernt schimmerte dunkel der Auenwald. Den Hügel hinter dem Aul herunter kam eine Herde: Kühe, Schafe, Ziegen. (16)

Invariably, memories of village life back home encourage a celebratory romance or nostalgia for the past in which fossilized memories reinforce boundaries rather than create the possibilities for bridging the divide between exile and homeland. As the narrator describes:

Der Wanderer lächelte schief. Er dachte an sein Heimatdorf Mannheim, an die gediegenen Häuser, die hohen Umzäunungen, die gestrichenen Tore, an die nirgends fehlende Sommerküche – das *Backhaus*. Und hinter Haus und *Backhaus* befanden sich beinahe bei allen Dorfbewohnern diverse Anbauten – Getreidespeicher, Geflügelstall, Pferdestall, ein Viehhof für Kühe, Jungbullen, Kälber, für Schafe und Ziegen, ein Schuppen für Kamele. Und hinter diesen stattlichen und gepflegten Bauten erstreckte sich der Garten. So war es im Mannheim auf der Wiesenseite, und das war längst nicht das wohlhabendste. Hier hingegen... (16-7)

Estrangement and alienation rather than openness pervade David's language, which enunciates with great specificity what has been lost, but glosses over what stands before him because he lacks the cultural vocabulary to articulate the particulars of his present circumstances. As the chapter closes, his companion ushers him inside for tea and sleep – tomorrow is, of course, another day: "Los, Perschil, in Haus. Wir Tee trinken und schlafen. Du müde, ich müde. Morgen, wenn Allah will, ist neuer Tag" (17). And indeed David spends many days and many nights in the aul acculturating to its rhythms and routines. It is rather fitting, then, that the last chapter of the first part of the novel concludes with David Pawlowitsch (no longer bearing the metonymic appellation "Der Wanderer") on the verge of sleep once again:

Er schloss die Augen und sah sogleich Schneehügel vor sich, dazwischen den sich endlos windenden winterlichen Weg, er sah den Alten, sein Bärtchen mit den Eiszapfen darin, sah die vom Frost gefesselte Steinfurt, sah die harten Schneebröckchen unter den Hufen des Passgängers hervorstieben, und wieder Schneewehen, Schneewehen und die grenzenlose stumme Steppe. Nun ja, sagte er sich im Einschlafen, da ist also ein weiterer Tag in meinem Leben vergangen, ein langer, langer Wintertag... (165)

David has learned to approach the aul on its own terms and this internalization of Kazakh life and landscape serves to initiate the process of resettling the self within this borderland space.

Whereas the aul gradually comes to represent a third space for David, it offers only a state of unhomeliness for his brother Christian, who has endured but does not survive the terrors of state-sanctioned discrimination and violence. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha employs Freud's concept of *unheimlich* in order to examine the unhomely condition of the modern world in which there is a creeping recognition that the line between public and private as well as world and home disintegrates. When Christian first returns to his brother he uses the word "Dochodjaga" or "Muselmann" (i.e. those starving and resigned to death in the Nazi concentration camps) to refer to himself, but the narrator reveals a certain optimism of the will amidst the overwhelming pessimism of Christian's intellect: "Christian lächelte in sich hinein bei dem tröstenden Gedanken, dass er ja jetzt in einem gottverlassenen kasachischen Aul unter der Obhut seines großen Bruders weilte und dass ein winziger Strahl Leben in seiner geschundenen Seele noch nicht erloschen war". (164) As Bhabha puts it, "The incalculable colonized subject - half acquiescent, half oppositional, always untrustworthy – produces an unresolvable problem of cultural difference for the very address of colonial cultural authority" (*Location of Culture* 33). Attempts to reclaim his ethnic German cultural traditions and repressed history soon follow: David and Christian sing folksongs; they speak in dialect; they discuss their family histories; and they draw maps of the Volga River region, essentially trying to re-map their German identities onto their alienated psyches. However, whereas David has internalized, at least to a certain extent, aspects of Kazakh life in the aul, Christian's unhomeliness reinforces a nagging sense of estrangement as well as the irrevocable erasure of his cultural identity:

Jawohl, die Sehnsucht nach der Heimat, dem Vaterhaus, die Unmöglichkeit, eine Heimat zu haben, das erzwungene Umherziehen durch die weite Welt, die Verlorenheit, das unauslöschliche Heimweh, das einsame Schicksal des ewigen Wanderers, das tragische Empfinden, kein Zuhause zu haben – dies ist das verbreitetste, das herzerreißende Motiv deutscher Lieder. Der Deutsche zieht durch die Welt, sucht überall Wurzeln zu schlagen, er schafft sich eine Basis, richtet sich ein, baut ein Haus, trotzdem ist dies nicht seine Erde, bleibt er ein Fremdling, ein nicht Aufgenommener, ein Reisender, und sein Haus, wo immer es steht, ist das Haus des Heimatlosen, welches man ihm fatalerweise unbedingt wegzunehmen versucht [...]. (231)

In another passage, Christian laments:

Ja, die Erinnerung... [...] Wir haben keine Heimat, kein Haus. Nur die Erinnerung. Den wichtigsten Schatz des Heimatlosen. Des freiwillig oder des unfreiwillig Heimatlosen, ganz gleich. Unser Zuhause ist die Erinnerung. Unser Haus ist demnach die Hauslosigkeit. [...] Solange in dir die Erinnerung brennt, bist du am Leben. Wo immer du weilst. Wo immer du dir ein Haus baust. Die Erinnerung ist unsre Hoffnung. [...] Darin offenbar besteht unsere einzige Rettung'. (234)

But the trauma is too great, the bridge cannot be crossed, and the language of the prison camp supersedes the language of home and the estranging syntax creates an unbridgeable distance between personal agency and the events of his past.

Schneesturm. Frost. Das Knarren der Zweige unterm kalten, tiefhängenden Himmel. Das Kreischen der Säge. Das Ächzen der sterbenden Kiefer, die unwillig in die tiefen Schneewehen stürzt und alles ringsum mit ihrem Todesdonner betäubt. Die schweigenden Schatten am Lagerfeuer. Die muffige Baracke. Der spitzig gestäubte Stacheldraht. Die Wachtürme. Die höhnischen Witzeleien. Das heisere Geschimpf am glühenden Kanonenofen. Das Gewälze auf den knarrenden Pritschen. Das Gebell der Schäferhunde. Das Zählen auf dem Appellplatz... (165)

His memories of the labour camps have irrevocably altered his personal, psychic landscape, and here Belger approaches the issue of home and displacement in an attempt to make literature the site on which the unhomely is enacted. Within this borderland space, the aul can also

function as a site of human dislocation. Capturing the condition of estrangement glimpsed from the recognition of the world as an unhallowed place, Christian's repeats the words "mir ist so kalt" before drawing his last breath. Through Christian's fixity and fetishism of an ethnic German identity, Belger seems to sound a note of warning against what Bhabha described in *The Location of Culture* as "the celebratory romance of the past" (9). In many ways, his experiences speak to the impossibility for some of coming to terms with the traumas of exile.

Perhaps more so than the previous two parts, the third and final part of the novel explores the complexities of pluralistic selves along with the possibilities for constructing identity through language. All three characters - David, Christian, and now Harry - seem to inhabit borderland spaces in which cultural hybridity and (to use Kristeva's striking expression) a wounded cosmopolitanism permeates their lives. However, with his focus on the sixteen year old Harry, Belger offers a model for moving beyond the postcolonial struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy in favor of interculturality. Unlike Christian, who clings to the exilic souvenirs of his memory, young Harry's circumstantial sanguinity undercuts such chimerical nostalgia. Repeating the line "Nicht Vergangenes, was das Herz noch reut...", Harry begins to reflect on his past and the narrator offers a window into his thoughts:

Was hatte er, Harry, schon für "Verganenes"? Was konnte er bereuen? Seine Vergangenheit erschien ihm freudlos, leer, gewebt aus Kränkungen, Erniedrigungen, Entbehrungen und Bedrängnissen. Tatsächlich, was hatte es in seiner Vergangenheit gegeben? Bruchstücke kindlicher Erinnerungen, vage wie der Nebel über dem Ischim zur Frühlingszeit, irgendwelche Streiche, Vergnügungen mit der Kinderkorona im fernen deutschen Dorf an der Wolga [...] "Nicht Vergangenes, was das Herz noch reut..." Diese Zeile sagte alles. Was kam danach? Umherirren, Hunger, Erniedrigung, ein fremdes Land, eine andere Sprache, andere Sitten. Keine Behausung, keinerlei Rückhalt, alles nur provisorisch und ungewiss, Not ohne Ende, Niedergeschlagenheit, Verunsicherung. (273-4)

Belger offers a striking contrast between Christian's ossified notion of ethnic German identity, one that is simultaneously utopian and ephemeral, and Harry's unsentimental pragmatism, which acknowledges the traumas of the past as a catalyst for the future recreation of the self within this new context.

Belger's peregrinatory prose culminates in Harry's formative experiences within the labyrinthine Soviet bureaucracy, which echoes Belger's own experiences. Despite his deportation, he has attended Kazakh schools, acquired both Russian and Kazakh, and his use of the latter is virtually indistinguishable from the ethnic Kazakhs that he encounters. He is outwardly and indeed inwardly in the eyes of his Kazakh peers as well as inwardly "one of them". And yet, as Bhabha reminds us, "Hegemony requires iteration and alterity to be effective" (*Location of Culture* 29). In one instance, he excels academically at school and should receive the top prize, but he is instantly branded by his "otherness" when he referred to as "ein Deutsche" (290) and denied the accolade. However, he is not without his supporters as one character, a witness to the discrimination heaped on Harry, rebuts: "Unsinn! Was haben der Deutsche und der Sonderübersiedler damit zu tun? Das riecht hier nach keiner Politik. Es geht allein um Leistung und um Fleiß. Er ist Schüler eine kasachischen Schule. Er hat all die Jahre Kasachisch gelernt. Auch die Aufsätze schreibt er kasachisch" (290-1). Nevertheless, beyond the boundaries of the aul, Harry remains for some an outsider despite his linguistic proficiency: "er ist kein Ka-sa-chhe!" (291). The act of linguistic negotiation makes possible a space for translation in which hybridity offers a viable alternative to the strict demarcation of identity based on ethnicity or nationality – either "German" or "Kazakh". Although he is haunted by history, Harry comes to find acceptance amongst Kazakhs. Impressed by his ability to speak fluent Kazakh, a school official proclaims: "Da bist du ja einer von uns, ein Kasache. Mein Brüderchen! Hab ich doch gleich bemerkt, dass du das Iman im Gesicht hast" (406). However, the blacklisting of ethnic Germans excludes him from pursuing his university education until a high-ranking Kazakh from a neighboring aul intervenes. The enigma of exile has resulted in Harry living the locality of culture, which is to say one that is more temporal than historical, with the aul serving as an interstitial space for the ongoing process of re-negotiating the self across linguistic designations of identity.

VII. Conclusion

By way of concluding, we might recall the question posed at the beginning of the article, namely whether Belger's writings represent a model for moving beyond the postcolonial struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political

autonomy in favor of intercultural encounters. In the first instance, his essay "Aul" and novel *Das Haus des Heimatlosen* should be understood as transnational literature in which migrants and migrant communities are theorized along an axis that includes multiculturalism, identity, and hybridity, all of which intersects with considerations of minority literature. In other words, Belger presents a multiplicity of perspectives, which is to say that he portrays characters caught between two worlds due to their essentialist views of cultural identity; he offers characters that ascribe or embody multicultural notions of fixed ethnic identities that are conterminous with specific groups; and he includes characters that acknowledge the fragmented nature of identity and subsequently re-evaluate it as a fluid, ongoing process. Often his fictional characters seem to seesaw between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia, as if caught between naive essentialism and self-conscious melancholy past no longer present. And yet both Belger and his writing move beyond the stuck-between-two-worlds binary as well as the rather static notion of multiculturalism by affirming the migrant writer's fundamental hybridity, one which undercuts what Rita Felski has described as the "doxa of difference". By employing metaphors of hybridity, Belger eschews further atomization in favour of multiplicity and the interplay of pluralistic selves. In her eponymously entitled article Felski described the necessity and value of such approaches to fiction: "Metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognize differences within the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notions of identity, but also address connections between subjects by recognizing affiliations, cross-pollinations, echoes, and repetitions, thereby unseating difference from a position of absolute privilege" (12). In this way, Belger's deterritorialized memory makes possible the renegotiation of identity, history, and political practices within contested linguistic and cultural spaces.

NOTES

- ¹ See Klimenko.
- ² See, for example, Pohl.
- ³ On the migration patterns of Russian-Germans, see, for example, Pohl, Brantsch, Eisfeld, Fleischhauer, and Pinkus.
- ⁴ Of the latter category, namely 'Exilliteratur' (1933-45) some of the most important authors include Alfred Döblin (*Babylonische Wanderung*, the Amazonas-Trilogy), Brecht (*Furcht und Elend des dritten Reiches*, *Flüchlingsgespräche*, *Mutter Courage*, *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*), Anna Seghers (*Das siebte Kreuz*, *Transit*), Thomas Mann (*Dr Faustus*), Heinrich Mann (*Henry IV* novels), and Arnold Zweig (*Das Beil von Wandsbek*). Additional authors in exile include Joseph Roth (*Tarabas*), Hans-Henny Jahn, Lion Feuchtwanger, Oskar Maria Graf, Franz Werfel (*Die 40 Tage des Musa Dagh*), Stefan Zweig (*Die Welt von gestern*), Franz Mehring (*Die verbrannte Bibliothek*), and Ernst Toller, among others.
- ⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences', <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/c/cultural-diversity/cultural-diversity-and-cultural-differences-homi-k-bhabha.html> [accessed 25 July 2017]. See also *The Location of Culture*, pp. 35-39.
- ⁶ Herold Belger, *Selected Works*, p. 7.
- ⁷ Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 204.

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