GOING THE DISTANCE: STORIES AND DISPLACEMENT
ENCOUNTERING EXPERIENCES OF GERMAN MIGRANTS

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I would like to say a few words before beginning this ethnography. First, it is personally motivated. While I am trying to uncover ways in which a few German migrants tell stories to make sense of ideas of culture, home, and migration, I am doing so because both of my mother's parents are German immigrants, meaning I grew up hearing German when adults were talking about something I was not supposed to hear. Second, although it is personal, it is not about me. Any point at which I reference myself is where I see myself as a major component in how the stories of another are being told.

Writing and Research

While I have interwoven interviewees' stories with theory, I want to close the gap between the expert language of anthropologists and everyday speech, a gap that could imply the people whose stories I have had the privilege of telling are somehow inferior to me (Abu-Lughod 1991: 150-1) or disguise change in myself. To use Abu-Lughod's language, I believe every ethnographic experience is a 'halfie,' or multicultural, experience (*ibid.*:137) because while one is an individual apart from those being studied, interaction elapses, distorts, or otherwise changes previous boundaries or distances. I also do not want write in a way that distances the average reader—there may be ideas that the wider public does not spend much time on, but I study anthropology because I want these ideas to be more widespread. Because of this urge for general

understanding, I have decided not to question whether 'culture' exists. Everyone interviewed mentioned 'culture'; I do not think it is my place to redefine it on their behalf. However, I *do* want to eschew homogenous notions of culture that assume anthropological omniscience or objectivity and, instead, focus on conversational moments that show the impact of social forces on an individual's perceptions (*ibid.* 154, 157).

Given this, I have decided to focus on four individuals' stories. Two are those of older Germans I know from Cleveland, Ohio, interviewed for five hours altogether over Skype, and two are the stories of German students at the University of St Andrews, interviewed in person for a total of two and a half hours. I will focus on Gertrude and Freida's[1], stories, then on Adelina and Constanze's stories, interweaving theory along the way.

Gertrude and Frieda

With Gertrude and Frieda's stories I would like to focus on a few main themes: family, having a story to tell, and displacement. As background, Gertrude, my grandmother (Oma), came over from Soltau, a small town in north Germany, in 1967 to marry my opa, who had immigrated as a young boy in 1952. Frieda, my German tutor, immigrated in 1959 at age nine.

[1] All false names.

Each of their stories started off with a detailed history of what came before: they mentioned the war and, more extensively, its effects on family life. In the words of Gertrude,

> 'Most of the immigrants in the fifties, like Great-Oma, it was more, how should I say. Opa's biological father was killed in the war, and Great-Oma was evacuated out of her hometown to a farm in Bavaria because of bombing raids. Opa was just a baby. Great-Oma's dad was a miner and already dead from black-lung disease. Great-Oma's sister—she went up to Soltau, my hometown. That's where they tried to meet up again. Because nothing worked after the war, Great-Oma hitched rides on trains and trucks that did deliveries to find her family. She left Opa behind because she didn't want to take the chance. After she found her sister, she went back and got Opa, and they lived together. She met the Great-Opa you know there, because he was an American soldier, and in 1952 she decided to come here because things were still bad in Germany. Opa came back for visits years later, and anyway in '67 I came over.'

To her, the story had a beginning, and it started with the connections of family: how people were torn apart, how people wanted to reunite. Frieda's story was similar. When I asked why she came to America, she responded by first telling me that her mother died when she was two years old, leaving her father with three children. Her father then married another woman who was horrible to her eldest brother. He ran away to live with his grandparents, and then later befriended an American army nurse who treated him like he was her own. By this time, her father had divorced her stepmother, but his

eldest son moved to America to continue to live with the nurse. Their father followed with Frieda and her other brother in order to keep the family together.

Again, the story started with family separation and reunion. Another similarity between these two stories is that they both began with another person. In this, migration heightened the senses of surrounding connections. Details of family life also kept reoccurring: there were deaths in the family, children born, tense marriages, and reunion between unrecognizable family members after years apart. Family was interwoven, a constant factor.

Put simply, both Gertrude and Frieda had a story to tell. I only noticed this when I thought about my conversations with Adelina and Constanze. Those conversations (to state the obvious) were more conversational than anything else. I asked them questions, and they answered, sometimes asking me questions in return but rarely speaking at length. However, when I asked Gertrude and Frieda how they came over from Germany, their responses became a story only punctuated by occasional guiding questions. I am not sure if a longer life or greater displacement caused this difference, but the distinctiveness of their narratives was clear. Their stories were cohesive, bound by family, ever aware of connections to the stories of others, and framed by guiding themes.

One of the other guiding themes of Gertrude's and Frieda's stories was that of the 'first journey' followed by 'the arrival.' For both women, this part of the story was detailed and complex. Take, for example, the details of Frieda's story. At this point she had already described difficulties with getting the ship out of Hamburg:

> ‘When I was a child, I got horrendously seasick, *horrendous*. My father bought all the bananas he could before we left Germany and hung them in a net above my bed. Because the ship wasn’t technically a passenger ship, we also ate with the crew, at the captain’s table. It felt like family for me, a very strange family.’

She then went on to describe other details of arrival: the New York lights, feeling very foreign, the long drive to El Paso, a rock hitting the windshield.

Gertrude also had an arrival story. She described the different ports the ship stopped at before crossing the Atlantic, the passengers standing on the top deck to see the Statue of Liberty, loading crates onto a train, the long drive home to Cleveland, going out for coffee and not wanting to touch the filthy café tables.

These details struck me because there was a clear structure of journey, arrival, and impressions. Interestingly, neither Adelina’s nor Constanze’s story had this structure. Again, it makes me wonder if more drastic change, as opposed to living both home and abroad, triggers the formation of a more distinct narrative, if narrative makes sense of two sharply divided worlds.

Lastly, though strong themes of displacement ran throughout each story, this is ultimately where the two narratives diverged. For Frieda, the theme of displacement began when she described a conversation between her and her father when they were sailing to America:

> ‘When he told me I’d have to learn English, nine-year-old Frieda laughed at him and politely reassured him that everyone in the world spoke German and there was no need to be silly.’

She also described being called a Nazi at school, working hard to erase her accent by the time she was fifteen, and then, at university, taking German as a 'very easy language credit' and realizing that she had 'lost something—lost some culture, and wanted to reclaim it.' Thus she studied German, eventually doing German Literature graduate work at the University of Wittenburg. At that point that, she began to see herself as being able 'to pick and choose from both American culture and German culture.' She felt enabled to negotiate between the cultures where others could not, once even peacefully stopping the Baader-Meinhof Gang (also known as the Red Army Faction, considered a terrorist organization by the West German government) from rioting on Easter Sunday in reaction to the presence of American families. Here it seemed that displacement was followed by a sense of empowerment and comfort.

Gertrude's story is slightly different. Themes of displacement started when she described her wedding to my opa. Because she had decided to have the wedding in America a few weeks after arriving, it was an isolating, lonely experience.

> 'People afterwards told me how nice the wedding was, and I turned to Opa and said, "Who was that?"'

But it was not always difficult; my great-oma was German, which meant that she cooked German food, had German friends and made Gertrude feel at home. Gertrude described what she missed about Germany:

> 'You kind of miss, how should I say, the contact over the years. When you go back you see old classmates at the market, you talk, you meet each other for coffee. More so even with family—all those family events, you miss. You made

> your choice, you have to accept it, and you can't be there for everything. … A country forms a person in a way, no matter where you are. You kind of have to accept their way of life to be accepted in that country. It doesn't mean you give up your culture, but you cannot be as stringent, in a way.'

For her, ideas of displacement were wrapped up in family and general sense of culture (which she often described in terms of the rhythm of everyday life). Here I noticed a difference. For Frieda, displacement was entwined with language, while Gertrude linked it to a sense of family, though both connected it with ideas of culture. This could be reflected in the reasons and timings with which they immigrated: Frieda immigrated at a time when German as a language would be especially repressed and at an age when she had not built up a mature network of friends and family, whereas Gertrude immigrated slightly later, when German wasn't as taboo and when she was older, moving from one established social network for the sake of another. Migrating at different points in history triggers different kinds of hardships, which then produce different regrets and hopes (Pine 2014: S96). As Fischer said, ethnicity is channeled differently at different times (1986: 195).

On that note, I would like to move on to Adelina and Constanze's stories. Perhaps with their ideas and experiences we can understand how different histories cause different kinds of narratives a little bit more.

Adelina and Constanze

I have already spoken about Adelina and Constanze's stories in comparison to the others': theirs were more conversational and did not have a definite structure. What I would like to talk about now is how their relationships to their cities play a major role in shaping feelings of belonging and displacement, and how their family relationships changed after being abroad.

Adelina spoke about Berlin after first describing moving around a great deal with her family:

> 'It was never easy to say where home is because I moved so much. As I got older, I realized that maybe my hometown is Berlin, but I wouldn't say that I identify that much with Germany…but rather with Berlin, because this was where my family and my friends and my close friends were. … If you grow up in a city, especially a city like Berlin, where there's so much going on and so much more young people as well, you just start relating to places in a different way. For me, there were always areas in the city that I knew were places where I liked to go when I was thirteen, and then things changed. I think what made me really feel at home in Berlin was that I joined a political youth movement when I was fifteen and I really got to know…more of the people involved and the community life in my area. And I think that really makes you feel like you belong to a place, and if you take on responsibilities you can't leave anyone—people expect things from you. And this makes you discover the place where you're staying in a different way as well. And just having all these memories of personal

> development connected to different places in Berlin—like the lake I used to go on summer evenings with my dad—will always make you feel more at home.’

Physical locations, relationships and a sense of responsibility seem to strongly form her sense of belonging. Another major theme throughout our conversation was language. For her, language could bring strong feelings of both connection and isolation, depending on whether she spoke the local language or not. I am especially drawn to a contradiction: she identifies with Berlin as opposed to Germany, but also identifies as German when speaking about the German language within Berlin. To me, this implies localized way of relating to a place and constructing an identity. This is especially reflected in her sense responsibility within the local area. When I asked her about whether or not she felt like a tourist in her own city after being in St Andrews, these themes came up again.

> ‘Definitely. I have a limited time frame, a list of people or places or exhibitions to see and food to eat, and I see lots of small things I didn’t really notice or value before.’

Noticing people and places and exhibitions all reflect that sense of localness, but time seems to condense these things for her and change how she experiences her area.

Constanze’s experience was similar in some ways and different in others. For one, she did not describe any particular connection to Hamburg prior to St Andrews, but when I asked her whether being in St Andrews made her feel like a tourist in her own city, she replied,

> ‘Yeah. I realized that I don’t really know Hamburg very well, even though I live half an hour away. One day my brother and I just decided to do all of the really touristy things. It’s changed how I talk about my home—I’ve caught myself defending my country, even though I never would have been proud about it before. …when people ask me where to visit, I always say Hamburg and list everything they have to see there.’

This made me think of the differences between Adelina’s and Constanze’s life stories leading up to the point at which they came to St Andrews: Adelina traveled and moved around much more and then settled within the city of Berlin, whereas Constanze lived mostly outside Hamburg. Maybe this contributed to their different perspectives—maybe moving around encourages someone to more strongly and more consciously attach oneself to a place, and, looking back on Adelina’s words, maybe a city lends itself more to shifting interests over a lifetime. Maybe it is so big, with so much for everyone, that it lets one’s world become smaller, more localized. Another thing I noticed was that Adelina’s story, with its unstructured preface of journeys before Berlin, seemed to slightly mirror Gertrude and Frieda’s. This makes me think, again, that greater displacement leads to a stronger sense of narrative.

This is reflected in how Adelina and Constanze approached family throughout the course of our conversations. Most poignant for me was when Constanze described a moment on her West Highland Way hike:

> ‘My mother told a hostel worker that she lived in Hamburg but that I live in Scotland. I don’t think Scotland’s my home! I’m just a German who studies in

> Scotland. It was very strange. I love my mother; I don't want to see myself as having a different home from her.'

This conscious identification with family as home was a theme in our conversation earlier. When I asked her how she spent time differently over the summer, she said that she tries to make her 'time at home as normal as possible' and spends time with her parents, her brother and her dog. I asked her what she thought of as 'normal.'

> 'Joining my mom when she takes the dog for the walk,' she said. 'Doing the shopping with her. … As a student, I never did any of this, actually.'

For her, going abroad made her more aware of her family and how much they meant to her. My conversation with Adelina brought this up when she spoke about how being abroad has changed how her parents relate to her:

> 'I feel more like a friend and fellow in conversation rather than just their daughter, and they're really interested in what I'm studying and really interested in hearing about it. Having parents who (usually) like to see you evolve and a home base—it's really important to me. …I really love spending time with my mom. We didn't use to consciously spend time together talking about things that matter, but now that's changed. Anyone who can be happy to come back home is very lucky.'

It seemed that relationships' ability to evolve as she evolved while still remaining intimate helped her build an idea of home and safety. Constanze mentioned this as well; for her, being able to go home after whatever happened 'is a very big security.' Adelina's experience also reflects Constanze's in that she has started to spend more

holiday time with family since first going abroad. This ‘permanent adaptability’ of home seems to be something exposed through absence. As Adelina said, suddenly being somewhere with no pre-existing social relationships makes one realize how built up (and precious) past social relationships were. This reflects ideas that Gertrude and Frieda’s stories both brought up. For Adelina and Constanze, displacement came with a more conscious awareness, or even narrative, of family and space.

Reflections

When I first set out to write this ethnography I thought I would look at migrants’ perceptions of Germany. But when I interviewed Frieda, I was impressed by how much of a *story* she had, so I decided to shift to how people told stories about Germany. However, having read some Abu-Lughod and completed this ethnography, I would now say this is about how people tell stories of migration experiences and how larger factors might influence storytelling. Recent political history is one of these factors: migrants heavily influenced by postwar events underwent transition and displacement in different ways when compared to students in a globalised setting (Pine 2014: S97, Nnaemeka 2007: 127).

Especially fascinating to me is how the magnitude and quality of one’s displacement seems to correlate to how and how much one narrativizes one’s life. For example, language provided one of Frieda’s and Adelina’s biggest transitions and therefore became a dominant theme. For Gertrude, Adelina, and Constanze, great familial and social displacement became a way of developing ideas of home and

belonging. Perhaps, to once more follow Abu-Lughod (1991: 100), one could read this ethnography as an allegory of how storytelling is symptomatic of displacement, how ethnographies themselves convey the ethnographer's displacement relative to his or her world. After floundering to figure out what I was writing about, I suspect that writing ethnography is artisanal (*ibid.* 150-1), for it comes from an ethnographer's confusion and the resulting desire to narrativize, to tell stories and make sense of our lives and our world.

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