Migrant Narratives

Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community

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Narrative – Writing Syrian lives: From xenophobia to conversation

Scene 1: A young Syrian man in his twenties, Allaa Faham, is moving around his apartment. He is handsome and well-dressed in an ironed shirt and dress pants. The apartment is well furnished and functional; it looks like an average German middle-class home, not like a student's apartment. Having made himself a cup of tea, the young man is about to throw away the teabag. On the floor, there are two garbage cans. The one on the right is wrapped in a bin liner, with a face painted on it. This way, the garbage is able to show its emotions. The young man lovingly looks at it and throws his teabag inside. Immediately, the garbage can starts frowning. Realizing his mistake, he takes the teabag back out and removes the metal staple and paper tag. It is only then that the garbage can starts smiling again. At dinner, the garbage can is sitting across from the young man at the dinner table, happy and content. He lovingly feeds it bits from his own plate (*5 Sachen die ich in Deutschland liebe* 2017).

Scene 2: Allaa Faham is about to enter the bedroom of his apartment. He is all dressed up, apparently about to go on a date. He is carrying a bunch of flowers, still wrapped in plastic. He looks excited and a little nervous. When he opens the door, to his dismay, he finds his roommate Abdul Abbasi in bed with another person, whose face we cannot see. Glued on top of this person's face, there is a picture of Björn Höcke, a leading politician of the German right-wing party, AfD. Looking at Allaa Faham, who is still standing in the doorway, we realise that it was with Björn Höcke that he wanted to go on a date and that apparently, Höcke has left him for his roommate. Even as Abdul gestures to him that things are not what they seem, Allaa Faham turns around and leaves, throwing away the flowers (*5 Sachen die ich in Deutschland liebe* 2017).

Scene 3: Abdul is sitting on his sofa, lovingly staring at the screen of his laptop, which he has placed next to him on the sofa. He is watching a soundless video of Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor. While he is watching Merkel speak, he is simultaneously texting on his cell phone: "Hi Mrs. Merkel. You are online. Please reply me". Abdul turns and exits into the backyard where he

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starts dancing, waltzing around and around to a romantic tune which can be heard in the background. He is lovingly looking at his dance partner: Angela Merkel (*Syrian Stereotypes in Deutschland* 2016).

Scene 4: Allaa Faham is sitting on a bench, alone in the woods. He is looking straight into the camera. His face seems serious, strained. This expression is supported by the music, which seems to evoke a tragic or at least pensive mode. Allaa Faham seems to be looking directly at the viewer, his face entreating, almost pleading. He starts telling a story: his story. Allaa Faham tells the audience that he wants the German public to overcome their fears of Syrian refugees. He assures them that he and his fellow refugees came to Germany not for economic or personal reasons, but because they were trying to escape from war, from uncertainty and insecurity. If this were possible, he tells his audience, they would return to their home country immediately, since everyone yearns for the country they grew up in. He pleads with the German public to let go of their fears of, and, prejudices towards, Syrian refugees (*Eine Nachricht* 2015).

Scene 5: Abdul Abbasi is lying on the sofa, relaxed. His girlfriend, a young white German woman with long dark hair, is sitting on a chair, looking at Abdul. We see her face only in profile. While Abdul is talking, being carried away by his emotions, his girlfriend is listening to him, only occasionally interjecting something. Abdul is telling her a story about how he imagined her long before he met her. The image of the moon is a constant metaphor in everything he says. When he decided to emigrate, he tells his girlfriend, he was thinking only of her. "But you didn't even know me then", she objects. He brushes this objection aside, continuing to think of metaphors which describe his love for her. The camera and sound now change to fast-forward mode, suggesting that this will go on for minutes, even hours. As the camera and sound resume normal speed, Abdul is still on the same topic. In the moon, he tells his girlfriend, there is a little box. In this box, there is his heart, which he is now offering to her. It is only then that he adds, "And can I go hang out with my friends tonight?" (*Wenn eine Deutsche mit einem Araber zusammen wäre* 2016).

Scene 6: Abdul Abbasi is sitting in the front row of a group of Syrian refugees. They are men and women, all of them young. Some men have beards, others are clean shaven. One of the women is wearing a head scarf. They have carefully arranged a group pose, as if posing for a class photo in a yearbook. Many of them are smiling into the camera. While we are still looking at the overall arrangement, trying to take in all the faces at once, Abdul Abbasi begins talking. This time, he is not talking to a general German public, but to the members of the AfD, the German right-wing party "Alternative für Deutschland" ("An Alternative for Germany"). In what he says, he seems to be anticipating the replies or reproaches that members of this party might address at Syrian refugees. "Hi, AfD", Abdul says, smiling good-naturedly into the camera, "this is the refugee crisis speaking. It's us, the parasites, the

alleged tourists, or however your followers prefer to call us". Abdul's face, as he is facing the camera, is calm. He is not angry but reassuring. He simply wants to talk. "You may be surprised", Abdul says, looking straight into the camera, "that we are addressing you in German. . . . No, this is not a unique case standing in front of the camera here. Many of us have learned to speak German, some even speak Bavarian. Many of us work, or are in an apprenticeship, and very many of us study at the university. Among us, there are tall and short people. There are even twins!" His words seem to reflect the diversity of the group of fellow refugees standing behind and next to him. They all continue to look into the camera, as if to reassure the audience that there is nothing to fear. Each face seems to tell a different story. As the viewer is still oscillating between the different faces in the group of Syrian refugees and Abdul, Abdul resumes speaking. He tells the imaginary members of the AfD that in fact, they should be grateful to them, the Syrians. Without them, Abdul notes, the AfD might never have been elected to Parliament in the first place. He has now come, Abdul says, to offer the AfD a deal: Now they have made it into the German Bundestag, the members of the AfD might actually reciprocate and give something to the refugees in return. Instead of only talking about the refugees, they may want to talk with them for a change. His last word to the AfD strikes a note of reassurance: "We do not bite" (*Flüchtlinge schicken eine wichtige Botschaft an AFD* 2017).

Methodological reflections – Syrian lives on YouTube: From ethnography to autoethnography

All of these scenes are taken from a series of videos by Syrian YouTubers Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham. The video series entitled "GermanLifeStyle" contains videos which are either in Arabic or German, with Arabic and German subtitles. Their goal is apparently simple: The two YouTubers, Syrian refugees who are now enrolled as students at German universities, want to teach their fellow refugees about the particularities of German culture. While these particularities may sometimes seem bizarre – such as the German obsession with waste separation – Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham suggest that in order for Syrian refugees to be integrated into German society, it is essential that they master the German codes of conduct. Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham thus appear to be mediators between the German mainstream public and the refugees. In the current German debate on the so-called "refugee crisis", which ultimately caused German chancellor Angela Merkel to step down as the chairwoman of the "Christian Democratic Party" ("Christlich-Demokratische Union", CDU) and to declare that she will not be up for re-election, such a translation may be more important than ever. In the heated debate in which some say German society is being "swamped" by refugees who refuse to comply with the written and unwritten codes of German culture, "GermanLifeStyle" functions as a form of decoding, for Syrian refugees, of their "alien" surroundings. The two young YouTubers have since published a book titled "Eingedeutscht" ("Turned

into a German") and, in an official ceremony, have even been awarded the German "integration medal" ("Integrationsmedaille") by Chancellor Angela Merkel herself.

As a researcher moving into the interpretation of this material, I am aware of the need to position myself with respect to the texts that I analyse. When I came across "GermanLifeStyle", purely by accident, I was aware that I was not part of the intended audience. At the same time, because of my own immigrant background and my academic training in cultural studies, I found myself curiously drawn to these YouTube videos. The more often I watched them, the more I became aware that their youthful antics and slapstick humour might be a form of camouflage for a message that was much more complex. I wondered whether it was possible to view the YouTube videos of "GermanLifeStyle" as a highly intricate form of refugee ethnography or autoethnography (Ellis *et al.* 2010). As Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich (2018, p. 4; insertion added) points out: "Narrative analysis as such emerges as a useful tool to reflect on how we deal with stories . . . . '[The] stories are co-composed in the spaces between us as inquirers and participants'". This causes me to reflect on my own position as I am reflecting on Abdul Abbasi's and Allaa Faham's YouTube videos. Trying to reflect on my own subject position in watching these clips, I am intrigued by how the videos create and speak to multiple audiences. What would it mean to be an outsider and insider in these narratives, respectively? And what forms of experience would the "inside" correspond to? The daughter of an Indian father and a German mother, I have reflected on questions of marginalisation and privilege all my life. I have felt simultaneously on the inside and the outside of many migrant narratives. I grew up in Germany in an academic family, but all my life, the migrant side of my own history is one that I feel most at home in. I find myself drawn to stories of unbelonging, of having to improvise new homes and forms of belonging. It is this aspect of "GermanLifeStyle" that I cherish in Abbasi's and Faham's stories, for all the dissimilarity of the migrant and refugee experience that they focus on. At the same time, I am acutely aware that my own subject position entails the risk of obfuscating the differences between their story and my own.

Once I have explored my own subject position as I look at these clips, I need to consider the questions that might be asked of this material. In this context, a reading of video clips as ethnographic documents would serve a number of purposes. First, it would enable us to have access to self-representations by refugees which we would otherwise be unable to see. Given the specificity of media representation, YouTube videos can be seen as a highly democratic and broadly accessible form of self-representation. While the publishing or film industries often feature gatekeepers such as reviewers and editors, who may only allow for a certain range of opinions, such gatekeeping is absent for YouTube videos. Yet, this does not mean that these videos are "unfiltered": They should not be taken simply as "authentic" representation of migrant subjectivity. Rather, they constitute a visual performance of the self.

It is here that the concept of "autoethnography" may be particularly fruitful. In their description of this paradigm, Ellis *et al*. (2010; emphases original, my insertion) have stressed the relationship between lived experience on the one hand and, on the other, the theorising of this experience in the form of autoethnographies: "When researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from . . . a particular cultural identity. However, . . . an autoethnographer must [also] 'look at experience analytically'". An ethnographic perspective on "GermanLifeStyle" may enable us to ask a number of interrelated questions: To what extent do Abdul Abbasi's and Allaa Faham's videos constitute a form of autoethnography on the part of Syrian refugees? What function does the apparent self-mockery in these videos serve? Could self-mockery be a form of empowerment? And to what extent do these videos deliberately blur the line between migrants and refugees?

At the same time, we need to take into account the constructedness of these narratives. This is particularly true of the relationship between visual material and narrative. As migrant ethnographies or autoethnographies in the form of video clips, these representations visualise migrant experience even as they "tell migrant stories." At the same time, it may be interesting to consider the notion of genre. What genre could these video clips be subsumed under? In this context, it may be noted that they seem to fit a number of genres at once. They alternately function as a form of advice literature directed at the YouTubers' fellow migrants or refugees. In what relationship does this genre of advice literature stand to migrant ethnography or autoethnography?

One of the central questions that these video clips pose is the relationship between migrant self-representation and viewer expectations. By foregrounding the fact that these migrant stories are staged and have been deliberately scripted and arranged for a mainstream German public, the clips may defy the audience's expectation that there are unfiltered stories about migrant lives "as they really are". In the analysis of the clips, it is hence central to unpack the notion of authenticity. In their constant self-mockery, the video clips of "GermanLifeStyle" may sabotage the audience's desire for taking voyeuristic pleasure in migrant pain. One of the predominant styles in the clips is the style of slapstick. Many of these stories seem to be the antics of male youth, complete with occasionally homophobic puns and allusions.

An analysis must hence take into account the complexity of this material. Here, it could be argued that the apparent simplicity of the style (the humour that is often crude, the slapstick style) serves as a way to camouflage the complexity of the narratives that these clips tell about migrant lives. This may also be true of the use of affect in these clips, or rather, their refusal to generate particular forms of affect. By refusing to subscribe to the tragic mode, these visual narratives refuse to cater to the mainstream public's willingness to pity these migrants for the hardships they have endured.

Finally, it is important to investigate the role of the title of this series of video clips: "GermanLifeStyle." The title might also serve to turn the notion of

migrant ethnography on its head. In complete contrast to this expectation, the clips pretend to provide an ethnography of German lifestyle, not of migrant lives. At the core of this confusion of identities, the blurring of lines between the migrant and the host society, there may be a complete reversal of power relations. The migrant or refugee may resist the expectations of a mainstream German audience which wants to learn the "truth" about migrant lives and may go on to confront this audience with the "truth" about their own lives. Rather than focusing on migrant lives as obscure and potentially threatening, it is the "German lifestyle" which becomes enigmatic and has to be decoded by migrant ethnography. Seen from this perspective, the relationship between migration and ethnography may be turned on its head by the Syrian youtubers Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham.

In order to answer these questions which can be brought to the material, we need to reflect on the methodologies that we use to "decode" or "read" these clips. To tease out the full complexity of the YouTube clips "GermanLifeStyle" as a form of migrant ethnography, we must employ different registers. We must subject these clips to both visual and narrative analysis. It is also necessary to investigate how these clips invoke certain genres (migrant documentary, slapstick comedy, advice literature), and how they may go on to sabotage the expectations triggered by these genres. This sabotaging may also consist in the mixing of multiple genres. Moreover, the use of humour may be central for understanding the particular form of autoethnography that is at the heart of "GermanLifeStyle". The use of humour, it could be argued, is diametrically opposed to the emotions that we associate with representations of migration, particularly with forced migration and the stories of refugees. Humour may serve multiple functions here: It may stress the idea of migrant resilience and survival. In "GermanLifeStyle", humour may also serve as a means to resist the tragic mode which may be expected by the viewer. By focusing not on scenes of pain and misery, but on the youthful antics of young Syrian men, these video clips refuse to tell stories of victimisation.

In terms of methodology, I am thus intrigued by how the repertoire of very different disciplines – migration studies, ethnography, narrative and cultural analysis, film studies – can be combined to unravel the complexity of "GermanLifeStyle". I would in fact argue that the sophistication of these clips lies in the fact that such a combination of fields and methodologies is necessary, in order to do justice to the complex narratives these clips tell. Ultimately, it can be claimed that Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham do not so much tell a migrant or refugee story, than tell us what story we want to be told. The central element of their sophistication, I argue in this chapter, is their awareness of the different frameworks through which their bodies will be read. By refusing to tell a single and "authentic" migrant or refugee story, Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham turn their own bodies – as migrant bodies – into an enigmatic sign that needs to be decoded.

This "decoding" and the ways in which it is being sabotaged by "GermanLifeStyle" is also true about the "autobiographical" content of the

clips. Even as Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham appear under their "real" names, they must nonetheless be seen as embodying particular roles. We must hence consider the forms in which they play with the autobiographical mode while at the same time, subverting this mode. Here, there may be a tension between the autobiographical and the ethnographic, on the one hand, and the performative, on the other. The former, it could be argued, imply that the clips as migrant narratives "document" migrant life in its "reality". The understanding of "GermanLifeStyle" as migrant *performance*, on the other hand, would tend to subvert this reality effect. The interplay between autobiography, ethnography and performance may hence be crucial for reading Abbasi and Faham's YouTube clips.

A cultural studies perspective, combined with questions of life writing (Jolly 2015, Hornung and Heinze 2013), may thus add different layers of analysis to the interpretation of immigrant lives. In migration studies and social science research, YouTube clips have been recognised as a form of ethnography (Kurtz *et al.* 2017). However, the methodology of cultural studies may add to these studies by stressing the performative dimension in which migrant stories are being told. Cultural studies may complement qualitative analyses in the social sciences by focusing on questions of aesthetics, genre, camera style; they may investigate the genre characteristics which come with certain modes of representation (comedy, tragedy, slapstick) and the expectations which these genres evoke in the audience.

Moreover, we might also employ performance and embodiment studies to analyse the clips of "GermanLifeStyle". How do these clips play with the physical presence of male migrant bodies? It is hence also important to consider aspects of sexuality and desire when interpreting these clips. Both Abbasi and Allaa Faham will be seen as attractive by a German public, and it is this "visual pleasure" (Mulvey 2009) that they seem to play with in the way they stage their own bodies as the bodies of young, male migrants from Syria. It may thus be no wonder that some of their clips are concerned with romance: In videos such as "Flirting in Arabic", they teach a German audience, presumably a white male German audience, how to romance white women. In this context, the clips can also be seen to tease German right-wing movements about their own sexual insecurity. Focusing on the staging of Syrian male bodies in "GermanLifeStyle", we may thus also inquire how these bodies are being staged as Middle Eastern, male, and desirable. This in turn may invite questions about the gendering of the audiences that Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham address in and through their video clips. How, then, are the two Syrian YouTubers "doing community" in their narratives, and what are the audiences that they may appeal to?

Analysis – Autoethnography as "doing community": Resisting the xenophobic gaze

As ethnographic documents, the videos by Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham accomplish three purposes in particular. First, they serve as a form of advice

literature for the YouTubers' fellow refugees about how to come to terms with their alien German surroundings. Second, they can be seen as "doing" or creating community for Syrian refugees. Third, the YouTube narratives may prove essential in terms of identity formation for both the migrant community and the German mainstream.

In order to determine how these YouTube clips create community and "do" identity, it has to be noted that the clips are highly complex performances. A central part of this complexity may be the video bloggers' multiple audiences. While on the surface, the videos seem to be a cultural manual for other refugees (the German equivalent of the Amy Vanderbild *Complete Book of Etiquette,* or a moral and cultural manual for Germany's growing refugee population), their cultural translation can in fact be seen as a two-way process. Not only do they translate "German lifestyle" for Syrian refugees but, either in German or through German subtitles, they also explain Syrian cultural habits to Germans. In this latter vein, the videos target not one, but two German audiences. First, they are aimed at entering a conversation with the German public, which is often unaware of the refugees' cultural background and the complexity of their culture. Second, the videos are a direct message to Germany's right-wing party, "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD). The two young Syrian video bloggers casually inform right-wing politicians like Björn Höcke that if it had not been for them, the refugees, the AfD might not have been so successful in both local and state elections, given this party's fuelling of anti-refugee sentiment.

The video clips described above are emblematic of these multiple strategies. To Syrian refugees, as well as to refugees and migrants from other parts of the world, Germans' emphasis on waste separation may often seem bizarre. Yet, on a political level, the first video clip about Allaa Faham's date with his garbage can for organic waste could not be more complex, nor could it be more subversive. A key argument which, in the current German debate, is often raised as a reason to stop immigration and to close the nation's doors to refugees is the claim that the members of these communities will not be able to assimilate to German mainstream culture. It is against this backdrop that "GermanLifeSyle's" demonstration of the bloggers' acute awareness of every tiny detail of German culture must be seen. In the video, Allaa Faham not only tosses his teabag into the garbage can for organic waste, but he even knows that he needs to remove the metal staple before doing so. While seeming to be mere slapstick on the surface, "GermanLifeStyle" in fact evinces the bloggers' complex mastery of German cultural signification. In this context, humour is a key means to defuse xenophobia. Right-wing politicians such as Björn Höcke are the butts of many of the bloggers' jokes. While in keeping with the adolescent humour of the clips, the video about Abdul Abbasi's lying in bed with Björn Höcke is clearly homophobic, it will nonetheless hit a nerve when watched by members of the far right: Part of Höcke's own agitation especially against male refugees from Arabic countries has been his invocation of the threat of "Arab masculinity". In Germany, as elsewhere, right-wing movements have portrayed refugees, especially Arab men, as potential rapists; they have also warned

against intermarriage between white German women and Arab refugees. The AfD party's slogan "Germans – we make them ourselves" (with a visual of a pregnant white German woman lying on a park bench with her head in the lap of her white male German partner) can be seen as being directed towards the fear of interethnic marriage.

Reading the YouTube videos of "GermanLifeStyle" through an ethnographic framework (Kurtz *et al*. 2017) hence evokes "ethnography" in all its different meanings. In the origins of the discipline, ethnography – as the description of peoples (Breidenstein 2012, p. 29) – was often seen as the portrayal of "different" or "foreign" cultures, often from the perspective of a Western observer. The method of "thick description" (Geertz 1973, Berg and Fuchs 1999) served as means to suspend all forms of value judgement (Breidenstein 2012, p. 29): The "other" culture was to be described in all its cultural detail, but these details were not to be judged or dismissed as strange, peculiar or bizarre. If this is the essence of cultural ethnography and thick description, "GermanLifeStyle" can actually be shown to marshal all these elements in the defence of refugee subjectivity against increasing German xenophobia. It presents its multiple audiences with a "thick description" of German culture, complete with the strange practice of waste separation. While such practices may seem strange to Syrian immigrants or refugees, the thick description – through the use of the garbage can's own emotions – humorously refrains from judging these practices. The same is true of the autoethnography contained in the videos. Once again cloaked in humour, the YouTubers explain the intricate details of Syrian culture to a German public, to which many of these cultural practices may seem alien. Moreover, the stance which these videos implicitly demand is one of reciprocity: If Syrian YouTubers' thick description of German lifestyle refrains from value judgements, so must German viewers' observation of the Syrian refugees' thick description of their own culture. In this vein, Abbasi and Allaa Faham can be seen as subverting the ethnographic paradigm: In these clips, it is German mainstream culture which is under scrutiny. In these clips, the migrant becomes the ethnographer, and refuses to be studied by the "ethnography" of the German public.

Central to this analysis of "GermanLifeStyle" as a form of migrant self-representation is the use of humour. Humour and the constant role of self-mockery are tightly interwoven. The clips can be seen as constantly making fun of the migrant inability to understand the complex codes of German culture (and not only the grammar of the German language). In clips such as the one about the *Mülltrennung*, the migrant subject laughingly admits his ignorance of these cultural codes; yet, he also simultaneously highlights the absurdity of some of these codes. While this may be controversial with regard to German waste management – since this is not so much a cultural habit than a practice to ensure sustainability – it is true of other instances in different clips where Allaa Faham describes his attempts to order products over the phone or make a doctor's appointment. It may be interesting to wonder here whether humour is used to sabotage other genre expectations and expectations in style.

One of the most central aspects in migration studies has been the question of assimilation. In different cultural and national contexts, and certainly in Germany, migrants have been called upon to assimilate to the German cultural norm". In fact, much of anti-immigrant rhetoric has evoked the spectre of the alleged "inassimilability" particularly of migrants from Islamic countries. Migrant narratives have stressed the pain inherent in having to abandon one's own cultural practices, religion, or lifestyle (Spikes 2020). It is characteristic of "GermanLifeStyle", and the specific ways in which it tells migrant or refugee stories, that it refuses to cater to what may, in fact, be a voyeuristic expectation of migrant pain on the part of German mainstream public. Instead of focusing on migrant pain, Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham resort to humour as a complex strategy of sabotage: They resist the call, by the German dominant culture, for migrant assimilation by humourously describing the migrant's painstaking attempt at mastering even the most bizarre of German cultural codes. In keeping with "GermanLifeStyle's" sabotaging of the codes of ethnography, the clips confound the power hierarchy between "native" cultures and the culture of the ethnographer. Inequalities of power have traditionally been at the heart of the ethnographic paradigm (Ellis *et al*. 2010). In Abdul Abbasi's and Allaa Faham's YouTube videos, on the other hand, it is the "native" or immigrant who becomes the ethnographer, and it is German mainstream culture which is studied in all its oddity. The target audience for this immigrant ethnography of the host culture, clearly, are the YouTubers' fellow refugees. Ethnographic paradigms can thus play a twofold role in analysing "GermanLifeStyle": They can highlight the ways in which these YouTube videos are simultaneously a migrant ethnography of the dominant German culture and a form of autoethnography. Not incidentally, the turn to autoethnography has itself been born of a legitimation crisis in the history of ethnography (Ellis *et al*. 2010).

This is a framework which is continually emphasised by the two Syrian YouTubers. As Abdul Abbasi puts it in one clip, rather than talking about the refugee crisis, it may be more instructive for the German public to talk to migrants and refugees themselves. Autoethnography hence enters the debate as an attempt, by migrant or refugee subjects themselves, to turn the tables and to reframe the debate on what is known in Germany as the "refugee crisis" ("Flüchtlingskrise" 2015).

One of the central questions which could be brought to the analysis of "GermanLifeStyle" is the idea of creating community. Arguably, the clips create different kinds of communities. The sophistication of the YouTube videos lies precisely in addressing all of these communities at once. The clips function as a form of "advice literature" for migrants and refugees who are trying to come to terms with their alien surroundings. This function is especially fulfilled through the use of subtitles: For an Arabic-speaking audience, the clips provide advice about how to master German bureaucracy, and how to deal with administration. However, it could also be argued that this function of advice literature is undermined by the humour and mock-ethnography used

in most of these clips. Rather than being a how-to-manual on how to survive in a bizarre German cultural landscape, the clips can be said to create community by sympathising with migrant ignorance about these strange cultural practices. It could also be noted in this context that the clips self-consciously stress the idea of language learning. Since many of the clips are in German and have Arabic subtitles, they can be used by migrants and refugees as a form of German language practice. In this context, it can also be suggested that one of the central moves made by "GermanLifeStyle" is that it deliberately blurs the line between migrants and refugees. Even as some migrants, by virtue in having been in Germany for a longer period of time, may be more familiar with German cultural and social practices, they may continue to be struck by the oddity of some of these practices. In this sense, too, "GermanLifeStyle" may create a sense of community among migrants and refugees. Ellis *et al*. (2010) have elaborated on the role of autoethnographies for community building.

Looking at Abdul Abbasi's and Allaa Faham's YouTube videos through the framework of autoethnography research thus helps us to understand and highlight the complexity, and the complex grafting, of these visual narratives. It may also be noteworthy here that community building is related to the dialogic framework of these clips. Not only do Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham interact in many of the videos, they are also shown in conversation with their friends and fellow community members. As Ellis *et al.* (2010, italics original) go on to note, "*Interactive interviews* provide an 'in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics' . . . . Interactive interviews are collaborative endeavours between researchers and participants".

In conclusion, it is important to analyse precisely what form of community is created through "GermanLifeStyle". It can be argued that these autoethnographic narratives create two forms of communities: First, they help create and consolidate a refugee community, particularly of Syrian refugees in Germany. Second, however, they can also be seen as building a larger group alliance between migrants and refugees. In this latter context, Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham's YouTube videos may actually strike a nerve in the German public debate. Political discussion has often hinged on a separation between migrant and refugee lives, to the extent of refugees being played off against immigrant communities, who may already have become well established in Germany. One of the most disturbing aspects about the reception of "GermanLifeStyle" by different audiences in Germany concerns precisely this aspect. In internet posts and social media, Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham sometimes have been harshly criticised by Germans of migrant descent, who stress their dissimilarity from the two Syrian YouTubers. One user, Magnone Agostino, posted a comment to an interview that Abdul Abbasi gave on a national talk show, the Anne Will show: "ist eine Frechheit ein syrer der kaum deutsch kann. Darf hier studieren u. stelt Ansprüche. U. alles auf kosten d. st. Zahler." ("is an insolence a Syrian who hardly speaks German. Is allowed to study here and makes claims. And everything at the expense of taxpayers"). It

is noteworthy here that the language employed by the user criticising Abbasi for taking advantage of the system, even though he hardly speaks German is characterised by a large amount of both grammar and spelling errors. Criticism such as the one voiced by Magnone Agostino is also concerned with the high degree of media visibility gained by the two YouTubers: Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham have been seen by German mainstream media as model migrants, an idea which has not least been made explicit in their being awarded the "Integrationsmedaille" ("integration medal") by Chancellor Angela Merkel. In this context, it may be useful to investigate the different media that Abbasi and Allaa Faham employ: While their clips may be viewed by migrant and refugee communities, their book seems to cater to a German mainstream public. This difference in audience may also have a class dimension and concerns matters of accessibility. While the book is written entirely in German, the clips are easily accessible on YouTube and have subtitles in German and Arabic. One question which might give rise to future research is the interplay between different media here: In fact, if the videos sabotage the idea of documenting migrant lives, the book may at first be read catering to the documentary mode by telling the story of successful assimilation. The fact that this strategy "works" would then be documented by the book's winning the integration medal. However, this impression turns out to be incorrect at a second glance at both the book's title and its cover: If a mainstream German middle-class audience expects a migrant or refugee story, they will be disappointed. The book cover does not sport "Arabic" images or writing, thus catering to an exoticist mode, but is covered entirely in the colours of the German flag. This may easily be seen as a way of "overdoing" Germanness. As performers of refugee and migrant identity, Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham can in fact be seen as "doing Syrian identity" and "doing German identity" at one and the same time. The emphasis on the "doing" identity here stresses the constructedness of both these identities (Hirschauer 2014). The idea of "overdoing Germanness" is also implied by the title of the book, "Eingedeutscht" ("turned into a German"). Here, too, humour serves as a subversive strategy of migrant empowerment. What the book gives us, is not the pain of having to assimilate to German cultural norms, but the "joy" of having been given the stamp of approval of successful assimilation. Not incidentally, the cover image also features a wooden stamp, thus invoking the omnipresence of German bureaucracy in granting or invoking cultural, social and political belonging.

At the same time, humour can be seen as a form of sabotaging expectations (Gonzalez and Gibson 2015, 7). Moreover, what is key in this context is the question of audience expectations. In their book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer have linked human rights discourse to the ways in which stories of human rights violations must be told. They argue that in order to support human rights campaigns against, for instance, female genital mutilation, the general public expects gruelling stories by the victims of human rights violations. These stories, they claim, must follow a specific pattern: they must portray the victim (often from the Global South) as being

in dire need for help from Western organisations. In order to evoke this need for support, stories must be narratives of victimisation, and they must cater to specific affects, such as empathy or even pity (Schaffer and Smith 2004). This question both of victimisation and of particular affects, may well be applied to the contexts in which migrant stories are being told, and the way in which they are being told. It could be argued that "GermanLifeStyle" subverts precisely this expectation. Through the use of humour and even slapstick, they resist what can amount to a voyeuristic pleasure in migrant pain. Only one of the clips described in the first section of this chapter, "Scene 4" does not seem to be in keeping with this sabotaging of expectations. This is demonstrated not only by the content of the narrative told by Allaa Faham, but also by the filmic style (camera, setting, and music). It is here that "GermanLifeStyle" seems most overtly ethnographic in the sense that Allaa Faham is providing the audience with his reasons for fleeing from Syria, and assures them that if the circumstances permit, he would willingly return to his home country. However, it has to be stressed that this clip, too, is staged. The performative aspect of this "documentary" mode, which is evoked by the clip, is heightened precisely by the fact that it is so out of keeping with the signature style of the two Syrian YouTubers. Since each clip is part of a series, it will necessarily be read by viewers as being in conversation with the other clips in the same series. Rather than being seen as the "real" mode of representation, it is hence this documentary style which will appear staged, since it is so incongruous with the humour of virtually all other clips. The "GermanLifeStyle" clips by Abdul Abbasi and Allaa Faham counter xenophobia with humour. They choose a different style in order to tell stories about migrant lives. For all the humour inherent in these filmic narratives, we may do well to take these stories seriously.

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