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Transnationalism in Contemporary German-language Fiction by Nonminority Writers

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In recent years transnationalism has become fundamental to debates across the social sciences and humanities as scholars wrestle with the interrelated phenomena of economic globalization, mass migration, the unprecedented expansion of travel and tourism, and the universalizing immediacy of the internet and new communications technologies. Setting contemporary flows of people, ideas, information, capital, products and lifestyles around the globe in their historical context, researchers essentially agree that what we are witnessing today is both quantitatively and qualitatively new and emphasize the impact of these cross-border currents on the way individuals “place themselves” in a world in which identities and cultures do not relate exclusively to fixed territories but are increasingly mobile, selected according to taste or necessity, hybrid, or even virtual. As Steven Vertovec puts it: “Yet today these systems of ties, interactions, exchange and mobility function intensively and in real time while being spread throughout the world” (3).

This article’s innovation is to consider the ways in which this present-day transnational reality figures in contemporary German language fiction by what – with obvious reservations, not least the assumption of an absent homogeneity, a majority culture, or even Leitkultur – might be termed nonminority writers. Its starting point is the striking focus in recent analyses of German-language fiction on Turkish-German writers in particular as transnational agents journeying back and forth between an imagined Germany and imagined spaces elsewhere – excellent work has been done by Leslie Adelson, Azade Seyhan, Tom Cheesman, B. Venkat Mani, and others – and the equally striking fact that far less has been done on nonminority writers with regard to their literary representation of the social, cultural, and psychological dislocations, adaptations, and new departures associated with the multidirectional permeation of impulses and perspectives across national borders as they experience it differently, or, more likely, in both diverging and overlapping ways. Venkat Mani’s Cosmopolitan Claims is unusual insofar as it sets a nonminority writer, Sten Nadolny, alongside Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoğlu (and the

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Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk), but still more work remains to be done on a very much wider range of nonminority writers.

This paucity of scholarly work on nonminority writers in relation to transnationalism seems to be an important gap for at least two reasons. First, nonminority Germans are routinely imagined, perhaps without any further thought, as “settled,” that is, as an indigenous population in relation to which “others” need to locate, or, more often, assert themselves. As Regina Römhild reminds us, however, in the transnational era “the ideal of fixed territories of culture turns into a fiction, and mobility becomes the common ground for the proliferation of diasporic life-worlds, cultures and identities.” Nonminority Germans, in short, are as itinerant as anyone else. And second, for all that the scholarly literature on “hyphenated-German” writers, for want of a better term, rightly underscores exclusion there is frequently a more or less theorized presumption that the migrant’s “inherent” transnationalism may also open up certain possibilities. Thus, for James Clifford, minorities living in diaspora may profit from the “empowering paradox” that “dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there” (322). With regard more specifically to minority authors in German, Mani summarizes two forms of benefit frequently believed to accrue to their work: the “re recuperation of lost tongues and idioms through the migratory experience” described in Seyhan’s analysis on the one hand and, on the other, the “gains that are made when migratory tales signal interventions in the history and culture of the host nation” identified by Adelson (Mani 18). Indeed, as far as culture is concerned, whether defined broadly as social practice or more narrowly as artistic production, migrants are often assumed to play a vital role in creative forms of “syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation and hybridity” that are highly valued in the present moment (Vertovec 7). Certainly, as Cheesman suggests, Germany’s minority authors, its “naturally cosmopolitan migrants,” are lionized as the country’s only hope of competing in a global market in which hybrid voices are in demand (“Akçam” 182).

Of course, the argument that it is sometimes possible to profit from being positioned as a “naturally cosmopolitan migrant” writer is as potentially problematic as it is potentially emancipatory. Indeed, it may ghettoize minority authors and, once again, fix the assumption that such writers position themselves, as subalterns, only in relation to a “majority culture.” Here, Adelson’s notion of the “vague linkage” to be found in some recent German-language fiction between “‘things Jewish’ and ‘things Turkish’” (“Touching Tales” 93) and Sander Gilman’s recognition of “the parallels between Jewish and the Muslim experience” (65) usefully remind us that diverse minority groups may define themselves in relationship to one another as much as they define themselves relative to a “dominant” culture. A striking example of this is Maxim Biller’s short novel Esra (2003; see Taberner, “Germans”). Equally, there is a risk that the elite status achieved by a particular author may be taken to mean that institutionalized discrimination no longer exists for the majority
of migrants. Returning to this article’s present interest in nonminority writers, however, the fact that the publishing industry and the media tend to regard minority authors as uniquely able to mediate between Germany and the wider world most likely reflects an implicit belief that peculiarly “German” factors make their nonminority colleagues less marketable as transnational, or less likely to write transnationally in any event. First, it seems that nonminority writers are perceived not to be globally networked by a (continuing) history of (post)colonialism or, with a few notable exceptions, through large, self-consciously diasporic communities in other countries. This may be understood to be a lack, both in terms of commercial opportunities, that is, the ability to ride the current wave of interest in transnational narratives about diasporic lives or postcolonial encounters, but also, more profoundly, with regard to the enduring anxiety, expressed in repeated debates since 1990, that today’s German-language writing is hopelessly provincial. Second, and perhaps predictably, the legacy of National Socialism seems to stand in the way of nonminority authors who might wish to make Germany accessible to the world, or the world accessible to it. Thus, the obligation to reference the discourse of remembrance marks them as singular and fixed, by nation and history, rather than as transnationally polyvalent and perforative – even when the German past can be “marketed” globally, through films such as Hirschbiegel’s Der Untergang (2004; see Cooke) or books such as Schlink’s Der Vorleser (1995), its “essential” Germaness is generally reasserted and rarely challenged.

Yet nonminority authors do nonetheless both experience and write transnationally. In so doing, they continue a long tradition in German-language letters of engaging with the wider world. Gottsched, Gryphius, Wieland, Winckelmann, Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, and others, down to the present day, to Günter Grass and newer writers such as Ingo Schulze or Christian Kracht – all have traversed and translated foreign cultures while probing fixed notions of “Germanness.” Indeed, the inelegant qualifier “German-language” already implies the transnationality of the object of study, reflecting the instability of German borders over the centuries; the spread of German speakers across multiple states; the fluidity of what has been taken to constitute the German language; and, most obviously, the use of German by writers born without German citizenship, for example, Kafka, Canetti, or, more recently, Ilija Trojanow, author of the bestseller Der Weltensammler (2006), and Saša Stanišić, the Bosnian immigrant best known for Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert (2006). Of course, the ways in which this venturing across and beyond borders expresses itself in fiction in any given period are shaped by the cultural and historical conditions that shape the contexts of production and reception. In the work of nonminority authors, therefore, a conventionally “German” story of belated statehood, contested modernity, exceptionalism, genocide, and ambivalent postnationalism patterns their engagement with today’s transnational epoch and enjoins them to produce localized narratives of a global phenomenon. Minority writers also engage with this overdetermined
history – Margaret Littler has examined texts dealing with the Nazi period by both minority and nonminority authors “that deterritorialize memory” (177), and Andreas Huyssen has noted that diaspora populations may “migrate into other pasts” (79) – but their purchase is perhaps a little different, insofar as the German past might appear to them to be not so much an ethical imperative as an ethnically coded marker of who is a “real” German, burdened by the Holocaust but also part of the community of remorse and self-overcoming.

The remainder of this article focuses on three important topoi relating to the phenomenon of transnationalism that are prominent in a wide variety of contemporary German-language writing by nonminority authors. These are: 1) travel to places with a historical connection to Germany and the attempt to re-imagine in fiction a now largely defunct German diaspora in North and South America and parts of Africa; 2) travel more generally from the German province to regions characterized either by a daunting metropolitan self-confidence or by an enviably self-assured parochialism; and 3) the “transnational value” of German culture, that is, its contribution to a world culture but also its ability to interact creatively with contemporary processes of cultural interpenetration. In offering here close readings of a small number of texts (by Hermann; Kehlmann; Stadler; Treichel) and a larger number of supplementary examples demonstrating the prevalence of transnational motifs in writing by nonminority writers (prominent among them Delius; Kracht; Mosebach; Schneider; Schulze; Sebald; Walser), this article will establish broad parameters for future research into an intrinsically fascinating but as yet generally overlooked aspect of contemporary German-language literature.

In recent years, much work has been done on the German Empire’s brief colonial history from the late nineteenth century until the defeat of 1918, often with an emphasis on continuities in racist and exploitative mentalities with National Socialism and on the political and cultural echoes of the period after 1945 (see Friedrichsmeyer; Perraudin). In literary studies specifically, scholars have fashioned a canon of texts from the precolonial and colonial period – for example Karl May’s stories of foreign adventure – the pre-Nazi and Nazi era – for example Hans Grimm’s Volk ohne Raum (1932) – and from contemporary writing, for example, Uwe Timm’s Morenga (1978), typically applying postcolonial theory to explicate the subsequent trajectory of what Susanne Zantop has described as Germany’s precolonial colonial fantasies. More mainstream authors such as Kleist, Goethe, Fontane, Raabe, and Kafka have been reread (see Dunker). With regards to contemporary fiction in particular, Paul Michael Lützeler has edited several volumes on what he has termed the “postkolonialen Blick,” including analyses of texts by Nicolas Born, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Peter Schneider, Hans Christoph Buch, Uwe Timm, Hubert Fichte, Luise Rinser, Grass, and Kracht, with a broadly positive, occasionally undifferentiated understanding of recent authors’ perspectives on the “Third World,” including former German colonies but also other
regions beset by the legacy of western colonialism more generally, and by neocolonialism, corruption, and civil war, from the 1960s to the present time.

For the most part, this scholarly work tends to concentrate on nonminority writers’ representations of the “other”: Buch’s vision of Haiti’s revolutionary history and its impoverished present in his “Haiti trilogy” (1984; 1990; 1992; see Uerlings), for example, or Grass’s India (see Shafi). Much less has been done on the significant subgroup of fictional texts that attempt to re-imagine Germany transnationally, that is, as a presence, whether as historical trace or a more contemporary attendance, within other cultures, and other histories, permeating beyond its borders even as it absorbs influences from elsewhere. Such texts make a major theme of a yearning for a present-day “diaspora consciousness” (Vertovec 5–6) to compensate for the affiliative and affective connections to the wider world that the Nazi campaign of conquest and genocide caused to be terminated. Indeed, a diaspora consciousness of this kind might make possible the “dual or multiple identifications” that are so highly valued in the transnational era and that can offer what Stuart Hall has called an “imaginary coherence” for a set of malleable identities” (228). Literature, in effect, is called upon to create a virtual diaspora that is as “real” as the virtual diasporas that now populate the internet (see Landzelius) but perhaps attached to a more conventional notion of “national culture” rooted in language and tradition. As might be expected, this literary invocation of diaspora consciousness most often returns to places with a significant history of German migration or residence: German colonies in southern Africa in Olaf Müller’s *Tintenpalast* (2000) and Stephan Wackwitz’s *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2003), for example, or formerly German provinces in the East in Thomas Medicus’s *In den Augen meines Großvaters* (2004) and Walter Kempowski’s *Alles umsonst* (2006); German settlements in Eastern Europe in Herta Müller’s “German-Romanian” fictions; North America in W. G. Sebald’s story of the German emigrant Ambros Adelwarth in *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) and Thomas Meinecke’s *The Church of John F. Kennedy* (1996); or Argentina in Arnold Stadler’s bleak reworking of Bruce Chatwin’s travel writings, *Feuerland* (1992). In fiction at least, nonminority writers might thus hope to become “naturally cosmopolitan migrants” too and escape their fixedness in a space and history forever defined by the Nazi past.

The immediate setting for Judith Hermann’s short story “Rote Korallen,” from the collection *Sommerhaus, später* (1998), in which a nameless narrator tells of her great-grandmother’s fragile beauty and the love that she inspired, is established with some precision as St. Petersburg in the run-up to the 1905 revolution. The background to this tale of great passions and bitter disappointments, on the other hand, remains out of focus and largely outside of the narrative frame but can easily be imagined to be the longer history of German immigration to Russia from the time of Catherine the Great to the late nineteenth century. Thus, the young woman’s husband is an engineer, brought to Russia to modernize the country, as so many Germans were in the
era of Czar Catherine – herself born of Prussian nobility – and is keen to assimilate. His wife, though homesick for her native Schleswig Holstein, takes a Russian lover, becomes pregnant by him, and gives birth to a daughter. It is only the revolutionary upheaval of 1905 that causes her to flee Russia, thereby foreclosing the story of renewed German-Russian symbiosis that might have followed. For the great-granddaughter, in fact, everything that comes after her great-grandmother’s return to Germany pales in comparison to the heady mixing of cultures, of the familiar and the exotic, experienced by her distant relative, including her own life, in which probable anorexia stands in for a metaphysical emptiness – “Ich fühlte mich wirklich so dünn und mager” (“Rote Korallen” 11) – and interminable introspection confirms her retreat from the wider world inhabited by a woman who died long ago but whose vitality overpowers the present: “Ich interessierte mich ausschließlich für mich selbst” (20).

In the final episode of the narrative, the great-granddaughter visits her boyfriend’s therapist in an attempt to free herself of her melancholia, or at least to resolve the question she asks at the outset of her tale: “Ist das die Geschichte, die ich erzählen will?” (11). Frustrated by the failure of the session, she throws the red necklace passed down from her great-grandmother at the analyst, causing it to break apart and, to her mind, to release the memories contained within its red corals, including St. Petersburg, the rivers Neva, Luga, and Narva, her great-grandmother, and the Jewish retainer Isaak Baruw, who accompanied her to Germany, her lover Nikolaij Sergejewitsch, the Black Sea, the Caspian, the Aegean, the Gulf, and the Atlantic Ocean (28). Littler proposes that this may be a “deterritorialising” gesture that releases the narrator’s “identity from the specific coordinates of her genealogy” (190). Yet it is equally possible that this is the story that she has desired to tell all along, an affective appropriation of the past that in fact reterritorializes within a diaspora consciousness a family history that has become stranded and gives her a sense of locatedness that she lacks in the Federal Republic. The memories that are discharged by the narrator’s act of dramatic self-liberation do evoke her great-grandmother’s singular experiences in St. Petersburg. Yet they also allude to a larger narrative of which her great-grandmother’s may be merely emblematic. This is a story of migration, settlement, and further migration, in which memories of her great-grandmother’s life in St. Petersburg flow, by way of the rivers Neva, Luga and Narva – topographically impossible but metaphorically justified – down to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, that is, to regions that had long been home to the Volga, Crimean, and Black Sea German communities and that would remain so until Stalin’s collectivization programme of the 1920s, the forced relocations in 1941, and the postwar expulsions. Just as significant, the flow of memories continues beyond the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, each landlocked or almost landlocked, to the Aegean, the Gulf and the Atlantic Ocean – thus to the wider world.

At the close of “Rote Korallen,” it is left open whether the trace memories of such transnational mobility, so distant from the modern German experience
since the self-inflicted disaster of Nazism, can lead to anything other than to the despondency endured by Hermann’s young German narrator. We assume that she remains in Germany and that her melancholic fixation on her great-grandmother’s German-Russian romance continues. Of greater import for this discussion, however, is the text’s adumbration of a particular constellation of mood and desire that appears across contemporary nonminority narratives. The longing for an affective substantiation of a diaspora consciousness that might enable transnational axes of opportunity and creativity, of familiarity and exotic encounter, is thus thwarted by an overinternalization of a modern, and more specifically post-Holocaust rationality. This identifies any quasimystical understanding of kinship and culture – and indeed affect itself – as suspect. A paralyzing melancholia thus pervades not only Hermann’s narrative but also a text as utterly different in style and storyline as Stadler’s *Feuerland*. Here, the protagonist travels to Patagonia – the destination of Volga Germans migrating onwards in the late nineteenth century – to celebrate a supposedly premodern culture of existential authenticity amongst the *germano argentinos* that has been replaced in the Federal Republic by a passionless modernity, only to discover that everything is as “wie zu Hause” (Stadler 84). Worse still, his yearning to experience in unmediated fashion, to feel awe, fear and pain directly, is disrupted by the intrusion of his critical self-consciousness: “Ich hätte erschaudern können, doch wies mich meine eigene grausame Herkunft in die Schranken” (51). A comparable response to the inherited horror of the past – an “eigene grausame Herkunft” – drives Sebald’s alter ego as he narrates the tale of his emigrant great-uncle, Ambros Adelwarth, in *Die Ausgewanderten*. This story tells of transnational travels through Europe, Turkey, Asia Minor, and Jerusalem – the point of departure for the “original” diaspora – and describes the psychic collapse of Ambros and his Jewish employer and companion, the playboy Cosmo Solomon, as Europe disintegrates into petty nationalisms in 1913/14. The narrator too is afflicted by a form of melancholia transmitted down through the generations as his efforts in the present day to trace his great-uncle’s steps are confounded by a painful awareness of the impossibility of ever recovering the easy cultural mixing that Ambros had enjoyed before the traumatic onset of the “Age of Extremes” (Hobsbawm) and, inextricably linked, the end of the German-Jewish symbiosis that he and Cosmo had appeared to embody.

A similar reading may be derived from texts such as Medicus’s *In den Augen meines Großvaters*, in which the narrator’s longing for the pine forests in formerly German lands east of the river Elbe is superseded by his forensic examination of his grandfather’s complicity in Nazi crimes; or Meinecke’s *The Church of John F. Kennedy*, where attempts to recover a German diaspora in the United States are undercut by the protagonist’s reflections on the racist potential inherent in ethnic identifications; or Kempowski’s ironic deconstruction in *Alles umsonst* of his own fantasy of a harmonious German diasporic presence in East Prussia before the “intrusion” of Nazism (see Taberner, “Memory-
Work”), and others besides. In many cases, the temptation to suggest a causal link back to an “original German victimhood” – the driving-out of Germans from Eastern Europe after 1945 and the severing of diasporic links in the wider world – is present, but for the most part it is resisted. The warning written into Grass’s dystopian postunification novel Unkenrufe (1992), in which a well-intentioned but ultimately sinister German repopulation of western Poland is contrasted with the beginnings of a more benign Bengali diaspora, is thus not realized.

The true reason for Germans’ expulsion from the transnational networks inhabited by others is in fact implicated in the texts themselves, as memory trace, uncanny presence, or juxtaposed subplot. It may be possible to find refuge from the place in which Nazi crimes were conceived in a re-imagined diaspora consciousness, but it is not possible to erase their historical consequences. The narrator’s self-alienation in “Rote Korallen,” for example, most likely appears trivial to her fish-grey boyfriend, the great-grandson of the Jewish retainer Isaak Baruw, who, Littler suggests, “shows no interest in the ‘Petersburg stories,’ probably because the fate of Baruw’s remaining family had been infinitely more disastrous” (190). Stadler’s narrator, likewise, observes that he was born only ten years after the closing of Dachau, “einen Steinwurf weit von der Außenstelle der Geschichte” (Feuerland 97). And Sebald’s work, of course, from Die Ausgewanderten to Austerlitz (2001), intertwines stories of German and Jewish migration, expulsion, and exile, while always maintaining the distinction between the rightful expectation that a Jewish diaspora consciousness might recover and flourish once again and the self-critical awareness that Auschwitz has rendered the resumption of the German transnational experience, in anything resembling its previous form at least, impossible (Taberner, “German Nostalgia”). By the close of Austerlitz the Kindertransport refugee Austerlitz has been able to piece together at least some of his transnational story, having gone to Prague to recover elements of his mother’s story and, miraculously, his Czech mother-tongue. Just as poignant are the final pages of the text where the German narrator reads from Dan Jacobson’s Heschel’s Kingdom (1999), an account of the South African novelist’s travels to Lithuania to re-imagine the world of his grandfather and to trace the lives of relatives killed in the Holocaust. Unlike Austerlitz and Jacobson, for the narrator there can be no viable journey back to a German diaspora, even in fiction – his onward migration at the end of the book is circular, leading back to the concentration camp at Breendonk, which he had first visited several decades, and almost four hundred pages, earlier in the mid-1960s.

Characters in contemporary German-language fiction travel not only to parts of the world with a historical connection to Germany, of course, but also to places where they hope to escape German history entirely. North America features in a number of texts, such as Kathrin Röggla’s really ground zero (2001), like Ulrich Peltzer’s Bryant Park (2001), a narrative set in New York around 11
September 2001, and the title story of Hermann’s *Nichts als Gespenster* (2003). Conversely, in Schneider’s *Eduards Heimkehr* (1999) and Dagmar Leupold’s *Nach den Kriegen* (2004), protagonists return from long stays in the United States and introduce an acquired global perspective on Germany’s parochial concerns. These works, and others, continue a tradition of literary engagement with America reaching back to Ernst Willkomm’s *Die Europamüden* (1838). From the postwar period, the four volumes of Uwe Johnson’s *Jahrestage* (1970, 1971, 1973,1983) and Peter Handke’s *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (1972), in which a German narrator’s observations on America reflect back on the Federal Republic, may offer a model for recent works. In other contemporary texts, destinations are more varied, itself an indication of the multidirectionality that characterizes the transnational era. For example, in Hermann’s *Nichts als Gespenster*, all but one of the stories are set outside Germany, in locations ranging from Iceland to Paris, Prague, Venice, and the Caribbean to the *Hotel International* in Austin, Texas. For the protagonist of Thomas Lehr’s *Nabokovs Katze* (1999), erotic encounter is to be found in Mexico, whereas Kracht’s *1979* is set in Iran at the time of the revolution, and many of the stories in Katrin Dorn’s *Tangogeschichten* (2002) take place, as might be expected, in Buenos Aires. Hans-Ulrich Treichel’s *Der irdische Amor* (2002) is situated in Italy, as is Schneider’s *Skylla* (2005), picking up a literary tradition extending back to Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* (1816–17), whereas Egypt is the setting for Treichel’s *Menschenflug* (2005). In Martin Mosebach’s *Die Türkin* (1999), the protagonist follows his love interest to her family’s origins in Turkey; in his novel *Das Beben* (2005), the destination is India. Stadler’s alter ego in *Ausflug nach Afrika* (2006) travels to Guinea-Bissau in an attempt to escape the modern world, and, in his *Eines Tages, vielleicht auch nachts* (2003), the protagonist travels to Cuba in order to flee a childhood in Vienna overshadowed by family connections to the Nazi past and domestic abuse, while in *Komm, gehen wir* (2007), Roland and Rosemarie are both quickly seduced by the unfamiliar self-confidence of an itinerant American on the island of Capri. Juli Zeh explores war-torn Bosnia in *Die Stille ist ein Geräusch* (2002), and the Caribbean, African countries including the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, and Bosnia, Chechnya, Cambodia, East Timor, and Pakistan feature in essays and fictional works by Buch.

Numerous issues are at stake in these works, which are only a selection of the rich variety of texts featuring travel in contemporary German-language writing. For example, much of the pop explosion of the late 1990s is motivated by the intuition that Germany is not “where it’s at,” with “cooler” destinations invoked by musical choices – the British band Massive Attack in the title story of the Hermann’s collection *Sommerhaus, später* or Oasis in Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre’s *Soloalbum* – or actual journeys, such as in Karen Duve’s *Dies ist kein Liebeslied* (2002), in which the anexoric protagonist travels to London in pursuit of unrequited love but also to escape the tedium of her life at home. In some of this pop literature, but elsewhere too, the search for the latest
“cool” destination is tempered by an underlying critique of mass tourism and a
globalized consumer culture, for instance, Kracht’s “travel guides” Ferien für
immer (1998), Der gelbe Bleistift (2000), a collation of reports for the Welt am
Sonntag on western visitors’ predilections in Asia, and Gebrauchsanweisung
für Kathmandu und Nepal (2009), Elke Naters’s Mau-Mau (2002), which
tells of five friends who holiday on a paradise island comparing suntans but
are unable to repress feelings of profound emptiness, or Matthias Politycki’s
cruiseship travelogue In 180 Tagen um die Welt (2008). Just as often, Ger-
man history catches up with the protagonists attempting to flee the past in
foreign locales. In Treichel’s Der irdische Amor and Der Menschenflug,
the protagonist’s recovered story of his family’s wartime expulsion from
East Prussia, explored in Der Verlorene (1998; see Taberner, “Hans-Ulrich
Treichel’s Der Verlorene”), continues to haunt him. In Schneider’s Skylla,
similarly, a member of the generation of ’68 visits Italy, as the main character
of Schneider’s post euphoric rumination on the failure of the student movement
did in Lenz (1973), and seeks to assess the extent of his complicity in the
revolutionary violence of that era. Finally, F. C. Delius’s Bildnis der Mutter
als junge Frau (2006) presents his mother’s sojourn in Rome in 1943 within a
broader consideration of German culture’s implication in fascism, and Mexico
is the escape Delius’s protagonist chooses not to embrace in Mein Jahr als
Mörder (2004), resolving to stay in Germany and confront the Nazi past.

Of particular interest here, however, are texts in which protagonists desire a
more transformative experience of transnationalism. Although just as suffused
by the German past as the novels by Treichel, Schneider, and Delius mentioned
above, Sebald’s alter ego in Die Ringe des Saturn (1999) nonetheless attempts
to create a mesh of transnational interrelationships as he walks through East
Anglia during a bout of severe depression, juxtaposing Albrecht Dürer with
Thomas Browne, Swinburne, Chateaubriand, Conrad, Borges, and Rembrandt,
and relating Jerusalem to China and the Congo, and these and other places
to the Norfolk Broads (see Walkowitz). This is transnationalism imagined as
a facility, as the ability to move with ease within a plurality of cultures seen
to intersect even as each of them is also experienced as singular. It is what
Delius’s mother markedly lacks in Bildnis der Mutter als junge Frau, despite
her exposure to Rome’s lacework of cultural influences (see Taberner, “From
Luther”). A facility of this kind is not simply a form of cosmopolitanism (see
Beck), it is important to note, in which individuals are equally at home in
different places. Nor is it the hybridity discussed by postcolonial scholars or
a facile multiculturalism in which respect for difference may undermine the
idea of universal values. Rather, it may resemble the “enlightened relativism”
(see Sikka) of Herder’s Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der
Menschheit (1784–91). Here, the eighteenth-century philosopher – often dis-
missed as a völkisch forerunner of Hitler’s racism – argues that every nation
has its own specialty (or “genius”), that all are valid, based on common human
values, but that each possesses its own form of expression. As Carl Niekerk
puts it: “By assuming a common origin of all human life in spite of its manifest
diversity, Herder successfully combines notions of universalism and cultural
relativism, identity and difference” (148). Certainly, this is what is longed
for in Daniel Kehlmann’s Die Vermessung der Welt (2005), in which Herder
is evoked (111) in the context of Alexander von Humboldt’s travels in South
America and Central Asia: the desire to discover universal principles across
cultures while also endeavouring to emphasize what is uniquely German.

This is an “ideal” transnationalism that is in fact undercut in both Die
Ringe des Saturn and Die Vermessung der Welt – the focus on what is “German”
shows Germany to be more singular than desired (the Nazi past) or may
promote a rather mystical vision of “Germaness.” Less ambitious, in contrast,
is the protagonist’s desire in Treichel’s Tristanakkord (2000) to simply be able
to “fit in” amongst the global elites he meets as he travels between Germany,
America, Scotland, and Sicily in the service of the composer Bergmann. Like
the author himself, as set out in numerous of his essays, Georg is defined
by the lack of a shared family narrative of the past – so traumatized are his
parents by their suffering during the war that they cannot connect with their
son – by an overwhelming sense of the shaming provinciality of his upbringing
in a West German backwater, and by his ensuing introversion (see Taberner,
“‘sehnsüchtig-traurig und unerlöst’”). Georg, then, has “zuviel Emsfelde und
zuwenig New York” (Tristanakkord 190) and is thus painfully ill-at-ease
when abroad. In America, for example, he is unable to generate appropriate
responses to obvious questions, replying “‘It’s okay’” in his impoverished
English when the right answer would have been: “‘It’s just great’ oder ‘it’s
marvellous, it’s wonderful’” (121). During the same visit, he repeatedly reveals
his parochialism and lack of experience, for example, when he is convinced
that a taxi driver is out to cheat him, having read that this is typical in New
York, and when he is terrified of a black man with a ghettoblaster: “Er kannte
den Typ aus dem Kino, es war der Typ Ghettohäuptling, der hochempfindlich,
sehr leicht kränkbar und nachtragend ist” (127). For all his globetrotting, in
fact, Georg is handicapped by his “kleinliche emsländische Natur” (126),
lacking the worldliness of his arch rival Steven, an English Ph.D student who
also travels in Bergmann’s entourage.

Treichel’s protagonist lacks the “transnational facility” that would allow
him to move between Europe and America with ease and to be culturally
competent in all places. Worse still, he is marooned, as it were, between
radically different self-images. On the one hand, Georg is attracted to the
superficiality and ahistoricity of the modern-day global celebrity culture – he is
disappointed that none of Woody Allan, Madonna, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or
Paul McCartney will be guests along with Bergmann on a New York chat show:
“Er hatte sich auf Berühmtheit gefreut” (155) – but his “emsländische Natur”
makes it impossible for him to become one of the “glückliche und erfolgreiche
Menschen” (123) who populate this universe. On the other hand, he has cut
himself off from memories of his provincial upbringing to such an extent that
his German past now appears inaccessible, stranded on the other side of his own Lethe, the river Ems, or “der Strom des Vergessens” (17). Yet this past might have been the source of a (to him) authentically German creativity to set against the fake transnationalism of the (largely American) consumer society to which he is both drawn but also unable to internalize. This would have been a form of creativity rooted in melancholia and sentimentality, to be sure, but it might in any case have validated his untimely introspection. The “lack” at the core of both his personality and family history might have been ennobled as a kind of neoromantic resistance to a contemporary global culture of manufactured contentment. As it is, Georg is so far removed from this heritage that he is not even able to recognize Wagner’s Tristan chord when he hears it. He fails, then, to appreciate the quintessential “German” mood – “sehnsüchtig-traurig und unerlöst” (79) – as it is most famously rendered by the quintessential German composer. All he is able to do is imitate. He produces poor versions of Beethoven and Hendrix (again he is stranded between different worlds) and copies copiously from a Georg Heym poem when asked by Bergmann to write text for a new piece of music (215–16). Most pathetic is his aping of Goethe’s Werther, who, so he gushes, “[sich] dann als der größte Künstler fühlen konnte, wenn er sich in die freie Natur begab, auf einen Hügel setzte und die Sonne aufgehen ließ” (29). Georg’s feeble crush on Bergmann’s assistant Mary can never move the reader as Werther’s tragically misguided adoration for Lotte surely does.

In some postcolonial theory, particularly in the work of Homi Bhabha, imitation may be re-imagined as mimicry, as a strategy of resistance on the part of the colonized subject who, in over-performing the role of subaltern, creates a moment of slippage that reveals the myths of solidarity and equal opportunity deployed to mask the essentialist ideology of racial superiority underpinning the imperial enterprise. In Tristanakkord, however, imitation has no such function. On the one hand, Georg’s performance of the part ascribed to him in global consumerism’s fantasy of democratic access is woefully inadequate and simply exposes him to ridicule. On the other hand, any hope of achieving a truly transnational facility, of being at ease both across cultures and in his own, is demolished by his baleful lack of a German heritage that he can genuinely inhabit rather than merely fake. Unlike his employer Bergmann, who has left behind his own “emsländische Herkunft” (23) and has successfully adopted the manners of the global elite, including ostentatious displays of wealth, throwing tantrums when the wrong whiskey is served, and competing for media time with his rival Nerlinger, Georg remains, at the end of the novel, in limbo.

A similar limbo characterizes Georg Klein’s Libidissi (1999), in which cultural hybridity offers resistance to the homogeneity of the global consumer society but, as the price of this hybridity, the Goethe Institute is destroyed (Taberner “New Modernism”), and Kracht’s Faserland (1995), in which the protagonist travels through Germany to Switzerland in search of “ein Teil
Deutschlands, in dem alles nicht so schlimm ist” but regrets the absence of a German tradition to set against the superficiality of international brands (Faserland 151). At the same time, these works, and others such as Schulze’s Simple Storys (1998), Andreas Neumeister’s Gut laut (1998), Frank Goosen’s liegen lernen (2000), or even Grass’s Im Krebsgang (2002), which may be as concerned with the threat posed by the internet to German literary forms as it is with an apparently nationally bound memory discourse (see Veel), also point to a different, if related, dimension in which nonminority writers engage with today’s transnational reality. This has less to do with whether Germans can feel at ease amongst their international peers than with the “transnational value” of German culture itself, with its recognizability, commerciability, and global reach. More important still, it has to do with the extent to which any specifically “German” contribution can be identified within the processes of cultural interpenetration that define the transnational era. In a good number of these works, the focus is relatively contemporary, framing either East Germany (in Simple Storys) or West Germany (in Gut laut and liegen lernen) as parochial places that nonetheless inspired a sense of belonging, unlike the post-1990 Federal Republic with its bland globalized homogeneity. In others, the historical range is longer, stretching back before 1945 to periods of famed German creativity or global prominence such as the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the rise of German power after 1870, or the Weimar Republic. Kehlmann’s Vermessung der Welt, for instance, is set in the age of Goethe, Schiller, and Humboldt. In Martin Walser’s Die Verteidigung der Kindheit (1991), Alfred pursues his “Pergamon Altar project,” invoking German preeminence in archaeological excavations of the ancient world at the end of the nineteenth century, in a vainglorious effort to recover traces of a still earlier time when some German states opened out to the world, that is, the baroque glories of Dresden before it was devastated by Allied bombing in February 1945. The Weimar Republic, on the other hand, features above all in recent Berlin novels such as Peltzer’s Alle oder keiner (1999), many of which explore the changed meaning post-1990 of iconic Weimar locations such as the reconstructed Potsdamer Platz (see Gerstenberger).

Frank Schirrmacher’s newspaper polemic “Idyllen in der Wüste oder Das Versagen vor der Metropole,” published on 10 October 1989 just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, is typically overshadowed by his criticisms of Christa Wolf the following summer and by his and Ulrich Greiner’s dismissal on the eve of unification of East and West German literature as compromised by excessive moralizing. However, “Idyllen” may be of greater significance for the debates on German literature’s “transnational value” that took place throughout the 1990s. Developing Karl-Heinz Bohrer’s critique of West Germany’s provincialism, Schirrmacher thus dismissed contemporary writing as “staubig, unsouverän, nachgeahmt, kurz: epigonal” and, contrasting present-day authors with the “Dichter der literarischen Moderne” (23, 18), claimed that it was unequal to the task of portraying the modern human
condition. This was an attack that resonates with conservative writers such as Walser, Stadler, Botho Strauß, and Mosebach, who although they might choose models other than modernism, perceive today’s German fiction to be largely imitative, cut off from its traditions and reduced to producing pale copies of more “metropolitan” literatures. Thus, a greater sense of a German tradition was required. For authors of the left-liberal mainstream, Uwe Wittstock’s prognosis four years later that German fiction had deviated “ab in die Nische” addressed a similar concern that German culture was widely seen as as “unsinnlich und weltfern” (10) but offered a different solution – German writers should aim for the “readability” supposedly underpinning the global success of their Anglo-American peers and deliver books that would entertain.

In “real” works of fiction, of course, things are more complicated. Some texts reference writers of yesteryear as a means of celebrating and promoting German culture at a time when, post unification, the Federal Republic had been released from its enforced superpower tutelage into a world that, from the end of the Cold War, was rapidly globalizing. Walser’s *Die Verteidigung der Kindheit* is an obvious example, and yet its nod to Kafka most likely signals that the author conceives of this German canon as simultaneously inherently transnational (see Mathäis). The same is true of Walser’s *Ein springender Brunnen* (1998), which alludes to Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin, but also to Stefan George, who went into Swiss exile and was friends with Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Hofmannsthal, and evoking as well the Persian poet Zarathustra (BC 628–551), who inspired the other great German influence on the novel, Nietzsche (Taberner, “Manifesto”). Stadler and Mosebach similarly privilege a German literary and philosophical tradition – Nietzsche and Heidegger are common sources – while also embedding this tradition within its transnational context. Both Stadler and Mosebach have written essays on German authors such as Kleist, Stifter, Hebbel, Brecht, Celan (a Romanian Jew), and Doderer – just as Walser has a substantial body of work on his precursors from Goethe to Kafka and beyond – but both also express nostalgia for the religious and cultural transnationalism of a traditionalist Catholicism now largely absent in Germany. Stadler’s *Mein Hund, meine Sau, mein Leben* (1996), for instance, reworks the author’s journey to Rome from the southwest German province to become a priest, and the transcendence of the Roman liturgy is celebrated throughout Mosebach’s fiction. Somewhat different, but with a similar emphasis on German writing’s transnational trajectory, is Sebald’s work. He turns repeatedly to Walter Benjamin, invoking a German-Jewish heritage, but also creates new connections between German and other literatures, for example in *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990), in which he juxtaposes Stendhal und Kafka, and *Die Ausgewanderten*, with its allusions to Nabokov (see Kilbourn). Grass too has always set his ideal of a German *Kulturnation* within a transnational context, and he features Simon Dach, Grimmelshausen, Dürer, Fontane, and many other German artists in his fiction while drawing on
the pan-European traditions of the baroque (see Weber) and the picaresque (see Lawson).

The mood of many of these texts, with the significant exception of those by Grass, might best be characterized as outwardly combative, often mordantly ironic, with an undertone of vulnerability, even defensiveness. Germany’s literary heritage is idealized as both authentically German and productively intercultural but cannot overcome the fake global homogeneity that seems to characterize the (American) present. Yet these works also project a paradoxical self-confidence. A striking congruence of form and content, of an enigmatic, even abstruse prose style and allusions to a German tradition within which abstraction itself is imagined as intrinsic reproduces the legend of German exceptionalism. What is re-imagined in these texts is a distinctive German sensibility, within the mesh of transnational influences, from which German culture draws its dynamism and, as important, against the contemporary elimination of difference. For other nonminority authors, however, allusions to the German tradition must be concealed within literary forms that replicate precisely the “international style” rejected by Walser, Stadler, Mosebach, and others as characteristic of today’s global consumer capitalism. Here, the key issue becomes the extent to which these texts simply mimic Anglo-American “readability” or Latin-American magical realism, for example, with references to a German context merely adding splashes of “local colour.” Put differently: must the relationship between “dominant” and “peripheral” forms always be unequal? Or might such texts occasionally be able to enact a genuine transnationalism, that is, a productive conversation between and across cultures? Schulze’s adaptation of Hemingway and Raymond Carver in Simple Stories; Hermann’s recourse to the American short story in Sommerhaus, später, including her rewriting of Hemingway in “Hurrikan (Something farewell),” and Nichts als Gespenster; Klein’s allusions to John Le Carre and Graham Greene, and John Grisham in Libidissi; the widespread references to Bret Easton Ellis but also to Nick Hornby in the pop literature of the late 1990s, etc. – each of these, along with so much of recent nonminority writing, attempts to address these questions with various degrees of resolution and conviction.

Daniel Kehlmann’s Die Vermessung der Welt may be usefully read against the backdrop of Matthias Politycki’s polemic “Der amerikanische Holzweg,” published in March 2000. Writing in the Frankfurter Rundschau, Politycki bemoaned that his fellow writers seemed not only to desire to be “die besseren Amerikaner” but also “dass wir dabei bereitwillig unsere so genannten ‘nationalen’ Identitäten abwickeln, und zwar nicht, wie die gängige Schutzbehauptung heißt, zu Gunsten einer durch internationale Synthese entstehenden Welt-, sondern zu Gunsten einer weltweit vereinnahmenden US-Monokultur” (2). Die Vermessung der Welt was praised for its “lighter” (i.e. “less German”) style and was certainly a great success globally – it was translated into forty languages following its publication in 2005 (see Zeyringer) and was widely compared to Thomas Pynchon’s Mason & Dixon.
(1997) and novels by Latin-American magical realists such as Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, and Juan Rolfo (Nickel 158). Yet Kehlmann’s adoption of an “Anglo-American” readability, his emphasis on character and plot, on readerly pleasure and distraction over a “German” intellectual abstraction and formal complexity, might appear to sacrifice something of the truly transnational significance of his protagonists, the explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt and the mathematician Johann Carl Friedrich Gauß, and reduce them to clichéd personifications of the universally familiar stereotype of “the German.” On the surface at least, Humboldt and Gauß appear not as the internationally networked, globally important thinkers that they undoubtedly were, but rather as parochially German in their inability to awe at the miraculous variety of the world. “Müsse man immer so deutsch sein?,” Humboldt’s (French) travelling companion asks him, and both Humboldt and Gauß are awkward, ill-at-ease, repressed, idealistic and melancholic in alternation, and ultimately conformist (80). This stylization of two of Germany’s most important contributors to transnational culture, focussing as it does on character rather than achievements, not only appears to restate the cliché that Germans can never be at home “in the world.” It also appears to suggest that the only way that nonminority writers can hope to escape this provinciality is to rework their heritage as entertainment, to redeploy German clichés within the global market for literature, and to mimic the affirmative aesthetic of today’s consumer culture. Thus, in *Die Vermessung der Welt* Humboldt and Gauß – despite or more likely because of their “Germanness” – may resemble modern celebrities, famous not for their accomplishments but for their poorly concealed homosexuality (Humboldt), lust (Gauß), or other comic or scandalous flaws (e.g. Gauß’s hypochondria or Humboldt’s apparent intent to deceive the world about reaching the summit of Mount Chimborazo; 181).

Kehlmann’s novel appears to have as its aim the (unlikely but ultimately profitable) “celebrification” (Rojek) of its German protagonists rather than a more profound engagement with the history of science, voyages of exploration, or Germany’s place in the world, whether in the nineteenth century or the modern era. Yet even as *Die Vermessung der Welt* relocates Humboldt and Gauß within today’s globalized (“American”) celebrity craze, it also reconstructs, though far less ostentatiously, German culture’s transnational significance in the Age of Enlightenment and into the nineteenth century. Thus, a cast of other German philosophers, writers, and scientists, many of similar stature to Humboldt and Gauß, also populates the novel. Unlike Humboldt and Gauß, however, these characters are not stylized for present-day consumption, as German clichés or flawed celebrities, but remain enigmatic, as unelaborated references that gesture beyond the text to a tradition that is almost certainly unfamiliar to most contemporary readers. Allusions to Gryphius, Wieland, Winckelmann, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, and Kant, or to Lichtenberg, Marcus Herz, Abraham Gotthelf Kästner, Abraham Gottlob Werner, and August Ferdinand Möbius point beyond a modern-day fascination with Humboldt’s sexuality or Gauß’s ill temper to a
past in which German thinkers corresponded with peers across the world, translated other cultures, and felt themselves to be at the heart of a transnational community of equals. For example, Wieland produced German versions of twenty-two of Shakespeare’s plays, sparking the *Shakespeare-Begeisterung* of the second half of the eighteenth century. Gryphius, too, was a great translator of English texts, just as Lichtenberg’s notebooks of anecdotes, quotations, and sketches are modelled on the “waste books” of English bookkeeping. Kästner, on the other hand, was a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, whereas Werner attracted the attention of students and thinkers from all over Europe with his (now discredited) geological theory of Neptunism, and Möbius’s work remains highly significant in the quintessentially international field of mathematics. Humboldt, of course, far from being “typically” German, in fact exerted a much greater influence in his time on other countries than he did on his own. Many of his (French) travel accounts were translated only much later (if at all) into the German language (see Lubrich).

Following his travels in South America, Humboldt visits Washington, under construction in 1804 as the capital of the recently founded United States. In this era, it is German culture that is to be copied – Humboldt notes with satisfaction the influence of Wincklemann’s own emulation of classical Greece on the new republic’s seat of government – and American culture that remains provincial: the German rather unkindly dismisses Thomas Jefferson as a “Hinterwäldlerpräsident” (211) – in fact, the real Humboldt was somewhat taken with the third President of the United States (Schwarz). By the close of the text, however, the focal point of world culture has already begun to shift away from Germany and from Europe in general. Thus, Gauß’s son Eugen flees the wave of repression that followed the Karlsbad decrees of 1819, designed to crush the liberal nationalism embraced by many of his generation in the wake of the wars of liberation, and finds his way to America. “Diesmal sei es keine Chimäre und auch kein Wetterleuchten” (302), the narrator comments, somewhat ambiguously, once Eugen lands in the “land of dreams,” as American historian Daniel Boorstin would characterize the lure of the United States almost a century and a half later: “For the oppressed European, life in America was itself fantasy” (171). But even before he joins the swelling German diaspora in the United States, Eugen has already forgotten his heritage. During a brief stop in Tenerife he fails to recognize the massive dragon tree he sees there. Today too only the most dedicated reader would take the time to complete the reference to the arboreal wonder famously described by Humboldt in 1810 in his *Atlas Picturesque*. At the end of the book it is clear that the transnational German culture taken for granted by Humboldt is destined to be subordinated within the global dominance of America. As in *Die Vermessung der Welt* itself, traces of this legacy may persist, but most likely solely in the form of more or less exotic allusions to a now unfamiliar world or dumbed-down stereotypes of “the German.”
This article has endeavoured to make the case for a broader conceptualization of transnationalism in contemporary German-language literature to include not only minority authors but also those described—not entirely unproblematically—as nonminority writers. It has explored three ways in which Germany’s transnational present is being worked through in nonminority writing: first, as an inhibited longing to renew a “diasporic consciousness” that might enable “dual or multiple identifications” (Hall 228); second, as nostalgia for a “transnational facility” that might allow nonminority authors to feel “at home” both abroad but also within their own heritage; and third, the “transnational value” of German culture in terms of its global reach and its unique contribution to world culture. To these three themes, others might be added, for example: the struggle to reconcile a post-68 promotion of critical reason and universalism as (West) German values and, post-1990, the basis for “transnational” understanding with the proximity of ethnic conflict and atrocity in the present, made visible in the influx of refugees as well as in historical parallels, in Germany’s historical connection to many of the locations of recent slaughters, and in the challenge to Germany’s ability to live up to its ideals of tolerance and openness to the world. Here, essayistic texts by Enzensberger (Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg, 1993), Schneider (Ende der Gewißheit, 1994), Handke (Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien, 1996), and Peter Sloterdijk (Regeln für den Menschenpark, 1999) explore, albeit with different conclusions, the implications particularly of the wars in the former Yugoslavia for Germany’s positive attitude, in the abstract at least, towards multilateralism and transnationalism (see Oppen); in fiction, Juli Zeh’s Spieltrieb (2004) does the same. In literature, Mosebach contrasts his German protagonists’ internalization of a post-Holocaust emphasis on universal values with what he finds in India and Turkey (Die Türkin and Das Beben), as does Stadler in Argentinia (Feuerland), Kracht in Iran (1979), and Politycki in Cuba (Herr der Hörner, 2005). The extent to which particular authors may exploit transnational motifs to escape or relativize the dilemmas of German identity after the Holocaust or simply to boost their commercial appeal varies, and a more detailed examination of individual texts would be required to produce a suitably differentiated picture.

More broadly, the examination of transnationalism in nonminority literature, especially when reunited with the already established enquiry into writing in German by minority authors, may open up new questions and new research directions. These include the extent to which there is a German Sonderweg within contemporary world literature and the degree to which nonminority German writing is doubly coded, for a domestic audience on the one hand and for an international public on the other. Or we might explore the measure of cross-over in terms of literary strategies and themes between “majority” and “minority” authors that may be glimpsed only once we reframe all writers in German in relation to the larger transnational reality of mobility and global communities rather than simply in relation to a seemingly fixed
German context. Thus, Zaimoğlu’s _hinterland_ (2009), which marries an indebtedness to German romanticism with a self-conscious Orientalism, might have more in common than is immediately obvious with texts by ostentatiously traditionalist authors such as Arnold Stadler or Martin Mosebach, in which German culture is revealed as having _always_ been transnationally implicated, frequently productively, but oftentimes not. As a final example, we might address the (present and future) potential for a creative, even liberating process of cultural exchange in German-language fiction between nonminority and minority writers and between them and the wider world that truly goes beyond the nation while retaining some obvious connection to it. The attempt to answer these questions will require new ways of looking at German-language literature, and a renewed fascination with its multidimensionality.

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