

(Con)fusion of Identity Narratives in Sasha Marianna Salzmann's *Ausser Sich* [*Beside Myself*] (2017)ⁱ

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Introduction: (Con)fusing Categories

Identity papers, personal records and even spaces – such as public toilets, polling stations and national borders – require us to *separate* and *differentiate* between male and female, citizens and foreigners. In other words, our daily practices of differentiation demand that we place ourselves, other individuals and bodies into specific categories that often follow a mutually exclusive logic. These categories are more than simple boxes to be ticked: they affect the way we perceive ourselves and others, shaping our identity narratives.

As the field of cognitive psychology reminds us, categorisation can be defined as ‘the process of organizing sensory experience into groups’.ⁱⁱ Stefan Hirschauer, a German sociologist who has extensively engaged with human practices of differentiation, highlights the importance of the act of seeing to this sensorial and cognitive process: categorising is the result of a ‘classificatory subsumption of individuals through *observation* in social categories’ (my italics).ⁱⁱⁱ In this way, categories provide frameworks of interpretation of a complex reality which would otherwise be too overwhelming for our limited mnemonic and perceptual capacities.^{iv} As a consequence, however, the same reality is inevitably simplified when subsumed under categories: some of its constitutive elements are filtered out in the process of separation in order to tackle mind-boggling stimuli. What happens when what we *see* does not match the categories available to us? When it is not clear whether we are dealing with a man or a woman or when a foreign accent that we cannot place makes it impossible to identify where someone is from? When the categories available to us appear as fused together? What occurs when we are suddenly confused, ‘unsure about how to interpret certain stimuli’?^v

Sasha Marianna Salzmann's novel *Ausser Sich* (2017)^{vi} – translated into English as *Beside Myself* –,^{vii} offers a particularly fertile soil to explore this notion of ‘confusion through fusion’, a process that I term (con)fusion – with the added parentheses making the underlying coalescence orthographically explicit: both a *fusion* of the boundaries between the identity categories available to explain reality, and the state of confusion triggered by it in the observer/reader. After providing an outline of the novel, I will analyse three instances of (con)fusion in the text, showing how the impossibility to categorise might be a particularly productive tool to ‘queer’ assumptions about who gets to be ‘at home’ in a body, country, family.

Sasha Marianna Salzmann, *Ausser Sich* (2017)

Ausser Sich [*Beside Myself*] is a text deeply concerned with questions of belonging and identity. The novel follows the main protagonist Alissa (Ali), who emigrated from the anti-Semitic Moscow of the 1990s to Germany with her twin male brother Anton and her Jewish-Russian family. When Anton suddenly disappears and Ali receives a blank postcard from Istanbul, she sets off to the Turkish metropole in order to find him. The search for the missing brother turns into a search for her own self, a journey into her conflicting national, linguistic and gender identities, excavating in her biography and retracing the history of three generations of Soviet families. Ali and Anton overlap, separate and merge throughout this quest, a (con)fusion which seems to suggest the conflation of the two characters into a single entity and an ambivalent gender transition in which femaleness and maleness can no longer be clearly distinguished. Indeed, Ali will start her own transition to male by taking the easily obtainable testosterone shots she buys while navigating Istanbul's queer subculture. Notwithstanding her environment's efforts to pin her down to accepted categories (a 'heterosexual woman', a 'German citizen with migrant background', 'her parents' daughter'), Ali constantly evades these endeavours. Similarly, the narrative eludes the imposition of a linear account by shifting between languages, gender pronouns, temporal dimensions and between third-person and first-person narration. These sudden and unexpected alterations dislocate the readers from their position of certainty and throw them into a state of permanent confusion.

'She didn't look anything like her passport photo'. Observing (Con)fusion

In one of the first scenes of the novel, Ali arrives at Istanbul airport and experiences difficulties with her passport at the border control. The passport can be considered as an identity marker par excellence, a document congealing and breaking down who we are in categories (name, gender, nationality), determining where we are from and where we can go. Hirschauer acknowledges this correlation when he states that 'to have an identity is to consistently carry around an inner ID-card'.^{viii}

Ali's passport is used by the customs officers to identify her through *observation* ('[t]he passport officer stared for a long time' (BM, p. 7)),^{ix} comparing the identity markers of gender (female) and nationality (German) with Ali's appearance and name. However, there is something suspicious about her, something which *does not match* the document the officers are scrutinising. Ali is a rather queer appearance: she has German citizenship *but* a Russian name, she is legally a female *but* does not look like one ('[s]he didn't look anything like her

passport photo; she'd had her hair cut' (BM, p. 7)).^x The categories of gender and nationality appear (con)fused to the point that the passport/identity loses its validity and its bearer crossing the border is stopped: the officers think the passport could be fake and that the traveller might be a woman trafficked from Russia. Ali's reaction is particularly significant: 'Ali opened her mouth to say something like: 'But I'm from Berlin!' or: 'Do I look like a trafficked woman?' Instead she burst out laughing' (BM, p. 7).^{xi} Her laughter refuses *both* the officers' narratives *and* a reinstatement of the categories of origin ('from Berlin') and gender ('not a trafficked woman') listed in her passport. A clarification leading to a separation of the categories does not occur; hence, the (con)fusion is not resolved, resulting in the 'confused faces' (BM, p. 8)^{xii} of the observers/customs officers, who are unable to explain the stimuli they receive.

'A question of grammar'. Reading (Con)fusion

Another instance in which Ali rejects identity categories and (con)fusion remains unsolved is when her friend Elya joins her in Istanbul in order to persuade her to return home, abandoning the search for Anton. Elya's questions about the gender of Ali's new partner and her desire to return home are left unanswered:

'Yes, I am seeing someone'
'A he or a she?'
'*Since when has that mattered to you?*'
(...)
'Because I have to know whether to ask if *he* is so important to you that you don't want to come back. Or if *she* is so important to you.'
'*A question of grammar?*'
'Exactly.'
'Have you come to fetch me back?'
'Is that what you want?'
'Do I look like someone who needs fetching back?' (BM, p. 188, my italics)^{xiii}

Ali directly confronts the observer's gaze and their craving to categorise with the limits of their own logic: (con)fusion resists the urge to pin down gender and locate a point of departure, a 'home' to which one can return ('fetch back'), i.e. the need to constrain reality in recognisable yet restrictive forms.

Categorisation as a 'question of grammar' is what the narrative structure and language of the novel actively undermine, articulating a (con)fusion that escapes linguistic conformity. Indeed, the novel, with its shifts and twists, makes it impossible for us readers to achieve a stable alignment. We are constantly thrown back and forth between a third-person narration with focalisation on Ali (presented as 'female' and accompanied by female pronouns – as in the first part of this contribution) into a first-person perspective which persuades us to identify

Ali as the ‘female’ narrator (see, for instance, BM, p. 69). However, this assumption is broken when, in one passage, the ‘I’ refers to a beard (‘the stubble on my chin and upper lip’ (BM, p. 153)),^{xiv} dismantling our assumption that Ali is speaking, or that she is speaking as a ‘she’. In a similar passage, a third-person narrator speaks of Ali by combining her name with male pronouns, shifting grammatical accordance: ‘*Ali* squeezed the green telephone receiver (...); *he* pushed *his* fingers between the two halves (BM, p. 295, my italics).^{xv} At times, it is the ‘male’ ‘I’ of the twin brother Anton which seems to claim *his* own voice (BM, p. 241), whereas another ‘I’ claims to tell the story of ‘Ali and how she became Anton’ (BM, p. 178) – fusing the speakers together.

Additionally, the narrative adds other layers of (con)fusion as it interweaves the languages of Ali/Anton’s heritage, collapses temporalities and inserts biographical accounts of Ali/Anton’s forefathers. We, as readers, struggle both to *understand* some untranslated sentences in Russian, Turkish and Yiddish incorporated into the German/English text and to reconstruct when exactly (before, during or after the stay in Istanbul) the fragment being narrated actually happened. In other words, similarly to the customs officers at the beginning of the novel, we are thrown into a state of confusion and are constantly asking ourselves: What language is being spoken? By whom? Is it Ali or Anton? Is it a male or a female? And, as Ali encourages us: ‘since when has that mattered’?

‘They wished for ancestors like them’. Queering ‘Home’

The result of this layered (con)fusion is that no narrative can ultimately impose itself as absolute. Ali/Anton’s hopes to find clear answers about themselves by going back to a familiar origin, diving into their relatives’ biographies, prove futile. As the narrator notices, the stories that the relatives tell about themselves are contingent and highly unstable, amounting to an ‘amorphous medley (...) – things that could never have been reduced to one version of a story, or told in only one language’ (BM, p. 222):^{xvi} narratives that always exceed fixed boundaries. However, in their shape-shifting character, these (con)fused narratives allow for new stories to emerge. For instance, they enable Ali and Kato, an Istanbul friend whose gender transition inspires Ali’s own transformation, to actively create alternative family homes:

They wished for ancestors like them: uncles who’d shaved their legs and squeezed their bellies into corsages and dresses at night, aunts with shingled hair and black lipstick, strolling through the streets in suits. None of these stories had ever found its way into the annals of the family history, but they must have existed so what was wrong with inventing them? (BM, p. 113)^{xvii}

Stories that have been filtered out because they did not fit into the dominant family narrative find a way in. Indeed, as sociologist Anne-Marie Fortier argues ‘the heterosexualized model of home as familiarity – home as sameness –’, a stable unit that regulates belonging through the upholding of dominant sexual and gender categories, can be undermined by rethinking home – and especially the childhood home in the context of the family – as the

contingent product of historical circumstances and discursive formations – of class, religion, ethnicity, nation – that individuals negotiate in the process of creating home. In this sense, *home is never fully achieved*, never fully arrived-at (my italics).^{xviii}

Through a cognitive and linguistic ‘queering’ of the home, through a (con)fusion of familiarity (uncles and aunts) with un-familiarity (drag and gender ambiguity), Ali and Kato are able to re-write their family history and carve out a home of their own. This is a home capable of hosting those who do not match the (hetero)normative modes of belonging based on fixed gender and sexual categories. A home within a hybrid flux that cannot be tied to a place ‘to be fetched back to’ or fixed into a passport. Significantly, at the end of the novel, Anton cannot be found, and Ali decides to take on the brother’s name. Ali passport is lost, as he/she suddenly realises that *identity papers* – now bearing another name and another picture – will no longer have any validity: ‘he suddenly realised that his passport was no more use to him anyway’ (BM, p. 313).^{xix}

Conclusion: Political Potential?

In *Ausser Sich*, categories of gender, linguistic, national and affective belonging are entangled and fused together, a blending that undermines their purity and validity as separate entities. The result of this fusion is a state of confusion: we want to *visualise*, but the text does not allow us. Both narrative language and structure, by recombining normative images and linguistic elements into ambiguous combinations, play with the way we discern and categorise who individuals are and where they come from, pointing to the limits of our interpretative models.

For this reason, instances of (con)fusion become productive opportunities of agency and renegotiation of identity narratives not only for the characters portrayed in their efforts to articulate they own selves, but also for the readers. In their potential to directly challenge our ability to create a visual and cognitive response according to pre-established categories, these moments of (con)fusion prompt us to *see* and *think* differently, to actively imagine alternatives to our social order. They open up spaces for political imagination in which new narratives and homes emerge: narratives that cannot be pinned down to one gender, one self, one language and homes that can harbour queer (be)longings.



Picture from the theatrical adaptation of Salzmann's novel (Maxim Gorki Theater) - © Esra Rotthoff

ⁱ This contribution draws on and presents findings from my master's thesis: 'Wenn du mich anschaust – bin ich ein ER oder eine SIE?' Gender (Con)fusion in Ulrike Draesner's *Mitgift* (2002) and Sasha Marianna Salzmann's *Ausser sich* (2017).

ⁱⁱ Emmanuel M. Pothos and Andy J. Wills, 'Introduction', in *Formal Approaches in Categorization*, ed. by Pothos and Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-17, p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stefan Hirschauer, 'Humandifferenzierung. Modi und Gradi sozialer Zugehörigkeit', in *Un/doing Differences. Praktiken der Humandifferenzierung*, ed. by Hirschauer (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2017), pp. 29-54, p. 30. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

^{iv} David H. Rakison and Chris A. Lawson, 'Categorization', in *The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Psychology, Vol. 1: Body and Mind*, ed. by Philip David Zelazo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-64, p. 5.

^v Ursula Hess, 'Now You See It, Now You Don't—The Confusing Case of Confusion as an Emotion: Commentary on Rozin and Cohen (2003)', *Emotion*, 3/1 (2003), pp. 76-80, p. 79.

^{vi} Sasha Marianna Salzmann, *Ausser Sich* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017). Henceforth AS.

^{vii} The first English translation appeared in 2019: Sasha Marianna Salzmann, *Beside Myself*, trans. by Imogen Taylor (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019). Henceforth BM. In this contribution, I will use the English translation and provide the German original in the endnotes.

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- viii Hirschauer, p. 48.
- ix ‘Der Beamte schaute lange dahin’ (AS, p. 14).
- x ‘Sie sah nicht mehr so aus wie auf dem Passfoto, die Haare waren ab’ (AS, p. 15).
- xi ‘Ali öffnete den Mund und wollte etwas sagen wie »Aber ich komme doch aus Berlin!« oder »Sehe ich so aus?«, stattdessen bekam sie einen Lachanfall’ (AS, p. 16).
- xii ‘verwirrt[e] Gesichter’ (AS, p. 16).
- xiii »Ja, ich habe hier jemanden.«
»Einen Er oder eine Sie? «
»Seit wann spielt das für dich eine Rolle? «
(...)
»Es spielt eine Rolle. «
»Welche? «
»Damit ich weiß, wie ich fragen kann, ob ER so wichtig ist, dass du nicht wiederkommen willst. Oder ob SIE so wichtig ist.«
»Eine grammatikalische Frage? «
»Genau.«
»Bist du gekommen, um mich zurückzuholen? «
»Möchtest du gern, dass ich dich zurückhole? «
» Seh ich so aus? « (AS, pp. 220-221).
- xiv ‘die Bartstoppeln an meinem Kinn und auf der Oberlippe’ (AS, p. 181).
- xv ‘Ali drückte den Grünen Telefonhörer (...) er steckte seine Fingerkuppen zwischen die beiden Hälften’ (AS, p. 341).
- xvi ‘ein amorphes Gemisch aus all dem (...) was niemals nur in einer Version der Geschichte, in einer Sprache Platz gefunden hätte’ (AS, p. 258).
- xvii ‘Wünschten sich Vorfahren, die so waren wie sie. Onkel mit rasierten Beinen, die nachts ihre Bäuche in Corsagen und Kleider zwängten, Tanten mit Wasserwelle und schwarzem Lippenstift, die in Anzügen durch die Straßen spazierten. Keine dieser Geschichten hatte je ihren Weg in die Erzählungen von Familie gefunden, aber es musste sie doch gegeben haben, also was war falsch daran, sie sich zu erdenken?’ (As, p. 136).
- xviii Anne-Marie Fortier, ‘Making Home: Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachments’, in *Uprootings/Regroundings. Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. by Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier, Mimi Sheller (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 115-136, p. 131.
- xix ‘und plötzlich fiel ihm ein, dass der Pass ihm ohnehin nichts mehr nützen würde’ (AS, p. 361).