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„Aus dem Bauch heraus?" Reading Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* (1992) and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)

I Introduction

German-Turkish writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat have quite a bit in common. Both authors are immigrants: Özdamar initially came to Germany as a young woman and Edwidge Danticat moved from Haiti to the United States when she was twelve years old. Additionally, the first novels of both Özdamar and Danticat received an unusual amount of media attention in the context of two exceptional events.

In 1991 the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis was awarded to Emine Sevgi Özdamar for selected passages she had read from her novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei, hat zwei Türen, aus einer kam ich rein, aus der anderen ging ich raus*. On May 22, 1998 Oprah Winfrey, host of the famous *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, announced the selection of Edwidge Danticat's debut novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* for *Oprah's Book Club* (hereafter *OBC*). With the help of her book club Winfrey intended to promote the reading of literature to her predominantly female audience – an audience which, as Cecilia Konchar-Farr explains, „encompasses the barely middle class, the less educated, the ubiquitous audience member who hasn't ‚read a book since high school,' as well as the privileged, the college graduates, the stay-at-home soccer mom longing for intellectual stimulation" (Konchar-Farr 2004, 2).

In this article, I will explore the reception of Özdamar's and Danticat's novels in the context of these particular events. I argue that even though the two novels themselves have much in common, the processes of their reception differ substantially. The discourse surrounding the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis placed Özdamar and her text outside, or on the margins, of what is defined as *German* literature and in doing so established Özdamar as a female Turkish author winning an Austrian/ German prize. In contrast, *OBC*'s response to Danticat's text does not establish Danticat as a ‚foreign' author, rather it focuses on the text's potential for transcending cross-cultural boundaries.

II Emine Sevgi Özdamar and the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis Debate

In 1991 Emine Sevgi Özdamar became the first non-native speaker of German to win the prestigious Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis. Emine Sevgi Özdamar was born in 1946 in Malatya, Turkey. She first came to Germany in 1965 and stayed for two years working in a factory. She then returned to Istanbul in order to train as an actress and came back to Germany in 1976. Özdamar has been working as a writer since the early 1980s. Her first novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei, hat zwei Türen, aus einer kam ich rein, aus der anderen ging ich raus* is, as Kader Konuk explains, an unusual migration narrative:

> Der Roman handelt jedoch nicht von der Migration zwischen der Türkei und Deutschland, sondern von Migration innerhalb der Türkei. Die Erzählerin schildert die verschiedenen Stationen ihrer Kindheit: ihre Geburt und frühe Kindheit in Malatya, den Umzug in die Großstadt Istanbul, die Einschulung in Yenisehir und ihre Pubertät in Bursa, wo sie die Welt des Theaters entdeckt. Später zieht sie als Heranwachsende mit ihrer Familie nach Ankara und wieder zurück nach Istanbul, um von da aus nach Deutschland zu emigrieren. (Konuk 1997, 145)

At the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis event Özdamar had read selected passages from her then unpublished novel. The jury's decision for Özdamar's text was a very close call. The jury had been split and there was a run-off vote between Emine Sevgi Özdamar's selected passages from *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and Urs Allemann's „Babyficker," the provocative nature of which initiated a debate of its own. Özdamar's identity as a German-Turkish author factored into the jury's decision and into the coverage of the event on multiple levels. This becomes evident in the explanations provided by the jury members who voted for Özdamar's text:

> Ich stimme für den Prosatext ‚Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei' von Emine Sevgi Özdamar, weil er in märchenhaft zupackender Weise Bilder aus einer fremden Welt gibt und so die neue deutsche Literatur um neue Töne und Sujets bereichert. (Volker Hage qtd. in Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 167)

> Ich stimme für den Text von Emine Sevgi Özdamar (…), weil sie in dem Text etwas versucht und auch erreicht, was es bisher so in unserer Sprache noch nicht gab, in unserer Literatur: die Synthesis, das Zusammenbringen von zwei kulturellen Traditionen. Daraus entsteht für mich ein Blickwechsel, der mir alle Anerkennung wert scheint. (Marlis Gerhardt qtd. in Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 167 f)

> Ich stimme für Emine Sevgi Özdamar, die in einem polyphonen Text Elemente orientalischen Erzählens mit dem Verfahren der literarischen Moderne verknüpft und ohne falschen Exorzismus Leben und Tod, Geschichte und Ausbeutung in der Türkei des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts vor unsere Augen rückt. (Peter von Matt qtd. in Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 168)

> Ich habe Emine Sevgi Özdamar vorgeschlagen, und ich stimme für sie (…), weil ich glaube, sie hat uns wieder zu der Quelle der Erzählfähigkeit zurückgeführt, wo die Bilder so wuchernd sind, wo die Geschichte vorhanden und wo ein Respekt vor den Menschen zu empfinden ist, wo ihr ziviles Engagement zu spüren ist und wo die Metaphern, die Bilder, das Tempo und alles uns mitreißt. (Roberto Cazzola qtd. in Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 168)

Instead of exploring the ways in which the jury and the media read Özdamar's text in a more general manner, as others have done before, I will focus on the *parameters* of criticism of Özdamar's text. What are the critics' underlying assumptions that shape their statements? To what extent has the supposed relationship between Özdamar's ‚actual' identity as a cross-cultural author and the perceived ‚othernesss' of her text affected how both the jury and the reviewers approached it? Reviewing different sources related to the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis debate, including both video excerpts from the jury's discussion of the text and selected media responses, I conclude that specific processes of ‚othering' have had a strong impact on the discussion of Özdamar's text. I also aim to show, however, that a close reading reveals that some of the jury members tried hard to develop a vocabulary that does justice to the cross-cultural dimension of both Özdamar's text and her aesthetics.

The jury's treatment of the selected passages from Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and the media response both show the extent to which the critics read the text in terms of content and neglected a discussion of the literary qualities of the text. Volker Hage, for example, appreciated that the text tells stories from another world. His view is symptomatic of a general focus on the stories the text tells – and not on the more formal and aesthetic aspects of *how* it does so. Where the jurors addressed formal elements of the work, they mostly did so superficially. In the discussion of Özdamar's text, jury members compared it to both Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) and Grass's *Blechtrommel* (1959), but they appear to have treated these parallels as mere coincidences and stopped short of taking into consideration Özdamar's text within the context of the literary traditions from which those two canonical texts emerged. The discussion of the formal qualities of Özdamar's text remained so vague precisely because ultimately neither the jury members nor the majority of the reviewers tried to place Özdamar's text within a *German* tradition of writing, something the following comment by jury member Peter von Matt exemplifies:

> Ich verstehe nichts von türkischen Märchen, ich kenne die Erzähltradition nicht, in der dieser Text entstanden ist. Aber er berührt mich als voll von originalen, archaisch-altertümlichen Elementen, die in einem modernen Bewusstsein aufgefangen und zusammengefügt sind. (Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 147)

The jury's discussion of the formal characteristics of Özdamar's text remains only marginal, which is especially significant since the jury's discussion of Urs Allemann's „Babyficker,“ Özdamar's strongest competitor, was significantly

shaped by a discussion of formal elements. Incidentally, „Babyficker" in the end received the *Preis des Landes Kärnten*.

Tellingly, however, in response to the decision to award Özdamar the Bachmann-Preis, many reviewers have questioned this choice on the basis of the text's ostensibly inferior literary quality. Karen Jankowsky succinctly claims that

> [i]n this contestation of the jury's decision, critics oppose Özdamar as a moral, but aesthetically inexperienced Oriental teller of tales to Allemann as a perverted but sophisticated provocateur who pushes past the limits of literary respectability. (Jankowsky 1997, 267)

In their responses to Özdamar's reception of the prize, many critics seem to have taken the jury's neglect of the aesthetic and formal aspects of Özdamar's text as evidence that such aspects remained in any case undeserving of discussion. I argue that the critics' readiness to perceive Özdamar as a „moral, but aesthetically inexperienced Oriental teller of tales" (ibid.) might well be related to a historical tradition that associates women with nature in opposition to what is perceived as male culture, as Renate Hof describes in *Die Grammatik der Geschlechter:* „Da der Natur in *Opposition* zur Kultur ein geringerer Status zugesprochen wird, besteht, aufgrund der postulierten Nähe von Frauen und Natur, eine implizite, oft gar nicht bewußte Abwertung von Frauen" (Hof 1995, 109). Instead of engaging with the formal elements of her text as a *cultural* product, as they did with Alleman's text, critics read Özdamar's novel for content, conceiving of her text as an authentic (natural) narrative.

The jury's focus on content at the expense of form and aesthetics manifests itself in the debate's preoccupation with the text's ‚exotic' qualities. In their response to Özdamar's text jury members and journalists predominantly focused on the text's ‚exotic' or ‚oriental' qualities. Along these lines Ulrich Baron comments:

> Der Siegertext (…) zeichnete sich vor allem dadurch aus, daß er am konsequentesten gegen die hergebrachten Erwartungen an deutsche Literatur verstieß. ‚Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei' (…) kam als Knüpfwerk märchenhaft mythischer Bilder daher wie ein fliegender Teppich aus 1001 Nacht und ließ die Juroren ihre Klagenfurter Alltagssorgen vergessen. (Baron 1991)

The strong engagement with the text's ‚exotic' characteristics is particularly remarkable considering that most of the jury members and critics were trained in German literary history as well as in ‚Western' approaches to literature and literary theory. In their attempts to situate Özdamar's text in the context of its cultural and literary ‚roots' many of the critics resorted to clichés, most prominently references to *One Thousand and One Nights*, fairy tales, and Oriental story telling.

By focusing on what are perceived to be the text's ‚Oriental' elements, critics placed Özdamar outside, or on the margins of, what is understood to be *German* literature. Although Emine Sevgi Özdamar had already lived and worked in Germany for about fifteen years at the time, and despite the fact that she wrote the text in German, both jury members and journalists depicted her as a Turkish author writing in German, or: a Turkish author winning an Austrian/ German prize.

At the time, not only the supposedly ‚Oriental' qualities of her text but also the perception of her ‚ethnic' identity contributed to an emerging notion of Özdamar as a Turkish author. Indeed, the debate on Özdamar's text displays a very strong focus on her biographical background. In his review following the publication of Özdamar's novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* Joachim Sartorius writes: „Die Erzählerin (Emine ohne Zweifel, auch wenn sie ohne Namen bleibt)“ and later in the article Sartorius asserts „[e]s gelingt ihr immer wieder, diese eigene, privateste Geschichte mit der Geschichte der Türkei zu verweben (…)“ (Sartorious 1992, III). Often critics drew on Özdamar's biographical background in a seemingly positive way. However, one also finds downright condescending statements, such as when Jens Jessen refers to Özdamar's text as that of a „deutsch schreibenden Türkin, der mit folkloristischen Elementen aus der Märchentradition ihrer Heimat spielt, die von den Juroren gutmütigerweise für Surrealismus gehalten wurden“ (Jessen 1991, 33).

An overwhelming majority of the jury members and newspaper critics engaged with Özdamar's text in terms of its relationship *to* German literature, suggesting that the text itself was produced outside the discourses of that literature. During the jury's discussion of Özdamar's text Karl Corino stated:

> Ich postuliere indes, daß diese Literatur für den deutschen Sprachraum insgesamt in den nächsten Jahren, Jahrzehnten immer wichtiger werden wird. Diese Literatur, die sozusagen von den Rändern herkommt, – und das ist möglicherweise ein problematisches Bild –, kann der manchmal doch etwas dürren deutschen Sprache neues, frisches Blut zuführen. (Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 149)

Significantly, Corino not only identifies cross-cultural literature as something emerging from the outside, and, in doing so, establishes a clear center-margin dichotomy, but he does so with the help of an image that he himself finds highly problematic. Corino's use of this vocabulary is by no means an exception. In the *Berliner Zeitung*, for example, Hannes Würtz proclaims: „Unsere dürre Sprache gewinnt plötzlich Laute, bei denen wir wieder hin-hören. Neues Blut tut germanischer Wortverkalkung gut“ (qtd. in Konuk 1997, 154). Kader Konuk has briefly discussed this topic in her essay „Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei: Heim-at bei Emine Sevgi Özdamar“, in which she draws attention to this uncommon usage of a „Vokabular faschistischer Blut-und-Boden-Ideologie“ (ibid.). The use of this vocabulary in my view reflects the tension that can be traced throughout the debate about Özdamar's text: On the one hand, it mirrors a desire for something

new, for the *exotic*; on the other hand it references the anxiety associated with the idea of something *other* tainting the purity of German literature.

Karen Jankowsky claims that the Bachmann prize critics resisted marginalizing ethnic texts with categories such as „guest worker literature" (Jankowsky 1997, 270). She argues, however, that Özdamar's text presented the critics with a specific challenge:

> This possibility for acknowledging the work of a writer from Turkey as German literature is a contested one, since critics welcomed the ways Özdamar enriched literature in German with her cultural experiences from Turkey, but were hard put to explain, except through orientalizing platitudes, the ways Özdamar worked with literary language. (ibid.)

Up to this point my own analysis would support this claim. Indeed, there are many examples that qualify as what Edward Said first identified as an Orientalist discourse, whereby the West establishes an image of the East as an ‚other'. In his landmark study *Orientalism* Said describes Orientalism as a „way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1979, 1). This process not only serves to develop a certain image of the East but ultimately to shape Western identity: „the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1979, 1 ff). In the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis Debate Orientalist discourse is at work in instances in which the jury/critics treat Özdamar's text as if it not only lacked a German but *any* literary tradition. Roberto Cazzola thus claims with regards to Özdamar's use of language: „das ist das, was wir heute brauchen, also Erfindung, Erzähllust, Fabulierlust und da lastet eben keine Tradition, da bin ich nicht meinem Goethe verpflichtet oder meinen literarischen Ahnen" (Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 148). Cazzola's comment implies that Turkish literature, unlike German literature, lacks a historical tradition.

Notwithstanding the fact that, as Jankowsky terms it, „orientalizing platitudes" (Jankowsky 1997, 270) might have dominated the discussion of Özdamar's writing style, a close reading of some of the jury members' comments reveals that they were trying to come to terms with the specific challenge that Özdamar's text presented. Cazzola, for instance, soon after adopted an entirely different approach when he defended Özdamar's use of language on the grounds that if she makes „mistakes" (german „Fehler") she does so deliberately and has the same right to do so as anyone else. Tellingly, Cazzola began with a disclaimer:

> Es gibt aber auch ein Echo ihrer Muttersprache. Da ich ein Ausländer bin, kann ich das nicht so gut beurteilen, aber ich glaube, Emine Sevgi Özdamar kann sehr gut deutsch sprechen und schreiben. Und wenn sie manchmal Fehler macht, dann macht sie das ganz bewusst. Und wenn jemand ihr das vorwirft, dann frage ich

> mich, warum soll sich Jandl die ‚runtergekommene Sprache‘ leisten und warum soll sie das nicht können. Das ist eben eine kunstvolle Verfremdung ihrer Sprache und des Deutschen. (Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 149)

This comment represents an attempt to ‚normalize‘ Özdamar’s position and to shift the focus of the debate away from her ‚authentic‘ cultural/biographical identity to her role as an author of fiction. It draws attention to the complex power relationships involved in the discussion of literature. Who is entitled to judge what is allowed and for whom? Moreover, Cazzola draws attention to the literary qualities of Özdamar’s text by emphasizing what she *does* with the language she uses.

In a similar manner, Marlis Gerhardt tried to develop a vocabulary that goes beyond „orientalising platitudes“ (Jankowsky 1997, 270) when speaking of „[der] Synthesis, [dem] Zusammenbringen, [dem] Zusammenschauen von zwei kulturellen Traditionen“ (Felsberg/ Metelko 1991, 167 f) which generates a new perspective. The vocabulary that Gerhardt chose, in particular the word „Traditionen“, acknowledges that Özdamar’s aesthetics is not only shaped by a timeless sense of ‚Oriental storytelling‘ but that it emerges from the interplay of two, equally powerful, cultural traditions.

III The Reception of Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in Oprah’s *Book Club*

Like Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Edwidge Danticat is a female author with an immigrant’s background who writes in her ‚adopted‘ language. There are a number of parallels between *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Both are first novels published in the early/mid 1990s and both tell – albeit quite different – stories of migration. Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1969. Her parents left Haiti and moved to the United States when Danticat was a young child. She was raised by her aunt and uncle. When she was twelve years old, Danticat joined her family in the United States. She holds a degree in French literature from Barnard College and an MFA in creative writing from Brown University.

Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was first published in 1994 and became an *Oprah’s Book Club (OBC)* selection in 1998. The text is a first person narrative told from the perspective of its young female protagonist, Sophie Caco. Having grown up in Haiti under the care of her aunt, Sophie is suddenly forced to leave for New York City in order to be with her mother. This transition is extremely difficult for Sophie. She encounters problems adjusting to her new surroundings and struggles with her relationship to her mother. Sophie eventually realizes that her mother moved to the U.S. after she had been raped and had become pregnant, leaving behind Sophie – the baby daughter to whom she had given birth. As a grown-up woman, Sophie returns to Haiti with her own daughter Brigitte and tries to come to terms with her personal history.

On May 22, 1998 Oprah Winfrey announced the selection of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* for her book club. The following analysis of the transcript of the show explores how *OBC* responded to Danticat's novel. I was particularly interested in learning whether the treatment of Danticat's text was shaped by a tendency to mark her as an ‚exotic' or ‚foreign' author, as was the case with Özdamar's novel. Similar to the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis event, *OBC* is a highly staged media affair. However, a number of significant factors distinguish the format of the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis debate and its response to Emine Sevgi Özdamar's text from *OBC*'s engagement with Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Crucially, unlike the Bachmann prize, *OBC* does not award literary prizes, although the effect that Winfrey's selection of a book has on its sales might well exceed the economic capital that most literary prizes bestow on their recipients. Yet, the cultural capital associated with being selected by *OBC* has been notoriously low. In 2001 Winfrey chose Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as a book club selection. Franzen reacted in an ambivalent fashion to this ‚honor', noting: „She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe" (Kirkpatrick 2001, 3). Franzen also stated that he did not want to have the *Oprah* logo on the book (ibid.). Franzen's comments caused Winfrey to disinvite him from the show and triggered a heated debate about the role and function of ‚low' and ‚high' culture in the United States. The Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis event may have been criticised for the media hype it creates, but it nevertheless features well-reputed intellectuals such as Sigrid Löffler and Hellmuth Karasek and, in contrast to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, appeals to a predominantly academic audience.

In general, *OBC* adhered to the following procedure: First, Winfrey announces during one of her shows the novel she picked as the next book club selection. She then asks the audience to send her letters describing their responses to the text. Reading questions are made available to the audience on the show's website. Finally, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* hosts a book club segment, which includes the broadcasting of the recorded book club dinner with a number of handpicked viewers, who were selected based on the letters that Winfrey received from the audience.

The Oprah's Book Club episode on *Breath, Eyes, Memory* opened with clips from earlier *Oprah* episodes, such as the following exchange which, like Danticat's novel, focuses on the role of mother-daughter relationships:

> Chanda: 'Cause my mother thinks that she knows me, but she doesn't.
> Clara: I am your mother. I know you.
> (End of excerpt)
> Oprah Winfrey: (Voiceover) Mothers who won't let go; daughters who will not forgive. (*Oprah* Transcript 1998, 1)

Mother-daughter relationships are a central theme in Danticat's novel. Yet, other themes, such as Sophie's integration into U.S. society, her continuous struggle with eating disorders and her complicated relationships with men also

play a significant role in the text. Therefore, the extent to which *OBC* contextualizes the novel in terms of gender or, to be more specific, mother-daughter relationships from the very beginning is striking. *OBC* deliberately introduces Danticat's novel on terms that most of the (female) audience members will be able to relate to and that supposedly transcend cultural borders. Segments from earlier episodes function to establish a thematic connection between an issue previously discussed on the show and Danticat's novel. A little bit later, Winfrey introduces Danticat's novel to the show in the following way:

> Yes. Last day of school. Hi. Whoo! Hi, everybody. Good to see you. Have a seat. So excited. So excited, so excited, so excited. Book club day, book club day. All of you who read „Breath, Eyes, Memory“ [sic!] this month, you get to meet the wonderful author Edwidge Danti—Edwidge Danticat a little later on in the show and, as you know, „Breath, Eyes, Memory“ [sic!] is about mother daughter relationships, sexuality and all that other stuff – those of you who've read it. Those of you who are catching up, we're not even talking to you. So you'll get to see what happened at our book club dinner. (*Oprah* Transcript 1998, 1)

The introduction of the guest Barbara McFarland, co-author of *My Mother Was Right*: *Lessons Learned From Baby Boomer Women As They Make Peace With Their Mothers* (1997), further contributes to establishing the show's focus on mother-daughter relationships. Winfrey and McFarland discuss typical problems that arise in mother-daughter relationships and McFarland offers advice on how to effectively respond to these challenges. Winfrey's conversation with McFarland prefigures the way in which *OBC* establishes the novel as a therapeutic aid for coming to terms with one's own mother-daughter relationship(s). The show further reinforces this therapeutic point, at the expense of a discussion of formal and aesthetic features, by the way it engages with the viewers who were invited to take part in the show.

The viewers Winfrey invited to participate in her show play a vital role in establishing a relationship between the presentation of the book and the general audience. In the specific case of the book club segment on *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* Winfrey introduces the book by turning to her guest Dominique. Suggesting the central role that sexuality will play in the discussion to come, Winfrey introduces Dominque as a woman who „grew up in Haiti, where a daughter's virginity was sacred“ (*Oprah* Transcript 1998, 16). This is followed by a short statement from Dominique describing her childhood in Haiti. After Dominique, Winfrey introduces her other guests. These introductions serve to establish a link between the sophisticated and, to some extent, ‚exotic' nature of Danticat's novel and the ‚common' viewers by way of positioning the guests as representatives of the audience. This process becomes evident when Winfrey introduces Rebecca: „Rebecca is a 40-year-old-married mother of two from New Hampshire. Just to look at her, you'd think, ‚What could she have in common with a little Haitian girl?' A lot, in fact“ (ibid.). Rebecca's response emphasizes the personal connection she

developed to the text and points to how her reading of the novel caused her to re-evaluate her own relationships:

> As I read the pages of Edwidge Danticat's novel, I could not help but reflect upon these important relationships of mine – the issues that I have and have had with my mother, the ones I have worked out, the ones I will work out and the ones which will never be worked out. (ibid.)

This statement is indicative of the role that the *OBC* assigns to the novel. It suggests that the primary function of Danticat's text is one of mediation and reconciliation. The text here ostensibly functions as a link between the majority of Winfrey's predominantly white, middle class, female audience and the world narrated in the text. Throughout the discussion of Danticat's novel the guests identify with the characters from Danticat's text, such as in the case of Danette:

> …and the way that Sophie's [the novel's protagonist, S.E.-V.] grandmother says, ‚Isn't it beautiful to be able to look into Bridget's face and see your kin?' And that was really touching, because I can look into my mothers face, my grandmother's face, and I can see myself and – parts of who I am, and it's beautiful. (*Oprah* Transcript 1998, 19)

Focussing on the story the novel tells, *OBC* almost completely foregoes looking at formal characteristics. Instead, it calls for a reading on the level of content. Of the 15 *Reading Group Discussion Questions* made available on *Oprah*'s website, only one, asking about the use of color, actually encourages thinking about how the text functions as a literary text. Overall, the discussion questions encourage conceiving of the text as something that is ‚real' in itself or, at the very least, something that came into being naturally rather than a constructed literary product. This is particularly interesting as *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is – like Özdamar's novel – a very complex literary work that begs for a literary analysis of its formal and discursive aspects such as narrative perspective, the use of metaphors and intertextual references.[1]

At first sight, one might be inclined to read the way in which *OBC* tries to make the novel accessible to readers by emphasizing ‚common ground' in a positive way. Although *OBC* evidently does not appreciate the novel with regards to its literary merit, it seems to succeed in fostering cross-cultural communication. Yet, a closer reading reveals that this approach is highly problematic. Instead of acknowledging the individuality and uniqueness – and the Haitianness – of Danticat's novel, *OBC* turns the text into a vehicle for the audience's/reader's own catharsis. The way that *OBC* responded to Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* ultimately suggests that you can understand the story without knowing, or learning, anything about Haiti, or, to borrow Oprah Winfrey's words:

> What is interesting also – and that's what – that's the beauty of books, particularly „Breath, Eyes, Memory“ [sic!] – is that although it's written – it's a story of a young Haitian girl coming to this country dealing with relationships with her mother and all the other complications of sexuality and so forth *that you related to it and have not a piece of Haitian history as far as you know*. (*Oprah* Transcript 1998, 18; my emphasis)

In my discussion of the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis debate I have argued that through processes of *othering* Özdamar is ultimately established as a Turkish author receiving a German prize. Analyzing *OBC*'s engagement with Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, I set out to explore if similar processes of *othering* might be at work here. Surprisingly, quite the opposite was the case. Instead of turning the novel into a cultural ‚other' *OBC* emphasizes ‚common ground' through its focus on the culture-transcending significance of mother-daughter relationships. In her book *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* the poet and literary critic Kathleen Rooney points to the way in which *OBC* might foster simplified readings of high quality literary texts:

> Winfrey's use of television encourages the imposition of competing narratives – specifically the life stories of her audience members and her own mythologyzed biography – on the narratives of the books themselves, thereby running the risk of applying texts capable of multiple interpretations and uses to a single-minded, socially controlled, and largely therapeutic end. (Rooney 2005, xiii)

OBC's tendency to simplify complex texts seems to be connected to its treatment of texts as something that came into being naturally – that is not constructed but ‚real' in and of itself. Surprisingly, this is something *OBC* shares with the responses to Özdamar's text discussed above. Both *OBC* and the jury members of the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis forego a discussion of the texts' formal characteristics and focus almost exclusively on the content level. The critical discourses I examined treat the passages from Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as if they were unmediated stories – quite literally – ‚aus dem Bauch heraus erzählt,' or told, as it were, from the gut. None of the critics discussed here – not the intellectual literary critics of the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis or the contemporary critics covering the prize, not Oprah Winfrey, her staff, or her guests – show great awareness of the respective novels as literary texts. Rather, they treat them as if the novels were ‚authentic' and unmediated accounts of migration.

Drawing on the critics' different responses to Özdamar's text and to that of her competitor Alleman, I claimed that the critics' neglect of the formal characteristics of Özdamar's text might well be read as part of a tradition associating women with nature in opposition to men's association with culture. In the case of *OBC's* response to Danticat's novel, however, such an argument might be hard to pursue since there are multiple possible explanations. The neglect of a discus-

sion of the formal characteristics of the novel may be related to the perception of Danticat as a female writer, but it might just as well have something to do with *OBC*'s more general approach. Yet, the extent to which *OBC* stresses the text's autobiographical dimension is striking. In this context Winfrey's „number one question" takes on particular significance: „So, the number one question that I think everybody has when they read this, knowing that you also come from Haiti, is, is it autobiographical?" (*Oprah* Transcript 1998, 17) It is thus not the novel, the constructed literary text, that generates the readers' „number one question" but the preoccupation with the text's degree of authenticity.

IV Outlook

In her essay „Walk Straight" (2010) Edwidge Danticat writes extensively about the difficult position that reading her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as an ‚authentic' narrative puts her in:

> The virginity testing element of the book led to a backlash in some Haitian American circles. ‚You are a liar,' a woman wrote to me right before I left on the trip.
>
> ‚You dishonor us, making us sexual and psychological misfits.'
>
> ‚Why was she taught to read and write?' I overheard a man saying at a Haitian American fund-raising gala in New York, where I was getting an award for writing this book. ‚That is not us. The things she writes, they are not us.'
>
> Maligned as we were in the media at the time, as disaster-prone refugees and boat people and AIDS carriers, many of us had become overly sensitive and were eager to censor anyone who did not project a ‚positive image' of Haiti and Haitians.
>
> The letter writer was right, though. I was lying in that first book and all the other pieces of fiction I have written since. But isn't that what the word *fiction* or *novel* on the book jacket had implied? Isn't even the most elementary piece of fiction about a singularly exceptional fictional person, so that even if that fictional person is presented as an everyman or everywoman, he or she is bound to be the most exceptional everyman or everywoman in the lot? (Danticat 2010, 32)

Danticat's experience with some of the responses to her first novel illustrates the particularly complex position many cross-cultural writers find themselves in. Biographical readings may always be problematic as they might limit a text's potential for multiple interpretations. It seems, however, that the texts of cross-cultural authors are particularly prone to being read as emblematic representations of their ‚home' culture. Ultimately, both the inclination to read biographically and the strong focus on the level of content that I identified in the analyzed responses to the selected passages from Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and to Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also serve to downplay – or even ignore entirely – the authors' literary achievements and technical expertise to which their texts testify.

In this context it might be particularly interesting to explore the concerns that Jonathan Franzen expressed with regard to the selection of his novel by Winfrey for her book club in 2001 and its impact on his potential readership. During an interview with Terry Gross on *National Public Radio*, Franzen expressed his concerns that Winfrey's selection might alienate male readers (Franzen Interview, 2001). While it might be both inviting and easy to make light of Franzen's comment, his description of his experiences presenting the book illustrate that his concern may to a certain extent have been justified:

> I have heard more than one reader in signing lines now in bookstores say, ‚You know, if I hadn't heard you, I would have been put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick. I figure those books are for women, and I never touch it.' Those are the male readers speaking. So I'm a little confused about the whole thing right now. (Franzen Interview, 2001).

In an analysis of the reception of cross-cultural women authors, discussions of the relationship between literary taste and gender are of particular significance. Such discussions intersect with an Orientalist tradition of establishing the ‚other' as naïve and culturally inexperienced, as for example the discussion of Özdamar's text has illustrated. Kader Konuk points to the particular potential that the analysis of the reception of cross-cultural literature would have in this context:

> Die Analyse der Rezensionen bezüglich nicht-deutscher AutorInnen würde interessanten Aufschluß darüber geben, inwieweit die Kombination von Herkunft und Geschlecht einer Autorin oder eines Autors die Erwartungen der LeserInnen vorstrukturiert. (Konuk 1997, 154)

A comparative analysis of the reception of cross-cultural German and American women writers might provide insight into the dynamics of cross-cultural identity negotiations from a transatlantic perspective. When considered more closely, critics' references to the author's biography often turn out to be part of an ethnocentric argument. Critics literally read texts through the lens of what they consider to be the author's ethnic background, which has at least two problematic implications: On the one hand, reading a text in purely biographical terms prevents a reader from engaging with a text's individual aesthetics. What further complicates the situation, however, is that what many critics perceive to be the author's ethnic background often proves to be a projection of their own Orientalist gaze and their own expectations. This means that their perception is a product of their own imagination, something that is always already there.

Anmerkungen

1 Compare for example: a) Harbawi 2008, b) Francis 2004, or c) Braziel 2003.

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