In a cover story for *The New York Times Magazine*, Jason DeParle investigated a recent and growing trend for immigration in the modern era. Workers from countries with struggling economies, in this case the Philippines, leave behind families and friends to go abroad in order to seek higher paying positions and earn money to be sent back home. Yet, it is obviously a story that contains tropes recognizable to those who read immigrant autobiography: families are divided and children grow up without knowing their parents, dire economic conditions force the immigrant to leave, and the new land is portrayed in shining terms, a place that lures immigrants with the promise of astronomical wages but which also holds loneliness and possible abuse. It is largely a story of human tragedy; migrant workers leave their homelands to do what they must in order for their families to survive (50–57, 72, 122–23).

This familiar yet contemporary trend is perhaps not the only new model for immigration in the twenty-first century. By comparison, the immigrant autobiography presented by Russian-German author Wladimir Kaminer presents a journey so fantastically easy as to have originated in a fairy tale; Kaminer claims in his early books that his immigration took place largely via a drunken road trip for no more compelling reason than curiosity. The mythical aspect of Kaminer’s life story is further strengthened by his overnight and best-selling success as a writer publishing in German when he knew only Russian upon his arrival. This article will investigate to what extent Kaminer’s work portrays a unique and light-hearted version of the more traditional immigrant’s tale, as well as another aspect of Kaminer’s work that renders him controversial: whether his autobiographical writing can be considered autobiographical at all.

Born in Moscow in 1967, Kaminer immigrated to Germany in 1990 as a *Kontingentflüchtling* (quota refugee), where he was trained as a sound engineer for theater and radio. He quickly became popular in a wide range of media venues, through publishing ironic commentaries on Berlin life in various periodicals, including *die tageszeitung*, *Die Zeit*, and *Stern*, broadcasting a weekly radio show entitled «Wladimir’s World», serving as a DJ for his fa-
mous «Russendisko» events in the Kaffee Burger, and working for a year as a television correspondent for ZDF’s morning program. Although unfamiliar with his adopted country’s language upon arrival, he is also a prolific best-selling German author who within eight years has published eleven books, contributed to a number of anthologies, and released three compilations of Russian music for the German market. The one venture that did not enjoy overwhelming success was a 2006 foray into operating his own bar for the Russendisko along with two business partners; the establishment remained open only four and a half months. According to Kaminer, the failure was due to the fact that they did not have the time needed to invest in running the enterprise, which seems reasonable given his myriad other activities (Mösken).¹

As an author, Kaminer’s autobiographical style has proven controversial, for while it is clearly based on his own experiences as an immigrant, it contains fantastical elements which simply cannot be factual. For example, he declares that one of his wife’s talents is the ability to see in infrared (Schönhauser Allee 131)², says his mother-in-law disarmed children on a train who were using a found automatic weapon to make the female conductor undress (SA 159–60), and relates the story of fish suddenly springing back to life in order to attack him and his father at the end of a fishing trip (Helden des Alltags 17). While these are rather obvious examples, Kaminer possesses a unique ability to move from the actual to the fantastic in a subtle way so that the reader is not aware of it until something truly astonishing is revealed; it is the written equivalent to a jazz musician improvising on a theme until the original melody is obscured or lost.³ In Militärmusik, he describes how as a child he creates news reports to entertain his fellow students: «Ungefähr zu diesem Zeitpunkt wurde mir klar, wie dünn manchmal die Grenze zwischen Realität und Fiction ist» (17).

While Kaminer seems amused by the interplay between truth and fiction in his writing, the ambiguity vexes critics. In their frustration over an inability to distinguish concretely between fiction and reality, they make vague allusions to «curious cases» (Lubrich, «Russian Jews» 46) and «die (quasi) autobiographischen Texte» (Wienroeder-Skinner) and «autobiografisch konzipierten Geschichten» (Fischer-Kania 257). Adrian Wanner questions whether Kaminer is even telling the truth in interviews (603), although Wanner does argue that Kaminer is writing his life, even if credibility is strained in some stories (597–98). Sander Gilman also asserts that it is Kaminer’s factual autobiography that serves as his source material «and is therefore a window into the multiculturalism of the Berlin Republic, or at least into its fantasies» (23).⁴

Kaminer himself offers a different account of whether his writing is factual with every interview, and he speaks with critics constantly about his work.
Sometimes, he admits to writing about his own life: «Eigentlich ist alles, was ich schreibe, autobiographisch […] Manchmal überspitze ich die Situation, die ich beschreibe, manchmal verlege ich sie an andere Orte, aber ich denke sie nie aus» (Bergamini and Buhre). At other times, he treats the question regarding autobiography as an accusation: «I wouldn’t say my prose is autobiographical. It isn’t about Wladimir Kaminer, it’s about others. The narrator is transparent, a cipher. The reader doesn’t learn any intimate details about the narrator’s life; the focus is on the surrounding world, the past, the future, encounters» (Fishman). This defensiveness, however, is to some extent a reaction to the fact that people assume he simply writes down everything he experiences without acknowledging the necessary artistry in constructing these streamlined anecdotes: «There isn’t much fiction in it. But if, say, I like observing cats, and write constantly about cats, that can’t be journalism either. For an animal-lovers magazine, maybe» (Fishman).

Ultimately, however, Kaminer regards his own writing as a blend of truth and fiction, a style I term creative reality: «Man kann ja nie ein vollständiges Bild erzeugen, sondern immer nur ein Bruchteil der Realität und das ist dann nie hundertprozentig die Wahrheit» (Bergamini and Buhre). This is a logical explanation for some inconsistencies in his storytelling. In *Russendisko*, Kaminer writes that his mother immigrated with him in 1990 (30) and then several pages later (33) that it was 1991; similarly in *RD* he writes that his father tried four times to join the Communist party (10) but then later (186) that it was three times; in *MM* he states that he considered immigrating in July of 1990 (209), the month after he had actually immigrated (date given as June 22 [213]). Fischer-Kania points out that the rumor Kaminer claims to have heard in the summer of 1990 regarding Erich Honecker taking in Russian Jews (*MM* 261) cannot have been true since Honecker left the government in 1989.

However, these small details do not detract from the stories themselves, and since Kaminer’s objective is to comment and reminisce rather than to document, they are inconsequential. Clearly, the major facts of his life as presented in his stories are verifiable, and my objective in this essay is to explore how Kaminer portrays his own immigration journey, a story that has been immensely popular with the German reading public that obviously chooses to believe it. As Folkenflik notes, «Autobiography may be truthful or mendacious, for factuality is not crucial to its autobiographical interest, despite some critics’ neo-Romantic insistence on sincerity» (13).

In point of fact, Kaminer acknowledges the fact that drawing from his own life experiences causes him some measure of trouble. In the ironically titled story «Kein Wort mehr über meine Tante» (*Ich mache mir Sorgen, Mama* 153–55), Kaminer describes how his aunt does not appreciate being included
in his anecdotes, and he promises not to write about her anymore (in the story in which he writes about her). In 2001, he promises compensation for all of his friends and neighbors who appear in Schönhauser Allee (191), but then he immediately tells others who think they recognize themselves in his anecdotes, «Sie sind es nicht» (italics in original, 191). A year later in Helden des Alltags, he laments that he would like to publish a story but cannot in the Berlin newspapers, «denn viele Personen könnten sich in der Geschichte wieder erkennen und böse werden» (69).

Just as ambiguity is a central feature of Kaminer’s writing, it is part of his persona as well. Whether by his own definition or that of critics, he is presented as both Russian and German, Jewish and atheist, hipster and bourgeois family father, outsider immigrant and resident Berlin expert. Kaminer’s image in the media is complicated, as he both markets the commonly accepted stereotypes regarding Russians and asserts that he was an outsider in Russian society during his childhood in the Cold War. Similarly, Kaminer claims duality for his status in German culture: he is the outsider Russian, but he is also the traditional «Biedermann» of German literary tradition (for good and ill). Every aspect of his life is dualistic, and Kaminer exhibits neither difficulty nor compunction in moving back and forth between his perceived roles. He clearly functions as an expert on Russian culture (and markets his Russian cookbook Küche Totalitär based on this premise), but he plays the typical gardening German in Mein Leben im Schrebergarten. With Ich bin kein Berliner, he again positions himself as the outsider. In terms of marketing, it is convenient for Kaminer to inhabit many roles at once, which is why, as Lubrich notes, he refuses to let an interviewer categorize him as a Russian writer («Russian Jews» 48).

In examining Kaminer’s oeuvre as an immigrant autobiography, one should consider to what extent he is a typical autobiographer. He is certainly not a deliberate autobiographer per se, but his work would be unthinkable without autobiographical elements; in chronicling his daily life as an immigrant at the beginning of his career, he inevitably had to relate details from his own life. His narrative tone is seldom the reflective one of more traditional autobiography but rather that of more factual reportage. What is especially unusual for this genre is that he is not afraid to depict himself in an unflattering light. He admits to stealing things during his early life in the Soviet Union (MM 82, 88), shares the gory details of his battle with a lice infestation during his adolescence (MM 132), and allegedly acquiesces to selling a woman into slavery, but justifies the action by saying that she became the most favored member of the harem and was quite happy (MM 74–76). While most autobiographies celebrate successes (Folkenflik 224), Kaminer is not afraid to portray fail-
Kaminer’s autobiography is also not told in the traditional overarching chronological narrative structure (i.e., birth, childhood, young adulthood, etc.). Rather, anecdotes tumble out haphazardly. This is partly due to the path he traveled to become a successful writer. His initial book, *Russendisko*, begins *in medias res*, with his life as an immigrant in Berlin. Only because there was so much interest in his current life circumstances did a market emerge in which it was possible for Kaminer to publish further details from his life (albeit out of order) to explain how he came to Berlin.8 While *Militärmusik* is to a large extent a more traditional autobiography relating details from his birth through early adulthood (even if it is subtitled «Roman»), it only covers his life to the point of his departure for Germany. Vital aspects of his immigration story are divided among other publications, specifically his first days as an immigrant and the process of his integration.9 In *Karaoke*, Kaminer excuses his general lack of conventional narrative structure with a comparison to his work as a DJ laying records on a player: the excitement lies in not knowing what comes next (10–11).

Finally, unlike most autobiographers writing from the perspective of old age and a completed life (Folkenflik 14), Kaminer is a young man. The details of his immigrant story are also still being published; he tends to go back and reveal incrementally more about the subject matter time and again, seemingly returning to the same source as he needs new material.10 Also, those writing autobiographies are generally already public figures with success in a given field which makes reading their life stories desirable (Sturrock 23), but Kaminer became famous through his autobiography.

In terms of immigrant autobiography, too, Kaminer is unusual in many aspects of both form and content. Unlike some immigrant autobiographers who have to rely on a translator who inevitably filters the work to some degree (Padilla 126), Kaminer is in control of his narrative. He is frequently asked why he made the conscious choice to write in German rather than in his native language, and he explains that he wishes to reach German rather than Russian readers. Thus, his works focus on highlighting what is unique in the culture of his market audience, rather than educating potential future immigrants from his home country as to what they might find should they follow his path.11 It also means that he is free to utilize continuously the stereotypes of Russian behavior and culture, such as heavy drinking, that the German audience expects. Sau-ling Wong notes, however, that immigrant autobiographies generally play to the expectation of the description of the exotic that Western readers crave. For example, if Chinese-American autobiographies
were published in Chinese, there would be no need to describe customs such as weddings (306–07). The difference with Kaminer is that he is in control of casting himself as the exotic.

Wanner does mention that editors perhaps cleaned up Kaminer’s German, but this begs the question as to whether they are marketing his Russianness. Wanner notes, however, that on a basic linguistic level, Kaminer’s writing is inherently German: «There are practically no Russianisms in his language. Kaminer’s assumed linguistic persona is that of the ‹average German› with no outward literary pretensions» (595). Thus, his oeuvre does not apparently exhibit a frequent problem of the genre, namely well-meaning editors who subjugate the authentic voice of immigrant autobiography when editing according to the rules of standard language (Boelhower 111, Karpinski 121). If Kaminer is being heavily edited, there is little textual evidence for the practice. Only on one occasion does Kaminer himself relate an anecdote in which he is taken to task by an editor for using the word «Scheisse» too often; she wants him to change it to «Mist.» However, he interprets the linguistic admonishment as a geographical (she is in Munich, he in Berlin) preference rather than that of an editor who is a native speaker (Sorgen 225).

The story Kaminer tells about his immigration to Germany, then, is indeed his own, and when one examines the typical individual stages of the immigrant’s path, such as the decision to immigrate, the choice of country, the journey itself, and the period of adjustment to the new country, Kaminer’s life has been unique in many ways. What is most unusual is the relentlessly positive tone in which Kaminer’s contribution to the genre is written, even when later works reveal that his initial depiction of the ease of his immigration was perhaps exaggerated.

Immigrants choose to leave their home countries for any number of reasons: to improve their own economic situation and that of their families, to pursue political and religious freedom, or to escape persecution and/or violence based on race, creed, or myriad other reasons. Because Kaminer was allowed to enter Germany as a Kontingentflüchtling with Jewish parents, many critics assume that he is a Jewish writer and discuss him as such. Before the real reasons for his departure are discussed, this false assumption must be addressed. As reflected in his writings, he himself is far more an atheist than a practicing Jew, and there are very few references to Judaism and Jewish life in his stories, despite the persistent need of critics to refer to him as the «Russian-Jewish» author.

This is not to say that one does not find references to anti-Semitism in Russia in Kaminer’s work. Early in his first book, he claims that his father experienced anti-Jewish discrimination; his application to become a member of the
Communist party was continually rejected because he might immigrate to Israel at any time as a Jew (RD 9–10). Ironically, while classification as a Jew hindered the father’s success in the USSR during the Cold War, it is the very thing that ultimately allows for his son’s immigration as the Soviet Union is disintegrating; this detail is made more incongruous by the fact that Kaminer does not take religion particularly seriously. In this regard, Kaminer is fairly typical of quota refugees, most of whom have no knowledge of Jewish culture or religious practices (Fischer-Kania 262). Of the six definitions of Jewishness outlined by Oliver Lubrich, Kaminer belongs to only one, the «civilian definition,» meaning his father’s passport under the Soviet system listed his nationality as Jewish («Russian Jews» 36–37). This national definition of Jewishness has an interesting parallel in one of Kaminer’s stories in Militär-musik about a Russian psychiatric ward nurse who speaks in Italian: «Die arme Frau bildet sich ein, sie wäre Italienerin, nur weil in ihrem Pass unter Nationalität ‹Italienisch› steht» (200).

Historically, this national identity of Jewishness was cause for concern in Soviet Russia, even if the quota refugees did not consider themselves Jewish in personal faith. Lubrich («Russian Jews» 39) comments that Russian immigrants so associated their homeland with anti-Semitism that they were not dissuaded in choosing Germany as a destination by either its history of the Holocaust or by modern-day right-wing activity. Schoeps et al found that Russian Jews generally came to Germany primarily because of fears of anti-Semitism and civil wars at home, not for economic reasons; they also outline the acute danger faced by Russian Jews after the collapse of the USSR (10–12). Kaminer, though, does not seem to take the peril seriously in two anecdotes related in Militär-musik. While Kaminer reports the wild allegations that the group «Gedächtnis» makes in a public rally, such as Jews poisoning the water supply or sabotaging public transit, his laconic response («Gut, dass sie meinen Nachnamen nicht wissen» [103]) is hardly indicative of an alarm that would compel him to migrate (99–107). He also maintains that he is made the scapegoat for the misdeeds of a politically well-protected Jewish choreographer when the culture ministry asserts a Zionist conspiracy, but he makes light of a resulting two-hour KGB interrogation regarding the incident in question: «Anschließend wollten sie von mir unbedingt wissen, ob ich eher dem Faschismus zugeneigt sei oder der Homosexualität» (57).

Presumably because of these few stories and Kaminer’s emigration status as a Kontingentflüchtling, some critics are determined to read him as a Jewish author. Gortinskaya makes the puzzling statement: «First and foremost Kaminer is a Jew, who grew up in Russia […]» (20). Sander Gilman declares: «And yet the question of his ›Jewish‹ perspective in the Federal Republic of
Germany remains part of his public persona» (27), but as much as Gilman implies that Kaminer neglects his Jewishness in his literary oeuvre, it simply does not seem to be an issue with Kaminer. I agree with Lubrich (49) and Wanner (591–92) that it is a mistake to consider Kaminer a Jewish writer since he does not cast himself as such, especially not in the vein of a Heinrich Heine or Karl Emil Franzos.

Kaminer does not claim serious religious persecution, and Kaminer’s given reason for immigrating is initially flippant. In his first book, he notes of his emigration, «Es war eine spontane Entscheidung» (RD 12). When he is later asked on a government form, he is uncertain what to write: «Ich bin 1990 absolut grundlos nach Deutschland eingereist» (RD 190). His wife corrects him and reminds him that he came to Germany «aus Spaß» (RD 190). He eventually settles on «Neugierde» as the official reason for the bureaucrats (RD 191). The true impetus for his departure from the Soviet Union was his father’s admonition: «Doch die Freiheit ist nur ein Gast hier. Sie kann sich in Russland nicht lange halten. Sohn, nutze die Chance. Sitz nicht herum und trink Bier. Die größte Freiheit ist die Möglichkeit abzuhauen» (RD 23). He also asserts that he was not the only one who left without a real plan for emigration: «Die meisten hatten kein besonderes Reiseziel, sie wollten einfach nur weg. Die Freiheit, die Gorbatchows Perestroika mit sich brachte, wurde vom Volk einfältig aufgenommen als Freiheit, einfach abzuhauen» (MM 189).

Kaminer continues to display a lighthearted attitude towards the monumental decision to leave his homeland in his later work Militärmusik. When he notices that co-workers on his theater project were steadily disappearing, he dryly comments, «Ich wurde auch langsam reif für eine Reise» (209) and later asks himself, «Warum bin ich eigentlich noch hier?» (209). Also telling for Kaminer’s general attitude that emigration is not terribly burdensome is his frequent use of words such as «Umzug» (RD 23) or «Reise» (MM 209) to describe his experience; in the work Mein Leben im Schrebergarten, he begins an anecdote with the phrase «Bevor ich hierherzog» (43).

While Kaminer often jests about his emigration, he also reveals more serious political considerations in his decision to leave. Already in his grandparents’ generation, the Kaminer family experienced human rights abuses in the early days of the Soviet Union (Sorgen 77–78). He divulges that he and his friends dreamed of emigrating as kids and closely followed the stories of those who were able to escape (RD 50–53). As a young man, he and his business partner worry about KGB traps when organizing illegal underground concerts (MM 122–23); when eventually caught, he is forced to serve a term of two years in the army as a punishment (MM 151). In civilian life, the Soviet planned economy was not always able to meet basic needs. Regarding his father’s obsession
with Birkensaft, Kaminer notes: «Viele sowjetische Bürger gingen damals auf
die Suche nach ausgefallenen Lebensmitteln und Getränken. Sie vertrauten
der Natur mehr als den staatlichen Versorgungseinrichtungen» (Helden 45).

In Russendisko, there is also a brief hint about emigration not being as care-
free as he otherwise portrays it, when he discusses his father’s joy that Kamin-
er and his mother were able to leave Russia in 1990: «Es war mit einer gewis-
sen Aufopferung verbunden und alles in allem nicht leicht gewesen. Nicht
ejeder schaffte es» (30). Immediately thereafter, though, he divulges that the
fairy tale ease of his own immigration was hard on his father, who is used to
existential battles (31). Additionally, with the departure of many of his col-
leagues, he admits that many felt that this was a small window of opportunity
(and in some ways it was, both in gaining admittance as a quota refugee and in
his finding housing): «At that time, the GDR still existed, legally, but in real-
ity, no longer. The Wall had come down, and a lot of Easterners were rushing
West because they were afraid the wall would go up again» (Fishman). Gen-
erally, however, the tone of all of Kaminer’s writing is upbeat and does not
make the imperative to leave his homeland seem urgent, which leads Dagmar
Wienroeder-Skinner to comment that the collection reflects «eine glückliche
Kindheit und Jugend – trotz oder wegen Diktatur, Planwirtschaft und Ab-
schottung nach innen» («Alle Fantasie»).

At the time of Kaminer’s emigration, the Soviet system was, of course, on
the verge of collapse, and one critic chastizes him for leaving. Diana Gortins-
kaya believes neither the political nor jocular justifications that Kaminer offers
for his departure and asserts he immigrated for economic reasons (15), basing
her claim on Elena Tichomirova’s conclusions regarding Russian emigration
during the 1990s. Indirectly, Gortinskaya reproaches him for not staying and
attempting to create a stable democracy: «Shortly before and right after the
colossal events of 1991 the Soviet population drew apart: some stayed to put
enormous effort into dealing with the consequences of the new geopolitical
reality, while others, like Kaminer and some of his protagonists, left Russia
for a new life abroad. […] those who chose to leave tended to be more resent-
ful and did not demonstrate the expected loyalty to the culture in which they
were brought up» (34–35). Kaminer himself addresses this topic in a later
work, in which he talks about his Russian school class and how fully half had
emigrated by the early 1990s – he maintains that those who stayed were more
successful than those who left (Schrebergarten 184).

Kaminer’s choice of Germany as immigration destination also seems to be
a matter of happenstance rather than planning. In immigrant autobiography,
immigrants often choose a country as their destination because they have ex-
sting family or jobs waiting for them; while he notes that essentially his entire
family had immigrated to countries where they saw a better hope for the future (Australia, America, Canada, Israel) by the time he was in kindergarten, he did not know most of them and heard about their immigration only later, so the family contacts in this case were not particularly close (Schrebergarten 116).

Ultimately, Kaminer asserts that he and his friend Mischa chose Germany because it was a cheap and politically easy destination. According to rumor, Honecker was accepting Jews into the German Democratic Republic, a tip that Kaminer alleges came from the uncle of a friend who was immigrating to America, where his assets were already located: «Doch ihr seid jung, habt nichts, für euch ist Deutschland genau das Richtige, da wimmelt es nur so von Pennern» (12). Additionally, a friend of his mother’s was able to procure an «offizielle Einladung» (MM 211) for the GDR. Even when on the train during the immigration trip, Mischa still has difficulty explaining to a German and an American whom they encounter why they have chosen Germany over Russia (MM 214–18). After arriving in Germany, Kaminer states that they were astonished that the Germans of all people were helping them, but it is unclear if the help is unexpected because they emigrated as Jewish quota refugees or because they are Russian, given the Russian army’s occupying status after World War II (RD 16–17).

A familiar trope in immigrant autobiography is the belief before departure that the destination country is a utopia, the proverbial shining city on a hill (Boelhower 6). This is not the case with Kaminer, who maintains that his youthful dreams of the West had already been dashed «als sich der sozialistische Käfig langsam öffnete» (Die Reise nach Trulala 90) during the end of the 1980s. More products from the United States appeared on the Soviet market, but the youth were disappointed by capitalist products that looked appealing initially but then fell apart quickly: «Amerika brach quasi vor unseren Augen zusammen» (Reise 90). Kaminer even quotes a song about this disappointment, in which the Russian singer bemoans, «Ein Lied über das Land meiner Träume, das mich verarschte, du!» (91). Even in his most recent book many years after his arrival, Kaminer reports how an immigrant who calls Germany a paradise is looked at with suspicion (Berliner 9–16). The new world in Kaminer’s immigrant autobiography is not longed for as place of opportunity, political freedom, or equality, but is rather simply the backdrop for an adventure.

The actual journey to the new homeland often serves as a dividing point for the narrative in immigrant autobiography (Boelhower 13). This is definitely not the case for Kaminer’s writings, in which the topic appears unexpectedly and frequently in collections of his short stories, with Kaminer revealing
greater or fewer details, and even changing his initial accounts, as it suits his purposes. Kaminer’s journey is also not the solitary quest undertaken by the lone immigrant, but occurs essentially in a caravan of others as part of the fifth wave of Russian emigration to Germany. Kaminer himself is aware that he is part of this particular immigrant group as well as of a larger immigrant tradition and details the other waves of immigration in his first book (RD 12–13).”

The ease of Kaminer’s eventual migration is highlighted in contrast to an earlier attempt to leave the USSR to visit his mother’s friend in Berlin in 1986. Kaminer endures a physical exam that includes urine and blood specimen exams, successfully bribes the director of his theater school to write him a supporting letter of recommendation, and studies earnestly for his appearance before the «Komitee für Internationale Freundschaft» (Reise 8). He tells this august board that his reason for travel to Germany is to learn about the socialist everyday of East German brothers: «In Wirklichkeit hatte ich vor, so viele Nazareth- und AC/DC-Platten in Ostberlin zu kaufen wie nur möglich und sie dann in Moskau für das Vierfache wieder zu verkaufen» (Reise 11).

His first attempt to travel to Germany ends in failure, but not due to his own shortcomings; permission is rejected because another theater student traveling abroad attempted to apply for political asylum, and all other applications were summarily dismissed (13). In the same book, the anecdotes that Kaminer shares regarding difficulties in traveling during his youth also make his immigration journey seem simple by comparison.

While many immigrants undergo an arduous journey to arrive in their new country, Kaminer’s emigration can be summarized in one phrase: drunken train trip. There was no need for a passport, since he was traveling to what was still part of the German Democratic Republic, and Kaminer states that the train tickets were so inexpensive that he only needed to sell his walkman and some cassettes to finance the journey (RD 24). Traveling lightly both metaphorically and physically, Kaminer’s description of the items he brings to remind him of his old country and help him adjust to the new is reminiscent of Günter Eich’s poem «Inventur»: a blue suit, cigarettes, photos from his army tour, and a few obligatory souvenirs of Russia: a Matrjoschka and vodka (RD 24) – less than what most contemporaries pack for most weekend getaways. Kaminer’s description of the journey itself is equally short:

Die zwei Tage auf Reisen vergingen wie im Flug. Der Wodka […] wurde ausge- trunken, die Zigaretten aufgeraucht, und die Matrjoschka verschwand unter my- steriösen Umständen. Als wir am Bahnhof Lichtenberg ausstiegen, brauchten wir erst einmal einige Stunden, um uns in der neuen Umgebung zu orientieren. Ich war
verkatert, mein blauer Anzug verknittert und befleckt. [...] Unser Plan war einfach: Leute kennenlernen, Verbindungen schaffen, in Berlin eine Unterkunft finden. (RD 24–25)

The whole episode has the effect of an adolescent lark or a quest for adventure, and indeed, Kaminer uses the word adventure to describe the trip: «der halbe Zug bestand aus solchen Romantikern wie uns, die auf Abenteuer aus waren» (RD 24).

In Militärmusik, published a year after this initial account, Kaminer discloses more details about his emigration yet still essentially supports his initial version of events. He reveals that he purchased a volume of Solzhenitsyn and science-fiction books for «geistige Unterhaltung» during the journey (214), says that he wanted to learn some German on the train but did not (217), and actually admits to some fear: «Zum ersten Mal stand ich kurz davor, die Grenzen meiner Heimat zu überschreiten. Der Weisheit des alten Gefangenen [Solzhenitsyn] konnte ich beim besten Willen nicht folgen: Ich hatte große Erwartungen, viele Fragen und auch ein wenig Angst. Ich fühlte mich dabei aber großartig» (221–22). Then, he comments on the general conversation turning into a «Besäufnis» (222), in spite of the intellectual accompaniment of Solzhenitsyn.

With the publication of Karaoke, which occurred four years later, Kaminer slightly alters some of the facts surrounding the circumstances of his move to Germany. He declares he did not actually intend to immigrate in 1990, but rather just to look around, or he would not have left his entire Russian rock music collection at home (53). He claims Mischa arranged for them to stay with his aunt for a few days (thereby making the need to find immediate housing in a foreigner’s home unnecessary). In a rare justification for the drinking done by Russians that is ever present in Kaminer’s work, he maintains that they had to drink on the train to congratulate a fellow traveler on his birthday, to celebrate his sudden engagement to a woman on the train, and to lament the subsequent hasty break-up of the couple (54–55). Finally, Kaminer asserts in this account that they left in July instead of June as originally stated, apparently in order to be able to relate an anecdote that their arrival occurred the day that Germany won the soccer Weltmeisterschaft. In spite of their low expectations for Germany, the new homeland really does seem to be the utopia that new immigrants anticipate, due to the bonhomie resulting from the victory. The next day, however, they find that the free alcohol and welcoming spirit have evaporated (55–60). Historical facts aside, it is very much in keeping with Kaminer’s general overall positive tone to depict his immigration as coinciding with a national celebration, which he again mentions in his newest work, Ich bin kein Berliner (90–92).
Once an immigrant has arrived in his adopted homeland, the most difficult part of the process is integration. It is telling, then, that the title chosen for Kaminer’s literary debut, *Russendisko*, is a word which, according to its Wikipedia entry, initially implied a meeting place for immigrants from Russia who were failing at adapting to German society, and thus congregated only with their fellow countrymen. More telling is that the entry gives Kaminer the credit for rehabilitating the word into a designation that implies a successful immigrant, along the lines of the word «Kanake» by writer Feridun Zaimoğlu («Russendisko»). Karl Esselborn notes that this reclaiming of the term through Kanak Sprak came into its current usage through public readings, interviews, and the Internet (18), which is analogous to Kaminer’s own path on the German public stage.

Kaminer did initially experience the frustration of the immigrant experience in not being able to communicate because of linguistic limitations. Of his time in the *Ausländerheim*, he writes, «Von der Außenwelt abgeschnitten und ohne Sprachkenntnisse lebten wir damals ziemlich isoliert» (*RD* 15). In a later book, he also acknowledges that learning the language was not as easy as it first appeared, as even when they made progress, «Einige Einheimische wollten uns nicht verstehen, sie boykottierten unsere Sprachkenntnisse» (*Reise* 75–76). Nevertheless, Kaminer presents his time of unemployment in the foreigner’s home before he had mastered the language as a kind of youthful nirvana, when he and his friends did nothing but play guitar and drink for days on end. In one anecdote, he and Mischa try their hand at pursuing the immigrant dream of instant wealth by selling beverages and snacks in a local train station. However, neither wants to put in the hard work necessary for the enterprise; they quit early, drink their profits, and return to the foreigner’s home. A third friend, who embodies the stereotypical immigrant engaging in hard work and sacrifice to realize the dream of self-sufficiency, is ridiculed by Kaminer for his ultimate success. When the successful immigrant names his first son Mark, it is pondered if the second will be named Dollar, since the family has decided to move on to America (*RD* 131–35).

During this initial time of isolation in Germany, it is the local Jewish community that reaches out to Kaminer and his fellow quota refugees. Much has been written in the secondary literature about Kaminer’s interactions with the local Jews, so there is no need to discuss the matter further here; essentially, Kaminer views the group’s generosity with wariness, expecting that something will be required of him in return. It could be added, however, that Kaminer portrays the community’s Jews not as a welcoming group helping fellow co-religionists, but rather as a group preying on those at a cultural disadvantage; he is proud that he does not fall for their machinations (*RD* 15).
In fact, in a later story, he portrays scientologists and Jehovah’s Witnesses preying on newly arrived Eastern European immigrants in the same way he talks about the local Jews (RD 133). When he ultimately decides «das mit dem Judentum sein zu lassen» (RD 16), he is making his decision as a Russian immigrant. In Russia, interfaith families could choose to be listed as Jewish or not, and adults could also later choose to change the designation their parents made for them. Although a quota refugee based on his status as a Jew, Kaminer follows the Russian practice of viewing Jewishness as a nationality rather than a religion and chooses to ignore it (Schoeps et al 15–16).

As a new immigrant, Kaminer is able to work in his field of theater as part of a government program: «für die unteren Schichten des Volkes, die sonst kaum Chancen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt gehabt hätten: ältere Menschen, Behinderte und Ausländer» (43). In addition to this work that he is accustomed to, he reveals in Karaoke that he also had to work at an Altkleidersammelstelle in 1990, getting up at 5:00 am every day (80); so, his initial life as an immigrant might perhaps not have been as easy as he initially portrayed it. Kaminer does, though, ultimately live the immigrant’s dream: in his adopted country, he has created a career from nothing, working in a field in which he has no experience or formal training. He is aware that his fairy-tale ending is not shared by all immigrants, and his good fortune is highlighted by his narration of friends’ more traditional immigrant experiences, such as difficulties with illegal immigration, forged papers, escaping deportation, and marriages to obtain an Aufenthaltserlaubnis (RD 54–57, 64, 67, 87–89): «Das Asylrecht in Deutschland ist launisch wie eine Frau, deren Vorlieben und Zurückweisungen nicht nachvollziehbar sind. In den einen Asylbewerber verliebt sich das Asylrecht auf den ersten Blick und lässt ihn nicht mehr gehen. Den anderen tritt es in den Arsch» (87). The other immigrants in Germany who appear in Kaminer’s œuvre still have an easier experience than the legal and illegal Chinese immigrants he encounters in South Russia, who work abandoned fields: «Zwanzig Stunden am Tag, fleißig, alles per Hand ohne jegliche Technik» (Küche 189).

Fischer-Kania argues that the ease with which Kaminer settles into Berlin is possible only because of the chaos present in the divided city at the end of the cold war (261). Kaminer himself acknowledges that the opportunity to claim one of the unoccupied apartments in East Berlin would not have been present two months later (RD 28–29). Just as with other aspects of his immigrant narrative, he later divulges that finding an abandoned apartment was not as easy as he first portrayed it, since so many West Germans were already squatting in all the livable apartments – he and his friend were forced to chose between one with a damaged floor or one with a damaged roof until another group of
immigrants took them in (Reise 51–52). Nevertheless, the fact that Kaminer was able to benefit from the historical situation came about only through his initiative to move out of the Ausländerheim on his own; here, the stereotypical aspect of an immigrant thriving due to his own resourcefulness is typical of the genre.

Kaminer realizes as well that his very stay in the country was due to a brief window of opportunity, noting that the time in which immigration was a relatively easy process for quota refugees was a short six months (RD 16–17). Poole also comments that Kaminer’s status as a Kontingentflüchtling made his experiences as an immigrant easier once he arrived in Germany: «not only an unlimited resident’s permit, but also an unlimited work permit and the right to social benefits such as health care, child benefits, student grants and scores of integration programmes […] In this sense, the «Jewish Russians» are a very privileged group of refugees» (150).

As a modern immigrant, Kaminer additionally does not suffer the traditional immigrant’s fate of being cut off from contact with his native language and home country.17 He soon encounters Russians everywhere; some of those he has contact with were already acquaintances in the Soviet Union (RD 18, 158–60, 175). Russian-language media are available to him and others (RD 164, SA 116, Sorgen 64–66), and he is also free to return to his homeland (Fischer-Kania 267, Wanner 598). In an interview, he admits that he travels to Moscow once a year, has relatives who visit him, and keeps up with those from Russia via the internet (Bergamini and Buhre). He also symbolically returns to Russia and Russian cultural material whenever he needs story ideas, such as with the Küche Totalitär essay collection/cookbook.18

Boelhower speaks of a «traumatized structure of immigrant life» (114) in immigrant autobiography given the questionable legal status of many immigrants, yet Kaminer seems secure in his status as Kontingentflüchtling. The end piece to his first published volume is an essay entitled «Warum ich immer noch keinen Antrag auf Einbürgerung gestellt habe,» which is a farcical look at his attempts to turn in the massive paperwork necessary to apply for citizenship (RD 189–92). He appears equally unconcerned about government officials investigating the citizenship status of his children, creating a witty facsimile of a government letter addressed to his then three-year old son in the story «Sebastian und die Ausländerbehörde»: «Sehr geehrter Herr Sebastian, […] seit beinahe drei Jahren befinden Sie sich illegal in Deutschland. Das geht so nicht, rufen Sie uns so schnell wie möglich an. Hochachtungsvoll, Spende» (29). While Kaminer later publishes a much more serious essay about how difficult it is to obtain citizenship and the problems he and his family have had, he ends on a typical positive note: «Und ich wusste: Früher oder später
würden wir und die meisten anderen es schaffen» (Sorgen 126). Indeed, Kaminer has successfully become a German citizen in the interim.

While a best-selling favorite of the general public, Kaminer’s unorthodox descriptions of the ease with which he became an immigrant to Germany have not been universally hailed by critics, who seem to expect heavy cultural commentary from migrant literature, as they anticipate discussions of the difficulty of the journey and of adapting to life in the Federal Republic. Both Wienroeder-Skinner and Rastegar are irritated by Kaminer’s breezy style; they anticipate a detailed description of the real life of immigrants, which Kaminer does not claim to offer. Mecklenburg is also critical of Kaminer’s tone: «Zehr- ten seine [Kaminers] Bücher zuerst noch von konkreter Erfahrung, von den Realgrotesken der späten Sowjetunion, so bereiten sie inzwischen billige Wit- ze zu ebenso billigen Kurzhumoresken auf, in denen die Stereotype nicht mehr ironisiert, sondern bloß reproduziert werden» (27). Sander Gilman adds, «His German audience wants happy memories of the Russian past that are just primitive enough to warrant an exaltation of the Berlin present» (24).

Perhaps the message of Kaminer’s writing is that immigration and integration are easier in a global age. Nora Fitzgerald alludes to this, noting that in Kaminer’s portrayal, «the happiest, least-burdened Berliners are its newest immigrants, whose lives are eccentric, extraordinary and rarely dull» (E1). Karl Esselborn notes, «[Migration] ist im Zeitalter der Mobilität, der Globalisierung und des Tourismus eine Form moderner Existenz geworden» (17). Brian Poole sees Kaminer as a modern-day Diogenes in his blithe descriptions: «His [Diogenes] humour is an entirely logical manifestation of moral conduct that refuses to take seriously what is not» (145), and he argues that Kaminer’s approach is indicative of current Russian Jewish immigrant culture in general: «They prefer irony to anger, anecdote to attack, and they are familiar with the popular generic traditions of satire because these form part of their national tradition» (161).

Ultimately, Kaminer will continue to be successful in spite of critics who deem his controversial immigrant autobiography to be too superficial; it is a rare perspective on migrant life that is marketable because it is full of amusement and humor rather than hardship. He ostensibly hopes to expand on his existing success in the publishing and media worlds by perhaps following in the footsteps of a fellow immigrant, one from Austria who has made a political life for himself in America after enjoying commercial success. The last essay in his 2007 guidebook on Berlin is entitled: «Eine Vision für Berlin: Meine erste Rede als Bürgermeisterkandidat» (211), in which he argues to privatize the capital city and sell off five districts which voted for the NPD during the last election. The essay is typical Kaminer jest, yet his intention to run for of-
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fice was picked up as a serious intention by the press («Wladimir Kaminer»), so yet another fairy tale chapter might be possible for this unorthodox immigrant.

Notes

1  With this and all Internet publications cited in my essay, I am unable to give page or paragraph numbers, as they are lacking in the original manuscripts.
2  After the initial reference to a primary source, the title will be abbreviated for the purposes of parenthetical citation, i.e., Schönhauser Allee will hence be cited as SA.
3  This style, a seamless blending of reality and fantasy, is also found in Mufti’s Islamic travelogue style of immigrant autobiography, as described by Barbara Metcalf, who claims it is rooted in Persian tradition (150).
4  Julia Watson raises the question about whether it is the critic of autobiography’s duty to verify factual details (247). I argue that it is not for the purposes of this essay, as the focus is on how Kaminer chooses to relate his own immigration narrative.
5  Quotes from this interview appeared in English, as they were translated by Fishman from the original Russian.
6  Wienroeder-Skinner notes that he, although an immigrant, is portrayed as a typical city resident encountering the provinces in Mein deutsches Dschungelbuch.
7  Adrian Wanner also comments on this role, in his excellent and thorough article in which he discusses the use of the picaro tradition in Kaminer’s writing.
8  Kaminer’s haphazard autobiography is not unique in this respect. According to Jerome Bruner, Mary McCarthy’s volume Memories of a Catholic Girlhood was only later offered as a chronological autobiography after initially being published individually as short stories (42).
9  While I will mention aspects of Kaminer’s experiences with integration during his early life as an immigrant, there is in no way space within the confines of this essay to detail exhaustively all that Kaminer has to say about integration and Leitkultur, whether in his own personal case or generally in society.
10  Kaminer also frequently recycles stories themselves, and not just material, when stories are included in multiple collections or in both CD versions of stories and then later incorporated into books. For example, «Militärmusik» was initially a short story in the collection Frische Goldjungs. Obviously, many of his anecdotes were also originally published as newspaper columns.
11  According to Diana Gortinskaya, Kaminer is not featured in the Russian media as he is in Germany; she goes so far as to claim that «none of the main Russian-Russian newspapers has published articles about Kaminer neither in their printed versions nor posted any articles or references on their internet sites so far» (25). While I will reference Gortinskaya, I consider the source (an MA thesis) problematic: she often misspells the names of major researchers in the field and without comment neglects Kaminer’s Mein deutsches Dschungelbuch entirely, even though it clearly fits into the scope of her thesis.
12  There are already many excellent sources that detail the historical circumstances of the Kontingentflüchtlinge and their arrival and integration into German culture, and I will not, therefore, broach the topic here. Lubrich and Gilman offer especially good explanations, and Schoeps et al provide a solid political background.
Interestingly, Gortinskaya is herself a young Russian, born in 1980 in Moscow, as was Kaminer. She makes these comments in an MA thesis that she completed as part of a program not in Russia, but rather in the United States.

Fischer-Kania asserts that Berlin as the end destination was even more random than a conscious decision: «Berlin ist in diesem Kontext weder eine Wahl noch ein Bekenntnis, sondern ein rasch, primär aus ökonomischen Gründen gewählter Ankunftsort» (261).

Gortinskaya makes a very interesting point that the German capital underwent its own migration from Bonn to Berlin around the time of Kaminer’s arrival, which sparked national interest in the city and provided by happy coincidence a market for Kaminer’s reports of life in Berlin in newspapers (17). Another geographical note is that Kaminer also moved from the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany without changing his residence, due to historical circumstance.

For a critical summary of the nine separate groups that make up Russians living in Germany today, see Oliver Lubrich (37). For more on the questing nature of travel in Kaminer’s works, see Adrian Wanner’s excellent article on the author as a modern-day picaro figure.

Obviously, this privilege of Russian immigrants is not different from the Turkish «Gastarbeiter» who have frequently returned home for visits for decades, but as the term implies, German policy initially assumed that Turks would be returning home permanently after brief work sojourns in the Federal Republic and did not regard them as immigrants as such.

Although discussions of food in no way comprise a majority of Kaminer’s musings, he engages with this volume in a food nostalgia common in immigrant writing, a theme which is also found in Fatih Akin’s cinematic offering about Italian migrants in Germany, Solino.

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