# At home, I’m a tourist: Musical migration and affective citizenship in Berlin

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**Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which musical, sonic, and more broadly sensory experiences of Berlin provide the ground for an ambivalent sense of civic belonging for a cadre of migrants affiliated with the city’s local electronic dance music scenes. Drawn from ethnographic fieldwork, the accounts of these “techno migrants” articulate an identification with the local music scenes, the built environment of the city, its urban soundscapes, its pace of life, its low population-density, its socio-economic and multicultural mix, the attitudes and sartorial styles of its residents, and the palpable sense of both recent history and imminent future. The affective dimensions of these identifications provide a means of sustaining a fantasy of belonging to a place where one remains foreign, relying on immersion in and identification with the city’s atmospheres to hold in abeyance the alienating aspects of migration. Thus, the *feeling* of being “at home” in Berlin stands in for other modes of civic belonging (e.g., legal, ethnic, cultural) to which techno-migrants have limited or obstructed access. These musical migrants seem to engage in a form of “affective citizenship” (Berlant 1997, Jones 2001, Mookherjee 2005), where a sense of belonging is sustained through affective experiences that index belonging, sometimes regardless of whether such belonging has juridical or social recognition.

**Keywords**

Migration

Tourism

Affect

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Berlin

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Music Scenes

Electronic Dance Music

**Introduction**

In 2007, electronic music artist Bruno Pronsato released a track entitled, “At Home, I’m A Tourist,” which was part of the full-length album, *Why Can’t We Be Like Us*. The album sonically indexed the German city of Berlin as stylistically the entire album falls within the style of “minimal” (techno/house) that was prevalent at that time in Berlin. More specifically, “At Home, I’m a Tourist” was meant to represent Pronsato’s at times ambivalent experiences as a foreign artist in Berlin’s electronic dance music scenes, for “Bruno Pronsato” is actually a moniker for Steven Ford, an American expatriate who has been based in Berlin since the early 2000s. Through sonic profile, texture, reverb effects and temporal phasing, “At Home, I’m a Tourist” sets a dark, unsettled, and disorienting tone, which could be interpreted as an expression of the affective dimensions of expatriate life in this industrial, German city. Indeed, this track should be understood in relation to the other tracks on the album; with titles such as “Same Faces - Different Names,” “Too Few Hellos, Too Many Goodbyes,” and “Why Can’t We Be Like Us?”, the entire album evokes themes of estrangement, disorientation, and destabilized identity. And yet, there are moments of “sync,” where disparate elements of the track snap into synchrony, representing moments of ease and belonging to this soundscape and this city.

The aim of this article is to examine the ways in which musical, sonic, and more broadly sensory experiences of the city provide the ground for an ambivalent sense of civic belonging. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2011–2012, it works from the accounts of “techno migrants,” who have relocated to Berlin to participate in the city’s electronic dance music (“techno” / “house”) scenes.[[1]](#footnote-1) These music-oriented expatriates identify with the built environment of the city, its urban soundscapes, its pace of life, its low population-density, its socio-economic and multicultural mix, the attitudes and sartorial styles of its residents, and the palpable sense of both recent history and imminent future. Across these various identifications, affect provides a means of sustaining a fantasy of belonging to a place where one remains foreign, relying on immersion in and identification with the city’s atmospheres to temporarily (and tenuously) hold in abeyance the alienating aspects of migration. In a sense, the feeling of being at home in Berlin stands in for other modes of civic belonging (e.g., legal, ethnic, cultural) to which techno-migrants have limited or obstructed access. These musical migrants seem to engage in a form of “affective citizenship” (Berlant 1997, Jones 2001, Mookherjee 2005), where a sense of belonging is engendered and sustained through affective experiences that are understood to index belonging, sometimes regardless of whether such belonging has juridical or social recognition.

The sounds and structures of “At Home I’m a Tourist” resonate with the testimonies featured in this article, where musical migrants recount moments of instant affinity with Berlin, often using metaphors such as being “in sync” to describe this affective resonance. The musical track evidences a particular kind of narrative, with its deep sonic range, from very low-frequency, resonant kick-drums (which require good headphones/speakers to even be audible) to glitchy clicks and pops in the higher-frequency range. Its dark and haunting tone evolves and brightens somewhat towards the end. Its central motif is a three-chord synthesizer arpeggio using a horn sound, which slowly emerges from the texture in the fourth minute of the track and which, during the track’s first “breakdown” section (approximately 5:15–6:00 in the recording), see all of the other musical elements drop away, leaving only the three-chord theme. This motif becomes increasingly blurred with a “reverb” effect until the bass drum kicks in and the track’s full texture suddenly returns. Both rhythmically and texturally, this creates a stretching-and-snapping effect, which is repeated throughout the rest of the tracks with varying combinations of sonic elements. Essentially, the various elements of this track seem to temporarily fall out of phase with each other, only to “snap” back into synchrony.

Pronsato’s track could serve as a soundtrack to the migration-narrative of Tabitha, an American in her early twenties who moved from Boston to Berlin in early 2010 with her partner, Xavier. After only visiting the city three times, they both felt drawn by the city’s vibrant electronic dance music scenes. As they related their account of moving to Berlin, I asked them, “Do you feel at home here?” Tabitha immediately replied, “In a sense, I feel that I’ve felt more at home here than I’ve felt anywhere. In the sense of fitting [in], in the sense that this is the place that I want to be, that this is…that I’m in some kind of synchronicity with what this place is. And I think that’s why we had to move here, because it was a good fit.” Tabitha’s sense of belonging also extended beyond personality to the rhythms and banalities of everyday life, remarking, “I know all the grocery stores, I know how to get around town.” Indeed, she felt like she knew Berlin more than she did Boston, where she attended college for four years. “But there are moments of alienation,” she said, “where you end up stumbling in some conversation, and you feel embarrassed because your German is not good enough…and something embarrassing happens; those moments of shame, of not speaking the language and everything.” Her voice trailed off and the pace of our interview abated for a moment. In a complementary fashion, both Pronsato’s music and Tabitha’s recollections seem to dramatize the feeling of coming into (and falling out of) alignment with one’s surroundings.

Tabitha’s account encapsulates many of the issues that I examine here: she experiences an instant sense of belonging to and in the city, which initially arises from an affective identification with the atmosphere of the city itself, gaining texture over time from her immersion in Berlin’s everyday life, its urban soundscapes, and its dance music scenes. And yet, there are times when this sense of belonging evaporates and leaves behind alienation and shame, particularly when some misunderstanding of language or etiquette highlights her cultural distance from the city in a way that cannot be bridged by feelings alone. During interviews with people who had moved to Berlin to participate in the city’s electronic dance music scenes, many reported “feeling at home” from their first moment in the city. But they were also wary of adopting the label “Berliner,” seemingly aware that the question of who is *echt Berliner* [“truly Berliner”] remains a sensitive and politically charged issue. Instead, they grasped for terms that conveyed both their strongly-felt affinity with the city and their self-perception as outsiders: expatriate, *Wahl-Berliner* [Berliner-by-choice], settled traveler, migrant.

The first section of this article offers a brief sketch of techno-migration as an emergent phenomenon in Berlin, situating it in relation to music tourism in the city’s music scenes. This is followed by an examination of the affective dimensions of feeling “at home,” focusing on the narratives of techno-migrants in Berlin. Finally, this article closes with a turn to the ambivalence that these migrants express regarding their integration into the city, highlighting the limits and stakes of affective citizenship in the face of institutional, ethnic, and cultural obstacles to belonging. Their accounts delineate a model of civic “belonging from the outside” (Probyn 1996) of ethnicity, birthplace, and citizenship – albeit a fragile and ambivalent one – which offers a critical view of the gap between citizenship as legal/institutional construct and citizenship as lived experience.

## Techno-tourism and techno-migration

Following the saturation of electronic dance music in Berlin in the late 1990s and the subsequent implosion of the rave scene (Denk and von Thülen 2012, Feige and Müller 2000, Nye 2009), a relatively new set of electronic music scenes emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, most of it focused around a stripped-down mix of house and techno often called “Berlin minimal.” The emergence of low-cost air carriers such as EasyJet and Ryan Air combined with the already-low cost of lodging and entertainment in the city to give rise to a still-growing trend of “techno-tourism,” where relatively young dance music fans travel to Berlin for weekends that are usually exclusively focused on nightclubs and music. The earlier years of this phenomenon have been captured in a book by local music journalist Tobias Rapp (Rapp 2009, Rapp 2010), who coined the term “EasyJet Set” to describe those weekend-warrior party travellers that characterize Berlin’s scenes; with this term, he points to the importance of budget air travel for making this phenomenon possible while also ironizing the contrast in wealth and resources between the affluent jet-setters of the mid-twentieth century and the younger, financially precarious nightlife travellers of twenty-first century Europe. These techno-tourists have distinctive patterns of activity in Berlin, focusing on music events to the exclusion of other touristic activities and engaging in cost-cutting measures such as lodging with local friends and eating at cheap *Imbiss* stands.

Most techno-tourists also belong to the growing cohort of “post-tourism” or “neo-bohemian” tourists visiting Berlin, in that they avoid conventional touristic activities, all the while striving to consume the city as they imagine locals would (Cohen 2008, Dunn 2005, Munt 1994, Ritzer and Liska 1997, Rojek 1993, Wang 1999). These travellers have absorbed the classic critique of “the tourist experience” (Ryan 1997, Urry 2002) – as inauthentic, artificial, exploitative, commercialized, and so on – instead preferring to engage in a sort of oblique search for the “authentic experience” of a location (Wang 1999). They spurn museums, guided tours, shopping centres, sightseeing, landmarks and so on, in favour of activities such as “hanging out” in cafés, wandering around “alternative” neighbourhoods (such as Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, as well as the increasingly-hip Neukölln and Wedding), and emulating the rhythms of local daily life (Novy and Huning 2009). Notably, Berlin’s urban soundscapes and local music scenes play an important role in this form of tourism, providing a sonic-aesthetic representation of local authenticity. And for techno-tourists in particular, Berlin’s sonic ecosystem serves as their means of discovering the city as a travel destination, their primary mode of participation in city life, and the main factor motivating their repeated visits.

During this same period of growth in techno-tourism, there has been a concomitant growth in the expatriate community in Berlin, which overlaps significantly with the city’s electronic dance music scenes. This is mostly driven by the city’s flourishing “creative” and “tech” sectors, which are made possible by property values that are a fraction of any other major European city (Bader and Bialluch 2009, Bader and Scharenberg 2010, Colomb 2012, Färber 2008, Heebels and van Aalst 2010, Novy and Colomb 2012, Zimmermann et al. 2007). The impact of this change can be gauged by the emergence of primarily-Anglophone media outlets directed towards expatriates, such as the magazine *Exberliner* (since 2002; http://www.exberliner.com/), the discussion forums on *Toytown Germany* (since 2002 in Munich, 2006 Germany-wide; http://www.toytowngermany.com/), or the English-language news site for Germany, *The Local* (since 2004; http://www.thelocal.de/). Often leaving behind meagre work opportunities in their home cities, most of these “creative” migrants find themselves working under relatively precarious labor conditions in Berlin, as the city’s creative industries are “pioneers for unregulated working conditions” (Bader and Scharenberg 2010). Berlin’s subcultural music scenes constitute a large segment of the city’s creative sector (Bader and Scharenberg 2010), and electronic music especially prominent in this regard: many of the world’s top-selling independent dance labels have either relocated to Berlin or established branch offices there; DJs from all over the world continue to relocate to the city in order to further their careers; and niche electronic music media-outlets such as *Resident Advisor* (http://www.residentadvisor.net/), *De:Bug* (http://de-bug.de), and *Groove Magazine* (http://www.groove.de/) have established a base of operations in the city. All of these developments employ booking managers, publicists, event coordinators, graphic designers, sound engineers, programmers, web developers, merchandise managers, journalists, accountants, lawyers, and administrative assistants – not to mention the jobs created by the city’s nightclubs, which provide a weekly showcase of the city’s musical talent. For most of these techno-migrants, Berlin’s electronic music scenes (and accompanying industry-networks) are also the primary site for socialization and acculturation into the city; thus, belonging to these music scenes can sometimes serve to either represent or replace broader civic belonging.

Given these coeval and somewhat intertwined phenomena, it is unsurprising that many of the “techno-tourists” that I initially interviewed for a research project on tourism became “techno-migrants” as my fieldwork progressed. For example, Henry, an Irish sound engineer in his early twenties, visited Berlin for the first time when his homeland was in the throes of the post-2008 financial crash that killed the so-called “Celtic Tiger.” With bleak job prospects and most of his peers on welfare, he asked himself, “Why stay in Ireland and work a crap job, when I could move to Berlin and get a crap job?” Although he did not see employment opportunities as much better in Berlin, the feel of the city along with its music scenes made it far more attractive to Henry than Dublin. For many of the techno-migrants that I interviewed, the decision to move to the city was initially an affective one – having to do with the feel, atmosphere, or “personality” of the city – after which one would work to make it financially and logistically feasible. “My head immediately said, ‘Fuck yes!’” said Lola, a Polish-American artist and graphic designer who moved from Chicago upon receiving an invitation from her cousin to share an apartment in Berlin, “Absolutely. I’m dropping everything to make this happen.”

Tabitha and Xavier were inspired to move to Berlin after only two visits, during which they felt an affinity to the city’s rhythms and residents. They struggled to describe precisely what it was that they found so deeply resonant with their own personalities, but their impressions of the city were a blend of freedom, eccentricity, hedonism, individualism, and even shades of anarchy. “Boston is quite uptight,” remarked Xavier, “and so Berlin seemed so… [*pause*] It was so easy to meet people, and people were just so *unashamed* to enjoy themselves. They even saw it as a real shame if you were going to deny yourself a fun Saturday night out. People were almost acting sad for us.” Xavier went on to recount their first visit to Berlin in 2007, where they attempted to “score” marijuana while dining on a patio in Kreuzberg; a few tentative queries led to them being offered a free joint and invited to join a private party in the upper floor of the restaurant. Later that evening, as they were returning to their hotel, a group of young partygoers on the *U-Bahn* [subway] invited them to a party, dumbfounded as they were that Tabitha and Xavier were heading home before sunrise on a Saturday: “They were just genuinely baffled,” said Xavier, “It was just the strangest thing they had ever heard of.” Xavier saw this as a meaningful but enigmatic portrait of the city, suggesting that “there was a lot to unpack about how things work, socially, in Berlin, if those two incidents took place back-to-back.” Later that weekend, the pair came across a reggae sound-system set up on the *Oberbaumbrücke* – a nineteenth-century double-decker brick bridge built in decorative North German gothic style – surrounded by “white kids with dreadlocks losing their shit to reggae.” They found it remarkable that such a scene was even possible; as Xavier put it, “That would’ve been, like…twenty different citations in any American city. You can’t just throw a fucking party *on a bridg*e – let alone an iconic landmark!” For both Xavier and Tabitha, these vignettes from their first visit created a sort of affective snapshot of the city, from which they garnered the impression that, “there really *is* something fundamentally different about this place,” and that they recognized something of themselves in this fundamental difference.

## Feeling at home

The sense of being “at home” in a particular place is commonly an integral aspect of the experience of citizenship, and it can be difficult and slow to develop for migrants, in the context of displacement, cultural estrangement, and disorientation. But most of the techno-migrants that I interviewed reported experiencing an instant sense of belonging upon their arrival in Berlin. They explained this sense in terms of several different factors, all of which contributed to the affective tone or “groove” of the city with which they felt a strong affinity. Here, music-specific and scene-specific factors combine with a broader issues such as built environment, economics, everyday routines, and encounters with fellow denizens to create an atmosphere that is understood to be more or less aligned with one’s personality. For example, Tabitha explained that, “for a certain type of personality, you get to Berlin…and it’s just *it*. It feels right, people are like you. It’s the same reason why I feel a little out of place in Paris. Everybody’s a little too clean and beautiful! Whereas here, I feel that people are on my same wavelength.” Xavier agreed, adding that, “The type of personality here is so much more…*us*. I think that’s why it’s so natural to be here, even though it’s a foreign city.”

Ellen, an American who moved to Berlin more than seven years ago after losing her job in Chicago, framed her arrival to the city in the terms of a romantic encounter: “I got [to Berlin], and I just fell in love with the place. I figured that it was the first place where it was really okay for me to be an outsider.” But, after a pause, Ellen reflected on this statement and added, “I’m not sure that I’ve felt at home anywhere in my life. *Definitely* not in Chicago.” Many other interviewees echoed Ellen’s sentiments, expressing a sense of alienation in their home cities while identifying with Berlin as a city of outsiders, eccentrics, and loners. Tabitha and Xavier, for example, argued that, for all the moments of brief estrangement they occasionally felt in Berlin, none of it compared to the profound alienation they felt while living in Boston. For Henry, the collapsing job market in Ireland was part of a larger set of complaints that fuelled his desire to relocate to Berlin; he also felt deeply dissatisfied with the dance music scene in Dublin, the local partying culture, and life in Ireland, saying, “I just had enough of Ireland. I just had enough.” For many interviewees, “home” was no longer where they were born and raised.

For some, this sense of alienation at “home” and affinity with Berlin was routed through the affective resonances of the urban built environment. Mariusz, for example, a Polish-German artist who grew up near Bonn before moving to Berlin, compared the two cities in terms of their built environments and the affective impact they had on him:

I was never really happy in the Rheinland. When I came to Berlin, I always felt at home here, due to a number of factors. Firstly, the city: I liked the anonymity; I liked the size of the city. And also, the buildings reminded me of my homeland. I’m originally from Silesia, which used to be Prussian, and Berlin was sort of our capital city. The buildings were built in a similar style, the houses and the streets. And so, Berlin reminded me of home through its urban structures. And I always thought: I am home here. [*Hier bin ich zuhause*.] Secondly, I liked that Berlin wasn’t as…finished and polished as things were in West Germany. I always liked this temporary, ever-changing, improvised aspect – which is also run-down and fucked up [*abgefucked*]. [*Laugh*] I like that. I like it when everything is so rough. (Mariusz 2012)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Lola voiced similar sentiments, again tracing connections back to an early childhood in Eastern Europe. When she first visited Palermo, Italy with a college travel group – her first visit to Europe since leaving Poland as a child – she was overwhelmed with a sense of affinity and recognition: “That European air, vibe, feeling…everything about it; the second it hit me, I was like, ‘Fuck yes! I’m home. This is exactly what I had been missing.’ And it went from the way the shops looked to the way the people looked to the things being sold on the streets to the small cars, the little winding streets that had one name on one side and another name on another. No blocky anything, no big supermarkets; it was all just pure Europeaness, which I really, really missed.” Note the narrative sequence in Lola’s account: she goes through three metaphors for atmosphere before framing the encounter in terms of affective impact, which she immediately ties to a sense of “home”; this sense of home, in turn, is tied to the look of the people on the street, the built environment, the vehicles, and a general sense of small scale. In a post-interview email, she described a similar experience upon arriving to Berlin a few years later, using the same affective vocabulary: “I LOVE Berlin now that I'm here. The architecture, the vibe, the energy, the cafes, the music, the amount of things constantly happening here, the variety of people […], the freedom, the mixture of dirty and sexy...you know? It has it all!”

Some interviewees also described a sense of belonging that developed over time, as they immersed themselves in the rhythms of everyday life in Berlin. Xavier, for example, only noticed his sense of belonging when he was occupied in mundane activities: “I don’t know when I started feeling that way, but I would notice it while doing something like going to lunch at work; mundane things where I notice that I’m just a person living in the city. It’s no longer contrived, I’m no longer just trying it out anymore.” In this case, the affective dimension of civic belonging did not hit Xavier instantly through atmosphere or cityscapes, but instead through the banal but repetitive activities associated with being a resident rather than a visitor. Here, it is the necessities of life rather than the specialness of the place that make Berlin home.

But the electronic dance music scenes of Berlin also offer a scene-specific way of generating this sense of belonging over time, primarily by developing one’s status as a “regular” patron of a particular venue or music event. Nigel, a twenty-six-year-old graduate student at a university near London, England, explained that he developed a sense of being at home in Berlin even before he decided to move there by flying to Berlin and frequenting the same circuit of venues approximately six times per year. He described feeling increasingly at home in Berlin since the winter of 2011, beginning on *Silvester* [New Year’s Eve]. He had been in Berlin for a weekend of music events earlier in December, and when he returned for Silvester, he dined with some of his previous acquaintances and went out partying with them. “You’d bump into people who you had seen before,” he says, “and, really, it snowballs from there.” When he returned for another weekend in February, he found that other partygoers recognized him as a familiar face, greeted him, and remembered his name: “There were people who’d tap me on the shoulder and say ‘Hey, are you Nigel?’ And, I think that, when you feel that…*that’s* when you feel at home.” This sense of home was cemented further when he returned to Berlin in the fall of 2011, after a summer-long hiatus from partying; he was struck that local dance music scene-participants still recognized him after a few months’ absence. He continued visiting Berlin approximately once every second month until he moved to the city in the summer of 2012, at which point he had *already* been feeling at home in the city for more than a year and a half.

In Nigel’s account, it is notable that his sense of belonging to a local subcultural music scene grounds his sense of belonging to the city itself. Here, scene-specific belonging becomes a synecdoche for civic belonging, as the criteria and rituals for belonging to a smaller subcultural group stand in for the broader cultural, social, and legal conditions of belonging to a city. This perhaps risks enabling expatriates to mistake the part for the whole, contenting themselves with belonging to a narrower social world, rather than integrating into the city as a whole. Indeed, some techno-migrants criticize their peers for not venturing beyond the social circles of the city’s electronic dance music scenes, partially echoing broader German immigration-policy debates about ethnic-migrant enclaves, *Parallelgesellschaften* [parallel societies], and *Integrationsversagen* [failure of integration]. In interviews, many expatriates spoke of feeling at home in Berlin and some also felt like “a Berliner” in some sense, but none of them reported feeling German *per se*. Although music scenes can help suture a foreign body into the city’s social and cultural fabric, it seems that they are far less capable of doing the same with nationality, citizenship, or ethnicity.

## Lingering ambivalences

And yet, as Tabitha’s earlier reflections indicate, there still are moments of alienation. Several other interviewees expressed lingering ambivalence about their connection to Berlin and among Berliners, usually citing issues of language, citizenship, and cultural integration. Quentin, a French DJ and music producer who also works at a French-language call-center in Berlin to make ends meet, summarized these sentiments concisely and poignantly: “I feel *chez moi*, but I don’t feel legitimate.”[[3]](#footnote-3) He attributes this sense of illegitimacy to his lack of German language proficiency, as well as to his difficulty finding the time and resources to learn the language while working and socializing in institutions that are either Anglophone or Francophone by default. “My integration is really frustrated, because I have tons of people around me; I didn’t just move to this country for the music, but also to live here. I want to meet people, and I know that I’ve missed out on a lot of people.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These challenges also limit him professionally, as he tries to secure DJ gigs and garner recognition for his music production; although English remains an important working language for the music scenes of Berlin, German-speakers nonetheless enjoy an advantage in dealing with local stakeholders such as venue management, booking agents, recording/mastering studios, and the staff of record shops and audio technology vendors – not to mention the various municipal and law-enforcement authorities, who may take an incisive interest in one’s nocturnal activities.

And, regardless of whether one is seeking to make a musical career in Berlin, German language proficiency remains a decisive factor in migrants’ experiences of arrival, integration, and belonging. As Xavier described earlier, some expatriates gain their sense of civic belonging from their participation in the mundane rhythms of everyday life; it is difficult to sustain this sense of cultural immersion, however, when one does not have the necessary language skills to carry out these tasks. For those who arrive in the city without a mastery of the German language, essential tasks such as finding lodging, negotiating with landlords, registering one’s address with the local authorities, setting up a bank account, setting up utilities, and applying for residency/work permits can all be occasions for moments of alienation. Although techno-migrants may quickly kindle a strong affective sense of belonging upon first arriving to Berlin, such blockages to their immersion into daily urban life can function much like a bucket of cold water, extinguishing the warm glow of affinity and affiliation. This also creates a situation where many techno-migrants have sharply contrasting experiences of belonging in local music scenes in comparison to everyday Berliner/German life: while the German language persists as a source of alienation and disillusionment for many techno-migrants, both electronic dance music and “international” English serve as a lingua franca for the local music scenes, thus allowing for the accumulation of scene-specific social and cultural capital.

Over the past few years in Berlin, as housing costs have spiked and both touristic and migrant flows to the city have noticeably intensified, techno-migrants have increasingly found themselves interpellated by intersecting anti-gentrification and anti-tourism discourses. Some of these complaints have taken on *Fremdfeindliche* [xenophobic] overtones, taking such forms as anti-tourist graffiti (e.g., “Touris raus!” [Tourists out!] or “Touristen Fisten!” [Fist tourists!]), vandalism of establishments associated with tourism and gentrification (e.g., “hipster” bars and cafés, nightclubs, restaurants, organic supermarkets, etc.), hostile encounters in public areas, refusal of service to non-Germanophones—or scolding about insufficient German proficiency—as well as anti-tourist complaints in scene-specific discussion forums (e.g., *Resident Advisor*, *RestRealität*). This hostility is sometimes couched in left-political, anti-capitalist rhetoric, grounded in very real concerns about quality of life and dwindling affordable housing for the city’s poorest inhabitants. This has in turn both played into the hands of pro-gentrification/pro-“urban-renewal” parties—who are eager to use German anxieties about the return of nationalism against their opponents—as well as given pause to some of the left-political factions that helped to develop and propagate anti-gentrification/-tourism messages in the first place. Although techno-migrants are neither typical tourists nor wealthy “yuppie” types, many have internalized the criticisms embedded in these debates, feeling insecure in their capacity to integrate as well as sensing rising hostility from local, German-speaking residents. For Lola, after a brief “honeymoon period” when she felt entirely smitten with Berlin, linguistic issues combined with financial and professional problems to create a sense of alienation and loneliness that lasted most of the fall after her arrival:

When I first got here, I definitely felt at home in terms of being in Europe. And then, October and November got very, very difficult. That’s when it really hit me very hard that…I’m a complete *Auslander* here. I don’t know the language; probably, if I tried to speak it, people would look at me funny, and I can only think in English at the moment. It was very frustrating. And also: the lack of money, the lack of comfort of being able to have an income. I felt *awful*. I’m in my thirties, I don’t have a steady job, I moved away from everybody I know. (Lola 2012)

Lola eventually overcame her sense of cultural distance and exclusion by investing a great deal of time and resources into learning German and making German-speaking contacts outside of the city’s EDM scenes. Indeed, most of the interviewees reporting such moments of alienation also recounted having overcome them with time and effort – albeit with difficulty.

Another way that expatriates internalize these critical discourses is by creating hierarchies within expatriate communities, praising or denigrating their peers based on their perceived ability to integrate into Berliner and German society. “There tends to be this sort of Berlin hierarchy,” argued Murphy, an Irish journalist and language instructor, “where the people who moved here first think they’re more important than the people who moved here after.” In his experience living in Berlin for more than four years, this hierarchy is mostly articulated through one’s time of arrival in the city (earlier being better), one’s command of the German language, and the proportion of Germans in one’s circle of friends. “There’s definitely this hierarchy,” he says, “and it seems totally ridiculous to me. You see this also in the media: people bashing tourists but also bashing newcomers to the city; which is kind of ridiculous, because a lot of the people writing these things are people who also moved here, whether it was in the 90s or later. Actual, real, Berlin-born Berliners are actually quite thin on the ground.”

For many of these techno-migrants who have relocated to Berlin, being “at home” is experienced through affect first and foremost, rather than through structural, linguistic, legal, and cultural modes of belonging. For some, the feeling of being at home in Berlin serves as a placeholder for other forms of civic belonging they may never fully inhabit or master. Indeed, there remain boundaries and separations that affective modes of belonging do little to change. Despite having lived in Berlin for several years, having developed almost fluent German proficiency, and maintaining a large retinue of local German-speaking friends, Murphy mused, “I feel myself as pretty local, but I know that, to a certain degree, I can never be fully local because I’m not German.” For Murphy, this knot of ethnic and national identity formed a hard barrier between him and a sense of unalloyed identification with Berlin.

Thus, the “affective citizenship” expressed by techno-migrants can also be understood as a kind of critical citizenship, based on several challenges it poses to conventional notions of citizenship. Its narrative of instant affinity diverges from those of both ethnonational citizenship and labor/asylum-based migration, in that it recognizes but also absorbs the experience of alterity through alternative narratives of affective identification. In this way, it also throws into relief citizenship’s own registers of feeling, suggesting that we should revise our understanding of citizenship to incorporate a more sensuous set of criteria for civic belonging. In its ambivalence, it also points to the contradictions of migration as lived experience—intimacy and alienation, a fraught and fragile sense of “home”—all the while highlighting migrants’ affective, sensory, and musical tactics for maintaining a sense of citizenship in the face of legal barriers, cultural exclusions, displacement, and so on. Affective citizenship also points to the insufficiency of conventional institutional models of citizenship to capture the practices and experiences of urban migration, but it also underlines its own fragility within a social regime where birthplace and bloodlines matter more than affinities and affection.

In any case, for the techno-migrants whose voices animate this article, affect serves as a powerful vector for engendering civic belonging in the face of displacement and cultural distance. It provides a sense of connection, identification, and immersion for a group that cannot rely on birthplace, citizenship, or ethnic identity to lay claim to their adopted city. And, as anti-tourist, anti-expatriate, and anti-migrant sentiment in Berlin intensifies for a complex host of reasons, such affective civic bonds seem likely to become both more important and more fragile. Indeed, while affect can shape our engagement with larger social structures and urban geographies, there are times when feelings are not enough.

# Interviews

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Henry. (2011) Interview by Author. Berlin, Germany, 14 December.

Lola. (2012) Interview by Author. Berlin, Germany, 25 January.

Mariusz. (2012) Interview by Author. Berlin, Germany, 2 February.

Murphy. (2011) Interview by Author. Berlin, Germany, 15 December.

Nigel. (2012) Interview by Author. Berlin, Germany, 5 January.

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1. Interviewees for this project were recruited through a combination of “snowball sampling” (i.e., asking fieldwork contacts to recommend other potential interviewees) and long-term immersion in Berlin’s electronic dance music scenes (i.e., participant-observation). This article focuses on the perspectives of a few interviewees, selected as a cross-section of the larger set of “techno migrants” consulted for this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Ich war nie richtig glücklich im Rheinland. Als ich in Berlin war, habe ich mich immer zuhause gefühlt. Und da sind mehrere Aspekte. Zum einen, die Stadt. Ich mochte die Anonymität. Ich mochte die Große der Stadt. Und auch die Bauhäuser erinnerten mich an meiner Heimat. Ich komme aus Obserschlesien. Und das war auch früher Preussisch, und Berlin war quasi die Hauptstadt davon. Und bei uns wurde es im ähnlichen Stil gebaut: die Häuser, die Strassen. Und Berlin erinnert mich sehn an meiner Heimat…von Stadtgebau. Und es war immer so, dass ich dachte: Hier bin ich eher zuhause. Ich mochte an Berlin schon immer, dass Berlin nicht so…fertig und so glattpoliert ist, wie in Westdeutschland. Ich mochte immer dieses Temporäre, dieses Im-Umbruch-Sein…dieses Improvisierte – auch kaputt und abgefuckt. [*Lach*] Ich mag das. I mag es, wenn alles so rau ist.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Je me sens chez moi, mais toujours pas légitime.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “J’ai une vrai frustration d’intégration, parce que j’ai plein de gens autour de moi, je suis venu dans un pays pas juste pour la musique, mais pour vivre ici. J’ai envie de rencontrer, et je passe à coté de pas mal de gens. Ca, c’est sur.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)