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ATTITUDES TO FUTURITY IN NEW GERMAN FEMINISMS AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S FICTION

Abstract Drawing on Clare Hemmings' work on feminist narratives, this article explores attitudes to the future in recent German-language pop-feminist volumes, including, amongst others, Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner and Barbara Streidl's *Wir Alpha-Mädchen: Warum Feminismus das Leben schöner macht* [*We Alpha-Girls: Why Feminism Makes Life More Beautiful*] (2008) and the feminist memoir *Neue deutsche Mädchen* [*New German Girls*] (2008) by Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether. After analysing the rhetoric of linear progress deployed in these texts and the ways in which their authors consign second-wave feminism to the past in the name of a normative future, I go on to examine future-thinking in two complex first-person novels: Helene Hegemann's *Axolotl Roadkill* (2010) and Antonia Baum's *Vollkommen leblos, bestenfalls tot* [*Completely Lifeless, Preferably Dead*] (2011). I demonstrate how these novels invoke a sense of disorientation and asynchronous temporality that is productively queer. Their disruptions of time and space, of language and form, combine with decentred central protagonists to throw doubt on the figure of the coherent sovereign subject who lurks persistently behind the new German feminists' configuration of the self-empowered "individual." Finally, this paper contends that the queer refusal of normative futures enacted by the novels allows the opportunity to imagine alternative modes of being that are potentially politically transformative.

Keywords German feminism; German literature; narrative; rhetoric; futures; queer disruptions; agency; subjectivity; individualism; social construction

In her 2011 monograph *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Clare Hemmings analyses the narratives recounted by feminists about Western feminism's recent past. She identifies three types of story, each matching the ideological viewpoint of its narrator. The "narrative of progress" is linear and future-oriented; it characterizes second-wave feminism as an essentialist, universalizing discourse located firmly in the past, which has been corrected by poststructuralist accounts of fluid identity and by theories of intersectionality, so that diverse life

experiences and multiple differences between women are now consistently taken into account. Hemmings glosses this story of progress in the following manner:

We used to think of “woman” or feminism as a unified category, but through the subsequent efforts of black and lesbian feminist theorists [...] the field has diversified and feminism itself has become the object of detailed critical and political scrutiny. Far from being a problem, difference within the category “woman,” and within feminisms, should be a cause for celebration [...] Since “woman” is no longer the ground of feminism [...] an intellectual focus on gender or feminism alone may indicate an anachronistic attachment to false unity or essentialism. (Hemmings 3–4)

The “narrative of loss,” on the other hand, characterizes recent feminist history in terms of the perceived undoing of unified political engagement in the face of “progressive fragmentation of categories,” whilst the “narrative of return” celebrates the long-awaited recuperation of earlier feminist theories after a period of perceived postmodern distraction. Those earlier theories – so the narrative goes – might in fact still have something to offer despite the “valuable critiques of essentialism” they were exposed to (4).

Hemmings argues that these stories should not be taken at face value and should instead be exposed to careful scrutiny, due to the ways in which they “intersect with wider institutionalizations of gendered meanings” that depict feminism as generally anachronistic and irrelevant (1). Indeed, the narrative of progress, the focus of the first section of this article, emerges not only in Anglo-American accounts of feminist history but also in European discussions of the recent Western feminist past, where feminist texts often endorse, reproduce and augment this logic.

In this paper, I begin by analysing how a corpus of essayistic feminist texts published in Germany around the mid-2000s invokes a narrative of progress, and I go on to think through the implications of relying on its logic. The volumes under discussion include the pop-theoretical text, *Wir Alpha-Mädchen: Warum Feminismus das Leben schöner macht* [*We Alpha-Girls: Why Feminism Makes Life More Beautiful*] (2008), by Meredith Haaf, Susanne Klingner and Barbara Streidl; the essayistic, autobiographical work, *Neue deutsche Mädchen* [*New German Girls*] (2008), by Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether; Mirja Stöcker’s edited work *Das F-Wort: Feminismus ist Sexy* [*The F-Word: Feminism is Sexy*] (2006); and Thea Dorn’s *Die F-Klasse: Wie die Zukunft von Frauen gemacht wird* [*The F-Class: How Women are Making the Future*] (2006). These contemporary texts, which purport to mark a new departure in feminism for a generation of young women, tend to legitimize their own future-oriented position by (to a greater or lesser degree) disparaging prominent second-wave feminists and repudiating second-wave strategies, which they often deem to be dogmatic and hopelessly anachronistic. In their place, the new feminisms emphasize the importance of individual choice, with the result that the target of the new feminism often becomes (their notion of) second-wave feminism itself.

After analysing the ways in which these new German feminists deploy the narrative of progress, I turn to a discussion of two German first-person novels which were published around the same time as the feminist volumes and which engage with many of the same issues. The novels can be compared fruitfully with the feminist texts due to their shared themes, on the one hand, and their contrasting temporal schema, on the other. The distinction lies in the disparate approaches to questions of futurity in the novels and in the essayistic texts, a divergence generated in part by the

novels' narrative strategies and the use of rhetoric in the feminist volumes. In stark contrast to the new feminist texts, the literary narratives under discussion, Helene Hegemann's *Axolotl Roadkill* (2010) and Antonia Baum's *Vollkommen leblos, bestenfalls tot* [*Completely Lifeless, Preferably Dead*] (2011), disrupt notions of linear progress and problematize future-facing orientations.

They also resist the logic of loss or return narratives, by which I mean a sense of nostalgia for a more politically progressive time, or hope for its return. I will demonstrate how these novels, in fact, invoke a sense of disorientation and asynchronous temporality that is productively queer. Their queer disruptions of time and space, of language and form, combine with decentred central protagonists to throw doubt on the figure of the coherent sovereign subject who lurks persistently behind the new German feminists' configuration of the self-empowered "individual." It is my contention that the queer temporality and disorientation generated by the novels in fact allow the opportunity of imagining alternative modes of being which are potentially politically transformative. By focusing on the stalled and troubled transitions from adolescence to young adulthood of two disruptive female protagonists, the novels pose important questions about the political implications of subscribing to the available "substantializations of identity," in Lee Edelman's terms, within contemporary neoliberalism and the notion of "history as a linear narrative [...] in which meaning succeeds as revealing itself – as itself – through time" (4). By refusing to partake in this "narrative movement toward a viable political future" the protagonists and their textual vehicles enact a queer resistance to the socio-political status quo (*ibid.*). They also critically illuminate the, in fact, normative trajectories invoked by the feminist narratives of progress under discussion. In contrast, the novels' young, disoriented protagonists and the fragmented form of the novels themselves embody what Judith Halberstam has called a postmodern rupture in the "stability of form and meaning," which, according to Halberstam, constitutes both a "crisis and an opportunity" (*In a Queer Time* 6).

Haaf, Klingner and Streidl's *We Alpha-Girls*, Hensel and Raether's *New German Girls*, Stöcker's *The F-Word* and Thea Dorn's *The F-Class* construct a temporal model of recent feminist history arranged to position their work in the vanguard of relevant, popular feminist thought. A visual depiction might illustrate this strategy in the form of a unidirectional arrow pointing from left to right, where the tip of the arrowhead represents both the present and the implied future of feminism. The arrow's point of origin and the base of the arrow shaft connote a homogenized notion of 1970s second-wave feminism situated firmly in a discrete and completed past. The length of the arrow represents a linear process moving through the 1980s, during which time the ground is prepared for 1970s feminism to be overhauled, in the first place through the influence of poststructuralism and 1990s Anglo-American feminist theorists who explode the category "woman," and now, finally, by these young writers in Germany located at the very tip of the arrowhead. Thematic progress becomes artificially mapped on to the temporal model: the arrow functions at different times to connote a move from sameness to difference, from anti- to pro-sex, from anti- to pro-men, from homo- to heterosexual, from proscription to permission, and, finally, from victimhood and anger to agency and fun.

The reinvention of published popular feminist discourse arising in the 2000s with the emergence of these volumes was all the more striking as a result of the prolonged dominance of Germany's equivalent to second-wave feminism in the German public sphere. I say "equivalent" as the wave metaphor does not constitute a part of feminist terminology in the German-language context. In fact, the post-1968

feminist resurgence in Germany, Austria and Switzerland became known as *Neufeminismus* (new feminism), leading me to use the Anglo-American terminology “second-wave” here to avoid confusion with the most recent volumes under discussion. The absence of the wave metaphor in the German context, however, which symbolically links stages in Anglo-American feminist discourse while simultaneously distinguishing between them, also contributed to the sense of abrupt caesura upon publication of the latest texts. In those recent volumes, the authors employ rhetorical strategies and a narrative structure in order to consign the, in their opinion, anachronistic tenets of second-wave feminism to the past and situate their own works firmly in the present. Techniques employed to achieve this include creating and sustaining a lexical dichotomy between “new” and “old” feminisms (they rename the (second-wave) “new feminists” “old feminists” and appropriate the moniker “new” for themselves), the use of comparative syntactical structures, the reconfiguration of the word “feminism” (it becomes the F-Word, the F-Class, and feminists become Alpha-Girls or New German Girls) and the employment of a linear structure within the physical texts, which invariably includes a simplistic account of 1970s and 1980s Western feminism, from which their “new” feminism emerges as a seemingly inevitable development.

The second-wave feminists in Germany become proponents, therefore, of an anachronistic “Altfeminismus” (old feminism), which is frequently conflated with the person of the prominent feminist journalist and media figurehead Alice Schwarzer, a strategy which tends to homogenize an in fact rich and varied period of German-language feminist history. The new feminists, on the other hand, align themselves in their volumes linguistically with the here and now, and “die Probleme junger Frauen von heute” (the problems of young women today) (Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl 14). And, in the case of the title to Thea Dorn’s volume (*The F-Class: How Women are Making the Future*), the present stretches into a future already being constructed by women – and that future reaches back into and inflects the present. The Alpha-Girls justify their work by claiming that the “old feminism” has lost its relevance for young women, proposing, “dass der Feminismus einfach nur mal auf den neuesten Stand gebracht werden muss” (feminism has just got to be brought up to date) (Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl 14). Their volume, they claim, marks the beginning of this process of making a new feminist future (ibid.).

New German Girls Jana Hensel and Elisabeth Raether also focus on Alice Schwarzer as the embodiment of “old feminism.” Despite dedicating a large amount of print to her, they assert that Schwarzer’s generation – implying the second wave – has become anachronistic. In unequivocal language, the New German Girls place Schwarzer firmly in the past: “mehr als das, was sie bis jetzt erreicht hat, wird diese [Schwarzer’s] Generation nicht erreichen. Die Zeit hat sie eingeholt, ihre Rhetorik ist oll, Alice Schwarzer und ihre Frauen sind Historie geworden“ (this generation won’t achieve any more than what they’ve already achieved. Time’s caught up with them, their rhetoric is old-hat. Alice Schwarzer and her women are history) (Hensel and Raether 14) The non-standard term “oll” in German functions something like the English “of yore,” in order to “other” the second wave linguistically. Following Hemmings, their generational logic constructs others, in this case Alice Schwarzer and her “women,” as “less invested in feminism by privileging time over context” (Hemmings 150). In this excerpt, what matters is that time has caught up with them, rather than the matter of contextually based distinctions.

The Alpha-Girls deploy their own rhetorical figures strategically and, in the process, oversimplify feminism’s recent past. This ensures that the new feminism may

be viewed favourably by comparison. For example, one of the opening chapters concludes with the following anaphoric call and response:

Der alte Feminismus hat keine Lösung für das Dilemma “Beruf oder Familie”? Dann muss der neue Feminismus eine finden! Der alte Feminismus will die Frauen stärken, indem er die Männer ausschließt? Dann muss ein neuer Feminismus den Männern erklären, warum es auch für sie super ist, wenn wir uns weiterentwickeln.

(So the old feminism has no solution for the dilemma “career or family”? Then the new feminism has to find one! So the old feminism wants to empower women by shutting out men? Then the new feminism has to explain to men how our further development is also great for them!) (Haaf, Klingner, and Streidl 14–15)

Thematically, the progress narrative in these texts configures second-wave feminism as a movement based around the notion of “woman” as a unified category; the universalizing tendency of 1970s feminists, they claim, resulted in hierarchies and exclusions which led to internal conflicts and schisms. In *We Alpha-Girls*, the 1970s and 1980s connote almost exclusively a time of “Grabenkämpfe und Rechthaberei” (sectarianism and self-righteousness) (194), during which the women’s movement disintegrated in the face of conflicts between heterosexual and lesbian feminists, pro- and anti-sex feminists and pro- and anti-pornography feminists (194–96). The Alpha-Girls fall back on the generalization that this infighting and feminism’s consequential downfall resulted from certain second-wave feminists’ “Kontrollzwang und ideologischer Totalanspruch” (control issues and exhaustive ideological demands) (195). Their central target for accusations of such tendencies in Germany is, once again, Schwarzer, who is accused of proselytizing, condescension and of disparaging women who have contrasting ideas or lifestyles. As a direct textual contrast, their subsequent chapter is entitled “Und Jetzt?” [And Now?], and begins with an aspirational reference to 1990s American third-wave feminism, with its more permissive attitude towards sex, sexuality and pop-cultural playfulness.

In order to construct a persuasive and comprehensively relevant progress narrative, the Alpha-Girls must perform an anti-universalizing gesture in order to signal a move from the universalist identity politics they associate with Schwarzer to a poststructurally inflected politics of difference and intersectionality that they associate with American third-wave feminism. Yet in their introduction the Alpha-Girls admit that some readers “werden vielleicht die spezifischen Perspektiven lesbischer Frauen oder etwa Migrantinnen vermissen” (will perhaps miss the particular perspectives of lesbian or migrant women) (8), for these are not included in their allegedly all-inclusive feminism. This is why the Alpha-Girls offer the disclaimer that their book does not intend to unite all viewpoints because they are aware that not all women in Germany live their lives in the same way (*ibid.*). This disclaimer has a useful if pernicious rhetorical function: a professed understanding of difference and intersectionality as progressive turns in Western feminism relieves the narrators of the burden of engaging fully with their details or their implications within their texts.

The Alpha-Girls also stress the importance of the theoretical insights provided by “die Genderforschung” (gender studies) for their own work (30). These include an awareness of the importance of differentiating between “biologischem und sozialen Geschlecht sowie zwischen Geschlecht und Geschlechtsidentität” (biological and

social sex, as well as between gender and gender identity) (ibid.). Referring to “gender studies” functions as shorthand for describing the intervention of poststructuralist, queer, and postcolonial feminist critiques, which are portrayed as interrupting the self-absorbed universalism and essentialism of the second wave. In her work, which does not draw on German feminism, Clare Hemmings notes that Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), in particular, functions as a threshold text in anglophone feminist texts, in particular, providing the same kind of shorthand for this shift as does the choice of naming gender studies rather than women’s studies. These strategies are also visible in the new feminist German texts under discussion. For example, in her contribution to the multi-authored volume *Das F-Wort: Feminismus ist sexy*, Jenny Warnecke credits Butler with the single-handed dismantling of the category “woman,” indeed of the subject itself. Warnecke locates the origins of twenty-first-century feminist thinking in Butler’s account of the incoherent subject and glosses the latter’s impact:

Mitten hinein in dieses Wir-Gefühl hat Judith Butler die Frau als Handlungssubjekt in Frage gestellt und philosophisch kurzerhand aufgelöst, stattdessen hat sie Bündnispolitik und Netzwerke empfohlen. Aktionen nehmen ihren Ausgangspunkt in einem gemeinsamen Problem und nicht in einer vermeintlichen Geschlechtsidentität.

(Judith Butler interrupted this sense of a feminist “we” by scrutinizing the acting subject category “woman” and, without further ado, philosophically dismantling it. In its place, she proposed a politics predicated on alliances and networks. Action originates in mutual problems and not in an alleged gender identity.) (Warnecke 36)

At another point, Warnecke claims that “[d]ie Frau im Plural gibt es nicht mehr. Das ist seit Judith Butlers Buch *Gender Trouble* klar” (woman in the plural doesn’t exist anymore. That’s been clear ever since Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*) (25).¹ Butler’s deployment as a textual grenade in the new German texts achieves several complex goals at once. Firstly, Butler constitutes a shorthand for the seismic shift in feminist theory which the young authors claim as their inheritance. Secondly, it distances these authors from their second-wave feminist forebears theoretically (difference over universalism) and spatially (US over German influence); the mention of Judith Butler, along with other aspects of Anglo-American and French theory, signals a turn away from a domestic tradition of feminist thought. Thirdly, it provides the appearance of a dalliance with queer theory without actually requiring full engagement with its finer details. This is because these volumes are generally entirely heteronormative and draw on Butler almost exclusively for her insights into sex and gender as social constructs and the deconstruction of the category “woman,” as the above passage demonstrates.

The progress narrative as it appears in the German texts is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it reduces complex historical developments to oversimplified summaries. Secondly, as Hemmings has noted, it “coincide[s] unnervingly with those [narratives] that place Western feminism firmly in the past in order to ‘neutralize’ gender equality in its global circuits” (11). The intention to reinvigorate feminist discourse in the face of malignant mainstream representations of feminism that consign second-wave feminism to history requires the construction of a linear narrative of progress distancing the new feminists – and their intended audience –

from the perceived negativity of “Altfeminismus” (old feminism). This strategy ultimately results in an all-pervasive textual preoccupation with the process of disentanglement from the past, to the extent that feminism itself appears to become the sole object of critique. The new feminisms thus collude with post- and anti-feminist narratives which themselves place feminism in the past, and reinscribe precisely those malignant popular representations of second-wave feminism. “Altfeminismus” becomes the problem instead of the social constellations which gave rise to feminist intervention in the first place. Thirdly, the texts’ vision of the future is somewhat ephemeral, as almost every thorny issue is dealt with by insisting that women must make their own individual choice.

As a result, concrete strategies for specific issues are lacking, as are suggestions for the interventions that the community of Alpha-Girls could make. The notion of a better future for women is rhetorically invoked but ultimately appears to be confined within the paradigm of the neoliberal status quo. In the place of a coherent political agenda for the future, the Alpha-Girls in fact appear to propose a withdrawal from radical feminist politics to that which Jana Hensel calls “normality.” She observes that “in den letzten Jahren wurde immer deutlicher: Längst ist es die Normalität, die zu unserer größten Sehnsucht geworden ist“ (in the last few years it’s become increasingly apparent that what we really desire is normality) (Hensel and Raether 15). This brand of feminism thus aligns itself with normative mainstream culture and circumvents the radicalism – and the concomitant exposure to censure – linked with Schwarzer’s generation. The Alpha-Girls have been exposed to, and in turn impose, what in Michel Foucault’s terms might be called the disciplinary function of patriarchal institutions enacted by the power of the norm (Foucault 92–108; Caputo and Yount 6). Normalization monitors and disciplines those who stray beyond the limits of the norm, which, as Hensel’s comment implies, makes the norm an object of aspiration.

I move now to an analysis of futurity in Helene Hegemann’s *Axolotl Roadkill* and Antonia Baum’s *Vollkommen leblos, bestenfalls tot*. Both debut novels, they present the reader with two young female protagonists, Mifti and Rosa, whose aggressive self-awareness, acerbic commentaries and ironic attitudes place both themselves and the reader at one remove from their otherwise palpable existential distress. Baum and Hegemann disturb representation at the formal level. Their complex, self-reflexive novels question the terms in which the experience of consciousness is represented and examine the possibility of coherent subjectivity, eschewing mimetic representation and disturbing linearity. Emily Jeremiah has noted that the dramatic circumstances surrounding the publication of Hegemann’s debut, when the author was seventeen, produced a particularly “instructive controversy,” which revealed a “great deal about contemporary German literary and cultural ideals, especially as far as girls and young women are concerned” (Jeremiah 400). (Hegemann was at first embraced as a “Wunderkind,” then, as the extent and variety of her intertextual approach became known, was publicly derided by the male literary establishment as derivative and/or deceitful.)

Nevertheless, the authors distance their protagonists from the feminist *grand récit* as a solution to crises in female subjectivity and agency. Instead, the novels hurtle towards their protagonists’ seemingly inevitable psychological and physical breakdown, offering them no system of belief or ideology on which to gain a purchase. Thus, Baum and Hegemann express ambivalence towards feminism – an ambivalence that Hegemann herself publicly identifies with – even while they draw in

part on a tradition of feminist aesthetics and tackle the issue of female agency thematically.²

The relentless inner monologue from which *Vollkommen leblos, bestenfalls tot* is constructed captures the complex thought processes of its psychologically unstable protagonist, Rosa Sperrlich. Scattered amongst the many fantastical sequences that could be dreams or hallucinations, there are conversations, at times in e-mail or text message form. Baum's protagonist moves to the city after her final school exams. She looks forward to escaping the toxic influence of her family, but instead she finds a controlling boyfriend, a tedious job in new media, and drug and alcohol excess. Thwarted in her attempts to find a foothold on her life, she rails against what she calls the "Werde-Pflicht" (compulsory-becoming) (Baum 237) of her generation. After two damaging relationships, Rosa becomes pregnant but aborts. She withdraws into a cocoon of lethargy, first starving herself then beginning to cut herself. The novel's conclusion finds her about to commit suicide by jumping from a tall building, and ends with a moment of insight on Rosa's part into her parents' messy lives and past mistakes. In the first edition (Hoffmann and Campe, 2011), the last line is the postscript "Rosa Sperrlich, Marcialla im Sommer 2011," which suggests that the novel is, in fact, the narrative that Rosa attempts to write during the period of her illness completed at a later date in Italy. The 2013 Suhrkamp edition omits this postscript, effectively sustaining the gesture of refusal to think the future enacted by the novel as a whole.

In *Axolotl Roadkill* the streams of consciousness are interspersed with flashbacks to the protagonist, Mifti's, troubled childhood. As in Baum's novel, it becomes clear that the novel we are reading is Mifti's diary. Meanwhile, Mifti takes drugs, has sex, steals money from her father, goes to parties in Berlin and yearns after her older ex-girlfriend, Alice. When her family finally expresses concern about her behaviour, Mifti allows herself to get caught whilst shoplifting in order to force an encounter with Alice. The novel ends with a hallucinatory reunion of sorts between the lovers and a replication of a hate-filled letter of maternal rejection signed in the name of Mifti's mother.

It may seem counterintuitive to select two novels for comparison which appear to withdraw from feminist engagement, indeed from the viability of socio-cultural critique per se, moving, as they do, between critical ambivalence and ironic observation. At one and the same time, the novels both express and thwart the yearning for an alternative mode of being, countering the contemplation of a better future with cynical posturing, self-harm, and the rejection of the future in the form of adulthood. But this rejection, or refusal, can be understood to constitute a productive queer intervention by offering an alternative to compulsory future-oriented positivity of the type displayed by the new feminists, which is based on a binary mode of thinking that privileges linear time over context. As Halberstam notes, "[w]hile liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness" (*In a Queer Time* 98).

Both characters must contend with "untidy" pasts in the form of their experience of traumatic childhood events: Mifti was physically and psychologically abused by her mother, who died two years before the novel begins, and she lives with her siblings, away from her emotionally distant father. Rosa grew up with a depressed, alcoholic mother, whose unhappy marriage led her to leave her husband and child in order to return to her studies, which she had broken off when pregnant with Rosa. Both characters' families are materially wealthy, but dysfunctional. Rosa

describes her family as “ein asozialer Familienrest mit Geld” (the anti-social remnants of a family with money) (Baum 7). In fact, families connote for them the most dangerous thing in the world (see, for example, *ibid.* 17), engendering a fear of adulthood, which expresses itself in Mifti’s desire never to grow up (Hegemann 15) and in Rosa’s rejection of what she calls the “Zukunfts-Krankheit” (the scourge of the prospective) (Baum 13).

The fear of growing up can be understood as part of the protagonists’ awareness of the normative trajectories they have been and will be exposed to. Rosa’s initial celibacy and, later, her anorexia can be seen as attempts to return to a less complex state of being in the form of prepubescence, and the only wish that Mifti expresses explicitly (and arguably without irony) is “nicht erwachsen werden” (not to grow up) (Hegemann 15), a desire which explains her sense of kinship with the axolotl of the title. This type of salamander, renowned for its regenerative qualities, reaches adulthood without metamorphosis, entailing that it remains – in human terms – prepubescent. Like the axolotl, both Mifti and Rosa appear to be suspended in stasis, stuck in a present determined by the past and unable to find any productive way of moving into the future: they spend hours sleeping, drifting in and out of consciousness or seeking escape in drug-induced altered states of consciousness. As Mifti writes: “ich traue mich nicht, an morgen zu denken, ich traue mich eigentlich überhaupt nicht, zu denken” (I don’t trust myself to think about tomorrow. I don’t even trust myself to think at all) (135).

The novels’ narrative structure reflects the characters’ sense of stasis, of refusing, or being unable, to move on; it also functions to render textually the overwhelming simultaneity of consciousness, i.e., the debilitating presence of the past and the (fear of the) future in the present. Thus, the linearity of traditional narrative form is perpetually disrupted, impeding forward propulsion, and disorientating the reader, who becomes as wrong-footed as the protagonists themselves. As Jeremiah notes:

The disorienting effect of Hegemann’s own novel can be seen as queerly instructive. The novel’s failure to offer orientation, or to orient itself according to literary conventions, provokes a consideration of what those norms actually constitute, just as Mifti’s failure to fit in prompts a challenge to the very idea of fitting in. (Jeremiah 404)

Axolotl Roadkill is constructed from a patchwork of non sequiturs and provocatively self-contradictory statements; indeed, Mifti’s brother suggests at one point that her writing (in the form of her diary) resembles roadkill. It is also often difficult to distinguish between past and present events and real or imagined scenes. In *Vollkommen leblos*, Rosa’s inner monologue is relentless and repetitive. This evokes the cyclical nature of Rosa’s jammed thought patterns. Sentences spread over pages, pinned down by an “I think” at each end, whilst her thoughts range across time, and space, and her narrated movements are punctuated by events, often sudden and violent, which are never identified as real or imagined.

When the reader first encounters Rosa, she is criticizing her teachers’ “Zukunfts-Besessenheit” (obsession with the future) (Baum 13), which she feels focuses only on the conventional markers of neoliberal success: wealth, career, and heteronormative nuclear family. She observes:

In den Klassenzimmern haben sie uns jahrelang terrorisiert mit ihren Einschüchterungs-Parolen über die Zukunft und über Berufe mit bzw. ohne Zukunft und wenig Zeit, das haben sie immer wieder gesagt, dass wir keine Zeit haben und uns beeilen müssen.

(In the classrooms they terrorized us for years with their threatening speeches about the future and about careers with – and careers without – a future and so little time, that’s what they said over and over again, that we had no time and had to hurry up.) (12)

This pressure can be understood in terms of the narrative of neoliberal self-optimization which, as I have argued elsewhere, exposes young women to relentless pressure to aspire and succeed (Spiers, “Long March”; “Mädchen”). Alongside school, the protagonists’ families constitute another source of this pressure. As a result, the unhappy and dysfunctional biographies of the parental generation in Baum’s and Hegemann’s novels function as a mode of queer critique of the heteronormative nuclear family, which aligns with the characters’ initial avowals that they will not cooperate with the imperative to procreate.

Rosa rails against what she calls “nationalsozialistisch[e] Popkultur” (national-socialist pop-culture) (Baum 207), a homogeneous postmodern culture, in which identity has become a lifestyle commodity, the pivotal consumer product concept driving neoliberal economics, or as Rosa puts it “I.C.H. inc.” (M.E. Inc.) (104). Rosa satirizes a culture in which individual self-responsibility has become the dominant narrative and citizens exist in solitary units, protecting themselves from intersubjective encounters with headphones (206). The consequence of freedom of individual choice and self-empowerment is that “[I]etztlich ist jeder für sich selbst verantwortlich” (ultimately everybody is responsible for themselves) (62), a line which echoes the Alpha-Girl rhetoric discussed above. Such a climate has no patience for those who are relentlessly exposed, buffeted and subsumed by the weight of social expectations. Instead, Rosa and Mifti are each reminded constantly: “Du sollst das einfach durchziehen” (you’ve just got to see it through) (Hegemann 77), an imperative they push against.

At the beginning of *Vollkommen leiblos*, Rosa views her imminent move to the city as an opportunity to shape her own life: “Man kann alles machen. Ich will was werden” (Anything is possible. I want to become something) (Baum 16). However, once in the city, Rosa experiences difficulty in establishing relationships, theorizing that, due to her traumatic childhood, something has been “ripped out” of her and never replaced (42). Like Mifti, she begins to perceive herself as fatally determined, a product of social construction which prevents her from truly autonomous action. These reflective passages constitute the interrogatory dimension inherent in these works of fiction, which remains lacking in the pop-feminist non-fiction. For example, in her relationship with her boyfriend Patrick she feels unable to be anything but “ferngesteuert” (remote-controlled) (Baum 30), a victim of the “seit Jahrhunderten überlieferten Schlamm” (legacy of centuries’-old sludge) of social convention and fixed gender roles (37). Convention and passive constructions of femininity clash with more recent postfeminist propaganda that demands that women become “total befreit. Sei weiblich und sei dabei wie ein Mann. Sei auch sexuell befreit [...] lass’ dich krass überall rein ficken und wirke dabei möglichst selbstbewusst” (totally liberated. Be feminine and, at the same time, be like a man. Be sexually liberated, too [...] let yourself be fucked like crazy in every conceivable hole, but make sure you look as

self-confident as you can while you do) (ibid.). This passage aligns strikingly with my critique of Alpha-Girl pop-feminism, which often foregrounds confident sexuality as one of the only viable sites of agency.

Having attempted and failed to gain a purchase on life Rosa becomes pregnant. After taking her mother's advice to abort, Rosa realizes she has undertaken that which her mother wishes she had done when she was pregnant with Rosa, increasing Rosa's sense of being socially alienated. She isolates herself still further, experiencing herself as trapped in a "Kopfgefängnis" (head prison) (233), eventually developing an eating disorder. Rosa describes her illness as a "Leistungssport" (competitive sport), satirically inverting the social demands placed upon her to succeed (209). Success in this case constitutes the complete destruction of self.

Rosa even views her disorder with ironic detachment: "Ich fand es nicht sehr originell essgestört zu werden, das störte mich tatsächlich, aber man braucht irgendein Gelände, irgendetwas was einem sagt, was man ist" (I didn't find it very original to develop a disturbed eating disorder. In fact, that really disturbed me. But you need some kind of handhold, something that tells you what you are) (ibid.). When her subsequent attempt to find this point of purchase at university fails, viewing the education offered there as an extension of her intellectual cage, Rosa begins to "open herself up" in other ways (232). She cuts herself because "[r]ot zeigt dir an, wo du im Raum stehst, Rot zeigt dir, dass du dich nicht irrst, Rot macht dich sichtbar, Rot schafft Ordnung, Einheit, Unterschied, ein Oben, ein Unten, einen Anfang und ein Ende" (red shows you where you are in space, red shows you that you're not mistaken, red makes you visible, red creates order, coherence, difference, an above, a below, a beginning and an end) (ibid.).

These passages are striking for their representation of Rosa's grappling with her sense of being socially determined not just in temporal but also in spatial terms. Stuck in the "prison" of her brain, Rosa rejects the imperative to pull herself together and in fact pursues an alternative path of self-orientation. Following Sara Ahmed, what Rosa has uncovered are the invisible lines of orientation that have determined the path her life would take. As Ahmed notes, "[w]e follow the line that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which 'we' emerge" (21). Rosa's process of enquiry into the normative processes of orientation involves exploring alternative models of orientation. These include the eating disorder, which functions as one kind of "handhold," "something that tells you what you are," or indeed orientates you. Cutting, too, becomes described in spatial terms that imply the processes of orientation: the red blood becomes the "line" that "shows you where you are in space." Rosa's non-normative spatial orientation makes visible the usually invisible normative lines and orientations directing individuals' progression through life by her very deviation from the path. Yet as Ahmed notes, "risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray [or] getting lost" (ibid.).

The novels, however, do not seek to portray this refusal to toe the line as necessarily liberating or pleasurable. The disorientation experienced by the protagonists, which becomes the reader's disorientation, is painful and, as Emily Jeremiah notes, frightening (405). Mifti and Rosa withdraw from a social world they view as culturally and politically bankrupt, seeking even to escape the body and the psyche, which proves impossible. They are portrayed as symbolically fragmented individuals, experiencing themselves as alienated from their own bodies and disconnected from any sense of personal agency. Mifti often dreams of her mutilated body, where only "[d]as Gesicht ist übrig geblieben, ein paar Fetzen an den

Fingerknöcheln auch. Hände und Füße baumeln, weil sie im Gelenk getrennt wurden” (my face is left, also a few shreds hanging off my knuckles. Hands and feet are flopping around because they’ve been severed at the joint) (Hegemann 40). Mirrors, which feature heavily in *Axolotl Roadkill*, function as a tool for Mifti’s attempts to overcome the association of her body with abuse and weakness:

Nur noch die grenzenlose Schwäche ist sichtbar und diese daraus entstandene Unschuld. Ohne den Blick von mir selbst abzuwenden, versuche ich mir in Erinnerung zu rufen, dass die Haut oberhalb meine Kniekehle, das Narbengewebe zwischen den Schultern und das Sommersprossenfeld auf meinem Oberschenkel zu mir gehören.

(I can only see limitless weakness and the innocence it generated. Without taking my eyes off my reflection I try to call to mind that the skin above the back of my knee, the scar tissue between my shoulders and the sprinkle of freckles on my thigh belong to me.) (110)

Her body has become a cipher for those abstract qualities of weakness, but also innocence, a vehicle onto which can be projected intolerable experience. As long as the body remains something “[d]er eigentlich nichts mit dir zu tun hat” (which has nothing to do with you) (96), that is, remains disconnected from consciousness per se, Mifti is able to retain a sense of at least mental resilience: “weil mein Körper im Gegensatz zu mir selbst ein auf körperliche Schmerzen reagierendes Reflexbündel ist” (because in contrast to my self, my body is just a bundle of reflexes reacting to physical pain) (84).

But Mifti despises the way in which her body continues to experience sensations despite being “disconnected” from her consciousness. For example, she becomes disgusted with her body’s ability to experience orgasm during sex with a stranger despite the sensation that her consciousness remains disconnected from the event (113). The world of sex, which becomes connected with corporeality and abuse, entails the loss of language (ibid.), a capacity Mifti at times appears to align with her “self.” While this sense of self is fragmented, it is divided rigidly into binaries: the body is associated with victimhood, and language at first appears to equate with consciousness or “self.” For example, after being attacked by her sister, Mifti observes that “[s]elbst das Schreien hat nichts mit mir selbst zu tun, sondern mit der unvermittelten Reaktion eines Organismus auf einen bestimmten Reiz. Ich bin nicht meine Schreie, ich bin nicht mein physisches Schmerzempfinden, ich bin kein Tier” (even the screaming has nothing to do with my self, only with an organism’s sudden response to a certain stimulus. I am not my screams. I am not my physical experience of pain. I am not an animal) (84). Yet, with a gesture that aligns with a Lacanian perspective, Mifti ultimately resists the equation of language with consciousness, or self. Acknowledging that even the language she uses is a result of her socialization, she asserts that “[m]ir wurde eine Sprache einverleibt, die nicht meine eigene ist” (I’ve assimilated a language that is not my own) (47).³

Mifti’s sense of alienation from the world, her body, and her language does not result in resignation but in fact a stubborn refusal to participate in life as it has been offered to her. She claims, furthermore:

Ich wollte aufhören zu denken, weil Wörter bedeutungslos waren, weil Bedeutungslosigkeit bedeutungslos war, weil das Leben nichts wert war, weil

meine komplette Physiognomie Teil des in sich stimmigen Organismus eines belebten Himmelskörper ist, von dem ICH mich abgrenze.

(I wanted to stop thinking because words were meaningless, because meaninglessness was meaningless, because life was worth nothing, because my entire physiognomy is part of the inherently consistent organism of a populated celestial body from which I distance myself.) (166)

This refusal of body–mind and self–social integration is part of the novel’s broader emphasis on the fragmented and disorientating nature of subjective consciousness. But it also connotes a radical act of refusal in the face of the normative options available to a young woman like Mifti. Turning again to Halberstam, Mifti’s “refusal of self” can be understood as “an anti-liberal act, a revolutionary statement of pure opposition that does not rely upon the liberal gesture of defiance but accesses another lexicon of power and speaks another language of refusal” (*Queer Art* 139).

As both texts move towards crisis, not progress, and their conclusions deny the conventional happy ending, they enact a subversion of the *Bildungsroman*, or the “Coming of Age Dramolette,” as Mifti puts it (Hegemann 199). Indeed, they subvert the narrative of progress that I have argued defines the essayistic feminist texts discussed above. On the one hand, the new feminist texts appear at first glance to offer a liberating narrative of progress: from a politics of “freedom from” to one of “freedom to.”⁴ However, their focus on rescuing feminism from what are anyway fallacious representations of second-wave feminism and their empty rhetoric, which conjures the smooth transcendence of social contingency and bright futures, undermines their own agenda.

But is the radical refusal of the future performed by the novels preferable to the naïve, unreflecting optimism of the essayistic texts? Does the bleakness of the future, or refusal to imagine one, “access another lexicon of power”? And what might that look like? In the novels under discussion, the answer to these questions perhaps lies with their emphasis on the generative act of writing, and on the capacity of narrative to hold a fragmenting subject within constantly shifting imaginary paradigms. For the ability to make and re-make the self with narrative is what finally allows the characters in the novels to test their capacity for generative action. As an alternative to cutting, Rosa attempts to write down her experiences in order to find the structure and coherence she desires. This is perhaps why she states: “Erst versuchen wir was Ganzes, eine Erzählung” (First, let’s try something whole: a story) (Baum 234). For Rosa, a story represents something necessarily coherent due to the conventions of narrative structure and the telos propelling it. However, the procedure initially produces only distress:

Denke ich, fällt mir sofort das Gegenteil dazu ein, denke ich, sehe ich immer die eine und die andere Seite, gibt es niemals etwas ganzes, gültiges [...] Aber so denkt man heute, dachte ich, als sich Alles in mir zerlegte, alles falsch war und nichts stimmte. Unverschämt, anmaßend, überheblich fand ich es von mir zu denken, es könne überhaupt einen ganzen Satz oder gar eine ganze Geschichte geben.

(I think and then the opposite thought occurs to me immediately, I think and I always see both sides, there’s never anything whole and valid [...] But that’s how people think today, I thought, as everything in me fragmented, everything

was wrong and nothing added up. I found it shameless, presumptuous, arrogant of me to think that there could ever be a whole sentence let alone a whole story.) (235)

Although Rosa claims towards the novel's conclusion that she never succeeded in writing (235–36), the inscription included in the first edition of the novel suggests that writing did in fact present one reason for her stepping back from the edge of the building she is about to jump off when the novel ends. Suhrkamp's editorial decision to remove the inscription, however, undermines that reading and prolongs the sense of radical refusal sustained throughout the text.

For Mifti, writing does provide a sense of coherence where it is subjectively lacking and represents an externalized connection of sorts. It becomes clear that the novel the reader is reading "is" Mifti's diary, which she views as "die Ausdruckswaffe gegen meine Angst" (the weapon of expression against my fear) (Hegemann 38) and as an attempt to make whole and long-lasting – even temporarily – that which might otherwise disappear (67).

It is worthwhile recalling here the arguments made by Lois McNay and Adriana Cavarero concerning the role played by the narrative medium in the "active process of configuration whereby individuals attempt to make sense of the temporality of existence" (McNay 27). Through their explorations of two characters struggling against the effects of social circumstance and psychological damage, Hegemann and Baum foreground the "retentive dimension of the sedimented effects of power on the body" (McNay 4–5). Yet the authors also develop a generative logic which imagines a more creative and imaginative stratum to action. As McNay contends, it is "crucial to conceptualize these creative or productive aspects immanent to agency in order to explain how, when faced with complexity and difference, individuals may respond in unanticipated and innovative ways which may hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change" (5). In this case, the narrative impulse experienced by Mifti and Rosa can be understood as what Cavarero calls the subject's desire for unity of the self in the form of a story. The subjects who emerge coincide with the "uncontrollable narrative impulse of memory" that produces the story the reader has before her, and are also "captured in the very text itself" (Cavarero 35).

For this reason, the novels appear to possess a self-awareness lacking in the essayistic texts; in short, they understand their own fictitious nature, and, consequently, the role of narrative in identity construction. Whilst the essayistic feminist works also construct a narrative, a fiction of recent feminist history to create their own identity and to serve their agenda, they do not acknowledge the constructed nature of their own story, but offer it up as the "truth." In the final analysis, however, linear narratives of progress and "truth" are unable to fully express – as the novels attempt to – the simultaneous temporality of consciousness, where agency may stem from a reconciliation of past and future in the present, and not from linear narratives of progress which disavow the past.

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notes

1 It is troubling that the new feminists all focus on Butler and not on any feminists of colour, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw or bell hooks, who intervened in debates concerning the universal female subject before Butler.

2 Helene Hegemann has publicly distanced herself from feminist debate, claiming: “[i]ch habe mich mit so etwas nie beschäftigt, weil ich in einer Generation – naja, verankert bin ich eigentlich in keiner Generation – aber in einem Jahrzehnt groß geworden bin, in dem sich Fragen nach Geschlechterrollen kaum mehr stellten” (I’ve never really thought about stuff like that because I’m of a generation – well, actually, I’m not really rooted in any generation – but I grew up in a decade when questions about gender roles were no longer relevant). Nevertheless, she acknowledges that members of the literary industry “sind mit anderen Standards sozialisiert worden, da wird mir dann ab und zu dieses Biologie-Intuitions-Monster-Ding angehängt und jede Form von Rationalität aberkannt, mit der ich an meine Arbeit herangehe” (were socialized with different standards and so occasionally I get lumbered with this biology-intuition-monster-thing and denied the rationality with which I go about my work). Furthermore, she is able to identify continuing gender bias inherent in literary institutions, acknowledging: “Trotzdem, wenn Hamlet auf die Bühne kommt, vertritt der ein Menschheitsproblem, und wenn Medea auf die Bühne kommt, ist sie eine Frau, die schwerstneurotisch ist” (Nevertheless, when Hamlet comes on stage he embodies the human condition, whereas when Medea comes on stage, she’s a crazy neurotic woman). She nevertheless refuses to be drawn on the issue, claiming: “ich rede da total ungern drüber, weil ich denke, je mehr darüber gesprochen wird, desto mehr bestätigt es einen darin, sich weiter in solchen Mustern wohlfühlen” (I don’t like talking about it because I think the more it gets talked about, the more you feel justified in staying in those kinds of roles). See Hegemann in Cosima Lutz, “Helene Hegemann beraubt ihre Freunde schonungslos,” *Welt Online* 10 Feb. 2010, available <<http://www.welt.de/News/article6329626/Helene-Hegemann-beraubt-ihre-Freunde-schonungslos.html>> (accessed 5 Sept. 2016).

3 This statement can also be read, of course, as an ironic authorial aside regarding Hegemann’s intertextual strategies.

4 For a full discussion of the paradigms of “freedom from” and “freedom to,” see Grosz.

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