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Narratives and Counternarratives of German Borderscapes

in Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Serpentina Angst*

DORA RUSCIANO

Introduction

¶1 The emerging field of border studies begins with the assumption that traditional correlations between borders, territories and national identities are becoming increasingly tenuous and underscore the relevance of fiction in bordering processes. In addressing the role of borders in cultural negotiations, works like *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetic of Boundaries and Crossings* by Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman (2021) and *Border Culture: Theory, Imagination, Geopolitics* by Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary and Viktor Konrad (2023) highlight the strong influence of narratives, both in enriching dominant ideologies and in elevating minority voices within public spheres.

¶2 A good example of fiction's contribution to reflections on borders and bordering processes is the German author Olivia Wenzel's novel, *1000 Serpentina Angst*, published in 2020. The novel soon attracted critics' attention, winning the Fulda-Preis award for best literary debut. "Szenisch, poetisch und mit geradezu körperlicher Unmittelbarkeit verhandelt *1000 Serpentina Angst* Fragen von akut gegenwärtiger Relevanz [...], die zugleich literarisch unterrepräsentiert sind, jetzt immerhin ein bisschen weniger", states Johanna Maxl in her laudation (Maxl, Laudatio). Racializa-

tion is arguably the most relevant social topic addressed by Wenzel in her novel and also the most overlooked in German literature, whose focus has been for a long time almost exclusively on a specific form of racialization, i.e. antisemitism, with little attention paid to anti-Black or anti-Asian racism. In light of the increasingly multiethnic composition of German society, this lack of attention or interest has become increasingly problematic, and Wenzel's novel contributes to the emergence of a new, more representative narrative.

¶3 Through a close reading of Wenzel's literary debut, I reflect on the multifaceted images the novel creates of contemporary Germany and its contribution to the current reassessment of the role of borders in socio-cultural spheres. Applying the concepts of *borderity* and *borderscape*, I reveal the significance of Wenzel's vivid illustration of the function of borders in the public sphere. I also illustrate Hanna Meretoja's study of "metanarrative autofiction," interpreting Wenzel's novel as an example of this literary subgenre, which sharpens and extends the reader's awareness of the role of narrative in society.

¶4 The neologism *borderity* was coined by Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary and Frédéric Giraut. The abstracting suffix "-ity" indicates that their focus is not on

borders as concrete or conventional liminal zones, places, or territories. Instead, the French scholars draw from Étienne Balibar, who stresses that borders are at the heart of politics, not at the margins, and works against the reductive understanding of borders merely as territorial frontiers. Borderity's scope expands to border politics, understanding it as mobile and diffuse. To highlight the dispersed political function of borders, Amilhat Szary and Giraut present borderities as Foucauldian apparatuses (*dispositifs*) of social conditioning and governmentality aimed at creating boundaries and imposing certain social orders. They illustrate this by rewriting a passage of Foucault's *Security, Territory Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, substituting the word "governmentality" with "borderity": "By [borderity] (governmentality), [we mean] the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit complex, form of power [...]" (Amilhat Szary – Giraut 8). As instruments of power, borders prove functional for contingent political interests and should thus be included in socio-political analyses. This implies that they can be constantly reconsidered and changed through processes of de-bordering and re-bordering, generating counter-politics and counter-narratives.

¶5 The artificial and negotiable character of borders is also the focus of Elena Dell'Agnese and Chiara Brambilla's study on borders. As an analogy for the term landscape, which refers to a territory shaped by human activity and experienced sensorially, they coined the term *borderscape* to emphasize the non-natural and negotiated character of borders, founded on physical experiences. Brambilla writes, "the term borderscape expresses the representation of borders as well as individual and collective practices of construction (bordering), deconstruction (de-bordering) and reconstruction (re-bordering) of borders" (Bram-

billa 27). Unlike the more generic term "bordering," "borderscape" refers as much to individuals' experiences of borders as to a border's continuous individual and collective renegotiation. Emphasis on the non-fixedness of borders fosters a new understanding of their intrinsic character. While, traditionally, one function of borders has been to separate different groups characterized by internal homogeneity, the concept of borderscape stresses the heterogeneity within all groups and the presence of internal borders within communities delineated by political, cultural, or other frontiers. Borderscape as a discourse thus goes beyond the traditional nation-state-territory triad, offering a methodology capable of generating knowledge for conscious political action. It liberates political imagination "from the burden of the territorialist imperative while opening up spaces within which the organization of new forms of the political and the social become possible" (Brambilla 18).

¶6 Political consciousness is also raised by an enhanced understanding of cultural narratives, whose relevance for socio-cultural negotiations in the public sphere is the object of Hanna Meretoja's study on metanarrative autofiction, which "articulates the complex ways in which the cultural and social forces around us affect the narrative models through which we make sense of our own experiences and those of others, and how it can expand our sense of the possible" (Meretoja 137). Meretoja considers metanarrative autofiction as a conduit of narrative agency, i.e. the ability to move consciously within the repertoire of pre-existing cultural narratives by questioning them and their socially conditioned character. According to her, narrative agency is based on narrative awareness, narrative imagination and narrative dialogicality: the awareness of the established cultural repertoire (narrative awareness) constitutes the capacity to question this

repertoire and to expand it creatively (narrative imagination) and in dialogue with other intersubjective narratives (narrative dialogicality). In this process, autofiction plays a significant role, since it “explores entanglements between one’s own narrative agency and narratives culturally imposed on us, and it provides critical perspectives on the ways in which cultural narrative models affect the space of possibility in which we narrate our lives and become who we are” (Meretoja 137).

¶7 In my interpretation, borderity, borderscapes, and metanarrative autofiction are interconnected concepts, useful for the analysis of Wenzel’s image of contemporary Germany. Despite the fact that the novel is not set at a borderland, border politics is central to the novel, which recounts experiences of political and social borders, emphasizing their constructedness and negotiability. The metanarrative and autofictional character of the novel enhance the reader’s awareness of borderities as constructions. In my analysis, Wenzel’s representation of fear is a form of borderity, – i.e. a Foucauldian *dispositif* that creates a border – in this case, a social and racial border, normalizing whiteness as a central socio-political armature.

1000 Serpentine Angst and The Relevance of Wenzel’s Work on Form

¶8 *1000 Serpentine Angst* is autofictional; like the writer, the protagonist is a young, Black, German woman born in the former GDR. The arc of her development is marked by several personal, historical and traumatic experiences. The novel is divided into three sections, entitled respectively: *points of view*, *picture this*, and *fluchtpunkte*. In the first section, events are sketched through a long, hectic dialogue between an unnamed protagonist and an inquiring voice, also unnamed. The absence of names for both the protagonist and the inquiring voices lends a paradigmatic character to the novel. In this section, the plot revolves around a journey to the United States, where the protagonist

sees her identity from a different point of view. Her experience with the Afro-American community is central. She feels welcomed, and also that she doesn’t belong. The narration is fragmentary, constantly interrupted by the recollection of old memories, which intrude upon the protagonist’s present. She meets Kim, a young German woman with a Vietnamese passport, whom she betrays and hurts with her self-destructive attitudes. In *picture this*, the second section, the protagonist is in Berlin again, searching for a therapist to help her heal from trauma and face her fears. This section is narrated in the first person and starts with a detailed description of a photograph of the protagonist’s mother. In *points of view*, dialogue structures the narrative in service of self-reflection, whereas in *picture this*, the reflection on fixed images of oneself and of the other raises awareness of their being an obstacle to self-development (at individual and society level). Here, the protagonist analyzes in detail the relevant events of her life as well as the problematic biographies of the people she loves. She recalls her twin brother jumping from a bridge incited by neo-Nazis in a context of structural racist abuse. She reconstructs her grandmother’s and mother’s histories, characterizing them, respectively, as a loyal socialist in the GDR and a punk rebel who struggled to raise her children alone and was eventually imprisoned by a repressive state for her alternative lifestyle. The protagonist also discusses her fear of loving a woman, and thematizes the constriction imposed by social labels via her fear of being pigeonholed as “queer.” *Fluchtpunkte*, the third section, returns to dialogic form, though the rhythm is slower and the tone is calmer. It starts with a trip to Vietnam, an “imperialistic journey,” as the protagonist describes it, which marks a new attitude towards life, past experiences and future possibilities. The protagonist’s unexpected pregnancy allows her to stop feeling stuck in her

traumatic past and difficult present. Fear does not disappear, but it transforms in response to uncertainty over an unknown potential overshadowing the ghosts of the past.

¶9 Priscilla Layne stresses that Wenzel upholds her right not to write ‘*Betroffenheitsliteratur*,’ i.e. autobiographic writings about traumas experienced by marginalized groups (Layne 48). Layne notes Wenzel’s reaffirmation that Black people’s lives cannot be reduced to the discrimination they are exposed to and argues that the novel goes beyond *Betroffenheitsliteratur* by highlighting the arbitrariness of preconstructed narratives about Black experience and creating a dignified counternarrative. In my interpretation, Wenzel doesn’t set her protagonist in the role of a victim searching for compassion. Instead, she prompts her readers to question certain racial narratives and social dynamics within Western societies using three main narrative strategies: repetition, dialogic form and *ekphrasis*.

¶10 Repetition of short scenes of discrimination, violence, and fear make palpable to the reader the experience of being exposed to a racializing gaze. These scenes are deliberately told in a dry manner. Wenzel’s focus is not on climaxes of tension and violence, but on their persistence. Repetitiveness acquires a political significance as it remarks upon how racialization impacts people’s lives as a matter of routine. The protagonist brings the issue to point in an exchange with her interlocutor:

ZIEMLICH REDUNDANT DAS GANZE.

Was?

AM BAHNHOF, DER NAZI.

IMMER WIEDER DIESE GESCHICHTEN, IN DENEN DIR FAST ETWAS PASSIERT, ABER LETZLICH DOCH NICHT. UND IMMER WIEDER BAHNHÖFE.

Mir ist etwas passiert.

Das Problem ist doch nicht, dass die Dinge, die

ich erzähle, sich wiederholen.

SONDERN?

Dass diese Dinge selbst sich wiederholen, ständig, dass sie nie aufgehört haben (1000 SA 270–271).

¶11 Repetition also makes the constant presence of the past apparent. Wenzel’s narrative segments are re-enactments and recollections of past events, presented as a dialogue between the protagonist and her interlocutors that is prompted by a present situation. This stresses vividness of certain traumas and how they condition everyday actions and states of being. The greater the trauma, the greater the fear. The protagonist states, “Die Angst vor manchen Realitäten kann schlimmer sein als diese Realitäten selbst” (1000 SA 86), justifying her desire to be violently beaten in order to overcome a fear, and explaining how this desire becomes stronger through the realization that fear is both potential and real at the same time. The choice of the word ‘*Realitäten*’ reinforces the idea that racist violence is not just a remote possibility, but a concrete presence conditioning the reality of its victims.

¶12 Repetition also implies another consequence of constant, systemic, racial violence and discrimination – its normalization. The acceptance of mechanisms of discrimination as an unchangeable reality, combined with the conscious or unconscious assertion of privilege, contributes significantly to their persistence. Wenzel addresses this issue in two scenes, in which the protagonist is confronted with the prejudices of two different therapists, whose help she seeks to overcome her panic attacks and constant feelings of being in danger. In analyzing the stories that make the protagonist feel that “*der Tod ziemlich aufdringlich an meinem Leben dranhängt*” (1000 SA 189), the first therapist dismisses the problem as a cultural one, saying, “*Ich denke, Sie haben alles richtig gemacht. Aber Sie sind in unserem Land eben eine Minderheit. [...] Sie*

fühlen sich zerrissen zwischen den Kulturen. Ich denke, das sind Probleme, die im Hier und Jetzt bestehen, mit der Außenwelt. [...] Und Ihre Fragen sind ja im Grunde nicht therapeutisch zu klären" (1000 SA 189). The second therapist's racism seems even more unconscious. Recounting her experiences with other patients, she links the traumas generated by racist violence to those suffered by children interned in Nazi concentration camps. At the same time, she interprets the protagonist's experiences as a consequence of growing up in East Germany, which she associates with right-wing extremism. The proposed parallels with the stories of other patients show that the therapist doesn't see the social, cultural and systemic character of racism and considers it almost inevitable. Generally, both therapists exhibit the most elemental form of racism, the assumption of whiteness as the norm and the reduction of a Blackness to a pathology.

¶13 Like repetition, the use of dialogic form recreates—especially in the first part of the novel—the infliction of constant inquiry upon racialized people, soliciting them constantly to justify their existence as part of a minority. Dialogues tend also to put the reader in the position of an external observer, stimulating a critical rather than an empathic orientation and thus, in a Brechtian manner, encouraging them to respond to the questions posed within the narrative.

¶14 What is more, the choice to write two thirds of the novel as dialogue reinforces the idea, central to the novel, that identity is a process constructed through dialogue with oneself, with society, and with the past. In *1000 Serpentinien Angst*, Wenzel creates a complex and multifaceted picture of German society. She questions various aspects of identity construction, rendered as a composite or compounded narrative that includes both internal and external journeys, and navigates political ideologies and social constructs. Both German society and identity manifest as constructions

that generate unjustifiable discrimination. To this model, Wenzel implicitly opposes a different one based on continuous listening and dialogue. As the protagonist states, it should be reflected "über das Wort ›Longing‹ im Wort ›Belonging‹ [...] und über das Wort ›Gehör‹ im Wort ›Angehören‹" (1000 SA 281). Otherwise stated, if identity is founded on belonging, this must in turn be founded upon listening. Wenzel seems to suggest that through listening to the other, an open and constantly changing society is possible.

¶15 Lastly, in the middle section of the novel, *ekphrasis* of old pictures provides a reflection on memories, on the narrow line between truth and fiction and on the impact of fixed images in the aftermath of discrimination trauma. In this part of the novel, the protagonist narrates in the first person and in a nonlinear fashion, offering a free association of thoughts. She describes in great detail pictures of her family, especially of her mother, Susanne. Wenzel's choice to interrupt the novel's dialogic structure with long, detailed *ekphrases* can be interpreted in a three-fold way. Regarding the link between photography and memory, pictures are presented simultaneously as signs of the presence and of the absence of the past in people's lives, as suggested by a quote from John Berger's *A Seventh Man*, inserted in the novel. For example, Susanne rejoices that, in prison, she did not have photos of her children with her, because that would have increased the suffering of separation. Later in the novel, Susanne chooses voluntarily to discard photographs of her children after her last meeting with her daughter, and then disappears from her life.

¶16 Wenzel's reflection on photographs is also linked to the issue of visibility in society. Commenting on a film set in New York that even all the extras are white, the protagonist bitterly observes that all Black Americans were cut from a comedic movie, manifesting the systematic exclusion

of racialized groups from the normative picture of society. This exclusion determines a narrower vision of society and a lack of identification that discourages and represses the active citizenship of non-whites. Indeed, as Marieke Borren has observed, Hannah Arendt regarded visibility as a crucial condition for both humanity and agency in the public sphere: “Human dignity, Arendt thought, does not refer to some natural quality, but only flourishes under conditions of plurality and publicity: in public visibility and natural invisibility” (Borren 219). The issue of in/visibility in public spheres emerges in several Arendt’s studies, spanning from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition* and *We Refugees*. It is closely linked to the creation of space through action and speech. “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose,” writes Arendt (Arendt 197). To be deprived of this space, adds the German philosopher, “means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance” (Arendt 198). Therefore, far from being a superficial detail, the erasure from the accepted pictures of society is a plastic manifestation of the dynamics of discrimination and the problems associated with it.

¶17 At the same time, pictures are presented as metonyms for a fixed interpretation of reality, a certain point of view potentially laden with negative consequences because of their seemingly neutral and self-evident character. In this sense, Wenzel plays with the double meaning of the term ‘Bild,’ which indicates both the material object of the picture and the mental, abstract or figurative image that individuals may have about others and themselves. The sentence, “*Was sind Bilder von uns, wenn sie uns in uns selbst einschließen?*”

(1000 SA 165), written on a wall and read by the protagonist, is central to understanding the novel as a whole. The picture of Susanne as a young woman, entitled *Susannes Traum*, with which this middle part of the novel opens, represents a characteristic synthesis of the GDR era, made up of both great dreams and great disappointments and disillusionments. In being so evocative, however, the photograph also risks being stereotyped and, in this sense, problematic and ineffective for understanding a complete or complex reality that goes beyond the surface of the image.

¶18 The protagonist’s fear of being trapped in an imposed image becomes clearer when thinking of processes of racialization. In an article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* about the absence of the ritual commemoration for Black victims of systemic violence in Germany, Wenzel problematizes the viral dissemination of the video depicting George Floyd’s murder, stressing the dangers of voyeurism, sensationalism, and the unnecessary reproduction of the racializing gaze. Wenzel writes, “Solidarität mit Opfern rassistischer Verbrechen ist wichtig, aber sie darf nicht abhängig davon sein, wie grausam und sichtbar diese Verbrechen sind” (“So viele Augen”). To illustrate her point of view, Wenzel imagines taking on the victim’s perspective who, on the point of death, sees himself as the world around him does, i.e., not as a man, but as a Black man, “Reduziert auf einen Schwarzen im Todeskampf, reduziert auf seine letzten, qualvollen Minuten. So many eyes, staunt er, die nicht ihn sehen, sondern das, was sein Mörder sah - eine Hautfarbe als Projektionsfläche” (“So viele Augen”). In Wenzel’s view, even anti-racism is not inherently exempt from the automatism on which racism itself is based, i.e. loading skin color with meaning and ceasing to see individuals with their singular and particular histories. She tries, however, to deconstruct this mechanism in her novel. In 1000

Serpentinen Angst, the inquiring voice asks, “WAS SOLLEN MENSCHEN SEHEN, WENN SIE IN DEIN GESICHT SCHAUEN?”, to which the protagonist replies, “Mich?” (1000 SA 16). This reply is both sly and candid, as the protagonist claims her right to be known and interpreted for her personal history. This does not mean denying the impact of skin color on a person’s life and history. It means starting from the stories of individuals to address political and social issues, analyzing and emphasizing the effects of society on people while avoiding racial generalizations as frameworks.

¶19 In the article for *FAZ*, Wenzel implicitly refuses to be a monolithic champion of Black people’s rights. She reaffirms this principle through the protagonist of her novel, who says, “Alle wollen ständig mit mir über Rassismus sprechen. Das ist doch nicht meine Lebensaufgabe” (1000 SA 13). Assigning Wenzel this task would reproduce racist patterns, reducing her to what a racializing gaze sees in her. Wenzel manages to address important issues like racialization and identity exactly because she does it as an author, by telling a story. She writes a counter-narrative that stimulates a debate on systemic racialization, casting a light on the social impact of narratives and intra-bordering practices. The use of repetition, dialogue and *ekphrasis* decreases empathy in the reader and prompt them to reflect critically upon the significance of constructing narratives. It highlights the significance of constant self-reflection and of the deconstruction of pre-constituted self-images. It sheds a light on the links between reality and fiction, stereotypes and reality, and between personal and collective narratives.

¶20 Wenzel’s novel is a metanarrative autofiction because its emphasis is not only on the fictional character of the narrative, but also on the broader importance that narratives have for the shaping of the actual socio-political world and our expe-

riences of it. The object of reflection, therefore, is not only the blurred line between fiction and non-fiction, but rather the significance of fiction itself for real individuals and communities. Meretoja writes, “While *metafictional* autofiction focuses on issues of fictionality in narrating lives, *metanarrative* autofiction, as I define it, reflects on the role of narratives (both fictional and nonfictional) in the process in which we make sense of our lives” (Meretoja 122). She emphasizes the link between private and public, the influence of cultural narratives on people’s lives and the increased, negative impact that results from their naturalization within societies and communities.

¶21 Meretoja’s research is relevant to the analysis of *1000 Serpentine Angst* because it enriches our understanding of Wenzel’s literary form. Wenzel proposes a counter-narrative with a metanarrative character, making it both a critical work on dominant narratives about being a person of color in Germany, and a creative and dialogical work that shapes possible and legitimate alternatives both from an individual and a collective point of view. In contrast to evoking empathy in readers through the protagonist’s experience of suffering, Wenzel’s experimental narrative style prompts a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of discrimination and the underlying narratives that perpetuate it.

Individual and Collective Identities

¶22 In several interviews, Wenzel reveals that she began working on *1000 Serpentine Angst* in the United States, where she had been invited to give a lecture at Durham University. Like the novel’s protagonist, she witnessed Trump’s first election and the subsequent shock. She also met Black American author and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose book *Between the World and Me* was a significant source of inspiration for Wenzel’s writing. Recollecting his life in form of a nonfictional letter to his teenage son, Coates reflects on mecha-

nisms of racialization and survival for Black people in contexts where being white is considered the norm. Combining socio-historical analysis, personal recollection and paternal worries, Coates manages to make palpable the impact of fear on racialized people's lives. In a similar way, the auto-fictional character of Wenzel's novel highlights the narrow line between private and public, between the social and individual consequences of fear.

¶23 The pervasiveness of fear in determining social action becomes apparent in the first pages of the novel, in a scene that takes place at the airport. The protagonist observes a man with a long beard and strange plastic belt praying on the floor. Immediately, the protagonist's thoughts go to the last prayer of a terrorist. She reports the man to the airport's security staff, who then describes him as an ordinary family man. The protagonist's behavior is determined by fear, as indicated by her confession: "*Sprengstoff! Selbstmordattentat!* Die Worte rasen mir durch den Kopf, da kann ich gar nichts machen" (1000 SA 25). Stressing that she is unable to mitigate her fear, the protagonist reveals the strong impact this sentiment has on society. The fact that the person triggered by fear and prejudice is a Black woman who also systematically experiences discrimination reinforces the criticism of this perverse social mechanism. "*Be a hero! Better safe than sorry!*" (1000 SA 27) is the exhortation to denounce suspicious situations that the protagonist will then read in the streets of New York, where paranoia is transformed into heroism and, ironically, the fight against terror is carried out with small doses of fear that condition people's everyday lives. Wenzel starts with a scene in which the protagonist is an active participant in discrimination in order to show that these social mechanisms, generated by fear, are widespread and subconscious.

¶24 She then moves to the protagonist's account of her own terror as a victim of racial discrimination and violence. Without *pathos*, she discusses the social

and political aspects of racialized violence and on the fear it generates. "Warum ich diese gemachte Angst in mich rein lasse. Warum ich das nicht besser abwehren kann?" (1000 SA 29), the protagonist asks herself. While brooding over the episode at the airport, she thinks back to a past event in which she had to choose between leaving a beach to escape a group of men with neo-Nazi tattoos and defending, both physically and symbolically, a father and his children, who had just been called the n-word. Again, Wenzel invokes mechanisms of fear, rather than violence. She also stresses a sense of guilt for acting out of self-preservation rather than solidarity. She writes, "Rechter Terror ist: Ich denke bis heute an diesen Tag, an die Unmöglichkeit, mich korrekt zu verhalten. Rechter Terror ist: Ich schäme mich für meine Feigheit. Rechter Terror ist: Ich war auch mal dieses Kind am See" (1000 *Serpentinen* 31).

¶25 In another seminal passage, the author reflects on fear as social glue by drawing upon American society. While rejoicing at the unusual feeling of welcome in Black community, the protagonist also stresses the complexity of social reality in the US. For example, she recounts how a simple gesture such as removing a hand from her jacket pocket as she passed by a police car was enough to arouse suspicion in the officers. She recounts:

Und plötzlich begreifst du: Diese warme Community schwarzer Menschen, hier in den USA, ist nur möglich, weil sie jahrhundertlang zum Überleben nötig war. Die Basis, auf der sich diese Menschen begegnen und bestärken, war und ist blutig, ungerecht, qualvoll. Du kannst dankbar sein, dass du willkommener Gast in dieser Gemeinschaft bist, eine Touristin dieser auf Schmerz gewachsenen Blackness (1000 SA 312).

¶26 This sense of community, Wenzel suggests, is based not so much, or not only, on shared tradi-

tions and values, but on fear triggered by violence and discrimination. It is not rooted in a shared view on the world, but in being exposed to a racializing gaze, or “DIE WEISSEN GLAUBEN WEISS ZU SEIN UND DIE SCHWARZEN SCHWARZ” (1000 SA 81), as summarized in the novel. The protagonist is also aware of the influence that these othering processes have on her own identity. This leads to the paradox that she feels to have more in common with foreigners than with white Germans, as the protagonist points out in a dialogue with her grandmother,

Wie sollte sie reagieren, wenn ich sie fragen würde, ob sie sich vorstellen könnte, dass ich natürlich erstmal nicht mit von weißen Polizisten hingerichteten Afroamerikanern zu tun habe und auch nichts mit Refugees auf irgendeinem Dach in Kreuzberg, dass ich aber am Ende des Tages doch mit diesen Menschen in Alltag mehr teile als mit ihr, meiner Großmutter, nämlich die Tatsache, einem Blick ausgeliefert zu sein, der uns, wenn ich überhaupt von einem Uns sprechen kann, als das Gleiche begreift, als das Gleiche markiert, als das Nichtweiße, das Andere, als Beleg einer Idee von Hautfarben und Differenz? (1000 SA 81).

¶27 Wenzel offers her readers a reflection on identity by problematizing the mechanisms on which it is based in contemporary societies. In particular, she shows the fragility of identification based on the need to group together against an external threat, out of insecurity or hatred, or, above all, out of fear. Wenzel suggests that this process is problematic in terms of those who hold, and violently held, power, and in terms of those who adapt to systemic violence.

¶28 In their research, Amilhat Szary and Giraut present refugees as an example of the mobile, diffuse and political character of borders, writing, “They

take the border with them wherever they travel” (Amilhat Szary – Giraut 12). Racialized people are exposed to a similar risk because, in dominant narratives, they are presented as foreign bodies in Western societies. Narratives about refugees and racialized peoples share the goal of delimiting and then repressing groups considered to be minorities. They also instill fear in public spheres to enact bordering mechanisms.

¶29 In her picture of German contemporary society, Wenzel manages to cast a light on the role of fear in the public sphere. She does not present fear in its private dimension, but rather as the cause and consequence of discrimination. As a form of borderity, fear imposes a model of society where whiteness is the norm and the other is objectified, without the possibility to contribute to the construction of a shared identity. Against this model, Wenzel opposes an image of identity as fluid and always changing, open to be re-constructed through aversion from stereotypical visions and the establishment of new perspectives. The protagonist of her novel crosses many borders and experiences different ways both of being perceived by others and of looking at herself, exclaiming, “DIE MÖGLICHKEIT EINES ALTERNATIVEN SELBSTBILDNIS WIRD ERFAHRBAR” (1000 SA 312). She becomes aware of this during her journey in Vietnam, a country in which she reflects upon the way she looks at unfamiliar realities. The protagonist discovers how her own gaze is influenced by Western stereotypes, which she can contrast with her self-criticism and curiosity. While enjoying the possibility to travel wherever she wants, because of her German passport, she reflects on the complexity of bordering processes, always based on the privileging of one group over another. As the protagonist’s interlocutor says, “IN ANGOLA HABEN SIE KOKOSNUSS ZU DIR GESAGT. AUSSEN BRAUN, INNEN WEISS” (1000 SA 13).

¶30 The protagonist’s self-reflective attitude gener-

ates a complex picture of identity in the novel. She reflects upon the motif of crossing geographical and cultural borders through journeys, emphasizing the importance of inhabiting multiple points of view. Her journeys are not a way to escape from traumas. Rather, they are often instruments to acquire new interpretative frameworks for understanding herself and for understanding the social dynamics that contribute to determining her identity, increasing her self-consciousness and social agency. In particular, journeys increase the protagonist's awareness of the artificiality of bordering processes, as well as of the possibility to create alternatives to the dominant models of society. Crossing borders, she transforms places into borderscapes, i.e. concrete and symbolic places around which dominant narratives of inclusion and exclusion materialize and where counter-narratives can be created. Such counter-narratives make visible what official narratives do not represent. Representation, whether understood as depiction or as political agency, is a key conceptual element of the borderscape. Novels like *1000 Serpentina Angst* offer precisely this form of representation in its dual meaning. Indeed, Wenzel gives visibility to the story of someone like the protagonist who, in a country like Germany where whiteness is still considered the norm, enjoys full political rights but is not a citizen because of the color of her skin; and to the story of someone like Kim, who is neither recognized as German, nor has German citizenship, although she grew up in the country. Narrating the protagonist's love for Kim, stressing particularly her fear to be trapped in another labeled community, the novel also gives visibility to queer people, highlighting how much same-sex love still considered a deviation from the norm. With reference to the former GDR, Wenzel points out the fact that, in the right circumstances, citizenship and visibility could be arbitrarily granted or

taken away, depending on whether one adheres to the dominant ideology. With reference to German unification, she makes apparent how much the stereotypical image of the so-called 'neue Bundesländer' is still rooted in German society and how problematic the unification process still is. "Warum fand nach dem Mauerfall in Westdeutschland nichts Anerkennung, das der Osten bis dahin hervorgebracht hatte?" (*1000 SA* 163) the protagonist asks herself, getting straight to the heart of the matter. Thus, Wenzel stages many marginalized communities that are not included in the dominant picture of Germany, offering a complex account of this country and its processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Conclusion

^{¶31} As suggested by the title, Wenzel's debut novel casts a light on the spirals of fear that afflict German society. The novel makes apparent how this universal, very human feeling can negatively condition social behavior when it is used to construct borders as borderity. Nevertheless, highlighting bordering practices, Wenzel creates a borderscape, that "opens up a new space of political possibilities, a space within which new kinds of political subjectivities become possible" (Brambilla 29). In fact, *1000 Serpentina Angst* constitutes an important counternarrative of German society that not only gives visibility to racialized and marginalized groups as a precondition for their effective political agency, but also increases awareness of the role of narratives in identity politics, which is fundamental for conscious political participation in general.

^{¶32} *1000 Serpentina Angst* is a political novel in its formal construction, not only in the issues it addresses. It is a relevant example of metanarrative autofiction, where the focus is not on fictionality but on narrativity. "WÄRST DU ERLEICHTERT ODER VERÄRGERT, WENN ICH DIE HÄLFTE ALLER RASSISTISCHER ERFAHRUN-

GEN AUSGEDACHT HÄTTE? [...] BEGREIFST DEN GEDANKEN, DASS ALLES, WAS ICH DIR ERZÄHLE, IN EIN EINZIGES LEBEN PASST UND DASS DIESES LEBEN DENNOCH EINGEWÖHN- LICHES UND EIN GUTES IST?" (1000 SA 341), asks the protagonist. Here, Wenzel reaffirms the dignity of the lives of marginalized people, distancing herself from *Betroffenheitsliteratur* and establishing a new way of representing the lives of racialized people in German literature. Like the ultrasound image of the protagonist's baby that marks a new course in her life, the novel is a concrete picture of the present and a sign of a potential future to be written, despite the narrowing frames of dominant ideologies.

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