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# Asymbolia and Self-Loss: Narratives of Depression by Women in Contemporary German Literature

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Contemporary writings by women of the “new generation”<sup>1</sup> revolve uncannily often and obsessively around issues of isolation, failed relationships, corporeal fragmentation, self-loss, and the failure of narration. While it is true that these women authors, like their male counterparts of the “new generation,” often focus their attention on “sexual adventures,” the “pursuit of sex,” on parties, on drugs, on nightlife, fringe lifestyles, gender bending etc. and often in metropolises like Berlin, what clearly distinguishes these contemporary narratives by women is their persistent depiction of depressed characters and the consistent failure of language and narration.

Earlier critics of these novels have focused predominantly on their illustrations of nightlife,<sup>2</sup> on the literary traditions of searching for “sex in the city,”<sup>3</sup> and on the obvious differences between individual stories.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on specific depictions of bodies, sexual relationships, and narrations in these texts instead of looking at their more superficial similarities (i.e. drinking, sex, and parties), we discover a uniquely female expression of an “aquarium life”, as Dückers calls it—an underlying and pervasive depression. In order to illustrate the nature and complexities of this depression, I will focus on numerous texts predominantly (but not exclusively) by women in the “new generation” of writers within the context of Kristevan psychoanalysis.

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*,<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva elucidates in detail how melancholia and depression constitute a “crisis of thought and speech” (K, 221) and “a crisis of representation.” (K, 221) And while Kristeva describes depression in general in *Black Sun*, she also highlights in her chapter on feminine depression the pervasiveness and extreme nature of depression among women. According to Kristeva, women are more frequently depressed than men.<sup>6</sup> And it seems telling that all of the patients she refers to in order to illustrate specific characteristics of depression are women. (K, 53–54, 55–58, 71–79, 80–86, 87–94)<sup>7</sup> Both in her general illustrations of depression and in her more specific analyses of feminine depression Kristeva provides us with a

psychoanalytical paradigm through which to assess the depressive nature and melancholic topics manifest in contemporary fiction by women.

As Kristeva points out, the depressed subject is confronted with feelings of resignation, loss of hope, and disinterest “in words, actions, and life itself.” (K, 3) It is not that the melancholic person’s despair is simply *inescapable*, but that it is *obvious* given the subject’s total psychic and hence often physical enervation. For the depressed subject “bonds and beings” (K, 4) or connections to others and a sense of a cohesive self are perceived as “absurdities” (K, 4) and “impossibilities.” (K, 33) Their feelings are largely ones of the “absence” and “void” of the self. (K, 7) Kristeva also notes (in accord with Freud and Ferenci) that the depressed patient perceives a “fragmentation and disintegration” (K, 18–19) of the self. Sadness or the affect of depression provides the subject with its only fragile defense against a sense of total self-fragmentation. In other words, profound sadness is the only thing that holds these subjects tenuously together. Language fails to function for the depressed subject allowing for no “form” or “father” or “schema” through which the subject’s sense of “I” can be established. (K, 23) In essence, the depressed subject has access to language, but not to meaningful signification. Language does not offer the possibility of concatenation between sign and signified and the depressed subject therefore perceives it as empty, detached from her- or himself, and without meaning, as she or he sinks into an “unorderable cognitive chaos” (K, 33) and “the blankness of asymbolia.” (33) For the depressed subject language constitutes the “collapse of meaning” (K, 52) as signification is disconnected from affective experience. (K, 54) For the melancholic, speech is like “an alien skin.” (K, 53) And, as Kristeva notes: “when meaning shatters, life no longer matters.” (K, 6) Her female patients, in particular, complain of pervasive feelings of “absolute nothingness” (87) and maintain that they often feel as if they were already dead. (K, 72, 73, 89)

Intriguingly, depressed persons are as likely to give up speech, as they are to talk incessantly. But as Kristeva points out, even those depressed patients who speak continuously experience constantly the disjuncture between self and other and signification. As one of her patients explains it, she talks all the time, “but I explain other people’s lives, I am not involved; and when I speak of my own, it’s as if I spoke of a stranger.” (54) Kristeva suggests that the depressed subject may be able to overcome this symbolic breakdown (37) through the rhythm, melody, and poetic forms of narrative and literature. In other words, the Semiotic elements (those non-linguistic parts) of narration might provide a space through which affect and signification could become attached (through talking about them and constructing through them, in essence, a narrative) in a way that would anchor meaning for the depressed subject.

Throughout this essay we will encounter characters whose depression is marked by their feelings of self-fragmentation, the void of existence, a desire for death, and the blankness of asymbolia. The selves these women writers nar-

rate about are caught in silent relationships (riddled with misunderstandings) with other selves who are as lost as they are. These narrations of depressed selves insist that narratives and narrating them do not function to secure a sense of self and stable subjectivity for the narrating subject. These authors depict characters and narrators as incessantly burdened by and trapped by, the narratives of others and the narratives that they tell. As we shall see, narrating the self actually underscores the emptiness of the self, the inevitable artifice of being, and the nothingness that underpins all existence for the depressed subject. In essence, narration in these contemporary texts fails to function and precisely because it constitutes the asymbolia of depressive speech.

While Kristeva's explication of depression and melancholia will provide us with a theoretical framework for our analysis, we will also discover that the contemporary narratives we are exploring appear much less optimistic than Kristeva about the possibility of a narrative cure. The narrators for the most part find themselves stuck in detached, meaningless narratives without perceiving a possible escape through Semiotic means. With these thoughts in mind we can turn our attention directly to the narratives themselves.

Writers such as Judith Hermann (*Sommerhaus später*, Fischer Verlag, 1998; *Nichts als Gespenster*, Fischer Verlag, 2003)<sup>8</sup>, Karen Duve (*Keine Ahnung*, Suhrkamp, 1999;), Tanja Dückers (*Spielzone*, Aufbau, 1999; *Himmelskörper*, Aufbau, 2003) Alexa Hennig von Lange (*Relax*, Rowohlt, 2000), Elke Naters (*Lügen*, Ullstein, 1999), Zoë Jenny (*Blütenstaubzimmer*, Goldmann, 1997), Inka Parei (*Die Schattenboxerin*, Schöffling, 1999) and Birgit Vanderbeke (*Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst*, Alexander Fest Verlag, 1999) return persistently to questions of self, self-narration, and the loss of self in/through narration. They tell stories of selves who are lost to themselves. Selves who find no meaning in their existence and who experience themselves as emptied out or full of nothingness. Their characters constantly face the void of their own existence.

And while male writers such as Benjamin Lebert (*Crazy*, Kiepenheuer, 1999), Hans-Ulrich Treichel (*Der Verlorene*, Suhrkamp, 1998) Benjamin v. Stuckrad-Barre (*Soloalbum*, Kiepenheuer, 1998), Ingo Schulze (*Simple Storys*, dtv, 1999) and Andreas Neumeister (*Gut Laut*, Suhrkamp, 1998) sometimes touch on similar themes of corporeal fragmentation and isolation, they do so with neither the same persistence nor the same overwhelming configuration.

In other words, while Treichel may address feelings of corporeal fragmentation he does not do so in connection with hollow interpersonal relationships and the failure of communication and narrative. And while von Stuckrad-Barre focuses on the isolation of a male protagonist who has lost his girlfriend, he does not connect that isolation to the overall breakdown of language and narrative—but precisely to the loss of a “meaningful” love relationship and the male protagonist's subsequent feelings of self-abjection. As we shall see, contemporary female writers of the “new generation” persistently

depict depressed subjects who feel corporeally fragmented, cut off from others, melancholic, abject, and at a loss for words and narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Even a novel such as von Lange's *Relax*—a celebratory “drug scene” novel, for instance—does not maintain its seemingly thorough optimism as the self-acclaimed “Rockstar’s” girlfriend recounts in the second half of the novel that amidst the “party life whirl” she is utterly alone: “Allein mit meinen Beinen, meinen Armen, meinem Bauch und meinem Mund. Meine Augen sind allein, und die sehen, daß ich alleine bin.” (197) The girlfriend perceives herself as bits and pieces of her body/self. She sees herself, her eyes as alone and eyes herself seeing herself alone. The circle of despair closes in as she circumscribes her own total isolation, essentially as if standing outside of herself.<sup>10</sup> For her the realities of the party scene are isolation and the anguish of disconnection.

Of course, I am not providing an analysis of every author or every text produced in recent years, but rather a strikingly consistent subset. Certainly, this kind of analysis will offer a closer look at the specificities of these literary works. Women of the “new generation” writing in German in recent years have been referred to condescendingly as “Fräuleinwunder” (Volker Hage)<sup>11</sup> and grouped together loosely perhaps only because of their age and gender or because they neglect history and politics in favor of introspection (Hermann<sup>12</sup> and Hage<sup>13</sup>). While generalizations that this generation of writers is searching for the “elusive nature of happiness” (Fitzgerald)<sup>14</sup> with a “tiring monotonous focus on one’s own condition” (FAZ)<sup>15</sup> may ring true, they remain rather vague assertions. What I hope to accomplish in this essay is a more detailed analysis of the issues of depression, isolation, melancholy stories, and narrative failure around which these new literary productions revolve and that give them a distinctive set of common concerns.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time it is important to note that the novels discussed here comprise a wide range of styles and subject matters. And, perhaps, that is also why the melancholic themes they share are so remarkable and striking. For instance, Hermann's *Sommerhaus, später* is collection of melancholy short stories in which characters lose speech, stop talking, subvert communication, and do not really know one another. Underlying the partying, drinking, drugs, and casual sex, is a predominant sense of nothingness, perpetual waiting,<sup>17</sup> and depression. While in a story titled “Hurrikan” “tropische Depression” (31) sets the mood, in “Bali-Frau” the prevailing depression is “kalt” (98) and immobilizes the characters as if they were “festgefroren.” (99)<sup>18</sup> In each case, the characters’ anticipation of ‘something’ happening dissipates into not much or nothing at all.<sup>19</sup> In *Nichts als Gespenster* Hermann continues the series of melancholy stories focusing on disconnected and indifferent friends and partners. Jenny's *Blütenstaubzimmer* tells the story of an isolated young girl, Jo, abandoned early by her mother and whose later efforts to locate and bond with her are thwarted by her mother at every turn. Jo eventually figures out that her mother is psychically deficient, indeed, an emotional vacuum (i.e. depressed

herself) and gives up.<sup>20</sup> Von Lange's *Relax* is a drug scene novel in which the perpetual partying is accompanied by a persistent lack of emotional depth or connection between characters. In *Keine Ahnung* Duve provides a collection of short stories about people on drugs, partying, giving up on life, and who are completely detached from the people around them. They are victims of sexual attack, experiment as prostitutes, or sleep with virtual strangers to see what will happen. Parei in *Schattenboxerin* recounts the story of Hell, who lives alone, illegally in an abandoned building in Berlin—she is lonely, fearful, a tortured victim of sexual attack, and reclusive.<sup>21</sup> In *Lügen* Naters recounts the story of two women who are “friends”—party together and console one another—but whose relationship is undermined by their mutual narcissism and jealousy. These are unhappy, lonely people who fail to connect because they cannot really envision anyone outside of themselves. Dückers in *Himmelskörper* tells the story of Freia and her twin brother as they attempt to come to terms with their family's Nazi past without falling back into that “Geschichte.” Here the characters' melancholy isolation is the product of the burden of their family history, their attempts to escape it, and their struggle with the psychic oppression they have inherited.

Finally, Dückers' *Spielzone* provides the most extensive focus of all on lost selves through a series of vignettes about thoroughly depressed characters. Because of the intensity and depth with which Dückers represents her figures, it makes sense to describe them at greater length. Herr Lämmele is a peeping tom and want-to-be writer, who hates himself, is alone, and prefers the escapades of his characters over his own boring life. Laura is a confused teenager who hangs out with her friends at night in a cemetery drinking and smoking joints etc. Rosemarie Minzlin is a widow who visits her husband's graveside every day, is alone, eats food according to colors (i.e. each day she consumes foods of specific colors) and keeps a diary of what she eats. Walkman/Rainer is described repeatedly as “ziellos.” (45) After his last girlfriend disappears suddenly, he wanders the streets of Berlin aimlessly. Elke is a translator and a recluse, who feeds and waters the plastic crocodile her last lover left for her when he left her for good. Katharina is an author, who observes all of these people (like a voyeur she says), and who ultimately leaves Berlin altogether in an attempt to free herself from their all-consuming and depressing stories. Karaul wants to literally “suck” his lover into himself. He is vampiric, homicidal, and suicidal. He perceives of himself as alone and distant. Ada is consumed with partying and sex. She is also so disturbed by her encounters with a lesbian mother that she cuts off one of her own nipples. And lastly, there is Benno who steals his deformed, twin brother out of a bottle of formaldehyde (at a hospital) and celebrates his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday with him. He sees himself and his dead brother as interchangeable.

Together the narratives discussed in this article constitute a wide-range of melancholy stories about abject selves. Most of the protagonists are incredibly alone and lead what Dückers refers to in *Spielzone* as a “hermetisches” life

(203) with “melancholische Anwandlungen” (132) and, indeed, not just melancholic moods, but thoroughly melancholic lives. With that in mind, we can turn to more specific correspondences among these melancholy stories.

We will begin by turning our attention to the obsessive concern in these contemporary writings by women with dysfunctional relationships and the subsequent profound isolation manifest between characters. Quite often the characters in these stories describe themselves as in the world, frequently even in crowds of people and yet perceive of them selves as totally disconnected. Hell, the main protagonist of Parei’s *Schattenboxerin*, recounts how she pushes her way through a “Menschenmenge” block after block as she moves through Berlin. However, that mass of persons dissolves quickly into bits and pieces, as Hell only records details and parts and not human beings:

“Die Bürgersteige sind dicht gefüllt mit Dreadlocks, schlecht sitzenden Anzügen, dem hitzefflirrenden Synthekstoff schwarzer Kopftucher, den rauen, schlecht durchbluteten Händen von Straßenkämpfern, eiternden Nasenringen, und nackten, weißen Waden über klobigen Stiefeln.” (18)

At several points in the novel, Hell expresses not only her fear of such impersonal masses of persons/human details, but also her compulsion to steer clear of others and especially of crowds whenever she can. Given that Hell is a victim of rape who is trying to come to terms with its shattering effects, one might suspect that her experience of others would be understandably extreme. But her sense of disconnection and corporeal fragmentation is rather typical of female protagonists in the contemporary fiction we are addressing.

Indeed, in a similar manner, Jo, the main protagonist of Jenny’s *Blütenstaubzimmer*, focuses on the body parts that surround her at a party held in a former slaughter house:

Im Licht des Stroboskops sehe ich nur noch einzelne Körperteile. . . Ich selbst bin ein Teil einer großen Körpermaschine, die zittert und die sich aufbäumt und einen hysterische Lärm veranstaltet, gegen die schreckliche Stille im Kopf. (93)

Jo juxtaposes the screaming body parts and body machine around her (and that is her) to the horrible silence, the emptiness she feels inside. Neither the abstraction of the slaughter house party (a place resonating with the idea of bodies “taken” apart or in pieces), other body parts, or the drugs she takes, ever fill the void she feels within or end the isolation. Indeed, in Jo’s description, we find even less detail than in Hell’s. Hell still sees distinguishing features/differentiating body parts, Jo sees simply unspecified “Körperteile” shivering in and out of view.

The female narrator of Duve’s “Keine Ahnung” who sleeps all the time, takes lot’s of drugs, hangs out in clubs, and never sleeps with the same man twice, also describes partying in a club as a thoroughly isolating experience. In her case, it is not the body parts of others that arrest her attention; she



concentrates on her own body. She perceives only herself dancing. She has absolutely no connection to the people around her—she sees only her own image throughout and dances intentionally only with and for herself. In the club, Sitrone, she explains that she places herself “vor die Spiegelwand und begann, mit mir selbst zu tanzen. Alle machten das so, standen aufgereit nebeneinander vor dem Spiegel und tanzten sich selber an. Keiner lächelte, jeder betrachtete sein Spiegelbild ganz ernst.” (9) Not just the female narrator, but everyone in the Sitrone dances for themselves, completely disconnected from those around them revealing the “absurdity of bonds and beings.” (K, 4) Moreover, the isolated dancers are free to decide whether (on the basis of their mirror images), “man sich leiden mochte oder ob man sich ganz abscheulich fand.” (9) The mirrored image of themselves seemingly standing in for the other underscores the sense that each and every one of the Sitrone patrons exist in and only for themselves. One has the sense that partying is not at all a shared experience, is not at all about connecting in any way with others. Partying is a lonely act of self-presentation that accentuates the cavernous melancholy enveloping the characters.

The female protagonist, Marie, in Hermann’s story “Camera Obscura” (SHS) watches herself (like Duve’s character in *Keine Ahnung*), but in this case she observes her transformation (before her own eyes) into disconnected body parts. Marie watches as her artist partner projects her live image onto his computer screen. What she sees is bits and pieces of herself: “Maries Scheitel, Maries Stirn, Maries Augenbrauen, ihre Augen, Nase, Mund, Kinn, Hals, Brustansatz, ein schwarzweißes, unheimliches Mariegesicht.” (163) Marie does not just see herself (as in Lacan’s pre-mirror stage) as a mouth here and a chin there; her self-description shifts during the course of this passage from body parts she clearly owns to disconnected body bits. What she first observes is: “Maries Scheitel, Maries Stirn”, “Maries Augenbrauen” and then “ihre Augen” and finally she shifts to listing body parts without possessive specifications: “Nase”, “Mund”, “Kinn”, “Hals” etc. Grammatically, Hermann demonstrates how Marie loses her grasp, her possession of her sense of self and her own corporeal unity and integrity. By the end of the passage, all that is left is a jumble of body parts without attribution. Marie’s sense of self and body is thoroughly undermined, as she perceives of her “own” face as “unheimlich”. One can think here of Freud’s notion of the uncanny or Kristeva’s concept of the abject each denoting something which is both of the self and yet strange and not of the self and disturbing. In Marie’s case, she becomes abject and estranging to herself: “gräßlich,” (163) “gruselig,” (163) and “schrecklich.” (163) Ultimately, the story ends with her final view of herself and her partner engaged in sex; an image she describes tellingly as a “fremde Verknotung zweier Menschen.” (165) For Marie, her non-self body gets knotted together with a strange, unknown other. She observes their lovemaking as if thoroughly detached, as if watching two strangers on a television (here computer) screen.



Contrastively, Hans-Ulrich Treichel's main male protagonist in *Der Verlorene* is obsessed with his own corporeal fragmentation as represented in the photos of him saved in his parents' family photo albums. The disjuncture in his familial experience and his concomitant self-loathing (140) is signified by the "einzelne Körperteile," (10) the "halbe Gesichtshälfte," (9) shown in the photos in which he was "teilweise oder gar nicht zu sehen." (9) As a result he feels ignored by his parents and unnoticed by most people. (139) Like Marie, this male protagonist finds himself both positioned as and perceives himself as abject in a fragmenting visual image of himself. Abject enough, indeed, that he feels an impending "Übelkeit." (174) But unlike so many other protagonists of stories and novels by women writers, Treichel's main character is not consumed by visions of corporeal fragmentation in the face of communication with the opposite sex, in the incapacity to narrate his story, or in sexual encounters.

Sexual encounters in the narratives by women, on the other hand, are consistently portrayed in terms of fragmented bodies and disconnected experiences. Hermann's female narrator in "Ruth" [NG] recounts, for instance, how she obsesses over the corporeal bits and pieces of her close friend's partner, Raoul—a man she does not know at all, but whom she desires nonetheless—and with whom she will enjoy a one-night stand. Try as she might, she cannot seem to bring his body parts together into any overall image in her imagination: ". . . ich konnte noch nicht einmal mehr sein Gesicht in der Erinnerung zusammenfügen, es gab nur Splitter, seine Augen, seine Mund, eine Bewegung mit der linken Hand, seine Stimme. . ." (34) Regardless, of her inability to put Raoul together—or perhaps because of it—she willingly deceives her best friend, sleeps with Raoul, and then casually goes on her way.

In *Blütenstaubzimmer*, Jo makes love to a stranger and recalls how she is thoroughly dissociated from the act of sex:

Er trug mich auf die Matratze in ein anderes Zimmer und zog mich aus. Ich erschrak, weil ich sein Gesicht nicht mehr erkennen konnte, das jetzt ganz nah über dem meinen lag, in Bruchstücke auseinanderfiel, Nase und Kinn, wie durch ein Lupe vergrößert, pflanzten sich fremd vor mir auf, und ich hätte es am liebsten mit der Hand von mir gestoßen, aber ich starrte daran vorbei an die Decke und hielt den Atem an . . . (86)

After the event, the narrator refers to her partner as "etwas Abgetrenntes auf der Matratze." (86)

In a similar manner, Jonina in Hermann's "Kaltblau" [NG] focuses on her partner, Magnus' face while lying in bed with him. Like Jo, Jonina struggles to put the pieces of her partner's face together. What Jonina discovers in those bits is his ice-cold aggression—the coldness of a complete stranger:

daß sein Gesicht eigentlich kalt ist [. . .] ein aggressives, forderndes, entschlossenes und kaltes Gesicht. . . Die Kälte stößt sie nicht ab. Sie zieht sie auch nicht an. Es ist die Kälte eines Fremden, die Kälte von jemandem mit dem sie auch

hunderttausend Jahre verbringen könnte, sie würde ihn doch niemals kennen. Das ist eine eiskalte Tatsache, ein kaltblaues Fakt . . . (86)

Jonina recognizes in Magnus' facial bits and pieces the cold aggression, the icy indifference and chilling absence that she will never be able to overcome—even if she stays with him for a hundred thousand years.

In a story entitled “Bali-Frau” [SHS] Hermann underscores the isolation of the modern melancholic character among “close friends.” She captures succinctly the prevailing nothingness of existence and the emptiness of relationships between persons when Marcus suggests that he could make a film about himself and his friends: “Ein Film darüber, daß es gar nichts ist, daß es nichts mehr gibt, nichts zwischen uns und nichts um uns herum, nur so eine Nacht mit dir und mir und Christiane . . .” (104) And in an even more drastic formulation, Hermann's female narrator in “Zuhälter” [NG] insists that she and her partner, Johannes, are nothing to one another. So little does he mean to her, that he may as well be a dead body lying in her bed: “Ich lag neben ihm, auf der Seite und sah ihn an. . . Ich hätte ebensogut neben einem Toten liegen können, neben irgendwem oder auch ganz woanders, so egal war ich ihm, und so egal war er mir . . .” (169–170) This sense of nothingness between and surrounding friends and lovers, this sense of an all-encompassing night of isolation and indifference persists throughout *Sommerhaus*, *später* and *Nichts als Gespenster* and resonates precisely with the isolating experiences illustrated throughout the stories and novels we have been discussing thus far.

In many cases, dysfunctional relationships and the subsequent psychic depression of friends and lovers are marked by the breakdown of language and the subversion of communication. Intimate relationships are often enveloped in total silence. In account after account, we discover “intimate” lovers and friends incapable of (or simply not willing to) talk to one another. They share a mutually melancholic and mute “co-existence.”<sup>22</sup>

In Hermann's story, “Rote Korallen [SHS],” the sense of prevailing nothingness between lovers is certainly closely tied to the melancholy retreat of characters and the loss of meaningful communication between partners. Hermann's female narrator describes her lover as a cold fish “kalt und stumm” who is not interested in himself. More importantly and astoundingly, he does not speak: “Mein Geliebter sprach nicht, lag auf seinem Bett herum, betrachtete seinen Körper, als wäre er schon tot.” (19) The narrator's lover acts as if he were already dead—a classic melancholic state (K, 72,73). And while her lover languishes in a near-dead state of speechless depression, the narrator, herself, notes that she has seldom spoken since being with him:

Ich sprach kaum mit ihm, und er sprach so gut wie nie mit mir, immer nur sagte er diesen einen Satz, und es gab Augenblicke, in denen ich dachte, die Sprache bestehe einzig und allein aus diesen sieben Worten: ich interessiere mich nicht für mich selbst. (21)

The narrator and her lover share a language that is monotonous, repetitive, and devoid of meaning. (K, 22, 33)

In Dückers' *Spielzone* Katharina provides a strikingly similar description of her relationship to her lover, Felix: "Ich habe mir die Mühe nicht gemacht, Felix meine Gedanken zu erklären, Ich rede einfach nicht gerne. Und Felix kriegt sein Maul auch nicht auf." (157) Likewise the partners in Hermann's "Ruth" [NG] realize that they have not spoken with one another either: "Wir hatten eigentlich überhaupt nicht gesprochen . . ." (48–49) Mutually mute, narrators and their lovers live together, but in total isolation, as they sink into the "blankness of asymbolia." (K, 33)

In contrast, in Hermann's stories when one of the characters does speak, he or she rattles on incessantly (like Kristeva's patient, see p. 2 above) — allowing for no meaningful exchange—i.e. subverting the fundamental function and purpose of language. In "Sonja" [SHS], the male narrator admits: "Ich hätte Sonja zu Tode reden können. . . Sie sagte während dieser ganzen Zeit nicht ein Wort." (61) Night after night the narrator talks and talks: "Ich redete wie zu mir selbst, und Sonja hörte zu, Sonja redete nie." (68) He talks only to himself. Indeed, he remarks to himself at one point that he knows absolutely nothing about Sonja—nothing about her family, work, or history. Indeed, he maintains that she "eigentlich nichts war" (55) and ostensibly then—not really worth getting to know. In "Hunter-Thompson Musik" [SHS] a young woman strikes up a conversation with Hunter, a lonely old man, who has no idea what she is talking about: "Hunter starrt sie an. . . er versteht sie nicht, sie spricht einen Code, aber er kann den Code nicht knacken" (122) because he is "Begegnungen, Gespräche nicht mehr gewohnt." (124) Finally, in "Zuhälter" [NG] Johannes repeats the same nonsense sentence incessantly to his partner, the female narrator: "'It's a long way to China,' sagte er mehrmals und geheimnisvoll, als sollte es mir irgend etwas bedeuten." (170) In each case, incessant talking by one interlocutor affects the same result: isolation. Talking becomes an auto-focussed obsession. And like the melancholic language Kristeva describes, strings of words are generated as if they had meaning, when in fact they do not.

We find a similar dissolution of intercommunication and a surprising willingness to maintain a relationship anyway in Vanderbeke's *Ich sehe was*. Here the female narrator, Alberta, first notes that she does not understand what her friend/acquaintance, Lembek says to her: "Immer wenn er redete, verstand ich überhaupt nichts." (24) Nonetheless, Alberta and Lembek continue to talk to each other incessantly even after they both acknowledge that they have no idea what the other is trying to say:

Einmal sagte ich [Alberta], haben Sie eine Ahnung, wovon wir sprechen, und er sagte, überhaupt nicht, ich dachte vielleicht Sie. Ich sagte, überhaupt nicht, aber lassen Sie uns noch bleiben, ich will gerade noch nicht gehen. Er sagte, ich auch nicht, also machten wir immer weiter. (26)

Regardless of the fact that both interlocutors admit they do not understand the other, both are content to keep on seeing each other and keep on talking. They are desperately willing to grasp and hang on to even—just—the motions of communicating with someone else.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, like Hermann, Duve in “89/90” suggests a “nothingness,” a sense of total isolation between lovers, but with even more directly expressed consequences for the characters’ senses of their own subjectivity. The female narrator describes her friend/lover, Thies as a “Schatten” (34) and when he tells her he loves her, she comments “Ich nahm es nicht persönlich.” (35) Moreover, the narrator insists that Thies has no way of knowing if he really even exists, because no one talks to him—he “sah aus, als wäre er jetzt völlig verrückt geworden. Kein Wunder. Niemand sprach mit ihm, und niemand erinnerte sich an ihn. Wie sollte er da wissen, ob er überhaupt existiere.” (36) The ultimate result of the overwhelming silence that dogs these characters is a sense of the “nothingness of the self” or an inability to even know if one actually exists. As language between friends and lovers fails to be about exchange, one friend and lover after another wallows in a state of isolation and depression.

Not surprisingly we find throughout these contemporary novels an array of melancholic, linguistically challenged characters expressing the narrow limits and emptiness of their lives—indeed, the very void that is themselves. Hell, in Parei’s *Schattenboxerin*, discusses how the scope of her life gets reduced to ever smaller parameters:

An manchen Tagen scheint mein Leben von der Zimmertür bis zur Balkonbrüstung zu reichen, am anderen nur bis zu den Kanten der Matratze. Hin und wieder endet es an der Stelle, wo mein Körper das Ende seiner physischen Ausdehnung erreicht hat. Ich ahne, daß es vielleicht möglich wäre, sich noch weiter zu minimieren, nach Innen hinein, aber an diesem Punkt überfällt mich Angst, und ich stehe auf. (113)

Hell is quickly approaching a kind of self-minimization that threatens to end in her eventual annihilation. She captures a sense of what Kristeva refers to as the “black sun” that affect that the depressed subject perceives “as pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence and renunciation.” (K, 21) Hell has not drawn her existential limits that narrowly yet, but she dreams nonetheless of being swallowed someday into the “hole” that Berlin is for her. (106–107) Hell retreats further and further in to herself or draws lines tighter and tighter around herself until she is ultimately psychically bound to her bed. Hell’s answer to her despondency is to withdraw into smaller and smaller spaces, until someday, she fears, she will disappear all together.

While Hell perceives of herself as shrinking in scope and understands that she is minimizing herself, Hermann’s characters in *Sommerhaus*, *später*, seem to have already lost themselves entirely. The female narrator of “Rote

Korallen" [SHS] fantasizes in desperation about talking to a therapist and remarks: "Ich stelle mir vor, im Zimmer des Therapeuten zu sitzen und über mich zu sprechen. Ich hatte keine Vorstellung davon, worüber ich sprechen sollte." (21) When confronted with the idea of talking about herself, she has no idea what she should say or what she should talk about. Similarly, when she imagines her lover talking to the therapist she startles herself with the idea that he would talk about *himself*—"über sich—über was?" (25)

Dückers intimates the same loss of any sense of self in *Himmelskörper* when Freia notes that her image in a train window shivers and dissipates before her eyes: "Ich sah mein Spiegelbild in der Zugscheibe zittern und zerrinnen. Zwischen den platzenden Regentropfen suchte ich meine Augen." (11) Freia is cognizant of the amorphousness of herself, the runny contours of self that appear and disappear into little rivers out of one's control and view. She envisions herself without discernable boundaries and limits as a hardly palpable and certainly not containable or graspable self.

Perhaps the most drastic representation of a disconnection with self arises in *Naters, Lügen*, when Augusta states flatly and boldly that she is dead:

Eines Morgens, nach Tagen, Jahren, ich weiß nicht mehr wie lange, wache ich auf und bin tot. Ich stehe auf und putze mir die Zähne, ziehe mich an und alles, aber das bin ich nicht. Ich kann mich nicht mehr spüren, es ist, als würde ich mir dabei zusehen und als wäre ich eine Fremde. Ich weiß nicht, wo ich bin, aber auf jeden Fall bin ich nicht mehr in meinem Körper. Mein Geist hat sich von meinem Körper getrennt oder so etwas ähnliches. (146)

All that remains of Augusta is a body going through the motions of life, pretending to be engaged in meaningful activity. But Augusta's self—as dead—is, of course, then irrevocably and thoroughly absent.

In Duve's "Keine Ahnung" the female narrator also registers the banality of existence and suggests her own imminent death (or feeling of approaching death). In her case, she is busy taking drugs, hoping to alleviate the last sufferings: "Ich schluckte aber gleichzeitig Schlaf- und Beruhigungsmittel wie jemand, der sowieso bald stirbt und der sich bloß noch über die finalen Schmerzen hinweghilft." (7) Like Augusta, this female narrator, if not already dead, sees herself on the path to death: "ready at any moment to plunge into death." (K, 4) Her solution is to try to deaden the void of a slow death through drugs. Indeed, shortly after this comment, she remarks: "Ich dachte ich sollte etwas in meinem Leben verändern, also rührte ich Tranquilizer und Schlaftabletten nicht mehr an und nahm statt dessen Aufputzmittel." (8) In spite of the drugs, and even a new course of drugs, the narrator ultimately admits that there is nothing she can do to change anything about her life, her death, or her self: "das Leben war bloß das Leben, und es gab nichts, das mich davor bewahren konnte, ich selbst zu sein." (28) She concludes that there is nothing she can do to save herself or protect herself from being—ultimately and finally—her own pathetic *self*.

Herr Lämmle in Dückers *Spielzone* shares the feeling of melancholic resignation evinced by Augusta and Duve's female narrator, insisting that he is "ganz bei mir selbst, zu keiner Verwandlung fähig. Immer nur ganz und gar ich selbst." (93) Lämmle is resigned to the fact that he is condemned to always be himself, incapable of any change or escape. A prospect that is thoroughly depressing for him. As a hack-writer he strives to lose himself/his life in that of his characters—to be anything or anyone other than himself. Likewise, characters in the stories we have been discussing express their self-loss in myriad ways and each in their own manner—in their resignation to empty relationships, in their melancholic retreats, in their immersion in drugs, and in their complicit and/or resigned acknowledgement of their own feelings of emptiness and nothingness.

The melancholy stories of self-loss we have discussed throughout this essay are also consistently concerned about stories and writing. At every level narrative seems to be "closed" to those seeking entry and fails to liberate those trapped inside. The function of writing/narration in stabilizing a sense of self and subjective cohesion does not arise. Conversely, characters constantly reflect upon their narrative anxieties and failures.

For most of the characters, like Jo in Jenny's *Blütenstaubzimmer* narratives are not only not self-affirming, they often seem to create anxiety about the status of one's self and/or sense of self. Jo's experience of narratives is one of being closed out and/or locked out by words that refuse her access to meaning and sense:

Ich lese den ersten Satz immer wieder und gelange nicht zum zweiten. Früher konnte ich durch die Wörter gehen wie durch offene Türen. Jetzt stehe ich davor, und nichts geschieht. Es ist nur eine ungeheure Anstrengung, diese Wörter zu verfolgen, die mich nirgendwohin bringen, nur zu einem Punkt und einem neuen Satz. (44)

The story/narrative fails to offer Jo access to any meaning and she finds it a tremendous strain to follow words that do not take her anywhere—other than mechanically to a period and a new sentence.

Indeed, while Jo gets stuck reading and re-reading the same sentence and never seems to get beyond the next period, Ellen and Felix in "Nichts als Gespenster" [NG] are subject to a narrative "Zwang" (220)—a compulsive act of telling and re-telling the same stories—what Ellen describes as a "sinnloses Unterfangen." (220) Ellen und Felix find them selves enacting an exercise in story-telling and weeping that is endless and useless:

Sie saßen neben einander, und Felix schwieg, und Ellen versuchte, das Schweigen auszuhalten. Dann fing sie doch an zu reden und steigerte sich aus lauter Hilfslosigkeit in derart sentimentale, verrückte Geschichten hinein, daß beide irgendwann immer in Tränen ausbrachen. (219)

This exercise was "das Ritual" (220): "Ellen wußte das, es war wie ein Zwang, ihn zum weinen zu bringen, um ihn dann wieder trösten zu können, ein sinn-

loses Unterfangen.” (220) Ellen’s senseless narratives reduce them to melancholy weeping, and like Jo’s sentences—leave them ultimately in the same miserable psychic state. They just keep on following those narratives endlessly in circles that lead only to more weeping.

While Jo finds it impossible to read herself into a narrative and Ellen und Felix just keep on traveling the same narrative rut, the female narrator in Hermann’s “Zuhälter” [NG] cannot seem to find anyone to address a story or letter to. For her there is no recipient of her narrative: “Ich würde gerne mal wieder jemandem begegnen, dem ich etwas erzählen könnte. Dem ich einen Brief schreiben könnte.” (168) Likewise, Vanderbeke’s Alberta describes her inability to express herself in writing. But in her case the problem is that she cannot seem to capture what she wants to say:

An Lembek schrieb ich einen Brief, und als es fertig war, las ich ihn durch, es war alles drin, was ich gesehen hatte, aber alles war falsch, also warf ich ihn weg. Dann schrieb ich noch einen und warf ihn auch weg, und dann schrieb ich keinen mehr. (45)

Alberta has as much difficulty communicating to Lembek in writing as in conversation. Here it is clear that the words she writes somehow list what she wants to say, but do not express the meaning she hopes to convey. Her words do not concatenate with her signifieds (K, 33) and so she gives up.

In a even more shocking formulation, the “dead” Augusta of Naters’ *Lügen* recounts how she watches the body that was once hers write endless trash, while she stands by unable to intervene:

Dann setzt sich dieser Körper an meinem Schreibtisch und schreibt und schreibt und schreibt und hört nicht auf. Ich schaue ihm über die Schulter, was der da schreibt ohne meinen Kopf, und es ist tatsächlich nur Müll. Seitenweise Müll, ich kann das gar nicht anders beschreiben. Ich will mir die Haare raufen und laut schreien aus Verzweiflung, aber das geht nicht, weil ich keine Haare habe zum Raufen, keinen Mund zum Schreien. Weil mein Körper am Schreibtisch sitzt und Müll schreibt ohne Ende. Und ich kann nichts tun. (147)

Augusta describes her total detachment from her body and as narrator/writer from the process of writing. Her psychic self stands outside her body and watches it write on and on independently of her. While her former body writes incessantly and against her will, she is psychically not simply absent, but tortured by her knowledge of what is being written and her inability to alter it in any way.

Duve’s female narrator in, “Im tiefen Schnee ein stilles Heim,” radically underscores yet another version of self-loss and narrative disjuncture. Her narrator remarks first that her life is “eine einzige Last, nichts als Unbehagen.” (113) As she writes her own story, she remarks that she has nothing to write and hopes that after writing her mind will be “wieder leer.” (155) Her writing appears to be an attempt at unburdening herself and yet is complicated by the



fact that the pages she writes are insufficient to represent her. In fact, when her life story comes out a bit thin, she just adds some empty pages to fill out the text:

Ich nehme mein Leben (referring to the text) in die Hand und wiege es. Es ist ein bißchen dünn. Ich nehme noch einen Teil des unbenutzten Schreibmaschinensapapiers aus der Schublade und hefte es hinter die von mir beschriebenen Seiten. Ich wiege das Manuskript noch einmal in der Hand. Diesmal ist es genug. (159)

For Duve's narrator empty pages are as representative of her life and self as the pages she has written. And, indeed, the blank sheets she adds to "fill in" her story and give it literal heft, also signify the blankness and the void that is her depressed self. The written pages are also not a greater or lesser representation of the female narrator than blank ones. Both portions of this self narrative are equally empty and poignant signifiers of the nothingness of her life and self.

Jo, Alberta, Augusta, and Ellen each described their incapacity to get inside or to have access to or control over the narratives they are reading and/or writing. Duve's narrator accentuated the blankness of her self and self-narration. In each case the narrators experience a disjuncture between narrative and self that leads them to despair and in most cases (except for Ellen und Felix) they ultimately abandon their attempts to enter into or to write narratives that no longer compel them and/or that they cannot control.

In stark contrast, the male protagonist, Benjamin, of Benjamin Lebert's *Crazy*, finds that books and narratives and stories infuse him with a "beruhigendes Gefühl" (140) with the feeling "daß etwas in dieser Welt noch festgehalten werden kann." (140) And when reading he feels thorough access to the narrative, its meaning, and emotion: "Ich lese weiter. Die Buchstaben und Sätze fliegen mir zu. Es ist ein schönes Buch. Jeder Ausdruck, jede Bermerkung trifft in mein Herz. Schon früh habe ich Tränen in den Augen." (141) Indeed, Benjamin bonds with his male friends as they read Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* together. As Benjamin reads he notes the responses of his friends: "Die Wangen der Jungen sind rot. Sogar Janosch schnauft laut. Wild schüttelt er den Kopf. Seine Augen platzen fast. . . .Hastig greift er nach dem Hemingway-Roman. Kugli und der dünne Felix reichen sich entsetzt die Hände. In ihren Augen schimmern Tränen." (144) Here narrative does function both in providing the subject with a sense of connection, cohesion, and constancy, but also in forging and strengthening the bonds between men. It symbolizes an access through narrative to shared emotions and self-affirmation that does not come to the fore in the discussions of narrative in the works by female writers discussed here and/or in their depictions of mostly female protagonists.

Even more startling perhaps, we find in several of the contemporary works by women characters who are narrators themselves, but who cannot free themselves from the stories that they feel have entrapped them. These

characters search endlessly for a way out of the narratives that threaten to crush them and specifically their senses of self and self-cohesion. These writers are endlessly anxious about isolating their own narratives and expressing some sense of themselves.

Hermann captures this anxiety most succinctly in her short story, “Rote Korallen” [SHS]. Here she recounts the story of a female narrator who cannot seem to extract, free, or stabilize her sense of self in relation to her family’s story and the narrations of her great grandmother in particular. The narrator in “Rote Korallen” [SHS] laments that when she tries to tell “her” stories to her lover, he tells her “die Geschichten sind vorbei.” (21)<sup>24</sup> The narrator is devastated by this comment, because she feels that her great grandmother’s story was her own story: “Die Geschichte meiner Urgroßmutter war meine Geschichte.” (22) Her lover complicates matters by telling her she should not confuse her stories with those of others: “und überhaupt solle ich meine eigene Geschichte nicht mit den anderen Geschichten verwechseln.” (22) Her lover also insists that he himself has no “eigene Geschichte.” (21) The female narrator is lost in a web of narrative self-loss as she remarks:

Ich kannte die Geschichte meiner Urgroßmutter. . . Die Vergangenheit war so dicht mit mir verwoben, daß sie mir manchmal wie mein eigenes Leben erschien. Die Geschichte meiner Urgroßmutter war meine Geschichte. Aber wo war meine Geschichte ohne meine Urgroßmutter? Ich wußte es nicht. (22)

The narrator feels her story is her great grandmother’s story, but by the end of her assertions she is confused about what story would be left to her without her great grandmother. She does not know who she would be, if not subsumed by her great grandmother’s story/narration. This confusion on the narrator’s part is not surprising as she speaks to herself of her melancholic self and existence: “Daß du nämlich gar nichts ist? Nur die Müdigkeit und die leeren, stillen Tage . . .” (26) She, herself, is nothing, her life is tired, empty and still. Her great grandmother’s story—the story of some other self—stands in for her SELF—because she, herself, is nothing. Indeed, the narrator suggests that she has “zu viele Geschichten in mir” (26), too many stories inside her—filling up ostensibly—the void that is herself. But, nonetheless, these are stories that make “das Leben schwer” (26) because they do not anchor for her any sense of her own self. They simply stand in for the self she does not feel is there. And, for this reason, the narrator keeps wondering throughout the story, if this is the story she wants to tell: “Ist das die Geschichte, die ich erzählen will? Ich bin nicht sicher, nicht wirklich sicher.” (11, 19, 29)<sup>25</sup>

Like Hermann’s narrator, the writer, Katharina in Dückers’ *Spielzone* expresses her frustration with the narratives of others that crowd her and threaten to subsume her very sense of a (separate) self. Katharina describes herself (as an author) as “eine unfreiwillige Voyeurin” (111) who is forced to absorb more of her surroundings than she would like. Indeed, we discover during the

course of the novel that Katharina is busy absorbing the stories of the countless melancholy figures of the novel. She is so consumed by the melancholy stories of Ada, Nils, Moritz, and Karaul that she feels a need to get away from them, before she identifies too much with their stories: “Ich sollte einfach mal wieder in Urlaub fahren, je länger ich ununterbrochen hier bin, desto mehr identifiziere ich mich mit den Geschichten anderer Leute, nachts setzen sich ihre Erlebnisse noch in meinen Träumen fort.” (155) Like the female narrator of Hermann’s “Rote Korallen” [SHS] Katharina begins to confuse the stories of others, with her own story. Her dreams (the royal road to one’s own unconscious, according to Freud) are filled with the experiences of others and not her own. Katharina begins to not only identify with the stories of others, but to make them her own. All of these stories threaten to “crowd out” Katharina’s sense of herself:

All diese Geschichten. Amerikanisches Gequake vorm Tacheles. Kaktusbrille. Extra Large, Extra Small. Plus. Minus. Draußen wirft jemand Mitte November Silvesterknaller. Ich lege mich aufs Bett und warte. Nach ein, zwei Stunden ist Adas Stimme ein Hauch, das Feuerwerk das Klicken der Glasperlen meines Armbands, wenn sie aneinanderstoßen, auf meiner Zunge balanciere ich ein Stück Mandarin mit Zimt. Ich lächele mich im Spiegel an. Hier ist niemand außer mir. (158)

Katharina must let these stories dissipate and dissolve from her consciousness, before she can be certain that she is really, finally alone with herself. Indeed, by the end of the novel Katharina decides to leave Berlin—to leave the city of “überdrehte und verschrobene Existenzen” (156) and “verschwundene Menschen” (206) that surround her and who continue to batter away at her sense of self. Outside of Berlin she envisions (perhaps) being able to tell her own story and “nicht immer nur die stories anderer Leute.” (206–207)

While Katharina wants to escape the narratives of others by getting herself out of Berlin and away from the other selves who “crowd her out”, Hermann’s narrator in “Rote Korallen” [SHS] suggests that to escape the narratives that oppress her and threaten her sense of self, she will try to tell the stories in order to get out and away from them: “Ich will die Geschichte erzählen, hörst du! . . . die alten Geschichten, ich will sie erzählen, um aus ihnen hinaus; und fortgehen zu können” (24). Intriguingly, Freia, the female writer in Dückers’ *Himmelskörper*, has the same plan. In order to escape from the stories of others—and specifically of the Nazi pasts of their parents and grandparents, Freia and her brother, Paul, decide they must write it all down: “laß uns doch all das aufschreiben.” (273) And Paul agrees that they should write the story down so that they won’t burden their friends and lovers with it: “Ich möchte hier in Frieden leben und Jacques (his partner) nicht immer mit unserer Geschichte belasten, und deshalb müssen wir dieses Buch schreiben.” (318) Writing their family narrative ought to free them (and everyone around them) from it. As a written narrative, the story of their family and themselves

would finally be “an einem Ort: Papier, so leicht wie Wolken, Luft, Cirrus Perlucidas.” (318) The self, the “me” that Freia has been searching for throughout the course of the novel and in (and in relation to) her family’s Nazi past would be contained once and for all. Or would it?

The medium, the book, has the same amorphous, runny contours, Freia saw in her own self-reflection as she watched her facial features dissolve and trickle away on the train window as the novel opened (see above p. 12). The book, itself, the narrative, is like clouds, air, Cirrus Perlucidas—it has an amorphous, moving, transforming, and inherently elusive character that suggests precisely—that narratives of selves and stories do not anchor senses of self and self-cohesion, but accentuate by their very nature that selves, narrations, and subjectivity can never be so easily bound together, held in place, and/or contained in the pages of a book. Like Augusta’s narrative, some “blank sheets” are also likely to “fill in” or “empty out” any stable sense of self.

And, indeed, as much as Hermann’s narrator wants to tell her great grandmother’s story in order to escape it, one has the sense that she may never actually be able to free herself—for who is *she* anyway—from the narratives of others. Likewise, Katharina may leave Berlin, but that does not seem to be any guarantee that she will not be bombarded with and subsumed by the stories of others—wherever she may eventually go.<sup>26</sup> And finally, Freia and Paul will also discover that their narrative, even in book form, will dissipate like clouds or air and elude their grasp.

In striking juxtaposition to the narrative embattlement expressed consistently by the women writers we have discussed, Benjamin Lebert’s *Crazy* ends with a virtual encomium on stories that suggests that all of life’s events/stories are the stories that write life. Benjamin and his friends decide that their story is about themselves: “Sie [die Geschichte] handelte von us.” (168) That there are many stories and as they travel the “Weg des Lebens,” they will inevitably “bilden und finden—neue Geschichten.” (169) Indeed, Benjamin and his friends wait and see with anticipation what new stories will arise. They express no anxieties about being entrapped either by narratives of others or of themselves. Similarly, the character, Enrico, in Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Storys* also celebrates narration and expresses his desire “über alles zu schreiben, über die ganze Welt.” (203) Enrico insists “ich muß auch schreiben, vor allem muß ich schreiben” (204) because as the narrator explains: “er konnte nicht aufhören, die Welt zu beschreiben. Er konnte einfach nicht aufhören zu schreiben.” (204) For these male narrators, narrating is about narrating one’s self (the stories are about us) and narrating is something integral to the creative self—something that self “must do.” Narrating is not for these male writers something that impinges on them, embattles them, or threatens their sense of self.

The close analysis of narratives by contemporary women writers and specifically their depictions of bodies, dysfunctional relationships, the breakdown of communication, self-loss, and narrative failure, has revealed a pervasive

and shared representation of depression. It is, in fact, women of the “new generation” writing in German in recent years, who have outlined a persistent depression on the part of female protagonists and narrators faced with a modern “aquarium life”—a life that does not seem to offer them meaning.

The women writers of the “new generation” discussed here confer, ultimately, in the insistence that available narratives and forms of communication and linguistic expression do not function to bolster their characters’ senses of self and interconnectedness with others. Within these narratives they are trapped into self-loss and depression and these writers perceive an urgent need to disentangle and free themselves from such oppressive narratives. Whether or not they will succeed in delivering themselves from self-effacing narratives and reasserting their own sense of subjectivity remains a question unanswered by these texts. Unlike Kristeva, who envisions a potential escape from asymbolia through the gaps and fissures of language—through the tones, melodies and rhythms of poetic form, contemporary writings by women of the “new generation” often revolve obsessively around female protagonists and writers who are struggling to connect to and find self cohesion within narratives from which they feel ultimately detached. And, yet, in spite of the odds, many of these stories do evoke, finally, the hope for an escape from the fetters of a stifling narrative, from a devitalizing depression, and subsequently the possibility of self-assertion. And, perhaps, that hope already constitutes—in and of itself a step beyond the enervation of depression.

<sup>1</sup>The term “writers of the new generation” (Volker Hage, “Literarisches Fräuleinwunder,” *Der Spiegel*, March 22, 1999, 244–6) or “pop-movement” (Wolfgang Höbel, “Das gute, beschissene Leben,” *Der Spiegel*, December 1998, 246–249) have been used to describe the surge of writing by young authors in the late 1990’s and/or the turn of the century. All of the authors discussed in this essay are included in this group. The women of this group have also been referred to patronizingly as “Fräuleinwunder” (see Hage and Peter Graves in “Karen Duve, Kathrin Schmidt, Judith Hermann: ‘Ein literarisches Fräuleinwunder’?” *German Life and Letters*, 55:2, April 2002, 196–207).

<sup>2</sup>Hage, “Literarisches Fräuleinwunder” 244–6.

<sup>3</sup>Katharina Gerstenberger, “Play Zones: The Erotics of the New Berlin.” *The German Quarterly* 76.3 (Summer 2003) 259–272.

<sup>4</sup>Graves, “Karen Duve” 196–207.

<sup>5</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>Among other things, Kristeva, *Black Sun* 71 refers to “the greater frequency of feminine depressions—a sociologically proven fact.” Which might also explain, in part, the frequency of narratives of depression by women writing contemporary German fiction.

<sup>7</sup>It should be pointed out, of course, that in the second half of *Black Sun* Kristeva focuses on depression in artistic expression and there she focuses predominantly on men—Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855), and Feodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881). Here Marguerite Duras (1914–1996) is the female exception. This seems perhaps to be a reflection of Kristeva’s concentration on more canonical/historical objects and texts. It also seems noteworthy that the 20<sup>th</sup> century author Kristeva focuses on is a woman.

<sup>8</sup>Throughout this article I will abbreviate the titles *Sommerhaus, später* (SHS) and *Nichts als Gespenster* (NG) to distinguish which collection of short stories a particular story is from.

<sup>9</sup>Höbel, "Das gute, beschissene Leben" 246 suggests that part of the popularity of these new texts lies with their potential to answer the questions posed by critics and publishers: "Wie lebt der junge Mensch im Zeitalter von Techno und Popmoderne? Und wer kann uns das bitte alles aufnotieren?"

<sup>10</sup>Similarly, the female narrator in Hermann's "Ruth (Freundinnen)" [NG] p. 37 insists "bei allem was ich tat, konnte ich mich von außen sehen, distanziert, aus weiter Ferne. . ."

<sup>11</sup>Hage, "Literarisches Fräuleinwunder" 244–6.

<sup>12</sup>Judith Hermann quoted in the *New York Times* in an article by Nora Fitzgerald, "For Young German Writers, All is Ich." *New York Times* (July 24, 2003) B1.

<sup>13</sup>Volker Hage, "Ganz schön abgedreht." *Der Spiegel* (October 11, 1999) 247 and 248.

<sup>14</sup>Fitzgerald, "For Young German Writers" B1.

<sup>15</sup>Fitzgerald, "For Young German Writers" B5.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Graves, "Karen Duve" 196–207 argues that these works have no common unifying style or content. Graves only looks at a few texts through a narrow set of comparisons. Focusing on a broader spectrum of contemporary writings by young women in German, we do find some very remarkable thematic correspondences that Graves misses entirely.

<sup>17</sup>Graves, "Karen Duve" 204 maintains "It is this sense of unfulfilled possibilities which pervades Hermann's stories and gives so many of them a distinctive chill." Jan Brandt, "Prosa in Zimmerlautstärke." *Jungle World* (2/24/1999) [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/periodika/jungle\\_world/\\_99/09/26b.html](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/periodika/jungle_world/_99/09/26b.html) maintains similarly: "Es geht ruhig zu bei Judith Hermann. Die Zimmer sind dunkel, der Himmel ist grau, die Menschen sind müde. Meist fällt Schnee, und manchmal wird ein bißchen Staub aufgewirbelt. Sogar in den Gesichtsfalten der Figuren scheint sich Staub angesammelt zu haben, so langsam und leise leben sie, ihre Zeit dehnt sich unendlich."

<sup>18</sup>Fitzgerald, "For Young German Writers" B5 asserts "Some of Ms. Hermann's characters wallow in a claustrophobic depression."

<sup>19</sup>Graves, "Karen Duve" 203 suggests that *Sommerhaus, später* draws "the reader into an inhospitable world of contingent events and casual relationships, where happiness is experienced as memory or aspiration, but never as present reality."

<sup>20</sup>See also Günther Stocker, "Träumen des Aufwachsens. Drei Varianten aus der Schweizer Literatur der neunziger Jahre." *Weimarer Beiträge* 48.3 (2002) 380–398 in which he concurs that Jenny's *Blütenstaubzimmer* is a novel about Jo's search for closeness, communication, and contact to her mother in vain (382) and remarks that "Die Welt des Romans ist trostlos: Kinos, in denen es nach Urin stinkt, aggressive Kinder, die auf verrotteten Spielplätzen spielen müssen oder Schmetterlinge töten, krank aussehende Menschen mit rotgeschwollenen Augen, die sich mürrisch und mißtrauisch durch den Alltag quälen" (384).

<sup>21</sup>Ijoma Mangold, "Der Feind sitzt beim Sektfrühstück." *Berliner Zeitung* (9/25/1999) M9 notes that Hell has lived for years closed up autistically "in ihre Einsamkeitshöhle." The novel portrays in general, according to Mangold, the "Härte und Brutalität" of Berlin as the true world of the city.

<sup>22</sup>None of the contemporary novels I have read by male authors focuses on the issues of loss of language/communication, and the failure of narrative, the way that the novels written by women do. As a matter of fact, these issues seem to be of little or passing concern in the male-authored texts.

<sup>23</sup>See also Matthias Uecker, "Missverständnisse, Rollenspiele, Double Binds: Kommunikation und Bewusstsein im Werk Birgit Vanderbeke." *German Life and Letters* 55:3 (July 2002) 312–327 in which he discusses the difficulties of communication in the works of Vanderbeke and especially the uncertainties and misunderstandings characteristic of communication within families throughout her work. Uecker does not discuss *Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst*. Interestingly, Uecker notes that Vanderbeke's literary style in general might be described as giving the impression "dass zwar ununterbrochen geredet wird, dass aber dabei gar keine Kommunikation stattfindet" (320). The passage cited here/above would certainly bolster that analysis.

<sup>24</sup>In "Wohin des Wegs" [NG] Hermann invokes the dissatisfying effect of telling old stories again as the female narrator talks about how tiring it is to tell her old stories to her partner, Jacob: "Ich habe einmal gesagt, daß es mich müde machen würde, immer und immer wieder die alten Geschichten zu erzählen, die Vergangenheit, die Kindheit, die ersten Lieben, und die letzten, die erkenntnishaften Momente, Glück das, was macht, daß ich bin, wie ich bin. Ich bin nicht sicher, ob er [Jacob] mich versteht. . ." (234) And then she explains that she is compelled

to do it anyway: “Obwohl es mich müde macht, immer und immer wieder die alten Geschichten zu erzählen, kann ich nicht widerstehen und erzähle sie doch” (234).

<sup>25</sup>In contrast, Inge Stephan, “Undine an der Newa und am Suzhou River, Wasserfrauen-Phantasien im interkulturellen und intermedialen Vergleich.” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 12/3 (2002) 547–563 describes Judith Hermann’s *Rote Korallen* as a story of emancipation from the many stories that plague the female narrator (549). Stephan anchors her argument on the narrator’s anger at the end of the story and suggests she frees herself from the stories that plague her by throwing the *rote Korallen* at the therapist (551–552). And while, I agree that this moment promises escape from the stories, it does not resolve the issue as the narrator goes right back to her silent, unreceptive lover in the last paragraph of the story and restates her anxiety about which story she is attempting to tell. In other words, the story does not end with her self-assertion (in the second to last paragraph), it ends with a narrative repetition (in the final paragraph), a return to her obsession with which narrative she has to tell.

<sup>26</sup>As Jo suggests in *Blütenstaubzimmer*, any contemplated flight—any fantasy of going to Milwaukee in her case—in order to escape the world of self-loss and melancholy stories is probably senseless because essentially it is “nirgendwo anders” (95).