As German as Kafka

Rock, Lene

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INTRODUCTION

“What is Enlightenment at the beginning of the 21st century? [Was ist Aufklärung am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts?]” In his plea for a Europe beyond the national paradigm, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that an embrace of Enlightenment values is more urgent than ever. Europe, he argues, suffers from a paradox: “Whoever thinks of Europe as a large nation [...] awakens the national primal fears of Europeans: either Europe or the European nations—a third option is simply impossible [Wer Europa als Großnation denkt [...] weckt die nationalen Urängste der Europäer: entweder Europa, oder die europäischen Nationen—ein Drittes ist ausgeschlossen].” Yet in order to allay the fears of member states, “that with their approval of the European Constitution they commit cultural suicide [dass sie mit ihrer Zustimmung zur Europäischen Verfassung kulturellen Selbstmord begehen],” they must step outside of a national concept of Europe, and rethink it from a cosmopolitan perspective—“a Europe of differences, of acknowledged national particularities [das Europa der Differenz, der anerkannten nationalen Partikularitäten].” Beck rephrases Kant’s sapere aude in terms of the courage to acknowledge religious, cultural, and national pluralism and to strive for equality despite those differences:

Have the courage to engage your ‘cosmopolitan view’, i.e. to profess your multiple identities: to connect the lifestyles born of language, skin color, nationality, or religion with the awareness that in the radical precariousness of the world everyone is equal and everyone is different.

[Habe den Mut, dich deines ‘kosmopolitischen Blickes’ zu bedienen, das heißt, dich zu deinen vielfältigen Identitäten zu bekennen: die aus Sprache, Hautfarbe, Nationalität oder Religion erwachsenen Lebensformen mit dem Bewusstsein zu verbinden, dass in der radikalen Unsicherheit der Welt alle gleich sind und jeder anders ist.]
Beck revisits the Enlightened foundations of the European project in a context of radical global insecurity. At the onset of the twenty-first century the effects of decades-long globalization processes and migration waves are evident in the increasingly diversified ethnic, cultural, and religious makeup of Western societies. Yet the apparent triumph of ‘the global’ over ‘the local’ is only one aspect of that Unsicherheit. Europe today bears the traces of a fundamental tension of modernity: alongside globalizing tendencies and transnational cultural processes, it has also witnessed the resurgence of nationalism and particularism. In the light of European ideological history, this is a “remarkable reversal, a most unexpected turn of events,” according to Stuart Hall. Both the liberal and the Marxist paths of modernization “implied that the attachment to the local and the particular would gradually give way to more universalistic and cosmopolitan or international values and identities; that nationalism and ethnicity were archaic forms of attachment—the sorts of thing that would be ‘melted’ away by the revolutionizing force of modernity.” Instead, “the intensification of worldwide relations,” which affect “distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa,” seems to go hand in hand with its opposite: the insistence on the local and the particular.

That tension is especially evident in Germany, a country that—unlike Britain or France—has a very limited colonial history, and struggles to this day with its status as a country of immigration, even if it houses a ‘minority’ of 17 million people with migration backgrounds. The presence of that minority of millions is—in part—the long-term effect of an economic globalization process initiated with foreign recruitment agreements between the 1950s and the 1970s. Since then, and with renewed intensity after the 9/11 attacks, the visibility of religious and cultural difference in German society has been the topic of heated debate. Any debate about the ‘Other’ is indirectly a demarcation of one’s own identity. Indeed, the intensity of the Leitkultur debate (2000/2001) illustrates how Germany struggles to define itself as an inclusive Einwanderungsland and instead continues to adhere to national concepts of culture and identity, as the more recent successes of Alternative für Deutschland confirm. In other words, Germany, like Europe, is affected deeply by that modern tension between the global and the local, the universal and the particular.
How, then, does *Aufklärung* fit the German context? Over the last couple of years, the debate on immigration and integration has been fueled by a perhaps familiar but in fact oversimplifying distinction between defenders of Western civilization and the perceived opponents of its secular, Enlightened foundations. The debate recently flared to new heights as thousands of people marched the streets of Dresden, protesting the ‘Islamisierung des Abendlandes’. Yet although the current debate feels urgent and unique, it is not entirely without historical precedent. Both at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century, Germany witnessed polarizing discourses on identity, culture, and nationhood. In these debates, two groups of people were increasingly considered as outsiders of ‘the’ German nation: at the beginning of the twentieth century they were Jews; at the end of the twentieth century they were immigrants. There needs to be no argument about the differences between both historical periods. Jews have had a longer presence on German ‘soil’ than many so-called authentic Germans. And there is the caesura of the Shoah, the irredeemable cut through the history of civilization that is often banalized in discussions about exclusion. Yet these crucial differences should not obscure the long history of Jews in Germany before the Shoah, nor the valuable insights that their history may offer.

The social position of German Jews, among whom many strongly identified with the Enlightenment project, puts the frequent references to *Aufklärung* today in an interesting historical perspective. German Jews around 1900 and new German citizens around 2000 found themselves in comparable paradoxical positions. Despite the emphasis on their perceived cultural or racial incompatibility, heightened by increasingly explicit anti-Semitic or xenophobic sentiment, the society German Jews and ‘new’ Germans live in continues to insist on adaptation, assimilation, and integration. This paradox reveals a more fundamental contradiction at the heart of the German integration debate. The apparent conflict between *Aufklärung* and its opponents seems to cover a tendency to functionalize Enlightened values in the promotion of an exclusive German identity. The belief in an inclusive society of equals that informs assimilation and integration processes then hits a wall: outsiders are promised access, but when they obtain the key, the locks appear to have been changed.

This investigation compares literary endeavors by German Jews and by ‘new’ Germans who find themselves caught in that social paradox, in which, despite the broken promise of inclusion and the insistence on differences, assimilation and integration continue to be required by host societies. At both ends of the twentieth century, authors and artists were and are sensitive to various
questions of cultural identity—of normativity, coercion, exclusion, assimilation, or hybridity—many of which have been disclosed and digested in a fascinating diversity of artistic modes. While history has proven that art and literature are vulnerable to ideological cooptation, to instrumentalization in identity formation or national(istic) programs, many literary texts can be regarded to function as a particular kind of “social imaginary” as well. As a highly subtle form of art it communicates the ways “people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, [...] the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” As such, it may add more nuance to the public debate. Whereas ‘cultural identity’ is often used as a static description of an individual’s life, or of the experience of collectivities, many literary texts fathom and expose irritating and insolvable complexities that are missing from the debate and from its conviction of ‘common sense’. Nevertheless, the literary endeavors of German Jews and new Germans are confronted with an Identitätszwang that deeply affects their self-perception as writers and their role as intellectuals. They are expected to account for, represent, mediate, or reject their perceived cultural difference through fiction, or to take a stand in political and social matters that involve their minority position. As a result, they are torn between the allure of artistic autonomy and the fear of losing social relevance as intellectuals. By comparing a selected number of literary texts, this study reveals comparable tensions manifesting themselves in the two periods and show some remarkable common patterns in the variegated responses to that imperative of identity. A range of issues related to the ‘politics’ of literature will be addressed. How does literature intervene in the debate on culture, identity, and difference? Does it subvert, question, or resist the assumptions that govern the discussion? Or does it withdraw from it altogether, taking position on a side stage instead? How does it resist the myth-making on which nations founded themselves? And, finally, can literature imagine a way out of the dead end that the Enlightened promise seems to have reached?

The title may have fooled the reader: this is not a study on Franz Kafka. It is, nevertheless, an investigation into the intricate connection between literature and identity that Kafka has come to represent—almost to the point of commonplace. The title refers to a quote by the Iranian-German writer and intellectual Navid Kermani. In an interview for the magazine Literaturen, four “not quite German writers [nicht ganz deutsche Autoren]”—Kermani, Terézia Mora, Imran Ayata, and Wladimir Kaminer—are asked about the ‘added value’ of cultural difference to their writing. To the interviewer’s suggestion that they are not “German authors [...] in the sense of Goethe or Thomas Mann [deutsche Autoren [...] im Sinne
von Goethe oder Thomas Mann],” Kermani responds that he considers himself “German rather in the sense of Kafka [deutsch eher im Sinne von Kafka],” even if he finds national designations irrelevant in a literary context. His Kafka reference at first seems to indicate a strong identification with the German literary canon, from which the interviewer apparently excludes him. Yet Kermani’s response is also, especially, an ironic reminder of the cultural heterogeneity of that national canon. For Kafka was, of course, not a German. First, he was an Austrian living in the multiethnic, multilingual Austro-Hungarian conglomerate. After the triumph of nationalist differences in the First World War, he became a Czech who belonged to a German-speaking Jewish elite in Bohemia surrounded by strong Czech and (now minority) German nationalist sentiments. The designation ‘German’ thus hardly captures the linguistic, cultural, and national complexity that Kermani’s Kafka reference evokes. Precisely that heterogeneity is the reason why his comparison makes sense—the historical analogy is not merely anecdotal. At both ends of the twentieth century German-Jewish writers and writers from non-German backgrounds were and are well aware of how the multiplicity of their national, cultural, or religious identities affects their writing and their reception as ‘not quite German’ writers.

This study investigates that historical analogy by comparative close reading of a selection of texts. The comparison demonstrates that in a context of intense identity discourses and perceived threat to ‘German’ values, many literary texts seem to re-enter into an implicit dialogue with the Enlightenment, a dialogue that does not involve a return to but a re-evaluation of its premise: Bildung—the humanistic ideal of self-cultivation—and the insistence on autonomy as the precondition of a society of equal individuals. The different literary texts reveal a wavering confidence in Enlightened individualism, while at the same time drawing contours of unexpected, tentative, and ephemeral forms of intimacy. The distinctly relational individuals engendered by fleeting forms of connection resist the embrace of collective identities. Instead, the texts imagine a variety of fragile senses of community in defiance of the monolithic rhetoric of otherness and incompatibility that characterizes the communis opinio.

The comparison builds a bridge between two productive fields of study that have remained largely unrelated: interkulturelle Germanistik and German-Jewish studies. German-Jewish studies focus on the relations between European Jewish communities and German-speaking society from a broad historical, social, and cultural perspective. Exemplary would be Arno Herzig’s Jüdische Geschichte in Deutschland. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (2002). These investigations analyze, among other themes and periods, the Haskalah—the
Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century—as do for example Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin in New Perspectives on the Haskalah (2001); the Jewish acculturation process, as investigated by Shulamit Volkov in Das jüdische Projekt der Moderne (2001); the history of anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic rhetorics in the German public debate, which Marcel Stoetzler analyzes in The State, the Nation, and the Jews (2008); and the Holocaust and postwar European history. The study of German-Jewish literature within that framework is rich and variegated. Its scope ranges from encyclopedic works on German-Jewish authors such as Sander Gilman’s and Jack Zipes’ Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture (1997) and Andreas B. Kilcher’s Metzler Lexikon der deutsch-jüdischen Literatur (2000), to studies of more specific cultural contexts such as Cultural Zionism, of which Mark Gelber’s Melancholy Pride: Nation, Race, and Gender in the German Literature of Cultural Zionism (2000) is a revealing investigation, to analyses from a gender perspective, like Barbara Hahn’s Die Jüdin Pallas Athene (2002).

Interkulturelle Germanistik deals with a far more limited historical period. It developed as a subfield of Germanistik only after the emergence of so-called guest workers’ literature in the 1980s, but it has widened its scope. A standard work is Carmine Chiellino’s Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland (2000). From an institutional point of view, interkulturelle Germanistik reveals conspicuous contrasts between the theoretical approaches of German Studies in the United States or Britain and of the Germanistik ‘intra muros’, where postcolonial theory and ‘minority writing’ have only recently started shifting away from the margins of literary study. In German studies, ‘new’ German literatures and theoretical concepts of the representation of cultural identity have been central research topics, as in for instance Leslie Adelson’s The Turkish Turn (2005) and Tom Cheesman’s Cosmopolite Fictions (2005). In German studies, these ‘new’ literatures are also studied from a wider perspective that includes them in the whole of contemporary German literature, as in Lyn Marven’s and Stuart Taberner’s Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century (2011) and of gender studies, as illustrated by Brigid Haines’ and Margaret Littler’s Contemporary Women’s Writing in German: Changing the Subject (2004).

Despite their different foci, German-Jewish studies and interkulturelle Germanistik address issues of cultural identity in a German(-language) context. They engage with questions of cultural difference, adaptation, and exchange; they investigate mechanisms of subjection and exclusion, stereotype and prejudice; and they reflect on the power relations between so-called minority and majority groups. Yet a comparison between them has rarely been made.
A few recent contributions have already pointed out interesting parallels between German-Jewish writing around 1900 and contemporary ‘literature of migration’. In *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (2012), Yasemin Yildiz investigates “the postmonolingual condition” and the impact of the “monolingual paradigm” from a historical perspective, focusing on the writings of Kafka, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada, and Feridun Zaimoglu. Liesbeth Minnaard, in *New Germans, New Dutch* (2008), points out that a “trialogue” between Germans, Jews, and Turks—or other minorities—may be a valuable approach in debates on identity. The concept of triangulation may break away from the problematic and limiting situation in which, implicitly, “the position of all other minorities in Germany is measured and negotiated in relation to [the] German-Jewish trauma.” An approach that takes into account multiple relations—historically or comparatively—may “achieve a more differentiated reflection of (xenophobic, anti-Semitic or racist) structures of Othering and discrimination.” Minnaard demonstrates that such a comparative approach between Dutch and German minority literatures is fruitful. As I aim to illustrate, a *historical* comparison as well yields interesting parallels between writers from different periods who all acutely sensed and addressed the vexed issue of ‘belonging’.

Any historical comparison warrants caution. A juxtaposition of German-Jewish literature and contemporary ‘literature of migration’ must remain aware of the implications of the comparative process itself. On a fundamental *historical* level, it should be noted that Nazism and the *Shoah* constitute a moment of incommensurability between German Jews and ‘new German citizens’. The comparability of anti-Semitism and what is commonly referred to as ‘islamophobia’, is, to say the least, up for debate. The anti-Semitic discourse that led to the Holocaust is deeply rooted in European and German history, and from that historical perspective bears only limited resemblance to the anti-Islamic sentiments that flared to new heights after the 9/11 attacks. The danger in commonplace analogies such as “Gestern die Juden, heute die Muslime” resides in the abstraction—and potentially banalization—of very specific, different historical contexts. Therefore, the present selection of German-Jewish texts is limited to the period before 1933. Hitler’s rise to power marks the moment when anti-Semitism becomes official state ideology, and any ground for comparison is lost. Even so, while it is difficult to blank out the course of history from our contemporary perspective on pre-war German-Jewish relations, it would be a loss—from both historical and literary perspectives—if that ‘teleological awareness’ made it impossible to look for parallels in a past that preceded the *Shoah*. The observation that, at both ends of the twentieth century, a considerable
group of writers were confronted with a hostile climate and addressed issues of identity, exclusion, or community, should be food for thought.

From a literary perspective, it could be argued that “the comparison of the cultural expressions of different languages, nations, peoples in practice seems always constrained by an invisible binary bind in which comparison must end either by accentuating differences or by subsuming them under some overarching unity.” Armed with that awareness, the literary analyses in this study consistently take into account the historical contexts of individual texts. Although inspired by a comparable social paradox, the comparison will be executed primarily on a thematic level. The close readings are clustered around similar themes and motifs: the artist and the aesthete, the metropolitan experience, and (post-) imperial forms of (anti-) heroism. These clusters support an approach to coercive mechanisms of assimilation, compliance, stereotype, and collective identity, leading to an argument about the modern individual. In other words, the present investigation aims to acquire more insight into the ‘politics’ of literature against the background of historical and social realities.

A methodological concern involves the delineation of the object of study. When I refer to ‘German-Jewish literature’ or ‘intercultural literature’, I do so with reservation, in the awareness that the study of minority writing involves a typical and inevitable paradox. It brings down a corpus of texts to a common denominator—usually the author’s Jewish or non-German origins. Yet even a brief glance at the field uncovers an aesthetic, thematic, and generic variety that defies such categorization. A strict biographical delineation reduces writers and their works to their ‘ethnic’ belonging. As such, it reproduces and reinforces the differences and power relations that these texts often seem to challenge. By designating a separate status to minority writers, their outsider position is once more confirmed in terms of their artistic endeavors.

That paradox has visibly affected the two fields of study. In an essay on the question “What is ‘German-Jewish literature’? [Was ist ‘deutsch-jüdische Literatur’?],” Andreas B. Kilcher remarks that, despite considerable critical interest in German-Jewish writing, ‘German-Jewish literature’ as a descriptive category for a long time lacked a clear conceptual, terminological, and methodological foundation. He points out the problems associated with a strictly biographical delineation. It might seem like an unproblematic method at first—“In order to determine the corpus of this literature, therefore, there would be little more to do than to compile a corresponding list of authors and works. [Um das Korpus dieser Literatur zu bestimmen, bliebe folglich nicht mehr zu tun, als eine entsprechende Autoren- und Werkliste zu erstellen.]” But the danger resides in
the assumption that Jewish identity is objectifiable and visible as a literary feature, which potentially leads to the instrumentalization and disregard of aesthetic qualities. The only ‘fact’ that can be determined and researched, according to Kilcher, is not an aspect of literature itself but the many variegated interpretations of and discourses about German-Jewish literature. I am however convinced that it is also valuable to scrutinize individual texts, since close reading uncovers a far more variegated palette of meanings and interpretations than a strict focus on the ideological or poetological positions of authors.

The interkulturelle Germanistik has encountered a similar problem in defining its object of investigation, as reflected by ongoing terminological confusion. Over the years, literature from ‘non-ethnic’ German writers has been designated as Gastarbeiterliteratur, which emphasizes the social position of the authors; Ausländerliteratur, which extends the scope beyond the realm of foreign workers; Migrantenliteratur, Migrationsliteratur, ‘literature of migration’, and ‘literature of settlement’, which all reflect the authors’ recent German residence. Having gained currency in the course of the 1990s, the term ‘intercultural literature’ focuses on cultural exchanges within German society, acknowledging that, in a globalized, multiethnic, and multicultural society, cultural identities are not determined by a fixed set of features.

The evolving terminology at first seems to mirror a thematic transformation within this literature, which, broadly speaking, has exchanged its initially oppositional character for increasing aesthetic self-awareness. The changing terms, though, are also evidence of how this highly heterogeneous literature resists categorization, as well as challenges dominant concepts of identity and culture. Increasing awareness of how specific designations may reproduce power relations has contributed to a reluctance to fixate and determine the body of texts. This literature is now often received as a challenge to the concept of national identities as a form of writing after the dissolution of fixed national cultural concepts after the demise of the East/West power blocs, as a literature beyond the bourgeois concept with its background in nationalism and imperialism, as a literature that subverts the opposites of ‘foreign’ and ‘own’, native and foreign, as a literature of hybridity and patchwork identities [...]. In other words, a literature that permits the experience of the illusion of a homogeneous cultural identity as well as of non-bipolar and hierarchical encounters with the foreign, articulates the foreign, and undermines the fixation of the foreign.
However, that ‘intercultural’ focus—described above in terms of postcolonial hybridity and of a binary of Eigen- and Fremdheit—has yielded very different, even conflicting, interpretations. The study of ‘literature of migration’ has been the domain of two schools of thought. The German-based interkulturelle Germanistik has adopted a predominantly hermeneutic paradigm that ‘reads’ interculturality as an exchange between German and non-German cultures, and is founded on “the central principle of ‘understanding’ the foreign, of insight into the foreign culture [die leitende Idee eines ‘Verstehens’ des Fremden, einer Einfühlung in die fremde Kultur].” In anglophone German studies, this literature is usually approached from postcolonial perspectives, which chart the social and political power relations represented or subverted by literature. They reject the notion of clearly defined cultural entities—and thus any distinction between eigen and fremd. Instead, the latter school of thought “attend[s] to the unsettling of all identities […], and indeed see[s] any attribution of identity as essentializing and exclusive.” The postcolonial perspective has gradually entered the scope of the German-based school, even if there remains some skepticism towards its method and concepts. Volker C. Dörr characterizes the gradual evolution towards the Anglo-American model as follows—by his own admission “overly trenchantly [überpointiert]”:

While in the 1980s it was still a question of how guest worker literature could assist its German reader in understanding a foreign culture from the (hierarchically higher) point of view of his own culture, and in doing so learn something about the foreign view of his ‘own’ culture—or possibly even through the foreign view about his own culture—today things are as complicated as they have ever been: The understanding that cultures are not self-contained homogeneous essences, ‘not completely isolated and compartmentalized entities,’ but rather that
they are ‘reciprocal interactions of different, even antagonistic cultures and subcultures’ ‘within’ cultures, has become widely accepted.

Introduction


The skepticism of the Inlandsgermanistik towards concepts of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’ is possibly related to the idea that a (post)colonial paradigm does not entirely fit the German situation since the 1980s—and not just because the story of labor migration is not a colonial relation strictu sensu. The reluctance can also be attributed to the fact that for a long time, Germany has not recognized its own status as a country of immigration—unlike for instance Canada and the United States, where the postcolonial approach has been long established as a valid method for describing minority writing.

Even though a postcolonial perspective has been embraced gradually by the interkulturelle Germanistik, Dörr formulates a crucial reservation about the way it has been applied, pointing out that the concept of hybridity itself may be vulnerable to re-essentialization. Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes that “the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third space emerges,” and that hybridity itself is “the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge.” Hybridity is, in other words, not the mixed result of two pre-existing substances. However, the concept has often been applied that way, leading to an inadvertent but problematic sequence:

And so, implicitly, the idea returns that the source of the hybrid culture consists of two cultures as self-contained homogeneous entities. The notion of hybridity thus leads to (re-)essentializations. [...] It also leads to the re-essentialization of the hybrid third itself, for the hybrid is by no means always understood in a differential way [...]. The special thing about German-Turkish migrants, then, is not just that their culture is
a mixture of ‘the’ German and ‘the’ Turkish; there is also ‘the’ hybrid migrant culture.

[...Unausgesprochen kehrt dann die Vorstellung wieder, dasjenige, aus dem die eine hybride Kultur gemischt sei, seien eben doch zwei Kulturen als in sich abgeschlossene homogene Wesenheiten. Die Vorstellung der Hybridität verleitet also zu (Re-) Essentialisierungen. [...] Sie verleitet auch zur Re-Essentialisierung des hybriden Dritten selbst, denn keineswegs immer wird das Hybride dann differentiell verstanden [...]. Dann erscheint als das Besondere etwa der deutsch-türkischen Migranten nicht nur, dass ihre Kultur aus ‘dem’ Deutschen und ‘dem’ Türkischen gemischt ist; es gibt dann auch gleich ‘die’ hybride Migrantenkultur.]

The danger of re-essentializing hybridity may explain why, both in German-Jewish Studies and in research on intercultural literature, there have emerged tendencies to move away from descriptions of identity in reference to an implicit scale between ‘Germanness’ and ‘non-Germanness’. My approach joins more recent attempts to study minority writing beyond cultural binaries. Both fields of study exhibit an increasing weariness with such binaries, since they unduly imply that one’s very personal and subjective experience, one’s self-definition, can be explained entirely in reference to a polarity of (non-) Germanness. In other words, such binaries do not do justice to the complexities of historical intercultural processes, and most certainly not to the variegated literary responses to them.

In the field of intercultural literature, particularly the “two-worlds paradigm” has grown contested. In a series of articles, as well as in her seminal *The Turkish Turn*, Leslie A. Adelson criticizes the trope for its implied reference to two delineated cultures—a concept that hinders the development of new insights and perspectives on literature: “‘Between Two Worlds’ is the place customarily reserved for these authors and their texts on the cultural maps of our time, but the trope of ‘betweenness’ often functions like a reservation designed to contain, restrain, and impede new knowledge, not enable it.” The popular descriptive metaphor of an existence ‘on a bridge between two cultures’ was voluntarily adopted by early migrant writers, but its borrowing by literary critics has had a “regressive effect” on the reception of more complex explorations of identity formation. The paradigm has become “a cultural fable” that “exerts the enormous gravitational pull of a black hole in spite of its historical obsolescence.” In other words, the insights and aesthetic complexity of this ‘literature of migration’ warrant more subtle approaches than a perhaps satisfying but imprecise metaphor can deliver.
In research on German-Jewish literature it is the contested notion of assimilation that has given way to alternative approaches. The term implies that, in the process of emancipation, German Jews gradually abandoned all aspects of their Jewish heritage in order to integrate into German society. But that one-sided evolution of a minority dissolving into ‘mainstream’ culture has long been revealed as an inadequate description. Still, German-Jewish authors are often investigated in reference to their position on the ideological spectrum between dissimilation and assimilation. However, neither in the lived experience of German Jews, nor in their writings, do the two poles emerge as mutually exclusive. As for instance Jonathan Skolnik argues in the context of German-Jewish historical fiction,

the Jewish embrace of German-language culture also took on forms which encompassed a different relation between ‘Jewish past’ and ‘German fiction’, one that makes necessary a different view of integration and acculturation. By imagining, indeed reinventing Jewish history through German-language historical novels, German Jews asserted their own unique identity as they integrated into larger narratives of German and European history. [...] Dissimilation is the crystallization of a new form of Jewish identity and distinctiveness that occurs as part of the dynamic of acculturation and alongside the phenomenon of assimilation.\(^58\)

In the same vein, Scott Spector argues that, even if it allows nuance, the imagined spectrum between absolute Jewish identification at one end, and complete appropriation of German identity at the other, is inadequate and deceptive.\(^59\) “The distinctions between ‘spontaneous’ and ‘acquired’ cultural character, accidental adaptation and essential adoption, or stable essence and assimilatory appearance are all themselves powerfully ideological instruments of segregation, rather than descriptors of a cultural condition.”\(^60\) Instead, Spector pleads for studying history and literature by shifting focus from assimilatory identity to subjective experiences—especially their inconsistencies and surprising contradictions. Vivian Liska addresses a similar issue in her investigation into “uncommon communities” in German-Jewish literature.\(^61\) Her study resists the “widespread practice in cultural studies and political theory that invokes literary texts only to subsume them under pre-existing concepts and categories [...].” Instead, she sets out to illustrate “the complex, conflicting, and polyvalent, multi-interpretable relations to communities [...].”\(^62\) Discussing instances of ambivalence toward collectivities and the Jewish community in particular, she investigates how the
undecided position of German-Jewish authors, between insider and outsider, engenders unusual affiliations that challenge the conventional foundation of community on principles of sameness and identity.63

Taking into consideration the insights from both fields, this investigation charts instances of inbetweenness that do not emerge from a binary of identities. Rather, any inbetweenness on the part of the examined authors and texts can be attributed to a particular literary sensitivity, which enhances their reflection on issues of cultural identity. They are not primarily positioned ‘in-between two cultures’ but on a field of tensions between identity and opposition, between difference and indifference, between myth and storytelling. The selected texts—even if the selection is neither exhaustive nor entirely representative—reflect the variety of authors’ biographies, ideological affiliations, and poetological views, as well as the stylistic, thematic, and generic responses to the imperative of identity in both periods. I argue that the selected literary works are not primarily stories of identity but, rather, of singularity. They evoke a gradual erosion of the Enlightened individual in the course of various assimilation processes. At the moment when assimilatory desire sees its Enlightened foundations crumbling, a vulnerable and relational individual emerges, as well as forms of connection that resist being claimed by any form of collective identity. As the present texts show, the way out of such expired individualism can be inspired by storytelling, by adopting and cultivating an aesthetic or hermeneutic distance towards reality. Indeed, many protagonists are performers, spectators, readers, and storytellers. From a metatexual perspective, then, they reflect the potential of the arts to imagine alternative forms of community, beyond the imperative to self-identify as ‘German’, ‘Jewish’, or anything ‘in-between’.

The emergence of these tentative forms of community is reminiscent of the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–) and of his notion of ‘being singular plural’ in particular. Nancy, whose work is influenced by Heidegger, Bataille, and Derrida, has reconceptualized community in non-identitarian terms. One of the main questions in his writing is how—in the light of the violent implications of collective identity witnessed during the twentieth century—we can still think and speak of a plural ‘we’, without transforming it into an essential, substantial, and exclusive identity.64 In The Inoperative Community (1991) and in Being Singular Plural (2000),65 Nancy calls into question traditional and modern communitarian impulses, as well as the individualism supported by Enlightened modernity. Written against the backdrop of a disintegrating Soviet Union, of the violent culmination of ethnic particularism in the Balkan conflict, and of advancing neoliberalism, Nancy’s seminal texts convey a pronounced sensitivity
to the coercive, potentially destructive nature of hypostatized community, as well as to the instrumentalization of the subject in economic, political, or ideological narratives. Nancy criticizes the mythical “longing for an original community” at the heart of Western political thought. He proposes an alternative notion of community, one that resists “any communion or fusion based on a unified, institutionalized, and exclusionary common ground, a sharply defined goal, and a clear conceptualization of itself.” Whereas commonly notions of community are predicated on exterior definition, or on a well-defined common purpose, Nancy proposes ‘being-with’ instead—a connection relying on shared exposure that does not heed the “communal desire for a closed and undivided social identity.” It implies the radical, mutual openness of singular beings, who as a result are in a constant state of change, and thus resist the static notion of community as a fusion of pre-existing individuals.

Nancy does not offer a concrete methodology for literary analysis. Nevertheless, his philosophical insights allow for uncovering the intricate way in which literary texts are concerned with community, prejudice, and myth-making. They make the reader more attuned to subtle, often unspoken aspects of cultural identity. Due to the extended scope of his work, I will limit my—inevitably abbreviated and simplified—introduction to his writing to the concepts relevant to the literary analyses in the upcoming chapters: ‘being singular plural’, community as a resistance to ‘immanence’, and the ‘interruption of myth’.

Rejecting a Cartesian-Kantian model of the subject “as an active, synthesizing individual” that is “present to itself,” Nancy argues that the notion of an absolute individual, independent from or in control of the outside world, is at odds with its existential interrelatedness. For the ‘subject’ only ever experiences itself as a singular being by ‘being outside of itself’, in the mutual exposure to another singular being. Nancy describes this exposure—which is fleeting and must always be experienced anew—as a moment of sharing and ‘being singular plural’—a community that serves no other purpose, an ‘inoperative community’. In other words, no singular being exists before the experience of community. This non-identitarian, non-foundational community emerges as a resistance to immanence. In Nancy’s writing, immanence denotes the destructive desire for a closed social identity that fueled the conflicts of the European twentieth century—from the nationalisms leading to the First World War, to Nazism, to the Balkan conflict of the 1990s. Immanentism is present in communities or nations who try to defend ‘their identity’ from ‘external’ influence, so that they remain “united around their undivided selfhood, culture or values.” Immanentism was also at work in former socialist regimes, which considered the communist ideal as the
final destination of humanity. In these cases, immanentism denotes the desire for a perfectly transparent self-identity, found in the people united as one to achieve a common goal: to remove all alienation of the capitalist way of life, so as to create a society that is “harmoniously present with itself.” Nancy is critical of the fusional self-perception of societies, nations, or communities, and particularly the mechanism of myth-making at work in them. Communities found and identify themselves through an “apparently coherent fictional narrative and then (and this turns the fiction into a myth), simultaneously, [...] erase and obliterate this very fictional gesture in order to suggest the naturalness and ontological essentiality of the imagined community.” Myths create the illusion of full transparency and “pure identification” within the community, which implies that every ‘member’ mirrors and represents the community’s origin, destiny, identity: “In myth [...] existences are not offered in their singularity: but the characteristics of particularity contribute to the system of the ‘exemplary life’ in which nothing holds back, where nothing remains within a singular limit, where, on the contrary, everything is communicated and set up for identification.”

Nancy reserves a particular role for literature in the exposure, or ‘interruption’, of these myths. As opposed to the mythic story of community, which relies on pure identification, exemplarity, and heroism, literature instead “unworks” the myth. Literature “incompletes it instead of completing it, and suspends the completion of the heroic-mythic figure.” In other words, literary texts convey images of a singularity of being that myths of identity and community fail to represent.

Nancy’s notions of ‘being singular plural,’ ‘resistance to immanence,’ and the literary ‘interruption of myth’ have inspired the scope and the selection of texts at hand. The selection represents only a portion of the texts examined in preceding research. In a dialogue with Nancy’s theory, which described and confirmed some of the tendencies uncovered by my initial readings, the body of texts has been limited to three thematic clusters, each dealing with various aspects of identity, community, prejudice, exclusion, and assimilation, and which furthermore illustrate the ambivalences of Aufklärung in a variety of ways. The selection is the result of the historical comparison, as it reflects similar patterns and thematic preferences in both periods: the position of the artist, the metropolitan experience, and the myths of empires. Due to a vast body of texts dealing with identity issues, many potential comparisons have fallen outside the scope of this investigation. For instance, travel literature (fictional or documentary) warrants further investigation. It would be interesting to compare for instance Joseph Roth’s Juden auf Wanderschaft (1927), Alfred Döblin’s Reise
in Polen (1925), Ilja Trojanow’s Der Weltensammler (2006), Navid Kermani’s Ausnahmezustand (2013) and Else Lasker-Schüler’s Das Hebräerland (1937). A comparison of literary reflections on war experiences at both ends of the century could be revealing as well, with stories about the Balkan conflict, such as Saša Stanišić’s Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert (2006) and about the First World War, such as Arnold Zweig’s Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa (1927). Issues of multilingualism associated with cultural identity or migration are present in texts from both periods as well. Contemporary texts like Marica Bodrožić’s Sterne erben, Sterne färben (2007) or Özdamar’s Mutterzunge (1990) can be read with an eye to the role of Yiddish in Kafka’s or Roth’s writings or Fritz Mauthner’s thoughts on the Sprachkrise around 1900. Yet the selected works bring forward literary themes crucial to each period and illustrate several aspects of the modern experience at both ends of the century from a variety of perspectives.

The literary analyses of Chapters 2 to 4 are clustered around three types of ‘individuals’—the aesthete, the city dweller, and the family hero. These thematic clusters reflect a scaling implicit in Nancy’s thought. The immanentism of radical individualism as exhibited by the aesthete is analyzed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents the metropolitan experience as a moment of recalibration in which the radical individual is confronted with fleeting forms of intimacy. Chapter 4 investigates imperial myths and the immanentism of the ‘collective individual’. All these protagonists represent faltering narratives of assimilation and Enlightenment. At the same time, they are spectators, city readers and storytellers who are able to discern and produce communities and singularities beyond familiar identities, and beyond the myths that have shaped their existence.

Chapter 1 offers a historical introduction into the discursive and sociohistorical contexts of German-Jewish literature around 1900 and ‘literature of migration’ around 2000. Both periods are characterized by a (discursive) conflation of the notions Kultur and Zivilisation. On the one hand, the insistence on integration and assimilation—emancipation processes that emphasize individual improvement and self-realization—suggests that German society is founded on an Enlightened promise of inclusion. However, in both periods that promise becomes problematically entangled in an exclusionary notion of Kultur. Especially when Aufklärung is invoked as a ‘German’ value—a cultural achievement rather than an ongoing process to be realized by individuals—the principles of freedom, pluralism, and tolerance become an instrument of exclusionary language. This leads to a paradoxical position of German Jews and new German citizens, who are expected to integrate, though they continue to be singled out as ‘Others’.
Chapter 2 investigates the erosion of assimilation narratives through the lens of the aesthete. It compares two texts from the *Wiener Moderne*—Arthur Schnitzler’s *Fräulein Else* (1924) and Richard Beer-Hofmann’s *Der Tod Georgs* (1900)—to Navid Kermani’s *Kurzmitteilung* (2007) and Feridun Zaimoglu’s *Liebesbrand* (2008). In *Fräulein Else* and in *Kurzmitteilung*, the aesthetes fashion themselves as images to behold, as works of art. Their self-performance is partially motivated by an assimilatory drive, which in both cases reaches a dead end. The two novels contain a critique of radical assimilation as a process of self-aestheticization culminating in self-commodification and destructive isolation. The other two novels start from that dead end and outline the aesthete’s ‘conversion’ to undecided, tentative forms of community. The (semi-) aesthetes in *Der Tod Georgs* and in *Liebesbrand* suffer from a ‘perceptive disorder’ symptomatic of their submission to idealism, both in an everyday and in a philosophical sense. At the same time, their disorder allows them to recover a sense of connection to the world—in discovering a forgotten (Jewish) heritage, or in finding ‘ordinary’ love and a ‘kinship without obligation.’ On a metafictional level, these variations on the aesthete illustrate that the oppositional character of art is not necessarily found in the explicit thematization of identity issues yet resides precisely in its aesthetic, mediated, and anti-mimetic nature.

Chapter 3 examines the metropolitan experience as a moment of recalibration for the autonomous, Enlightened individual. The chapter compares Ludwig Jacobowski’s *Werther, der Jude* (1892) and Franz Hessel’s *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929) to Terézia Mora’s *Alle Tage* (2006) and Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s story “Der Hof im Spiegel” (2001). These stories feature the city as an ambivalent space that exposes the futility of emancipatory effort, yet where the erosion of individualism also engenders vulnerability and connection. This recalibration finds expression in two themes. Firstly, in a comparison of Jacobowski’s and Mora’s novels, I discuss two ‘failed’ individuals in the light of a confrontation between *Bildung* and pervasive stereotype. Secondly, in a comparison of Özdamar’s story and Hessel’s reflections, I will focus on experiences of labyrinthine disorientation/dis-Orientation and on the adoption of hermeneutic distance. These strategies allow the individual to define itself not in terms of autonomy, but of relationality and proximity. The four city dwellers illustrate that neither radical individualism nor collectivism can lay claim to the city. Rather, the city space enables a resistance to *immanence.*
Chapter 4 examines the workings of imperial myths and their demise through the lens of the family hero. Four family (hi)stories relate the decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of the Bulgarian and Hungarian socialist regimes. A comparison of Joseph Roth’s (post-) imperial writing and two instances of the ‘Eastern turn’ in contemporary literature deals with imperial myths losing their hold, as people resist and subvert the regimes’ tendencies toward de-individualization. In the comparison of Joseph Roth’s famous novel on the imperial past *Radetzkymarsch* (1932) and Dimitré Dinev’s (post-) communist family saga *Engelszungen* (2003), the family motif highlights the illusory nature of imperial unity. The intertwining narratives of family and imperial history expose the fissures in the smooth surface of imperial myth. By way of contrast to these novels’ past orientation, the disintegrated families in Roth’s *Hiob* (1930) and Zsuzsa Bánk’s *Der Schwimmer* (2002) recover a future-oriented perspective. Featuring nomadic and diasporic families, the novels seem to reflect a sense of vanishing (comm)unity. Yet against the background of failed revolution and insistent modernity, the families’ experiences of *Heimatlosigkeit* provide the condition for transformation in terms of a new, postcommunist temporality (in *Der Schwimmer*) or a renewed religious experience (in *Hiob*). On a metafictional level, the four novels in this chapter convey the redemptive potential of art and storytelling. They are presented as strategies of subversion, of emancipation from the ‘collective individual’, of connection and endurance, whenever confidence in modern progress starts wavering. In other words, connecting singular beings, art and storytelling ‘interrupt’ the oppressive myths of imperial authority.