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# The Case of Helene Hegemann: Queerness, Failure, and the German Girl

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Helene Hegemann's 2010 novel *Axolotl Roadkill*, whose author was seventeen at the time of publication, provoked an instructive controversy. The debates the novel triggered tell us a great deal about contemporary German literary and cultural ideals, especially as far as girls and young women are concerned. Hegemann's work in fact "queers" such ideals, evoking though its sixteen-year-old heroine Mifti a traumatized yet defiantly perverse subject. The novel's content, however, has been overshadowed by media discussions of its author, a contested and provocative figure who herself challenges established models of femininity. In this article, I consequently begin by discussing the reception of Hegemann, concentrating on the questions of age, gender, and Germanness. I go on to examine *Axolotl Roadkill*, asking how the novel itself conceives of subjectivity, generationality, and nationality. In addition, I discuss the novel as a queer text. I suggest that Mifti – and the novel itself – illustrate what Judith Halberstam terms "the queer art of failure." Mifti and Hegemann are triumphant failures as German girls. They thus ask us to consider critically what passes for normality and success in our times.

Hegemann's youth unsurprisingly attracted comment in media coverage of the author, but other factors contributed to the furore surrounding the publication of her novel. The autobiographical status of her work was the subject of speculation, with the prominence of the author's father, the dramatist Carl Hegemann, serving only to add piquancy (see März). But Hegemann attracted even greater attention when it was revealed that her novel quotes passages from a blog by a writer known as Airen (now published as a book, see Airen), a revelation that led to a flurry of articles in the press about plagiarism and the internet, authorship and intertextuality, and to either condemnation or defence. Hegemann's lack of repentance in the face of the revelation drew criticism. Some commentators, however, have situated the writer in a tradition of "borrowing" that goes back to Thomas Mann and Shakespeare (Graf).<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting contradiction here: on the one hand, Hegemann's work has widely been viewed as autobiographical; on the other, it has been seen as an example of derivativeness or even theft. This contradictoriness points to the unresolved status of literature in

<sup>1</sup> The Wikipedia entry for Hegemann offers a good summary of the debates (see "Helene Hegemann").

postmodernism, as both intertextual and “original.” It also reveals cultural ambivalence in the face of the young female writer in particular.

Critics have reacted to the writer’s age by seeking to extrapolate from it broader messages about childhood and adulthood. Susanne Schmetkamp, for example, reads the precocious figure of Hegemann as illustrating the speed at which children grow up in contemporary society. At the same time, Hegemann appeals to an adult readership supposedly resistant to responsibility; the writer and her novel offer “Futter für die infantile Gesellschaft” (Schmetkamp). Hegemann’s youth potentially makes her attractive to older people; Jana Simon asserts, “Helene ist ein Mädchen, dem Erwachsene gerne gefallen wollen. In ihrer Nähe fühlen sie sich hip” (see also Kalle). She satisfies what one commentator calls “die Sehnsucht eines erwachsenen Establishments nach einer authentischen, originellen Jugend” (Schmidt). But Hegemann’s age also inspires projection and appropriation (see Kalle). Hegemann’s status as a young person or girl is indeed complex. One journalist describes Hegemann’s eighteenth-birthday party, to which the press was apparently invited, as “[e]in Kindergeburtstag als Performance für Erwachsene?” (Thumfart). Thus, Hegemann’s youth appears to this commentator provocative and even suspect in its “performed” quality. Hegemann herself concedes the performative element of her public persona: “Natürlich kokettiere ich mit meinem Jugendbonus. Und kokettiere sogar damit, dass ich mit ihm kokettiere” (qtd. in Simon). This reflection highlights Hegemann’s agency, and her knowingness, countering views of the author as symbol or surface.

Johannes Thumfart offers an example of such a view. He describes Hegemann as artfully offering a “Projektionsfläche für sexistische Machtfantasien.” He thereby suggests that Hegemann is colluding with and even encouraging sexism. It is notable that in online discussions in particular, Hegemann’s appearance attracts repeated, and often negative, attention, a phenomenon one could link to feminist discussions of a dominant, objectifying “male gaze” (Mulvey 11). However, to accuse Hegemann of offering a projection surface for sexism itself constitutes an act of projection. It is a form of victim-blaming: accusing the victim of causing her own subjugation. And Hegemann is not exactly conventionally *feminine*, if we see the term as connoting docility and demureness. Ursula März indeed argues that Hegemann’s status as an unpredictable *Wunderkind* – remarkably, she has a background in film and in theatre<sup>2</sup> – links her to a masculine tradition of youthful, troubled, talented artists: “Ihr ungestümer literarischer Auftritt spielt sich vielmehr auf der Bühne einer männlichen, in der deutschen Kulturgeschichte seit je idealisierten Künstlertypologie ab: der des früh gereiften, genialischen, gegebenenfalls etwas wahnsinnigen jungen Mannes.” März cites, in this context, Georg Büchner, Durs Grünbein, Peter Handke, and Daniel Kehlmann. The figure of Hegemann thus suggests the emergence of a new kind of girl, one capable of

2 Hegemann’s play *Ariel 15* premiered in December 2007 in Berlin. She wrote and directed a film, *Torpedo*, which was first shown in 2008.

accomplishments hitherto coded as masculine. Moreover, Hegemann's queer sensibility challenges any easy elision of sex and gender, as we will later see. Her media appearances might on the one hand be seen as coquettish – she often hides behind her hair (see Simon) – but they are also eloquent and assured, for example, in the BBC Radio 4 arts programme *Front Row*.

Nevertheless, Iris Radisch's article in *Die Zeit* of February 2010, "Die alten Männer und das junge Mädchen," persuasively points out the unavoidably gendered dynamics of the relationship between Hegemann and what we might tentatively term the German literary establishment. Radisch begins her piece by declaring the world of the German media "eine Männerwelt." She argues that Hegemann initially appeared ideal as far as this world was concerned: "siebzehn Jahr, langes Haar, schwierige Kindheit." However, once it emerged that Hegemann had committed plagiarism, she became, according to Radisch, "ein böses Mädchen." Radisch likens the writer's treatment at the hands of the male-dominated German press to that once meted out by church elders to women suspected of witchcraft. Radisch cites male commentators who refer to Hegemann as a "Ding" and are dismissive of her writing. She detects in such comments "[einen] misogynen Ton, mit dem das männliche Establishment eine bedrohlich junge, bedrohlich virtuose und bedrohlich bedenklöse Autorin aus seinem Hoheitsbereich verbannen möchte."

Radisch's understanding of Hegemann as a disruptive figure, a "naughty girl," ties in with a key insight from the emerging field of girls' studies, where "[g]irl" signifies the contested status of young women, no longer children, and their unstable and sometimes subversive relationship to social norms relating to heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood" (Modern Girl around the World Research Group 9). Radisch detects such subversive instability in the figure of Hegemann, who challenges established norms and ideals. Specifically, Radisch identifies in the case of Hegemann a collision of two cultures: one almost totally male, academic, and elderly – of which Marcel Reich-Ranicki was an example – and one that is, as she puts it, "ein wenig jünger, ein wenig weiblicher und viel autodidaktischer." She reads the struggle between the old men and the young girl as a gauge for "die allmähliche Verunsicherung der alten männlichen Hochkultur, die um ihre Zukunft fürchtet." Radisch thus links the questions of Hegemann's age and her gender with the furore surrounding the revelations regarding her plagiarism in a convincing and interesting manner. Hegemann herself has mocked views of herself as a victim of age- and gender-based hostility, noting, "Zum Glück bin ich nicht mehr so blöd, zu vermuten, das Problem [others' hostility] bestünde in meinem Alter oder darin, dass ich ein Mädchen bin. Es besteht in der Tatsache, dass ich nicht der gängigen Vorstellung eines 'authentischen Jugendlichen' entspreche" ("An meine Kritiker"). I will return to this insight later. Hegemann's piece also questions the notion that generational conflict is either inevitable or desirable. She ends her article with the false revelation that she is twenty-six.

But for all Hegemann's playful dismissal of the obsession with age, we cannot simply disregard reactions to her that focus on her youth. Hegemann

provokes anxieties concerned not only with the question of young people and their supposed lack of direction or morals but also with the status of the German nation in general. An article about the Eurovision Song Contest links Hegemann to the eventual winner, Lena Meyer-Landrut, and to the heroine of Charlotte Roche's provocative, bestselling novel *Feuchtgebiete*, Helen, when the male writer exhorts his readership: "Seien wir ehrlich: Wer möchte schon, dass die Helen(e)s [that is, Helene, Lena, Helen] die deutsche Jugend repräsentieren" (Moritz).<sup>3</sup> He appeals, then, to a German public concerned about its image, which is allegedly being hijacked by wayward girls. This view of Hegemann echoes reactions to the "modern girl" in the 1920s and 1930s, as a "body in need of policing" by nation states and other authorities. Like Hegemann, the modern girl was a "contested figure," either celebrated or viewed as in need of control (Modern Girl around the World Research Group 16, 15). Hegemann thus troubles contemporary notions of acceptable girlhood, revealing the restrictiveness of these notions.

Her novel, for its part, disrupts literary ideals. *Axolotl Roadkill* tells of Mifti, who lives with her half-siblings, Annika and Edmond, in Prenzlauer Berg. Mifti's mother, an alcoholic, died when her daughter was thirteen, and Mifti moved from Düsseldorf to Berlin to live with her father, a remote intellectual of whom she sees little. The novel is a surreal, hallucinatory trip. It consists of loosely connected scenes, as Mifti, "ein Nervenzusammenbruch auf zwei Beinen" (März), staggers around Berlin in a state of intoxication. The novel's dissonance and disconnectedness pose a challenge to what Radisch describes as "unsere alte Literatur der bürgerlichen Subjektivität mit ihren subtilen Noten"; Hegemann's vision is "echt-unecht [. . .] herrschaftsfrei [. . .] gesetzlos [. . .] jargonverschmiert [. . .] polysexuell und undurchschaubar" ("Die alten Männer"). The novel's exposure of subjectivity as fragmented, and haunted by loss and lack, ties in with Lacanian views of the subject, additionally suggesting a view of feminine postmodern subjectivity as traumatized. Its "undurchschaubar" quality echoes and enhances this portrayal. The novel's thematization of failure, and its own failure to be clearly legible or obviously "useful," are also, I argue, queer.

The narrative offers little in the way of guidance. The "Vorwort" begins only on page twenty-one; this is not a linear narrative, then, but a self-consciously ruptured one. Reality here is skewed and uncertain. Drug-induced lacunae mean that there are gaps in the narrative (see 62). The occasional use of lists, as well as text messages and emails, serves further to disrupt the idea of a single, all-knowing narrator (20, 26–30, 42, 87). Part of the narrative is written in the form of theatre script (e.g. 70–71), another alienating device that also flags up the conventions that dictate all genres of text. Mifti's friend, Ophelia, rejects what she terms "diese[ ] junge[ ] deutsche[ ] Sozialrealismusscheiße" (80): a reference to the

3 But compare Matthias Kalle, who sees Lena Meyer-Landrut as constituting an ideal young German; see also Tanja Dückers's comparable analysis of the Eurovision winner.

naturalism that arguably dominates contemporary European literary fiction. And any pretence at realism or social relevance is dismissed when Mifti refers to reading as involving “Realitätsflucht” (12). The disorienting effect of Hegemann’s own novel can be seen as queerly instructive. According to Sara Ahmed, “when we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated; we might not even think ‘to think’ about this point. When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have” (5–6). The novel’s failure to offer orientation, or to orient itself according to literary conventions, provokes a consideration of what those norms actually constitute, just as Mifti’s failure to fit in prompts a challenge to the very idea of fitting in, an idea to which I will return.

The novel even casts doubt on its own status as literature, since it emerges from an undigested stream of consciousness: “Früher war das alles so schön pubertär hingerotzt und jetzt ist es angestrenzte Literatur” (7). This puzzling reflection suggests that once-unheard teenage expressions of angst are now – widely? – granted the status of literature. The novel thus questions its status as literature, while at the same time displaying consciousness of its author’s youth, and of the dismissal to which her youthful experiences will potentially be subjected. This can be seen as a defensive gesture intended to forestall any criticism from an older, “literary” readership. The style of the work oscillates between self-consciously high-falutin’ and crude, a mish-mash that itself acts to unsettle definitions of literary language.

Language, here, does not offer clarity or reassurance. The writing subject is destructive. Annika, Mifti’s half-sister, accuses the latter of having destroyed language and suggests that everything Mifti says is a lie (50). Mifti notes, “I totally agree und frage trotzdem [. . .]” This response can be seen as illustrative of her destruction of (the German) language. Edmond, having read Mifti’s journal, opines, “You write like a roadkill” (188). The writer is thus figured not as a rational, significant agent but as a dead, peripheral entity. Mifti herself conceives her journal-writing as an act of anticipatory atonement; she wishes, in writing, to apologize to her future self for the failure to keep her promises (41). At best, then, writing testifies to failure. Narrative fails to grant coherence; it only exposes a lack of consistency and connectedness. The first chapter ends with a numbered list of three apparently unrelated points, the first of which is “Ich habe meine [. . .] Patchworkgeschichte verloren” (10).

The novel explicitly reflects on the role of language in the construction of the subject, in line with Radisch’s view of the work as challenging the taken-for-grantedness of “bürgerliche Subjektivität” (“Die alten Männer”). Mifti considers, for example, “Mir wurde eine Sprache einverleibt, die nicht meine eigene ist” (47). This is a Lacanian view, suggesting the imposition by the symbolic order of its strictures, which lead to loss and lack. The novel’s self-declared “intertextual” (208) quality accords with Mifti’s understanding of language as having its own life, and of the subject as dependent upon it. The novel quotes frequently. Its epigraph is a slogan for the television channel Pro7: “We love to entertain

you.” As well as archly pointing up the inanity of certain strains of popular culture, the novel also mockingly cites this English-language claim to highlight its own status as “entertainment” rather than “serious” literature. It features “found” texts, including, notably and notoriously, the short extracts from Airen’s blog, now acknowledged in an appendix, and other random offerings, such as “If found please return to the club” (12). The narrative also makes use of “real” email correspondence and of online discussion posts. Such borrowing, or mixing, is characteristic of contemporary Berlin, as one character argues. Edmond explains to Mifti: “Berlin is here to mix everything with everything, Alter? Ich bediene mich überall, wo ich Inspiration finde und beflügelt werde, Mifti. Filme, Musik, Bücher, Gemälde [. . .] Fotos, Gespräche, Träume” (13).<sup>4</sup> When Mifti asks if these sentiments are her brother’s own, he concedes that he has got them from some blogger – as if Hegemann were anticipating the controversy that would surround her book.

This is a playful moment, but elsewhere the porosity of the subject is frightening and traumatic. The narrator reports that she wakes up screaming “weil so viele Gedanken da sind, dass man seine eigenen Gedanken gar nicht mehr von den fremden unterscheiden kann” (7–8). The decentred subject is potentially the site of trauma, then, as the “case” of Mifti demonstrates. Mifti struggles to define herself, at one point terming her wildness “eine charakteristische Eigenart” (21). The tautology hints at the irony underlying this pronouncement. And on the next page, Mifti reports her interest in her “dissoziative Identitätsstörung[en]” (22), so undermining further such essentialist claims. Early on in the novel, the narrator wonders if the vomit staining her clothing is hers, or another’s, a grotesque detail that suggests uncertain boundaries – between inside and outside, self and other (10). As Mifti puts it, “Es ist megahart, ein Individuum zu sein” (159–60).

Mifti thus offers a case study that raises broader issues about subjectivity in postmodernism. With her traumatic background, she can be viewed as a postmodern figure par excellence. Critic and psychoanalyst Lynne Layton asks, “Is the trauma victim [. . .] the quintessential postmodern figure?” (137). In the novel, trauma is explicitly offered as a diagnosis; Mifti refers to people who are “(im weitesten Sinne) traumatisiert” (72), apparently classing herself as such. “Psychosis” offers another possible label, with Mifti providing the textbook-style observation: “Auffällige Symptome für eine Psychose sind Halluzinationen” (79). Elsewhere, she speculates that she is “borderlinegestört,” a diagnosis another character dismisses as vague (73). Mifti is, in addition, found to be incurable and “therapieresistent” (147, 171). Her own view is that believing that “Psychologiescheiß” can cure ills is mere superstition (175). Thus she rejects psychoanalysis, insisting on her own perversity.

4 Hegemann notes of this passage: “the joke of it is, they say I stole that sentence from Airen, when in fact it’s originally from Jim Jarmusch, who I think saw it on a gallery sign somewhere, and then the line ‘I steal from anywhere’ is Jarmusch quoting Jean-Luc Godard” (Connolly).

To what extent is Mifti's assertion of an incurable dividedness subversive? Feminist critics such as Kaja Silverman argue that in the patriarchal imaginary, the condition of lack is denied and projected onto women. Masculinity equals wholeness, femininity lack. The acknowledgement of fragmentation thus becomes a strategy of resistance to patriarchy's dominant fiction (Layton 120). Layton, however, criticizes the trend in cultural criticism that celebrates fragmentariness, suggesting, "In postmodern work that lauds interdeterminacy, fragmentation is essentialized, universalized, and celebrated in a way that seems not to acknowledge what it feels like to experience it" (124). Layton also claims:

The decentred subject of much of postmodern cultural criticism and art is a victim of culturally imposed trauma. These victims are agents, too, making meaning out of their traumas. Nonetheless, trauma restricts the possible domain of self-expression and relational expression and restricts them in particular ways. (139)

Viewed in this light, Mifti is both a victim of trauma and an agent who narrates her story and acts in her particular social context. However, as the novel makes clear, her trauma is restrictive and frightening; the text acknowledges "what it feels like" to experience fragmentation. In exposing the damaging effects of fragmentation, the novel refuses postmodernist figurations of subjectivity that celebrate incoherence without properly scrutinizing its psychological causes or effects.

Hegemann thus offers a vision of postmodern trauma, compelled to repetition and struggling towards narrativization, which it also resists as too painful (see here Robson 18, 11–12). One could identify the cause for Mifti's precocity in her past: Mifti was a parentified child with a dysfunctional mother. As a young girl, Mifti appears to have taken responsibility for her "soziopathisches Elternteil" (74). In offering such a diagnosis, the novel could be seen as conservative. At least one critic has made a similar suggestion in connection with Roche's *Feuchtgebiete*, in which the central figure's reaction to her parents' divorce somehow explains her deviant and attention-seeking behaviour (Ellmann). However, the (incurable) case of Mifti is more interesting than that. Hegemann's assertion of postmodern trauma is disruptive, pointing the way towards new conceptions of subjectivity in postmodernism. The traumatized girl is not awaiting a cure, instead rejecting psychoanalysis and insisting on her own perversity. Hegemann views Mifti as courageous in this respect:

Miftis Situation hat mich literarisch interessiert: komplett befreit zu sein von Konventionen, was aber nicht möglich ist, ohne sich komplett zu zerstören. Sie hat nichts mehr mit der regulären Auffassung eines Teenagers zu tun. Und die, die sie liebt, den abwesenden Vater, die ältere Modelfreundin, sind gleichzeitig ihre Anti-Vorbilder. Mifti ist mehr als nur irgendeine Drogenabhängige vom Kotti, sie hat eine Biografie. Und sie entscheidet sich bewusst für eine negative Entwicklung, indem sie Heroin probiert. Das zeugt auch von Mut. ("Interview"; see also *Front Row*)



Mifti's "negative Entwicklung" is thus a positive choice and involves both destruction and liberation. It also bears comparison with Hegemann's own self-diagnosed "failure" to conform to dominant stereotypes of young people, a failure I read as queer. In particular, I suggest that Mifti's and Hegemann's refusal or inability to fit in, to look to positive role models, exemplifies what Halberstam terms "the queer art of failure." Observing that "[f]ailure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well," Halberstam also argues that under certain circumstances, failing "may [. . .] offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world [than 'success']" (3, 2–3). Thus, Halberstam and Hegemann both see "failure" as potentially creative and liberating.

Hegemann does not mystify or romanticize failure, however. In its exposure of the lived effects of traumatized, fractured subjectivity, her novel points up the difficulties inherent in the "abnormal" position. Her text also exemplifies the potential of literature to make theoretical insights such as Halberstam's recognizable and urgent. Helene Moglen argues in fact that "theory [. . .] *needs* fiction to complete it. Fictions *perform* their experiences of multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction in ways that enable identification" (146). This is not to fall into the common trap of viewing Hegemann's novel as authentically "autobiographical" or as testimony to her "own" trauma. Hegemann herself rejects such a conception of her work (see *Front Row*). Asked in an interview about her similarities to her protagonist, she answers:

(Hegemann) Ich will jetzt nicht aufgrund eines Abwehrmechanismus alle Gemeinsamkeiten abstreiten, aber Mifti ist eine frei erfundene Figur. Ich bin ja leider Gottes in demselben Alter, und wer will, kann mich daran dingfest machen. Dadurch wird mir dann aber die Fähigkeit aberkannt, ein fiktives Werk durchzukomponieren. Ist schon komisch. Wenn Martin Walser in seinem Roman ganz offensichtlich über seinen eigenen Vater schreibt, fragt ihn aus Respekt keiner danach. Wenn ich über einen alkoholkranken Künstlervater mit schwach ausgeprägtem Familiensinn schreibe, dann denken alle, dass das zwangsläufig mein eigener sein muss. Mein eigener Vater . . .

(tip) . . . der ehemalige Volksbühnen-Chefdraturg Carl Hegemann . . .

(Hegemann) . . . ist aber super. Und ich nehme auch keine Drogen, ich bin sogar zu faul zum Alkohol trinken.

[. . .]

Das Buch ist wirklich keine Autobiografie, vielleicht so etwas wie eine alternative Biografie.

Hegemann thus challenges the assumption that her work is autobiographical in any easy or unproblematic way, suggesting by the reference to Walser that this is a misconception founded on her gender and/or youth.

However, while Hegemann distinguishes between herself and her protagonist, the figures of Helene and Mifti are intertwined in and through the debates about the author and her work. This is true of any author and his/her work but especially in this case, where discussions of the author have been so lively and prominent. In engaging with the case of Mifti, we also encounter Helene. “Life” and “writing” cannot be easily disentangled (Robson 23–24). What does it mean to engage with this young female writer/protagonist? I have suggested that Mifti/Helene offers an invitation to rethink girlish, German subjectivity in postmodernism: as traumatized but as insisting on self-assertion in a way that the “literary establishment” might not like or get – this in line with Radisch’s analysis. Mifti/Helene may indeed offer a projection surface, but it is mirrored, reflecting back to the viewer his own anxieties and refusing neat co-option for any set of values. Hegemann’s “undurchschaubar” novel does not allow for such unproblematic readings.

*Axolotl* explicitly both invites and challenges readings of the text as biographical and/or instructive at several points. Describing the events of a particular evening, the narrator asserts, “Ich persönlich würde mich wirklich freuen, wenn Sie als Publikum in diesem geschilderten Abend etwas Brauchbares finden, das über das Individuell-Psychologische der Autorin hinausgeht” (49). The author’s individuality could allow access, then, to broader truths. The assertion is sarcastic, however (“ich würde mich wirklich freuen”). Elsewhere, the narrator asks the reader, “Ist es das, was ihr für Wahnsinn haltet? Fürchtet ihr euch davor, verrückt zu werden? Jagen euch Leute, die durchdrehen, einen wohligen Schauer über den Rücken?” (64). She thus accuses the reader of voyeurism, challenging prurient reactions to the text and refusing views of it as titillating spectacle. The novel, like the author itself, both invites and frustrates attempts to extract a message or moral. This “failure” to be cooperative or intelligible is, again, queer in Halberstam’s sense.

The novel’s queer problematization of stable subjectivities and viewpoints is underpinned by games with ideas of age; the text destabilizes categories such as old and young. The early reference to a “Kinderzimmer” is juxtaposed with details of drugs the room contains. The space is also invaded by voices calling the protagonist’s name. This childish realm is not safe or sealed off but rather a site of nightmarish fantasies. Later, Mifti wakes up in a child’s room that does not belong to her, a moment that makes clear her status as a non-child (170). One character tells Mifti that when he was her age, he was not smoking but instead learning how to tie balloons. There is here an ironic exposure of idealizations of childhood and youth. Mifti rejects such sentimentalization, responding with a mocking repetition of his words – a kind of critical mimicry – and reflecting explicitly, “Wie mich das alles ankotzt, diese Erwachsenenschwadroniererei” (20). Mifti’s position as a teenager grants her a vantage point from which to view critically the constructs of adulthood and childhood. The figure of the axolotl, a kind of salamander that remains in a state of suspended youthfulness, acts as an image for this in-between state (*Front Row*; Connolly).

The narrator's identity as a teenager is hardly fixed, however, but subject to repeated, playful redefinition. Mifti ironically refers to herself as a minor in the following description, for example: "wie bei jeder drogenabhängigen Minderjährigen [. . .]" (12). This formulation relies on the shock value inherent in the juxtaposition of two categories that are usually seen as mutually exclusive – addict and minor. In a comparable passage, Mifti seems to protest at her drug-taking milieu: "Mann, scheiße, ich bin minderjährig" (78; compare 115). Ophelia, her friend, replies that Mifti is not sixteen but rather a part of her, Ophelia's, life. Thus, while the narrator does point out a disjunction between her status and her habits and milieu, the observation is immediately dismissed; Mifti does not really exist in her own right. Elsewhere, Mifti evokes a performative view of her own youthful persona: "Ich [. . .] erfreue mich an der von mir perfekt dargestellten Attitüde des arroganten, misshandelten Arschkinds, das mit seiner versnobten Kaputtheit kokettiert und die Kaputtheit seines Umfeldes gleich mit entlarvt" (47). This declaration is irritating in its simultaneous suggestion and refutation of a symbolic or revelatory function to Mifti's persona. Wilfully perverse, it ties in with journalistic reactions to Hegemann herself, as exposing kidulthood and general dysfunction but also coquettishly "performing" for an audience, in a self-aggrandizing and narcissistic fashion.

Generation and age are thus uncertain terms in the novel. When in the company of her schoolmates, Mifti is no longer an "ausgestossene, pseudoarrogante Schülverweigerin" but a silent, integrated member of a group of young people. However, Mifti's precocity still marks her out (94). Mifti therefore fails to take her proper place in society. What are the broader implications of Mifti's, and Hegemann's, refusal to toe the line in this respect? Aleida Assmann argues that the new interest in generationality in German culture is a sign that we have entered a "postindividuelles Zeitalter" (22). The individual is no longer privileged as the locus of meaning; rather, there is a widespread awareness of one's inevitable conditioning and of one's precursors. As we have seen, Hegemann's novel indeed casts doubt upon the possibility of individuality. But it does not attempt to establish a historical context or a lineage for its decentred protagonist, who instead – unlike the protagonists of the *Familienromane* to which Assmann alludes (26) – remains unanchored. Mifti's resistance to social groupings that rely on age suggests that generationality, for her, is not an answer to the question of identity. This novel is thus both post-individual and post-generational, occupying instead a queer space that privileges failed, fractured modes of being/becoming.

A similar ambivalence is at work in the novel's construction of Germanness. I have mentioned the idea that Hegemann and her novel are troubling to ideals of Germanness, and especially to German literariness. The novel frequently deploys English, a language Mifti speaks well. However, at one point, Mifti speaks English, then finds she has to translate for her peers, so that English emerges as an inadequate lingua franca and the status of the German language remains intact (95). Mifti's sense of her national identity is nonetheless unclear. She encounters

a group of youths, referred to as “Vollprolls,” one of whom is named Erhan. The youths accuse Mifti of having given a Nazi salute. She counters that she was just putting on her headphones. Moreover, she is herself an “Ausländerin” (85). Elsewhere, though, she claims to her father that has never even visited another country but then qualifies this assertion – she has been to France (119). Ophelia, for her part, is “not f\*\*\*ing german” (179). And in the description of a school visit to a concentration camp, we find a grotesque rejection of engagements with the National Socialist past. The teacher’s explanation as to the significance of the site is overshadowed by one boy’s demand that he be allowed to smoke and by Mifti’s conversation with a classmate “über irgendeine Scheiße” (100). If we accept the contention that the memory of the Holocaust constitutes “a cornerstone of German national identity” (Fuchs 1), then this scene offers a rejection of that identity. The novel rejects a set notion of Germanness – though it does not eschew the category outright – and presents a queer, post-national conception of the (girlish) self.

Hegemann’s and/or Mifti’s queerness has often been overlooked in discussions of the novel and its author, however. The novel signals its queerness early on when a customer in Lidl is described as a “heterosexuelle Kommunikationsdesignerin” (11), a designation that challenges heteronormativity by marking the straight subject, rather than assuming that it is the queer who is deviant and in need of labelling. A similar refusal of heterosexism occurs when Mifti’s half-brother, Edmond, is declared gay by a man who appears to be his lover (131). Mifti counters that he is in fact “stockbisexuell,” as is Mifti herself (133). This description, “stockbisexuell,” gives bisexuality a taken-for-granted status. Elsewhere, pseudo-Darwinist explanations of human sexual behaviour appear dubious; Mifti’s friend Ophelia wonders why she herself generally falls in love with women, if everything is a matter of chemistry or biology (29). Mifti records later, “Dann knutschen wir [Ophelia and Mifti] aus lauter Langeweile.” One of them, presumably Ophelia, makes the observation: “Wir sind ja beide so geschlechterverwirrt, Schatz” (43). This world-weary flipness is perhaps an example of what Radisch terms the novel’s “Koketterie” (“Lesetipp”), but it also fits the text’s queer agenda.

In line with this queerness, Mifti is in love with a forty-six-year-old woman, Alice. Ophelia dubs this state of affairs “krank”; Mifti agrees (44). This cheerful embrace of abnormality is highly queer, in Halberstam’s sense. Mifti and Alice had sex when Mifti was fourteen or fifteen, and Mifti sees in the older woman her dead mother. This “abnormal” relationship on the one hand ties in with traditional attempts to pathologize queerness. On the other, as implied, its unapologetic perversity is usefully queer. And Mifti’s claim that her feelings for Alice have nothing to do with homosexuality (168) – a description that mockingly paraphrases Ophelia’s earlier claim that her relationship with a male DJ has nothing to do with heterosexuality – acts to free feelings from categorizations such as “gay” and “straight”: itself a queer move that challenges the “Heteromatrix” that Hegemann’s text explicitly refers to elsewhere (177).

The queerness of this text does not reside only its depiction of a (disturbing) same-sex relationship, however, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in its rejection of “normality.” The novel criticizes and satirizes dominant, mainstream ideals. Early on the novel, Mifti asserts:

Ich will ein Kinderheim in Afghanistan bauen und viele Anziehsachen haben. Ich brauche nicht nur Essen und ein Dach über dem Kopf, sondern drei titanweiß ausgestattete Villen, jeden Tag bis zu elf Prostituierte und ein mich in plüschigen, güldenen Zwanziger-Jahre-Chic hüllendes Sowjet-Uniform-Kostüm von Chanel. (8–9)

This comically excessive vision points to the grotesque materialism of the age, evoking a rapacious consumerism that is apparently tempered by showy acts of charity. Mifti’s desire for luxury and indulgence is undermined by the humorous precision of the language (“bis zu elf Prostituierte”). Hegemann is not only satirizing a culture of excess, best expressed in popular dreams of celebrity lifestyles, but also mocking the *desire* for such a life, by exposing the very process of interpellation by which such fantasies sustain themselves. This vision of a lifestyle that far exceeds basic material needs – food and a roof over one’s head – is knowingly ludicrous. The novel’s references to brand names (here Chanel) similarly suggest a culture that is hung up on status and wealth, an obsession that comes to the fore in a later passage: “Gloria drückt mir ihre echte Hermès-Tasche aus hellblauem Kalbsleder in die Hand, rückt ihren Margiela-Cardigan zurecht, wechselt ihre Acne-Jeans gegen einen Flanellminirock von Marc Jacobs [. . .]” (32). This profusion of brand names means that they are relativized, rendered absurd, a device reminiscent of Christian Kracht’s 1995 novel *Faserland*, which also features a privileged, isolated young protagonist. Hegemann’s work thus evokes an individualistic, materialistic society whose norms Mifti both mocks and internalizes. The text does not, then, posit a stable vantage point from which to critique culture – itself, arguably, a queer move. Ahmed notes, “[Q]ueer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact” (4). The novel thus fails or refuses to offer any obvious morals or messages.

Where does it leave us, then? Radisch reads Hegemann’s espousal of relativism as a tragic necessity, explaining, “Von uns aus gesehen, von der Welt der Subjektphilosophie, der Eigentumsrechte und der mündigen Bürger ist [es] eine Tragödie. Von ihr aus gesehen eine Notwendigkeit” (“Die alten Männer”). Radisch thus posits a “we,” a community of concerned older readers whose values are now redundant, or anyway not transmissible to the next generation. While such an understanding is problematic – it implies the existence of a homogeneous community with shared concerns – it interestingly raises the question of how to read Hegemann’s text, and her person, as an older critic, as well as, more broadly, the matter of ethical reception. The objectifying and dismissive discourses produced by many commentators are not helpful. I suggest instead that

we look carefully at both the novel and the author for the insights that it and she generate, especially concerning age, gender, literariness, and Germanness. In particular, the queer trauma that Hegemann evokes offers an invitation to embrace failure and abnormality and to examine critically what passes for success and acceptability today. Hegemann's vision of a decentred subject, neither an "individual" nor a member of a "generation," queer and post-national, offers no usable answers. Its perversity forces us to rethink radically how we might conceive the postmodern subject.

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