Disappointing Expectations
Intersectional Perspectives in
Transcultural German Literature

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> In the context of the violence against women, this elision of identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because of the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring the differences *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups, another problem of identity politics that bears of efforts to politicize violence against women
> (Crenshaw 1991, 1242).

1. Declare Yourself!

> Ich werde nie wissen, was es heißt, unsichtbar zu sein. Ich werde nie wissen, wie es ist, unvorsichtig sein zu können beim Küssen im Park, einfach draufloszuknutschen. Was es heißt, durch die Straßen zu streifen und nicht damit rechnen zu müssen, dass jemand im Vorbeigehen meine Haare zu berühren versucht. Wie es ist, sich nicht ständig in Selbstgesprächen zu beschwichtigen, wenn man mehrmals am Tag gefragt wird, ob man Deutsch verstehe. Mich in der Menge

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> aufzulösen, ist keine Option für mich. Ich gehöre gleich mehreren Minderheiten an; das kaschieren zu wollen birgt für mich größere Gefahren, als meine Positionen zu benennen (Salzmann 2019, 13).[1]

This statement, which underscores the experience of belonging to multiple minority groups and the necessity of openly declaring that belonging, appears in an essay by Sasha Marianna Salzmann, which bears the emblematic title *Sichtbar* (Visible). The essay was published in 2019 in the anthology *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare), edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah. The volume brings together essays by German authors with migrant backgrounds who speak out against the rise of right-wing extremism in Germany. This political shift is encapsulated in the instrumentalization of the term *Heimat*: a uniquely German word that is difficult to translate and, in this context, evokes an exclusive and exclusionary bond between an autochthonous community and its territory.

In Salzmann's case – born in Volgograd in 1985 – belonging to multiple minority groups refers not only to her Jewish heritage and multilingualism (she writes in German, while Russian is the language of her family and childhood), but also to her non-binary gender identity. This experience is reflected in the novels of German-speaking authors of Jewish and post-Soviet origin. Their characters often embody multiple markers of diversity. Consider, for instance, Mascha, the protagonist of *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (*All Russians Love Birch Trees*) by

[1] "I will never know what it means to be invisible. I'll never know what it's like to be able to be careless when kissing in the park, to just go for it. What it means to stroll through the streets and not have to worry about someone trying to touch my hair as I walk past. What it's like not to constantly talk to yourself when you're asked several times a day whether you understand German. Dissolving into the crowd is not an option for me. I belong to several minorities at once; trying to conceal this is more dangerous for me than stating my positions"; unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

Olga Grjasnowa (Grjasnowa 2012), or Alissa in *Außer sich* (*Beside Myself*) by Salzmann herself (Salzmann 2017). Throughout this essay, brief references will be made to these novels, whose protagonists embody complex identities characterized by multiple "markers of minority".

This contribution seeks to develop a political reading of multilingual and transcultural literature, drawing inspiration from Salzmann's essay *Sichtbar*, cited above. Her reflections serve as a point of departure for examining the concept of intersectionality, which has become central in recent decades within diversity and minority studies. In the second part of the essay, I will investigate how certain transcultural authors adopt and advocate for an intersectional approach to German language, an approach they actively promote within public discourse.

2. Divide and Conquer

Although Salzmann does not explicitly use the word "intersectionality" in the essay, it is clear that her reference to her identity as a complex set of characteristics that make her an uncomfortable and indecipherable individual in the eyes of the majority society, can be linked to a field of study that has been flourishing in the social sciences for some twenty-five years: I refer to the intersectional studies that arose from research that was itself "intersectional" insofar as it simultaneously explored issues related to critical race studies, gender studies, and labour law. It was in 1989 when legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw published the first of two studies dedicated to the analysis of a 1970s court case in which five black women accused their employer, General Motors, of firing them, as part of staff reduction measures, primarily for being women and black.

As Keming Yang (2024) states, Crenshaw made a powerful case for explaining Black women's marginalized experiences because of the intersection of their race and gender, which would be ignored by the US legal system as it would only consider either race or gender separately. She referred to such 'either/or' reasoning as a "single-axis framework" (Crenshaw 1989, 140). The fundamental flaw of

this framework is that the human attributes (gender, race, age, etc.) are taken as mutually exclusive; that is, when one of them is being considered, the others must be excluded (Yang 2024, 6).

What Crenshaw emphasises is a deficiency not only in the American legal system, but also in the feminist theories and racism studies of the time, which were accustomed to considering the problems arising from single axes of discrimination and not the more acute and penalising ones generated by the intersection of these axes. Since then, the category of intersectionality has enjoyed great success not only in the movement for civil rights, but also in gender studies and social theories that study the redefinition of the concept of identity in global society, in particular the strategies of marginalisation of intersectional minorities by majorities (Davis & Lutz 2024, 6).

One of those strategies is to consider a single diversity in isolation, separating it from other “markers of diversity” present in intersectional biographies. Isolating a single diversity turns it into a garrison, a bastion to be defended. In the rhetoric of right-wing populism, however, the garrison is to be defended not from the prevarications and discriminations of majorities, but from the attacks of other declared intolerant minorities.

Getting back to Salzmann’s essay, this “isolationist” tendency can be seen in the strategies used by some German politicians to win support. As concrete examples, Salzmann cites prominent politicians in Germany: Jens Spahn, currently the parliamentary group leader of the CDU/CSU in the Bundestag, and Alice Weidel, leader of Alternative für Deutschland, the second-largest party in Germany, officially classified as far-right by the German Domestic Intelligence Services in 2025. The fact that both Spahn and Weidel have openly declared their homosexuality is considered an indication of democracy in Western and liberal society and, as such, is accepted even by far-right voters, provided they continue to preach hatred and resentment against economic migrants and Muslims. Jens Spahn and Alice Weidel know very well – writes Salzmann – that with right-wing populist

slogans they can advance their careers much faster than through debates on the complex issue of multiple discrimination (Salzmann 2019, 21).

To this “divide and conquer” strategy of far-right populism – which aims to pit minorities against each other – Salzmann responds with a plea for breaking the silence and for a firm rejection of assimilation. Playing with open cards means, first and foremost, unmasking attempts at instrumentalization connected to a broader phenomenon: the reduction of complexity that dominates public discourse. On this topic, Salzmann finds support in the reflections of poet and essayist Max Czollek with whom she created a discussion forum in 2016 on redefining Jewish identity in contemporary German society.

Under the motto *Desintegriert euch!* (Disintegrate yourselves) – the title of his 2018 essay – Czollek calls on German Jews to free themselves from a stereotyped identity assigned to them by a public discourse he defines as a “Theatre of Memory”, an idea he borrows from studies dating back to the 1990s by German Canadian sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann (Bodemann 1996). On this “stage”, the image of the Jew as a descendant of Holocaust victims is performed – a role not chosen by Jews but assigned by the majority society, aimed at stabilizing “the image of the good, redeemed, normal German” (Czollek 2018, 25).

A sociologist had already given in the early 2000s a definition of the “model” Jew in Germany which fits very well with the concept of Theatre of Memory formulated by Czollek:

> Highly educated and highly skilled, religious but not orthodox, or at least prepared to observe Jewish traditions again, poor and willing to integrate, largely without any ties to his land of origin, modest and grateful for the assistance given by the new society, and, above all, someone who had migrated because of anti-Semitic persecution and knew about the Holocaust and even had experienced personally (Becker 2003, 23).

It is evident that this image is bound to disappoint expectations, as it does not at all correspond to the reality of contemporary German Jewry. Today, the Jewish community in Germany largely consists of families from the former USSR, who were welcomed into the Federal Republic in the early 1990s as *Kontingentflüchtlinge* (quota refugees). The Jews who arrived from the dissolved Soviet Union at that time were Russian-speaking and predominantly non-religious. The memory of forced assimilation into Russian society – especially during the years of Stalinist terror – was just as present as the memory of the extermination camps. In fact, in a historical paradox, some of these fully Russified Jews tended to not consider themselves victims at all. On the contrary, they see themselves among the winners of the Second World War – the "Great Patriotic War" from a Soviet perspective (Belkin 2017).

To disintegrate, then, means to destabilize stereotypical perceptions of the other, sabotaging binary dynamics in which majorities are always set against minorities in isolation, and to advocate for intersectional identities: according to the aforementioned logic of "divide and conquer", the Jew who is different from the German is distinct from the Russian speaker who is different from the German speaker, and again distinct from the sexually non-binary person who is different from the heterosexual. A politics of pseudo-integration does not provide for the inclusion of identities that intersect multiple markers of diversity.

It is evident that this critique of the separation and isolation of minorities by the majority society touches the heart of the issue of intersectionality and makes clear that an inclusive mindset within the civil rights movement has become almost a necessary path:

> In their writings, the Black feminists themselves included other social groups who were unfairly treated due to their multiple identities, such as lower- or working-class people, LGBTQIA+ people, Asians and Latinos, immigrants, etc. In principle, intersectionality therefore could occur to any human group that belongs to the

> intersection of two or more categories of identity, although in reality some intersectional groups are certainly more advantaged than others (Yang 2024, 11).

An intersectional perspective continues to find space within contemporary civil rights movements. This is evidenced by recent mobilizations that, originating from specific instances of racial and gender-based violence, have leveraged digital networks as global catalysts – most notably the *#BLM* (*Black Lives Matter*) and #MeToo movements. As Barbara Giovanna Bello has pointed out in a recent article, a lesser-known yet significant aspect of both movements is that they were initiated in the United States by Black women activists. From the outset, these activists articulated an explicitly intersectional framework in their foundational documents. For instance, in the case of Black Lives Matter, "by including transgender Black people in the participation and leading of the movement, the focus on White, cisgender, heteronormative, and sexist privilege is dismantled and broadened" (Bello 2024, 277).

Although a detailed examination of these movements' specific developments falls outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the internet, as a medium for disseminating intersectional approaches to discrimination, presents both opportunities and contradictions. One such contradiction arises from the emphasis on emblematic figures who often reflect dominant social categories – Black men in the case of #BLM, and white women in the case of #MeToo – thus reproducing the limited visibility of statistically more represented social groups and classes (278).

Nevertheless, alongside these challenges, the digital sphere appears to offer still underexplored potential: through its global and pervasive reach, the emergence of individual narratives recounting cases of intersectional discrimination and abuse, and the consequent formation of alliances among marginalized groups, represent a tangible avenue for advancing intersectional justice. For example, by connecting the two movements, it would be possible to give voice to the experiences of real people in which "racism and sexism readily intersect" (Crenshaw 1991, 1242).

The strategy of alliance among minorities – based on the premise that after all, every individual exists at the intersection of multiple minority identities – is also the path pursued by transcultural German-language authors such as Czollek and Salzmann. The alliance approach fosters a solidarity-based dialogue among minorities, but also helps to reveal shared axes of marginalization, thereby allowing political struggle to focus on issues that cut across individual minority groups. More broadly, the Jewish-German authors oppose the cultural approach of "either/or", which renders minorities captive to externally imposed identities.

3. Battleground Language

Intersectionality is a political battleground for transcultural literature that is also reflected – not least – in a reflection on the social consequences of language use. As evidence of this it is worth mentioning once again the forum on contemporary Judaism by Salzmann and Czollek. In their report at the conclusion of the discussions, they read:

> Während wir im Laufe des Kongresses immer wieder mit der polemischen Setzung von 'wir' (Jüd*innen) und 'ihr' (Deutschen) operierten, zielte das letzte Podium unter dem Titel „Wer sind wir und wenn ja, wer?" zugleich auf eine Dekonstruktion eben jener Wir-Kategorie. Damit sollte nicht nur ein weiteres Mal auf die Vielfalt innerhalb der jüdischen Gemeinschaft verwiesen werden, es ging uns darum, die Setzung des 'Wir' als artifiziell und strategisch zu unterstreichen. Denn letztlich läuft die Gegenüberstellung von Jüd*innen und Deutschen dem zuwider, was wir als Queerness oder Komplexität identitärer Positionen behaupteten (Czollek & Salzmann 2016, 14).[2]

[2] "During the course of the congress, we repeatedly operated with the polemical distinction between 'we' (Jews) and 'you' (Germans), but the final panel, titled *Who are we, and if so, who?*, aimed precisely at deconstructing that very 'we' category. The goal was not only to once again highlight the diversity within the Jewish community, but also to

Language is a tool that must be handled with extreme care, as the writer must strive to avoid externally imposed identity attributions, and avoid falling into the trap of reproducing the logic of simplification and / or isolation through binary oppositions – typical features of the manipulative strategies employed by populist movements.

Criticism of personal pronouns, symbols of belonging to totalizing identities, is also found in many pages of novels in transcultural literature. Consider only, a dialogue between Masha, the protagonist of Olga Grjasnowa's *All Russian Love Birch Trees* – with whom the author shares some biographical traits – and Daniel, a German friend of Masha. In a conversation at a party, the friend describes himself as anti-German, and by that he means pro-Jewish, pro-American and, in a sense, radical leftist (Grjasnowa 2012, 62):

> "Du, ich stehe voll hinter euch" sagte Daniel. "Hinter wem?" "Na euch eben". […] "Welches euch?" Ich schrie beinahe, ein paar Leute aus der Schlange drehten sich um. "Hinter Israel, natürlich" "Hast du gerade noch so die Kurve gekriegt?" "Du bist gemein. Was hältst du von der Situation? Ich meine du als Jüdin" "Daniel, lass mich mit dem Scheiß in Ruhe. Was willst du überhaupt von mir? Ich lebe in Deutschland. Ich habe einen deutschen Pass. Ich bin nicht Israel. Ich lebe nicht dort, und ich habe auch keinen besonderen Draht zur israelischen Regierung" (63).[3]

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emphasize that the construction of 'we' is artificial and strategic. Ultimately, the opposition between Jews and Germans runs counter to what we assert as queerness or the complexity of identity positions".

[3] "'You, I'm right behind you', said Daniel. 'Behind who?' 'Well, you guys'. [...] 'Which you?' I almost shouted, a few people in the queue turned around. 'Behind Israel, of course'. 'Did you just get your act together?' 'You're mean, what do you think of the situation? I mean you as a Jew'. 'Daniel, leave me alone with this shit, what do you want from me anyway? I live in Germany. I have a German passport. I am not Israel. I don't live there, and I have no special connection to the Israeli government'".

Again, there is a rejection of assimilation to “we Jews”, especially since Mascha’s family biography, as Jewish refugee from Azerbaijan, does not allow for an identification with Israel. On the contrary, the protagonist’s character is explicitly construct around the frustration of others’ expectations, including the readers, precisely because in her biography the contradictions and inconsistencies accumulate (Vangi 2021, 191): in her training as an interpreter she decides to learn the study of the Arabic language and not the Hebrew language, despite bright career prospects she accepts the proposal of a menial job, and the journey she undertakes to Israel is not dictated by the need to find a cultural identity, but to escape the pain caused by the loss of her fiancé (Grjasnowa 2012, 223).

Playing with personal pronouns, questioning them, implies a willingness to make the subject-person unclassifiable. It rejects not only belonging to one culture of origin, but also to gender categories. Emblematic is the example of Alissa, the protagonist of Sasha Marianna Salzmann’s *Außer sich*, who likes to call herself Ali, cultivating ambivalence with respect to her identity. She is a young Russian German woman, Jewish and nonbinary. After the disappearance of her twin brother Anton, Ali searches for him for a long time and, having failed to find him, decides to “recreate” her brother in her own body by injecting herself with testosterone. However, Ali is not transformed into a man, but rather into an unclassifiable being. In an emblematic passage, she/he slips out of her body, observing a conversation with her mother from the outside, oscillating between times, bodies (Salzmann 2017, 272). The rejection of the binary opposition of categories, taken to extremes, becomes a rejection of any category of identification. Much more desirable appears to the character to float in a dimension of transit without necessarily having the intent to land on the outcome of a sexed body: “Ich fühle mich unfähig, verbindliche Aussagen zu treffen, eine Perspektive einzunehmen, eine Stimme zu entwickeln, die nur die meine wäre und für mich sprechen würde. Ein festgeschriebenes Я”[4] (Salzmann 2017, 274). The liberation of an (id)entity

[4] “I feel incapable of making binding statements, of adopting a perspective, of developing

is symbolized at the linguistic level by the abandonment of the personal pronoun: the Russian first person singular pronoun Я, homophone with the German “ja”, symbolizes the rejection of any identification in a body, whether female or male.
In this radical rejection of the identity of a sexed body, there are consonances not only with the intersectional paradigm, but also with the research of the Feminist Posthumanities, which identifies phallo-logocentrism as a system of oppression, proposing the overcoming of exclusively anthropomorphic and gender-binary conceptions of living beings.[5]
The critique of language thus conveys in these authors a critique of the “monopolies” of social discourse, articulated according to individual axes of discrimination, which impose their own interpretation of the other that does not correspond to the multifaceted reality of individuals conceived as intersectional.
The German language itself represents a monopoly of a culture that wants to be autochthonous and monolithic and that does not yet seem to have developed a multilingual sensibility. The battle for a polyphonic conception of German is conducted with militant fervour especially by German-speaking authors of the so-called second or third generation with migrant backgrounds. On the question of language and public discourse is centred entirely, for example, Kübra Gümüşay’s influential reflection in the 2020 essay *Sprache und Sein* (Language and Being).
To speak out, then, means to claim the right to uniqueness and to the complexity of individuals who seek to free themselves from others’ definitions. It is interesting

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a voice that would be mine alone and speak for me. A codified Я”.

[5] In particular, Patricia MacCormack has deconstructed sexual desire, usually informed by an isomorphic binarism that defines and delimits the male body as well as the female body, crystallizing them into a reified object. The subject, on the other hand, should not be defined: “To define the subject is a humanist project, to understand the subject as an expressive and affected conduit in perpetual relations with other expressive and affected entities is instead the goal of the new theoretical approaches of Feminist Posthumanities” (MacCormack 2018, 38).

to note that this liberation, in the cases described by multilingual writers, occurs through a mode of interpersonal communication that is open and sincere: telling one's own story – finally outside of pre-established frameworks or imposed formats – has a cathartic effect, especially when the listeners are someone capable of understanding because they have experienced similar forms of marginalization (Gümüşay 2020, 66).

The web, similarly to what happens in the United States, appears to offer a space of resonance for the diverse voices of global society. Austrian journalist of Bosnian origin Melisa Erkurt has examined, for instance, the case of the hashtag *#MeTwo*, which – through a clever play on words referencing the most widely known protest movement – was launched in German-speaking countries in 2018. *#MeTwo* gave voice to the discomfort experienced by individuals with migrant backgrounds when faced with situations of discrimination, including subtle or implicit forms of racism.

Beyond the success of sharing similar experiences, the hashtag also enabled users to engage in creative self-expression, particularly through the use of self-ironic and inventive language. Migrants shared neologisms, linguistic creations in German that reflected their unique deviations from standard usage and their rich contaminations with other languages spoken in their communities (Erkurt 2020, 58-78).

New spaces of communication thus allow for the recognition of the intersectional nature of language itself, which increasingly reflects the plurality of voices and accents of its new speakers and writers. Second- and third-generation individuals with migrant backgrounds feel the need to reclaim the German language – a language in which they have often felt like guests – by enriching it with their lived experience of intersectional otherness. In doing so, they contribute to the emergence of a "new language," one that resonates both publicly and symbolically with their intersectional identities.

This enrichment does not end in the creation of hybrid neologisms or the integration into German of borrowings from other languages, but is, in a more profound

way, a conception of language that arises from the experience of those who express themselves in different languages and cross the boundaries between them on a daily basis, feeling the need not to decide for one language and claiming the need to express themselves, depending on their needs and moods, in one or the other language, sometimes contaminating them.

This experience of translingualism is well exemplified, according to Gümüşay, by the writing practice of some transcultural authors, not only German-speaking, who take advantage, for example, of self-translation that is often a rewriting of the text or of playing with signifiers through the insertion of untranslated words and expressions from other languages into German (Gümüşay 2020, 26-33). That this experience of language also has a socio-political implication is well understood by the author:

> Wir Kinder, die in verschiedenen Sprachen leben, sehen Mauern, die sich durch unsere Gesellschaft ziehen, die für die meisten Menschen, die ausschließlich die dominierende Sprache sprechen, vermutlich nicht sichtbar sind. […] Wir leben auf beiden Seiten der Mauer, wechseln hin und her und hoffen, die auf der einen Seite können sehen, was auf der anderen Seite geschieht. Und umgekehrt. Wir tragen Dinge von hier nach dort, wir laufen, wir erklären. Irgendwann sind wir erschöpft, doch wir wissen auch, dass wir nur auf beiden Seiten in unserer Vollständigkeit existieren können. Dass wir alle unsere Sprachen brauchen, um zu sein (34).[6]

[6] “We children, who live in different languages, see walls that run through our society that are probably not visible to most people who speak only the dominant language. [...] We live on both sides of the wall, switching back and forth and hoping that those on one side can see what is happening on the other. And viceversa. We carry things from here to there, we walk, we explain. At some point we are exhausted, but we also know that we can only exist in our completeness on both sides. That we all need our languages in order to exist”.

Once again, the metaphor of the (in)visibility of barriers erected between linguistic identities comes into play. These barriers are not even perceived by the majority but are very clearly felt and overcome by multilingual speakers through their daily use of two or more languages. Giving visibility to the multilingual reality of everyday life in Germany is practically revolutionary in a society that still perceives itself as predominantly monolingual in its literary tradition and in key areas of cultural transmission, such as the education system (Grjasnowa 2021, 38-40).
Furthermore, in reclaiming the right to ambiguity and constant oscillation between idioms Gümüşay advocates the overcoming of binary opposition even at the linguistic level. Against the normative character of a language codified in a grammar and spoken with a single accent, transcultural authors claim an intrinsically plural and polyphonic German that, as a medium forged by intersectional biographies, can rightfully call itself intersectional.

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