Exploring Identity in Literature and Life Stories

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The Elusive Self

Edited by

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and Elin Nesje Vestli

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

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INTRODUCTION

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Dimensions of Identity in Narratives

Exploring Identity in Literature and Life Stories: The Elusive Self grew out of a project focusing on how issues of identity are presented in different types of narratives, based at Østfold University College, Halden, Norway. It was initiated towards the end of 2015 by the Literature and Narrativity Research Group in the Foreign Language Department. The group held a conference in Vienna, Austria in December 2017, and continued with a series of symposia in the following year, where more members of the research group and scholars from other institutions were invited to participate. In addition to the Østfold University College researchers, contributors were recruited from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, the West University and the Polytechnic University of Timisoara, Romania, the Nelson Mandela University of South Africa, the University of Vienna, Austria and the University of Ragusa, Italy. This volume comprises 18 chapters, selected and adapted from the three-year long project.

According to the psychologist and narratologist Michael Bamberg, identity "designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory" (2013). This definition reveals the complexity of the term. Many narratives have focused on issues of identity, from the

classical Bildungsroman describing the development and education of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood, to postmodern studies of the fragmented self in literature and life stories.

The initial context of the Bildungsroman was Germany in the late 18th century, and these novels recorded the development of a (usually male) protagonist, maturing through a process of acculturation. Ultimately, the protagonist was integrated harmoniously into the surrounding society (Karafilis 1998, 63). As Maria Karafilis argues, today, "the goals of such a text are naïve and, in fact, impossible to achieve in postmodern societies that deny the existence of a unified self" (ibid.). Instead, contemporary narratives seem to affirm "an era of alienation from the society whose values in former times might have confirmed selfhood" (Breandlin 1984, 75, cited in Karafilis ibid.). The Bildungsroman and other narrative genres have had to develop to accommodate new forms of being and socio-economic conditions in our globalized, yet fragmented world.

Our work in this project focuses mainly on contemporary literature or life stories, actualizing this postmodern conundrum. The overarching research question in this volume is: How is the sense of self negotiated in narratives that problematize identity formation and transformation? Our point of departure is first, and foremost narratives in which a subject is confronted with major life changes and has to adjust to new situations or contexts. The fictional characters and the informants in the different narratives discussed in the contributions experience existential challenges, in which they must consider how to balance between being positioned or positioning themselves in terms of identity. This requires negotiation between old and new positions and already established perceptions, both their own and those of others.

The majority of the studies here address identity as it is thematized in literary narratives, but others also include analyses of other types of narrative: e.g., life-writings, pathographies, interviews, reading logs, language corpora, film, and theatre. The texts discussed are thus based on both the stories of fictional characters and on the life stories of actual individuals. They all include elements of identity negotiation, realized in different fashions. The contributors approach identity formation in terms of a number of the various dimensions listed in Bamberg's definition of identity above (2013). Rather than arranging the chapters in terms of genre here, they are organized in groups in terms of the major dimensions of identity they share thematically: Identity and Cultural Hybridity; Identity

and Religion; Identity, Nationality and Language; Identity, Profession and Gender; Identity and Illness; and Identity and Childhood. However, these themes cross each other in unexpected ways, and the chapters are therefore organized in terms of their *dominant* thematic issues rather than isolated, single issues.

The question of personal identity has engaged philosophers for centuries, and a common dilemma in the approaches found in the Western tradition is how one can preserve sameness in a sense of self, faced with the constant change inherent in the biological human condition (Ritivoi 2005, 231). More recently, Paul Ricœur has discussed this continuity/change dilemma: "Let me recall the terms of the confrontation: on one side, identity as *sameness* (Latin *idem*, German *Gleichheit*, French *mêmeté*); on the other, identity as *selfhood* (Latin *ipse*, German *Selbstheit*, French *ipséité*)" (Ricœur 1994, 116). Here Ricœur describes individual identity as having two sides. *Mêmeté* describes the permanence of the self, whereas *ipséité* denotes the constantly evolving nature of selfhood.

The way we think about selfhood and identity is also constantly evolving. The humanist model, for example, defined the "self" as "a conscious being who had the power of logic and rationality to discover the truth about the workings of the world, and who was able to act and think for himself or herself, independently of external influences, and also able to think reflexively about the status of his or her own being" (Klages 2011, 89). In contrast, in poststructuralist thought, the idea of identity or selfhood is no longer considered to be something that is natural or innate; instead it is something that is socially constructed (ibid., 88). However, different disciplines seem to concur that identity is constructed through the stories we tell ourselves, and each other about who we think we are; narrative configurations create meaning out of the chaos of reality. As Ricœur maintains, we come to grips with our own identities by creating our own life stories, inspired by literature and drawing on literary elements:

> self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history, or if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary biographies. (1994, 114, footnote 1)

Making sense of our lives and our sense of selfhood means structuring the events in our lives. Any stability in identity, however, is an illusion; and as

Ricœur has pointed out, one's life story is inevitably incomplete as long as one is still alive. In this connection, Ritovoi asks whether it is possible to make sense of the plot without knowledge of the way the narrative ends (2008, 232)? In contrast to life stories, literary narratives tend to convey a sense of an ending, which again sheds light on our understanding and interpretation of the whole story (Kermode 2000).

Literature "is the space in which questions about the nature of personal identity are most provocatively articulated" (Bennett and Royle 2009, 130). Narration is a privileged genre for identity construction especially because it requires us to situate characters in space and time. A narrative consists of both a "story" and a "plot". Whereas a story merely presents a chain of events, the plot presents stories that are not only chronologically related, but also related in terms of cause and effect (Forster 1962, 92). Narrating also "enables speakers/writers to disassociate the speaking/ writing self from the act of speaking, to take a reflective position vis-a-vis self as character" (Bamberg 2013). This disassociation or defamiliarization raises awareness, opening new spaces for re-negotiation of the identity. This applies to fictional characters and autobiographical stories, but also equally well to the identity negotiations of readers or viewers.

As previously stated, identity processes are dynamic. They are the result of negotiations and social interactions: "'Identity negotiation processes' refer to those activities through which people establish, maintain, and change their identities" (Swann and Bosson 2008, 465). However, there will always be encounters with others or new situations in which the status and role of a person are challenged, leading to incongruence. The image of the self must then be re-negotiated. Identity is not established once, and for all, but is under constant revision because we are members of a society and a culture. Cultural identity "is a matter of becoming as much as being [and] belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 1990, 435). Incongruence in identity processes can lead to unease, but can also open up an in-between space where a new identity can be negotiated. This in-between space gives room for creativity; this existential uncertainty triggers experimentation, playing on the edge where one can challenge, expand, cross, or even move boundaries. It is in these creative spaces that the negotiation of identity takes place.

The contributors here examine the transformation processes that take place in the narrow space between past and future, in other words in the in-between spaces, where the individual is struggling to position or establish

her- or himself between the two proverbial stools. Thus, the identity discourses discussed in this volume reflect the tension between being forced into or assigned a role, consisting of the expectations and conceptions of others, or of life itself, and the need to establish one's own role or space. Several contributions deal with the concept of "the other" (see e.g. Beauvoir 1997 in connection with gender or Said 1978 in connection with culture) the stranger. Among other recurring issues are hybrid identities (Bhabha 2004) as well as what could be called a homeless identity (McCarthy 2013).

It has also been pointed out that broadly speaking, "questions of personal or individual identity are indissociably bound up with language" (Bennett and Royle 2009, 131). A number of the contributors (KELLY; JØRGENSEN; PREDOIU; NUBERT and DASCĂLU-ROMITAN), focus on language as a constitutive factor in identity formation and transformation (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). It is, for example, interesting to examine the effects of hybrid identities, in the space between two or more languages or sociolects. The anthology analyzes narratives from several language areas, first and foremost English, French, German, Norwegian and Spanish. It also covers narratives from several countries and regions: Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, France, Germany, Great Britain, Haiti, India, Israel, Japan, Polynesia, Norway, Romania, Spain and South Africa.

Identity and Cultural Hybridity

The first three chapters (VESTLI, PREDOIU and KELLY) examine novels which thematize identity crises brought about by the situations of immigrants and refugees as well as integration issues affecting the identity of second generation immigrants. We see what can happen when people have to leave their homes, their languages and their cultures behind. Furthermore, the situation of the children of these immigrants is problematic, positioned as they are between two distinct cultures, often with opposing values. Some of the characters are unable to tackle the challenges and perish; others take advantage of the in-between spaces and develop hybrid identities.

In "'Brittle identities': Identity Discourses in the Work of Austrian Author Julya Rabinowich", ELIN NESJE VESTLI focuses on hybrid identities in three contemporary novels written by Julya Rabinowich. VESTLI shows how the female protagonists in *Spaltkopf* (2008), *Die Erdfresserin* (2012) and *Dazwischen: Ich* (2016), all from migration backgrounds and

contextualized in transgenerational and transnational family histories, feel uprooted and struggle to find their place in a new country with a new social framework. Rabinowich uses complex narrative structures to thematize the notion of in-between, not as a static space, but as a dynamic process in which one can negotiate and struggle in choosing one's own way.

GRAZZIELLA PREDOIU examines two novels written by Olga Grjasnowa, a German author, born in Azerbaijan in a Russian-Jewish family. In "Identity, Trauma and Language Confusion", PREDOIU discusses identity discourses in *Der Russe ist einer der Birken liebt* (2012) and *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017). She shows how the author depicts young people who, due to international political conflicts, are forced to break up from their country of origin and try to settle elsewhere. The problems of migration are exacerbated by complex family stories, shaped through persecution and traumas passed down from one generation to the next. Grjasnowa portrays a cosmopolitan, but rootless generation, whose members PREDOIU interprets as nomads or commuters, all stuck in a non-place.

In his chapter "Fractured Boundaries, Cultural Hybridity and In-between Spaces in Norwegian Young Adult Immigrant Literature: Maria Navarro Skaranger's *Alle utlendinger har lukka gardiner*", WAYNE KELLY discusses how the concept of cultural hybridity may be applied to Navarro Skaranger's novel from 2015. In this literary debut, Navarro Skaranger, a young, second-generation immigrant author, describes the life of young adults, most of them with immigrant backgrounds, in one of Oslo's suburbs. In relating her story, the author uses so-called "Kebab-Norwegian", a sociolect that many young Norwegians, not only those with immigrant backgrounds, can relate to. KELLY discusses how literature may contribute to managing integration and assimilation, and how novels like Navarro Skaranger's can contribute to our understanding of our changing societies.

Identity and Religion

Religion is often crucial in the formation of an individual's identity. It can give a person a sense of belonging, but can also restrict their perceived freedom, leading to a crisis in faith (BARSTAD). Religious beliefs often reflect on death and the afterlife. DUCKWORTH examines poems that demonstrate how the idea of death is utterly central to identity. Social-

anthropologists and religion scholars also see the importance of religion in terms of a collective identity (RAMSTAD).

In "The Search for Authenticity: Religious Identity in Norwegian Author Tor Edvin Dahl's *Guds tjener*", GURI ELLEN BARSTAD focuses on the representation of religious identity in this Norwegian Bildungsroman from 1973. The protagonist, Anders, embarks on a spiritual journey outside his familiar Pentecostal milieu. He spends some time in an in-between space before taking the decisive plunge into a secular world full of promises, returning home with new knowledge and insight. The novel draws on and problematizes existentialist concepts such as freedom, choice, anxiety and responsibility. Understanding that he has "to be" before he can "become", the character reflects on the relationship between authenticity and religious identity.

In "'My centre not my edge': Uncanny Identity, Death, Doubles and Medievalism in Kevin Hart's *Your Shadow*", MELANIE DUCKWORTH discusses a series of poems addressed to and spoken by "your shadow". The shadow is the body's constant companion–it is discovered at birth, and accompanies the body throughout life until the body and its shadow are united forever in the grave. While death can be seen as the ultimate erasure of self, the shadow poems show that it is in fact central to one's identity. In her chapter, DUCKWORTH uses the notions of "the uncanny" and "the double" to explore the fraught connection between identity and death. This also enables a consideration of the collection's use of two different strains of medieval imagery, both of which are preoccupied with death and identity: Catholic medieval mysticism, and the memento mori tradition, which feeds into the Gothic. The power of the collection comes from its combination of playful literal description, metaphor, black humour, uncanny foreboding, and a mystical desire for transcendence. The shadow remains a slippery, unsettling, companionable, and ultimately faithful reflection of the self.

METTE RAMSTAD discusses the development of a "Saint" identity in East Polynesia, catalyzed by the work of missionaries from the Church of the Latter Day Saints (LDS or Mormon) during their first sojourns in the region in the mid-1800s. In her chapter, she explores narratives found in historical and ethnographic accounts that focus on the construction of a Polynesian LDS identity and its Israelite connection. Furthermore, she draws on contemporary East Polynesian Latter-day Saints narratives (1950–1995), and interviews which explore personal experiences and

popular religious understandings of Christianity. East Polynesian converts were able to combine traditional beliefs in the influence of the spirits of deceased family and ancestors with their new LDS religious beliefs. The "Saint" identity, as a chosen and privileged people with a genealogical connection to the tribes of Israel, remains appealing to many LDS Polynesians today.

Identity, Nationality and Language

Just as religion can define the collective identity of a community, shared historical memories contribute to a collective national identity (AVIAS). An individual's identity within a national context can, however, be challenged if one belongs to a minority, in terms of for example ethnicity, language or age (AVIAS; NUBERT and DASCĂLU-ROMIŢAN; JØRGENSEN).

In "The Weight of Collective Memory: Surviving in the Inhospitable Realm of Haiti", ANDRÉ AVIAS examines the relationship between identity and culture/history in three Haitian novels, all to different degrees documentary: *Tout bouge autour de moi* by Dany Laferrière, *Ballade d'un amour inachevé* by Louis-Philippe Dalembert and *Bain de lune* by Yanick Lahens. None of the three authors has French as their native language, but they have chosen to write in French. Culture and history combine to create a community's collective memory. Haiti has had its share of earthquakes, violence, oppression and political unrest, and AVIAS shows how the inhabitants' ability to survive as well as their narrative about it have become an important part of their collective identity. He focuses not only on the battle for physical survival but also on traditional Haitian spirituality as a means of mental survival.

In their chapter "Identity, Migration and Language in Two Stories by the German-Speaking Writer Richard Wagner from Romania", ROXANA NUBERT and ANA-MARIA DASCĂLU-ROMITAN discuss the two texts *Ausreiseantrag* (1988) and *Begrüßungsgeld* (1989), written by Richard Wagner. The author, who migrated to West Germany in 1988, comes from the German-speaking minority in Romania. Both texts are partially autobiographical, and the existential crises that the protagonist, the author Stirner, lives through both in Romania, where he is politically persecuted and in West Germany, where he is considered an alien, mirror Wagner's own experiences. The chapter explores the individual's struggle to define his own identity and the connection between identity and language, including regional variations.

ANNETTE M. MYRE JØRGENSEN examines how language codes contribute to the constitution of a group identity among teenagers. She argues for the significance of different codes in the analysis of so-called *vague language* (VL) in teenage conversations in Madrid, where the informants narrate events to their peers. She uses examples from the COLAm-corpus (www.colam.org), and a pragmatic linguistic approach. These teenagers' interactions are interspersed with codes that are in-group identity markers, making their speech nearly incomprehensible for the people around them. Examples of vague language are presented in JØRGENSEN'S study in order to show that these expressions work not only as a communicative strategy, but that they also create bonds between members of the group and express their in-group social identity: "a same age group" affiliation with their peers. She therefore concludes that contrary to popular belief, vague language is not motivated simply by sheer laziness or by an unwillingness to think.

Identity, Profession and Gender

JØRGENSEN'S study draws on the language of teenage informants. The contributions of BJÖRK, ESCHENBACH, KHAU and WEB as well as of KNUTSEN also use informants. The former chapter deals with what can be called "life stories" (cf. Bruner 1990), whereas the latter analyzes reading logs where students comment on their reading of a novel. Both chapters focus on professional identities, since work is an essential part of individual identity. Work is also thematized in PFEIFFER, SCHININÀ and EKSTAM. BJÖRK et al. and EKSTAM write about gender as part of our identity in addition to discussing the importance of professions and working life. BRITT ANDERSEN goes beyond gender roles to discuss how discourses of sexualities are negotiated in narratives.

EVA LAMBERTSSON BJÖRK, JUTTA ESCHENBACH, MATHABO KHAU and LYNETTE WEB are interested in first generation academic women in South Africa and the journey they took to academia. This obviously involves changing identities. In individual, semi-structured interviews with three women, Buhle, Jane, and Mpho, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, they posed questions related to their life stories. First, they focused on the interviewees' hopes for the future as young girls. Secondly, they were asked about challenges and highlights during the journey, and finally, about how they viewed their journey from their present vantage point as academics. They find that these women managed to break free from the fixed gendered script of African woman and its repetitive

patterns. In their life stories about the journey towards academia, they position themselves, and are positioned as different from others. In this vying for positions, they are able to construct a new sense of self.

In "Fiction as the 'first laboratory of moral judgment'", KAREN PATRICK KNUTSEN examines the relationship between reading fictional narratives and students' development of their professional identities as future teachers. Paul Ricoeur (1994) argues that literature functions as a laboratory where we experiment with judgments of approval and condemnation; when reading narratives, we come to grips with our own identities and values by creating our own life stories, inspired by literature and drawing on literary elements. KNUTSEN examines 86 teacher trainee reading logs where students respond to Anglo-Indian writer Bali Rai's teenage novel *(Un)arranged Marriage* (2001). Students commented on dysfunctional families, arranged marriages, the importance of education, racism and the tolerance of difference, contrasting their own experiences with those of the protagonist. The moral judgments they make in their logs suggest that they have become more aware of their own identities and development as future teachers.

In "Negotiating and Introducing Identities: The 'Écriture Collective' of Ariane Mnouchkine, Hélène Cixous and the Théâtre du Soleil", GABRIELLE C. PFEIFFER focuses on professional identity in the theatre. Against the background of the history of the Théâtre du Soleil, PFEIFFER examines how the directrice Ariane Mnouchkine and her ensemble established and developed a collective ensemble identity, based on the idea of collaborative work in all aspects of their productions. In spite of this collaborative ideal, the special competence of individual ensemble members is fundamental in ensuring the quality of their work. To exemplify their concept of professional identity PFEIFFER discusses the artistic meeting between the ensemble and the French feminist writer Hélène Cixous, who has been collaborating with the theatre since the 1980s.

In the next chapter, ALESSANDRA SCHININÀ examines a number of works by the Austrian writer Kathrin Röggla: *wir schlafen nicht* (2004), *die alarmbereiten* (2010), *besser wäre: keine* (2013) and *Nachtsendung* (2016). SCHININÀ argues that Röggla shows how alienation can lead to the loss of self in a globalized work environment. Her characters–who are office and NGO workers, computer scientists, interpreters, politicians, managers and the like–live in a permanent and conscious state of self-

representation, which is characterized by the omnipresence of the media and a sense of precariousness. Their identities increasingly dissolve and, in the end, they move like ghosts or zombies in disturbing urban landscapes and non-places. These characters are determined and trapped by a system that impedes free, individual development. Literature and literary discourse thus become Röggla's tool for denouncing dominant economic discourses and for reflecting on social identities, on the loss of liberty, and on the essential democracy needed for the autonomous, conscious development of identity.

JANE M. EKSTAM has chosen to focus on Canadian writer Jacqueline Winspear's female detective Maisie Dobbs in a series that follows the protagonist from girlhood to adulthood, set against the background of the two world wars. The books delineate the gradual development of Maisie's identity from being "the other" to becoming an active "agent" in her own life. Maisie is "the other" in three main respects: social class, gender, and profession (there were few female private investigators in the inter-war years). Her development illustrates the huge changes taking place in female identity formations during this turbulent period. Starting in a working-class family, and later working as a domestic servant, Maisie changes her status (and identity) forever. She becomes a successful, educated, and self-assured professional. Throughout this mythical narrative, however, Maisie retains a strong core identity based on her natural empathy with victims of injustice, and, to some extent, with the perpetrators of foul deeds.

EKSTAM'S chapter, as we have seen, describes the way gender expectations complicated a fictional woman's professional choices during the first decades of the 20th century. BJÖRK ET AL.'S interviews with female academics from South Africa deal with how societal expectations tend to restrict behavior and enforce conformity to current gender norms, making it difficult for South African women to choose academic careers, even in the 21st century. BRITT ANDERSEN, like EKSTAM, has chosen to focus on a historical narrative. She discusses how sexual orientation is negotiated in a narrative from 1925, namely Virginia Woolf's innovative modernist novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Gender and sexual orientation are two distinct aspects of our identity: gender identity is personal, based on our internal experience of naming our gender. Sexual orientation, in contrast, is interpersonal and involves who we are physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to (e.g. Butler 1990; Foucault 1990). When Woolf was writing, same-sex love was a tabooed issue; in Sir Alfred Douglas'

words it was "the love that dare not speak its name". In her close reading of the novel, ANDERSEN shows how Woolf nevertheless thematizes sexual orientation through her highly associative, stream-of-consciousness technique, and through the use of doubling, or parallel characters. She focuses particularly on the character Miss Kilman, who has often been over-looked by readers and critics alike, and argues that she has an important function in the narrative as she helps to delineate the sexual identity of the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway.

Identity and Illness

WLADIMIR CHÁVEZ VACA is also concerned with "life stories". He addresses two so-called pathographies–or narratives of illness–which raise questions of identity, since a person is undoubtedly changed after being diagnosed with a serious or fatal disease. He draws on two books; the first is Japanese writer Masahiro "Hiro" Fujita's *99% Thank you* (2013), and the second is Spanish writer Leo Montero's *Muñeca de Trapo* (2013). Both writers tell the stories of their own illness; they have both been diagnosed with the incurable disease Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) that progressively weakens the muscles, causing paralysis and, in its final stage, death by respiratory failure. The disease is capable of stealing the patient's voice; it darkens and overwhelms their powers of speech. CHÁVEZ VACA finds that formulating their testimonies as pathographies can help patients in their quest to regain control of the situation and come to terms with their new identities as terminally ill or radically changed.

Identity and Childhood

The two last chapters focus on identity formation in childhood. GRO-ANITA MYKLEVOLD discusses the construction of a homeless identity in the contemporary children's book *Mr Stink* (2009) by British writer David Walliams. She notes that childhood plays an important role in identity development and children's literature often grapples with issues related to identity. MYKLEVOLD examines how Walliams' child protagonist Chloe interprets the "individual biography" (Giddens 1991) of a homeless character, Mr Stink, and how the narrative contradicts or confirms stereotypical images of such a large, heterogeneous group as the homeless community. She also discusses the metafictive devices that Walliams uses, showing how they relate to the construction of Chloe's identity as a promising writer. MYKLEVOLD pursues the following research questions: How can a child protagonist's perceptions of a homeless person's identity

say something about the (in)tolerance of contemporary society? And, how can metafictional children's literature assist readers in becoming more tolerant towards ambiguity and marginalized groups?

In "'The right Alice': A Cybertext Perspective on Narrated Identity in the Film Adaptations of Lewis Carroll's Novels", BRITT W. SVENHARD argues that the medium of film can function as a tool that can convey the multi-level structure of cybertexts, thus creating a new, cultural narrative model for the construction of identity. She examines Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), and James Bobin's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016), both based on the classical children's tales of Lewis Carroll. SVENHARD explores the dream motif in Burton's film and the memory motif in Bobin's, linking both to theories on narrativization and identity construction. The classical fantasy stories about *Alice* in both films are used to emphasize how cybertext structures can shape viable models for life narratives and identity construction.

As the chapters in this anthology demonstrate, the self is indeed elusive. Literature and life stories, however, allow us to explore identity processes, shedding light on the roles different social and personal dimensions can play in the negotiation and integration of the sense of self. Our contribution has been revealing the wide variety of stories that thematize this search for the elusive self across nationalities, languages and genres. The stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are can help to preserve a sense of sameness, or *mêmeté,* and simultaneously help us understand the continual evolution of identity, or *ipséité*, in Ricœur's (1994) terms.

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IDENTITY AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

CHAPTER ONE

"BRITTLE IDENTITIES":
IDENTITY DISCOURSES IN THE WORK OF
AUSTRIAN AUTHOR JULYA RABINOVICH

ELIN NESJE VESTLI

Introduction

"Mich interessieren brüchige Identitäten" (Paterno 2014). [1] With this statement, Julya Rabinowich sums up her previous work. Her protagonists, most of them from migration backgrounds, appear "brittle" in many ways. They are on the move, crossing borders that are both real and metaphorical. Uprooted and transplanted,[2] as the author also characterizes herself, they struggle to find a way to grow new roots without totally letting go of the old ones, to re-position themselves in a new setting. In the following, I will look into the literary identity discourses in Rabinowich's novels *Spaltkopf* (2008 [*Splithead*])*, Dazwischen: Ich* (2016 [In-between: I, my trans.]), which show several parallels, and finally *Die Erdfresserin* (2012 [The Woman Who Ate Dirt, my trans.]), Rabinowich's darkest and most radical novel to date.

Biography and Literary Work

Julya Rabinowich was born into a Jewish-Russian family in St. Petersburg in 1970; the family migrated to Austria in 1977. Rabinowich is a trained artist from the University of Applied Arts in Vienna; her graduation portfolio consisted of a cycle of paintings entitled *Spaltkopf* (2006),[3] or *Splithead* in its English translation, the same title she chose for her debut novel, inspired by her own migration experiences. Moreover, her work as a simultaneous translator (Russian-German) during psychotherapy sessions for refugees in Vienna influences her writings; the refugees' stories, which she translated while working as a state-approved interpreter between 2006 and 2012, leave literary traces, especially in *Die*

Erdfresserin (in which the author pictures herself as a translator with her characteristic dark page haircut, (cf. Rabinowich 2012, 155)) and in *Dazwischen: Ich.*

Rabinowich made her debut as a writer in 2003 with an early version of *Spaltkopf* (cf. Schwenns-Harrant 2014, 65), for which she was honoured with the annual award from "edition exil", an Austrian literary support program for authors with migration backgrounds. Today she stands her ground within Austrian contemporary literature. Whereas the three novels discussed in this chapter deal with the negotiation of identity in the context of transnational biographies, she turns in a quite different direction with *Herznovelle* (2011) and *Krötenliebe* (2016). The tautly composed *Herznovelle*, the title of which gives associations to Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle*, thematizes the identity crisis of a well off, but bored wife. *Krötenliebe* deals with the Austrian icons Alma Mahler and Oskar Kokoschka as well as with the Austrian-Jewish biologist Paul Kammerer, first acclaimed as the new Darwin, then framed as a fraud, who embodies the Jewish "Leerstelle" in the Austrian official memory. With these novels, full of intertextual references to the Wiener Moderne, Rabinowich writes herself into the Austrian literary tradition.[4]

In-between?

Already in her debut novel Rabinowich uses the notion of in-between, falling between the two proverbial stools, a metaphor she radicalizes by comparing her situation to lying on a bed of nails (cf. Rabinowich 2011a, 12). Her novel for young adults uses this metaphor as its title: *Dazwischen: Ich*, In-between: I. The notion of in-between,[5] apparently indispensable in discussions of contemporary migration literature, is however both inaccurate and controversial, as pointed out by literary scholars, such as Leslie Adelson, Jim Jordan and Sandra Vlasta. As early as 2001, Adelson disagreed with the metaphor used in the sense of creating a "bridge 'between two worlds'" (Adelson 2001, 246). She argued that this paradigm of bridging two worlds "is designed to keep discrete worlds apart as much as it pretends to bring them together" (ibid.) and thus denies the dynamic nature of cultural transformation. With reference to Adelson, Jordan characterizes "the two worlds paradigm, complete with stools and bridges" (Jordan 2006, 497) as a "cliché" (ibid., 489). He refutes "a model of two fixed entities, with the migrant subject either suspended in motion or trapped between them" (Jordan 2006, 490). Sandra Vlasta also disputes the idea of "zwei intakte, in sich

abgeschlossene Welten, die durch klare Grenzen voneinander geteilt sind"
in her work on German-Turkish literature (Vlasta 2009, 103).[6] In her
research on identity discourses in contemporary German-Turkish novels
she points out the dynamic character, the permeability or mixture rather
than the depiction of an existence between disparate spheres of life (cf.
ibid, 104).

Based on this briefly outlined argument I will discuss Rabinowich's use of
the metaphor of in-between in the context of the identity discourses in her
literary work. The concept of hybrid identity, which goes back to the
cultural theorist Stuart Hall, is relevant for my reading. The notion of a
hybrid identity (cf. Griem 1998) aims to describe the composite identity of
migrants, who have a bond to their country of origin, to which they are not
able to (or do not wish to) return, and who thus adapt to the new country,
to its culture and language, but not through full assimilation. As my point
of departure I use Silke Fürstenau and Heike Niedrig, who apply the
concept at an individual level and define hybrid identity as "einen
spezifischen diskursiven Modus der Selbstverortung im (dominanten)
national-kulturellen Repräsentationssystem" (Fürstenau, and Niedrig 2007,
247).[7] Their study is not based on a deficit assumption, but on the
proposition that:

> 'neue, dauerhafte Formen und Inhalte von Selbstvergewisserungen und
> von sozialen Positionierungen', die insofern 'hybrid' seien, […] die
> 'Elemente der Herkunfts- *und* der Aunkunftsregion' aufnähmen und 'zu
> etwas Eigenem und Neuen [sic!] transformierten". (ibid., 248)[8]

Spaltkopf

Spaltkopf is told from the perspective of the girl Mischka, who–together
with her parents and grandmother–is allowed to leave the Soviet Union for
Austria as a Jewish contingent refugee. The plot revolves around
Mischka's experiences in Vienna in the late 1970s and 1980s and is
expanded with childhood memories from the Soviet Union. The novel
ends with her first visit in post-Soviet Russia when she is expecting her
first child. After a prologue, the development of the protagonist unfolds in
the following two, detailed parts. In this introduction, laid out as four
lessons, a complex travel motif is established: "Ich mache also eine Reise.
Ich bin eigentlich nie angekommen, weder bei meiner ersten noch nach der
zweiten" (Rabinowich 2011a, 9),[9] expanded by a reference to the game
hopscotch: "mein Spiel ist das Tempelhüpfen von Land zu Land" (ibid.).[10]
In hopscotch, a game played mostly while standing on one leg, one

advances through good balance and brave jumps, and one succeeds only by taking detours, in the sense of concentric movements and repeated attempts at self-positioning. By establishing this metaphor in the prologue, Rabinowich implies a difficult process of identity development, at the same time as she puts the protagonist in an agentive position: not trapped, but balancing on one leg, contemplating the next jump.

The external circumstances of Mischka's socialization are complex: the story begins with her exclusion and repression in the Soviet Union, continues with her experiences of the unknown West and her integration process in Vienna; on top of this she has to learn a new language. In addition, her family history is intricate. Through the traumatic and partly repressed fate of Mischka's grandmother, who was a victim of anti-Semitic pogroms in Tsarist Russia, a transgenerational family history of persecution emerges. As a result, the family's provenance is a taboo, not only in public, but also within the family itself. Mischka learns of her Jewish origin only through coincidence: "Juden, das sind wir" (ibid., 62).[11] The transgenerational family trauma, a result of denial as a condition of survival, is manifested in the image of the split head, an image handed down in the family, which expresses the trauma in a circuitous way, evoking fears based upon the experience of alterity for generations. Mischka learns about the image of the split head, but not what it represents. The split head is a metaphor of seemingly incompatible existences (cf. Niedermeier 2009); it is manifested in the novel as a second narrative voice and symbolizes the many layers of repressed memories through generations as well as the seemingly unbridgeable schism between external regulation and self-esteem, which prohibits an autonomous and realistic self-positioning. The power of the split head may only be restrained by looking it in the eye. Mischka finally succeeds in doing so, when she, after years of hesitation, again visits Russia where she finds herself again speaking (and dreaming in) Russian and by looking at herself in the mirror.

Even though Vienna–with its Mozartkugeln and Barbie dolls–fascinates her, Mischka soon becomes familiar with the experience of alterity, of being "the other". Obsessed with the desire for belonging, she compensates for her alleged strangeness by trying to distinguish herself positively from other migrant children in her class, for example by speaking German better than they do and through participation in the Catholic lessons. Over-adjustment follows, mimicry understood as the "desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry" (Bhabha 1994, 88):

"Adoptiert werden will ich. Endlich Teil dieses Landes sein. Die richtigen Dinge tragen, tun und sagen. Das künstlich erblondete Haar über eine knochige Schulter werfen" (Rabinowich 2011a, 86);[12] she desires a visible transformation, which is impossible for the dark-haired, chubby girl, a reaction that the author–considering her own development–characterizes as "Integrationswut" (Schwenns-Harrant 2014, 60). [13] Later, during puberty, Mischka behaves auto-aggressively, developing eating disorders, dropping out and joining socially marginalized groups, for example as a punker and a squatter in Berlin in the late 80s, living on the edge of society.

An important subject in the contemporary transnational family novel is increased family tension as a result of the challenges due to migration. Not only does the protagonist herself suffer from the traumatic experience of migration and the difficulties of integration, but her family ties barely endure the struggles of everyday life in the new country. In the foreign environment, her relatives are the only people she truly knows, but at the same time family life forms the stage where battles are fought and frustration is voiced (cf. Schweiger 2012). Thus migration-related conflicts often turn out to be part of the power struggle between parents and children, for example when the child masters the new language and the social codes better than the parents. Additionally, puberty in the novel is depicted as a second emigration (cf. Rabinowich 2011a, 82) since Mischka's pubertal rebellion is directed not only against the authority of her parents, but also against the Russian values they voice. The daughter's emancipation makes excessive demands on the father, who sees his authority as paterfamilias in danger. "Mein Vater, eigentlich liberal und offen, fällt ins tiefste Patriarchat zurück. […] Alle Freiheiten, die mir bisher gewährt wurden, werden von meiner Periode hinweggeschwemmt" (ibid., 80–81). [14] The conflicts end when her father leaves for Russia, where he unexpectedly dies–leaving his daughter feeling guilty and lost.

The novel traces the protagonist's complex journey, both in the literal world and in the transcendent sense. In this way, the travel motif highlights the challenges of migration and adolescence. Mischka's journey consists of several self-positionings, partly one-legged (playing hopscotch), partly on shifting ground (cf. ibid, 183), choosing the bed of nails (cf. ibid., 12, 181) over the two proverbial stools–if you do not want to get hurt, you must not lean on the solid surfaces. At the same time, however a linguistic self-positioning takes place. Through the declaration "ich schreibe" (ibid., 11),[15] she makes a linguistic conquest, implementing

the metaphor of translation as a border crossing. Her earlier rejection of the Russian language, which she felt was forced upon her by her parents, crumbles. When she enters a new phase of life through the birth of her own daughter, she allows the repressed language to surface in her dreams: "Ich träume auf Russisch neuerdings" (ibid., 144).[16] The conquest of the German language is no longer opposed to her dreams in Russian, they both belong to her. With one leg in each language, she finally recovers her balance.

Dazwischen: Ich

Rabinowich's first novel for young readers uses her play *Tagfinsternis* (2014) as its point of departure. The play explores the conflicts in a family living in a refugee accommodation, showing how the resultant mental stress affects the relations between them and challenges their self-esteem. The conflict culminates when the father decides to return to their country of origin, now a battle zone, to support his brother, thus jeopardizing their asylum application and the future of the whole family. The young daughter, in the play a minor character, turns out to be the protagonist and first-person narrator in *Dazwischen: Ich*; the novel is composed as her diary.

The teenager Madina lives together with her parents, a younger brother and an aunt in a refugee accommodation in a German-speaking country. At the beginning of the novel, they have been living there for approximately two years, and during this time Madina has developed into a young woman. Her discovery of her own body and her startling first, timid experience of love are familiar features of the adolescent novel. Her development is overshadowed by the bleak atmosphere of the refugee lodgings, the lack of private space and their uncertain future. Their application for asylum has not yet been processed, and their future is on hold.

In contrast to her parents, who spend the whole day in the cramped lodgings, Madina attends school and thus experiences a respite. She quickly learns German, and with the help of her best friend, Laura, she gradually finds her place in the new country, although she is always aware of a certain distance to her classmates–based on her different upbringing and experiences. Her parents, on the other hand, isolate themselves, especially her father, who increasingly reflects on his cultural and religious origin: "Wir werden jetzt traditionell, damit ja niemand vergisst,

wer wir sind" (Rabinowich 2016, 112).[17] In this way, he hopes to preserve his authority as paterfamilias, which he feels is endangered by the customs of the new country. For reasons that are logical only for him, he refuses to learn German and thus paradoxically turns out to be dependent on his daughter, who must act as interpreter between her parents and the authorities, a humiliation which he in turn tries to compensate for by enforcing even stricter educational measures. This accelerates Madina's pubertal conflicts with her parents: she loves her father and understands his concern for her, but she wants to set the course for her future herself, as is customary in the new country: "Damals fand ich das in Ordnung [dass die Frauen die Hausarbeit machen, während die Männer sich ausruhen]. Heute nicht mehr" (ibid., 39).[18] She does not care about simple, short-term compromises, like being allowed to wear pants or to stay overnight at Laura's house, she wants to make future-oriented and long-term decisions: "Ich will hier leben" (ibid., 247).[19]

Compared to *Spaltkopf*, the complex social and cultural framework in *Dazwischen: Ich* has been simplified, as is to be expected considering the target group of readers. To make the plot as exemplary as possible, we are not told which country Madina originally comes from or what language is her native tongue; her religious affiliation is only indicated by references to wearing a headscarf (which she is not forced to do). The traumatizing events that forced her family to flee concentrate on specific, memorable images in the form of flashbacks, such as the death of her best friend, which demonstrates how the traumatic impact focuses on interpersonal relationships rather than political analyses or statements. The repeated flashbacks are triggered by harmless events, such as fireworks, and thus exemplify the permanent emotional stress under which refugees live in a context that is comprehensible for young readers. The uncertainty of the future, not being able to make plans, the repeated questioning by the authorities as well as clumsy and malicious comments at school contribute to the emotional insecurity in Madina's daily life. However, the author avoids a black-and-white portrait by including significant contrast figures that positively contribute to Madina's development, such as the clerk who confirms her in her new self-confidence: "'Du machst das toll […]. Solche wie dich können wir hier gut brauchen.' Und wirklich, es klingt blöd, aber ich denke: Das weiß ich" (ibid., 252).[20]

Even though Madina is strong-willed, gifted, and has few, but supportive friends, she is faced with a complex threshold that she must cross: to a new home, to a new language, to a new stage in her life. And this