

Mariam Popal

TOUCHING SPACES IN TEXTURES

An abstract, expressive sketch in dark brown, red, and green lines, overlaid on the title text. The sketch appears to be a study of a hand or a face, with fluid, gestural lines that suggest movement and texture. The lines are layered, with some colors appearing more prominent than others, creating a sense of depth and complexity.

Affective Humor and Dialogicity
in Contemporary Literature

[transcript] Literary Theory

Mariam Popal
Touching Spaces in Textures

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... for you...

*On earth is known to none
The smile that is not sister to a tear*
(George Eliot)

*»This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a ›certain Chinese encyclopedia‹ in which it is written that ›animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies‹. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. But what is it impossible to think, and what kind of impossibility are we faced with here?«
(Michel Foucault [1966] 1994, xv)*

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Acknowledgments

This study is a revised version of my habilitation thesis. The initial idea for the study came to me while I was reading Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005). Reading this book made me think about the power of humor that sustained my family and me over a long and intangible ›time‹.

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Introduction

What makes us smile and wonder in humorous moments? What makes us think and feel pleasure and pain at the same time when we read passages that echo some form of humor? What *touches* us in such instances of texts? How is humor involved in the evocation of such *touching spaces* in the text?

In this study, I proceed from a poetological insight I experienced while reading Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), when I thought I had encountered what might be called *touching spaces* within humorous instances of the text – and they have haunted me ever since. I felt that there was much more to the built-in humor of (con-)texts than we might assume at first or even second glance. In this study, then, I explore the poetological insights of such spaces that touch us in affective as well as epistemological ways. These spaces seem at once to touch different threads within the (literary) text as well as outside of it, building a texture within and beyond the text with the outside world, in discursive as well as material ways (Derrida [1967] 1974; Spivak 1989, 2012; Geisenhanslüke 2015). I am particularly interested in the conjunction of touch and humor and their technical and epistemological connections, as well as the poetological elements evoked in the text. I consider, on the one hand, philosophical and theoretical reflections on touch and its meanings, as well as on humor and its affective economy that emerge from this mélange. On the other hand, I focus on how exemplary contemporary novels induce such spaces of touch – and what they touch upon. Although some threads from Greek philosophy and mythology, Ovid's *Narcissus and Echo*, as well as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will be discussed, in terms of the temporal and spatial configuration, the project limits itself in the reading section to two novels from the Western hemisphere, Canada and the UK, considering works in English and French. The novels are Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001) and Dany Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008). Both novels transcend the limitations of their spatial confines and, through diasporic and migratory routes that also encompass the subjectivity of the authors and their narrators and characters, open up a much wider spatial network of exchange and encounter within the narrative discourses of the novels that hint at the fabric of the wider world. By exploring how normative, mainstream meanings inherent in language and discourse are addressed in different ways in the literary spaces, I examine the processes set in motion as a byproduct. The work is pursued through a thematic framework within a close reading and a critical

narratological analysis. It consists of two broad sections. The first section introduces the main concerns, addressing the question of humor, affectivity, and touch. The second part consists of a close reading of the thematic analysis, as well as the imagological and representational repertoire of the novels. Based on these two parts, the concluding part summarizes the findings and offers a view on the affectivity of humor and the poetics of its touch with regard to the ethical implications of this relation.

I begin by addressing the question of humor and by looking at the various understandings, definitions, and uses of humor in different theoretical and philosophical approaches in order to assess the terms, possibilities, limits, and limitations attached to its meaning and the angles from which it is discussed. This is necessary for two reasons: Firstly, it makes it possible to see how these terms and definitions are demarcated and circumscribed, and secondly, it also explains the wide range of debates and understandings of humor, the contradictory statements about it, as well as the derogatory status that humor still holds, to some extent, in literary and philosophical theorizations.

My conclusion is that humor is an *affective rhetoric of deconstruction*, generated within the poetology of the literary text and the literariness of texts more generally.

While humor is often looked down upon in more classical and modern Western philosophical texts, and even excluded from mainstream philosophy, some studies shed light on its ›benefits‹, ranging from philosophical insights to health issues.

Most scholars, especially in contemporary debates, agree on the incongruity theory of humor, whether this incongruity is seen in the different meanings of the said and the meant, or the said and a subsequent act. But how this incongruity emerges, remains unresolved, although some scholars, such as Sigmund Freud, emphasize the role of language as the medium through which it arises. In addition to these different approaches to humor, humor is often considered and used, sometimes consciously and sometimes implicitly, as a tool of critique, a quality of humor that is also addressed here from various angles. This aspect is important for the study because it sheds light on the ways in which humor is used as a praxis of resistance, for example within the interventionist politics of critical, intersectional, feminist, queer, Black, Jewish, postcolonial theory, as well as class-based critical approaches. Whereas tragedy is considered a significant and insightful form of expression and genre in literary theory, humor is mostly viewed as ridicule and mockery, or as nonsensical play, often for mere amusement. More recent and modernist texts adopt a more radical position of humor, challenging earlier positions as well as philosophy per se, even to the extent of discussing humor *as* philosophy, thus giving humor a greater significance. In these approaches, humor is considered part of an economy of tragedy, a direction in which this study also ventures.

Finally, based on such considerations, humor is understood here as a *tonality* that can capture different nuances, and thus as a specter of different and differently evoked humorous instances in the text. Such an understanding of humor raises the question of how humor works in language and how it generates those various traits. This question will be further explored in a fourfold discussion of humor within theories of performativity, within literary theory in a narrower sense with a special focus on ›irony‹, within a discussion of rhetoric, and, finally, within the poetics of texts as a kind of allegorical surplus of not-knowing (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*).

There are different theoretical strands of performativity. Here, I will consider theories of performativity that shed light on the work of language and humor. Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to the grotesque and the carnivalesque is also discussed as a theory that combines the performing and performative sides of humorous tendencies in novels. The work of Shoshana Felman and J.L. Austin's speech act theory are addressed, as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's hitherto rather neglected understanding of performativity in relation to marginalized spaces, which Sedgwick calls *periperformatives*: instances of witnessing at the margins of actual performative acts, which give impetus to these centrings but also challenge them. Her attention to humor as a performative element that deals with affectivity and processes of transformation can be understood as retrospectively produced rearrangements of previous experiences.

In literary theory, in a narrower sense, there are other terms related to humor, such as ›irony‹, parody, satire, or pun. In order to situate my understanding of humor in this regard, I will also discuss humor in relation to such terms. ›Irony‹, as a figure of speech and a frequently discussed term in literary theory, is central to this discussion. Of particular importance in this context are the works of the literary theorist Paul de Man, whose approaches to ›irony‹ continue to occupy a dominant and influential position. Rather than following de Man's understanding of ›irony‹ as a superficial and inferior linguistic instance, Friedrich Schlegel's and, based on Schlegel, Peter Szondi's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's approaches to ›irony‹ as *parabasis* are emphasized. This understanding of ›irony‹ aligns well with a view of humor as a phenomenon that plays with incongruity. In this way, ›irony‹ is perceived as an incongruous humorous tonality that, like the overall work of humorous inclinations, is an intervening, parabolic, performative intervention in thought and language with a pensive and epistemological amplitude. ›Irony‹ is thus perceived as a technical term and figure of speech that circumscribes the incongruous, allusive, and rapturous humorous work in (literary) texts. Humor is thereby also considered as a rhetorical device. With regard to the question of rhetoric, this study takes three interrelated approaches: Firstly, I discuss a more current situating of the modern(-ist) comeback and understanding of rhetoric (Bender/Wellbery 1990; Richards 2008; Geisenhanslüke 2003, 2018). Secondly, Paul de Man's postmodernist approach to rhetoric as a deconstructivist phenomenon, often referred to as *rhetoricity*, is discussed (de Man 1983, 1996; Bender/Wellbery 1990; Geisenhanslüke 2009). Other approaches have also emphasized the role of rhetoric in the making of meaning in texts. Eagleton, for example, understands rhetoric as a »discourse theory« interested in the »formal devices of language«. He relates the »enigma« of its meanings to a decipherable formalist semiotics (Eagleton 2000, 179). Eagleton also links rhetoric to the ways in which language and discourse produce effects on (implied) readers. Likewise, he also refers to power and desire in discourse and language within a historically determined »symbolic order« or »signifying practices« (Eagleton 2000, 180 ff.). In these understandings, rhetoric is seen as the inclination of a text, its drive, desire, and orientation, however subtle, toward stability or change and against the background of dominant, hitherto normalized understandings. Thirdly, I will consider Achim Geisenhanslüke's approach to rhetoric, which opens it up to questions of functionality within poetological concerns and links those postmodernist theoretical presuppositions back to classical understandings of rhetoric in literary studies. Geisenhanslüke elaborates on how rhetoric evokes different sentiments and senses, explicitly

linking the affective meaning of a text to rhetoricality (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 103 ff.). In this approach, rhetoric appears as the glue that binds the two instances of poetics – its aesthetic and epistemological qualities – in order to generate meanings.

Along these parameters, I understand humor as a rhetorically generated, *affective, deconstructive poetological tonality* that is performed within a (con)text.

This understanding of humor, however, does not clarify how humor relates to *affectivity*, especially since humor is often seen not only as an ›affect‹, but also as a phenomenon that arouses it (for example amusement, ridicule, empowerment, thoughtfulness, melancholy). Thus, while humor is often mentioned as an ›affect‹ or assumed to evoke ›affects‹, there is no further discussion of the ways in which this is the case. I address this question by looking at the various debates in affect studies and by considering the relationship between humor as a deconstructive rhetorical device to what I call *affectivity*. My understanding of *affectivity* is situated within a critical Spinozian framework and within feminist and constructivist approaches in literary theory and cultural studies (Ahmed 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014; Leys 2011, 2012, 2020; Ngai 2007, 2012; Sedgwick 1993, 2003; Geisenhanslüke 2018, 2019). The question for me, therefore, is not an ontological one; it is less about what ›affects‹ are or about assuming fixed and distinctive ›emotions‹ to be explored without any considerations of language, discourse, and the (discursive) functionality they may occupy. The main question for me is how to relate humor to what I call *affectivity*, a specter of different affective dynamics in the production of texts and in the sociopolitical texture, in such a way that it is not presumed as ›given‹ and taken for granted. Rather, the attempt is to take a critical look at how humor is generated in relation to *affectivity* in the text, what function it occupies, and what effect it has in a (con)text. *Affectivity* is understood as an interrelational, processual, subject-related and fluctuating, prelingual as well as discursive practice with material effects that also permeates (literary) texts. It is seen as an engaged intervention and contribution to stabilizing or destabilizing discourses and conventionalized symmetries of historically determined power structures. Furthermore, I see two other interrelated points regarding *affectivity*. Following a psychoanalytic approach, *affectivity* is seen as a mechanism of self-regulation (Hilgers 2012, 17; Sedgwick 2003; Geisenhanslüke 2008). Humorous tendencies in (literary) (con-)texts are then understood as sites and archives of multiple traces of affective nodal points, and in this respect as antidotes to the mechanisms of the signifying process of discursive power regulations (Sedgwick 1993, 8; 2003, 9; Geisenhanslüke 2019, 16 ff.).

From these discussions, humor is perceived as a complex rhetorical phenomenon that deconstructs meaning within an affective poetological endeavor, which also sets epistemological threads in motion. For the purposes of this study, therefore, humor is understood as *affective humor*.

In contrast to the established scholarly discourse on affectivity and humor, the poetics of humor in the rhetoric of language and the (de-)signification mechanism of discourse are key in this study.

Based on these reflections, I understand *affective humor* as an allusive form of non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*).

Within its economy of non-knowledge and power-lessness, *affective humor*, it is argued, opens up *touching spaces* for pausing and thinking. It is a form of epistemology that

questions both ›knowledge‹ and ›power‹. It does so from an allegorical rather than a ›suspicious‹ insight that emerges from the poetics of the humorous work in (con-)texts. In doing so, *affective humor* makes room for the possibility of a different encounter and different ways of thinking. It is understood as an oscillating, implicitly evoked, unfinished insight into non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) as ›the most elaborate form of knowledge‹ (Lacan 1966, quoted in Geisenhanslüke 2015, 82) – and the most effective form of powerlessness (*OhnMacht*).

Affective humor is thus seen as an epistemology in the making. Accordingly, it is argued that it has an indecisive, unfinished, dialogical form that derives from its interventionist, parabolic character. With its parabolic structure as well as its proposal for dialogicity, *affective humor* induces a space, an in-betweenness. However, because its form extends into an uncompleted, allegorical inclination, it is not a closed space, but one that, like a stitch, continually opens up other spaces as it intervenes in the text, giving it further texture.

In the third and final conceptual-theoretical part of this first section, I turn to the meanings of touch and its relation to *affective humor*.

After an introductory discussion, the focus here remains on Jacques Derrida's thorough elaborations. In particular, two of Derrida's works (Derrida 1993, [2002] 2005) that deal explicitly with touch are discussed and used as a basis for understanding its multiple meanings and poetological juncture.

Derrida opens up various aspects of touch that go far beyond a haptic as well as a sensual understanding. He also discloses the meaning of the term in relation to thought, to the psychic, to reading and writing, to the phenomenality of affectivity that nevertheless has epistemological and bodily effects. Derrida's discussion also includes other aspects that are only implicitly conceivable as forms of touch, such as ›thanking‹ as a loving and indebted relation to another. He also discusses touch as ›law‹, both in the narrow sense and in the sense of unwritten discursive and sociopolitical ›laws‹ that make it possible to touch at all upon an issue, or to make others untouchable. Derrida thus problematizes *touchability* as a function of written and unwritten ›laws‹ that are historically and sociopolitically produced, showing that some issues can be sanctioned or held sacred, abhorrent or dangerous, and thus rendered untouchable. Touch, then, has not only affectionate, caressing ›stroking‹ sides, but also more violent, ›striking‹ sides, which can sometimes be intermingled. On the one hand, Derrida situates his reflections within a philosophical question that comes in the form of a poetically induced everyday encounter. He touches on the boundaries of philosophy and literature (and disciplinary ›laws‹) as well as on everyday encounters and their implications. On the other hand, he also discusses various philosophical approaches to touch, from Aristotle to Jean-Luc Nancy, whom Derrida praises as ›the philosopher of touch‹ and reproaches for not sufficiently engaging with the ambiguity of the meanings and deconstructive considerations of touch. In this way, Derrida also performs touch as a form of (aporetic) critique, as well as a form of caring. He also reflects on the effects of humor and touch, particularly in the bodily experience of ›laughter‹, which he defines as a process of break and deconstruction. Furthermore, Derrida establishes a relation of alterity in the work of touch. According to Derrida, there is a primordial relation to an other in the economy of touch. It is, in a sense, an *ur-touch*, as it prefigures an event that has already occurred within a prior relationality; the possibil-

ity of sensing arises from such *ur*-modes of touch, which leave an imprint in the body to which subsequent forms are related. This primary touch, however, is not understood as a haptic touch, but as an *event*, an *a priori orientation* that comes from an other, but which takes place within the boundaries of a singular body and subject. In this fashion, the complex workings of *affective humor* are understood in relation to a responsive capacity of a primordial relation and to the various discursive threads that allow or forbid the touch of certain issues. *Affective humor* is thus a poetological device that, in a deconstructivist rhetoric, opens up a space in language, discourse, and the relation to an other in which it addresses different issues along various meanings of touch. These different aspects, which I trace in Derrida's problematization, make it possible to understand the entangled, interwoven structure of meaning and meaning production in the discursive and literary texture of humorous instances and tonalities as intimate, bodily felt dynamics of relational ties and dialogical processes that interweave outside and inside structures and experiences.

While an affective humorous rhetoric accompanies much of Derrida's work, as the readings of these two texts show, Derrida mainly problematizes touch around humor in a critical reading of Nancy's discussion of a poem, a literary work, where he especially highlights the bodily and dispersing effect of ›laughter‹. The touch of ›laughter‹ is seen as a bodily as well as an epistemological decomposition. However, Derrida does not limit ›laughter‹ to a specific bodily reaction. In his elaborations, ›laughter‹ can be perceived as the manifold effects and processes that the poetics of humorous tonalities, with its affective, pensive economy, can create in the body and the mind (Derrida 2005, 114). Behind this discussion of the (epistemological) function of ›laughter‹, humor can be conceived as a structuring and productive machinery of the rhetoric and poetics of the text. In this sense, humor can be understood as a deconstructive rhetorical process in the making, affectively charged and involving a disassembly that opens up a space for the possibility of other encounters and other forms of signification. Derrida's discussion of ›laughter‹ as an affective deconstruction with bodily and epistemological threads helps to scrutinize the signifying process of the humorous tonality, so that it can be considered in its fissured and diversely disordering effects – especially so in relation to close reading and the narratological elements of (literary) texts. These Derridean discussions shed light on the many different forms of engagement that the novels also open up in their different humorous tendencies. In this way, it can be shown that literature, while affectively touching different strands of meaning, creates space for further thought, and the manner in which it does so. The humorous poetics of the novels, rather than to be ›mere‹ amusement and entertainment, set in process possibilities for *rethinking* and negotiating epistemological and sociopolitical issues in affective ways.

This poetological and epistemological work, which literary texts and literariness as such contain in simple, subtle, and yet multiple ways, is shown and discussed in more detail in the second broad section of the study. In its ability to create such spaces of touch in thoughtful, but also empowering, playful, and pleasurable ways, I hope to show that *affective humor* expands the possibility of intervention and agency as well as the possibility of epistemological change. It is therefore equally important *who* has access to and *uses* humor, and in what ways it is used – questions of subjectivity as well as value. These are issues that are discussed throughout the study. Subjectivity is understood as an intersec-

tional, historically driven discursive formation with embodied and material meanings. It is also seen as a thread of discursive and material, (diegetic and extra-diegetic) traces immanent in (novelistic) texts, as well as an integral part of the evoked meanings of (these) texts. While this understanding determines a generalizable understanding of subjectivity, the conditional, singular, *auto-bio-graphical* instances that shape and distinguish (the course of) lives are seen as the crucial moments and infinitely heterogeneous features of subject-formation that also shape meaning in significant ways, inside and outside texts and discourses. My consideration of subjectivity is informed by Michel Foucault's approach to the entanglement of ›knowledge‹ and power that emerges in discourse and the subject-positions that are consequently constructed, as well as Jacques Derrida's understanding of *autobiography* as a dynamic, resistant, and singular inscription of subject-formation in the experience of a historical time-space and the relation of a self to an other and to the world. It is also informed by the critical approaches of Stuart Hall, Edward W. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Audre Lorde, which also emphasize the historical context and relations of domination in the production of meaning and the economy of representation (Foucault [1966] 1994, [1969] 1972, [1976] 1978; Derrida 1998; Said 1983, 179–225; Lorde [1984] 2007, 36; Spivak [1985] 1994, 66–111; Hall [1997] 2009). I also see it as key to understanding the different narrative levels and the narrative formations and processes of signification in the (literary) texts.¹ In reading the novels, the problem of subjectivity is discussed in combination with narratological textual instances. Narratological terms are used as analytical tools. These include the ›real author‹, the ›implied author‹, and the narrator, as well as possible, assumed ›implied readers‹ or an ›implied audience‹ evoked somewhere at the margins of the text, in addition to the subjectivity and subject-position of the characters and their relationship to each other. With regard to these narratological discussions and terms, I draw primarily on H. Porter Abbott (2010, 2021), as well as Gérard Genette ([1972] 1983), Wayne C. Booth (1983), Seymour Chatman (1978, 1990), Monika Fludernik (2008, 2009, 2015), Mieke Bal (2017), and James Phelan (2005, 2017). These narratological instances in the layers of the texts are significant because they can shed light on the angle and orientation of the meanings evoked and the spaces of touch that emerge. Such narratological concerns are further addressed here for two reasons. On the one hand, the reading of the novels can (ideally) be more easily traced and made more transparent. On the other hand, such traces of subjectivity reveal instances of subject-formation as well as aspects of subject-related counter-formations, which may not follow discourse but displace the signification-configurations in it. They can therefore be seen as relevant aspects of the processes of meaning production and processing that are set in play in the text. They not only point to invisible points of relatedness, but also transform them.

The term *texture* (Spivak 1999; Geisenhanslüke 2015) in the title of this study indicates a constructivist approach to language and discourse. Language and discourse are understood not as abstract entities, but as historically and ›culturally‹ shaped phenomena that are sociopolitically formative, have inscribed and continue to inscribe the material

1 The question of the emergence of subjectivity and subject-constitution in (and as?) a poetic and poetological instance in/and ›the power of language‹ (*der Macht der Sprache in der Dichtung*), an important aspect of reading, I think, is also raised and tackled by Geisenhanslüke (2015, 44 ff.).

world, reach into our bodies, and that determine, at least to some extent, our perceptions of ›truth‹ and ›untruth‹ and ›right‹ and ›wrong‹. The term *texture* then emphasizes the connection between language, discourse, and texts in the narrower sense, as well as the material effects and interweaving of meanings with historical events and their linguistic, discursive, and fixating material impacts and tendencies. At the same time, the term allows us to think beyond these historically driven chains of meaning and to look for forms of resistance, subversion, and transformation that attempt to further interlace and weave this texture in new ways. Texts, especially literary narratives and novels, are understood as seams of sociopolitical discourses and their negotiations, and in this sense as texts that can also be or contain counter-discourses (of ›knowledge‹ and power) (Geisenhanslüke 2015, 41).

I follow a thematic close reading of the novels not only along the theoretical configurations, but also with a view to other epistemological aspects that complement and extend these reflections in the literary texts.

The two exemplary novels, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Dany Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008), share some similarities but are otherwise quite different. The similarities can be seen in some postmodernist features that both novels share, such as the idea of chance. Both novels also have a transnational thread and can be seen as narratives that also deal with diasporic experiences and postcolonial themes. Some threads in both novels include routes and attachments to the Caribbean, specifically to Jamaica and Haiti. Both novels negotiate sociopolitical images and values. The different writing styles of the authors are embedded in postcolonial epistemologies in the sense of and within a critical, I think, *humanist* ›discursive critique in the making‹ (Mbembe 2008, 2) that transcends any fixation. This subtle critical angle makes it possible to distinguish different forms of signification in the novels, which either adhere to conventions, override them, or move beyond any known and binary understandings. In all these cases, the novels employ various tonalities of humor, which entail different and differently evoked affective and epistemological senses. These poetologically evoked meanings and allusions, however, shed light on the discursive texture and ideological tendencies that the novels speak from, have to deal with, and negotiate. Aside from such similarities, the two novels remain different. This also applies to their use and form of humor. *White Teeth* is written from the vantage point of a non-character, an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, who thus does not belong to the storyworld. The novel has a distinctive story and plot, although it may not be linear. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is written from the perspective of a homodiegetic narrator (character narrator), who is enmeshed in the narrative and storyworld, flitting in and out at a metaleptic level. Instead of following a plot, it questions it and the story it wants to tell. In both novels, however, the titles, as paratexts, are meaningful in a variety of ways and are therefore considered in this study as important parts of the analytical structure. Scholarly work on these authors has so far concentrated on the postmodernist and, to a lesser extent, postcolonial tendencies of their works, such as questions of ›identity‹, diaspora, metropolitan life, ›multiculturalism‹, border-crossing, and the bonding of different ›ethnicities‹. While some scholarly attention has been paid to ethics and ›race‹, humor, an important feature in both novels, is acknowledged incidentally, but not yet analyzed as a structuring component in either work. The evocations

of humor in both novels touch on the texture of our thinking, questioning it, and weaving it in other directions.

In this second, reading section of the study, I explore how imagological and stereotypical meanings inscribed in the representative regimes of language and discourse are dislocated in the humorous rhetoric of the two exemplary novels, what their affective work unleashes, and what can be seen and gained from the *touching spaces* they seem to create.

It is shown, I hope, how *affective humor* develops a performing and a performative role: On the one hand, humor is performed, *produced*, in the narrative. On the other hand, a conventionalized utterance or image is repeated and destabilized in the humorous repetition. The rhetoric of *affective humor* gives way to a space in the text in which different issues are touched upon simultaneously, which can be painful as well as pleasurable, joyful as well as tragic. By invoking incongruous images and conventionalized meanings within the poetics of the text, the deconstruction of humor's rhetoric allows for a different perception of the old, the seemingly familiar. Previously normalized notions are scrutinized and questioned. In this way, a conventionalized image is shown to be untenable, and a different, multiple understanding is signaled by the humorously evoked allusions. Simultaneously, fixed meanings are put on hold while an epistemological shift takes shape, which is where the political or even more so the ethical promise of the performative utterances of humor seems to lie (Butler 2003, 1999; Felman 2003). Reading the novels, I further argue how the repetition and representation of stereotypes and their simultaneous humorous destabilization unlock dialogical threads. These threads open up spaces in which different perceptions of the self and the other can emerge, as they touch on different relations in the inscribed textures in which images of the self and the other, as well as discursive significations and epistemological assumptions, can be challenged. In this way, I suggest, a poetological sphere of non-knowledge and powerlessness, of *NichtWissen* and *OhnMacht*, is invoked that is critical of conventional patterns and open for further elaborations, and that questions any straightforward understanding of ›knowledge‹ and power.

In these instances, touch occurs through *grasping* in a threefold Derridian sense: It encompasses an abstract touch of a subject-image in the text, a tactile touch in the sense of a (different) perception of self and other, and an affective touch that enables an epistemological reorientation.

While the reading of the two novels centralizes the diegetic level of the text, I also discuss other instances that shed light on the narratological meta-levels present in the text, especially with regard to a possible emergent relationship between an ›implied author‹ and an ›implied audience‹.

The study concludes with a prospective question about the ethics inherent in those *touching spaces* generated by *affective humor*. In this sense, I am particularly interested in considering *affective humor* as an iterative act with a difference. I relate this idea to the figure of Echo in Ovid's *Narcissus and Echo*. Claire Nouvet discusses Ovid's Narcissus as a »narrative about responsibility« and as »the duty of responding to the call of the other« (Nouvet 1991, 104) by alluding to Derrida's caution to attend to some form of ›ultraethicity‹ instead of presuming a preconceived self, other or ethics. Nouvet thus does not presuppose an ethics of literature per se – one that would give »a chance to the other« – but

rather, as one that is »at the risk of facing its own narrative impossibility« (Nouvet 1991, 104). The »apparition of the ethical imperative« shines through as a form of »thematic visibility« in the work of language (Nouvet 1991, 116). Following Maurice Blanchot and the »desastrous« effects of the transformation of the »I« by the call of the »other«, Echo, she continues, is »[t]he echo which answers my call by remarking my originary absence from »my« call »comes back« as a prayer addressed to »me«. An answer which is also a demand, it enigmatically addresses »me«, commands me to respond while, at the same time, condemning me to unresponsiveness« (Nouvet 1991, 116). However, it may not only be »the work of language« that brings the ethical imperative to the fore, but the unenforced literariness, the literary, dialogical site that renders *the enunciation* and *the enunciated* (Benveniste 1966, 1974), and what foregrounds it, and the effect, and what comes after it, as »duties« and »prayers« in-between the o/Other, which determine the »self«, »I«, and »me« as a potential possibility of openness – within specific, inner and outer readings, and experiences of subjectivity in an (intersectionally) hierarchized and divided, and yet shared wor(l)d. *Ethical imperatives* would then have to be always sought anew in-between the *enunciation* and the *enunciated* and their materialized after-effects. Both Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Derrida [2003] 2005; Spivak [1993] 2012) refer to implicit forms of knowing and speaking that are at work not only in Narcissus' but also in Echo's utterances. Following this image, the novel's negotiation of discursive traits and resignifications through the performative work and affective economy of humor² is considered as a form of repetition that repeats specific discourses, utterances, and images, but may say something else.

Like Echo's distorted and disfiguring repetition of Narcissus' utterances, the humorous evocations of literature are regarded as forms of questioning, as »ultraethicity«, that challenge normative »knowledge« and power, giving subjectivity to the repeating voices, which in the »repetition« challenge meaning for *rethinking*. Conventionalized language is appropriated and (historically determined) meanings appear unhinged, signifying something different, maybe the unruly structure of signification itself? In this respect, the ethical implications of the novel's humorous work are discussed as unenforced and as *reparative readings and writing* in queering processes of healing (Sedgwick 2003). Although, according to the myth, Echo is cursed to repeat, unable to speak her own

2 In *Rhetorik der Echo* (2003), Bettine Menke indeed discusses Echo as paranomasia and as a *trope*, linking it in particular to »irony« and wit in configurations of resilience and powerlessness (*Ohnmacht*). However, in contrast to an automatism that would bind the figure of Echo to the (good) or repressed other, or to a call for an ethical response, Menke also problematizes Echo as a *Nachruf* (literally an obituary), as *fame* that mourns lost power and glory, and in this sense haunts the present, determining and orienting it to a certain extent. She also discusses echo both as a sign of absence that constitutes alleged presences and, in the sense of rumor, as a counter-model of *authorship* that is regarded as a threat to the exactitude and certainty of (cartisian) subjecthood (*intentionales Sprechen*) (153). Echo, relegated to the (female) other, is rejected and vulgarized, and yet it haunts discourse (and politics) with its ghostly presence. Therefore, as an important intervention in the discourse on the call of the o/Other and questions of spectrality – and quite striking in terms of regressive positions and *normalized discourses of power* – I think her text is an approach to »ultraethicity«. It attempts not to presume an ethics, while at the same time searching for it, a direction in which this study also attempts to move.

voice, she nonetheless disobeys the rule she is subjected to, metaphorizing it into her own subjectivity, sense-making, and sensuality. In reusing the words she hears, she fills them, possibly, with other meanings. These may not sound so different, but they always remain to be deciphered anew. Echo then may resemble the always already sliding echo of literature – and literary meanings. The repetitive and reparative effects of its rhetorically evoked deconstructive poetics seem to be particularly palpable in the work of *affective humor*, which touches in different ways on discursively set images, opening up sensuous and epistemological avenues that allow for a different ›ethically‹ informed proximity of self and other, beyond discourse and beyond the limits and limitations of what is considered to be ›knowledge‹ and power.

What seems to emerge from this process may be the possibility of another wor(l)d, of what Derrida calls ›sovereignty‹ (Derrida 2005 a, xii), manifested in the powerless power and unknowing ›knowledge‹ of Echo as power-lessness and non-knowledge. In the process, an *other*, unconquerable, form of agency may unfold, one that emerges in the unenforcing speech and farewell of Echo, which does not affirm ›truths‹ but opens them up. *Affective humor* as such a poetics of literary imagination can be understood as a disruptive, dis/empowering, reparative rhetoric; it involves implicit ›knowledges‹ and powers that inadvertently question and transcend previous beliefs. The poetics of *affective humor* employed in the novels thus can overturn power (a-)symmetries and assumed ›knowledges‹, and make possible, at least for moments, an encounter on equal terms through charming, convivial, radical questioning. Humor appears as an affectively and sensually charged, essential, poetologically generated, deconstructive rhetoric that encompasses ›ultraethical‹ traits. In this sense, at the threshold of an oscillation of conscious and unconscious, discursive and affective economies that permeate the texture of the novelistic text and our material, bodily, and discursive wor(l)ds, humor reveals a multilayered notion of thought and reflection that we may have to take into account in the processes of reading and analysis in general (and of ›seeing‹, ›hearing‹, ›writing‹, ›ourselves‹, ›others‹).

This ethical difference, which Echo signifies as the other figure of dominance, normativity, and power, can be seen as the underlying relational condition between ›philosophy‹, as the narcissistic space of dominant epistemologies, and ›literature‹ as the *ekhora* that possibly resonates power-lessness and non-knowledge in the larger (infinite) space of what could become language. These two institutionalized discourses and textures, which seem to be fundamentally dependent on each other while also encompassing each other, are parts of the same ›organ‹, albeit with different accents, one emphasizing ›knowledge‹ and power and the other non-knowledge and power-lessness in the space beyond the court of discourse (and even language – potential language maybe). It should come as no surprise that Derrida, in his mischievous sense of wonder, implicitly describes both instances, in an interview as part of the experience within the self (as other?) (Derrida 2007 a: 0.35 ff.). Especially in Derrida's *authorial* voice, this conjunction seems quite obvious – an intertwined *narcissechoism*? Such an approach can perhaps become a prescription for how to conceive of our wor(l)ds with all its ambiguities? One last thought concerning gender-sensitive writing: Throughout the work, I have used an asterisk with the pronouns ›she‹ and, occasionally, ›he‹. I have also employed ›they‹ for an unknown gender and as a singular non-binary pronoun to emphasize sensitivity to gender issues. I did this systematically – and also unsystematically wherever I felt it was

necessary to leave space for fluidity, and ambiguous references, and untotalizing meanings.

Let's begin, then, with some beginnings in discussing the touch of humor and its touching spaces, and what we can expect from them along such lines.

Section I

Theoretical and Conceptual Frames

On Affective Humor and Touching Spaces

Beginnings with Laughter or Humor's Zany Comedy

»We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they're humorless, they fail.«
(bell hooks 2015)

»You live and learn. Then you die and forget it all«. – But what if you live and learn and don't die?«
(Matthew Bevis 2013, 60)

bell hook's appeal in this passage places humor at the dynamic center of any (›meaningful‹) revolution. At the same time, she implicitly links humorlessness to failure. But the failure she marks as the result of humorlessness is not the same failure she alludes to in the first sentence of the statement: »We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor«, which is also based on the idea of failure. In this sentence, bell hooks draws a triangle of relationships. She speaks to a ›we‹, she refers to a goal, a ›meaningful revolution‹, and she raises the question of humor as an essential necessity for the realization of this goal by ›us‹. Humor is linked to a ›meaningful revolution‹. It is also tied to a specific context and a specific performing subjectivity. The statement, moreover, indicates a space and a spacing in a complex encounter: of different discourses, of different subjectivities, and of audiences present and absent (a ›we‹ and a ›not-we‹, however imagined), and a revolution within the economy of power.

Humor stands here as a dynamic, life-giving motor for what bell hooks calls a ›meaningful‹ ›revolution‹. While ›revolution‹ evokes what in German can be perceived as *Begehren* and *Aufbegehren*, desire and revolt, the indispensable, affective movement from thought to action, the word ›meaningful‹ evokes a thoughtful, distanced attitude to this desired thought-act of political critique, as well as, in its necessary narcissistic demand for self-care, a thoughtful, critical reflection on the performing subjectivity inherent in the call for the revolutionary movement that takes place and comes into being at the same time. In this way, bell hooks not only places humor at the beginning

of a ›meaningful revolution‹ as a life-enhancing dynamic, but also understands it as a permanent necessity that facilitates the analysis and confrontation of the failures that are inherent in this movement, so it can be perceived as ›meaningful‹ and proceed within this discontinuous unlearning process of self-scrutinizing ruptures. It thus does not exclude failure from a meaningful revolutionary act, but places it squarely within its process. In this statement, there is also the desire to achieve a ›meaningful revolution‹. This desire implies not only a goal, but also a relationship, an encounter, a space between ›us‹ and ›the world‹. It can also be read as an *a priori* ethical desire to encounter the *O/other*,¹ as well as the desire to do it differently, not to exercise power, not to be violent and genocidal in order to achieve this goal, but to be *committed to the desire* to achieve it – by adhering to humor as the beginning, the limit, and the limitation of a ›meaningful revolution‹. Both ›revolution‹ and humor subtly evoke images of affectivity – a spectrum of different ›affects‹. While ›revolution‹ is connoted as ›love‹, grief, rage, and determination, humor, by contrast, indicates an openness to pleasure, and joy, and (the sweetness of) melancholy in dealing with pain. bell hooks' statement also links humor to political movements and to power, counter-power, and their discourses within an asymmetrical economic web. Her indicative definition seems to include and speak to Matthew Bevis's playful interjection and performance of humor as an interventionist rhetorical act: *What if we don't die and don't forget?* This is ›the most scientific of all possible hypotheses‹, as Friedrich Nietzsche might have claimed, for there is a resemblance between bell hooks' understanding and Bevis' humorous concluding remark, and the crux of Nietzsche's much discussed theory of *eternal recurrence* – a theory that is also debated in terms of its ethical implications.² How would we behave? – Would we behave differently if we did not die and not forget? And what role might not-forgetting play? Would we be obliged to behave in a particular way? (And which subjectivities are evoked by the pronoun ›we‹ here?) How would that affect our choices, and how would we face the *O/other*, both the Other with a capital O, as a power that can also be found in the traits of the self, and the other with a small o, which represents otherness, and which also resides at the margins

1 See footnote 3.

2 Nietzsche's famous notion of eternal recurrence – that everything will happen over and over again – is now seen as a central concept in his thought. In his work, Nietzsche mentions it in *The Gay Science* (§ 341) as well as throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche, this is in fact not a happy thought, but a heavy one, a blow (with regard to all the disgust that is part of life); although Nietzsche writes that he knows this concept from ›other thinkers‹ (and he mentions H. Heine in this context, see Kaufmann 2013, 317), he still describes it as a sudden ›revelatory‹ moment. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche seems to develop this idea further as an affirmation and poetics of living along the horrors and pitfalls of life, as moments, worthwhile, ›full‹ forms of living, against conventionalized norms, beliefs, and constraints. This concept not only affirms life in the (nonsensical) way it appears to be; it also affirms non-death, the impossibility of ›dying‹. An ethical quest seems to emerge from this ›call‹: how to live in the quasi-knowledge that everything returns and must be faced anew? A thought that seems to require infinite internal and external reflection, deceleration? (Fantasy? Imagination? Creativity? Justice?) Nietzsche's thought is particularly interesting because it is outside any ›law‹, religious conformity, and dogma, and even questions them (as aberrant human conventions). For an overview see Anderson (2017); Kaufmann (1974, 2013, 317 ff.); and Nietzsche/Kaufmann (1974, 273, 1978, 219, 70 ff.); Deleuze (2002, 27 ff.).

of the self, giving it structure?³ And how would we indulge and invest in the future, if we did not die and did not forget? Humor, as in this evocation, refers to the possibilities of the impossible (in conventionalized thought); it recaptures an iteration, albeit one that shifts the impossible to the possible, while also opening up the revolutionary philosophical and ethical dimensions that such a shift might entail.

This study and search for an understanding of humor is guided by such questions.

While bell hooks integrates humor as a vital and self-critical marker of a discourse initiated by a (Black feminist, critical) intervention, it has not always been welcome in other discourses, especially those representing dominant (Western?) canons and archives. Somehow, elsewhere, humor seems to get in the way in an unwieldy manner, queering the flow of authoritative thought, an interrogative quality not always appreciated (Amir 2017).

Indeed, theorizations of humor are seen as a rather modern phenomenon, at least in ›the West‹. According to John Morreall, »from antiquity to the 20th century, the most any significant philosopher wrote about laughter or humour was an essay, and only a few lesser-known thinkers such as Frances Hutcheson and James Beattie wrote that much« (Morreall 2020).

It is interesting that while Aristotle's work on tragedy has survived, his work on comedy has been lost – or only lost in translation, until perhaps one day it is found in the layers of an Arabic work in the depths of some forgotten library from the time of ›Islamic Spain‹ or in some archive in (North or Sub-Saharan) Africa or Hindustan?⁴ However, the ghost of this work by one of the most celebrated (Western?) fathers of philosophy has

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- 3 On the definition of O/other and othering, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985, 247–272). Spivak's theorization builds on Lacan's psychoanalytic approach to the formation of the subject in the infant. Seeing itself mirrored in the mother's gaze (the Other as the absolute pole of address), the baby conceives of itself for the first time (and if all goes well) as a stable and intact entity, and desires to become this mirrored other-image (Lacan's mirror stage); Spivak applies this approach to the relationship between ›empire‹ and the ›colonized world‹ in colonial discourse, in which, too, subject-formations take place. But Spivak also implements a Derridean reading of Lacan's mirror stage in her approach, suggesting that meaning formation takes place on both sides of the divide. *Othering* signals the discursive processes and material effects in which these relations of supremacy and inferiorization that regulate structures of power and domination are construed.
- 4 In his study on tragedy *The Greeks and Us* (2019), Simon Critchley follows the trail of Aristotle's lost book. He focuses on the *Tractatus Coislinialus*, a 10th (or 17th?)-century Byzantine text thought to be a summary of Aristotle's second book of *Poetics*, which is said to deal with comedy. Although the authenticity of the text is controversial among classicists (with Critchley arguing for its validity), it seems to have already influenced the discourse on humor. The *Tractatus Coislinialus* arrived in Paris from Cyprus in 1643 and became part of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*. It was brought to a wider readership by J. A. Cramer in 1839 and became influential through the work of the philologist Jacob Bernays (*Two Treatises on the Aristotelian Theory of Drama*, published in 1880), who happened to be the uncle of Sigmund Freud's wife, Martha Bernays. It was Bernays's theory of catharsis, based on a reading of this text, that influenced Sigmund Freud's famous and still much debated work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). For fruitful discussions of the possibility of Afro-Asian roots in Greek and Roman culture, see also Daniel Orrells, Gurminder K. Bhambra, Tessa Roynon (2011). See regarding a discussion of the contents of the *Tractatus* in literary theory Frye ([1975] 2020, 166ff., 172 ff.).

been enough of an incentive to give way to a haunting pursuit of the idea, concept, literary form, and genre of comedy in literary studies, but also in philosophy, otherwise the sense of ›laughter‹ and humor might have disappeared forever from the somber and solemn undertakings of (philosophical) thought (at least ›in the West‹?).⁵ Laughter had already been discredited by Plato's negative and suspicious inclinations towards it, especially in the *Republic*, and was banned from thinking (law and order), indeed made philosophy's other, well into (post-)modernity (Stott 2005; Amir 2017; Geisenhanslüke 2017).

Aristotle, although he, too, described humor as abusive, was less apodictic about it (Carroll 2014, 6; Bevis 2013, 20 ff.) – but then there is the gap of his missing work. Whether this could be read as the tragedy of comedy, or the comedy of tragedy, or both, or of humor's salty traces in the tracks of (philosophical) thought – who will ever know (this *Geschick* and *Geworfenheit*)? Interestingly, Matthew Bevis makes a connection between the degradation of humor in ancient Greek (European) philosophy and the Dionysian mysteries (Bevis 2013, 8). The Dionysian mysteries and rites symbolize liberation from social constraints and conventions. Intoxication, dance, trance, and fertility rites represent rebirth, creativity, and new beginnings. These implicitly mock conventionalized power structures and create space for thought by including the senses and experiences of transcendence (Bevis 2013, 8 ff.). More interestingly, Demeter, the mother of Dionysus, is often associated with the mother goddess* Cybele, who, coming from ›the East‹, remained to a certain extent ›foreign‹ and ›exotic‹.⁶ Perhaps here are some early traces of the othering and *selfing* that later became fundamental to (only Western?) self-understandings, as well as the philosophical divide between thinking, which is linked to ›reason‹, and sensuality, and everything else that was seen as purely outside of ›reason‹ and excluded from philosophy. This rift, which was critically addressed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)⁷ and captured as the Apollonian and

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- 5 Regarding ›seriousness‹ as a kind of presupposition for philosophy to define itself, see Derrida ([1993] 1995, 100 ff.). Derrida develops this idea from Hegel's reading of Plato as a separation from the ›mythic form‹. In ›essence‹, this could be ›translated‹ as ›literary writing‹ – which seems such an essential part of Platonic thought-writing. Odd.
 - 6 Beginning with the archaeological finding of a Cybele figure in Afghanistan dating back to Bactria, Philippe Borgeaud attempts to trace the figure in a historical analysis; the figure of Cybele represents not only a mother-goddess* who seems to be found throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe, but one who, according to Borgeaud, also represents ›exotic otherness and ancestral heritage‹ (Borgeaud [1996] 2004).
 - 7 Nietzsche's intervention is also often seen and discussed in conjunction with theories of tragedy. In his seminal work *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1978) and in particular its appendix *The Fourth Stage*, Wole Soyinka reads this in(ter)vention of Nietzsche as the anchoring of tragedy in Western thought and argues for an opening of the search for the epistemologies and meanings of tragedy around the globe, beginning and emphasizing the Yoruba God Ogun as a complementary figure that integrates the tragic with a unification of the Apollonian and Dionysian parts depicted by Nietzsche. Yet I think Nietzsche was not so much interested in drawing a binary distinction here and emphasizing tragedy for European needs, as in criticizing and deploring the lopsidedness of what was perceived as ›reason‹ in European philosophy. In this sense, Nietzsche can be read in conjunction with decolonial readings and himself may in fact be conceived as an *Esu*-figure, *signifyin(g)* with this contentious book the overpowering and patterned rule of thinking along with what was deemed to be ›reason‹. For the meanings of the mythical figure of *Esu*- and divinity, as well as the rhetoric of *signifyin(g)* as a critical practice in African American and African diasporic cultural and

Dionysian concepts, can also be traced in modern Western thought (Nevo 1963; Carlevalle 2005; Geisenhanslüke 2011; Amir 2019). Humor, therefore, – or rather, its absence – may have a much more significant trace in the shaping of (only Western?) philosophy than it might appear at first sight.

Despite these negative ascriptions, studies on humor have emerged in scattered and disparate ways, undermining the ban. The concept, category, and genre of comedy, even in the narrower sense, and all the more so in all its overarching and specific meanings, and the category of humor, which is often attached to it in different ways, now comprise such a vast field of research and scholarly attention that it seems impossible to come to terms with it in the confines of a library, let alone in a single study.⁸ It might be compared to being swept over or sunk under the very fine and powerful weight of the sands of a desert. Klaus Schwind attributes this partly chaotic and magisterial level of scholarly attention to humor to the rather late engagement with the disparate categories attached to it and the unsystematic, predominantly negative connotations associated with it (Schwind 2001, 332; see also Morreall 2020). Another reason for this rather late interest and the huge amount of work on humor is the revaluation of humor and the desire to understand it at different levels of philosophical, cognitive, psychological, literary, and aesthetic inquiry that has been unleashed in the wake of (post-)modernist and poststructuralist critiques, which question the supremacy of ›reason‹ and ›knowledge‹ (that have centralized and universalized a *white*, ›able‹, cis-normative, middle-class, (enlightened ;-)) male subject of *Christian* descent). Furthermore, as Simon Critchley puts it, there is something about humor (perhaps its [presumed] otherness?) that attracts thought, maybe because defining it seems such an ›elusive task‹. Critchley describes his attempt as an attraction to an ›impossible object‹ that ›philosophy cannot appropriate or conceptualize‹, that resists ›philosophy as discourse‹, and to watch ›what happens in this play of resistance and attraction‹ (Critchley 2005).

This section, too, while attracted to and captivated by humor and how it works, cannot offer a concise overview. Rather, it is a sober attempt (without any guarantees) – how could it be otherwise, given all the fine sand and its derailing effects – to come to terms

literary productions, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. [1978] 2014. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s encompassing theory of *signifyin(g)* as ›the trope of tropes‹, as a, *the*, rhetorical device for infinite forms of *resignification*, and as the work of (literary) theory per se is a still underexplored foundational work. See also annotation 21, p. 84.

- 8 An overview of this trace of ›the comic‹ within literary and philosophical thought, can be found in Achim Geisenhanslüke (2017, 68–77), and, in particular with regard to ›the joke‹, in Bettine Menke (2021). For a broader historical overview, see Klaus Schwind (2001, 232–283). Lydia Amir's recent three-volume work can be seen as a first in-depth attempt to change this situation and to fill this gap in philosophy from a (continental?) philosophical point of view. Amir is painfully aware of this lack in philosophy and attempts to show the importance that humor has had in the work of various philosophers, reading their work as explicit and implicit traces of humor. According to Amir, humor is an important ›tool‹ in philosophy (Amir 2017). Amir's work encompasses the work of (Western) philosophers from the so-called Middle Ages to modernity. Her search is accompanied by a reluctance to engage with ›postmodernism‹ in which she places the work of Jacques Derrida, but from which she distances George Bataille and Gilles Deleuze (Amir 2022, 4). Following an Aristotelian-inspired gesture, Amir's aim is to show the interconnectedness of humor with the notion of *good life* (see Amir 2017, 2019, 2022).

with some configurations of the humorous in terms of its possible (affective) functions and functionalities within the various techniques of language inscribed in the asymmetries of the workings of language and power – all of which are also reflected in discourse, the materiality of the wor(l)d, and thus also in (contemporary) literary works.

The aim of this section, therefore, is not to provide yet another concise, let alone exhaustive, tidy overview – or definition – of literary understandings of the term, to discuss the centrality of the term as a genre, or to explore the relationship between what is presented as comedy or humor in conjunction with, other terms used for the humorous. In line with Edward W. Said's understanding of a critical stance, this approach »improvises, in acts of an often inspired bricolage order out of extreme discontinuity. Its culture is a negative one of absence, antirepresentation, and [...] ignorance« (Said 1983, 146). Its method is »incorporative; it converts what seems to be alien, or in some cases quixotic and trivial material, into pertinent dimensions of the text«, in which texts are seen as »deviations, exaggerations and negations of the human presence. They are at times phenomena of excess and rupture« (Said 1983, 147), put on a (discontinuous) line to see »how language signifies, what it signifies, in what form« (Said 1993, 147).

As Judith Roof writes about humor (and I take this as a further insight for this study):

»The logical difficulty here, as you might have noticed, is how one knows some event is comic in the first place. If one does not understand how comedy operates, and if one's task is to figure that out, then producing a taxonomy as a first step seems to rely on an analysis that has already been completed. How do you know what the comic is unless you know what it is? This might sound suspiciously like the problem of inseparability [...].« (Roof 2018, 9)

Indeed, it may well be the case, and I follow Roof in arguing for such an understanding, in which humor cannot be separated and thought of independently from other concepts of the comic, as well as the political, ethical, theoretical, epistemological, and sociopolitical issues it touches upon.⁹ Its understanding and function, as well as reflections on it can only be understood as contingent and slippery – but, nevertheless, as a »social practice« as well as a literary and performative cultural expression that is worth paying closer attention to. Taking this suspicion of inseparability as a starting point, I wish to open up an approach to humor understood, on the one hand, in its relation to affectivity as a form of »touch« (a concept with its own inseparabilities). Indeed, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (2009), Eric Weitz defines »laughter« as the »physical effect« of humor that takes place without touching (Weitz 2009, 3), implicitly considering humor as a form of touch that functions without an immediate haptic sense. In this text, too, touch is not necessarily understood as a physical phenomenon but rather problematized as an intersubjective, affective relationality, enunciated in language that points to something within an occurring event, whether large or small. On the other hand, by focusing on its relations and embeddedness in affectivity, performativity, and language, I aim to think about it in a way that scrutinizes its rhetorical setting-to-work dynamics, and to consider these

9 See also Bettine Menke (2021, vii–viii).

workings within a narratological analysis of novels that, however implicitly and differently, address and perform these issues in the (con-)textual spaces they invoke. As Lydia Amir notes in the introduction to her work *Philosophy, Humor and the Human Condition* (2019): »Rather than laughing off our ridicule, however, we should take it seriously and own it. Affirming it enables us to reach the highest promises of philosophy and religion, of the East and the West« (Amir 2019, ix), and of the South and the North, one might add, which can be sensed in the ways in which the poetics of (literary) writing (of any kind) affects them in different ways, and which may indeed contain the promises and flavors of other, more inclusive, more earth-bound ways of thought.

The first part of this section gives an overview of different theories and approaches to humor. The second part proposes theoretical approaches that provide a basis for theorizing *affective humor*. Finally, the third part of this section is concerned with the interrelation of affectivity, humor, and touch and the spaces of interrelationality that this opens up. Here, I consider and centralize the meaning of touch along the lines of Jacques Derrida, whose work remains an important contribution to the understanding and further development of the term. In light of all these aspects, I understand humor as a doubly spatial phenomenon that carves out a space of encounter and, within this space, opens up another space for negotiating dialogicity beyond itself.

A-View-Over-Humor

Although there have always been attempts to come to terms with the phenomenon of humor and to philosophize and theorize its ›nature‹, processes, and effects, one of the difficulties in tracing its whereabouts and understanding is that the term collapses into several other terms such as ›comedy‹, ›the comic‹, ›joke‹, ›wit‹, ›irony‹, and ›laughter‹ – often in the same text. So, the confusion or complexity of humor is already inherent in the process of defining it. Andrew Bennet and Nicolas Royle express this in the following way: »There are few things worse than the prospect of trying to talk about laughter, or trying to define what is humorous« (2023, 145; see also Menke 2021, vii-viii). This is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's idea of the deferral and the infinite metonymic procedure of *différance* in language and the production of meaning, which already escapes what it proposes to say and fix by alluding to something else in order to make that argument. This whole process and the desire to finally define something may have been a humorous pleasure and a mild melancholy for Derrida, who may have said: »If you had looked at what I had to say to you, you might have wanted to start somewhere else. But just keep on trying ...«.

For some time now, perhaps since (European?) antiquity (or since Aristotle's work was lost?), it is no secret that there is a certain hierarchy between the concepts of comedy and humor (Schwind 2010, 340; Geisenhanslüke 2017, 68; Morreal 2020). While comedy occupies a sophisticated place in the most refined heights of (literary) theory and scholarship (a place it shares to some extent with the concepts of ›irony‹ and wit), humor is predominantly treated rather inimically as a kind of not *très chic* interloper, misfit, and pariah of (philosophical) thought. Humor and ›laughter‹ are somehow seen almost as a threat and ridicule – of the self, of stability, of order(s)? – and are negatively associated

with an assumed ›lightness‹ that seems incompatible with the weight of thinking *per se* in (›Western‹) philosophy (Critchley 2005; Banki 2017; Wirth 2017, 122; Morreall 2020).

Achim Geisenhanslüke attributes this tendency to marginalize humor within philosophy to its self-understanding as a field of wisdom and ›knowledge‹, to which humor (*das Komische, die Komik*) is considered a counterpart. According to him, this movement explicitly takes shape in modern philosophy. Humor is thus often seen as the other of philosophy, and also as the other of what philosophy understands as ›knowledge‹ or ›reason‹, a tendency in philosophical thinking that Geisenhanslüke attributes to Immanuel Kant's evocation of humor (*Witz, Witzigkeit*) in relation to ›reason‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 25 ff., 2017, 14 ff.). By emphasizing the *philosophical wit* of *literature*, Geisenhanslüke establishes a noteworthy connection between what is perceived as ›philosophical‹ and ›literary‹ utterances, implicitly alluding to the performative and metaphorical play of language, which he simultaneously enacts in saying: »It is in the wit of poetic writing [*Dichtkunst*] where philosophic acumen not only finds a mirror, but also a limit« (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 49; translations mine). Geisenhanslüke not only *reinscribes* a connection between literary writing, humor, and philosophy, but also suggests an *aporia* of philosophical reasonableness that opens up to and is limited by its other – the space of literature (and imagination?) – while it, at the same time, must succumb to the poetics of humor that the statement invokes.

The philosophically quite humorless attitude towards humor can be read as a strategy of control (Berlant 2017, 2018), not only of the thinking subject, but also in a broader sociopolitical sense. In this context, Berlant speaks of humorlessness as a political ›affect‹ used by different social groups for political control: »People on the top of social hierarchies use humorless performativity to produce the fear that protects power; people on the bottom perform it to refuse to extend and legitimate the top's self-pleasure« (Berlant 2018, 157 f.). The rejection of humor in philosophical thinking, in combination with what is seen as its opposite, sobriety – an attitude that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called the »usual disinterested academic style« (Spivak 1996, 30) – can be seen as pointing to an epistemological topology in academic thinking as well as to a desire for control that controls the *limits* rather than the *limitations* of thinking. This may be the most striking difference between philosophical thinking and humorous play (or, conversely, between philosophical play and humorous thinking): While philosophical thinking unfolds at the limits of ›knowledge‹, humor unfolds at its limitations; while philosophy sets the grounds for thinking, humor opens them up.

Although Berlant does not name it explicitly, their definition of humorlessness and humorless comedy (2017, 307) also refers to the central role that the materializations of the concept of ›race‹ play in sociopolitical structural hierarchies. For othered people, humor and laughing at this kind of humorlessness (of dominant thinking) means something else; it is not only a strategy of survival and resistance, but also an epistemological topology with an ethical affinity that seeks to transgress both sociopolitical and epistemological boundaries in search for new ways of thought¹⁰ – or so it can be hoped.

10 The importance of humor in relation to antisemitism/racism is addressed in Sigmund Freud's *The Joke and its Relation to the Subconscious* (1905) in different open and more hidden ways as will be discussed further below.

Within literary studies, it is not only the philosophical approach to humor that provides the basis for understanding it, but also an internal factor: the genre of comedy. Comedy occupies an important, ancient, and central place in literary studies that is linked to drama, is well studied, and over centuries, remained »stubbornly intact« (Leggatt 1980, 1). This is also evident in publications that depict the term by emphasizing its central status within literary studies (Weitz 2009). The term ›comedy‹ is also regularly applied to a number of subgenres, subdivisions, and other, older and modern, forms of humorous expression and style, such as pastoral comedy, comedy of manners, stand-up comedy, cartooning and caricature, sitcom and slapstick, and so on (Stott 2005, 2). There are also a number of other terms in literary studies and literary theory that refer to humorous representation in writing, language, and literature, such as wit, pun, satire, ›irony‹, parody, the grotesque, farce, or the burlesque. Thus, while the humorous diversity of literary and artistic expression is not denied, it is ›comedy‹ that is taken as the overarching term for naming them. Matthew Bevis therefore suggests that we think of comedy »as a literary genre and a range of non-literary phenomena, experiences and events« of everyday life (Bevis 2013, 2).

In more recent publications, however, and while comedy retains its important place in literary studies, the term ›humor‹ is increasingly used as an umbrella term to capture the many facets of the humorous in order to be able to analyze it across the spectrum of its meanings. Thus, despite its poor ranking, humor is now being discussed in literary studies, but also in philosophy and other fields, as another more comprehensive term, and is recently – at last – seen as explicitly related to comedy (Stott 2005; Weitz 2009). In line with the paradigm of the unfixity of the subject (– and certainly since postmodernist theorizations –) humor in these new approaches to the comic seems to signal a kind of (epistemological) democratization process of what can be regarded as the value of insight that is attached to the humorous. Here, the corporeal aspect of humor and the centrality of the body play an important role. In these different approaches, ›humor‹ is often taken up as an umbrella term that refers to different expressions and functionalities of what is considered ›funny‹/›comic‹/›comedic‹ or as ›laughter‹.¹¹ Following the OED's approach

11 For example, the editors of the journal *Anglistik – International Journal of English Studies* speak of ›the comic‹ in their special issue on the humorous and the way it is used and reflected in (English) literature (27/2016, 5 ff.). This may be related with the German context in which the study is situated, at least physically, where the term humor not used in this general, overarching way. Florian Klaeger uses the term *negative hilarity* to highlight another »bitter« comedic expression and literary mode of disillusionment in contemporary literature that has a diegetic as well as meta-critical trait. Often depicted as ›non-comedy‹, it also understands itself as ›non-tragedy‹. This critical tone does not comply with ›old‹ understandings of the genre of comedy and tragedy awaiting something new that has yet to arrive. See Klaeger (2009, 71–84). In German *humor* generally signifies a *sense* of humor. The terms *Komik* and *das Komische* appear to be more overarching depiction of humor – a topic that has recently become en vogue again, and is much under scholarly scrutiny, with some very insightful publications. See, for example, *Komik – Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, 2017, edited by Uwe Wirth. The very particular quality of these two terms is their ambiguity and equivocality, especially in their modern meanings. In the expression »Wie komisch!« they can refer back to a witty remark as a resentful response. Thus, rather than to be the last word, *Komik* appears here with a teasing quality. However, *komisch* is not only jocular or zany, but also odd, curious or even uncanny or creepy – a trait lacking in humor, even in satirical humor. Therefore, I do not know,

to comedy as »a broader impulse at work and play in life«, Bevis links humor to comedy without distinguishing between the two terms or their historical setting. He sees humor as a feature of comedy and as an artistic expression, but also as a lens of and for its critical analysis. Regarding the workings of comedy he asks: »How can humor be used? When do we laugh, and why? What is it that speakers as well as writers enjoy – and risk – when they tell a joke, indulge in bathos, talk nonsense, or encourage irony?« (Bevis 2013, 2). This does not make the task of defining the humorous more specific or easier, but it may show the limits of defining what ›comedy‹ is and of differentiating it from humor.

In older considerations, humor in the sense of ›wit‹ is discussed as being of some value, for example in Cicero's characterization of it as a winsome gift – albeit one that cannot be taught systematically; an idea that is also reflected in Kant's understanding of *Witz* as *ingenium* (Geisenhanslüke 2017, 71; see also Menke 2021, xix ff.). Humor in this sense of insightful, playful thinking is thus somehow related to the ›nature‹ and ›character‹ of human beings (only philosophers?), and in this sense also to the process of gaining a kind of aesthetically generated, sophisticated insight. Humor is then also seen as a form of (literary) aesthetics, as the experience of the liminality of being human per se, and as the limit of (philosophical) reasonableness, and even as philosophy itself (Geisenhanslüke 2017, 76) – considerations in which it appears as a marker of knowledgeability and reflective thinking in and of itself. However, the overall and main understandings of theories of humor suggest that humor has been predominantly understood negatively in philosophy (Critchley 2005; Geisenhanslüke 2017; Wirth 2017; Morreall 2020). Apart from some scattered appreciation of the humorous in ancient texts by Aristotle and Aristophanes – and some modern reflections – it is only recently, and in line with the explosive use of various forms of (performative) humor in the media and entertainment industry, that humor has been seen as a purposeful and ›healthy‹ site of human behavior and ability, often within quite biologist, evolutionary approaches along theories of play (Boyd 2004; Linge 2006; Cann/Collette 2014). It is therefore interesting to see in which directions discourses on humor will go and take us, especially when defining humor itself seems to become a comic act (or play?). As Critchley points out, implicitly highlighting the constructed nature of finding a starting point for humor in order to situate it within a framework, while also acknowledging other approaches:

»No one can agree what comedy is, what comedy is not, what the difference is between irony, humor, satire: these are incredibly contested and contestable topics. I chose humor, partly, because I can tell a clear historical story about it: humor begins as a concept in the English language at the end of the seventeenth century, with the shift from the medical theory of the four humors to the modern idea of humor. You can locate it, and its location is one that you can tell a story about in so far as the birth of humor as something jocular (and not as the doctrine of the humors in classical medicine) is tied to the development of what we now think of as liberal democracy.« (Critchley 2005)

whether the German terms *Komik* and *komisch* are favorable in the German context or if the debate would also benefit from the use of *Humor*.

Andrew Stott and Lydia Amir emphasize the interrelation of humor with the tragic, but also with other forms of the humorous (Stott 2005; Amir 2017, 2022). Stott points to the difficulty of finding a generic definition that is not too narrow and that can be applied to the variety of forms in which humor can be expressed. In order to address the diversity of humorous elements and to be able to analyze specific features and themes in these different forms, Stott extracts a denominator for ›the comic‹, which he takes to be its ›tonal‹ rather than ›structural‹ feature. Instead of ›the comic‹, he therefore proposes to speak of ›humor‹ as »a specific tone which operates free from generic constraints and which, while not the exclusive property of comedy, is closely associated with it« (Stott 2005, 2). Following Stott, humor is understood here as a *tonality*, a rhythmic deployment, as a more general characteristic of and in the production of meaning (Stott 2005, 2; see also Terry Eagleton 2019; Kindt 2017, 2017 a).

›Tonality‹ refers to two aspects: On the one hand, it refers to the different forms that a humorous touch can take in the text. On the other hand, it refers to the different effects and affectivity that it unleashes. *Rhythmic* does not only refer to the different tones and forms that the humorous can produce. It also refers to another aspect: the sociopolitical context of the speaker/storyteller/narrator as well as the sensibilities of their audience(s) within historically determined signifying practices. This idea of the *rhythmic* in the tonality of humor is based on Hérni Meschonnic's understanding of *rhythm*. Meschonnic draws from Émile Benveniste's work on rhythm as a *form in the process of formation* – not in the later meaning that Plato attached to it in the sense of ›the form of movement‹ (Benveniste 1971, 287, Michon 2021, Viehöver 2015). Meschonnic's understanding of rhythm refers not only to the text and narrative but also to language as a fluid, evolving material and to the shaping of a subject within an open historical process as well as the process of reading and writing (Meschonnic 1982, 15 ff., 71; Trabandt 1990, 14 ff; Geisenhanslüke 2013, 87, 106, Viehöver 2015). Meschonnic places a text, its meaning and understanding within a dynamic historical process that includes its different readings. In this way, he also considers the central aspect of subjectivity and ›subjectification‹ within the performative quality of language-use. *Rhythm*, understood in these terms, also includes the *echo* that a text finds or that is silenced and erased from discourse. Meschonnic's understanding of rhythm corresponds to the understanding of subjectivity within feminist Black, Postcolonial, and Decolonial Studies, where the subjectivity of the speaking subject, subject-positions, as well as self-positionings and positionality within discourse are centralized and considered as part of any reading, writing, and analysis (Said 1983, 185 ff.; Lorde [1984] 2007, 114 ff.; Spivak [1993] 2009, 11, 58 ff.; Crenshaw 1989; Illmonen 2019). In the process, the question of *who* (which historically formed subjectivity) says *what* in which context can be examined, and whether and how the said and the speaking subject find an *echo*.

Humor, too, involves an utterance, a (con)text or an act that – to put it in general terms – comes from somewhere and occurs in a specific context. Not only its tonality, but also its subject-related unfolding, the *rhythm*, and *echo* of this tonality in this sense, is relevant for the analysis of the signification produced and can be considered further.

Understood in this overarching way as *rhythmic tonality*, humor can encompass different styles and forms and evoke different functions in order to signal different effects of and in meaning. Such an understanding is of particular interest in relation to novels,

since novels (like any longer text?) can indeed use and combine different forms of humor with different functions to evoke different sites and tones of meaning within language, as well as the historically determined sociopolitical context that they reflect and echo. This is the understanding in which humor as a *rhythmic tonality* is worked with in this study and which forms the basis for its further elaboration: Humor, then, is understood as an umbrella term, a tonality, that can encompass different forms of the humorous and is bound to the *rhythm* and *echo* of historically driven and autobiographical subject formations.

Theories of Humor – an Overview I

In dealing with the wide variety of ideas about humor, what it is and how it works, theorizations of humor are often categorized under four broad labels. Since these categorizations are regularly used and quite common, I will briefly introduce them here for pragmatic reasons – in this way, the main threads of understanding humor and the difficulties of coming to terms with it may also become more apparent. These are the *theories of superiority, relief, play and incongruity* (Morreal 2009, 2020, 2013; Critchley 2002; Carroll 2014). These umbrella terms are often used to subdivide classical, modern, and contemporary philosophical and theoretical approaches to humor, and also include influential contributions in literary theory.

The earliest Western texts in this context depict and classify humor as something morally viscous and are subsumed under the category of *superiority theory*. The *superiority theory* is considered to be the oldest theory of humor and can be traced back to Plato. For Plato, humor and ›laughter‹ represent negative aspects of behavior. Plato relates humor/laughter to the loss of control and the undermining of authority (in a negative sense), and thus to a moral danger of social order. Plato rejects humor even in poetic form, in literature, and claims that it should be censored for the good of all (Plato 1980, 388 e–389 a).¹² His rejection, though, includes an ambiguous aspect of care. Plato regards humor in this sense of ›laughter‹ as a form of ignorance (of ›immature men‹) (Plato 1980, 457 b), and his approach condemns the ›laughter‹ of others (women) who do not know better [sic!]. Interestingly, however, Plato's declassification and exclusion of humor from the realm of philosophy and (sociopolitical) morality is reasoned from the perspective of power and relegates humor to the other (the enslaved and ›ignorant‹ populace). The so-called *superiority theory* of humor is therefore misleading in this respect, as it also indicates a rejection of hierarchical mockery, whereby in Plato ›laughter‹ is also seen as ›low class‹, indicating a rejection of the underprivileged laughing at those in power (philosophers, for example ;-)) (Morreal 2020; Bett 2019; Destrée/Trivigno 2019; see also Weber 1987, 692 ff.). Humor is in this way relegated to the enslaved and others classified as ›ignorant‹, while ›laughter‹, as an effect of humor, becomes the antonym of ›knowledge‹.

However, a kind of ›civilized‹, *witty* humor – which characterizes the rhetoric of the *Dialogues* throughout – is apparently allowed (under Plato's auspices and control, as it

12 Here and throughout the work, Lane Coopers translation of Plato's *Dialogues* is used in the edition *The Collected Dialogues of Plato – Including the Letters* of Hamilton/Cairns ([1960] 1980).

were). Although Plato's critique thus seems too complex to be easily discerned, it does point to a desire for control and a fear of losing it, whether in sociopolitical terms or in terms of the self and the body. The *superiority theory* of humor is also embedded in configurations in which and through which the marginalized other is placed – based on the ratio that they may ridicule orders of power. This approach is also marked by a hierarchy: ›Knowledge‹ and a *knowing humor*, are opposed to ignorance, ›emotionality‹, and exuberance.

The Stoics, too, reject humor, linking it to the loss of control of a (coherent?) self. It does not get better in Christianity, where God's ›laughter‹ coincides with HIS [sic!] wrath (Morreall 2020)¹³ (while THEY, HE*, and SHE* may be laughing out loud with joy.¹⁴ René Descartes in his *Passions of the Soul* and Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* also dismiss ›laughter‹ as a form of misbehavior and a sense of superiority over others or one's (former) self. It is not until Francis Hutcheson's 1750 critique of Hobbes's text that humor is dissociated from superiority as its sole possible meaning (Morreall 2020; Carroll 2014, 4 ff.). Nevertheless, theories of superiority remain a stable resource for theorizing humor.

The *release – or relief – theory* of humor is often attributed to an essay by Lord Shaftesbury (*An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, 1709). It emphasizes the effect of humor in releasing repressed, accumulated (nervous, ›animal‹) energies and ›affects‹, which find a way to be discharged from the system through humor. Aristotle's lost second volume of *Poetics*, thought to deal with comedy, may have included such an approach, with comedy acting as a catharsis for other sensations. Immanuel Kant, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud are also often seen as proponents of the *release theory* of humor, according to which unpleasant ›affects‹ are released from the body and mind through ›laughter‹ (Carroll 2014, 38 ff.). While Kant speaks of expectations aroused by the incongruous or contradictory that are resolved through ›laughter‹ in ›nothingness‹ (Morreall 2009, 248), Spencer sees ›laughter‹ as a capacity that frees the mind of superfluous energy. Freud's approach to humor builds in multiple ways on *theories of relief*, with ›laughter‹ understood as a release of energy from the psyche (Morreall 2009, 244 ff.). Another contemporary theory of humor, proposed by Jerrold Levinson, also emphasizes the pleasurable, enabling character of humor. Levinson views humor as the ›mirth‹ within a cognitive and ›conscious‹ process involving ›appropriate people‹ – those prepared for it – that manifests

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- 13 Humor and religion is another interesting branch in the study of humor, opening up the possibilities of understanding it in relation to faith, religiosity, transcendence, the everyday, textuality, and ›identity‹ formation. The link between humor and religion is not a new phenomenon, appearing, for example, in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, but what may be new is that it is being taken up in a systematic way, inspired by approaches from cultural studies; cf. for instance, Gerald Hartung and Markus Kleinert (2017). Regarding a more fundamental discussion of ›identity‹, see the work of Stuart Hall, for example, Hall (1990).
- 14 See, in this regard, Alena Zupančič's insightful exploration of humor/comedy, religion, psychoanalysis, and Hegel's understanding of ›knowledge‹ and *the Absolute* within his depictions of the aesthetic in the epic, and in tragedy and comedy. According to Zupančič ›Hegel's point [...] is that in this very ›work of the negative‹ (through which comic subjectivity appears) comedy produces its own necessity, universality, and substantiality (it is itself the only ›absolute power‹), and it does so by revealing the figures of the ›universal in itself: as something that is, in the end, utterly empty and contingent.« Cf. Zupančič 2008, 23 ff., here 27.

through some form of ›laughter‹ (Levinson 1998, 565 ff.; Carroll 2014, 43 ff.). Theories of play are traced back to St. Thomas Aquinas, who linked humor to pleasure and the ›solace of the soul‹. Humor is considered part of leisure and as play with words or ideas. Other theories of play see humor as an ›evolutionary‹ property that helps to manage information and develop a ›coherent world view‹, omitting those that seem unwarranted. Here, humor is discussed as a playful exercise that prepares for emergencies (Boyd 2004; Gervais/Wilson 2005; Carroll 2014; Wirth 2017).

The most influential of these overarching theories of humor is the so-called *incongruity theory*. *Incongruity theories* emphasize the lack of overlap between meanings evoked in utterances, actions, or objects. The *incongruity theory* of humor is considered to be the most convincing understanding of humor since Romanticism. It is the most accepted and still dominant theory of humor on a broad interdisciplinary level (Carroll 2014; Kindt 2017; Wirth 2017; Eagleton 2019).¹⁵ The incongruous effect of the humorous is also reflected in the understanding of ›irony‹, and to some extent of wit and pun, as saying one thing and meaning another.

Theories of Humor – an Overview II

Alongside these ongoing approaches to humor, which are also reflected in the interdisciplinary journal *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research*, there has also been a significant increase in studies of humor in literary theory.¹⁶ This tendency is evident in many recent publications on humor as a site of and for literary theory (Kafalenos 1985; Stott 2005; Critchley 2005; Stott 2006; Farber 2007; Weitz 2009; Greenberg 2011; Connelly 2012; Carroll 2014; Ridanpää 2014; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2017; Trousedale 2017; Wirth 2017; Roof 2018; Eagleton 2019; Menke 2021). I furthermore attribute this development to the ›affective turn‹, which perceives *affectivity* as a stimulus and form of ›knowledge‹ (Carroll 2014, 6, 55 ff.; Morreall 1983, 1983 a; Hogan 2016), but also to a (renewed) interest in humor as a device of literary writing with different aims beyond the ›merely comic‹ (Weber 1978, 1994; Wirth 1999, 2017; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2017; Roof 2018; Francis/Giappone/Mackenzie 2018; Eagleton 2019; Menke 2021).

The renewed interest in humor may also reflect the effects of late capitalism and its entertainment industry, in which forms of critique – if we consider humor to be such

15 In his overview of theories of humor in literary theory, Uwe Wirth (2017, 130 ff.) notes that Victor Ruskin (1985), as well as a number of other authors (Kotthoff 1998, 2009; Gerigk 2008; Kindt 2011) draw on the incongruity theory of humor, but in contrast to more deconstructivist motivated authors, they attempt to come to terms with it by paying attention to its semantic and linguistic layers, and, in this way, try to develop a more comprehensive, general, and universal, ›anthropological‹ understanding of humor. There is thus also a kind of theoretical ›contestation‹ over the ›frame‹ and approach to humor, which is also reflected in the competing claims and ›schools‹ of the various theorizations of humor, with no ›truth‹ in sight. However, deconstructive and semantic appeals and characteristics of humor may not be exclusive, but can be viewed as complementing each other, as this study hopes to show in-between the lines. Rather, it may be a question of where along the way one stops to read the humor of and in the text.

16 See for an overview Uwe Wirth' »Literaturtheorie« (2017, 122–133) and John Morreall's *Philosophy of Humor* (2020).

a form of social critique (Niebylsky 2004; Dadlez 2011; Fendler 2016; Bonello/Giappone/Francis/MacKenzie 2018) – are fetichized and marketed, for example, in the satire of sociopolitical agendas. Along these lines, Sianne Ngai speaks of humor as ›zaniness‹ and as a contemporary *aesthetic category* that attempts to come to terms with a seemingly ungraspable aesthetic feeling (Ngai 2010; Berlant/Ngai 2017). Like Klaus Schwind, Ngai historicizes this trend and links it to German Romanticism and the aestheticization of humor. Schwind attributes this trend and the renewed interest in humor to the late eighteenth century, the emergence of a literate subject (*Bildungssubjekt*), and a positive *experience of perception* (*Wahrnehmungserfahrung*), in which humor (*Komik*) is distinguished from the negatively connotated ridiculous (*das Lächerliche*). According to Schwind, a shift in the meaning of humor is taking place in this time period, coming from the arts/comedy and entering the aestheticized everyday discourses around the experience of pleasure (*Genußserfahrung*) (Schwind 2001, 232). Schwind sees this shift as a form of legitimization of ›laughter‹ against the backdrop of conventionalized social and *Christian* understandings, which it resists; in this way, humorous pleasure is cultivated within what he calls a ›civilizing process‹ (*Zivilisierungsprozess*). It does not seem far-fetched to reconsider understandings of humor in the late eighteenth-century discourses described here, in relation to colonialism and its structures of ›knowledge‹ production, against the backdrop of the emerging and centralized subjectivity of a *white*, male, ›able‹, cis-normative, middle-class subject of ›reason‹ replacing the subject of *Christianity* – an issue that has rarely been taken up in scholarly debates and that seems worthy of further attention.¹⁷

This valorization of the humorous blossoms in critical (poststructuralist) postmodern accounts that play with the sense of meaning, as well as in discourses that exploit these philosophical shifts in the wake and commercialization of a late capitalist taste for non-sense (Ngai 2010, 951 ff., 2012). The latter development may be an answer to the question of what it might have been that necessitated this form of excited and exhilarated non-sense – humor as our still present twofold (critical and subverting the critical) *aesthetic category* – and whether it is indeed an *aesthetic category* (whose subject is yet to be specified) or a readily available (linguistic, aesthetic) expression of an experience of discomfort with (the readily available acceleration of) ›time‹. This is a question that this study will not be able to answer, but that may linger in the margins of the analysis. ›Time‹, though, is a central category often linked to humor, especially ›the joke‹, but also the sitcom and other performative forms of humor, such as comedy itself (Bevis 2013, 58). Especially in these relations, ›time‹ is seen as an important factor that plays with a sense of suspension and aroused expectations, a topic that is often discussed within theories of release, and which, in terms of expectations, is an aspect of humor that was also emphasized by Kant. The basis of this logic is that as soon as ›the joke‹ or humorous display ends, expectations are fulfilled, leading to ›laughter‹; sometimes, however, ›time‹ itself is seen as the source and component of the play and the defects that organize humor (Carroll 2014, 33 ff.; Bevis 2013, 58 ff.).

17 Achim Geisenhanslüke's analysis of ›stupidity‹ and ›wit‹ and the formation of ›reason‹ in modernity can be taken as a starting point that explores this question more specifically (Geisenhanslüke 2011).

Points of Relevance and Departure

This schema for dealing with the variety of theories of humor can only be understood as a way of coming to terms with the multitude of approaches, which often have features that are subsumed under one theory, but which in fact can also be attributed to at least one of the others and thus cannot be seen as exhaustive.

In the following, I wish to outline some further reflections on humor that are important throughout the work and to which I will return. As a first step, I will introduce the modernist theorizations of humor by Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. Both thinkers remain influential, widely used, and instrumental to various other understandings of humor. Both approaches are seen as precursors of theorizations of humor that implicitly address humor's performative potential, its affective and rhetorical sides, and the question of subjectivity that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Modernist Approaches – Freud and Bergson

Freud's theories of humor can be categorized under both the *relief theory* and the *incongruity theory* of humor, and the question is whether they can be reduced at all to one of these approaches, since they also encompass other aspects that are not included in either of them.

Freud's still influential approaches have (at least) three dimensions, which are already invoked in his terminology of the humorous. He distinguishes between ›the joke‹ (*Witz*), the comic (*das Komische*), and humor (*Humor*), which he attributes to different topoi of his first topographical model of the psyche.¹⁸

While ›the joke‹ emerges from the unconscious, the comic and humor – according to Freud – emerge from the preconscious, that is, from the transit place between consciousness and the unconscious, which is more directly accessible to consciousness. Freud understands the workings of ›the joke‹ as a way of releasing a repression through an unconscious *repression effort* (*Hemmungsaufwand*) and condensation that is set in play in language.

He also distinguishes between humor (*Witz*) – the ability to draw on witty metaphors and connotations – and humor (*Witz*) as ›the joke‹ in performance (Wirth 2003). While Freud links the comic (*Komik*) and ›laughter‹ to a *perceptual effort* (*Vorstellungsaufwand*), because an imagined expected perception does not occur (is incongruent with expectation), he associates humor (*Humor*) with an affective effort (*Gefühlsaufwand*), because a tension tied to an affective expectation is fulfilled in a different way (which also invokes incongruity) (Pietzkar 2006; Geisenhanslüke 2015; Morreal 2020; see also de Lauretis 2010).

In all three of these meanings of humor, the psychological energy summoned becomes superfluous and is released, but in different ways and with different functions, with the expected outcome each time being incongruent with the actual outcome.

18 For an explanation of Freud's topographical model of the psyche, see Carl Pietzner (2006) and Teresa de Lauretis (2010). Freud's topographical model distinguishes between three distinct and interrelated parts of the psyche: the unconscious, the pre-conscious and the conscious, the pre-conscious being a kind of repository where some of the unconscious finds its way into consciousness.

Freud's most elaborate work on humor, his theorizations of ›the joke‹, a work published in parallel with his works on hysteria and sexuality (*A Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*), builds on his dream theory. Concurrent with the dream-work, Freud also speaks of ›the joke‹-work. Freud, like the Greek philosophers, explicitly refers to language as an important aspect of the ›joke technique‹; like the dream-work, ›the joke‹-work is understood as a processual production of meaning through condensation and displacement, which, like dreams (and also like poetry), finds expression in metonymic and metaphoric ways through language (John 1996, 55 ff.; Coletta 2003; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 210 ff., 2015, 2016; Roof 2018; Menke 2021). Freud thus emphasizes the poetics of a signifying system of signs through metaphoric and metonymic shifts and condensations that play with and constantly frustrate conventionalized perceptions and expectations. Freud's understanding of humor is not only a play within a system of incongruous speculations, but also a process that opens up such expectations by exposing them as unavailable. It presupposes a process of unavailability, in the humorous play of language, as well as in conventionalized, sociopolitical normalcy. Unavailability is understood here in a more Derridean sense as temporal and spatial deferral, spectrality, and supplementarity, which makes it possible to think beyond any immediate meaning, reference, or ›representation‹ of signs in the process.¹⁹

Freud discovers a form of non-assignment that accompanies language and normativity, dreams and poetry. The humorous production of meaning seems exploratory. It is undoing rather than constitutive and binding. Freud's theory of humor thus goes beyond theories of incongruity. It is therefore difficult to fit Freud's theory of humor into one of the above schemes, because the relief produced in humor also has different functions. It can have a repressive, perceptual, or affective quality. Freud's approach may be better preserved in theories of the performative (to which we will come later), since displacement and condensation take place through an often language-related, performative *act*. The metaphorical, language-related play of humor that Freud discusses is also indicative of a performative understanding of humor. However, Freud emphasizes that it is not so much the allegorical or metaphorical comparison as such (*Gleichnis, Gleichniswitz, Vergleich; here: Gleichnis*) that causes humor (or incongruity), but its alienated, surprising use, its displaced and condensed deployment that deviates from (discursive and normalized) conventions and expectations (Freud 2024.8, 71 ff., 1999.6, 87), a trait that can also be found in the literality of poetic language. This may be why Freud compares ›the joke‹ (in the sense of wit and witticism) with poetry and the dream-work and uses the same terms to describe the workings of humor. Freud not only analyzes ›the joke‹ along the lines of the dream. In fact, he argues that dreams *use* ›jokes‹ through displacement and condensation to disguise meaning and circumvent super-ego censorship (Carey 2002, vii). The

19 Hartmut Rosa also uses the word ›unavailability‹ in conjunction with what he calls ›resonances‹, especially in the economy of ›desire‹ and ›availability‹ (Rosa 2019). Although there may be some overlap in terms of some of the phenomenological traits he mentions with what I attempt to consider as ›touch‹ and ›unavailability‹, my understanding of ›unavailability‹ differs from Rosa's in that it is seen as an inner space in its own right. It is related to Derrida's concept of *différance*, and also describes a space of withdrawal in the self as the basis for an untouchable, perhaps almost sacred, ›niche‹.

language of ›the joke‹, in this sense, is seen as a signifying technique, a rhetorical tool with poetological insight, which uses condensation and displacement within conscious and unconscious movements to express new forms of lose ›unification‹ between different meanings. Freud's understanding of humor is thus based, on the one hand, on linguistic representations that allude to a shift of familiar meanings to things that are unfamiliar and unconventional. At the same time, he links the effects of humor to something unknown, unknown to both the narrator and the listener (Geisenhanslüke 2017, 73). The humorous portrayal that Freud draws also considers subjectivity and the function of ›the joke‹ for the emergence of the subject. Humor allows the subject to talk about unpleasant or tabooed experiences, while providing a shelter from destructive counter-attacks (Carey 2002, xiii; Freud 2024.8, 79 (90)). Although Freud speaks of ›the joke‹-technique and its rhetoric, he links ›joke‹-making to the unconscious and an unconscious subjectivity: »[I]n forming a joke one lets go of a train of thought for a moment, and then it suddenly surfaces from the unconscious as a joke« (Freud 2024.8, 146 (168)).

With regard to the subjectivity of the narrator, it is interesting to note that Freud, like Kant, links humor in the sense of wit to an elite group of people who are considered capable of it. He does not regard ›the joke‹ as a ›natural‹ and general ability to form language. This contrasts with his placement of humor in the unconscious and pre-conscious, and with other theories that relate humor to ›lowness‹, to social class, and to the body, sexuality, and defecation.

Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche, for example, relate humor in different ways to underprivileged classes (Bevis 2013, 63 ff.). Reading against the grain, this also means that humor can be codified as a means of empowerment and a strategy for speaking out against various power nexuses – allowing for the emergence of empowered subject-formations. This understanding also reflects Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to and reading of humor and the carnivalesque as (performed) forms of relief and redemption from oppression. As will be discussed later in his much subsequent work on humor, Freud also links it to strategies of empowerment that emanate from the unconscious.

Henri Bergson's *Laughter – An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900) – like Freud's work on humor – is another influential modernist theory of humor, not least because he writes about humor by looking at the current events and ways of life of the time in which he lives. Accordingly, the language he uses sometimes contains offensive, racist vocabulary. While Freud argues for the traces of the psyche in the bewildering phenomenon of humor (although he also refers to the body), Bergson's central point focuses on humor and its effects on the body (although he also refers to the ›unconscious‹) and the way it is displaced and alienated by machine-like, automated movements. Consequently, Bergson views the performing subject as a thing-like entity (Bergson 1911, 16 b).

Although Bergson emphasizes the appeal to ›intelligence‹ in the work of humor, he expands the meaning of ›intelligence‹ in his understanding of humor to include what he calls the ›touch‹ (*contact*) of ›other forms of intelligence‹ (Bergson 1991, 4). This movement of humor thus involves other sensibilities, suggesting a network of different relational ties that are important for its functioning. These other aspects are subjectivity, sociality, and feelings of belonging. Bergson calls these the ›reverberations‹ (*répercussions*) of humor. He also emphasizes that humor always involves a group of people and that it is not infinite (Bergson 1991, 4 ff.). In this way, not unlike Freud, Bergson links humor to a

social sphere and also confines it to a specific space-time, ultimately making it a part of signifying practices and symbolic orders.

Bergson's work was written in what Critchley calls »the dawn of cinema« (Critchley 2005, 57). In this work, Bergson depicts an aspect of the »falling« and »failing man« and, starting from the humorous portrayal of the mechanization of everyday life, examines the comical site of mechanized, industrialized life, which is perhaps best symbolized and summarized in silent, panchromatic films, especially those by Charlie Chaplin (Bevis 2013, 29 ff.). Bergson's theory of »laughter« can be read as a reflection on the art of (silent) cinema and its significance for the mimetic comedy of (everyday) life and the subjectivity it forms. A person, a living human being, appears in this way as a machine (to which we can add experiences with AI) through the performance, the act, and the representation of rigidity and repetition.

Another characteristic that Bergson mentions is »absentmindedness« in the act of performance and a state of unconsciousness (Bergson 1991, 13). »Laughter« is presented as unconsciousness and as a condition that can be observed; it is subjectivity itself, it seems, that is both mocked and regarded with wonder here. Bergson's approach implicitly suggests that the meanings of subjectivity and subject-formation can be read (differently) in the performative acts of a subject when it appears absent-minded. Subjectivity appears in this way as a mental emergence, mirrored in the acts of the body, which cannot be fully controlled by the mind. Bergson's unconscious subject is not to be seen in a negative way, but rather understood as »natural« in its clumsiness.

Furthermore, Bergson's analysis of humor divides subjectivity into an unconscious performing subject and a subject in a (mental) state of insightful wonder. This provokes »laughter« in a third, observing subject – who laughs at the auto-divided self (recognizing itself) – rather than at the performing other subject they observe. The subject of humor in Bergson's reflections is thus split by seemingly incongruous bodily and psychic acts of performing and reflecting. Although Bergson's understanding of the subject entails a dualistic element, in contrast to the Cartesian understanding of the subject at the time, his image of the subject contains a divided, split and yet interconnected understanding of subjectivity, in which the body and the mind appear as reconciled and yet also incongruous. Humor here arises from an insight into the unfulfilled desire for sovereignty, which can be both disturbing and comforting.

What we find in Bergson's theory of humor is an acknowledgment of the self's resemblance to a machine, of the self's limitations, and of its constant struggle to perform adequately at the edge of failure. Humor functions as a form of self-reflexivity here, as an indirect, meta-descriptive (philosophical, aesthetically produced) insight that questions and blurs the distinction between machine and human and the meaning of subjectivity in late capitalist culture. With regard to discourses on algorithms, (in)animacy, cyborgs, and (a new) humanity, Bergson's theories remain relevant and meaningful. His theory of humor can be understood as a self-reflexive approach to release-theories of humor that laugh at the self and the modern subject. It can also be understood as a theory of incongruity, but also as a theory of (the failure of) performativity and its (philosophical and metatheoretical) implications.

Both approaches, Freud's and Bergson's, also consider the social dimensions of humor and its community-building and (dis)socializing aspects. They play with the liminal-

ity of conscious and unconscious features of human behavior, which is revealed in humor as a threshold process of internal and external relations and entanglements.

Ethical and Performative Dimensions of Humor

Bergson's analysis of the unconscious subject and Freud's connection of humor to the unconscious also reflect an ethical site of humor. It can be understood in relation to the idea of the ›fool‹ and the ›naïve‹. In the theories of Freud and Bergson discussed above, this ethical trait arises from the oscillating gaze/reading of a knowing observer/reader and the unknowing, unconscious, and ›innocent‹ actions of an agent/character, as well as the *response*-ability of a subject who is not always aware of what they are doing. The space of the ethical appears as the liminal space of an encounter construed on unequal grounds – on the one hand, there is an observed and objectified subject in a state of unawareness; on the other, there is a subject that seems fully aware of its actions (observing another) (and who may still be observed by another). In this way, the observing subject is reminded of their own vulnerability in the act of observing. Humor is thus charged with a tragic, or at least meditative, insight – which can be expanded, more generally, to the ethical dimension of the process of reading (the world as well as a text) per se. The reading subject is a subject in a relation of power that can be reversed; in observing and questioning the act of another, they can also observe and question themselves. Thus, in the act of reading/acting, the subject is exposed to vulnerability and reminded of it. This may be one of the reasons why literature and humor are distinguished from philosophical thought or *Wissenschaftlichkeit*, because in this way the latter realms retain a more authoritative validity.

Kant, too, posits an aesthetically produced characteristic of humor in connection with its ethical dimension, with Geisenhanslüke warning against Kant's premise of wit and the disparaging of humor that he grants to simplicity (*Einfalt*), albeit within the aesthetics of (refined) literature, as the (good) other of ›reason‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 50 ff., 2017, 71). However, Kant undermines the idea of the sublime by presenting the naïve side of humor as a quasi-wonder. At the same time, and as a consequence, the naïve, the fool, also appears as a figure who questions and opens up the rigid limits of the definition of ›reason‹. The naïve *dehierarchizes* the order of knowing and not-knowing – and its representations. The unconscious, awkward, clumsy subject of naivety evokes feelings of empathy rather than disgust (or so it can be hoped at least). According to these approaches, the fool, the naïve subject – while being laughed at – also obtains a form of superiority that arises precisely from their unawareness and is only revealed to the reader/spectator in the utterances or actions that their figure performs (Geisenhanslüke 2011). The figure of the fool acts in a doubly incongruous way. On the one hand, it represents someone that it is (not) foolish, and on the other, it represents a performance that, in its foolishness, is questioning and critical (and, thus, not foolish). In this way, it questions both normalcy and incongruity as aspects to understand humor or distinguish it from ›knowledge‹. This amounts to a questioning of a straightforward conception of humor and a destabilization of such distinctions. In this sense, the figure of the fool also illuminates the elusiveness of the difference between a ›real‹ performance and the performance of everyday acts as

well as the perceived ›truth‹ of the serious and the non-serious. All acts appear to be wise and foolish at the same time.

Schwind draws attention to another ethical side of the humorous that is worth thinking about. In his insightful, treatise-like essay *Komisch* (2001) – which unfortunately gets lost in the thick volume on aesthetic terms – he points to the ethical dimension that arises from the (post-)modernist culture of nonsense. Whoever laughs at another, for whatever reason, also positions themselves and remains responsible for their ›laughter‹ as well as for being a witness to such ›laughter‹ (Schwind 2001, 334). In this way, the (political) question of subjectivity and positionality with regard to humor is emphasized, as is the question of responsibility in relation to the subject of humor/›laughter‹. This, one could say, is another ethical positioning of humor that does not refer to the narrator and narratee of a text but speaks directly to its ›(implied) audience‹, and that also comes down to questions of subjectivity and humor. It is also bound to a *space* that emerges from this relationality: a text and its social context, which offers the possibility of a counter-signature (either through ›laughter‹ or through a critical distancing from what the scene/text wants to evoke with its specific humorous tonality). Moreover, in this way humor always already positions its own progressive or regressive realm and space of speaking. This ethical aspect of humor raised by Schwind also shows the limits of humor with regard to offensive, sexist, and racist content and allusions, something that could be called *false humor*²⁰ and that cannot be separated from questions of subjectivity. Thus, humor has a limit where it can turn into *false humor* and become an insult and a political weapon of degradation in the economy of power.

Within the above theorizations of humor, humor not only has a visionary dimension but must also be considered within a broader performance-related landscape and language, which will be discussed in the next chapter. This trait of humor, and comedy, is a

20 Sigmund Freud speaks in this regard in a more general sense of ›hostile jokes‹ as a ›new technique of insult‹ parallel to ›sexual aggression‹: »Since our individual childhood, and, similarly, since the childhood of human civilization, hostile impulses against our fellow men have been subject to the same restrictions, the same progressive repression, as our sexual urges. We have not yet got so far as to be able to love our enemies or to offer our left cheek after being struck on the right. [...] Insofar as we are all able to feel that we are members of one people, we allow ourselves to disregard most of these restrictions in relation to a foreign people« (Freud 2024.8, 90). Freud also emphasizes the social function of such offensive humor. According to him, its purpose is not solely to insult as such, but, at the same time, to ally with a third person ›against our enemy. By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him, [...] which the third person – who has made no efforts« – endorses with their ›laughter‹ (Freud 2024.8, 90). In his book *On Humor*, Simon Critchley calls this form of humor reactionary or ›untruth humor‹ that ›tells us important truths about who we are«. I prefer, though, to speak of *false humor* instead, as in the expression ›un-truth humor‹ ›truth‹ remains as a problematic residue because it unwittingly centralizes dominant subject-positions from where this sense of humor may be deployed. Cf. Critchley (2005, 12). While I think that it is relevant to keep in mind that humor indeed can become ›hostile‹ at any time, its use as a tool of power, and thus subject-related contexts, should also be considered. This includes the subjectivity and subject-position that determine and name what ›truth‹ and ›untruth‹ are, which I regard as an important aspect of any critique. I think this is more strongly expressed in the narrower term *false humor*. I therefore, use the term *false humor* to define this form of insult disguised as humor. See also here, p.78 ff. and annotation 21, p. 84.

property that has been discussed in both literary and cultural theory, and is, in fact, one of the most recent and still influential (literary) theories of humor (Wirth 2017), alongside Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, which can also be understood as a performativity theory of humor as will be argued. While ancient accounts of comedy in literary studies, beginning with Aristotle's approach to comedy, can be seen as earlier theories of humor related to performativity in the enactment and staging of a play and its effectiveness, John L. Austin's speech act theory (Austin 1975) has been influential in contemporary understandings of the performative as conventionalized and institutionalized linguistic acts of speech by authorized ›people‹ who also produce ›a certain conventional effect‹ (Austin 1975, 14) within an accepted conventional procedure of acts of speech.

Performativity thus draws on the linguistic and philosophical understanding of performativity/performance as acts of speech that simultaneously perform ›the act‹ they denote (Culler 2000, 503).

Shoshana Felman (1983, 2003) in particular developed a humorous reading of Austin's theory of performativity, understanding it as a performative theory of humor. Felman's main claim is that there is an inconsistency in Austin's theory: Austin's theory contradicts itself as it also reveals the pitfalls of speech acts (Felman 2003, 73). Felman reflects the ›referential excess of utterance over the statement‹, which, according to her, is also conceivable in Austin's demonstration and which relies on *misfires* and *failures* of speech acts to define and express their validity. Felman's argument develops in three ways: Firstly, she argues that the ›excess of utterance‹ fulfils something beyond what it proposes, its own self-referentiality; secondly, speech acts mark a trace of possible utterances beyond themselves (their illocutionary meaning); and thirdly, in this way speech acts leave their mark as a trace of possible meanings ›in the realm of reality‹ (Felman 2003, 52 ff.). Felman's reading of Austin's theory of performativity as a theory of humor is thus based on its playful and affective side and the evocation of pleasure. Because of this, and the links between philosophy and literature that Felman seeks to demonstrate in her psychoanalytic Lacanian reading, she asserts that Austin's performativity theory is ›full of promises‹ and therefore ›seductive‹ (Felman 2003, 73). The link between humor and the erotic that is thereby constituted is not new (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 2016); the same is true of the link between humor and the body, as can also be seen in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. Felman's particular merit, however, lies in linking Austin's linguistic theory of performativity to a theorization of humor and the pleasure in theory-building and ›knowledge‹ production, as well as the pleasure in finding (or promising) satisfaction in this way – (and always failing to achieve it ...?) (Felman 2003, 71 ff.) – a possibility that is usually separated from, not seen or even denied in (serious) philosophy and/or scholarly texts (and *Wissenschaftlichkeit* in general). In this way, Austin's theory of performativity can itself be seen as the performative pleasure of constituting ›knowledge‹. Furthermore, Felman argues that the libidinal act of Austin's speech refers not so much to eroticism in languages, but to eroticism *as* language. The body – and this is another point that Felman links to the performativity theory of humor – is where this pleasurable economy of language occurs, where its pleasure resides and is exercised: ›Thus the act of provoking laughter (of provoking pleasure), by causing a slip (by tripping) leads to the act of exploding. If laughter is, literally, a sort of explosion of the speaking body, the act of exploding – with laughter – becomes an explosive performance in every sense of the word‹ (Felman 2003, 87). In

this theory, then, language, eroticism, and pleasure all amount to other names for humor and, positively speaking, may be understood as pointing to a *loving entrenchment of epistemology*, an entanglement between (eroticized) language, (eroticized) body, and (in this performative way, eroticized) humor. Felman reads Austin's theory as a form of ›comedy‹ that laughs at its own bargains and thereby *linguistically* produces humor in the sense of bodily (felt) pleasure; humor, thus conceived, is not only an ›affect‹ but arouses a different spectrum of affectivity (of ›love‹, pleasure, eroticism, surrender) *through language and in language*.

The (critical) almost defiant reference to seduction, sexuality, and eroticism that is read and attached to the theorization of humor (and language), or rather the erotization of a specter of possibilities that something called ›love‹ (and its pleasure/pain) raises, might have its own history and may lay in (Western?) deprecation of the body and eroticism and in the exclusion of pleasure and desire from philosophy, a point that Felman herself raises.²¹ Felman's work, read this way, confirms the *affective* side of (humorous) epistemology and the (im/possible) promises that it raises. It might therefore be fruitful and revealing to speak of the *affectivity* of (humorous) texts per se, the spectrum of different ›affects‹ that are elicited in humor (and in epistemology). This is also the direction taken by Judith Roof in her analysis of humor (2018). Roof uses the idea of the performance of humor to argue for its explosive effect. Without referring specifically to any of the theories mentioned above, she speaks of the ›comic event‹ – which can also be understood as a performative act – and relates it more to Sigmund Freud's approach and Henri Bergson's analysis of humor. Roof thus uses the idea of the performance of ›a joke‹ and its displacement in relation to the social space. Based on Bergson, for example, she examines how values are transposed to another social space and in this way can highlight a specific void of meaning and the void of meaning of these values. In this manner, specific social behaviors or utterances that implement the social order and privilege a specific (dominant) class are (critically) highlighted through humor. Roof refers to Bergson's understanding of humor in this sense as a ›transposition downwards‹ (*la transposition de bas en haut*) (Bergson 1991, 96), a critical, mimetic staging of dominant-class behavior understood as ›respectability‹²²:

»Far more artificial, but also far more refined, is the transposition upwards, from below when applied to the moral value of things, not to their physical dimensions. To express in reputable language some disreputable idea, to take some scandalous situa-

21 However, it is interesting how central sexuality becomes in the reading of humor, especially against the background of Freud's notion of ›sexuality‹. Freud speaks of ›sexuality‹ rather in order to sound as ›scientific‹ as possible in accordance with the fashions and paradigms of his time (Austin's performative theory), but he understands the term ›sexuality‹ in a comprehensive sense as ›love‹. Thus, Freud's understanding of ›sexuality‹ does not mean ›eroticism‹ in a narrow sense. ›Eroticism‹ may rather be seen as an aspect and form of ›love‹ that can be produced and experienced.

22 Bergson indeed uses the English word *respectability* and defines this form of humor as one that is often used in the literary works of English-speaking (or ought one rather say, finally, anglophone: »dans la littérature anglaise en générale«) novelists like Dickens and Thackeray. See Bergson (1991, 96).

tion, some low-class calling or disgraceful behavior, and describe them in terms of the utmost respectability, is generally comic.» (Bergson 1991, 142)

Bergson thus undoes the theory of superiority that Plato associates with humor by reading humor as a political act of rebellion within the sanctuary of everyday social grammar. Roof calls this »the performance of a joke manqué« (Roof 2018, 165). However, Bergson's understanding of this »transposition upwards« contains a critical, sociopolitical stance at the edge of an ethical question – which Roof does not reflect upon further – when he emphasizes the mirroring and revealing nature of this kind of humor by saying: »A word is sometimes sufficient, provided it gives us a glimpse of an entire system of transposition accepted in certain social circles and reveals, as it were, a moral organisation of immorality« (Bergson 1991, 40 a).

The transposition of humor is not »manqué«, as Roof claims. It is full of subtle critique that parodies the performance, the »respectability«, of a dominant class's self-construction and self-celebration. This feature of humor, which Bergson identifies in the »transposition downward«, centralizes the place and, again, the subject of the humorous utterance. The »transposition downward«, like Freud's *Jewish jokes* and African American humor, is also, from the perspective of the narrating subject, a »transposition upward« in as much as it is a form of empowerment that is unleashed in humor. It thus opens up a space from which it can touch upon various sociopolitical dilemmas and prohibitions. In doing so, it also illuminates and questions the hierarchy and limits of the space of the un/speakable.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's rather neglected work on performativity extends these approaches by emphasizing other aspects of the performative. These are essential for (re)theorizing humor and how it works in different (con-)texts. Therefore, Sedgwick's theory of performativity will be discussed in more detail here. In particular, I will consider three of her concepts that shed light on humor in the (literary) text, but also on the relationship between discourse and the materiality of life, and how these are addressed in literature.

Periperformatives, Reparative Readings – and *Besides*

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick centralizes, on the one hand, the spatial aspect of performativity and, on the other hand, she emphasizes the affective side of performativity in language. Sedgwick's approach also allows different aspects of the performative and its performance to be considered and analyzed simultaneously. Moreover, she bases much of her work (and sociopolitical critique) on the reading of literature, of novels, complementing philosophical theorizing with literary philosophizing. In doing so, Sedgwick develops a theory of the performative that is concerned with the *spatial* mechanisms of power and resistance. While emphasizing the centrality of sanctioned, dominant performatives, she also points to their limits and to their transient, cellular connections with other performatives. Sedgwick calls this effect of the performative *periperformatives*: »Periperformative utterances aren't just about performative utterances in a referential sense: They cluster around them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative« (Sedgwick 2003, 68). She also considers the formation of subjects as well as what she

calls »performative affectivity« within the performative speech/act (Sedgwick 2003, 68). *Periperformatives* draw attention to utterances around conventionalized performatives that accompany, challenge, or resist a particular ›intended‹ centralized meaning (Sedgwick 2003, 68 ff.). Sedgwick contends that these utterances around more or less institutionalized performatives may be by far the more prevalent mode of performatives than those sanctioned, centralized utterances (authorized by the state or discursive practice). These spaces around authorized performatives allow those excluded from them or objectified by them to look back at the sanctioned performative scenes. It is also the space of the potentiality of humor, of the performative that comes from the other who reads performative exclusions and their constructions, coming from the other side of the dialogue that a performative utterance sets into work. Humor in such a chain of periperformatives also alludes to an (ethical) space of the other and to the relations that are evoked in it. In Sedgwick's reading, the periperformative – as a(n) un/structure that gives structure to the performative – can be read as queerness in all its infinite forms. Queerness occupies the space of the ethical relationship between the (sanctioned) performative and everything excluded from it, a trait that is also found in humor. Humor, then, can also be understood as a form of queering that raises questions regarding the ethical implications of performative utterances and acts.

Sedgwick develops these theorizations around performatives, not only by psychologically and phenomenologically inspired readings, but also by a close reading of literary texts, on the one hand, and a critical engagement with and critical distance from what she calls the ›paranoia‹ of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, on the other hand. Her spatial theory of the performative also has a temporal aspect in its double meaning: It opens up the past and the present/ation of discourse towards an unknown other. Sedgwick links language to the machinery of affectivity that is used and set in play in the performative utterance/act, suggesting that performative utterances/acts function not only as abstractions, but also by producing and enabling bodily felt, affective effects that can be motivators, or, to put it more strongly, *touching phenomena*, for processes of unlearning that unfold from the performative proscenium. Such affective characteristics of the performative throw notions and positions of normativity into crisis by revealing their internal discrepancies, as they can generate authority and subjugation, but also imply resistance and subversion (Sedgwick 2003, 97 ff.).

Sedgwick illustrates this with great care in her discussions of ›shame‹ and the subject position it entails (1993, 2003). She argues that as authoritative speech acts, phrases such as »Shame on you!« are not only imbued with the enforcement of a normative value, but also with the affective production and use of ›shame‹. In Sedgwick's reading, however, ›shame‹ is not perceived as a ›negative‹ affective sense, but as one that gives form to the possibility of a sovereign subject-formation (Sedgwick 1993, 4 ff.). In her reading of Henry James's works and the way he inserts ›shame‹ in his autobiographical allusions, Sedgwick discusses it not (only) as a ›bad feeling‹, as ego-psychology does, but along the lines of the psychology of the self, as a form of affectivity that gives the self interiority, a space for reflection (Sedgwick 2003, 98), from which the (writing) subject emerges and can orient themselves toward empowerment (Sedgwick 1993, 8 ff.). In this process, Sedgwick separates ›shame‹ from the object to which it is linked in the performative utterance, suggesting that ›shame‹ (discernible in bodily reactions such as averted eyes and

a hanging head) can be understood as a capacity, a force, that dissects the signifying process of a *shaming* performative utterance. In this way, Sedgwick distances ›shame‹ from where it has traditionally been located, both in psychology and in (Foucault's) critical theory, namely in the vicinity of guilt and repression. Sedgwick attempts to separate thinking about ›shame‹ (and consequently empowerment) from Foucault's *repressive hypothesis*, which critically examines discourses of (sexual) confession as in the hands of power, as a product of social control, produced in relations of power, rather than as a reflective and subversive facet *against* power. According to Sedgwick, a *repressive hypothesis* as a reading angle in this sense is too strong and overlooks the possibility of other meanings that are not in the fold of the machinery of Foucauldian thought (Sedgwick 1993, 8, 2003, 9 ff.). She contends that ›shame‹ does not remain a ›negative feeling‹ of experiencing humiliation, nor a ›hip‹ discursive topic, but that it marks a redefinition of a self-empowering subject, that ›shame‹ is, can be, for example, reintroduced into the *becoming* of a (writing) subjectivity as a *productive site of pleasure*. In her illustration of how this affective process is operationalized in the works of Henry James, a humorous angle can be discerned in both James's and Sedgwick's texts, which transforms the humiliating experience into a humorous tone and provides it with a further self-affirming, self-assuring, empowering twist. James's text reevaluates the *reappraisal* of sociopolitical norms that manifest within the self. The shift from humiliating ›shame‹ to self-sustaining pleasure is produced through humor, and it is this humor that seems to lead Sedgwick towards a theorization of ›shame‹ that is different from previous understandings. Sedgwick writes:

»Note in this passage (from the [*The*] *Ambassadors* [1903] preface) that ›impudence‹ is the glamorizing trait James attributes to his stories – impudence that bespeaks not the absence of shame from this scene of flirtation, but rather its pleurably recirculated afterglow:

›[the story] rejoices ... to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it's about—liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence. Let us grant then that the impudence is always there – there, so to speak, for grace and effect and allure; there, above all, because the Story is just the spoiled child of art, and because, as we are always disappointed when the pampered don't ›play up‹, we like it, to that extent, to look all its character. It probably does so, in truth, even when we most flatter ourselves that we negotiate with it by treaty.‹ To dramatize the story as impudent in relation to its creator is also to dramatize the luxurious distance between this scene and one of repudiation: the conceivable shame of a past self, a past production, is being caught up and recirculated through a lambent interpersonal figuration of the intimate, indulged mutual pressure of light differentials of power and knowledge.« (Sedgwick 1993, 10)

With the first sentence »[i]ts pleurably recirculated afterglow«, Sedgwick already mimics James's humorous tone. This tone in James's text is aptly organized around the word ›impudence‹. The use of ›impudence‹ signals bravery and courage, on the one hand, and a playful, self-constructive awareness, on the other. *Impudence* is celebrated here, turning the heavy and ›identity‹-fracturing effect of ›shame‹ into the audacity of a refracted humorous tone that gives a new structure to the subject of writing as the one ›flatter-

ing themselves«, albeit in the protective phrase ›the spoilt child of art‹ from which it also derives its humorous tone. Humor dwells in this space of memory as well as of writing, materializing there by giving new meaning to shaming, which marks a past time whose tragic, or as Sedgwick calls it, *dramatic effect* is still felt, but humorized and in this way embellished and softened in a self-caring and self-reassuring way by a ›child‹ within that does not ›play‹. The joyously humorous tone in the use of ›impudence‹ also empowers the (finally) speaking subject who seems unbreakable and always there to ›speak, for grace and effect and allure‹; the impudence of ›shame‹ is thus relegated to the impudence of a speaking subject who raises their eyes and looks back.

Sedgwick calls this ›reparenting‹ or ›reissuing‹ and a ›strategy‹ for »dramatizing and integrating ›shame‹, in the sense of rendering this potentially paralyzing affect narratively, emotionally and performatively productive« (Sedgwick 1993, 11). In this way, the affective bodily response can be perceived as a signpost to empowerment, rather than as the fulfilment of a humiliating act or within an omnipotent hypothesis of repression. Sedgwick addresses the place of the (othered) other here, preparing the ground for the possibility of reading subversive *resignifications* that have *healing* rather than destructive bodily and mental effects, and that empower rather than cost power. Sedgwick's subversive strategy is itself an empowering theory based on both an analysis and an evocation of affectivity. It describes and performs a transformation of dramatic into joyful ›affects‹. It is thus an affective strategy of doubling, involving a specter of different ›affects‹ with different trajectories, the subtlety of which triggers a silent (smiling) humorous tone.

Sedgwick's humor thus lays the foundation for what she calls *weak theory* and for the- orizations of ›knowledge‹ that go beyond what is celebrated as ›knowledge‹. She vehemently engages with the ›paranoia‹ of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, one of her best-known critiques of poststructuralist thought – the problem she identifies there being a dogmatic deployment (Sedgwick 2003, 124 ff.). The crux of her critique suggests that, while a *hermeneutics of suspicion* is essential for dismantling significations (of power), it is also overly focused on finding ›truths‹ and fixing meaning, that it is paranoid – in positive but also self-damaging ways – and that it neglects and excludes bodily aspects (Sedgwick 2003, 125 ff.). Instead of these ›strong theories‹, which subsume many relational but different phenomena under the title of a suspicious, unmasking, *paranoid reading*, Sedgwick proposes to consider *weak theory* as a critical reading possibility, which she calls *reparative reading*. *Reparative reading* allows to »experience surprise«, the density of a moment, and its affective effect:

»[T]o a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.« (Sedgwick 2003, 146)

Reparative reading is thus also an ethical reading and a form of agency, a creative as well as indulgent transformative power of *dedesignating*. Sedgwick illustrates of *reparative reading* in the sphere of literature and the works of Henry James in the autobiographical space, as a space of experience in which affectivity – in this case, ›shame‹ – is belatedly addressed in the literary text. Sedgwick thus constitutes a link between sociopolitical discourses, affectivity, and literary practice, or rather the practice of writing (for a wider public). Consequently, it can be argued that the humorous performativity of a literary text has an affective side, and that it queers signification in a way that alters the meaning of an event as well as a subject position altogether, that queering is in fact deconstruction, a reading that is produced by the other, who would otherwise fall within the proscenium of the witness circle or stand beside it, in a process of invisibilizing.

Beside is an important term for how Sedgwick arranges her theory of performativity spatially. In place of dualisms, *beside* indicates

»[...] a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction of the law of the excluded middle [...] Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations [...] *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations.« (Sedgwick 2003, 8)

A *beside* can thus even be seen as a corrective to a ›pure‹ deferral or metonymic understanding of language and discourse, as it reveals the workings of power and value that are also part of terms and terminologies. It shows that deconstruction is not always the same and that it remains tied to processes of subject formation – and that humor can be conceived as a *beside-effect* within the performative faculty of language. Humor shifts the meaning of meta-discourses in literary narratives – and (con-)texts. In addition, *besides* include not only the aspect of time in humor, but also the aspect of space and that which humor also touches upon metaphorically and metonymically.

It can be concluded, moreover, that this bodily-felt affective side of the performative is part of and enmeshed in the epistemological and cognitive processes set in motion by performative acts and utterances per se, explicitly discussed throughout the study. The affective attribution of the performative can also be seen as creating space for reorientations, transformations, and changes, not only of meaning, but also of the perception of the self and the O/other.

It is here that an *affective* side of humor as a performative function can be anchored. In her discussion of queer performativity, Sedgwick, in a side-remark, brings up humor and ›humorlessness‹ as phenomena that could be understood more fully within an analysis of affectivity (Sedgwick 1993, 14). Humor, from a position of dominance or in order to legitimize, restore, or stabilize supremacy, thus *false humor*²³, follows on first sight a signification of humiliation; but it can still be *reissued*, to use Sedgwick's word: ›negative feelings‹ can be *reused* to enable a space in which violent speech acts and experiences are opened up in surprising ways that can trigger transformation (of dominant, abusive)

23 See regarding *false humor* also annotations 20, p. 49, and 21, p. 84, as well as page 78.

meaning production. Often the citational, conventionalized character of speech/acts are set into work to perform and parody such meanings. What humor produces in this way may not be ›knowledge‹ in a traditional sense, but, nevertheless, may comprise a space for *relearning*, a space *beside* the norm, one in which different subjectivities, the writing one, the narrating ones, as well as a possible (diverse) readership or audience, are addressed and can follow the transformative process (and be transformed by it, if they so wish).

But even an empowering humor can be humiliating for those subjectivities that are confronted by it and whose identities are questioned.²⁴ The performance of humor thus depends not only on the form of the performative speech/act and its periperformatives but also on the subjectivity of the speaking/acting figure, and on *how* they perform it. However, the performativity of humor, as long as it is not *false humor*, can be considered as a *reparative reading (and writing)*. Humor, in this sense, not only *rereads* social norms and significations but recycles them within another frame of signification. Its reparative trait lies, on the one hand, in arousing a specter of affectivity like joy, amusement, relief, pensiveness, or even melancholy, however intensely felt. On the other hand, humor is *reparative* as it does not enforce a ›truth‹, but rather alludes to the possibility of other understandings.

The Bakhtinian Approach and the Dialogic

Although Bakhtin's work was much celebrated in the wake of poststructuralist theory and can be seen to be a profound push in the theorizations of humor, the hype around his work has given way to other approaches which either stress the performative site of humor or its purely linguistic-semantic elements (Wirth 2017). But Bakhtin has also been seen as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century (Holquist [1981] 2014; Todorov 1981), and there is, in fact, an abiding interest in Bakhtin's works and his importance with regard, for example, to questions of postcoloniality and postsocialism as well as ethics (Friedman 2001; Montesi 2005; Gratskova/Chakrabarty 2017; Hirschkop 2021). Bakhtin's work offers a rich field of research and remains relevant for this study for several reasons. Apart from the obvious political reasons as a reminder of the importance not to exclude (non-Western) thinkers from theory and discourse, and not to conceive theoretical approaches as successive and alternate edifices of thought and *turns*, and beyond the (remaining residues of) poststructuralist theoretical implications that the structure of and impulse to categorize and order as to *who* and *what belongs (where)*, is also (politically) constructed and heteronomous and should, therefore, always be questioned – a site for further reflection – two other aspects remain central to this study. Firstly, Bakhtin explicitly considers the ways in which humor is installed *in the novel* through the carnivalesque²⁵, and also refers to the ›referential‹ side of literary texts, that is the ways in which

24 Regarding ›hostile jokes‹ and *false humor* see annotation 20, p. 49, annotation 21, p. 84, see also p. 78 ff., p. 140 ff., p. 86 ff., and 140 ff.

25 Bakhtin traces the trajectory of a culturally informed sociopolitical phenomenon, the carnival, and how and in which ways it finds a new home in the novelistic text. He claims a direct connection between the carnival of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and its afterlife in literature: »From the second half of the seventeenth century on, carnival almost completely ceases to be a direct source

discourses and their materializations are taken up and negotiated in the novel. The trails and links between the sociopolitical and the literary text are also explored in this work. Secondly, dialogicity is a major concern for Bakhtin's theory and analysis of the novel. The significance of the dialogic in the novelistic encounter and its implications for humor are also explored in this study. Bakhtin examines the function of the text's humorous tonality in challenging dogmatism and conventionalized beliefs. It is an approach that combines humor and performance in the concept of the carnivalesque, a disguised but deliberate staging in which the performative site is enmeshed in that moment of surprise within the humorous shift in the text. According to Bakhtin the very structure of the novel per se exposes itself to its own rapturous humor. In this way the carnivalesque humor of the novel ends in an opening, a void, which can be considered as the space of the dialogic. The humorous tonality of the carnivalesque in the novel thus touches upon different facets of meaning and opens up a space for unlearning and (*re*)thinking.

Bakhtin sees two forms of power at work in the novel: those that carry the discursive power of dominant discourses, which Bakhtin calls ›centripetal forces‹, and those that seek to unfix meanings, which Bakhtin calls ›centrifugal forces‹ and that challenge these dominant utterances and participate in their unmaking²⁶ (Bakhtin 1999, 161). The humorous features of language and construction of meaning that Bakhtin sees at work in the novel have social as well as epistemological elements (Eagleton 2019, 31).

Bakhtin's theory thus allows for a sociopolitically informed reading of humor that considers the use – and abuse – of language and the entanglement and exchange between different discourses and languages – those of the novel and those of the sociopolitical.

Bakhtin characterizes this humorous tone *of* and *in* literature as a ›multi-styled‹, ›heterovoiced‹, and ›multi-toned‹ narrative that mixes ›high and low‹, ›serious and

of carnivalization, ceding its place to the influence of already carnivalized literature; in this way carnivalization becomes a purely literary tradition« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 131). Bakhtin thus implicitly emphasizes not only the historical development of the ›carnavalesque writing‹ and also the historical relevance of the meaning of carnivalized literature. This literature does not simply rely on convention: it engages with it and questions it: »[T]he historical figures of the past are deliberately and emphatically contemporized; they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present« Bakhtin (1984 a, 108). The carnivalesque is the institutionalization of humor as a sociopolitically legalized and limited space of critique that is (*re*)created in the literary text. The concept of ›the carnival‹ does not only show the conjunction of cultural practice, material world, and the literary text. In particular, in *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin examines the function of the carnivalesque humor as a sociopolitical feature in the literary text. He discusses the ways in which the carnival as an event is taken up as a strategy of the novel to say the unsayable and to open up the (performative) space of the sayable by including the marginalized and abject in the page theater of the novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984 a), Bakhtin discusses ambivalences and dilemmas and the multiple meanings evoked by the rhetoric of the carnivalesque humorous text. He argues that all utterances have multiple and ambiguous meanings without ever coming to an end, which he regards, not unlike Derrida, as the self-subverting excess of meaning.

26 In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1999, 160 ff.), by considering selected passages in the later works of Dostoevsky and other, English, novels, Bakhtin also pays attention to the ways the novel sets these carnivalization into being and looks at its functions. Bakhtin, thereby, pays tribute to the sociopolitical aspects that are picked up and mirrored in the novelistic text and which elucidate the subversive mechanisms of the carnivalesque humorous tonality.

comic« and that contains bits of different ›genres‹, comprising *representing* as well as *represented* meanings: »[W]hat appears here, as a result, is a radically new relationship to the word as the material of literature« (Bakhtin 1999, 108). With these different shades of meanings in *words*, the novel constructs ever new ›images‹, as Bakhtin calls them, which are anchored in the text, like a prism. Bakhtin characterizes the novel, in this sense, as literature that is *per se* carnivalized (Bakhtin 1999, 109).

In Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque, humor encompasses different approaches and tonalities. These different modes, however, belong together and enrich and emphasize each other, rather than being exclusive. In *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1984), Bakhtin speaks of ›grotesque realism‹ and ›grotesque imagery‹. In contrast to ancient literature in which »all orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade« (Bakhtin 1984, 320), and instead of modern literature where »the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation [...] have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific« (Bakhtin 1984, 321), Rabelais' writing evokes *grotesque realism* and *imagery* that are bound to abject images of the body. For Bakhtin, *grotesque imagery* is a kind of universal ›natural‹ part of any language:

»This boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space extends to all languages, all literatures, and the entire system of gesticulation; in the midst of it the bodily canon of art, belles lettres, and polite conversation of modern times is a tiny island. This limited canon never prevailed in antique literature. In the official literature of European peoples it has existed only for the last four hundred years.« (Bakhtin 1984, 319)

Bakhtin establishes a link between the arts, folklore, and the ›extra-official life‹ of people, in which the body describes a wholeness, a symbolic cycle. The body is an entity that »fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying« (Bakhtin 1984, 319). The body and the abdominal body parts are celebrated in a cosmic way. They signify the wholeness of life to which death forms a part. For Bakhtin, such meanings are abjured in conventionalized meta-discourses and what he calls ›official‹ languages. Part of this humor are the joyful as well as the tragic sites of ›coming into the world – being in the world – leaving the world‹ that indicate pleasure and pain, as parts of the same, rather than as opposites.

›Grotesque imagery‹, it could be stated, is not just ›grotesquery‹ for its own sake or to evoke humor and ›laughter‹; it does not just have the function of relief and criticism. It is a form of ›wisdom‹, a philosophical act and performance that marvels at, celebrates, and mourns the nonsense of being.

Bakhtin also uses the term *serio-comical* to further indicate to this inclusive form of humor. He describes this »carnival sense of the world« as a changing and transformative rhetorical element that has a ›special relationship to reality‹ (Bakhtin 1984a, 107). He links the *serio-comical* to political and incongruous movements in meaning²⁷ (1984 a, 108).

27 Bakhtin speaks of the *Socratic Dialogue* and *Menippean Satire* with pastiches of *carnivalist folklore*, all of which found their way into the novel. See Bakhtin (1984 a, 161 ff.).

Here, he evokes the idea of ›experience‹ as part of life and literature, which he makes out in the assemblage of the different *forms* of the dialogic, such as the diatribe, the soliloquy, and the symposium (Bakhtin 1984 a, 116; 119 ff.).

Moreover, in Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, the bodily language of ›laughter‹ with its different meanings is also centralized and discussed. In ›laughter‹ – as a practice of bodily politics – humor, performativity, singularity, and the production of meaning are intertwined against the backdrop of a historically driven discursive context in crisis. ›Laughter‹ is the bodily echo and effect of this process. Like humor in general, ›laughter‹ in its non-serious allusions thus questions the self as well as itself and the moment and act in which it occurs. In this, it goes beyond ›mere‹ sociopolitical critique. It also laughs out the tragic humor that the supposedly cosmic cycle of life and death seems to represent. Its ›laughter‹ is one of recognition and incomprehension. It is both dramatic, mournful, and joyful for it knows something it does not know, and that empowers and renders one powerless as the basis of life (and death): The carnivalizing humor of literary texts ›is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. ›Laughter‹ embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 127). This crisis is a liminal place of negation and affirmation, of ›death‹ and ›renewal‹ (Bakhtin 1984 a, 127). Bakhtin's understanding of humor thus is not only linked to ›celebration‹ and joy,²⁸ but includes what Simon Critchley in citing Samuel Beckett's *Watt* ([1953] 2009) – a literary text – understands as a *risus purus*, a mirthless ›laughter‹: »[T]he laugh laughing at the laugh, beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy« (Beckett 2009, 40). For Critchley this, in effect, is the ›essence of humor‹. Critchley does not connote it to unhappiness, but to ›liberation‹ and ›consolation‹: »This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness« (Critchley 2005, 111).

Risus purus seems to describe a web of different fused and yet distinguishable affective responses that come with insight. What Bakhtin pursues in the novel seems to be such a *risus purus*. He not only analyzes it for its philosophical merits, but also points to and examines the web of discourses and sociopolitical aspects of ›life‹. He shows how these practices are negotiated in the novel and quasi turned inside out through humor as a writing technique, as ›experience‹, and insight that wonders at the liminal space of ›knowing‹ and not-knowing, power and powerlessness.

28 I think Simon Critchley misreads Bakhtin here when he claims that he pays too much attention to the (joyous) body. It seems to me that Critchley overlooks the tragedy inscribed in Bakhtin's theory, which makes the body a site of transience but which, in its weakness and flaws, also provides an empowering site of critique; no other space remains from which to speak. Cf. Critchley (2005, 50 ff.).

Bakhtin also conceives of ›laughter‹ as a form of textual rhetoric and formalism that evokes an amalgamation of different aporetic meanings in the literary text. He calls these ambiguities²⁹ and the interweaving of dualities ›Socratic irony‹ and ›reduced laughter‹, traces them back to classical (Greek) literature and thus to an other form of knowing that also includes not-knowing and that remains power-less. For Bakhtin, ›Socratic irony‹ and ›reduced laughter‹ signal a form of humor that stands for change. He sees it generally at work in the sociopolitical ›reality‹ and in literary works (Bakhtin 1999, 131 ff., 164). He calls this process the »unrestrained mésalliances of thoughts and images« (Bakhtin 1999, 132), which refers to »the track left by ›laughter‹ in the structure of represented reality«, even though its ›laughter‹ may not be »heard« (Bakhtin 1999, 164). *Reduced ›laughter‹* constitutes a form of humor in the narrative of the novel that is silent and not necessarily ›entertaining‹, but which may cause us to smile. Shown and evoked are the paradoxes and oddities of common, unconscious ›knowledge‹, of which one is not always aware, and of which the literary text reminds us. This is a form of humor that does not exhaust itself in ›laughter‹ but remains as a residue, leaving a trace or *laugh-effect*, as it were, within a longer time-frame of wonder. It is a humorous tonality that is sought and achieved in the literary text, where »the one-sided seriousness of life and thought« gives way to the dialogic form of the novel which, instead of definitive statements, leaves »no finalizing period at the end« (Bakhtin 1999, 164 ff.) but marvels at the ›world‹. What the novel thus captures through this silent humor is a wondering stance. This humor must not be obvious, but one that has to be discerned in the folds of the novelistic text »without any conclusive conclusions« (Bakhtin 1999, 165), and that, in this way, invites to rethink the conventionalized ›obvious‹ of our ›knowledge‹ and of power. It is an »artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things« (Bakhtin 1999, 166).

The novel as *the* site of the humorous is also the realm of dialogicity for Bakhtin. According to him, the humorous, the carnivalesque, undoes (sanctioned) conventionalized, centripetal meanings and opens up a multiplicity of other meanings. Thus, Bakhtin perceives the carnivalesque humorous tonality of the novel as an angle towards the dialogic (Bakhtin 1999, 115). Dialogicity is considered to be one of his most important concepts – a complex concept that Bakhtin sees at work, on the one hand, in the various unfinished

29 In *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1985), Bakhtin refers to the ambivalence of humor, even when it depicts the ›ugly‹ side of the carnivalesque, including the implications of bodily excrement and waste representing the ›lower stratum‹ of the body. Bakhtin argues that this ›loud‹ carnivalesque humor also not only refers to the abject side of the body and its functionalities, but at the same time also to its renewing, loving, birth-giving, and (pro-)creative sides (146 ff.). Bakhtin links this ›grotesque realism‹, the grotesquery of bodily functionality that he defines as »the wrong side, or rather the right side of abuse«, to the ›ugly‹ side of the body and its ›uselessness‹ and pleasure resulting from »overindulgence of food, drink and sexual intercourse« (161). This implies what he calls »a gay funeral« (152).

positions of speaking that are unfolded in the novel.³⁰ On the other hand, Bakhtin finds it in the ›word‹ per se. For him, *words* are already composed of many different meanings.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity, which he regards as characteristic of the novel, is not to be understood in the sense of the dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogicity is a characteristic of language in the sense that every word inherits infinite layers of meaning. Language, the word, is thus dialogic to itself. Its otherness is inherent in it. However, he differentiates between dialogicity and ›monologism‹, not as two opposing binary systems of language and discourse, but as two *ways of dealing* with the dialogist ›nature‹ of the word and discourse (in the struggle over representation and power). In line with this, Bakhtin sees diversity and rapture in the evoked polyphonic ›voices‹ of the novel. He regards these ›voices‹ as interacting and as correlative with other voices and words and as dynamic entities that can change any dialogic interplay (Sasse 2010, 91). Bakhtin also sees a struggle for power at play in dialogicity, a struggle to determine what ›truth‹ is. But it is also the reference to ›truth‹ itself that engenders dialogicity, which is suppressed within monologist, unifying theorizations and discourses.³¹ This multidimensionality of meaning or dialogical language can only be temporarily arrested in an ›utterance‹ within a specific, situational context. Bakhtin understands language not as a unified abstract system but as discourse, »as utterances that are shot through with competing social, ideological, and cultural perceptions, as speech acts that have effects on the social, cultural and ideological world within which they are produced« (Jefferson 1986, 171).

30 De Man finds fault with Bakhtin's concept in a rather polemic and authoritative gesture. He criticizes the term as contradictory. According to de Man, Bakhtin does not link dialogicity to the figures of speech (de Man's ›tropes‹). He regards Bakhtin as a ›metaphysical thinker‹ and as a ›formalist‹; however, de Man's own critique is also contradictory, since it must invoke the names of Edmund Husserl, Walter Benjamin, and Immanuel Levinas along with Bakhtin's, without discussing them further. As these names indicate, there is an ethical dimension tied to Bakhtin's understanding of dialogicity, with the concept split between a formalist (which here implies text-bound) approach and a broader insight beyond the text. Instead of acknowledging this, de Man places hermeneutics and poetics into a binary relationship, with ›dialogicity‹ in-between them, pushing it further towards the unchic end of hermeneutics. De Man construes this binarism without questioning or revealing his own premises, which are to centralize thinking along tropes and maybe also the possibility of a subject-free form of speaking, while randomly referring to radical alterity, (which he never *says* he asserts, but only that *others*, like Husserl, do). In this way, de Man argues and wants to claim that ›dialogicity‹ is incompatible with deconstruction. De Man's article reads at times like a sabotage of Bakhtin's sudden fame; he speaks, for example, of ›the dialogical ideology‹ and even of ›dialectical imperialism‹ (1983a, 105), which sound rather odd, since the terms can stand for de Man's own approach, and this is particularly remarkable against the backdrop of the concealment of his past, antisemitic texts. Maybe there is also something that can be called *the structure of dialogic erasure* in texts that we must always keep in mind? Cf. de Man (1983a, 103 ff.).

31 Eva Kimminich speaks in this sense of ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹ as ›blank spaces‹ that drive literary as well as scientific ›imaginations‹, and that amount to the question of *form*, and thus to the question of ›representation‹ as *visions*. Cf. Kimminich (1998, 15).

By focusing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogicity³² and heteroglossia³³, Ann Jefferson emphasizes the socio-cultural texture of texts in Bakhtin's theorizations of the novel. Jefferson brings together Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic and heteroglossia with Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as a (sociopolitical) nexus of ›knowledge‹ and power. In this way, Jefferson sheds light on a broader understanding and deployment of the evocation of realism and fictionality. Realism is thereby understood in the sense of a *realist impulse* (Earnshaw 2010) and the *reality effect* or *referential illusion* (Barthes 1989) or »a construct of reference« (Culler 2002, 134).

Jefferson further problematizes the concept of referentiality in the use of stereotypes and ›character-types‹. Reading Bakhtin alongside Foucault, she demonstrates that the referentiality Bakhtin describes is split; it is always linked to language, discourse, power, and the attempt to establish a unified meaning. In this sense, it is linked to the concept of ›truth‹ rather than to a given ›reality‹.³⁴ Meaning remains constantly charged and changed, and never ›fixable‹. In this struggle, however, Jefferson identifies a ›will to reference‹ that also ›generates the notion of heteroglossia‹ (Jefferson 1986, 177, 180). This ›representational intent of discourse‹, an ›impulse towards‹ this referentiality, also generates dialogicity as a ›referentiality‹ that encompasses the polyphonic liveliness of language and the centrifugal force of dialogicity (Jefferson 1986, 177).

The novel evokes these different forces inherent in discourse and language through different speech acts, thus bringing the dialogic site of discourse and language to the fore. In this way, it also implicates a *reality effect* between discourse, language, and different sociopolitical, and ideological struggles that are always inherent in the dialogic character of language and discourse. The novelistic text alludes to the ›reality‹ of such dialogic forces by introducing characters as ›speaking human beings‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 332)

32 For an introduction to Michael Bakhtin's main concepts in literary studies, see Todorov (1984), Holquist (2014), and Hirschkop (2021). For a further examination of his thoughts within a wider historical and intellectual context, see Sylvia Sasse (2010).

33 Bakhtin's term ›heteroglossia‹ has its own ›heteroglossic‹ history and point of entry into literary theory. Julia Kristeva introduced some aspects of Bakhtin's theory in France but redefined it as ›plenitude of speech‹ – probably to align with the (post-) structuralist theory of subjectivity of the time, which viewed it as a ›mosaic of quotations‹ and thus as ›intertextuality‹. While this concept has its merits, it does not reflect Bakhtin's idea of the plurality of forms of speech in language or with regard to characters. In the ›plenitude of speech‹, paradoxes are not and must not be reconcilable. They remain conflicting and contradictory – which Bakhtin considers dialogic and valuable. Roland Barthes, though, views this as something to be overcome by *écriture* in his own theory of the ›war of languages‹. The term has also been discussed in narratology, particularly as a linguistic phenomenon in creating ›voice‹ and ›point of view‹. However, broader theoretical applications of the concept in relation to plurality, agency, subjectivity, and performativity are still lacking. For a discussion of the term in narratology, see Tjupa (2013), Kristeva (1982 b), and Barthes (1986). For a historical overview of the term and its development in the thought of Julia Kristeva, see Martínez Alfaro (1996).

34 This understanding of referentiality is not incompatible with some constructivist approaches in narratology. Not only because narratology as a discourse itself stresses different approaches and terminologies to identify structures, but also because the question of ›experience‹, verisimilitude, ›identity‹, and ideology are part of the debate. Cf. Herman/Vervaeck (2005, 95 ff.), see also Fludernik (1996). This is also intriguing for further reflection in relation to what James Phelan calls the rhetorical approach to narrative theory. See Phelan (2017).

who represent different ›types‹ inscribed in discourse (Jefferson 1986, 173) in the struggle for establishing (albeit fleeting) meanings in a dialogic and processual manner. Thus, as Jefferson also notes, there must be a writing-against – or *speaking to* – a unified, authoritarian, and centripetal force of discourse inherent in language, and, according to Bakhtin, in the novel, which is addressed and also parodied in the the novel's dialogic structure.

Bakhtin's characterization of humor in the novel as such an endeavor suggests that there is a form of not-knowing and power-lessness involved, since the dialogic form of humor is unfinished as a dialogic phenomenon.

This process of negotiation and dialogicity that accompanies the novel is, according to Bakhtin, a form of ›truth‹-seeking in the literary work, as opposed to the ›finished truth‹ of »official monolingualism«. Bakhtin defines ›truth‹ as a process that is always in dialogue: »Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between* people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction« (Bakhtin 1984 a, 110; emphasize mine). In this description of the dialogic as a search, there is also an ethical angle that presumes and considers the utterance of an other and a relational space in which dialogicity takes place; Bakhtin refers to the ›market-place‹ as the place for such negotiations (Bakhtin 1999, 128). His theory of humor thus also has a strong spatial inclination in which its dialogic character is embedded and from which it emerges (Bakhtin 1984, 145 ff.). This *space* of dialogicity is required for it to appear at all, and from where it can develop its further, manifold trajectories, as well as to retain its unfinished potential. To be dialogical, the dialogic, must remain open to future responses. Whereas, according to Bakhtin, in (sanctioned) centripetal texts the dialogic trait of discourse is regularly repressed and monologized within a united form, in centrifugal humorous texts this unfinished and open dialogic character of discourse reappears (Bakhtin 1984 a, 110 ff.). It is this ›market-place‹ of the many voices that is enacted in the humorous pages of the novel.

Jefferson's reading of Bakhtin's approach to the novel allows us to relate questions of subjectivity and subject-position to the novel and to interlink the narratological tools that determine these positions in the (literary) text (›real author‹, ›implied author‹, ›implied audience‹). It can be asked *how* sociopolitical discourse enters and is negotiated in the novel. Secondly, the question of *who* is writing/speaking and *who* is being addressed in the (different narrative levels of the) novel can be explored in more text-related detail. Thirdly, it sheds light on *what* is negotiated in the novel, in *what ways*, and in what ways this matters in terms of the subject who writes and the subject who is addressed in the text. These questions are seen as interrelated and relevant to the referential textuality of a text. In sum, then, the dialogic tone of humor is understood as a form of insightful, epistemological engagement that operates at the seam of literary, philosophical, discursive, and reality-evoking demarcations. Within this seam of different performed discourses and speech acts, humor questions and dialogues the normativity of dominance and what is perceived as ›truth‹ or ›common sense‹, or ›knowledge‹.

As Culler notes, following Austin and Derrida, in order for language (and any sign system) to be discerned and ›understood‹, it must follow certain iterations, it must be »identifiable as conforming to an iterable model« (Culler 2011, 99). Derrida calls this iterable model of language the ›general iterability‹ of language, »chains of iterable marks«

(Derrida, quoted in Culler 2000, 509). Iterability in language/discourse thus refers to such established referential configurations of meanings in specific sociopolitical contexts. The dialogic character of language and discourse, which is inevitably evoked in the novel, resignifies such iterable signs by its heteroglossic design and can destabilize conventionalized norms. It is therefore also compatible with Butler's and Sedgwick's understanding of performativity. Since this performative quality of the iterable is not pursued in the same way as is normatively expected, it acquires a performative structure. In this gap that opens up between the expected and their different unexpected contextual evocations, the possibility of change, subversion, and resistance emerges *in a humorous tonality* (see Bakhtin 1984 a). The conventional use of language and meaning in narratives, although ›quoted‹, repeated, can acquire another meaning through the performative humorous process in the dialogic encounter of and within the narrative discourse – and can help to renegotiate hitherto taken-for-granted imageries.

The unstable questioning and dialogic traits that humor seems to evoke also produce a diverse, often aporetic specter of affectivity, such as mourning and contemplation, as well as joy. The next section will explore the affective side of humor and the connotation of an affective economy lying within and accompanying it. Since I understand this study as a contribution to a constructivist approach within literary theory to what is called the affective turn, the question for me is not so much an ontological one (of what ›affects‹ are), or the presumption of fixed and distinctive ›affects‹, that are to be explored further, but rather, *how to relate to* this process in the production of texts and in the sociopolitical texture in such a way that they are not presumed and essentialized as ›given‹, or understood on the basis of ›scientific results‹ as a solid basis of investigation. Furthermore, the study is informed by two other points concerning ›affects‹, which are seen as interrelated. Firstly, in following Micha Hilgers' psychological approach, ›affects‹ are seen as describing a *mechanism of self-regulation* (Hilgers 2012, 17). As such, ›affects‹ can be understood as nodal cross-points of psychic traces that are triggered by actual discourses and/or sensual experiences – albeit with an indeterminate trajectory as to what they mean and how they may develop in their regulatory functionality and effect. This in fact – the infinite traces of these trajectories – is, it is argued, what is inscribed and spilled out in literary texts (and maybe in other texts as well, in a much more hidden, masked, and subtle way). Secondly, following the approaches of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1993, 8, 2003, 9) and Achim Geisenhanslüke (2019, 16 ff.), literary texts are considered as sites and archives of these manifold, affective traces, and, in this respect, as an antidote to Foucault's all-encompassing depiction of the mechanisms of power/›knowledge‹.³⁵ Finally, in view of these points and based on a Spinozian understanding, I speak of *affectivity* rather than of ›affects‹. In *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza links *affectus* not only to the processes in and of the body, but also to thought. In this way, he points to an incalculable, infinite, textured, and interlinked structure of internal and external, material and immaterial processes, in which ›affects‹, like thoughts, can transform constantly. Spinoza writes: »By emotion

35 Interestingly, both – Sedgwick as well as Geisenhanslüke – draw on ›shame‹ to develop their literary-informed counter-renderings, which may have to do with the sociopolitically precarious and prohibitive regulatory functions associated with it.

[*affectus*] I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections« (Spinoza [1677] 2018, 95).³⁶ I understand affectivity as this faculty of perception and expression, as a correlation of internal and external material and immaterial nodes of psychological, bodily, and thought-related processing. These metamorphosing structures are influenced by (historically conditioned) sociopolitical relations inscribed in subjects in infinite ways. Articulated performatively in actions and language these relational structures intervene in discourse, the material and corporeal worlds, and the sociopolitical realm.

Humor and – ›Affect‹

Most theories subsume humor explicitly or implicitly under ›feeling‹, ›sense‹, ›sensation‹, or ›emotion‹ (see also Noel Carroll 2014, 55 ff.). Often humor is associated with ›affects‹ linked to superiority, repression, or relief, with ›laughter‹ often seen as the release of emotional energy. Humor is often also characterized by the simultaneous induction of ambivalent ›affects‹ such as fear, anxiety, and amusement. It also is often linked to a mixture of different ›affects‹ like ›pain and pleasure‹ (Bergson 1911, 22 b; Barbero 2014); Kant explicitly speaks of humor as an ›affect‹ and as the changing free play of sensation (Morreall 2009, 248). Furthermore, in all these theories, humor is linked not only to a change in cognitive state, resulting from suddenness and surprise, but also to pleasure and lust (Morreall 2009; Roof 2018; Freud 2024.8, 88, 185 ff.). Other accounts also stress this dimension, proposing that humor should be perceived as *amusement* in relation to a cognitive process of awareness (Levinson 2006; Dadlez 2011).

While many theories of humor thus discuss humor as an ›affect‹, its affective side has not yet been considered for itself. Besides the tragic-humorous that carries an affective weight, especially triggered by the allusion to tragedy, and besides the often-claimed emotive character of literature per se, which also indicates an affective effect of humor, its explicit relation to affectivity remains unclear. However, as Freud's allusion to humor as an ›affect‹ suggests, and theories of humor discuss, humor also has an affective side that might be worth considering, especially in the context of its understanding as a cognitive faculty in the Kantian sense of ›knowledge‹ (*Erkenntnisvermögen*).³⁷ In order to deal with the affective structure of humor, and in particular with the so-called ›affective turn‹, it seems necessary to first look at the meanings of ›affects‹ and what is evoked as the affective turn and where this study fits in. A further chapter examines theories of humor that link humor in one way or another to specific ›affects‹, as well as the limits of affectivity and humor.

36 Edwin Curley translates *affectus* not as ›emotion‹, but as ›affect‹; cf. Spinoza (1994, 154).

37 This is also what Simon Critchley might mean in an interview with *Cabinet* when he says: »I'm convinced that there are deep philosophical insights yielded through the practice of humor« (17/2005), a point Critchley tries to pursue in *On Humor* (2005), as well as when he follows the meanings and unmeanings of the Greek tragedy for the contemporary »us« (2020).

The ›Affective Turn‹, Literature, and Humor

As with all concepts, it is difficult to adequately begin a discussion of ›literature‹, ›affects‹, humor, and their interrelations without telling a story or recounting an existing one. In more recent works, various (con-)texts in a general sense are reconsidered for their affective meaning as cultural products in connection with the so-called ›affective turn‹.¹ There is a growing body of literature on ›affect‹ (in the humanities, social sciences, neurosciences, and cognitive sciences) and, increasingly, in literary studies.² This ›turn to affect‹ should not, however, be understood as a cohesive and intrinsically more or less unified episteme or academic field. Rather it seems more accurate to understand the turn to ›affect‹ as a ramified, inconsistent, conflicting, and, to an extent, contesting, perforated net of approaches that both implicitly and explicitly work with one or more aspects of the different terms that depict different ›affects‹ or different approaches to ›affects‹ (Ingraham 2003; Leys 2017; Seigworth/Pedwell 2023). These approaches include the study of terms understood as individual ›affects‹ (like ›love‹, hate, fear, shame) and the relationship between these ›affects‹, cognition, and consciousness in their philosophical, phys-

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- 1 There are different and opposing overviews on the so-called turn to ›affect‹, itself a contested term. Ruth Leys' account (2017) is a detailed, concise, and critical of the debate's positivist reliance on ›scientific‹ results – as an aftereffect of the backlash of poststructuralist theory. Leys considers these approaches as uncritical and unreflected regarding their presumptions. Ali Lara, opposing this view, contends that affect studies are not against questions of ideology or ›race‹, but that ›they‹ rather ›just want to theorize other cases that remain to be explored‹ (Lara 2020, 8). Jan Slaby differentiates between different approaches to ›affect‹, assuming that the varying focuses of research mirror not only disciplinary academic cultures, but also different political stances (cf. Slaby 2018). A first anthology that opens up the field of the ›affective turn‹, a term coined by sociologist and gender studies scholar Patricia T. Clough, is her and Jean Halley's *The Affective Turn – Theorizing the Social* (2007). Here, the affective turn is linked to the work of the body and of ›emotions‹ within feminist and queer studies (ix). See also Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), an anthology that brings together different influential approaches in the field. This is somewhat differently but nevertheless affirmatively emphasized in a more recent publication that promises to provide an overview of some of the main concerns in this contested field. See Seigworth and Pedwell (2023).
 - 2 For an overview of the discussions in literary studies, see Patrick Colm Hogan (2016); Donald R. Wehrs/Thomas Blake (2017); Nancy Armstrong (2014); Stephen Ahern (2019, 2024).

ical, neurological, or psychological processes and/or effects. The main focus lies on the understandings of the meanings of ›affects‹ for themselves as well as for thought and society. The question is whether ›affects‹ are to be seen as autonomous from other external and internal factors or if they must be seen through the lens of intentionality with regard to ›objects‹. Many aspects of these approaches are interdisciplinary, ranging as far as philosophy and cognitive neuroscience.³ It would exceed the scope of this discussion to take into account the various approaches to come to terms with the existing studies. However, I wish to highlight a few points that I consider to be of key importance. The term ›affect‹ emphasizes an abstract discourse, which is considered one of its problematic aspects. On the whole, many debates in ›affects studies‹ are expressed in a rather cumbersome fashion, often with such vigor that I am tempted to say that the term ›affect‹ seems to represent a labyrinth of views on *an abstract other* per se in much of the literature on the topic. My hunch is that, after *feelings* and *emotions* were assigned to the realm of *the other* of ›reason‹ in Western thought, and after the emergence and establishment of (feminist) Black Studies, Postcolonial Studies (especially in the U.S. and, more generally, the English-speaking world), as well as feminist and queer theory, have complicated the construction of the *other* as an object of ›knowledge‹ in academia, it seems that this void has been filled by the turn to ›affect‹, which may explain why it has become so explosively fashionable to speak about it (that is, *as other*, something *to gaze upon*).⁴

The affective turn is a discursive trend that has been evident in publications since 2000. It can be traced back to 1995, when two significant publications emerged in the field: Brian Massumi's *The Autonomy of Affekt* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's *Shame in the Cybernetic Fold* (Seigworth/Gregg 2010, Hallermeier 2023). This attention to ›affects‹ has been implicitly also legitimized with new findings in the neuro- and cognitive sciences. Interestingly, these approaches have often been taken

3 This is particularly evident in the approaches in German literary studies where a focus on ›emotions‹ as/in literature has emerged in the last decades (in 2006 Thomas Anz speaks of the ›emotional turn‹ in literary studies, in the online platform *literaturkritik.de*), which has since been followed by publications on fundamental questions about the role and understandings of ›emotions‹ and/in literature (and also) film. Simone Winko's much cited book *Kodierte Gefühle* (2003) can be regarded as such a pivotal point of interest in affect studies in literature. See also, for example, Sandra Poppe's *Emotionen in Literatur und Film* (2012) as well as Martin von Koppenfels and Cornelia Zumbusch's *Handbuch Literatur und Emotion* (2016). In English and American literary studies, the focus on affectivity appears to be more transdisciplinary, focusing on the *meanings* of ›affects‹ in ›public spaces‹ in the broadest sense, and of individual ›affects‹ such as ›love‹, sadness, depression, joy, and fear in literary studies, cultural studies, as well as queer and feminist studies. Achim Geisenhanslüke's work on affectivity and/in comparative literature occupies an in-between space in its genealogical, maybe more cross-disciplinary approach (linking philosophy, literary theory, and psychology), bringing into dialogue classical and still influential philosophical texts, such as those of Aristotle, with modernist tendencies in philosophy, (Freudian) psychology, and literary texts. See, for example, Geisenhanslüke (2019). A number of (postcolonial) critical thinkers who have joined this thread of research in Black, postcolonial, cultural, gender, and queer studies include Sara Ahmed (2002, 2010, 2014); Jin Harithaworn (2015); Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas (2011).

4 For a critical discussion of the affective turn, see Sara Ahmed 2014, 204 ff. The peer-reviewed journal *Emotion Review* is regarded as one important source of research on affectivity; another more speculative, open access journal is *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*.

for granted in the humanities rather than questioned. Furthermore, previous studies have overlooked the question of why ›affects‹ were neglected, despite the fact that many philosophers *did* address the topic in their texts, discussing different ›affects‹ and their possible meanings.⁵ In light of the ongoing hype surrounding ›affects‹ and the dependence on positivist research in science and technology, it is not implausible to argue that the turn to ›affect‹ may also be part of a broader ›biologist ontological‹ and ›positivistic turn‹ in the humanities, social sciences, and also cultural studies (see also Clough/Hally 2007; Angel 2004; Brennan 2004). However, this trend is of course not uncontested. The question of where this may lead us, and how (far) critical approaches in the humanities, including literary studies and theory, can contribute to this ›turn‹ remains open. Unsurprisingly, these diverse approaches also center on different terms to depict ›affect‹, such as ›affect‹, ›emotion‹, and ›feeling‹. Notably, ›affect‹ has become the most accepted term, particularly among proponents of cultural studies and related theories.⁶

The following brief overview outlines the various approaches. This outline is of course, reductionist. It should also not be understood as an all-encompassing overview of the various research avenues in this field. It is merely an attempt to provide an overall sense of the influential currents of thought on theories of affectivity, particularly in literary and cultural studies.⁷

Firstly, there are proponents of ›affect theory‹ in psychology and cognitive neuroscience who have had a major influence on understanding ›affect‹ in an interdisciplinary manner. This group includes the works of Silvan S. Tomkins, his students Paul Eckman and Carol Izard and the neuroscientist Antonio R. Damasio. Secondly, there are philosophical works, especially those of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and those of their English translator, the political and cultural theorist Brian Massumi, which have had a

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- 5 There is a converse parallel between this new trend of attention to ›affect‹ and the emergence of conceptualizations of ›affect‹ and their function in theories around 1900. As Winko points out in her study this was a time of influential new theories including those of Darwin and Freud and a reevaluation of the body, with major consequences for the humanities (Winko 2003, 158–211). However, her work does not address how this corresponds with the project of colonialism and its manifold effects in theories on ›affect‹ and ›*Empfindsamkeit*‹ (sensibility). In both historical cases, this indicates a paradigmatic shift that I think correlates with processes of othering, (self-)racialization and ›identity‹ (and the attempt to implicitly bracket them). Sara Ahmed (2002), for example, indicates the hierarchization of ›emotions‹ within colonial terminology around notions of ›cultivated/civilized‹ and ›non-cultivated/non-civilized‹.
- 6 While all three terms are frequently used, ›emotion‹ is often related to approaches in philosophy that consider the term to refer to individualized states with intentional content that cause different effects in the body and the mind. See, for example, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010), and Margaret Wetherell (2012). Also see Jan Slaby (2016). Within cultural studies approaches, see, for instance, Sara Ahmed's discussion of the terms, Ahmed (2014, 204–225). Although, in her earlier work, Ahmed is critical of the term ›affect‹ and often uses ›emotion‹ instead, she regards herself as a scholar of ›affect‹. She points out that her use of the term ›emotion‹ has political implications and aims to reinforce the feminist underpinnings of any theorizations of ›affect‹ that are often overlooked in the more recent focus on ›affect‹.
- 7 Jan Slaby differentiates between three different approaches to ›affect‹ whereby he assumes that the various research foci mirror not only various disciplinary cultures, but also different political stances. Cf. Slaby (2018).

significant impact on the field. Important to both groups are the philosophical works of Baruch Spinoza and William James. Though these works differ, I believe they share enough similarities to group them under one heading. Both Antonio Damasio, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi draw on Spinozian approaches that see the body as the locus of affectivity and of the mind in contrast to René Descartes, who claimed a dissociation between body and mind. Antonio Damasio also distinguishes between the terms ›emotions‹ (bodily reactions to stimuli such as sweating) and ›feelings‹ (registered brain awareness indicating that something is occurring in the form of ›feelings‹ such as fear). The distinction between steps of perception and bodily reactions is reflected in the works of William James, Brian Massumi, and the differentiation of terms such as ›affects‹ and ›emotions‹/›feelings‹ or ›pre-personal-affects‹. This group also considers the works of psychologist and philosopher Silvan S. Tomkins to be important, especially his four-volume publication, *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1991). In fact, literary and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced this work to the humanities. In this work, Tomkins distinguishes nine pairs of ›affects‹ based on intensity (interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, and fear-terror, shame-humiliation and dismell-disgust). Tomkins regards these as universal, whereas he views ›emotions‹ as too complex and elusive to describe and define. Tomkins' students, Paul Ekman and Carroll Izard, developed these ideas in their own influential works. These ›affects‹ and the works expounding on them have gained significant attention and cross-disciplinary interest in the early stages of the renewed interest in ›affect studies‹⁸

Thirdly, there are the works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, especially those on shame and humiliation, as well as the work and approaches that followed in her footsteps. Sedgwick's works are not structured around ›affects‹ per se, but rather, as evidenced by her readings of Henry James's texts, they constitute an attempt to broaden the scope of critical theory beyond the *hermeneutics of suspicion* (the approaches of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud) and Sedgwick's concept of *paranoid reading*, towards an epistemology of *reparative reading*, as discussed in the previous section. Sedgwick acknowledges the importance of these theories but argues that such *paranoid* approaches, while necessary, are often accompanied by negative ›affects‹. Her strategy is to extend these theories by employing a more empowering philosophy that considers affectivity in a ›self-affirming, (autotelic) way while still following critical theoretical approaches that also consider pleasure and joy. She does this by using what – drawing on Silvan S. Tomkins – she calls *weak theory*.⁹ One of the major concepts and analytical tools that Sedg-

8 In literary studies these influences are linked to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, especially to her co-edited work with Adam Frank (1995.)

9 What Eve K. Sedgwick though also presupposes is that a ›hermeneutics of suspicion‹ arouses ›negative feelings‹ and that these are ›bad‹ (e.g., sadness, anger, depressive moods, and melancholy). However, rather than categorizing ›affects‹ in an evaluative sense, they can be understood as negatively coded yet still empowering, enabling, and liberating in other ways. (See, in particular, the valuable work of Heather Love in this regard (2007); see also Cvetcovich 2012). This is also evident in Sedgwick's own reading of Henry James's work, particularly her examination of James's use of shame for self-empowerment. Thus, such negatively coded ›affects‹ may be considered affectivities of relief and, in this sense, may count as ›good affects‹. Moreover, as literary critic Sianne Ngai argues in *Ugly Feelings* (2007), paranoia and irritation are ›messed up‹ feelings of ›our time‹, which

wick helped implement in critical and queer theory is the concept of *reparative reading*, which links Tomkins's *weak theory* to Melanie Klein's concept of ›reparation‹. Her work thus differs from ›pure‹, rather uncritical, depictions of ›affect studies‹ and entails an emancipatory, enabling critique of power. Thus, it is still seen as a vital source of and for critical theory in queer and feminist approaches on affectivity, in literary theory and beyond (Ronda Arab/Michelle Dowd/Adam Zucker 2015; Robyn Wiegman 2015, 2016; Ellis Hanson 2011). Several other scholars in feminist studies have also been inspired by Sedgwick's work. They focus on particular ›affects‹ in everyday contexts and have broadened the scope of ›affect studies‹.¹⁰ Sara Ahmed's works, which link ›affect studies‹ to feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory, are specifically influential (Ahmed, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014). In her work, Ahmed follows a similar approach to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, sharing with her a critical poststructuralist approach to theory. Ahmed traces the functionality of specific ›affects‹ critically, considering power relations, and treating ›race‹, gender, and sexuality as intersectional categories of analysis.¹¹ She follows a ›suspicious‹ reading/writing with a reaffirming one that looks at the enabling potential of thinking along affectivity.¹² Ahmed draws on different philosophical threads that, as with many other scholars in ›affect studies‹, encompass readings of/in phenomenology (a subject often disavowed in poststructuralist texts, as well as in ›affects studies‹). Fourthly, there are important approaches that are critical of the proponents in the mainstream discourse of ›affect studies‹ in the humanities. One of the most prominent critics of more mainstream threads in ›affect studies‹ is Ruth Leys. Notably in two of her essays, published in *Critical Inquiry: The Turn to Affect – A Critique* (2011) and *Facts and Moods – Reply to my Critics* (2012) Leys addresses the propositions that are suggested by the proponents of the mainstream affective turn. Leys's critique revolves around the so-called ›basic emotions‹ mentioned above and the duality that is made between cognition and ›emotion‹

are connoted with negative self-consciousness and powerlessness. However, these forms of affectivity can give rise to agency.

- 10 For example, see the influential work of Lauren Berlant (2012, 2018). For discussions of Sedgwick's influential readings and her subsequent impact, see, Erin Murphy, J. Keith Vincent (2010), Robyn Wiegmann (2014), and Jonathan A. Allen (2015).
- 11 Jan Slaby highlights the practice of affective discursivity discussed and employed by Sara Ahmed in her texts to generate and expand insights about ›affects‹ and the affective turn. (See Slaby 2018, 15ff.). In an attempt to shed light on the various angles within the field of ›affect studies‹, Slaby distinguishes between metaphysical, scholarly, and activist approaches. Ahmed's approach, which Slaby considers the most important because it provides insights from marginalized positions, is seen as the ›activist‹ approach. However, this differentiation seems problematic to me, as it suggests that *white* scholars do not engage in political willfulness through their writing by following a specific tradition of scholarly debate and style. From an anti-colonial and postcolonial feminist perspective, I argue that a text's tone, whether detached, engaged, or declarative, does not free it from its sociopolitical context. It always signifies and contributes to a political position. Furthermore, the designation ›activist‹ is becoming a rather stereotyped position of marginality that is increasingly accepted at the margins of scholarly debate. This helps stabilize the debate while simultaneously glorifying the precariousness of scholars of color and those at the margins of the academic machinery.
- 12 One of her most pioneering works, which is still widely discussed, is *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* ([2004] 2014). See also *Queer phenomenology* (2006), *The promise of happiness* (2010a), and *Willful Subjects* (2014).

and between ›affect‹ and ›emotion‹. According to Leys, these distinctions are both drawn from interpretations of scientific experiments that are taken for granted. Leys acknowledges differences in the mainstream research on ›affects‹, but criticizes the notion that a sharp distinction can be made between ›affects‹, which are seen as ›pre-personal‹, ›biological‹ and ›organism-related‹, and which are understood as having nothing to do with intention, cognition and meaning. She also criticizes the idea that, while some cultural theorists like Brian Massumi reject an uncritical belief in the correctness of scientific results and dualisms, many scholars nevertheless build their own assumptions and philosophical presuppositions on scientific experiments and research, turning them into facts without reading them against the grain and considering their hidden and unhidden presumptions. Leys also notes that many current neuroscience works published around the same time as Tomkins's and Ekman's (Russell 1962/1980/2005; Fridlund 1962/1991) do not privilege biological processes over cultural ones, yet these works have been ignored in the turn to affectivity. She claims that this is also the case with students of Ekman and Tomkins, who have criticized the basic format of the experiments (Leys 2017, 310 ff.). Leys is not alone with her critique in the humanities. In addition to the works she relies on (Papoulias and Callard 2010; Hemmings 2005; Gross 2006; Nussbaum 2001; and Rosenwein 2010), Sara Ahmed, for example, also criticizes the rather masculinist approach in much of the trend in ›affect studies‹ – a trend that uses and privileges the term ›affect‹ over ›emotion‹. This, she argues, emphasizes a highly formalized discourse, thereby ignoring feminist studies – prior to the ›turn‹ – on ›emotions‹/›emotionalizing‹/›emotionality‹ and their function in relation to power and gendered – and I would add racialized – discourses (Ahmed 2014, 204 ff.; see also Garcia-Rojas 2016). The use of the terms ›emotions‹, ›affects‹, and ›feelings‹ remains an unresolved issue that indicates the different approaches to the topic. Finally, in literary studies, the focus of the affective turn is predominantly on theorizations concerning what literary studies can contribute to the understanding of ›affects‹ and how such questions and undertakings can be expressed. Furthermore, the research focuses on taxonomy, model findings, and terminology (Anz 2012, 155–170), as well as questions regarding ›affects‹ and the ›paradoxes‹ of fictionality (Zipfel 2012, 127–153). More recent publications discuss the inherent relationship between literature and ›affects‹, referencing classical philosophical texts, such as those of Plato and Aristotle. These publications address questions such as whether literature is the site and expression of ›affects‹ or if affectivity is used in literature to produce specific meanings (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 2019).

Although some scholars speak of a constructivist approach to ›affects‹ (Wirth 2002; Winko 2003, 208; Eming 2007, 259) this approach is not expressed as a field or problem in its own right in literary studies. Following Jutta Eming, however, one could argue that a constructivist approach to affectivity *literally* makes sense and may contribute to understanding literature's ability to shed new light on the meanings and constructions of ›affects‹ as revealing signs and codes in literary texts, sociopolitical (con-)texts, and the current transdisciplinary discourse about ›affects‹ as such.¹³ Here, I therefore, use the term

13 Overall, the discourse on ›affects‹, particularly in an interdisciplinary context, contributes to an understanding of perception. This is evident in the growing field of approaches to theories of ›affects‹ and/as perception. In addition to the vast array of publications on perception, a philosophical

affectivity also to emphasize the processual and dynamic aspects within an intersectional cluster of sociopolitical, subjective, gender-, ›race‹-, different ability-, age-, and class-related, discursive, and historical phenomena that are bound to the body and mind. In this sense, affectivity is understood as an interacting, interrelated and relational space within and among such phenomena. A body-mind dualism is thereby questioned, and ›affects‹ are seen as the effects of sociopolitical and psychological body-mind processes as well as processes that cause body-mind reactions. The body, as a place and space of affectivity, can easily be related to the canon, the texts, and the texture that inscribe meanings into different surfaces and objects. These processes of affectivity are also reflected in cultural productions and in texts as their linguistic translations. In this sense, affectivity is also understood as part of literary texts, as exemplified, in Sedgwick's work (see also Breithaupt 2018). This study also touches on three questions raised in this context. The first is the concept of *movere* as a rhetorical principle that affects and influences an audience cognitively and emotionally. The second is the *paradox of fiction*: although one knows a text is fictional, one is still affected by it. The third is the functions and presentations of affectivity in literary texts (Morreall 1985; Kuehnast, Wagner, Wassiliwizky, Jakobson, & Menninghaus 2014; Mellmann 2015; Carroll 1990; Barbero 2014; Hillebrandt 2011; Tullmann and Buckwalter 2014).

Interestingly enough, however, both humor and touch are not yet central topics in studies on affectivity. So with this attempt, I hope to shed light on and contribute to debates on this nexus.

From the above discussions of humor, its functions as well the attempts to define its ›essence‹ and effects, a link between humor, its performative and aesthetic quality, and affectivity can be inferred; moreover, a social interrelation between at least two entities – a self and an other – can be presupposed in the dynamics of affectivity as well as in the formation of humor. Furthermore, as noted, not only is humor itself often considered as an ›affect‹, but the relationship that ensues with and through it is also linked to various ›affects‹ (Berlant 2017; Berlant/Ngai 2017).

encyclopedia of perception is now available. See Mohan Matthen (2015). However, discussions on perception and perception theories remain ontological and are approached in a positivist manner, provoking a critical stance. More interesting, and seemingly a way out of such transcendental undertakings, may be the idea of the *propositionality* of these works. Upon closer examination of discourses on ›affects‹ (or perception), it comes to mind that they are articulated and non-articulated utterances and arguments in different styles and traditions of writing. These un-written approaches lend them a ›specific‹ grammar and attachment to finding ›results‹ and insights. Nevertheless, all these works are propositional by nature. The difference between these works and critical works on ›affects‹, such as those by Sedgwick and Leys (works which are often marginalized in writings and encyclopedic entries), is, I think, that the former do not regard their work as propositional or political with epistemological implications. Instead, they seem to perceive their work as ›truth‹-finding practices, which I find problematic. One can read propositions to find out what is claimed and refuted and what is or is not part of the structure of ›knowledge‹. In other words, one can find out what is or is not centralized in the text to understand what the discourses are saying and what they are silent about.

Laugh's Humor – Laugh's ›Love‹

One of the ›affects‹ that is often and in different ways connoted as humor is ›love‹. Different aspects of the affinity between ›to love‹ and ›to laugh‹ are often drawn in these discussions. Especially in the genre of romantic comedy, a link is established that has changed over time but is still recurrent. ›Love‹ is thereby regarded as a laughable (and lovable) condition. It is invoked as a mild ›madness‹ and suffering with a happy-ending reward, qualities that are also connected to ›laughter‹. Both are also often seen as traits that reestablish the image of a happy society (Frye [1957] 2020, 163; Mizejewski 2009, 17 ff.; see also Ahmed 2010). Both terms require an object or something to which they are related, both are seen in conjunction with a lack, both are connected to the body. The quality of ›love‹, as erotic desire, is regarded as having an affinity with loss and loss of control, qualities that are also discussed in terms of the effects of humor, which, too, signals a (disarming?) loss of control that is mirrored in a bodily feature (for example in laughing) or in the psychic state of confusion in ›love‹ – which can manifest itself in (bodily) neglect. In both cases, the self seems to fall into fragments.

Taking up this relationship between laughing and loving, already evoked in ancient texts, Bevis points out: »[A]s Parmeno explains to one lovelorn gallant at the beginning of *The Eunuch* (161 BC): if a matter has no plan or control to it at all, you can't manage it according to a plan.« The ›matter‹ here is amorous desire. For Terence and his many followers, to be in love is to have lost the plot« (Bevis 2013, 52). ›Love‹ is thus often discussed as humor and an imaginary that is connoted as being lost and losing control, which unfolds within an inter-subjective trajectory. There is also another, underlying relationship between loving and laughing. In many dramas and narratives ›love‹ is used to *generate* humor. ›Love‹, it could be said, is an ›affect‹ that accompanies humor, but is also one through which humor is constructed.

In fact, some theorizations of humor flirt with the humorous in a quite eroticized (masculinist) manner, in which humor is assigned as the other of philosophy. This is for example the case with Henri Bergson's approach to the humorous, as Judith Roof remarks. Roof alludes to Bergson's motivation to deal with humor only through the evocation of a (cis-)normative allusion, which she identifies as a general masculinist stance on humor in philosophy, stating:

»[I]n Bergson's original French version, comedy is not only grammatically feminine, it behaves like a strumpet, always sliding, becoming loose, a little provocative and impertinent challenger to our speculations – or perhaps expectations. Bergson's scene renders comedy a stripper to be ogled, a little thought-teaser who always manages to get away. There it is: the low phallic comedy as both ›low‹ and ›phallic‹.« (Roof 2018, 8)

Roof thus turns the tables and links what is seen in humor as ›phallic‹ and ›low‹ to the heart of Western philosophical aspirations and approaches to humor: In philosophical texts, humor is linked to cis-normative flirtation and erotics, and othered. She thus implicitly discerns a form of psychological transference – a projection – in philosophical discourses on humor, which it shares with ›love‹ and erotics as desired and disavowed ›affects‹ that cannot constitute thought. According to her, then, it is not humor that is ›low‹

and ›phallic‹, but a masculinist trait of philosophical reasoning that somehow tends to clandestinely (and possessively?) constitute and control its own grounds through a sexualized othering of other forms of thought. As Roof points out, Bergson describes ›laughter‹ in an eroticized way, but tries to hide this gesture within the power of his philosophic response in the form of supremacist flirtatious observations (Roof 2018, 8 ff.). Before surrendering himself to the humor he observes, to the call of the other within himself, as it were, Bergson subordinates humor to the power of philosophic rhetoric and saves the language and space of philosophy from humorous contamination and from change. Bergson's writings on humor describe what the explosive work of humor can do, and he neutralizes it within the rhetoric of a masculinized, logocentric, philosophizing where humor – that pleasurable bomb that destroys – is banished from the realm of philosophical thought and, in a degrading, flirtatious way, sublated.

Freud's theories also recognize in humor a form of displaced eroticized lust that he sees at work in the pleasurable pay-off that joking implies and promises. The humor of ›the joke‹ is regarded as both promise and fulfillment. According to this thread, the desire to ›love‹ and the desire to laugh are related to the promise of satisfaction, which is why both are linked to suspense and the threat of rupture with a view to compensation. This can be seen, for example, in the way Freud eroticizes ›the joke‹ as a ›side leap‹ (*Seitensprung*) (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 208 ff.). The term indicates an understanding of humor as rupture. Humor transcends ›the laws‹ of regulatory conventions, the possible consequences of which are nevertheless risked because of the promise that it holds. Humor as *Seitensprung* not only plays with the limits of the sayable, but also echoes the regulatory link of humor and ›love‹ to sociopolitical ›laws‹, to what is allowed and what is forbidden. Humor and ›love‹ thus mark a liminal crossing not only of sociopolitical transgression, but also of the boundaries of power regulations. In his analysis of Freud's letters to his wife and Kierkegaard's concept of ›laughter‹, Geisenhanslüke also suggests another link between ›love‹ and humor as ›irony‹. According to him both eroticism and humor follow a negativity: ›Irony‹ says one thing and means something else, and erotic ›love‹ desires something it does not have, so that both seem bound to an incongruous experience and expression of lack (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 147 ff.).

A political and caring attitude toward humor and ›laughter‹ as a necessary form of self-›love‹, is implicit in Hélène Cixous's seminal text *The Laugh of the Medusa* ([1975] 1976). In this text, Cixous ponders upon different forms of exclusion in relation to femininity. Cixous links self-›love‹ with humor and ›laughter‹ as a philosophic way of dealing with the (old) biased masculinist imagery that presupposes and excludes femininity (as the other of masculinity) from thought. Although Cixous' text carries the package of an essentialist feminism, it has not lost its actuality. The ›laughter‹ of the Medusa seems to laugh out all forms of colonial, racialized, sexualized, and anti-feminist otherings, calling for ›laughter‹ as a sign of self-care as well as resistance. In fact, Cixous's humorous tone unleashes a serious, empowering philosophical proposition. Her call for ›laughter‹ signifies a movement that, coming from the past and facing the (unbearable) present (of power asymmetries), unfolds in a future to come:

»They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on.

For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and its militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts! Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.« (Cixous 1975, 885)

Cixous' humor here plays with the alleged danger, and not just a psychological one, of the female sex, trapped between two deadly poles: that of the abyss and that of the Medusa, which it signifies, caught within the phallogocentric economy of language, imagery, and discourse. The text is grounded in feminist self-care as well as in a deconstruction of masculinist male-centered mythologized and psychologist assumptions: Not only is the ›castration anxiety‹, often connotated by the female figure rendered absurd. The figure of the siren is also reattached to male masculinist discourses, and detached from images of femininity.

Within a different frame, one that reconciles Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy with empowering feminist readings, Sarah Kofman rethinks humor and ›laughter‹ as an affirmative ›love‹ of life. Kofman reads Nietzsche against the grain, not so much in order to destabilize his approach, but to approach him within a feminist understanding. In doing so, Kofman substantiates Nietzsche's insights. Along the way, she encounters the Greek mythical figure *Baubo* and stresses Nietzsche's Dionysian affinity. She presents *Baubo*, as a figure in the Eleusian mysteries who is also a symbol of fertility and *eternal return*, and who »can appear as a female double of Dionysus« (Kofman 1988, 197; see also Gray 1994, 1 ff.). Dionysius thus appears as a queer and queering figure, a goddess* who symbolizes life and procreation. Kofman points out the aporetic Dionysian affirmation of life and cheerfulness in the face of suffering.

»The figure of *Baubô* indicates that a simple logic could never understand that life is neither depth nor surface, that behind the veil, there is another veil, behind a layer of paint, another layer. It signifies also that appearance should cause us neither pessimism nor skepticism, but rather the affirming laugh of a living being who knows that despite death life can come back indefinitely [...].« (Kofman 1988, 197)

The figure of ›Dionysus‹ points to a relationship of life and death and to thought and understanding as comprehensive and eternal experiences of life (and death?). Here, sensuality, affectivity, and the humorous are combined in a corporeal expression as ›gaiety and laughter‹, expressing optimism beyond misery and certainties. In reflecting upon Nietzsche's musings on ›truth‹, Kofman find her own voice and a theory of humor that she links to *Baubo*. She writes:

»Mastery means to know how to keep oneself at a distance, know how to close doors and windows and keep the shutters closed. To hold oneself in the camera obscura, not

to refuse appearance but to affirm it and to laugh, for if life is ferocious and cruel, she is also fecundity and eternal return: her name is *Baubô*.« (Kofman 1988, 1961)¹⁴

Baubo here signifies ›laughter‹, joy, and ›love‹ that do not succumb to sorrow, but affirm life as the nonsense possibility of recurrence. As Kofman further explains, *Baubo* is sometimes also the figuration of ›woman*‹ itself (Kofman 1988, 197). *Baubo* appears to Demeter, who is grieving over the disappearance and abduction of her child Persephone (sometimes also Dionysus). In order to soothe Demeter, *Baubo* lifts her skirt and shows her belly, on which is drawn the image of one of Demeter's children, Iachos or Dionysus. Seeing this image, Demeter laughs in joy. Kofman interprets this humorous act of *Baubo* as an apotropaic, loving gesture that offers solace through an embrace of eternal recurrence (Kofman 1988, 197). Humor resides here in the corporeality of the birthing female body, as well as in its symbolic, potential ability to give birth to a futurity, to creativity and repetition, to the overcoming of sorrow. Kofman thus interlinks humor to the power to *make* (someone) laugh, within moments of powerlessness, and sees in it a caring, loving motivation *to move*, to change someone's mood and perception. Humor in this sense opens up thought affirmatively toward an un/expecting, not-knowing future.¹⁵ *Baubo* may also represent care, female solidarity, and powers that go beyond the ›known‹ and the norm. *Baubo* uses humor to enchant and empower. She symbolizes that which transcends the plagues of ›reality‹ and oppression, which is the enchantment of the magical as unknown, not-knowing and power-less fields of another form of ›knowledge‹, a ›knowledge‹ that may be contrary to all (known) beliefs. The powerless not-knowing of aesthetics maybe that signifies difference and transformation. *Baubo's* loving humor can thus be conceived as a caring, feminist affirmation within experiences of grief and loss. This loving humor appears here as a proclamation, the herald of a ›nevertheless‹, an insight, however vaguely experienced, that circuits of suffering may have an end. It is evoked by a joyful ›knowledge‹, which comes from experiences of sadness and melancholy and promises an end to their limbo. Like ›love‹, humor is thus linked to a reassuring act of promise.

14 Kofman speaks here of a ›camera obscura‹, one of her important concepts, as an inner self and inner shelter that ›knows‹ more than it shows. This surplus of ›knowing‹ entails more than factual ›knowing‹, it also encompasses aporias, contradictions, a past with all its different experiences of affectivity, sometimes at odds with itself, suffering, a ›knowledge‹ that, thus, ›knows‹ the peaks and troughs of life, and that, nevertheless, out of this ›camera obscura‹ remains calm and open to what may come, affirming things as they are. Embedded in this affirmation is also the Nietzschean belief in an eternity that repeats itself. This is what Kofman calls the mastery of keeping oneself at a distance. It may mean acknowledging (one's) suffering and pain, and yet, keeping it as ›knowledge‹ within the self, looking at them and at life from such an inner refuge, a distance that is most intimate to oneself, in order to live on – because of and side by side with a growing other ›knowledge‹: that of the repeatability of living.

15 In the same vein, Frances Gray argues for a rereading of the figure of *Baubo* for theorizing humor and its relation to both misogynist and feminist imageries. Cf. Gray (1994, 1 ff.).

Humor's Pain – Humor's Healing

Humor, then, indicates pain as well as overcoming. In this sense, it signifies a form of critique and technique of speaking/writing that is used in relation to theories, which depict suffering and marginalization where it is differently utilized as a form of decolonizing resistance and empowerment, but also in the sense of care, as a self-critical, transformative tool (Lowe 1996; Karman 1998; Harper 2002; Ball 2003; Zimmermann 2003; Franklyn 2006; Pye 2006; Coletta 2009; Moura 2010; Moss 2015; Deveau 2015; Göktürk 2011, 2017; Kotthoff 2017). Often humor is thereby used as a means to destabilize stereotypes and racist signification (Cixous 1976; Gray 1994; Gates 1988; Holoch 2012; Moss 2015), and it is also seen as a healing strategy used by various othered communities (Banerjee 2005; Ridanpää 2014; Göktürk 2017).

Humor becomes a means of trickstery, world-play, deconstructive imagery, and enabling empowerment. As Mona Lisa Saloy says of Black comedians:

»These accomplished comedians are the product of a culture whose humor rose out of a bitter, often harsh and dangerous racial climate; the result is the common adage that Blacks laughed to keep from crying, giving fuel to Langston Hughes's admonition that ›laughter‹ is the best medicine. Black humor sustained Africans in America from the earliest use of parody, to animal tales, the dozens, in proverbs, to the urban narratives such as toasts, and many other forms such as jokes, the foundation for these contemporary practitioners. Considering the proliferation of professional Black comedians, male and female, rest assured that Black humor exists in pure folk form orally, on the block, in families, neighborhoods, at churches, and still on front porches or street corners wherever Black folks congregate.« (Saloy 2001)

This healing site of humor is also highlighted and analyzed by Sigmund Freud and his so-called *Jewish Jokes*. It is interesting and revealing in this regard that Freud's reference to *Jewish Jokes* is rarely discussed as theory building against antisemitism (and racism in general) or its reparative, healing aspects.¹⁶ Freud's informed analysis remains relevant, however, as he also depicts literary texts to denote humor, but has not been sufficiently considered in this regard. As an example, I will therefore have a closer look at the ways Freud elaborates on (joke-)humor in this sense of resistance and healing in his reading of a literary text.

Freud alludes to the witticism of ›the joke‹ in a peculiar and central way that simultaneously places and displaces ›Jewishness‹ within language and imagery (Freud 2024, 8, 41 ff.). He speaks of *Jewish Jokes* by referring to and analyzing them not only in a technical way that remains subliminal, but that also problematizes sociopolitical degradation as well as empowerment (see also Kofman 1986, 35–48). The Jewish German poet

16 Although these elements of Freudian humor theory are quite evident, they are seldom highlighted as central to his work. One exception is Sarah Kofman's reading of Freud's ideas on humor, which, for reasons that remain unclear, is rarely cited. See Kofman (1986, 26 ff.); see also Menke (2020, 443). Other studies demonstrate the value of integrating his theories with alternative approaches to humor, particularly when exploring its potential as a tool for empowerment and critique. For example, see Gilman (1986); Emig (2010); Göktürk (2009, 2017).

H. Heine (1797–1986) occupies a prominent and central position in this context. Like no other German poet, Heine stands for witticism in both senses of the word, in the sense of highly intellectual as well as pleasurable wit. Humor appears here as a third space of utterance that makes speaking possible and thus enables critique, empowerment and subtlety, community building, and belonging. It allows a critical engagement with anti-semitism/racism and the confrontation and overcoming of socially accepted and conventionalized antisemitic/racist attitudes and images. Heine appears as the (knowing) hero who accomplishes this without a great deal of effort. There is thus a lightness and an ease with which Heine can maintain his sovereignty. Heine is serious, witty, and humorous at the same time. Not without some humor Freud mentions Heine in connection with a so-called ›*Kalauer*‹, which is not considered to be particularly witty, by saying »of which Heine is guilty [*das Heine zur Last fällt*]« (Freud [1905] 2002, 36). Nevertheless, Freud cites one such ›joke‹ to invoke the work of humor inherent in it, without explicitly addressing the economy of antisemitism that it problematizes:

»[Heine] Having for a long time represented himself to his lady as an ›Indian Prince‹, he throws off the mask and confesses ›Madam! I have deceived you ... I have no more ever been in Kalkutta [Calcutta] than the Kalkuttenbraten [roast Calcutta fowl] that I ate for luncheon.« (Freud 2024.8, 41)

What Freud omits is why Heine, a German poet of distinguished fame, would claim to be an ›Indian prince‹, and why Freud would repeat ›the joke‹ without surprise, and, it seems, with some relish. Freud may have left this out, because it is so obvious that ›the joke‹ is not least a response to the economy of normalized forms of othering and anti-semitism that plays at the shores of ›knowledge‹ and power, as Heine's ›joke‹ is both an analysis and a deconstruction of antisemitic slander. The repetition of ›the joke‹ may thus also represent a healing way of dealing with antisemitism. The self-masking and the injuries of (antisemitic) interpellation, othering, exclusion, and the ascription of difference in a degrading sense – ›oriental‹, ›Jewish‹, ›Indian‹ – intersect with the empowering self-idealization and image of ›an Indian prince‹ (a *prince*, that is, of noble descent: from ›India‹, Asia, the desirous beautiful, ›exotic‹ place of imperial fantasies somewhere else, in ›the Orient‹), so that everyone (*white* European of *Christian* descent in Heine's – and also Freud's – context) should feel envious. ›The joke‹, in this way, laughs off the defamation, unaffected by it. But there is also the mourning, the traumatization, and the experience of being permanently exposed to antisemitism, to which humor here serves as a mask. What is masked, by both Heine and Freud, is the injury as well as the tragic basis of the humor itself that makes speaking about this always concomitant antisemitic companion in language, imagery, social interrelation, and the intimacy of ›love‹-relations, possible at all. (But humor goes beyond the moment, opening up to other possibilities of existing and ›humanisms‹, tugging at the imagination.) Seldom does Freud make these allusions to such injuries explicit, but he works with them below the threshold of his analysis in subtle and empowering ways. Humor in this sense is critical, a site for and of empowerment and healing, and it means an undoing of antisemitic/racist representational

connotations.¹⁷ Humor, furthermore, unleashes a double, divided address. It addresses at least two different ›audiences‹, an ›internal‹, (Jewish) insider ›audience‹, which implicitly – or more explicitly – receives the whole wit of the humorous inclinations, empowered by it, and to an external, (*white*) outsider ›audience‹ who may only get parts of it. Freud expressly refers to and makes use of this social, community building effect of ›jokes‹, as well as the *other* subjectivity that is triggered and instantiated by the analysis of *Jewish Jokes* and their reiteration. He makes very clear, which ›jokes‹ he calls *Jewish Jokes* by connecting them to a specific subjectivity. For Freud only those ›jokes‹ about Jews are *Jewish Jokes* that are made and told *by* Jews. He, thus, assertively refers to the complex allusions and processes of vulnerability and repair that are part of these ›jokes‹ and to which only Jews (and other racialized people?) have access. Freud thus clearly excludes from this understanding racist ›jokes‹ made/told *about* ›Jews‹ from antisemitic frontiers and subject-positions. In the chapter on the motives of ›jokes‹ in which he discusses them as social phenomena and processes, he states:

»A more transparent case is offered, once more, by the Jewish jokes, which, as I have already mentioned (p. 98), are ordinarily made by Jews themselves, while the anecdotes about them from other sources scarcely ever rise above the level of comic stories or of brutal derision [...]. The involvement of the persons concerned seems to stand out as the determinant here, as it did in Heine's ›famillionairely‹ joke [to which we will come further below]; and its significance seems to lie in the fact that the person concerned finds criticism or aggressiveness difficult so long as they are direct, and possible only along circuitous paths.« (Freud 2024.8, 124)

In this way, Freud emphasizes the subjectivity of the speaking subject, the one who tells ›the joke‹, as well as of the narrator of ›the joke‹ within ›the joke‹. What he calls *the involvement of the persons concerned* as determinant for the exchange and understanding of ›the joke‹ also refers to the (implied) ›audience‹ of ›the joke‹ as well as to the one who analyzes it. Freud himself, therefore, understands *Jewish Jokes* and can discern them. This is a reading ability, a capacity, that to an extent also reflects the traumatic experience of antisemitism, which has produced a specific subject-position but also a specific ›knowledge‹, power, and community that can negotiate this experience, *make* such ›jokes‹, and reveal their full extent. A pre-designed, discursive, or sociopolitical position is in this way rejected by Freud. Rather than to endure such abusive slander, Freud names them and identifies the gesture as ›farcical tale‹ and ›brutal derision‹. In this way, he refers to the

17 Karen Smythe refers to Freud's precarious situation in finding a professorship, and she therefore reads Freud's text also as a distancing from stereotypical, racist images of ›the Jew‹, arguing that Freud uses this distancing to free himself from such images in favor of a wider readership of his work. I would argue, however, that the text should not be reduced to a quasi ›personal‹ defense-mechanism (or rather, that the political in the personal should be considered, not the other way round), especially as Freud indeed explicitly mentions antisemitism. I think insofar as it also transposes a form of social critique and another form of ›knowledge‹ that is sociopolitically marginalized, Freud's ›joke‹-theory follows rather a decolonizing epistemology (against internal European colonization), which goes beyond itself, and opens up other possibilities for thought. Cf. Smythe (1991); see also Kofman's analysis in this regard (1986).

frivolity and violence of antisemitic ›jokes‹, which lack any kind of wit and merely reiterate stereotypical racist insults. He displaces antisemitic discourse and imagery in open and yet concealed ways – the only possible way to take part in (the dominant, normalized, antisemitic, racist) discourse: in the form of a discursive guerrilla war. He thus uses the arena of ›knowledge‹ and erudition to place his own, other(-ed) ›knowledge‹, which has changed the configuration of the dominant ›knowledge‹ system for good. Only in this implicit form is it possible to detect Freud's critical political intervention between pain and pleasure in his analysis of humor in the text.

Freud's analysis of these ›jokes‹ thus implicitly sheds light on antisemitism, on the one hand, and on mechanisms of self-empowerment, on the other hand – without explicitly addressing them. Instead, a tone of mourning and enablement can be inferred from ›the jokes‹ as well as from their shifted repetition and analysis.

›Joking‹ in this sense of interventionist agency becomes a form of *signifyin* (Gates, Jr. [1988] 2014) that is crucial to marginalized communities. In this reiterated form of humor, of the *Witz*, the tragedy of antisemitic and racist experiences is not only transformed into an affectivity of relief. It is also transposed into an epistemology that is liberating, *decolonizing the mind* (Thiong'o 1986), and – through its humorous *finesse* that surpasses playfully, with alleged ease, the falseness and absurdity of antisemitism/racism – shows another possibility of *humanistic* thinking beyond the confines of ›race‹ and dominant, oppressive perceptions. The *Jewish Jokes* Freud refers to also have a gentle and caring tone with regard to the ›Jewish community‹, however allusively imagined, or rather to experiences of antisemitism. This is well illustrated in another analysis of a *Jewish Joke* that Freud discusses, in which again, Heine plays a decisive role – as Freud depicts it in one of Heine's works, reflecting on it with delight:

»In the part of his *Reisbilder* [1824] entitled *Die Bäder von Lucca*, Heinrich Heine introduces the delightful figure of the lottery-collector and corn-remover Hirsch-Hyacinth, who boasts of his connections with Baron Rothschild and finally says: ›And as truly as God will grant me his blessings, Doctor Heine, I was sitting next to Salomon Rothschild and he treated me just like his equal, quite famillionarely.« (Freud 2024.8, 15 (16))

Freud is referring here to the ability of words, ›the linguistic and expressive technique‹ of ›jokes‹, to reformulate meanings. ›The joke‹ makes subtle use of a double ›knowledge‹ that is informed by experiences with antisemitism.¹⁸ On the one hand, antisemitic implications of ›wealth‹ are brought to the fore and rearranged in the *Jewish Joke*. On the

18 Freud returns to this ›joke‹ several times. On another occasion he problematizes Heine's *auto-biographical*, self-ironic *wit* that can also be part of ›the joke-humor, maintaining and analyzing this ›joke‹ as an allusion to Heine's own biographical experiences. The figure of ›Hirsch-Hyacinth‹ then becomes an allusion to Heine himself and his relation to his wealthy uncle Salomon, alluded to in ›the joke‹ as ›Baron Rothschild‹. Cf. Freud (2024.8, 12 (13), 15 (16)); also Kofman (1986, 36 ff.); Menke (2021, 450 ff.). This, however, must be seen as only one slice of the ›joke's‹ allusions, for otherwise the word ›famillionairely‹ would not make any sense, since Heine is already part of his family, and there would be nothing unusual or witty about it. ›The joke‹ only works in full if the figure of ›Hirsch-Hyacinth‹ is seen as an outsider, a third person, not belonging to the family. In which case, he would be a reference to antisemitism as a common underlying experience and denominator – one that in ironic and ›knowing‹ way, makes them ›family‹ through such experiences and their

other hand, the retelling of ›the joke‹ goes beyond the countering of the racist imagery, as two Jewish men (the figure of Hirsch-Hyacinth and ›Heine‹) exchange ›the joke‹ amongst themselves; they do not only understand and try to rewrite the antisemitic implication, but also share this ›knowledge‹ and also *know* how to deal with it; they ridicule it and enjoy the ridicule as well as each other's company. Thus, the retelling of the antisemitic stereotype that ›the joke‹ iterates entails an empowering, critical stance, and the assurance of another ›knowing‹ self as well as another ›counter-knowledge‹. However, there is another dimension to this ›joke‹ that is evoked and retained in the word ›familiarily‹ as part of the phrase ›famillionaire‹. It denotes a form of kinship marked by the suffering inherent in antisemitic attacks. Both, ›the rich‹ and ›the poor‹ Jewish figures of ›the joke‹, form a ›family‹ against the atrocities of the structures of antisemitism. Not only these two economically unequal Jewish figures exchange, understand, and rewrite this other ›knowledge‹ in ›the joke‹, but also the poet and thinker Heine and the psychologist Freud, who both use it in and for their works. The implicit ›knowledge‹ in ›the joke‹ is both a mutual pain and a rewarding pleasure. In retelling and rewriting ›the joke‹, in listening to it, as well as in the dismantling and implicit analysis of it, which remain framed by humor, both affective instances are processed performatively. It is telling that Freud analyzes this ›joke‹ only in a technical way, in terms of its linguistic composition and abbreviation, and that, although he discusses ›condensation‹ here, he does not go into detail about what this means in terms of the sociopolitical aspects of ›the joke‹ (Freud 2024.8, 18 ff.); however, he is more explicit when he refers to the image of the so-called *Schnorrer* in *Jewish Jokes* as a delightful and ›democratic mode of thinking of Jews« – a decolonial signifier of Jewishness and Jewish solidarity that transcends class against the backdrop of antisemitism (Freud 2024.8, 98 ff.). The pain-pleasure that is evoked appears in the veiled, masked form of humor, the only place where it seemingly can reside and take shape.

For Freud, humor works with omissions on the side of the narrator and with absences that must be filled by the listener (Freud 2024.8, 68, 145). He also employs the image of the ›Janus face‹ in relation to ›jokes‹, of its double and allusive meanings that hint at unconscious understandings and those that are reflected in more overt forms on the surface of ›the joke‹.

Freud's understanding of ›the joke‹-humor thus alludes to forms of intelligibility that operate on external, sociopolitical, and internal, psychic levels, and to mechanisms of dealing with, negotiating, and working through them. These reveal forms of concealed ›knowledge‹ and concealed power. *Jewish Jokes* thus have a threshold, a liminal place that speaks of suffering as well as empowerment. This two-faced work of humor also expresses a form of experienced trauma and tragedy, as well as self-reassurance.¹⁹ Its

common ›knowledge‹ about them, as well as the wit to address them in such ways and rise above their mediocracy.

19 On the problematization of double meanings, the sense in non-sense, the Janus face and ›translation‹ in Freud's understanding of humor, antisemitism, Jewishness, and the (healing) function of ›the joke‹, see Sarah Kofman's marvelous reading, where she in fact, in a comparison with Nietzsche, adheres to Freud himself as a Janus God (Kofman 1986, 43 f., 26 ff., 55 ff.; see also Menke 2021, 443 ff.).

joy comes from this double meaning. But Freud is referring to the *deconstructive poetics* of this *tragic-comic* work of humor with regard to *Jewish Jokes* that interrogates ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹ in a much more general, epistemological sense, when he questions the common meanings of humor and philosophy in a nutshell by saying:²⁰

»But the powerful technical method of absurdity is here linked with another technique, representation by the opposite, for, according to the uncontradicted assertion of the first Jew, the second is lying when he tells the truth and is telling the truth by means of a lie. But the more serious substance of the joke is the problem of what determines the truth. The joke, once again, is pointing to a problem and is making use of the uncertainty of one of our commonest concepts. Is it the truth if we describe things as they are without troubling to consider how our hearer will understand what we say? Or is this only Jesuitical truth, and does not genuine truth consist in taking the hearer into account and giving him a faithful picture of our own knowledge? [...] What they are attacking is not a person or an institution but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions.« (Freud 2024.8, 101)

Not only is it interesting that Freud speaks of ›knowledge‹ as a *speculative good*, but also the function he ascribes to humor is remarkable, resembling a deconstructive deferral. This deconstructive trace in humor can be perceived as the intrinsic work of the *tragic-comic*, which humor generally ›translates‹ and negotiates as a faculty operating at the limits of conscious and unconscious strands.

The *Jewish Joke* – in this sense of subtly evoked ›knowledge‹ – entails a space of exchange within the shelter of a ›community‹ with similar experiences of oppression; this may be already indicated in a condensed sense and be part of the word *Witz* and the double meaning of ›joking‹ and wittiness. Freud distinguishes not only between the site of the unconscious of ›the joke‹ (*Witz*), which always comprises the meaning of *wit* (*Witz*), but also its manifestation in language in the double sense of the humorous as well as the witty. *Witz* in the sense of *wittiness* and ›joke‹ marks the language of the sociopolitical other and is an answer to antisemitism, oppression, and violence. Humor appears as a sheltering and protective mode of displacement and condensation that creates a space to speak the unspeakable, the tragic that goes with it, as a strategy of inner healing and ›outer‹, sociopolitical resistance. But once set in play, it opens up a space for liberating and empowering ›knowledge‹ formations for everyone to conceive the wor(l)d differently outside of (hurting) meta-discourses.

Thus, the appropriation of antisemitic ›jokes‹ by Jews (and racist ›jokes‹ by other oppressed communities) generally plays in self-reflective ways with the correlation of humor as anti-dominant, healing, reparative, and political work from within the economy of (centuries-old) experiences of repression and sociopolitical marginalization. This understanding of Freud's approach to humor and *Jewish Jokes* can be related to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s reading of *signifyin(g)*, mentioned above, as well as W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of

20 Freud is alluding here to a specific *Jewish Joke*, in which ›truth‹ is negotiated through absurdity; here, too, the antisemitic slander that lies behind ›the joke‹ is not further discussed, but only the form and technique of ›the joke‹. See Freud (2024.8, 98 ff., 101).

double consciousness.²¹ Not only has it the flavor of a ›knowing‹ humor, a form of ›knowledg‹ that remains itself unmentioned and premised; it also is a playful form of insinuation of the tragic that has almost become another layer of skin, transferred into an anti-dominant, liberating, epistemological aesthetic.

When I use the term *tragic-comic* in the following, I am alluding to this tentative approach, which links the work of humor to a double-sidedness of omissions and allusions based on the tragic and some form of humorous tonality that must be ›filled‹ and ›translated‹, and which may correspond in the end to an *anti-dominant (other) humanistic, deconstructive poetics*.

As we have seen, Freud also uses two other terms for the humorous besides *Witz*, which are the German terms *Komik* and *Humor*. While the former is linked to the imagination and understood as a release of imaginative energy, the latter is linked to affectivity and understood as its unresolved release. Moreover, in an essay written explicitly on humor more than twenty years after his work on ›the joke‹, in 1927, Freud centralizes and expands the notion of humor (*Humor*), reflecting in particular on its empowering quality. Here, Freud does not only describe humor as the expenditure of excess energy. Rather,

21 Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s account of the rhetoric of *signifyin(g)* ([1988] 2014 (see also annotation 7, p. 32f.) can be perceived as a theoretical extension and supplement to Freud's allusions of *Jewish Jokes*, as well as to anti-dominant rhetoric generally with its (infinite), suggestive, open-ended poetics. *Signifyin(g)* plays with ruptures, *sampling* – using snippets of old songs for new ones – the multiplicity of meanings, trickery, and lying (in the sense of telling stories (61), akin to how Nietzsche uses the word, see Geisenhanslüke 2011) in oral as well as written African American diasporic textualities and intertextualities. Gates Jr. tracks *signifyin* as a rhetorical theory of literary form in pan-African mythology and its traces in a wide range of African American vernacular, lyrical, musical as well as literary practices. The mythical character of *Esu* in Yuruba (and other related names) as well as their diasporic kin *the signifying monkey* in African diasporic cultural praxis and literatures, is a trickster-mediato‹ of textual interpretation und reading, and a figuration of this process. While *Esu* mediates between human and the Gods, reading the written texture, they also create new significations and meanings as such, however transiently and contextually. *Esu* also represents a figure embodying undecidability in terms of sexuality and also within processes of reading, epitomizing ›the ambiguity of figurative language‹ (25), while the *signifying monkey*, a figure of parable in many African American narratives derived from *Esu* mythology, at the same time, signifies a practice of ›various sorts of playful language games‹ that encompasses the poetics and rhetoric of vernacular *use* of language and discourse on the one hand, and the intertextuality and open-ended texture of signification that is echoed in literature and textuality on the other. Gates Jr. indeed refers to *sginifyin* and Freud's ›joke‹ -work and dream-work (64); moreover, there exist also Janus-face figurines of *Esu*, which may reflect their indeterminate, non-binary, in-between figuration (Gates, Jr. 2014, 28, 34–36, 143). Jeanne Rosier Smith (1997) deploys Gates Jr. approach in her analysis of what she calls ›American Ethnic Fiction‹ as a trickster-theory and an underlying form of signature, which I think can only be understood as an aspect of Gates, Jr.'s work that speaks to and challenges theory itself. See also Joseph Litvak's (2009) analysis of US-American antisemitic stereotypes since the 1940s, the role of humor and dominant images of ›citizenship‹ and sociopolitical forms of subjectification. There is also an implicit affinity of Freud's *Jewish Jokes*, and mostly implicit critique of antisemitism, and W.E.B. Du Bois' insight into ›double consciousness‹ (Du Bois [1903] 2005, 3) – a double ›knowledg‹ that comes from racializing, racist experiences, and the ability to form two kinds of ›consciousness‹ at once, one shaped by an understanding of the dominant racist discourse, and one that comes from an inner, other insight that questions it and vaguely senses another ›knowledg‹ outside of these controlling and racist images.

his concept of humor is a pivotal point in the affective, epistemic, poetic, and discursive economy of the ego. Freud regards humor here as a (one of the few good) soothing traits of the super-ego, which helps the ego to overcome feelings of inferiority and to develop a sense of agency in the face of dominant social pressures. Humor becomes the protective trace of the super-ego that shields the child parts of the ego from damage; it makes it possible for the child to remain above insults instead of succumbing to them and being hurt by them. Freud speaks of the magnificent (*großartig*) and elevating (*erhebend*) nature and function of humor. He describes humor as liberating (*befreiend*) and seems to assess it differently from the more technical and linguistic functions of ›the joke‹ (*Witz*) (Freud 2024.21, 147ff., 1999.14, 385.). Freud speaks here of the *humorous process* (*humoristischer Vorgang*) and the *humorous attitude* (*humoristische Einstellung*), both of which indicate a performative quality inherent in the humorous display. What is sought is some form of internal and/or external affective touch, but one that is incongruent with what may be expected. Freud's analysis of humor can also be understood as a two-step form of negotiation and then translation of negative, repressive, depressing, painful affective experiences »to which the situation would naturally give rise« that are transformed into a »jest« (*Scherz*) (Freud 2024.21, 148, 1999.14, 384). Humor thus shifts difficult affective experiences into an empowering attitude. Freud understands the humorous process (*humoristischer Vorgang*), here also as an *echo* and a *copy* (*Nachklang, Kopie*) of the performer in the ›audience‹ or the listener. In this transformative gesture, Freud recognizes a positively connoted triumph of narcissism that serves the self-preservation of the humorous subject, which is transmitted to the listening (reading) subject and affects them as well. (Narcissus and Echo appear here as figurations that both exhibit a complex amplitude in subjects. Narcissus protects the self from harm by transforming painful experience into speakable, performative language; it is Echo's language that represents this transformation process of pain into pleasure, even evoking its resonance as a form of learning in the other.) The process of humor, which takes place in both the narrator and the reading/listening subject in its transmitted form, Freud calls ›unknown‹ (*unbekannter Prozess*) (Freud 2024.21, 148, 1999.14, 385). Humor then appears as a process that also represents non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*).

Against the backdrop of Freud's definition, humor can be seen as a performative discourse within signifying practices that undermines antisemitic, racist, and authoritative, dominant language. Through the workings of *Humor* and the performance of the *Witz*, humor creates the possibility to carve out an enabling space of shelter within the self and to speak up. The unspeakable, in which the experience of antisemitism and racism resides in the affective form of disgust, pain, pensiveness, and resistance, and the normalized mechanisms in which the concepts of ›race‹ and antisemitism/racism are embedded, can thus be brought to the surface and negotiated. This inner movement is well expressed in the German idiom *etwas zur Sprache bringen*, ›to bring something to language‹. In this sense, humor is a double form of protection: It is a protection against the normalcy of antisemitism/dominance within the historically determined symbolic social order, and it is an inner refuge through which it becomes possible to develop – in an un-conscious, not-knowing, power-less way – a secret and pleasurable inner code of exchange to deal with traumatic experiences and supremacist structures. Humor is then a double movement in the self as well as in language and signification that is used to play-

fully displace and enable other possibilities of meaning while protecting the psyche from harm.

Thus, the (Jewish) ›joke‹, as well as humor in general, functions as a counter-discursive strategy often used by othered and racialized people, whether or not it is recognized, acknowledged, and understood in dominant social structures. It functions as a healing balm, helping the wounded self to overcome hurtful experiences by unmasking and yet silently laughing off (racist) attacks.²² For marginalized and racialized communities, and sexualized subjects, it is not just the sociability of humor that matters. Rather, humor acquires an existential aspect in terms of (sociopolitical and psychic) survival, as well as in terms of articulating and giving voice to (othered) experiences and forms of ›knowledge‹. Humor also allows such codes to be shared and becomes a powerful and liberating tool of and for (subversive, political) expression – even if only for moments.

Humor 'n Affective Critique

Humor, then, can be understood as a site of engaged, reparative agency that destabilizes dominant discourses while paving the path for various other understandings of what is excluded from ideologies of dominance under code words such as ›reason‹. In the same vein, studies of humor can be seen in relation to social class. This can also be discerned in an intersectional way in Freud's Heine-›joke‹, in which the socially ›higher‹ class evoked by ›wealth‹ is (affectionately) ridiculed and dehierarchized from a subjectivity that symbolizes underprivilege and poverty with all its connotations, while a tone of solidarity based on experiences of antisemitism is wittily maintained. The work of Mikhail Bakhtin and, based on his work, more recent accounts by Terry Eagleton also show the correlation between engaged humor as critique and social class (Eagleton 2019). Here, too, humor is part of affective allusions to self-empowerment, evoked through grotesquery, indicating an attitude of disdain to the observance of tabooed sociopolitical ›laws‹.

Although the links between humor and critique are obvious, humor's ability to destabilize can also be used to reinforce, abusive, conventionalized understandings of normalcy. I have problematized this aspect by calling it *false humor*.²³ In my understanding, this dominant form of humor, performed from a position of supremacy, marks the limits of humor and forms a contrast to the liberating effect of socio-critical, anti-racist, queering, and feminist tonalities of humor.²⁴

There is, for example, the image of non-binary and female subjectivity as ›not funny‹, which is, at the same time, a topos of (male masculinist) fun-making (Gray 1994, 1 ff.);

22 The super-ego in this case may mean more than the residue of parental voices in the psyche. It may also include the effects of counter-discourses. The affective and analytical sides of humor that Freud highlights here are recomposed as a form of affective and affectionate quasi-parental, deconstructive, discursive-countering, and reissuing protection of the self against harmful and distressing (sociopolitical) images and racist underpinnings – a quality that characterizes Freud's work as well as that of Du Bois and Gates Jr.

23 See annotation 20, p. 49, see also p. 78 ff. and annotation 21.

24 Such critical forms of humor can also entail and be effective through a ›shock value of the ob-scene‹; Cf. Willet/Willet/Sherman (2012, 224 ff.).

Ahmed 2010, 65; Willet/Willet/Sherman 2012, 217 ff; Mizejewsky/Sturtevant 2017, 3; Kothoff 2017, 147). Along with racist ›jokes‹, this is another example of *false humor*. Read against the grain, it reveals the biased values and evaluations within a specific space-time, shedding light on the discourse it is enmeshed in while providing a context for critical reflection (Critchley 2002, 12, 58 ff.). In this sense, *false humor* also reflects the subjectivities from which it is spoken and is therefore indeed enlightening. Besides a wide range of studies that deal with sexist and racist humor in the analysis of literature and other arts, more recent queer and feminist studies question whether theories of humor – which were largely written by male scholars – are suitable for critical feminist analysis and engagement (Kein 2015, 671). At the same time, there is a search for other venues to critically theorize humor, especially from (Black) feminist positions.²⁵ Feminist theorists have introduced approaches to the analysis of humor that explicitly address the ways in which humor is used to reinscribe racist and sexist language. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw opens up an intersectional approach to the study of humor and its workings that critically examines anti-racist claims to humor. As she points out, while such (male-dominated) humor may serve as an empowering tool against racism, it sometimes displays misogynist and repressive features, which reestablish and excuse sexist speech acts and structures, while Black women and women of color are presumed to conform to it for the sake of a greater good (Crenshaw 1991, 1292 ff). Another form of engagement with feminist humor is what feminist scholar Rebecca Krefting calls ›charged humor‹ (Krefting 2014, 106 ff.). Krefting builds her ideas on the concept of ›cultural citizenship‹, coined by the Latin@ Cultural Studies Working Group, which emphasizes the work of illegalized citizens who are crucial to the stability and maintenance of the state and yet are rendered invisible (see also Kathryn Kein 2015, 671 ff.). Krefting explores the mobilizing potential of ›charged humor‹ while lamenting its limitations in a market-oriented economy. Other approaches rely on the ambivalence and liminality of humor, which it shares with queer sensibility (Reed 2013; Mizejewsky 2014; see also Mizejewsky/Sturtevant 2017). Mizejewsky and Sturtevant's approach suggests to focus on the notion of ›hysteria‹, which signals both an effect of humor and a complex discursive practice of managing the mechanisms of othering (Mizejewsky/Sturtevant 2017, 1 ff.). Although these works reflect on the workings of humor and its destabilizing and transformative capacities, they only implicitly address its affective sides.

Freud's above-mentioned insights on ›the joke‹ and humor can therefore be considered as still relevant contributions to critical theorizations of humor, which, because of their analytical precision, remain crucial to the analysis of literary texts.

The danger and limitation of humor as a form of empowerment, however, resides in its vulnerability when it is not understood within its subtle signification, but is instead read and used to reinstate racist meanings within the wider public sphere, and when it is turned thus into *false humor* from dominant perspectives.

There are other liminal spaces that humor creates, as we will see in the following sub-chapters. These liminal spaces will be addressed by considering three approaches to humor as *experiences of a limit*.

25 Hélène Cixous's feminist approach in *The Laugh of the Medusa* ([1975] 1976, 875–893) remains a central and influential text in this regard.

Liminality I – Fanon’s ›Laughter‹ and the Ogling of the Other

As can be seen in Freud’s discussion of humor and ›the joke‹, humor is also used as a linguistic, performative tool for the decolonization of the self. In this sense, humor echoes the allegory of the inscription of the dominant and colonial gaze on the body and its effects. Its thematization can also be traced back to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In this work, Fanon considers the subjectification of both the one who is looked at (and othered) and the Other who looks – and (from a position of power) produces a supremacist self. In the text, the imperial gaze of the Other is enacted by a little *white* girl who, upon encountering the narrator in Fanon’s autobiographical analysis, uses the N. word: – »Look, a N. [...] Mama, see the N.! I’m frightened«, – (Fanon 2008, 86). The child associates fear, not with the narrator’s sight, but with the sight of the abusive colonial sign that is associated with the racist and violent denotation.

Fanon reflects on the psychological effects of this injurious process of signification, which reduces the other to an object of the gaze, to a thing and, in its abusive demarcation, touches upon the experience of a limit:

»I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.« (Fanon [1952] 2008, 84)

In this passage, Fanon, on the one hand, exposes the limits of ›laughter‹ as a process of demasking. He recognizes that the colonial gaze goes much deeper than anything that can be captured by the eye, by looking back and expressing this absolute crisis in the form of an apotheosis, an absence, a failure of ›laughter‹. ›Laughter‹ with all its possible affective sites is suspended. The voice of a frightened child cannot be dismissed with counter-humor, which blatantly shows how deeply embedded and seemingly invincible the racist gesture is because of its ingrained roots/routs in conventionalized (colonial) discourse as a normalized part of language as well as naturalized bodily acts (alleged *seeing*). The colonial gaze of historically driven discourse has deeply penetrated the body and its senses and functions. On the part of the supremacist, colonizer subject, racism has become almost a compulsive and impulsive bodily response. On the part of the subject in processes of decolonialization, it has an almost arresting and paralyzing effect on the body. The colonial gaze first marks the body of the other as a thing and then places it on the other side of humanity as an object (which *white* children have learned to fear – a projective reversal of the colonizing experience). On the other hand, Fanon uses a complex tone of humor to deconstruct this fixation. First, he emphasizes the ›historicity‹ of the act, and then, with resignation and tongue-in-cheek, points to the very same system of ›knowledge‹ in which he, too, is imbricated (›which I had learned from Jaspers‹). The fact of his unravelling deconstructive thought blows up this placement and process of othering, and shows the limits of conventionalized racist thinking but also of decolonial thought, and in doing so exposes its (›self-)mendacious, racist, as well as racialized foundation. The liminality of Fanon’s analysis has three sides: It is at the liminal of the concept of ›race‹ as a stabilizing as well as destabilizing colonial category. It is at the liminal edge

of an epistemological self-reflexivity that positions the subject of counter-articulation at the limits of discourse, racism, philosophy, and resistance, and finally, it is on the liminal cusp of an *affective humor* that, again, oscillates between pain and pleasure.

Fanon returns the pedagogical, benevolent, sexualized assault of the *white* woman, the mother, by drawing another boundary, which he establishes as the subject of a new historicity and discourse. He does not open the barrier to his skin, but shelters himself, using the insult as an invitation to intervene in the dominant discourse revealed by the encounter, however abrasive, subverting its structure, passing through it to the other side of power, queering its logic. Fanon not only refuses to be placed and appropriated within the Other's discourse, and not only uses the destructive abuse of language to disrupt, however temporarily, the very same abusive discourse, but rather employs language as a tool of and for liberation. This is a movement that is marked by ›laughter‹, at the end of which another self is born. The racist event bounces back into the sphere of the imperial Other to ignite its own fire by questioning it:

»Kiss the handsome N.[...]’s ass, madame! Shame flooded her face. At last, I was set free from my rumination. At the same time, I accomplished two things: I identified my enemies and I made a scene. A grand slam. Now one would be able to laugh. The field of battle having been marked out, I entered the lists.« (Fanon 2008, 86)

›Shame‹ here is aroused in the Other, because the falsity of the encounter is brought to light by Fanon's return of the slander and his refusal to succumb to its placement within an oppressive configuration. The reparative, healing performance of Fanon's utterance is brought to the fore; the other takes control of discourse. Fanon intervenes in the philosophies of ›race‹, ›humanity‹, and *seeing*, correcting them and reorienting their discourse to serve the calculus of a free mind that cannot be imprisoned showing that ›the other‹ cannot be objectified and dominated. His response and speaking back demonstrates the agency of the observed and at the same time invisibilized other, as well as the historical continuum of (imperial) discourse itself, signifying its decay.

Fanon's mischievous humor and ›laughter‹ can be read as a rhetorically deconstructive resignification of discourse, and as an affective effect of a self-liberating, decolonizing subjectivity. It can be said, with Bakhtin, that »[w]hile breaking up false seriousness, false historic pathos«, Fanon »prepared the soil for a new seriousness and for a new historic pathos« (Bakhtin 1984, 439). By reversing and objectifying discourse, Fanon, through ›laughter‹, liberates colonized subjectivity from a predetermined subject-position, nullifying its thingness. At the same time, he enriches the same system of ›knowledge‹ with his impalpable ›double knowledge‹:

»I have ceaselessly striven to show the N. [...] that in a sense he makes himself abnormal; to show the white man that he is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion [...] Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.« (Fanon 2008, 175, 181)

In this way, Fanon passionately intervenes in the formation of a new discourse, calling for a different dialogue that goes beyond the biased abuses of racism by shifting it to the possibility of a different understanding of what ›humanity‹ might mean.

The humor evoked by Fanon in this context signifies a form of ›double knowledge‹ that remains humble and open to any predication and that – despite experiences of abuse – is self-reflexive and self-critical, setting the tone for the possibility of (cis-male?) ›love‹ and a different ›brotherhood‹. But Fanon's humor also marks the process of thinking itself as an unrestrained, ›laughing‹ self-healing act. Humor and ›laughter‹ are here the outward sign, the *clang*, of this process, showing the interconnectedness of an embodied mind. It is a tonality that oscillates between the pain of trauma and the wounded but recovering body-mind. This process of affectivity, inseparable from thought, is the *reissuing* of the ›bad‹ feeling and its transformation into joy. It is the process that Sedgwick mentions in relation to the writings of Henry James and the transformative potential of ›shame‹. This rather peculiar process unfolds its healing power as a strategy in the reflected *afterwardsness* (Freud) of reading, of psychic memory, writing it back into the social and discursive un/consciousness. The fall of the subject – in this case a vicious attack with a performative speech act – does not cause the collapse and disintegration of the (othered) subject; it triggers a self-sustaining subjectivity that takes a stand, which, as Fanon shows, goes beyond the moment of the abusive exchange, and that, profoundly touched by it, thinks along a visionary futurity in which another form of egalitarian encounter may be possible.

Analyzing and transcending this gaze, Fanon uses humor as a knowing strategy of the colonized other in response to such colonial atrocities. Humor, in this decolonizing sense, is an affective effect of thought against violent and authoritative frames of ›truth‹ in discourses of power, which disrupts and frustrates their fixity and authority. It symbolizes a critical gaze back at authoritative language and its effects, disturbing its underlying presuppositions and thus invalidating the imperial gaze.

Fanon's humor goes beyond Bakhtin's ideas of the carnivalesque because it is not ›seasonal‹ and parodic; it is similar to Bakhtin's approach in that it also frustrates and disrupts power relations. Against the racist performative utterance, trapped in witnessing its circles, Fanon not only laughs within a liminal affectivity. Fanon's ›laughter‹ signifies and performs a rectification and exposure of the limits of coloniality and its eager desire (and unwitting ignorance) to limit humanism and then to install it as the norm. But this is not about turning the tables. Rather, Fanon recognizes and identifies the subject of coloniality also as its victim. This recognition and insight does not only come from ›reason‹ and analysis in a narrow sense, but also from the ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness of trauma and pain, both of which are evident in Fanon's humor and ›laughter‹. Against this experience – or rather at its other limit/end – Fanon offers another experience of the limit that can lend itself to joyful ›laughter‹ when, at the end of his work, he writes of his decolonizing humanist insight as a *touch*, »a simple attempt« to understand beyond historically conditioned, biased formations – towards other shores.

In the following, I wish to draw on two further notions and uses of ›laughter‹/humor as a border experience, both of which, from very different perspectives, shed light on the threshold and liminality of these phenomena. These can be traced in a text by Friedrich Nietzsche as well as in the writings of the Jewish German philosopher Helmuth Plessner.

Liminality II – Nietzsche – at Crossing Borders

Nietzsche's approach to humor is implicitly invoked in several of his texts, but it is most often associated with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885). As with many other approaches to humor, there is a spectrum of terms evoked here that haunt each other. Particularly with regard to Nietzsche whose poetic language does not seem to be interested in clear definitions, it is difficult to narrow down the use of humor or ›laughter‹ or to extract ›exact‹ definitions from his work. However, Mark Alfano, like John Kress, considers Nietzsche to be one of the few philosophers who pays attention to humor and uses it in his work (Kress 2008; Alfano 2018). But Nietzsche is not just attentive to humor and uses it in his philosophy and rhetoric. Indeed, humor seems to be an important element of epistemology and critique in Nietzsche's work (Gunter 1968; Kaufmann 1968; Pippin 1988; Conway 2009; Lippitt 1992; Kress 2008; Boddicker 2021). Lydia Amir (2022) draws particular attention to the French reception of Nietzsche, where Nietzsche is read from an early phase as a philosopher of humor, ›laughter‹, comedy, and play. According to Amir, Nietzsche's ›liberating laughter‹ combines both destruction and creation (Amir 2022). Thus, it is also the tragic that must be considered as an important element of Nietzsche's understanding of humor (Hatab 1988; Geisenhanslüke 2011; Amir 2022). According to Alfano, indeed a catalog of ethically important ›virtues‹ informs Nietzsche's work, including curiosity, courage, solitude, and a *sense of humor*. Rather than defining what he means by a *sense of humor*, Alfano thus refers to what could be called Nietzsche's attitude towards philosophical insight and ›(self-)knowledge‹ (Alfano 2022).

Humor has different functions in Nietzsche's work. At times, it is tinged with what Alfano calls a ›pathos of distance‹, by which he means a critical stance connoted by contempt and disgust. It appears in Nietzsche's texts around dogmatism, unquestioned beliefs, and commonplace positions. A joyful humor and ›laughter‹, Nietzsche's ›higher laughter‹, appears in a more gentle form when it is mentioned along with curiosity and ›intellectual courage‹ as well as ›wisdom‹ (Alfano 2021, 280 ff.; Gunter 1968). Nietzsche's attention is also drawn to affectivity that he attributes to certain drives, which are considered sociopolitically harmful and hazardous to the status quo. Nietzsche deplores the fact that such ›affects‹ and undesirable desires are associated with specific social groups and members of society, rather than to be seen as ›most human‹ concerns (Alfano 2021, 273 f.).

Humor is also a tool with which Nietzsche mocks his own approaches, not only gauging his achievements with the same critical grid (Conway 1992, 2009; Gilman 2001), but also setting a high standard of self-criticism that any epistemology must be able to withstand and be willing to undergo. Furthermore, Nietzsche uses humor to structure his text and to generate a specific affectivity with respect to his intended ›audience‹ (Boddicker 2021, 448).

In Nietzsche's work, humor leads to an opening up of inquiry or a condemnation of previous beliefs. Nietzsche's sense of humor demonstrates an unrelenting skepticism and is also intended to produce and process self-transcendence by laughing at that very self (Alfano 2018a, 2021). As Pete A. Gunter notes, Nietzsche's claims are part of his philosophical presuppositions, one of which is a harmonious duality he sees in pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, symbolized by the Apollonian and Dionysian figures. While the Apol-

Ionian expresses order, form, and measure, the Dionysian stands for potentially destructive attitudes and drives, but also for creativity and poetry; the ideal synergy of the two forces, according to Nietzsche, is exemplified in the Greek tragedies of Sophocles and in the work of Ovid. With Euripides, Nietzsche sees the beginning, and with the ›reason‹-oriented philosophy of Socrates, the destruction of this necessary interplay and an imbalance of this harmony and understanding (Gunter 1968, 493 ff.; see also Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2012). Humor, in this sense, harbors Nietzsche's epistemological framework and is a tool with which he simultaneously objects to this imbalance and argues for an epistemology that is also informed by Dionysian elements, without which any understanding remains incomplete and in fact an impediment to ›real‹ ›truth‹ (Gunter (1968). Nietzsche is interested in challenging the configurations of thought and corroded beliefs that have acquired the status of ›truth‹, but he is not invested in the crude implementation of another system of ›truth‹ that would merely replace what he criticizes. Moreover, as Alfano notes, humor and ›laughter‹ allow people to abandon fixed beliefs without ›falling into nihilism‹; rather, they lead to the acquisition and maintenance of a positive affectivity (Alfano 2019), which may also be why Nietzsche – the philosopher of affirmation par excellence – uses humor as an affective rhetoric. Humor may be the only vital rhetoric that refrains from self-righteous formulations of ›truth‹. It is therefore no coincidence that Nietzsche's circular philosophy, which may have a (more nuanced) affinity to the figure of Dionysius, emphasizes the work of humor and the intertwining of the tragic and the humorous (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2012; Amir 2019, 2022).

There is thus a rather complicated theory of humor in Nietzsche's philosophy that remains still undertheorized and has yet to be further unearthed. As mentioned above, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is considered not only as one of Nietzsche's major works, but also as one of his most important works with regard to humor. At the same time, since Nietzsche is not a philosopher of holistic theories, it is probably also risky to look for an explicit theory of humor in Nietzsche's work. With *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche creates a mythopoetic narrative, a form of narrative that he may miss in modernity, another kind of pre-Socratic *Attic tragedy* perhaps. In its literary and philosophical effort, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* does not imitate Attic tragedy but creates a new one, one that emerges from the experience of modernity, which is also the experience of European imperialism, that has left its mark on European ›culture‹, discourse, and ›knowledge‹. These seem to be at least inspired by the ›knowledges‹ of the other(-ed). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, then, Nietzsche's main character represents two dilemmas at once: While remaining male, he becomes the (*white* man's) other: He represents the image of an ancient ›Persianate‹ (itself a dilemmatic term) ›Prince‹; the European subject thus becomes the other of themselves, and an unwitting anti-hero, in search of a ›truth‹ that is nothing more than this: an awkward, futile, to some extent ridiculous, powerless, as well as tragic search into the abyss of the unknown. The European (like the other) remains a Sisyphean figure (which could be read, with some optimism, as a sign that European philosophy, in spite of itself, perhaps would like to move towards ›equality‹, at least in theory). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's last work, combines tragedy and humor. The humor in the text in fact opens up its tragic elements, and it is written in a highly poetic style. I would like to look at the beginning of the book to see how Nietzsche deploys the other in the figure of ›Zarathustra‹ and how he uses humor to convey this (*Psst!...*):

»Zarathustra's Prologue 1

When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains. Here he enjoyed his spirit and solitude, and for ten years did not tire of it. But at last a change came over his heart, and one morning he rose with the dawn [*Morgenröte*], stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus: ›You great star [*großes Gestirn*], what would your happiness be had you not those for whom you shine? For ten years you have climbed to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of the journey, had it not been for me and my eagle and my serpent. But we waited for you every morning, took your overflow from you, and blessed you for it.

Behold, I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to receive it.

I would give away and distribute, until the wise among men find joy once again in their folly, and the poor in their riches.

For that I must descend to the depths, as you do in the evening when you go behind the sea and still bring light to the underworld, you overrich star.

Like you, I must *go under* – go down, as is said by man, to whom I want to descend.

So bless me then, you quiet eye that can look even upon an all-too-great happiness without envy!

Bless the cup that wants to overflow, that the water may flow from it golden and carry everywhere the reflection of your delight.

Behold, this cup wants to become empty again, and Zarathustra wants to become man again.‹

Thus, Zarathustra began to go under [*Also begann Zarathustras Untergang*].‹ (Nietzsche/Kaufmann [1883/1954] 1988, 121 f.; emphasis in the text as well as in the original; additions mine)

In the first two sentences of Zarathustra's prologue, we are introduced to the narrative by a more neutral narrator. But from the third sentence on, the rhetoric becomes humorous: »But at last a change came over his heart, and one morning he rose with the dawn, stepped before the sun, and spoke to it thus«. It is aroused by the observant distance the narrator establishes between themselves and Zarathustra. The distance resembles an ironic attitude towards the figure. The ›irony‹ of the text, however, is rather awkward, as it is not clear whether it is meant in a degrading way, or whether it follows more tender feelings towards the character, but does not want to reveal them, thus leaving it to an ›implied audience‹ to decide for itself. Nietzsche's narrator, it could be argued with Wayne C. Booth, is an *unreliable narrator* (Booth [1961] 1983; Shen 2011). One cannot be sure what they are up to and whether one can trust them. Zarathustra's childlike, almost naïve, half-playfully angry embrace of the sun makes him sympathetic and arouses empathy for him; he seems a little foolish, a little silly. It is as if the narrator observes the character from a distance, not only in space but also in time, with an affectionate eye, as if looking at their younger self. An ›implied author‹, however, points Zarathustra – surprisingly in accordance with the chosen name – towards the ›East‹ (of ›Europe‹). This is further indicated by the symbolism of the text, such as the sun, which often represents ›the Orient‹ and by the fact that it awakens him: Zarathustra awakens with the beginning of the day, with the morning and the dawn, as if for the (Zoroastrian, of course, but also Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim?? in any case: ›oriental‹) time of prayer, where Nietzsche, or at least the

narrator, also seems to reside, in order to bring another form of wisdom to the ›West‹. ›Knowledge‹ thus seems to be geographically anchored in the ›East‹ (of ›Europe‹), while both ›Europe‹ and the ›East‹ appear to be unknowing and powerless – landscapes.

Humor also seems to characterize Zarathustra's dialogic monologue with the sun. Firstly, because the sun never answers (and Zarathustra has to read even that) – like all good and *true* texts, it remains a silent and enigmatic interlocutor (maybe because it is so difficult to know and to put into words what it is to know, even if it were clear, what it should be, or what the question is – it seems to echo in the silence). Secondly, in this rather voyoristic act of the narrator, Zarathustra (the prophet) appears somewhat ridiculous to speak to an absent-minded distant *Gestirn* (the sun does not seem to be intimidating, at least Zarathustra does not fear it). A form of self-psychology sets in, which, like Charles Baudelaire's falling subject (as will be seen), must laugh at its self as it realizes the apparent folly of its performance and empty faith. Zarathustra almost becomes the observing self (the European narrator, the ›implied audience‹?). In this way, the text may also annoy other possible ›audiences‹ somewhere in the corners of the text that are inevitably invoked without being implied. The humorous discord with the sun could be understood as a prayer, but also as a farewell, and in all these cases the humorous tonality is supposedly untroubled and happily directed towards the sad and the tragic, towards failure. In a sense, Zarathustra dethrones the sun-goddess*, while at the same time praising them in a rather unruly way, telling them that their greatness needs the faithful in order to exist, and not the other way around. It remains also uncertain whether Zarathustra's decision to decamp can be taken seriously or must be mocked, since he has decided to ›teach‹ his epiphany to others. Can one ever become a ›teacher‹ to others? Or must we rather remain and regard ourselves as disciples (before the sun? On earth?), the text seems to ask. The ›implied author‹ could have portrayed Zarathustra differently, they could have shown him in a much more noble and more serious mode, praying and talking to his goddess*. But they chose to show Zarathustra in this rather ridiculous mood and in a rather exposed way. Zarathustra is depicted in the narrative in a vulnerable and intimate, too certain, inner state, standing ›naked‹, un-knowing, and power-less before his goddess* – unaware that he is being observed (by the ›implied author's‹ narrator). Finally, Zarathustra does not know that Nietzsche is hiding somewhere out there. Not only does Nietzsche overhear this conversation, but also, in his text, secretly discloses it in detail (to a very large ›audience‹ – even Nietzsche himself probably did not know this –) and without Zarathustra's ›knowledge‹ – against which Zarathustra remains powerless, but where his power may unfold.

Nietzsche's narrator thus shows the most intimate part of a noble hero-prophet in a very delicate position, which in its nakedness resembles that of a child, yet one who is expected to be a *true* ›knower‹.

The humor that Nietzsche evokes through Zarathustra's sincere and simple dialogic monologue, as well as the recitation of Zarathustra's anachronistic, naïve but modernist wise speech-prayer style, exposes a deeper lying state of the subject's helplessness in the face of an untouchable, inaccessible, all-knowing, exhausting Other who rises and sits at will and causes their subjugated subjects to endure their (unknown) will. And despite this tyranny, Zarathustra, in his almost altruistic ›love‹, also praises this Other and worships them – even though there may be (no such goddess*) (to ›love‹ and praise), just a *heavenly*

body. Thus, Zarathustra is from the outset imbued with a tragic, painful humor in the face of sincere humility and fidelity, which leaves him with nothing more than a firm belief in nothingness, a *Gestirn*. The tone of the humor changes at the same time into a more tender, caressing one, which may leave a possible ›implied audience‹ puzzled and perhaps also touched at the sight of Zarathustra – who maybe wishes to thank and get rid of this shining, all-knowing great star – but may nevertheless feel a certain sympathy for him as well, and fear that he may lose himself, if he sets off from this radiant goddess*. Prayer and ›love‹ seem to be thrown into the same pot, imbued with pain, pleasure, unknowing, power-lessness and some tang of care.

This undulating, humorous tone of the narrative is heightened and culminates in the narrator's casual, equally detached yet forgiving statement at the end of the preamble about Zarathustra's *Untergang*, which again resonates in humor, as it evokes several meanings at once. In one quite obvious sense, *Untergang* means *ruin*, which may provoke an ironic smile. But *ruin* can also signify destruction, the destruction of the known, the destruction of the path one leaves behind. It also expresses a state of fear and anxiety that goes with it. Finally, ›to go under‹, ›to sink‹ (*untergehen*) can describe the willingness to let go, to open oneself up to the unknown. Moreover, *Untergang* at the end of the passage mimics Zarathustra's direct discourse, and in this sober repetition evokes a fraction of uncertainty as to whether the narrator is again making fun of Zarathustra or is rather eager to follow Zarathustra's journey into an actual underworld. (Is there an underworld – imaginable – where the sun sets – in the occidant? An *Abendland*?) The uncertainty of the humorous tinge also arouses suspense about Zarathustra's path as well as about the kind of underworld he may find. *Untergang*, then, can also indicate Zarathustra's translation of the ›knower's‹ beliefs into a *human(-istic?)* language, and perhaps an effort to develop some kind of ›knowledge‹, to go down into the catacombs of the human psyche and solitary thought, to one's own unearthed possibilities, to form a kind of ›knowledge‹ that is not anchored in binding ›laws‹. And even this movement in Zarathustra's thought appears as a vain, tragic, lost effort, an(other) illusion. The sobriety of the narrator's neutrality and distance, however, produces an intensification of the humorous tone, which oscillates between a slightly superior amazement and fascination as well as sympathy, and which may keep an ›implied audience‹ submissive to the narrator's mood – and open to Zarathustra's teachings. The figure of Zarathustra, indicated by his name, geographizes him outside the borders of ›Europe‹, in the timeless and history-less abyss of the outdated, non-European space, which produces an uncanny humor, as on one hand, Zarathustra seems to be the (backward) other, who can be ridiculed at any time and at any cost. On the other hand, there is too much sympathy to eliminate the figure in such a general gesture of dominance. Although laughed at, Zarathustra, because of his congenial naivety and folly, exudes some form of authority that is unintentional, questioning, and questionable. He speaks to his inner self and would not even be audible if the narrator's report did not reveal the secrets of his thoughts. Zarathustra also appears almost as the inner self of a ›Europe‹ that craves to be critical of itself, a ›Europe‹ that desires the other to know (better than them), a ›Europe‹ that wishes to be taught by the other. ›Europe‹, here in the figure of Zarathustra, loses all distance and becomes the other, so that Zarathustra appears as someone all too familiar to the (European?) ›implied audience‹ – as someone *all too human* and yet different – maybe enough to nullify European

supremacy? The (othered) other and the European self seem to become indistinguishable. This is maybe the staging of an other ›Europe‹, that others ›Europe‹, the other's ›Europe‹ – ›Europe‹ as difference. This makes it difficult to simply laugh at Zarathustra's foolishness and backwardness; it becomes ›Europe's‹ foolishness and backwardness, since the other, too, becomes quasi European. Zarathustra can be read as an ›oriental Europe's‹ effort to learn anew by unlearning from the (naivety of?) one's own self, from one's powerless state of not-knowing. Nietzsche thus may suggest the sublation of dualisms, and of *this* dualism, as something else, from within a state of immanence.

Humor, then, takes the form of a restrained, expectant, slightly suspicious fascination that opens up the possibility of a space of immanence on a plane of equity (not sameness) – or so one might hope ...

Nietzsche's deployment of humor therefore generates a liminality with regard to the otherness, with which ›Europe‹ itself is endowed. It also shows ›Europe‹ at the limit of the other, which in fact determines European thought and text. The passage also plays at the liminal threshold of the narrative form, with the distinction between the self and the other, and with the knowing and the not-knowing, the power-lessness that is engendered, as well as with humor and sobriety, all of which seem to merge into each other.

The text also plays with the threshold of literature and philosophy, which seem both foolishly preoccupied with an empty and impregnable ›religiosity‹ and the ›religious‹, dogmatic belief in finding some ›truth‹. These are all liminal spaces that echo an infinite state of uncertainty. From a Nietzschean point of view, then, humor is perhaps ideally construed to induce thoughtfulness, as an impetus to *reimagine* and reflect on things outside any usual box – everywhere.

Liminality III – Plessner – at Border Crossings

Helmuth Plessner's research and work on ›laughter‹ (and crying) has strangely been largely overlooked in the humanities. Although Plessner's approach takes into account ›laughter‹ rather than humor, his insights are nevertheless helpful in understanding the workings of both the tragic and the humorous, and often their at times indistinguishable bodily effects of ›laughter‹ and crying that can affect and shake the whole body. But my focus here will be on ›laughter‹. Plessner's work remains essential in locating ›laughter‹/crying within the body, but also within the mind and in relation to an environment. His work thus examines ›laughter‹ and crying not for themselves nor for their functions, but within a multiplicity of internal and external relations as complex phenomena. The two perspectives on the liminality of humor and ›laughter‹ outlined above, in the work of Fanon and Nietzsche, can be seen as the psychologized and philosophized manifestations of Plessner's work that describes the limits of human understanding. Plessner illuminates the actuality of historically determined textures in which our bodies and minds remain imbued. In this sense, the work of the two thinkers mentioned above could be seen as the two wings of what Plessner calls »eccentric positionality« (*exzentrische Positionalität*), laid out in the volume *The Levels of Organic Life and the Human: Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology* ([1928]2019). Eccentric positionality is the core and cornerstone of Plessner's understanding of ›laughter‹/crying. It refers

to a (human?) capacity that arises from a duality of self-awareness (Plessner 1970, 40; Dobeson 2018, 43–46; Fischer 2016, 275). According to Plessner, human beings become, as it were, human, because they consist of two intertwined properties: of being a body and of having a body; we exist *as* a body and *in* a body and can perceive ourselves from different positions, always in relation to our ›environment‹ (Plessner 1970, 40 ff.; Prusak 2005, 57) – and thus, one could add, the historicity of (sociopolitical) contexts.

Human beings, Plessner argues, can grasp of their bodies both as things and as subjects, what he calls ›impersonal‹ and ›personal‹ perceptions. The human being, Plessner writes,

»experiences himself [sich selbst] *as* a thing *in* a thing: but a thing which differs absolutely from all other things because he himself is that thing, because it obeys his intentions or at least responds to them. He is borne by it, encompassed by it, developed to effectiveness with and by it, yet at the same time it forms a resistance never to be wholly overcome.« (Plessner 1970, 41)

In this way, a multi-perspectivity of sensibility and perception is possible for the human being who, according to Plessner, »has itself, it knows about itself, it is remarkable to itself, and for this reason is it *I*...« (Plessner quoted after Prusak 2005, 55; punctuation and emphasis in the original). »We stand not only at the center of things«, Prusak continues, »but over and against ourselves at the same time, in the middle and on the periphery at once. This position Plessner names ›eccentric positionality‹« (Prusak 2005, 55).

Indeed, Plessner's concept of *eccentric positionality* not only reconciles the idea (and duality) of body and mind. While the body is the experience of a more or less centered corporeality, the mind is the ex-centred, incarnate (corporeal) experience, as well as the capacity for *eccentric experience* that allows one to leave the body, to perceive it as a thing in the world that ›travels‹ through the imagination and all possible senses and sensibilities. It also makes it possible to understand the fractured nature of the subject, the question of subjectivity, the fractured psyche and their interrelations and discordances.

According to Plessner, human beings have an equivocal rather than a univocal relationship to their bodies as they can perceive themselves *as* corporality (*Leibhaftigkeit*) as well as *in* a body (*im Körper*). Plessner refers to it as ›ambiguity‹ and an ›actual break‹ in the way one exists, labelling it (very poetically) *brokenness* (*Gebrochenheit*). For Plessner, *brokenness* describes the relationship of human beings to their bodies. *Brokenness* is at the same time the *basis of human existence* and the *source* as well as the *limit* of their capabilities (Plessner 1970, 32). Plessner thus explicitly distances himself from a Cartesian understanding of the subject. Rather, on the basis of his findings, he maintains the ambiguity of the sensuality of bodily experience, which for him means a *living body* in a *physical body* (*Leib im Körper*). More intriguingly, Plessner sees a connection between this understanding of existence and *the experience* of laughing and crying as ›the impenetrability‹ of human beings' ›relation‹ to their bodies (Plessner 1970, 32). He states

»To this end, the inquiry must free itself from the bias inherent in the Cartesian interpretation of human existence. The two-substance theory, which survives as a double-aspect theory, in the rigid and seemingly self-evident alternative: physical or mental, is

not capable of understanding the phenomena of laughing and crying. Hence it would be a crude misunderstanding to reduce the ›ambiguity‹ of physical existence to a duality of interpretation, that is, to consciousness.« (Plessner 1970, 32)

This brokenness of the human being is thus not consciously graspable, and yet the parts work together autonomously. According to Plessner, laughing and crying are not gestures, but have a complex ›expressive character‹. Plessner speaks of their ›opacity‹ to the point of ›meaninglessness‹, as it seems impossible to sharply define and articulate their significance; and yet he also describes this opaqueness as imperatively ›essential to their expressive meaning‹ (Plessner 1970, 68). Both reactions, ›laughing‹ and crying, in fact reveal the brokenness of our existing *form* (Prusak 2005, 58). ›Laughing‹ and crying are the experience of a limit where the subject can only respond to something that appears unanswerable, with the collapse inherent in *eccentric positionality*. However, Plessner does not see a duality, contrast, or opposition in ›laughing‹ and ›crying‹, since both can arise from similar affective states: »Their basis, however, must be sought elsewhere than in the usual direction« (Plessner 1970, 49). Plessner also distinguishes both from a bodily language. Rather, he considers both experiences as the ›purest‹ form of ›expressive movements‹ and as moments in a state of overpowering for both subjects, the one who experiences them as well as the one who observes them.

Plessner, then, relates ›laughing‹ and crying to each other in a non-oppositional way, understanding them as modes of multiple meanings resulting from a state of multilayered expressivity, which also represents humor and the tragic. Secondly, Plessner understands both conditions as states that are beyond the control of the subject, but as meaningful states of affective as well as bodily and sensual responses to experiences of overpowering (Plessner 1970, 52–56). In this context, Plessner refers to Friedrich Georg Jünger's work on humor (*Über das Komische*, 1948). Jünger discusses humor as a relation of power asymmetries, with regard to the (sociopolitical) rules with which it clashes, and, in this sense, as the negotiation of conflicts (Plessner 1970, 88 ff.). Plessner speaks of humor as »the gift of preserving our sense of the comic« (Plessner 1970, 91). Here is a longer passage that captures central aspects of his understanding of humor within broader sociopolitical relations:

»The comic is not a logical, ethical or (strictly speaking) aesthetic conflict; it has nothing to do with the alternatives of true or false, good or evil, beautiful or ugly. They may appear in it, but it is not exhausted by them. Comedy belongs to the level to which all special applications of norms refer: the level on which man, as such and as a whole, asserts himself in the world and against the world. His position in it, somewhere, sometime, i. e., his eccentric position, enables him to accept himself and his world, in which he is at home and in which he knows his way around, as at once circumscribed and open, familiar and strange, full of sense and nonsense. This is the core of comedy, but the normal course of life and its duties make us forget it. We take things in this or that way and seal them against ambiguity. But our technique of taking the world seriously and binding it to us, actively and contemplatively, rationally and emotionally, has gaps, in the particular as in the whole. Things surprise us by their appearance, they take an unforeseen turn, they create situations to which we can no longer find a serious response. [...] None of this may make us aware of the inscrutability of the comic strip as

such. Nevertheless, it makes itself felt and reminds us, even in its most insignificant expression, of our eccentric position. The art of the great comic, of the caricaturist, the poet, the actor, the clown, knows this and extracts from it the truly striking, truly inexorable effects, which gain in illuminating power the closer they come to the darkness of the tragic.« (Plessner 1970, 91)

For Plessner, then, we are also determined by what we do not know, by the *gaps* in the texture of existence. ›Laughing‹ and crying are self-regulating instances of a borderline experience of not knowing within instances of powerlessness, in which the brokenness of our existence, with all its constructed compositions and lacunae, is revealed in its disintegration, in its falling apart. At the same time, this falling apart is an essential means of transcending the liminal experience of this notknowing and this powerlessness. Both crying and laughing, in this sense, are for Plessner a ›twofold limitation‹ of human behavior to a ›limit situation‹, an experience of disorganization that reveals our fragmentation, our *brokenness*, in response to the experience of a limit. Throughout his work, Plessner points to the importance of (the historicity of) language, and that it is language that transports and transposes all subtexts, often misleadingly, and therefore also as a manifestation of the *conditio humana* as brokenness (Plessner 1970, 18 ff.; Weiland 2019, 86 ff.); but his focus is to emphasize that ›laughter‹ and crying are exceptional expressions of this state. In this sense, Plessner does not dwell on the functioning of language per se as an indicator of this state, and even excludes language from an analysis of ›laughing‹ and ›crying‹ (Plessner 1970, 23; Micheline 2021, 7).

Plessner's concept of ›laughing‹ and crying as liminal experiences of a limit that both humor and tragedy may articulate is quite palpable in Fanon's and Nietzsche's unfolding of ›laughter‹ and the tragic-humorous within the textuality of historically contingent contexts as well as within texts in a narrower sense. In both cases, the tragic-humorous that unfolds foregrounds perceptibility and intelligibility, revealing not despair or nonsense, but the entanglement of the inner and outer worlds that inscribes the body and is inscribed in the body. The experience of *brokenness* that appears in these instances of the tragic-humorous is an intervening *brokenness*. It shifts the ground of previous understandings; in this sense, it resembles a deconstruction in the material textuality of life. Here ›laughter‹ happens in two ways, backwards and forwards, occupying a middle threshold position. It precedes humor backwards as an effect and forwards because of our eccentric and fragmented disposition. Because it is also a bodily felt fragmentation, its reassembly must also involve a meaningful recomposition. This backward ›laughter‹ thus follows the experience of the incongruity of experiencing existence. It is also a ›laughter‹ that is forward-looking, because the previous experience is replaced by the liberating Sisyphean realization that we must always *rework* and *rearrange* ourselves, which, beyond its tragic element (the loss of some kind of ›certainty‹), opens up the possibility, at least to some extent, of *reassembling* ourselves anew in a different way.

›Laughter‹, which Plessner describes as a limit, thus follows an experience similar to the composition of the incongruity of humor in that it, too, involves an incongruity. Whereas in the theory of humor this incongruity is seen in the ambivalence of language, utterances, or actions, Plessner locates it in the composition of experiencing life as such.

In all the above-mentioned instances where humor appears as a liminal phenomenon, it touches a limit of understanding and implies a threshold beyond previous commensurabilities. ›Laughter‹ therefore expresses a possible bodily resonance to this state. It is a state of disassembly on the threshold of reassembly: within this movement, the body and the mind are shifted in distinct ways.

All three outlined approaches show the entanglement of humor with affectivity and sensuality, on the one hand, and with thought and historically conditioned sociopolitical relations and contexts on the other. Humor and ›laughter‹ remain ambiguous, and yet they open up other, hitherto unknown possibilities of understanding. It also becomes apparent that humor has no essence, but can be perceived as a *movement*, a movement that opens up a space for new thoughts or insights. It likewise occurs within a relationality, be it within the self or between the self and an other.

While these theories of humor and ›laughter‹ remain cross-disciplinary approaches, in the following chapters I will draw on insights from literary theory in a narrower sense, where humor is approached differently. These are debates that shed light on the function and workings of humor in a more language- and meaning-related way. My aim here is to combine these already discussed approaches to humor with its understanding in literary theory, in order to arrive at a conclusion as to how *affective humor* can ultimately be perceived, and how and in what ways it can function in texts.

I will start by defining ›irony‹ and discussing some of Paul de Man's most important texts on the subject. I will then consider the importance of humor within the processes of rhetoric and its relation to deconstruction. In a final chapter, I discuss humor as an affective event and problematize this stance by discussing Achim Geisenhanslüke's understanding of poetology and affectivity and its relation to humor as an ingredient of ›non-knowledge‹ that manifests itself in the economy of the text. In my reading of this approach, I will also show the cohesion of non-knowledge with what I perceive as powerlessness that I also argue is part of the workings of humor. At the end of this section, I will outline some of the main points regarding *affective humor* in a synopsis before finally turning to touch, how it is understood, and what it may mean in relation to affectivity and humor.

›Irony's Fall and the Question of Subjectivity

Besides performativity, there are a number of other terms in literary theory that are related to the analysis of humorous elements in language. One of the oldest of these words is rhetoric, or more recently *retoricity* (Bender/Wellbery 1990), which we will return to below. Then there are terms that describe tropes, devices, and genres of and in writing, such as ›irony‹, ›parody‹, ›pastiche‹, ›pun‹, and ›wit‹, and which are considered as ambiguous and inconclusive. All of these terms are associated with humor and often appear in the same text to represent a humorous tonality that the texts try to deal with by centralizing one of them. Two concepts in particular are treated with great intellectual and theoretical vigor: ›parody‹ and, in a much broader way, ›irony‹.

Although all the terms that circumscribe humor inevitably appear as its metonymic tonal repertoire, a more distinct hierarchy seems to dominate the discourse around it.

While there are a number of works of (high) theory on ›irony‹ that attest to the sophisticated status and importance of the term, ironic to itself and thus, as it seems, *true* to itself, the term is often used synonymically to denote humor more generally in (not only theoretical) texts. The theorization of ›irony‹ seems to authenticate a ›cultivated‹ site of the rather vilified status of humor and ›laughter‹ in the realm of (only Western?) thought. This also seems to be the case in (post-)modernist discussions of the humorous, where ›irony‹ gains some allies like parody.

As Linda Hutcheon notes, ›irony is a so-called sophisticated form of expression. So, too, parody is a sophisticated genre in the demands it makes on its practitioners and its interpreters‹ (Hutcheon 2000, 33). Reflecting on Bakhtin's use of parody, Morson speaks of parody as an ›etiology of utterance‹ (Morson 1989, 72) and as a parody of the parodying original, emphasizing the constructedness and semiotic double structure of signification. For Morson, parody goes by various names, such as mimicry or mockery (Morson 1989, 62), which underscores the metonymic structure of its meaning. Morson also points out that parody ›can, in principle, take on an infinite number of tones‹ and is, in fact, a ›deviation‹ (Morson 1989, 67, 69), which makes it an incongruous humorous form of signification.

Although in many of these texts ›laughter‹, ›comic/comedy‹, and ›humor‹ are used in tandem to define ›parody‹ and ›irony‹, the distinction between the terms is not further problematized but taken for granted, as if it were clear what they signify, how they ›work‹, and in what (evaluative) relationship they stand to each other – or to theory. At the same time, ›parody‹ and especially ›irony‹ are distinguished from these other terms by their special (sophisticated) place in literary theory and philosophy, as is echoed in Hutcheon's remark quoted above. The problem that humor seems to pose for (high) theory and philosophy is already indicated by this confusion. According to Amir, many modernist philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Bataille, Rosset, and Deleuze, actually reject the term ›irony‹ for humor or prefer humor to ›irony‹ and implicitly oppose the ›supremacy of irony‹ over humor (Amir 2022, 4). However, it is ›irony‹ in particular that is often treated in literary theory (and philosophy) as the (high theoretical) trope of humorous intonation.

Although definitions of ›irony‹ vary, ›irony‹ is generally defined as saying one thing and meaning another, which comes close to an understanding of incongruity, a key characteristic also associated with humor. David Holdcroft distinguishes this incongruity of ›irony‹ as the rise of expectation (in what is said) and the discrepancy of its performance (Holdcroft 1983, 493).

›Irony‹ is of particular interest to this study, not only because it occupies such a relevant space and is highly valued (however ambivalently), but also because its understanding corresponds to the definition of humor in that both terms are seen as expressing an incongruity, be it verbal, situational, or performative (Muecke 1970, 100; Hutcheon 1992, 219).

There are also other aspects of ›irony‹ that are similar to those of humor. I would venture to say that ›irony‹ is humor in expensive camouflage that was permitted to enter the scene of (high) theorizing from an unconscious venue. The issues discussed in relation to ›irony‹ therefore shed light on its parallels with humor, and help to characterize the way humor works. As humor, ›irony‹ also involves a (surprising) shift from one mean-

ing to another within an utterance, which triggers a kind of thoughtful and/or affective engagement. Hutcheon refers to this as meanings that play off each other »with some critical edge«, opening up a space that is always »affectively charged« (Hutcheon 1992, 220). She also points to the oscillation between the said and its allusion, where the unsaid challenges the said but where both, or one might say different meanings are discernible (Hutcheon 1995, 59). Hutcheon therefore refers to ›irony‹ as a »discursive strategy« that requires a scene (Hutcheon 1995, 3 ff.).

This oblique play of meanings also entails a lacuna that can be called an ›ethical component‹ in the work of ›irony‹/humor because it opens up a relation to an other. It is a relationality that, according to Milan Kundera, »denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as ambiguity« (Kundera 2005, 134). ›Irony‹, like humor, is thus seen in relation to critique and affectivity. It is related to an oscillation between (at least) two meanings and is regarded as a rhetorical device that also needs an ›audience‹ that can catch its shifting meanings or, as Hutcheon points out, an ›audience‹ to whom the ›irony‹ seems as relevant as to the speaker who utters it (Hutcheon 1995, 96; see also Muecke 1970; Booth 1974; Wirth 2017; Jeffries 2018).

Hutcheon also raises two other relevant points that are consistent with the (incongruent) understanding of humor. According to Hutcheon, ›irony‹ has a kinetic element; it sets something in motion. Such *kinetic movement* describes a process of change that not only affects elements outside itself (e.g., position and/or perspective), but also involves some change in the entity performing the movement. In addition, Hutcheon describes ›irony‹ as a political gesture, but calls attention to what it does beyond its (possibly intended) immediate meanings (Hutcheon 1995, 45). This understanding reveals the politics inherent in ›irony‹ and humor, while politicizing them at the same time. But it also acknowledges its aesthetic rather than strictly political properties. ›Irony‹'s humor, its kinetic capacity, thus read, unstates meanings rather than instituting a fixed one, insofar as it alludes to a multiplicity of different meanings without explicitly mentioning or fixing them. Understood in this way, ›irony‹, can be described as a rhetorical bubble of multiple unstated meanings. Such other invocations are left around the corner as possible allusions if one is curious enough (or caring enough) to choose to turn around.

Within postcolonial theorizations, which also celebrate(d?) ›high theory‹, ›irony‹ is understood as an interventionist rupture and interruption. In this sense, it is once again politicized. Its political mark is seen as part of its rhetorical character. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on ›irony‹, which she proposes through a reading of Friedrich Schlegel/Paul de Man, can be understood in this way. In particular, in one of her essays entitled *Learning from de Man – Looking Back* (2005), Spivak addresses the problem of ›irony‹ and its possible function and significance for postcolonial understandings. In this text, Spivak emphasizes ›irony‹ as a *parabasis*.²⁶ Instead of questioning the (sociopolitical) setting of this tonality, Spivak, following Schlegel/De Man, describes ›irony‹ as an »undoing of understanding« (Spivak 2005, 31). Her approach to ›irony‹ in its function

26 See in this regard also Bettine Menke (2002, 231 f.). Menke, drawing on Schlegel, de Man, and others, points to *parabasis* as specific choral parts in Attic comedies in which the chorus addresses, among other things, the listeners and spectators.

as a parabasis is important, because it not only underlines the (political and theoretical) relevance of incongruity and ambiguity, which are also seen as part of humor. It also highlights the parabolic trait: the question of *what* it is that is interrupted. Spivak understands parabasis as the interruption of conventionalized and naturalized dominant discourses and meanings. The humorous interruption of ›irony‹ is seen, on the one hand, in the relation of language to power, its dynamic emancipation from them and the dissociation from their interrelated meanings, and, on the other hand, in the interruption of (political) authority. For Spivak, this disruption of political authority is not only a strategy but also a chance to open up the imagination to alternative ways of thinking and acting in the world, and an imperative requirement of ›being (theoretically) critical‹:

»[T]he instant of decision must remain heterogeneous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or constative determination, even if it may and must be preceded by all possible science and conscience. ... [P]ractical performativity is irreducible to any theorem ...« (Spivak 2005, 24; punctuation in the original)

The interruptive quality of ›irony‹, understood in this way, can also be thought of as a form of authorization. It is the moment when the subject of enunciation and its (silenced) other can come into being. This would confirm Freud's understanding of the functionality of humor as a protective and empowering moment of the super-ego.

Spivak understands the parabolic character of ›irony‹ as the capacity to state what would otherwise be othered (Spivak 2005, 24). Parabasis is thus linked not only to what is more or less explicitly, however incongruously, signified, but also to what is implicitly and silently referred to, its clandestine properties. Moreover, like Hutcheon, Spivak's emphasis on the other(-ed) traces in meaning that are awakened (or created) by the disruption underscores the ethical element that the disturbance of the supposed integrity of meaning and language entails. Parabasis thus takes on the bent form of a curve, of a detour, so that the other can enter the dialogic character of language:

»The law of curvature – that one cannot access another directly and with a guarantee (by ›appresentational analogy‹ only, Husserl will write) – is not a deterrent to politics ... If you call the imperative – *courbure droite* to straighten the curve into – a ›madness‹, it is a madness that writes the history of politics.« (Spivak 2005, 24)

The parabolic character of ›irony‹, which breaks with conventionalized understandings, intervenes in a »systematic undoing« of (academized) discourse itself (Spivak 2005, 28 ff.). Spivak also emphasizes an agent function of parabasis. For Spivak parabasis does not circumscribe a negativity, as de Man claims (as we will see below), but rather, as Schlegel understood it, an effective and affirmative, »descriptive figure of action« (Spivak 2005, 21), and thus an invitation and possibility to intervene in the »madness« that the wor[l]d implies (Spivak 2005, 23). Spivak thus relates the ›madness‹ of humorous insight inherent in ›irony‹, not unlike Bakhtin, to the madness of words rather than to the closure of meaning that cannot be (achieved). But this invitation to intervention and invention – always to be understood as performative and singular – is also seen in the texture of ›irony's‹ social and political, spatial-historical configurations:

»Indeed, my not-quite-not disfigurement of the de Manian figure of parabasis, borrowed from Schlegel borrowing from the theatrical practice of Attic comedy, is itself an ›allegory of reading‹. ›Reading‹ here is also a figure, for a transactional or performative relationship with the social fabric, the social textile, the social text.« (Spivak 2005, 27)

Thus, ›irony‹ can be understood as an interruptive humorous tonality that is interventionist, performative, and a discursive strategy of reading that gives other meanings to (con-)texts. In her reading of Freud and Fanon, two (Jewish and Black) psychologists who draw on the role of the other/literature (the other of philosophy), Spivak also points to the literary text as a parabasis. The parabolic character of literature lies in the possibility of imagining what is beyond the known, the possibility of the other. The relationship between literature and *experience*, in which parabasis can be thought of as a seam, is where the two are connected: ›What you are seeing [...] is the idea that the literary is in fact giving you an evidence that is not possible for you to experience so clearly in life« (Spivak 2014, 47).

However, in contrast to the idea that literature is based on experience and that the process of reading resembles (a denotation of) mimetic empirical ›knowledge‹, this understanding also identifies literature as an unempirical and unexperienced field of imagination that expands the senses of experience in and for the everyday and the sensitivity of the im/possibility of an other ›life‹. In this understanding, literature is seen as a form of threshold learning that offers insights outside and beyond what is presumed to be known. At the same time, Spivak points to the danger of pathologizing literature as evidence of what and how otherness is. Freud's and Fanon's readings are seen for their other epistemological grounding, as they read singular ›minds‹ that, like literature, cannot be generalized. Only when literature is seen as a singularity, and when the text is read in the sense of non-assignment, can the danger of taking literature as evidence be overcome. If the text is read as straightforward signification, it encourages an uncritical reading within the structure that produced it – and the reading fails. Spivak's term for a non-assigning reading of texts is ›affirmative sabotage‹, an interventionist disruption, a parabolic form of reading – the way humor works – at the core of conventionalized utterances and their opening, understood as ›entering‹ the system to say ›no, not this‹ in order to use that breach differently in a (possible) next step within thought and praxis.

In his influential approach to ›irony‹, to which Spivak also refers in the above passage, Paul de Man points to other implicit connotations of ›irony‹, a reading that I find problematic and of which I am critical. De Man remains difficult to read, not because of his style, but because reading his texts inevitably raises the question of the ethics and the praxis of research, writing, and teaching. Paul de Man's posthumously discovered wartime activities and antisemitic texts raise – from within (historical) reality – the question of subjectivity, positionality, and the will (not) to choose to act in certain ways within academia. The one good thing that the scandal about de Man may have helped

to bring to the fore is the ethical turn (however short-lived?) in the humanities.²⁷ But perhaps there has been no turn, only a turning away from (high) theory, which is no solution either, because it means a turning away from reflecting the politics of reading, an always necessary venture in the fractured continuum of contemporary critical thought – or what is left of it. So, ›ethics‹ may have to remain a specter that haunts writing and teaching. It is in this sense of the ghost of the ethical that I formulate a very tentative (and most perhaps mistaken) reading of Paul de Man's approach to ›irony‹, as it is still often treated as central; I therefore look at the ways in which ›irony‹ is contextualized and evaluated in the trajectory of de Man's argument, rather than taking his approach as such as given and verified.

In two of his texts, de Man specifically discusses ›irony‹ – never mind that in both cases the underlying texts on which he builds his argument also discuss ›laughter‹, comedy, and humor, which, however, are readily taken for ›irony‹ (›irony‹ speaking here, humorously and with a roguish smile at this comedy). These two essays are *The Rhetoric of Temporality* from 1983 and a lecture given in 1976 and 1977, and published in 1996 in the volume *Aesthetic Ideology* under the title *On the Concept of Irony*.

In *The Rhetoric of Temporality*, de Man develops an idea of ›irony‹ by discussing Charles Baudelaire's *De l'essence de rire* and Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic approach to ›irony‹, as parabasis. Drawing on Baudelaire, de Man associates humor with a schism and a fall that ›come[s] into being only at the expense of [the subject's] empirical self, falling (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification«

27 Although it is often argued that de Man's theorization involves ethics, that it in fact is an ethical reading, I think the sphere of ambiguity ascribed to his works does not free him from understanding the ethical as a (disinterested) process produced by the text; there is in particular a passage from *Allegories of Reading* (1970, 206) that is often quoted to demonstrate de Man's ethical concern: »Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems. In this sense, ethics has nothing to do with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor, *a fortiori*, with a relationship between subjects. Morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as ›man‹ or ›love‹ or ›self‹, and not the cause or the consequence of such concepts. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion. Ethics (or, one should say, ethicity) is a discursive mode among others.« (Quoted in McQuillan 2001, 124). The question is whether ›ethics‹ can be seen as a ›language aporia‹ (and whether this is not itself a question of how one defines ethics; perhaps in this sense it would be a definition of ›ethicity‹ and would require another dimension of how ethics is treated in some niches of (literary) theory) or the questioning aporia that comes with reading. Without judging de Man or his works in any way, I cannot see an ethical reading in this paragraph, but rather a view of ›ethics‹ as a textual structure that is itself structured (and legitimized) as ›transparent‹. For me, the problem of subjectivity reappears in this passage, as does the (claim to) value-neutral technical readings of texts, which seems to me to be a (sanctioned) dangerous liaison with structures of power – made transparent, concealed behind a (subtly desiring and libidinous) language of academic approach disinterested style. I think what Derrida does with deconstruction is something else: It actually takes up the question of power at its core and in its pursuit. Deconstruction in a Derridean sense thus seems to me to be *ethical* in two ways. It illuminates power asymmetries in thought that are inscribed in language, and it is reminiscent not of mystification, but of an endless awaiting of the other's ›arriving/call‹ (and in this sense maybe almost mystical), akin to a silence or an in-betweenness – a gap held open for the dialogical response of the other.

(de Man 1983, 214). *Mystification* in the Romantic sense is the catchword around which de Man discusses the (non-power of) ›irony‹. Again, on the basis of a reading of Baudelaire, de Man distinguishes between an intersubjective humor and a form of humor that takes place within the subject's consciousness, within thought.

In Baudelaire's text, humor involves a disconcerting *fall*²⁸ of the subject, a stumbling that divides the subject into multiple parts. This is Baudelaire's *comique absolu*. *Comique absolu* does not occur between different subjectivities, but within the self/thought of a subject. The question that arises is how to read this fall and the splitting of the subject into a multiplicity (from a post-post-structuralist point of view, the subject is already to be seen as multiplicitous/extendable). In discussing this issue, de Man's rather ambiguous understanding of ›irony‹ becomes apparent. It seems that de Man uses ›irony‹ not to discuss it for itself, but to evaluate his favored trope: allegory.²⁹ What becomes implicitly clear is that he sees a close resemblance between the tropical function of allegory and ›irony‹, but weighs them differently, and on this basis associates the figures of speech with different capacities and a different timeliness (in which ›irony‹ seems quite obsolete).

For de Man, the fall of the subject (into several parts) is ›an expense‹: Although ›truth‹ and ›common belief‹ are questioned in ›irony‹, and its capacity to unmask is acknowledged, in de Man's reading this insight comes at the ›cost‹ of losing ›oneself‹, of losing ›control‹, and thus ending up in an endless chain of deferred meanings, in meaninglessness – whereas in allegory, according to de Man, the subject alludes to deferral without losing itself or breaking into parts, while the falling subject of humor appears to be ›mad‹ in its divided consciousness (de Man 1983, 215 f.).

De Man's reading evokes an interesting reflection on the notions of ›madness‹ and ›consciousness‹ from within ›madness‹ (as consciousness), but he does not explore them further. Instead, de Man seems apprehensive of the loss of the subject (of subjectivity, of power?) that lies in humor. Although this insight could indeed be seen as a cure, since it can demystify ›knowledge‹ as ›madness‹ and vice versa – surely depending on who is speaking in which (power-related) contexts –, instead of such an understanding, de Man rejects the queering capacity of ›irony‹ with the argument that the ›ironic subject‹ cannot ›return‹ to itself. Drawing on Schlegel, de Man calls this mechanism inherent in humor a ›permanent parabasis‹ (de Man 1983, 218). For Schlegel, ›irony‹ is a »permanent disruptive force«³⁰:

28 For a discussion of the manifold meanings of *falls* inherent in the ›wit of humor‹ (beautifully explored in the German language, in literature, literary theory, and with an emphasis on the work of Sigmund Freud as well as Jean Paul), see Bettine Menke (2021).

29 The reference to de Man's involvement with the Nazis and the antisemitic articles that came to light posthumously, and his discussion of ›irony‹, read together, do indeed seem ironic; the question is whether de Man wished to allegorize his acts (even before his own eyes) rather than allow ›irony‹ to overshadow his reputation and consciousness?

30 Ayon Roy (2009) discusses de Man's approach against a different reading of Hegel. See also Bettine Menke (2022, 42).

»In Schlegel's hands, irony explodes its rhetorical confines, widening into a philosophical and existential category. Irony as a permanent parabasis then, seems to be nothing less than the abyssal operation by which any claim to stability or continuity – be it artistic, philosophical, or existential – is incessantly undermined.« (Roy 2009, 107)

Unlike Schlegel, though, who humorously speaks of a continuous effect of the ironic, de Man regards this fracturing work of ›irony‹ as a fatal error as, paradoxically, it would require not only a stable consciousness but also a third (God) outside the subject in order for it to be exited (de Man 1983, 222 ff.). Insight, ›knowledge‹, in this rapturous continuation, ends, according to de Man, in nonsense. Hand in hand with this procedure goes the splitting of the subject into an »empirical self« »that exists in a state of inauthenticity« (which would suggest that there is an ›authentic state‹ (?) and »a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know unauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic« (de Man 1983, 214).

De Man uses this understanding of the continuous rapture of ›irony‹ – the ›irony‹ of ›irony‹ – to argue in favor of allegory (De Man 1983, 226 ff.); the ironic can be overcome, according to him, when it is allegorical, by which he means: when the separation, the difference within subjectivity, does not take place in the subject, but instead reflects on the object (the other) in a demystifying gesture (even when this other resides in the self). For de Man, this shift is a move from the (more) spatial deferral of ›irony‹ to a (more) temporal deferral of allegory (de Man 1983, 225). De Man's discussion here refers back to Schlegel's understanding of *reelle Sprache* (authentic language) as a kind of *ur-language*, a capacity inherent in the work of language.

Schlegel characterizes *authentic language* as encompassing and infinite, as »the origin of all poetry, to suspend the notions and the laws of rational thought and to replace us within a beautiful confusion of fantasy in the original chaos of human nature (for which mythology is the best name)« (quoted in de Man 1996, 181). Schlegel therefore includes »error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity [*geistreiche naivité*]« as part of this *ur-possibility*. Schlegel's thoughts, however, seem to alarm de Man. Not only does his concern revolve around a reflecting (*white male?*) self (of *Christian* descent?), but they also establish a hierarchy between tropes: up goes allegory, down goes ›irony‹. De Man links the alleged superiority of allegory, of all things, to the subject. Humor, code-named ›irony‹, is thus circumvented by de Man through the restitution of a supposedly stable, reflecting, universal subject. De Man's preference for allegory lies – as mentioned – in the belief that in allegory the splitting of the subject by ›irony‹ is transferred to the meaning of the text, leaving the speaking subject intact. The question, however, even if this were true, is whether this is a gain or a loss, especially from an ethical point of view. De Man attempts to demonstrate his point by discussing William Wordsworth's poem *Lucy Gray*:

A slumber did my spirit seal

I had not human fears:

She seemed a thing that could not feel

The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees;
 Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.

According to de Man, this poem is allegorical because the ›irony‹ that could be read in lines 3 and 4 is resolved by the concluding lines, which show the demystification of the (*white, Christian* male?) subject in a temporal sequence in which they reflect on death. In allegory, de Man continues, the division and difference does not take place within the subject. Instead, it is shifted to the level of the poem, »in which the conditions of error and of wisdom have become successive« (de Man 1983, 225).

Yet the poem suggests two subjects, apparently a ›male‹ ›I‹ and a ›she‹, and a specific relationship of the ›I‹ to the ›she‹. Although, according to de Man, Wordsworth's ›she‹ is »large enough to encompass Wordsworth as well« and that »Wordsworth is one of the few poets who can write proleptically about their own death and speak, as it were, from beyond their own graves« (de Man 1983, 225), it is notable that this other ›I‹, this death of the subject, is female and is a kind of ›resource‹ for its male subjectivity: While the speaking subject of the poem is the voice of the male ›I‹, ›she‹ is mirrored as the ›memoire‹ (of the ›I‹) and as death, *the other*. ›She‹ is a *triple* other: ›She‹ is memory, ›she‹ is ›death‹, ›she‹ is an almost forgotten, dead woman. In all three instances, ›she‹ not only does not exist, but is also denied a self-naming, a response. However, the final statement of the poem can still be opened up to negotiation and to ›irony‹. She* could, after all, rise from the grave and respond to the reflecting cis-male ›I‹ side of herself*. Perhaps she* would tell him not to be so sure, after all, because there are no certainties, or that one can only work towards them, and that is all there is of misery and joy.

Besides, de Man's implicit distinction between the presumed spatiality of ›irony‹ and the presumed temporality of allegory seems unconvincing, since both the text and an event involve a temporality (of reading and reflection) as well as a spatiality (of reading a page and reflecting on a context); both instances take place in a space and require a space in-between at least two entities (even when it is a negotiation within the self). Moreover, in de Man's definition of the allegorical, the ethical – which is the possibility for the other to speak – vanishes, or rather is erased. It is the ›time‹, temporality, and wisdom of a coherent (seemingly universal, *white*, cis-normative, male?) subject (of *Christian* descent?) that is restated, leaving no space for the other to respond. In the discontinuity of humor, on the other hand, the other (of the self) continuously speaks to itself, disrupting itself, keeping the conversation open – a prerequisite for the ethical to take place.

In addition, the subject's fall in humor is sudden, but must not have an immediate effect. The subject still has to get up (also to their beliefs), and look around (still smiling from the sudden fall), probably with other eyes. As an aftereffect of humor, the subject may look at the space and time of its vanishing presence and at the world with *another* insight. Reading the signs of a text in its temporal and spatial unfolding can shift one's insight from one moment to the next, from one instance of reading to another. In this process, time and space also slide, not only on the horizontal/linear lines of the page, but also in a kaleidoscopic way of different spaces and times that one brushes, enters, and exits in the process of reading (a scene as well as a text).

Moreover, the ›fall‹ of the subject, the insight that is part of it, can also be considered as a *gift*, in its liminal English-German double meaning of poison and medicine, firstly because a demystification of the self begins, a demystification of continuity that is also painful, toxic, and destructive, and secondly, as the mystification of the former belief, of a ›truth‹, can be grasped as an ›untruth‹ and can hence also be a form of healing, a relief from the earlier belief, from a one-dimensional understanding and subjectivity. There is thus a kind of growth, a surplus value in the fall of the subject.

The fall in humor also signals a process of learning, which de Man also acknowledges: »[W]isdom can be gained only at the cost of such a fall« (de Man 1983, 214). There are some presuppositions in what de Man says. He presupposes what he calls ›the subject of irony‹ (which, if anything, can only be thought of as a multiplicity); he further presupposes that this subject serves its two other subjects (the subject of enunciation and the enunciating, which he exchanges in the next sentence with the ›real author‹, ›the one who goes to the grocery store‹, the this-world-bound person, on the actual reading side of the text; that the subject of ›irony‹ is tempted to try again, as it were, and cannot wait to see how its humor develops; that in Baudelaire's (theoretical) distinction between *comique absolu* and *comique significatif* there is a prioritization of the former instead of a ›mere‹ descriptive insight about two possibilities that follow from the humorous (which must not be contradictory; one can give way to the other); and he rhetorically (using the power of rhetoric) places Baudelaire as the authority who would have to decide how his theory is to be understood – and that de Man's understanding is correct (de Man 1983, 217).

But the ›ironic subject‹ must not return to itself for humor to make sense. Firstly, there is no coherent self to which it could return. Secondly, it might be more a turning *to*, as well as a turning *into* another (subject) that may result from the fall. Finally, the ›ironic subject‹, like the subject they produce through humor, may not be involved in the disjunction and discontinuity of this self-partitioning. The self that is engendered by humor might rather be understood as an effect of afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*) in the Freudian sense. Then, there is the question which subject actually falls? The writing subject seems to have already overcome it, because it reflects its fall already in writing, as Baudelaire himself does. This is especially so for literature, since the literary text is already in the process of becoming, in an act of *afterwardsness*. *Literature* is therefore already beyond, or at least within, the fall. It surrenders to an insight from which its narrative takes off. Surrender, therefore, could be the reward of the fall in humor, the surrender to a (delicious) insight. ›Truth‹ and ›common beliefs‹ are questioned and can be seen as a mask; once this is recognized, the subject realizes their own constructedness, and the deconstructive work of humor can begin.

Such an understanding of humor as the fragmentation of the wor(l)d and the schism of the self is in accordance with Bakhtin's idea of dialogicity and Derrida's deferral of meaning in language, as well as the ethics of a deconstruction at work. Deconstruction in the Derridean sense already takes into account the binary and dichotomized trait of language, and thus the relations of power, on which language is centered in order to acquire a specific meaning. With Bakhtin and Derrida, deconstruction could thus be described as a *dialogical way of reading a text*. In a first step, the dialogical can be described as the transparent splitting off of other meanings, images, utterances that a word/image carries (past, present) or alludes to (future). Bakhtin also links dialogue to the splitting or

doubling that is already inherent in a word and with which the humorous rhetoric plays. This doubling/splitting of words in the play of the humorous rhetoric, moreover, ends (in the stated performative), but not forever. It is *the rhetoric* of humor as such that doubles and splits meanings.

What constitutes humor is not the doubling or splitting itself, but the *falling/surrendering of the self* to its deconstructive movement in thought. It is this acknowledgment of dependence on the other speaking within the wor(l)d and the loss of power and control inherent in this movement of the wor(l)d that is a hallmark of the (dialogic trait of) humor. This is why Schlegel is interested in the surplus-value of his questioning movement. If humor does not come to a halt, he seems to ask, what is gained by it, what is the insight? Schlegel pursues his inquiry in a humorous tone that resonates with Freud's idea of *afterwardsness*. Instead of a straightforward or finite answer, he asserts: »Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen. Sie kann unglaublich lange nachwirken« [Irony is not to be joked with. It can have an incredibly long-lasting effect]« (quoted in de Man 1983, 222; translation mine).

Although at first glance Schlegel's remark seems to double an already humorous tone, it is in fact also a humorous (deconstructive) double response: On the one hand, Schlegel is suggesting that ›irony‹ is a serious undertaking, not merely a ›joke‹. On the other hand, Schlegel's answer to the infinity of the humorous play is its long-lasting effect. The word *nachwirken* not only refers to an affective, pensive, tragic side of the humorous, which might indicate the sadness that humor can also evoke. It implies the possibility of an effect of the humorous play that works *within the self* for a much longer time, beyond the time of its utterance. This alludes to the possibility of change that humor can bring about in the self – a coming to insight in the longer term. The machinery of the humorous tone, understood in this way, is not just humor for humor's sake, which plays with the duplicity of language and understanding (and de Man's circuit nonsense ›madness‹), but an insight, a *gift* that unfolds itself in a time to come. This is what de Man seems to deny in his concept of ›irony‹. What he seems to overlook is the moment of shift in meaning within the work of humor, which already indicates a change *in* time and a change *of* time through language that echoes back to ›the empirical world‹ (de Man 1983, 222).

In *The Concept of Irony*, de Man is more open to the workings of ›irony‹, and his arguments are based closer on Schlegel's idea of ›irony‹ as a ›permanent parabasis‹ than on Søren Kierkegaard's more Hegelian understanding of ›irony‹ as negativity, but he nevertheless devalues Schlegel's joyful reception of ›irony‹.

De Man also writes against Kierkegaard, especially against Kierkegaard's understanding of ›irony‹ as a concept. The title of his text in fact mocks Kierkegaard's work of the same name; this shows the use of humor/›irony‹ as a rather supremacist de Manian style that evokes a range of affectivity – disgust, fascination, resentment – and indicates that there is more to the ›trope of irony‹ and its function, and that it also depends on the desiring subject who puts it to work.

Schlegel's humorous, philosophical invention and intervention not only serves de Man as a starting point for discussing ›irony‹. This theoretical, devaluating reflection, often ironic in tone, actually uses the power of humor to interrupt its disruptive power for which he criticizes it (De Man 1996, 166). This is probably why, in the text presented above, de Man develops allegory as a tropical stop sign for humor, as an attempt to protect

(his own?) texts (and the authority of his theorizing?) from humor's disruptive power. He is aware that ›irony‹ involves a rupturing buffoonery that disrupts the ›narrative illusion‹, which is Schlegel's parabasis as the ›interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register« (de Man 1996, 178). On the basis of this discussion, de Man finally defines ›irony‹ as the ›permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes« (de Man 1996, 179), and he concludes:

»So one could say, that any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing of any theory of narrative and it is ironic, as we say, that irony always comes up in relation to theories of narrative that would be consistent. Which doesn't mean that we don't have to keep working on it, because that's all we can do, but it will always be interrupted, always be disrupted, always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessarily contain.« (de Man 1996, 179)

For de Man, then, ›irony‹ as a trope is nihilistic rather than dialogical. In this essay he cites Peter Szondi, who, in a defense of Schlegel, in fact writes in a much more generous, lucid, and nuanced way about humor and its decomposing traits. For Szondi, ›the comedy of Tieck's plays is due to the pleasure of the reflection: it is the distance that reflection gains with regard to its own structure that is appreciated by means of laughter« (Szondi 1978, 31; quoted and translated in de Man 1996, 182).

Szondi refers not only to the space created by humor, ›the distance of reflection to itself‹, but also to the reflective, epistemic, time-related, interruptive character of humor, as well as to the affective pay-off, the appreciation, and to its possible bodily effect: ›laughter‹. In this definition, humor is not only metonymically linked within an ostensive theorization. It also sheds light on the contemplative, critical function of humor, which, according to Szondi, lies in its ability to create temporal and spatial distance in thought, so that thought reflects itself. Furthermore, Szondi links this critical function of humor to affectivity and pleasure.

Although this affective by-product of humor may not always be joyful and may sometimes be melancholic – since reflection is an internal experience that may involve a range of affective evocations in the (experiencing) subject – it can be thought of as a singular, political act because ›reflection‹ is a singular activity that includes the effect of changing one's mind, of taking the side of the other, and in this sense of becoming the other (of oneself). De Man also cites Walter Benjamin to support his thesis, and he reads Szondi against Walter Benjamin, but Benjamin and Szondi are not so far apart from each other. While Szondi sees humor as a space for epistemological reflection, Benjamin, too, regards it as a process that brings about change. For Benjamin, the humorous works through ›form‹. It disrupts the structure of (a patterned, default) narrative. Benjamin sees it as a ›critical act‹, that of a ›de-construction« (*Abbruch*). Its effect is understood not as negativity, but as a change that comes with the ›destruction‹ of a prior meaning.³¹ While Benjamin's observation acknowledges the operation of the humorous as a tonality of critique, it is Szondi's statement that goes beyond critique

31 De Man quotes Benjamin from Peter Szondi's ›Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie. Mit einer Beilage über Tiecks Komödien.« See De Man (1973, 145–148).

towards an understanding of the multi-dimensionality of humor as an open, critical, encompassing deconstructive process. This is implied in the affective and reflective instances of interruption and its spatial and temporal blank moment of change. This last aspect is also the main point for Schlegel. The strength of humor lies in this non-understanding (*Unverständlichkeit*), in the presumed ›madness‹ of ›irony‹. Non-understanding is not to be understood as negativity, as de Man describes it (de Man 1996, 183), but as an openness to the other. In this sense, it is reminiscent of Geisenhanslüke's ›poetology of non-knowledge‹ (*Poetology des Nichtwissens*), as will be discussed below, which adopts a reflective stance towards discourse as such and plunges into the im/possibilities of ›non-knowledge‹ in order to arrive at insights, however long-lasting, through which an *other* understanding of ›knowledge‹ and another ›knowledge‹ of understanding and its processes can be considered.

Surprisingly, though, de Man rails against Schlegel's *reelle Sprache*: »That sounds very nice, but you should remember that the chaos is error, madness, and stupidity, in all its forms« (de Man 1996, 184). What de Man seems to fear – and what makes him sympathetic, as in his rejection of ›irony‹ at least a form of accountable, ethical responsibility seems to be evoked – is, in fact, a collapse of the narrative of history and its relativization (de Man 1996, 184). He seems concerned about the consequences of Schlegel's approach for historiographical writing, which he perceives as one-dimensional and devaluing – and which is particularly uncanny against the backdrop of his past – and one wonders what has happened to his understanding of rhetoric, which we will discuss in the next section. However, Schlegel's romantic approach need not necessarily be understood as a relativization. On the contrary, it can allow for the critical review of historiographic texts, the righting of written wrongs from marginalized positions, and the disruption of hegemonic and dominant narratives. From a queering (feminist) postcolonial standpoint, for example, this unsettling trait of humor is applicable as a deconstructive reading of authoritative historiographical writings, which must be ironized in order to be questioned. And this, it is argued, is what happens in literature: It can stabilize or destabilize the narrative of history. Thus, it is not in the mastery of ›the performative rhetoric‹ that the complexity of humor, which de Man sees as a (future) solution to the problem, must rest, but rather in the question of the (speaking) subject, whether in the narratives of the ›everyday‹ or in the rhetoric of the novel (or in scientific or academic discourse). Thus, as Freud's analysis already suggested, the question is always who the speaking subject is in the work of humor, and how they position themselves.

In order to address the question of how humor *happens* and what it might imply, in the next chapter I will look at the meanings and workings of rhetoric, on the one hand and subjectivity on the other. A rhetorical definition of narrative may therefore not only be about »somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened« (Phelan 2017, ix), but may also have to consider subjectivity, the question of who this ›someone‹ ›is‹ and how they tell what they tell (in what context).

Humor as the Rhetoric of Deconstruction and Subjectivity

Humor as textual performance is also related to rhetoric. The rhetoric in the text is a basic element for humor/›irony‹ to take place. Humor as rupture and parabasis can be seen as a

deconstruction that is rhetorically pursued within the layers of the text and its narrative line.³²

I will refer, once again with some trepidation, to Paul de Man. De Man's work places rhetoric within a broader spectrum that extends beyond the narrower classical technical definitions of ›persuasion‹ and similar terms, bringing it into the poetics of the threshold place of everyday speech and some form of the experience of contemporaneity, where the appeal of novels (and perhaps literary texts in general) may reside. The term ›rhetoric‹ here is thus based on Paul de Man's understanding, not only in the ›derived‹ sense of comment, eloquence, and persuasion (de Man 1979, 6), but also in the sense of ›common speech‹, ›when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices‹, which meaning can be regarded as the prevailing one among the different possible meanings invoked in the text (de Man 1979, 10; see also Geisenhanslüke 2013, 107 ff.). But in contrast to de Man's approach that negates ›external‹ influence and – in a quite dangerously subjectless, depoliticizing way – is content with reading the different meanings of the text for themselves, playing with their self-de(con)structive modes, my interest in rhetoric and humor here is driven by the question of the subject and subjectivity. These certainly are not static, but are shaped by historically conditioned meanings and contexts and questions of gender, class, ›race‹, and other intersectionally and sociopolitically determinant categories.

De Man exposes a polymorphic character of the text in its linguistic and grammatical layers. It is this intricacy of different, complex, and possibly contradictory meanings of texts that de Man calls ›rhetoric‹ and a bunch of ›referential aberrations‹. Against the backdrop of this understanding, he defines literature as rhetoric per se:

»Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself.« (de Man 1979, 10; see also Geisenhanslüke 2000, 15 ff.)

The rhetorical study of texts, for de Man, includes the study of tropes and figures; it is in a narrow sense, perhaps as opposed to Booth's more traditional understanding of rhetoric as the unifying techniques an author uses to give form to a text, that de Man writes (Booth 1983, 74; Bialostosky 1985, 212). Geisenhanslüke broadens the scope of this understanding by identifying an ancient connection between rhetoric, poetics, aesthetics, and literature that had been severed through a rupture in philosophical thought. According to Geisenhanslüke, it crystallized in the nineteenth century with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and the central role it assigned to the ›genius mind‹ rather than to the faculty of language (Geisenhanslüke 2000, 14 ff.). Geisenhanslüke attributes de Man's reintroduction

32 For a discussion of the interrelationship of (techniques of) rhetoric and narrativity in narratology and storytelling and their dependence on the production of meaning within the complexity of affective, ideological, and ethical sites, see James Phelan (1996, 2005, 2017). Rather than explaining this approach by defining the terms, Phelan uses literary examples to make his point within text analysis. For an overview of a modern understanding of rhetoric (›new rhetoric‹) as ›rhetorical discourse‹ that uses narratives ›to induce social action‹, see also Iversen (2014). The ›new rhetoric‹ draws more attention to the functions of rhetoric beyond ›persuasion‹.

of rhetoric to an effort to revive this older thread that rhetoric occupied (Geisenhanslüke 2009, 107).

This rhetorical quality of paying attention to the simultaneously evoked possibility of different meanings is what de Man characterizes as the »semiological enigma« of the text (de Man 1979, 10).³³ Against the background of a Bakhtinian logic and narratological considerations, the »semiological enigma« can also be understood, at least in the novel, as a continuous and sometimes discontinuous shuttling of different narrative voices in the heteroglott and dialogic character of the rhetoric that the text sets in motion.³⁴ De Man's main argument, however, is that language cannot be decomposed into grammar and rhetoric as two distinct things, as has been the case and assumed in literary studies. Rather, de Man pays attention to the specificity and functionality of grammar and rhetoric as techniques of and in texts and in the work of language that at the same time produce various meanings that the text offers. De Man distinguishes between a rhetorization of grammar and a grammatization of rhetoric (de Man 1979, 16) when the text generates different possibilities of meaning through grammatical use (for example, the form of a question that gives a sentence a rhetorical quality) or through a specific use of figures and tropes that are repeated and thus produce a particular grammatized usage (when, for example, metaphors or, more generally, »resemblance« is used »in a way to disguise differences«) (de Man 1979, 16). Given these considerations, Bender and Wellbery (1990) refer to this more contemporary understanding of rhetoric as »rhetoricity«, which also underlies my approach to rhetoric here.

To understand the performativity of humor as a rhetorical work of language also means not only to conceive of humor as an explosive parabasis of conventionalized or expected meaning(s), but to regard the ambiguous performativity of language as its inevitable trait as well. In this sense, rhetoric is also understood as a dialogical procedure that cannot be fixed within a discursive trajectory from one side of a dialogical space. This dialogical, discursive trajectory of language – its rhetoricity – is not only floating but also bound to history and subjectivity, as different approaches in critical, feminist, Black, and postcolonial studies point out.³⁵ Both Stuart Hall and Edward W. Said refer to

33 As mentioned above, it is difficult to read de Man's approaches in literary theory without paying attention to his involvement in some antisemitic journalism during the war in Nazi-occupied Belgium, which came to light four years after his death. Dealing with de Man is, for better or worse, also, inevitably, a reading of his approach to such activities. In this sense, his approach to rhetoric can also be seen as a Lacanian return of the repressed, and may indeed be a semiological enigma with regard to what de Man as a scholar and writer was trying to pursue by engaging with the question of rhetoric and deconstruction: an apology, a request not to judge too soon, an apologetic self-persuasion, a haunted unconsciousness? This return of the repressed also raises the question of responsibility in the production of »knowledge«. For a discussion of the return of the repressed and the question of rhetoric, see E. F. Dyck (2001, 93–105). For a discussion of de Man's wartime journalism, see Werner Harmacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (1989). The multiple dilemmas of the return of the repressed are somehow echoed in Jacques Derrida's contribution to this volume, »Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell« (1988). See also Martin McQuillan (2001).

34 Instead of speaking of an enigma, Geisenhanslüke (2009, 95) ties rhetoric to an understanding of meaning as an effect of the text rather than as a verifiable schema.

35 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's approach to parabasis, discussed above, as an ironic disruption of dominant, conventionalized textual orders that emphasizes the worldliness of texts and the im-

this purposeful arrest of the text when, in different ways, they emphasize the historical and political implications that texts, despite their ambiguity, nevertheless carry.

Hall refers to the communicative context and what he calls the »translatability of a concept and its use in language« (2009, 21 f.). Said, while celebrating Derrida's »heterodox textuality« and the role of teaching as a double meaning of the institution of power and its embodiment in the teaching subject, *le corps enseignant*, nevertheless emphasizes the importance of writing »as the *consequence* of a historical evolution unique and yet absolutely crucial, to the narrative form itself« (Said 1983, 194; emphasis in the original).

Both approaches, Hall's and Said's, challenge de Man's enigmatic play and reintroduce the question of the *authorizing* power as the movement of the written text. They thus place the text in a historical context, beyond and in spite of all free floating of significations and traces. Similarly, Geisenhanslüke refers to Henri Meschonnic's approaches and reads his work as the theoretical *reinscription* of the historically situated subject and subjectivity that constitutes itself in language, giving it meaning, rather than seeing language and discourse as ›knowledge‹ production (without a (desiring) subject) (Geisenhanslüke 2009, 87). Audre Lorde's poetic and affirmative assertion that poetry is not a luxury but essential for forming meaning and giving voice to the unspoken, implicitly not only specifies de Man's definition of language and rhetoric as a deconstructive step in the making, but also fundamentally links it to the question of subjectivity, history, power, ›knowledge‹, and access to the institution and institutionalization of literature (and literary studies?). Indeed, Lorde's poetics illuminates de Man's understanding of literature as rhetoric while deconstructing its abstract, supposedly transparent (and universalized) (*white*, cis-male, middle-class subject of *Christian* descent?) stance; in doing so, Lorde asserts the poetic (and rhetorical) function of language as »imagination with insight« that does not diminish de Man's overall point, which, to paraphrase Bakhtin, accidentally emphasizes the heteroglot dialogic site of language (Lorde 2007, 37).

For Bakhtin, in the dialogic, inherent in language, in the act of performative utterances and the performativity of the novel, diverse enunciations coalesce through the figures; the ›implied author's‹ voice, too, is segmented, echoing other voices (Bakhtin 1984 a: 63), all of which are a »genuine rhetorical force« (Schuster 1985, 595). Like de Man, Bakhtin does not distinguish between aesthetic, linguistic, and performative functions of rhetoric. But unlike de Man, Bakhtin, in line with the approaches of Lorde, Hall, and Said, also locates dialogicity inherent in literature within the historically determined political and ideological, underpinnings, as well as within the responsiveness of the ›implied author‹ of a text's rhetoric.

These approaches emphasize the historical foundations of a text's »common sense« rhetoric and thus delimit de Man's ›semiotic enigma‹ by paying attention to the historical as well as the historically determined subject positions of the speaking subjects. This would also imply understanding the rhetoric inherent in the performative quality of humor as a situated deconstructive intervention. Humor as performative rhetoric calls into

fact of meaning production on the materiality of the wor(l)d, offers another understanding of rhetorical play along the same lines. Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech – A Politics of the Performative* (1997) 2021, 43 ff.) can also be understood in this way as an analysis of the work of rhetoric and its hazardous but complex sociopolitical dimensions in relations to structures of power.

question the solemnity and serenity of its own claims, and this may be what constitutes its deconstructive energy (and why it may be so feared in philosophy?). Although it can be argued that Derrida also emphasizes the power of language to shift meaning, since there is always an unstable and unfixable trace of *différance* inherent in it, Derrida's approach is more philosophically focused than on the multiple-edged gift of language. The ability of subjects to engage in language appears of secondary importance.³⁶ He seems (lovingly) too preoccupied with shaking the house of philosophy (frequently and increasingly using a good portion of the free floating poetic properties of language). Nevertheless, Derrida also distinguishes a moment in which power relations and their use are reflected in language. Deconstructive reading, then, is Derrida's attempt to bring to light the binary and dichotomous traits inherent in language, and to shift them into the possibility of an entirely different space where, at least for a moment, things can be different. Deconstruction is therefore not a »mere« reading of allegories in order to make sense, as it is for de Man. Deconstruction in the Derridean sense requires a reflection on the mechanisms of power and how they operate in the »game of the wor[l]d« (Derrida 1997, 50) and in the absences and presences of the (con-)text, of signification per se. A Derridean deconstructive move does not mean a passion for language for its own sake, nor a reversal of the power imbalance, but a shifting of the ground (in thought and language) on which binary and dichotomous thinking is established – which means that it can only be a slow movement that works beyond the expected. Justice »in an unconditional sense is its goal« (Lüdemann 2014, 59–72; Patton 2010, 44 ff.). In *Specters of Marx* ([1993] 1994), Derrida writes:

»Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also in the tradition of a certain Marxism, in a certain spirit of Marxism. There has been then, this attempted radicalization of Marxism called deconstruction [...].« (Derrida 2006, 115)

For Derrida, then, deconstruction is at once a sociopolitical textual and material intervention. It is an intervention from within the texture of the world as text, a texture that is historical, discursive, as well as related to subjectivity, and therefore *auto-bio-graphical*: The writing/reading subject is imbued as well as constructed by the texture of the wor(l)d in the making. Such a movement is understood not as a momentum, a final or permanent phase, but as an infinite form of vigilant *rereading* that may not begin with the self, but must first come from the other.

Moreover, especially in Derrida's understanding of language, there is a trait of agency, a coming to language, as part of its rhetorical trajectory, that Derrida opens up with an angle to the other within the structure of deconstruction. These approaches to rhetoric are also reflected in Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogicity of the novel and Sedgwick's understanding of the performative and periperformative, since, on the one hand, the multiple, historically formed meanings of wor(l)ds and sociopolitical power relations are emphasized, and, on the other hand, the opening of these meanings within the heteroglottic character of the literary, novelistic, and social text is differently

36 For a discussion of Derrida's approach as political resilience, see Said (1983, 175–225).

delineated. It is this characteristic of the opening of words and discourse that Bakhtin calls its ›carnavalesque character‹. The carnivalesque character of the (literary) text thus performs the ambiguity of humor that is unleashed in the text, which is also a political deciphering against the grain of normalized meanings. It is in dialogue with others and performs otherness, not only on the level of the semantics of meanings, but also on the level of the subjectivity of the characters and the different subject-positions that stabilize and destabilize conventionalized utterances as well as understandings. In this way, *affective humor* in the carnivalesque of the novel also reflects and mirrors the performances of the novelistic, dialogical periperformatives.

Terry Eagleton also notices this quality of language when he speaks of rhetoric. According to Eagleton, rhetoric is not just persuasion or a form of linguistic engagement with texts, characters, and tropes per se. Against both approaches, and in line with a Bakhtinian understanding, Eagleton reconceives rhetoric as an activity that is political and context-bound, and ›inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they are embedded« (Eagleton 2000, 179). Although Eagleton also links rhetoric to its more traditional understandings of ›criticism‹, ›persuasion‹, and its ›science‹, and considers himself a ›traditionalist« (Eagleton 2000, 179), he understands rhetoric as a ›discourse theory« that is interested in the ›formal devices of language« and thus relates the ›enigma« of its meanings to a decipherable formalist semiotics. Eagleton also links rhetoric to the ways in which language and discourse produce effects on ›implied readers‹. This means the workings of power and desire in discourse and language within a historically conditioned ›symbolic order« that operates through the ›signifying practices« of representation and negotiation, the carnivalesque, in different (cont-)texts or in novels (Eagleton 2000, 180 ff.).

In these understandings, rhetoric is seen as the inclination of a text, its drive and desire, however subtle, its orientation toward stability or change against the backdrop of dominant and normalized understandings. The performativity of humor in literary texts, in this sense, propels a deconstructive and dialogic rhetoric in which different meanings are enmeshed and give meaning to each other. This rhetorical performativity of *affective humor* entails not only the sedimentation of different aporetic meanings of the performative form of an utterance, but also the evocation of various possibilities of meaning implied in the humorous display – which, however, also initiate their own fall.

Considering the rhetoric of humor as a form of self-questioning activity makes it possible to analyze how it functions as a *deconstructive rhetoric*. However, *affective humor* must not be understood as an intentional endeavor but itself as a subject-related as well as singular *auto-bio-graphical* effect of the work of language and discourse, which not only can produce an immediate bodily felt reaction (laughing, for example), but one that simultaneously can open up a plurality of meanings that may be contradictory, paradoxical, and aporetic for further reflection. *Affective humor*, then, is understood as a deconstructive intervention, since it disentangles meanings as well as the form in which they are expressed.

A Poetology of Poetics

Not unlike Eagleton, Achim Geisenhanslücke also rethinks rhetoric in what may be called a *rereading* of a more ›traditional‹ approach by tracing it back to classical Greek philosophy (Geisenhanslücke 2015 a, 2018). Rather than emphasizing rhetoric as such, however, Geisenhanslücke approaches it within a genealogically informed trajectory of poetics.³⁷

Although poetics has a comprehensive meaning that includes the theory of literature as well as the techniques of poetic creation, its emphasis lies particularly in the recognition of theoretical insights and implications that are inherent in and part of literary works (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 13). Geisenhanslücke perceives critical readings as part of poetics, and poetics as the field that connects philosophy, rhetoric, and literature (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 15; also Simon 2018, 8). The theorist of poetics, the one who reads and explains poetics, is therefore, according to Geisenhanslücke, not the philosopher, but the *kritikós*, the critic (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 14; Birnstiel 2018, 400ff., 408); as the realm of the praxis of reading, poetics, – and this is an understanding where Friedrich Schlegel's and Achim Geisenhanslücke's approaches to poetics meet – can also be understood as the praxis of critique. Its limits, according to Schlegel, can only be defined ›by poetry‹ (Chaouli 2021, 19), to which it remains bound – and where it thus has a home. Poetics in this sense could be understood as a challenging and emancipatory ›institution‹ in the theory of literature and thought. It may call into question presupposed understandings of ›scientific thinking‹ and writing, which are often still seen as superior, analytical forms of gaining insight and ›knowledge‹. Poetics, as a critical attention to texts, may also require *poetic responses* and a responsiveness that addresses its poetic language, that is, its epistemological as well as aesthetic traits and insights.

›Poetics involves a theory of literature that is not simply a theory of something, but one that is simultaneously affected by its material [...] The line between theory and its subject matter that is [still] inscribed in most disciplines is in a peculiar way annulled in poetics.« (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 14)

For Geisenhanslücke, then, rhetoric entails a poetological endeavor that combines theoretical assumptions with literary praxis and techniques and that also evokes affectivity and sensibility. Moreover, he explicitly links the affective meanings of the text with the rhetoricality that a text evokes (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 103 ff.). Rhetoric thus appears as a *glue* that binds the two instances of poetics – its *aesthetic* and *epistemological* properties – , in order to poetologically generate meanings that have not only an epistemological, but also, as part of their epistemological processing, an affective and sensual aspect. In the

37 In *Poetik – Eine literaturtheoretische Einführung* (*Poetics – An Introduction to Literary Theory*; 2018), Geisenhanslücke critically examines the philosophical-political context in which the Greek debates took place and are discussed in certain central works. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, Geisenhanslücke follows various traces of the meanings and developments of poetics from Roman antiquity to modernity and Kant's theory of aesthetics, and finally pays close attention to Hölderlin's poetic reflections. He also links his search to poststructuralist developments and contemporary thought and figures such as Roland Barthes, Henri Meschonnic, and Peter Szondi (Geisenhanslücke 2018, 14.).

poetics and rhetoric of the text, there is thus not only an aesthetics that provides intelligibility but also epistemological insights that are aesthetically produced. A poetological approach allows us to see the (literary) text as an (artistic?) construct that also harbors (hidden?) epistemological meanings (sometimes maybe with a will to power and over-power?) in dealing with (the many dimensions of) a matter that goes far beyond a narrow understanding of ›art as aesthetics‹ (see also Geisenhanslüke 2011, 2015 a; Gamper 2012; Vogel 2018).

This is the thread that will be followed in the poetological analysis of *affective humor* in terms of its theoretical assumptions, and it will also be used in the reading of the novels, albeit taking into account historically shaped sociopolitical power asymmetries that largely determine the access to ›knowledge‹ and its institutions, as well as the possibility of speaking (and being heard).

In light of the (language-related and inevitably sociopolitical) understandings, humor and its affective, deconstructive, rhetorical, and epistemological workings will be further explored within the framework of these poetological approaches, which also pay attention to rhetoric and affectivity as well as to the theory and practice of poetological processes, and which then also form part of what ›knowledge‹ seems not to be – non-knowledge.

Affectivity, Non-Knowledge & Power-lessness

Non-Knowledge and Power-lessness in the Economy of Textures

Given that non-knowledge is often either seen as part of ›knowledge‹ and its search, perhaps even its beginning, in many different systems of ›knowledge‹, or praised for itself beyond what ›knowledge‹ may signify (Cicovacki 1997; Bennet 2009; 2015; Adler 2010; Adler/Godel 2010; Geisenhanslüke 2011; 2012; Gamper 2012; Godel 2012; Stange 2013; Menke 2021), it is remarkable that there are so few works on the meanings and definitions of what it may imply, and why it is *not* sought then – or (when?) do we (in hidden ways?) seek non-knowledge? In the sensuous epistemology of the arts, perhaps¹ What could be said, however, is that ›knowledge‹ is a much celebrated phenomenon, (or rather word?) praised and pursued for *some desire* of stability, certainty, fulfillment, and ›achievement‹ that still seems to haunt ›us‹ (Cicovacki 1997). At the same time, this more specific notion of ›knowledge‹ must also be seen within a specific time and place, specific discourses, and thus history and politics, which are often identified with the Copernican turn in ›Europe‹ (Adler/Godel 2010, 11; Gamper 2012, 9ff.), and which also signal the beginning of the so-called ›Age of Enlightenment‹, and discourses on ›reason‹, ›rationalism‹, ›empiricism‹ and ›sensuality‹.² We must then also situate this ›age‹ within the apogee of neo-global connections brought about by European colonialisms, and images

1 Hans Adler clearly connects Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's newly established philosophical field of aesthetics, which Baumgarten describes as *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, to the ›science‹ of non-knowledge as its underlying foundation (Adler 2010, 39).

2 For an overview of various thematic aspects concerning understandings of ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge associated with the Enlightenment see Adler and Godel's anthology on forms of *Nichtwissen* (2010). In his remarkable article Edward J. Hundert (1986) draws a noteworthy picture of hegemonic epistemes on and of(f) ›knowledge‹-discourses and rhetorics in the ›Enlightenment era‹ and the subjects and subjectivities (›knowing‹ and enlightened (European) *men* and ›primitives‹ (sometimes even ›wise‹ savages and native others – presumably also *men*), ambiguously created by depictions of ›reason‹ and reasonability within an (imperial) historical moment that still seems to linger on. Hundert links this rhetoric to a ›historical block‹, to use Antonio Gramsci's term, – the intellectual elite as a formation of power in this period.

of the European self and its internal and external others.³ Gamper refers specifically to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), where Kant, in an attempt to negotiate the different discourses and to find a way in-between them that favors ›reason‹, distinguishes in a hierarchical way between *having an opinion* (*meinen*), *believing* (*glauben*) and *knowing* (*wissen*). ›Knowledge‹ is, then, understood in the sense of subjectively and objectively determinable ›truth‹ (*sowohl subjektiv als objective zureichende Fürwahrhalten*); Kant further differentiates here between what is only subjectively knowable as *conviction* (*subjektive Zulänglichkeit* – which he calls *Überzeugung*) and objectively knowable (*objektive Zugänglichkeit*) that he dubs *certainty* (*Gewissheit*) (Gamper 2012, 9; Kant [1781] 2000, 686, B850). Everything else, beyond this metonymic terminology, that itself remains vague must be considered then to be ›ignorance‹ (Hundert 1986, 153). But this enlightenment discourse is, of course, not only driven by other philosophical viewpoints, even within ›Europe‹, that differ from Kant's;⁴ Kant himself was far less explicit regarding ›knowledge‹ than it might seem. As Predrag Cicovacki points out, Kant in fact uses throughout this work the term *Erkenntnis*, ›insight‹, which is more tentative, rather than to adopt ›knowledge‹ (*Wissen*) as a general term – in contrast to how ›knowledge‹ is applied today, often in connotations of ›to achieve‹ and to ›succeed‹. »This concentration on success is, of course, part of our overall Western obsession with success« Cicovacki continues (Cicovacki 1997, 38ff.), one that seems more market-oriented, measurable, *countable*, a form of profit thinking rather than *accountable*. The verb *erkennen*, in comparison, is closer to sensuality and the senses, especially the eyes, or the heart and memory, in the sense of *wiedererkennen* (to recognize anew), and closer to touch. Moreover, *to know* can be used for *to experience*, just as *erfahren* (to experience) can mean *Wissen* (to know). Furthermore, *to recognize* and *to experience*, imply the involvement of another entity, some form of encounter, whereas *to know* and *wissen* rather centralize the role and position of the subject as *agens*. It is also surprising that, although ›knowledge‹ is often juxtaposed with ›ignorance‹ and non-knowledge, the implications and meanings of ›knowledge‹ as such are sometimes historically situated, albeit often only within what is understood as an ›internal European‹ history, but are not further problematized and rather taken for granted – as if ›knowledge‹ and ›to know‹ were neutral words, uttered in a neutral space (of European philosophy?) and it were clear what they meant. There is, however, another German as well as English term for *knowing/Wissen*, that I think, is quite illuminating in this regard and may elucidate why ›to know‹ might have been centralized as well as the subject who thinks ›to know‹, which is the verb *beherrschen* – *to master, dominate, rule, control* – all word semantics that are seen as antonyms to *humor* as well as *affectivity*, that reflect power and are connoted by ideas of domination and control, and also form the

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- 3 Although the turn to ›knowledge‹ in this time is often connoted by the phrase *sapere aude* ›dare to know‹ that Kant also used, it actually signals a speaking up against the power of ›authority‹ and orthodox (religious) beliefs, and thus, in *this* sense, against, ›unreasonable‹ doctrines. The phrase goes back to the lyric poet Horace and his *Epistles*, albeit with a different semantic, and perhaps also epistemological and ethical implication, that is, ›dare to be wise‹. It is, then, an ambiguous time and ambiguous discourse that can be *reissued* – always anew – in light of ›lyrical wisdom‹ in a productive and progressive way. See Hundert's insightful article (1986).
- 4 See for a discussion of other discursive angles and critiques of Kant's understanding of ›knowledge‹ for example Gamper (2012), Geisenhanslüke (2012).

playground for philosophical epistemologies in the adjacent field of what has become the other of ›knowledge‹ and philosophy: ›literature‹ and ›aesthetics‹ as the (powerless? And yet unmasterable?) vast field of non-knowledge?⁵ In a cursory remark, Hans Adler indeed refers to the fantasies of discovery and conquest connoted by the term *Nichtwissen* as a *territory* – the territory of the discoverer (*Territorium der Entdecker*) – in the ›Age of Enlightenment‹ (and colonialism), with the goal of extrapolation (*erschließen*) and extinction (*Auslöschung*) of the *terra incognita* (Adler 2010, 25). As Edward J. Hundert points out, reading the discourses and rhetoric of the Enlightenment along what seems to be a psychoanalytic trait is that they are not free of affectivity but driven by it. In particular, he points to the hidden fears that always seem to accompany claims to supremacy:

»And behind aggressive doctrines of progress, of which of stadial theories of the growth of consciousness formed a central part, lurked a vision of the loss of self-control, of a lapse into infantile dependence, of a return to immaturity. The recently liberated found in the behavior of the primitives surrounding them an uncomfortably thin line between civilization and barbarism, for the fantasies of the vulgar too readily energized their own. [...] They suggest a relationship conditioned by the anxiety intellectuals experienced as they confronted not only their former, but perhaps their potential selves [...] [T]he philosophes forged a lasting cognitive ideal, knowledge freed from contingent historical solidarities and affective social performances. They secured an image of an autonomous self which could detach from any particular point of view, step backward as it were, and critically judge that standpoint from a privileged epistemological space. Their assertions of autonomy and hence modernity involved claims to have broken the hold of myth upon the mind, yet the enlightened practiced a new remythification. Through theory they projected anxiety and desire, so as to deny the common culture a voice in the comprehension of its own tradition and root in ours a still potent and not entirely elective affinity between knowledge and power.« (Hundert 1986, 156–157)

It is this conjunction that I wish to address, in the poetics of non-knowledge, which must then also be problematized in its implications with power-lessness. In order to emphasize and visualize the liminal, dynamic, open-ended, and oscillating process that can be presumed in the terms not-knowing and powerless-ness, I use them with a hyphen in English and with a capital letter in German: non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*). Moreover, it is significant, and interesting, I think, that we do not have

5 Cicovacki though, uses ›cognition‹ and ›recognition‹ instead of ›insight‹. See also Achim Geisenhanslüke/Hans Rott (2007), Andrew Bennett (2009, 2015), both sources use ›not knowing‹ and ›ignorance‹ interchangeably; another favorite word used is ›agniology‹, coined by the Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier (1808–1864) for the unknowable and a quasi other side of ›epistemology‹ that he also coined. See, furthermore, Achim Geisenhanslüke (2011), Michael Gamper (2012) and the anthology *Literatur und Nicht-Wissen* (Bies/Gamper 2012), which is considered to be the first interdisciplinary, historically informed, and systematic search for the productive meanings of non-knowledge (*Nicht-Wissen*) as a field of investigation (*Untersuchungsfeld*) rather than a concept. See also Matthias Gross and Lindsey McGoey (2015), who speak of a growing *field* of ›ignorance studies‹, which makes ›ignorance‹ a fortiori the other of ›knowledge‹; see critically in this regard Geisenhanslüke (2012).

singular words for these terms to express the *sense* that they may echo (see also Geisenhanslücke 2012, 25), maybe their ›voluminosity‹, which in a way indicates overpowering, and yet also the infinite process of *unlearning* – another form of limitless ›voluminosity‹?⁶

In what follows I will turn to Achim Geisenhanslücke's understanding of non-knowledge, by also delineating power-lessness as the inevitable adjacent other side of it that echoes implicitly from his works, to discuss what this might mean in the context of the deconstructive rhetoric and poetics of *affective humor*.

Following Lacan, Geisenhanslücke defines non-knowledge not as a lack of ›knowledge‹ nor as a fetishization of language, but as a state of multiplicity, a field of difference, within different con-texts and horizons, as the most liberating and most elaborate sense of ›knowledge‹ (Geisenhanslücke 2015, 82 ff.) – and, I would add, as the most elaborate form of power *as power-lessness*. Geisenhanslücke's reading depicts a division and a struggle between affectivity and rationalism within the claims of Western philosophy. I therefore take this reading to be an approach that destabilizes Western (and enlightened) thought merely as a straightforward outcome of ›reason‹ serving as the sole instrument of thought.

Non-knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) is a theme that Geisenhanslücke discusses in quite related ways and genealogical approaches within various of his works, in which slices of its tenets are suggested. In these scattered reflections the imperceptibility and lingering proximity of what we perceive as ›knowledge‹ seems to delicately imply its insular construction in immediate proximity to the vast field of the unknowable, to what is regarded as non-knowledge and ›ignorance‹. In a multi-layered unfolding of readings that attempt to explore the term in different literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic approaches, Geisenhanslücke carves out space for thinking non-knowledge within a scheme that is not mystifying but that can be thought as part and structure of ›knowledge‹-making itself in different fields. Instead of understanding non-knowledge as the other of ›knowledge‹, as its negativity, (see also Gamper 2012,14, Stange, 2013,11 ff.) Geisenhanslücke delineates it at least from these three discursive traits that address ›knowledge‹ (at the margins of ›truth‹) and that seem to be successively interdependent within discourse. Geisenhanslücke thus opens up the lines where these different forms of thinking de/construct the knowability (and presumed mastery) of ›knowledge‹. In doing so, he reveals literature and the literariness of texts as the field and arena in which ›not-knowing‹ is often located in philosophically and psychologically inclined texts within writings, whereby these leave their own trace of literariness. Literature and literariness thus appear as an unrestrained field of non-knowledge that goes far beyond the rather restricted halt that (philosophical and psychoanalytical) hermeneutic readings often seem to offer as ›knowledge‹. In a politically implicated appeal, Geisenhanslücke asserts that in the prevailing context of a ›knowledge-society‹ (*Wissensgesellschaft*) (Geisenhanslücke/Rott 2007; Geisenhanslücke 2007a) (which is increasingly developing into a seemingly borderless and ›proper‹ era of digitality and AI reliability), it is an ethical task of responsibility within the humanities

6 Geisenhanslücke (2012, 25) begins with the observation that, »initially, not-knowing defies any closer conceptual definition«.

to consider the vast possibilities and the infinite field of non-knowledge in the production of ›knowledge‹. His approach describes a *return* to (possible) lost paths of past imaginations (in literary theory), and in this way, while remaining connected to recent developments in literary theory as well as to ancient, classical (Western?) texts, he cuts across the possibilities of rethinking conventionalized fields of inquiry (not only) within literary studies, through what seems to be a close reading of the literary text centralizing the acumen of their poetic insight; thus, there is also a methodological (*re*)turn inherent in this approach. This is particularly the case with one of his more recent works, *Am scharfen Ufer* (2021). The work gives impetus to a critical reading of Martin Heidegger by confronting Heidegger's (quite poetic) language (or the language Heidegger appropriated from poetry) with the question of timeliness, politicizing Heidegger's quest and also questioning deconstruction's occasional fling with the apolitical and its dismissal of the ›present‹ (contemporaneity). It also proposes a reading of Hölderlin that places Hölderlin in a more cosmopolitan, earthbound place; the other and the self, ›West‹ and ›East‹, ›Occident‹ and ›Orient‹ appear differently connected, without a disputation of history or difference; the term ›Oriental‹ (*das Orientalische*) seems to be employed here as a point of orientation⁷ (Geisenhanslüke 2021, 65 ff.). In this way, what comes into view is a *reorientation* within the imagination of possible approaches in literary theory (as well as philosophy and psychology) in the representational regimes of the self and the other.⁸

Non-knowledge appears as a movement woven into the historical presence of the writing subject (perhaps as a signature of the singularity of the *auto-bio-graphic*) and seems to touch the limits of ›knowledge‹, as an ethical/political dilemma (Geisenhanslüke/Rott 2007, 7 ff., Geisenhanslüke 2012, 27).

On the borderlines of this question of non-knowledge, then, appears the other, un-problematised question that I shall address, the adjacent question of power-lessness, which can be well grasped in the German word *OhnMacht*. I understand *OhnMacht* as a dynamic structure of *powerlessness and coming to power* and what it may denote, operating in conjunction with non-knowledge and its affective sides, as well as an essential part of the work of humor.

To an implied extent, this other vast realm of power-lessness that seems to be connoted with non-knowledge and its affective economy looms on the margins of discursive affirmations as well as exclusions, which may be why humor is often rejected as it, at least implicitly, signifies the economy of power-lessness (*OhnMacht*) and can thus be regarded as underlying its epistemology.

This interweaving of non-knowledge, affectivity, language/literariness, the liminal threshold of power-lessness and humor, becomes particularly palpable in one of Geisenhanslüke's publications, which begins with a seminal text of European philosophy per se, Plato's *Symposium* that considers one of the most fundamental ›affects‹ – one that

7 For a more detailed analysis and discussion of this approach see Popal (2024).

8 This is demonstrated through a discussion of Hölderlin's late poems *Rememberance* and *The Ister*, and in a shift in Heideggerian readings of the poems, without ignoring Heidegger's counterintuitive importance of these readings; another noteworthy aspect is a reading of Henri Meschonnic as a signpost within and after deconstruction; see Geisenhanslüke (2021, 77–88; 113 ff.).

is also connoted like no other by (philosophical) thinking per se: ›love⁹ – and thus the ›love‹ (desire, longing, rejection-acceptance, lust, drive?) for ›knowledge‹ (or rather for its production?) (Geisenhanslüke 2016; see also Gill 1999; Destrée/Giannopoulou 2017), which is again not only of specific importance, but at the same time precludes and in turn marks power-lessness as well as the lust for power. A play in-between the two?¹⁰ In this work, Geisenhanslüke engages with various foundational texts from philosophy (Plato), but also from psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan) and literature (Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, Goethe) that address the concept of ›love‹ (or: desire, longing, rejection-acceptance, lust, drive?) within the liminal intersection of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature.¹¹ Geisenhanslüke thus begins at the heart of (Western?) philosophy with one of its almost mythical core texts.¹²

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- 9 While *erôs* is often translated as *desire*, in following Christopher Gill and Achim Geisenhanslüke, I will use it here in the sense of ›love‹ because of the broad meanings of the word that are discussed in *The Symposium*. See for a critical discussion of ›love‹ and its meanings from queering feminist shores Lauren Berlant (2012) and bell hooks (2001). Both thinkers *detach* ›love‹ from dominant critical thinking (in philosophy, psychoanalysis, but also conventional meanings of desire or sexuality) in different ways, yet begin *with* ›love‹ (as some kind of hope, risk, (normative/liberating) fantasy), *attaching* it to transformative critical thinking. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a quite different take on ›love‹ in *dialogue* in her still underdiscussed publication *A Dialogue on Love* (1999).
- 10 Perhaps this is why it may be so closely associated with war and violence on a micro and macro level? One of the most brilliant, psychoanalytical informed analysis in this regard remains for me Jacqueline Rose's work (1993).
- 11 Including Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. The text also entails a discussion of the figure of the Medusa, which Geisenhanslüke further, especially in Ovid's recounting of it, problematizes in interesting ways, as a potentially counterintuitive feminist text (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 100–118). Medusa is considered, thereby, as a masculinist abjected figuration of the powers of lust and Freudian castration-angst, and related to vulnerability, feminine self-protection, experiences of sexual abuse, and rape. See in this regard also Adrienne Rich (1979), Teresa de Lauretis (1984), and Heidi Morse (2018).
- 12 *The Symposium* is a text with an intertwined, deferred narrative frame; it recounts the event of a banquet from the perspective of a disciple and admirer of Socrates (Apollodorus), who was not present at the scene, which took place many years before the recount, but who reiterates the narrative of an acquaintance, Aristodemus, another disciple of Socrates at the time, who in turn was invited to the event by Socrates himself. The event has the character of a contest, (or dinner party (Gill 1999, xi)), is hosted by the poet and rhetorician Agathon, who has won a tragedy competition the day before. Apollodorus appears as a liminal figure between Agathon and Socrates: he is the disciple of Socrates and a younger of Agathon and is described as a bit ›mad‹ (*toll*); Aristodemus' narrative is, according to Apollodorus, confirmed by Socrates, who is a speaker of the evening; The story involves a rather somber event (than the day before) of rhetoricians, philosophers and poets about the question, the understanding and the value of ›love‹ (*Eros*); Geisenhanslüke points out that ›Dionysian elements‹ like wine and the flutist are expelled from the evening (as well as women and enslaved persons (Gill 1990, xiii)) in order to have ›healthier‹ circumstances (and more intellectual (= so called: *free*) *male* discernments). At the heart of *The Symposium*, according to Geisenhanslüke, is the question of whether *Eros* is the origin of the philosophical search for ›truth‹, or whether it is rather a force and power of unreason that drives human creatures to ›madness‹ and death; see Geisenhanslüke (2016, 23); see also, especially with regard to the dialogic form, Gill (1999, xvi ff.).

Generally, humor often appears here either as a rhetoric that constitutes the tonality of the text or as a rhetoric of non-knowledge (and power-lessness). It often seems to be an affectively charged rhetoric that deals with questions of ›love‹ and ›truth‹ in order to produce certain sentiments of understanding or to prepare the ground for talking about ›love‹ (eroticism, desire, sexuality, friendship?) at all (or its masculinized figuration, *Eros*). Taking *The Symposium* as a starting point, Geisenhanslüke identifies a rationale of not-knowing in Western philosophy (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 21). According to Geisenhanslüke, the text shows a »dramatic struggle« between »reason and unreason«, philosophical reasoning and Dionysian rapture. Geisenhanslüke sees this particularly represented by the figures of Socrates and Agathon, in contrast to more conventional readings that diminish the role of Agathon, who can be depicted as signifying rhetoric and poetry (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 23; see also Nussbaum [1979] 1986, 166, 168; Gonzalez 2019, 109). Socrates appears in the text as the founder of an understanding of (philosophical) ›knowledge‹ that is based on the (exclusive) desire to *know*, because it is precisely what it (exclusively) lacks and (according to this logic) desires. Philosophy thus seeks what it does not have (›knowledge‹) and what it longs for (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 82), ›knowledge‹ (– and power?). Socrates, whose appearance marks the end of the speeches (after the poet Agathon, who is in love with the im/possibilities of language¹³, and before the politician Alcibiades, who is in love with Socrates), constitutes this lack in philosophy's ›love‹ for wisdom by rejecting literary accesses to ›knowledge‹; he belittles Aristophanes and Agathon, the representatives of *comedy* and *tragedy*, from a position of disguised ironic superiority by not acknowledging their poetical access to ›knowledge‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 40 ff., 55 ff.).

In this reiteration of *The Symposium* as a text in the interstices of non-knowledge (and, in subtle ways power-lessness as may become apparent in the course of this reading), a fourfold understanding of humor can be seen at work: on the one hand, Aristophanes' performance is announced within a humorous inclination in the Platonic text, its narrative mood appears comical;¹⁴ then again, Aristophanes, as a representative of comedy, uses humor as a narrative tonality to invent a quite tragic, very poetic genesis of ›love‹ as an affective retrieval (of one's lost other half));¹⁵ on the other hand, there is Socrates

13 According to Christopher Gill, though, Agathon appears to be praising ›himself‹ (the loved one, rather than the lover or ›love‹) using rhetorical techniques from Gorgia and remaining quite ›superficial‹ in his speech. Cf. Gill (1999, xxv ff.). In this Gill follows the derogatory Socratic tone of *The Symposium* toward rethoric and ›beauty‹ in this sense. See for an other, central meaning of Agathon in the *The Symposium* Gonzalez (2019, 108 ff.).

14 Aristophanes has the hiccups, which must first be treated (by sneezing), and then an interlude on the ridiculous follows.

15 According to this myth, ›love‹ (*Eros*) is the consequence of a divine disciplinary punishment; the so-called spherical humans, described as having double organs on each side of their halves and being either male, female or bisexual, are cut in half by Zeus (out of a conflictual rivalry); faced with this pain, they search for their other half, and when they finally find each other, they want to merge, but then, they forget to eat, neglect their other needs, and thus die; they die not only because of the cut and its consequences, but also because of the fulfillment that leads to their death; the sought-after merging involves not only physical affection, but is also a union of souls that extends beyond death. See Geisenhanslüke (2016, 40–48). Death, read in this way, can in fact be seen, not as an end, but as a continuity of ›love‹: in ›love‹ within an otherness – other than life. In

who uses humor rhetorically in its own quite inferiorizing, and authoritative sense (Socratic ›irony‹?) to undermine poetic language as ›beautiful‹ but ›untruth‹ (as a means to counter Agathon). Moreover, humor serves Socrates to disguise his already knowing (or so Socrates assumes (or Plato? Or subsequent (Western) philosophers?)) intention to humiliate the two poets.

Humor thus appears as a rhetoric bound to a spectrum of affectivity: On the one hand, it can give voice to a tone of superiority, on the other hand, it can make pensive, and can also announce a tonality that is half mournful and half tragic. It all depends on what the narrator wants to achieve, what form of affectivity they seek to inform, in order to give meaning and a direction to what they say (which still remains a puzzling puzzle and task for an ›audience‹ that might be implied herein). This economy of affectivity in the philosophic text imbued in humor is linked to determining the meaning of ›knowledge‹ and ›longing‹ (and to ›knowledge‹ as ›longing‹). Sometimes ›longing‹ appears as ›knowledge‹, and it is then that power-lessness and non-knowledge seem to fall into some kind of chiasmic harmony that, at the same time, evokes a silent and pensive humor in a slightly resigned tone. Humor, in any case, thus signals a beginning, rather than an accomplished or fixating endeavor.

The text also signals a division between (the epistemological power and ›knowledge‹ of) poetic and philosophic writing: »The opening conversation between Socrates and Agathon is, in a sense, an *ur*-scene for the distinction between poetry and philosophy« (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 57). Socrates bases his ironizing claim on the idea that Aristophanes and Agathon are ignorant regarding their own (affective?) state, that they do not know what they are actually talking about and what exactly it is that they seek. So, what really matters (to Socrates) is that they are both unaware, vague, not knowing (and powerless?) dudes. Socrates assesses the value of ›truth‹ (the knowing power of philosophic reflection? (is it?)) above the ›beauty‹ (power-less not-knowing non-power?) of language (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 57) and thus reduces the manifold complexity of the word, of the poetic, to ›beauty‹, which for Sokrates amounts to a playing with words (and with ›truth‹).¹⁶ Both approaches, in Socrates' view, do not amount to the (›real‹) meaning of ›love‹ but to *not knowing*. However, as Geisenhanslüke points out by looking at the margins of the text, Socrates definition of ›love‹ as a lack that desires to know, and of philosophy as a form of ›love‹ that seeks to find ›knowledge‹, as well as his apparent superiority over Aristophanes and Agathon, is opened up at the end of *The Symposium*. The text shows the three figures in an engaged ongoing periperformative dialogue after

his critical reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and other Freudian texts, Geisenhanslüke shows how Freud uses this narrative to develop his psychoanalytically informed understanding of ›love‹ and death as desires of union, in which the two merge, rather than to cancel each other out; Geisenhanslüke's subsequent reading of Goethe's *Elective Affinities* in this book thus seems to mirror Freud's; Freud would perhaps have been horrified to hear this, *almost* religious, almost mystical death-›love‹ as such an (›ultimate? ›normal?‹) way of seeking ›love‹ within and beyond (the blink of?) life (or maybe not). See Geisenhanslüke (2016, 161 ff.).

16 Aristophanes and especially Agathon's ›love‹ for wisdom lies in the ›knowledge‹ of the poetically informed language, which, in fact, links ›love‹, its fulfilment and ›knowledge‹ to the possibilities of what the power-less non-knowledge of language's play might be, rather than by declaring one-dimensionally what ›truths‹ are; see further Geisenhanslüke (2016, 69).

the celebration and main part of the contest (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 69; Plato/Gill 1999, 63). The performativity of the dialogic, as it were, thus continues and takes place in a spatial and temporal deferral – a niche, a ›side corridor‹ around the banquet, after the performance. The text itself, in this way, opens up its presumed assumption and finitude. Socrates' alleged victory, does not appear as an end in itself, but can be seen as part of a playful gathering, after which the conversations are continued (the question though is, why *this* Socrates in his superior role could become the non-plus-ultra figure of ›Western‹ rationalism, rather than the discussing, conceding Socrates of the periperformative side talks?).

Besides this powerful philosophical approach to ›knowledge‹, Geisenhanslüke deciphers another postulated ›knowledge‹ that also builds on the dialogues of *The Symposium* but is part of modernist discourses, and that for its part rejects and mocks philosophy's desire for ›knowledge‹/power, understanding it derisively as not-knowing. This modernist stance, as well as Geisenhanslüke's critique of it, also takes shelter in an affectively laden, humorous economy. It is in Jacques Lacan's Freudian informed psychoanalytical approach to ›knowledge‹ and turn to *The Symposium* that Geisenhanslüke considers this other (prevalent, quite ubiquitous) understanding of non-knowledge, which Lacan establishes as the non-knowledge of philosophy by promoting psychoanalysis as ›knowledge‹. Like the movement of philosophy that posits itself as ›truth‹ by inferiorizing the work of poetic language, Lacan bases psychoanalysis' self-centered ›truth‹ on the belief that Socrates, as the representative of philosophy per se, does *not know* what his ›real‹ desire is, which is not a desire for ›knowledge‹, but a desire that is bound on lack¹⁷ (whatever *that* may be). Thus, Lacan does not connote this desire or his own approach to mechanisms of power(-lessness) either.¹⁸ In Lacan's psychoanalytically informed, hermeneutic consideration, which claims *to know* what ›knowledge‹ is, desire as well as ›love‹ are not seen as self-sufficient affective resources for themselves that have the power and ability to regulate and orient a subject; these are rather depicted as a kind of in-between excess-clipboard of inner and outward worlds.¹⁹ As Geisenhanslüke further elucidates here, with tongue-in-cheek, it seems that Lacan finds fault with tragedy and ridicules Agathon's dramatic praise for ›love‹ as comical stupidity, but Freud's foundational work

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- 17 Lacan acknowledges Socrates' insight that ›love‹'s desire desires an image of the loved object, yet he sees in Socrates' half-›knowledge‹ a postponement of the mystification of desire, as it shifts (philosophy's) desire to ›knowledge‹ rather than marking it as a void. However, as Geisenhanslüke shows, Lacan's critique itself is bound up in a double dilemma. On the one hand, Lacan sympathizes with Aristophanes ›comedy‹ and narrative of ›love‹, because he reads it as a narrative grounded in the problem of lack. But Aristophanes' story, unlike his usual dramas, amounts more to a tragedy rather than a comedy (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 81), so that Lacan's enthusiasm itself seems to be based on a lack, – and on the brittle, promise-less offering that tragedy proffers at first sight.
- 18 Lacan's theory did not go unchallenged, whereby Jacques Derrida's *The Post-Card – From Socrates, to Freud and Beyond* (1980) should be the most celebrated one from within philosophy. Geisenhanslüke's work as well as Simon Crichley's can be seen as further supplements of that. See Geisenhanslüke (2016, 84).
- 19 Affectivity especially, ›love‹, as Geisenhanslüke asserts elsewhere, is indeed intertwined with poetry; the affective side of poetry is at first acknowledged but then dismissed as distracting and harmful. Platonic philosophy not only insists on finding ›truth‹ but apparently also on appropriating and usurping the work of poetry. Cf. Geisenhanslüke (2018, 28).

in this regard, the Oedipus-complex, on which Lacan relies as well, is itself grounded on a tragedy (and perhaps also its tragic-comic sides), displayed in a literary work. From a poetological stance therefore, Lacan's attitude appears ironic and all the more so as he does not seem to be aware of that.

Lacan, uses humor in two paradoxical ways: He uses humor to structure his language affectively and to give impetus to his argument as well as to arouse an affective response that is based on a rhetoric that ridicules. Instead of acknowledging this reliance on the tragic (and the ambiguous sentiment of the comic-tragic in Aristophanes' and Agathon's narratives), which Lacan skips in this psychoanalytical knowledging (and which must have its own *psychological* – and strategic? – implications), he detects an other central nodal point on which tragedy is grounded that, for him, psychologizing the literary text a second time (after Freud) is Oedipus not-knowing: Oedipus' tragedy is founded on non-knowledge regarding his parents, a form of non-knowledge, however, that he acts upon (killing his father and marrying his mother) and which forms the basis for the irrevocable tragedy that seems peculiar, unbelievable, shocking, *komisch*, and, at least on a first, rash sight, therefore almost *funny*.

The performing orators and guests of *The Symposium* speak about their inclination to ›Eros‹, the masculine figuration of ›love‹, in a quite distinct ›male‹ homoerotic staging. The text is like a web in which thinking is interlinked with affectivity, performativity, and its construction. *The Symposium* not only appears as a philosophical tractate, but also as a structured, literary one in which the psychoanalytical aspects of another struggle, between philosophy and literature in the layers of poetics and rhetoric, are buried in the thick and depths of the texture of the text and appear to still await their unearthing. It is in this successive display and dispute that Socrates seems to prevail, or is privileged, as the superior sight within and of (Western?) philosophy (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 70 ff.).

The successive forms of non-knowledge along which Geisenhanslüke organizes his reading, come across as avenues of power-lessness, not in the sense of impuissance, but in the sense of a ›time-out‹ within thought and affectivity. Power-lessness is indicated in the temporal gaps within the succession of the speeches, in the suspension that sets aside one talk and awaits the talk of the next speaker. One speech, thereby, seems to outdo the former and appears to be superior to its predecessor. This is not only the case in the structure of *The Symposium* but also in the extended structure that Geisenhanslüke establishes in continuing the text, firstly, by invoking the image of an ongoing discussion at the margins of the philosophical text itself, secondly by introducing Lacan as a quasi-successor and speaker of *The Symposium*, and thirdly by his own critical reading of Lacan's insights (and its further development throughout the book).

All these instances introduce a rupture within the claim of power that the speakers attempt to establish, a parabasis. These ruptures – ruptures as breaks and ruptures of exhilaration/intoxication – are accompanied by a mechanism of homoerotically charged sexualized overpowering and power-lessness that also get visible in Geisenhanslüke's reading, in a rhetoric that appears as an eroticized form of ›love‹ (-making) and seems indistinguishable from an almost (masculinist) bodily wrestle for the quest of ›knowledge‹ -›truth‹ -power within this apparent contest of (non-)knowledge. This becomes especially apparent in a humorous (disguising?) rhetoric, formed and grazed by (a sexualized) violence (of ›love‹ and rivalry) in the immediate, liminal neighborhood of embar-

rassment and obscenity, a language that collapses sexual penetration and buggery and that may stand for this parabolic overruling moment of power-lessness as the movement in (Western?) (philosophic?) thinking per se; not only does Jacques Derrida evoke this humor-inflected imagery of embarrassment, lust and humiliation in describing the post card on which Socrates is writing at a desk and Plato is standing right behind him, looking at his work, as if learning it by heart or dictating him, giving Derrida the famous image of Plato having an erection behind Socrates' back »[...] before slowly sliding, still warm, under Socrates' right leg« (Derrida 1987, 18). The figures of writing and transference are in this way rhetorically reversed (by a sexualized image of overpowering).²⁰ This rhetoric not only forms the dialectic of Socrates' scathing-humorous dealing with Agathon in *The Symposium* (who is no less ambiguous in humorously inviting Socrates to sit next to him, so he can learn from him); it is reiterated in Lacan's infringing sneer at Socrates, which Geisenhanslüke describes as a sodomitical movement in which Lacan »takes [...] the Symposium [...] quasi from the behind« (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 77), and which Geisenhanslüke avenges in his critique of Lacan and settles up with him (as well as Socratic philosophy) by disentangling the poetics of the tragedy as well as the notion of ›love‹ as lack from a (purely) psychoanalytical understanding or philosophic knowledging. In this way, humor, too, is transferred into a liminal deconstructive, affective, rhetoric of spleen/critique rather than ridicule.

Although Geisenhanslüke shows how gender and sexuality are delinked and queer possibilities of ›love‹ (*Eros*) are easily interchanged in many, if not all, of the addresses, it is apparent that femininity occupies the absent center of the scene, sitting in the circular rows of the auditorium, or so it seems – enjoying herself* (legs crossed, arms wide open on the empty side-seats – with raised eyebrows, delighted!, she* smiles, shaking her* head, wondering,) (she* is only semi-focused, though, pondering whether she* might join the philosophy troop, yet she* is quite sure she* *has* already joined the team (organization?), together with her* sisters and friends, but still never seems to be included in the picture center stage, marking rather margins – *hmm ...* opening up her* own theatre? Maybe ... there are already quite a few, but it never hurts ...).

Geisenhanslüke's quest for non-knowledge, however, is a performance of what it aspires to do: the search for the seams of non-knowledge (where power-lessness looms happily in unseen ways, too) unravels the interconnected workings of highly affective, literary, philosophical and psychoanalytical threads of and in thought, writing and politics, writing politics, while also implicating a quest for the question of ethics. Within this banquet that either praises (male?) ›love‹ (the first speakers, Phaidros, Pausanias, Eryximachos), or ›loves‹ the praise (poetry) (Agathon), questions ›love‹ (Socrates), or haunts

20 Elsewhere, Geisenhanslüke amplifies the ambivalent place that Socrates occupies within (the very same) Western philosophy, as either the hero or the traitor of a tradition of thought; it is in the latter that he places Friedrich Nietzsche's and Walter Benjamin's approaches to Socrates as a ›murderer‹ of tragedy and a ›monster‹; While Nietzsche's (and Benjamin's) harsh critiques are directed against Socrates' reliance on the ›monstrosity‹ of an all-encompassing ›reason‹, in Nietzsche's high philosophical tirade, imperialism, too, sends its regards; Socrates is seen as a *hybrid* and *impure figure*, with even his ›Greek origins‹ being questioned, making the concept of ›race‹ and the question of belonging an ancient regress within Western (?) (German) (?) thought; Cf. Geisenhanslüke (2011, 117).

it – in different ways (Aristophanes, Lacan) – also another, quite violent issue comes up at the rims of the topic and the speeches, which is (sexualized) abuses of queerness and pederasty. As Geisenhanslüke points out, pederasty is legitimized by almost all of the speakers of *The Symposium*, even when the seduction is pursued against the will of parents (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 34). As he also points out, Lacan takes this socially legitimized, sexualized abuse as a clue to laugh about *The Symposium* as a gathering of kinky male philosophers (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 34). Humor makes it possible for Lacan, it seems, to find a way to speak about male homoerotic in a derogatory way as well as about a painful, embarrassing, and maybe frightening aspect of abusive (male?) sexuality (and its history) that – still – echoes out of the text into social orders, which it also mirrors. Here, the tonality of overpowering also echoes its limits, reaching out to power-lessness at the margins of non-knowledge, as grief and helplessness, a tragedy. The humorous inclination transposes this specter of affectivity into (a speakable) language and puts it subtly on the table. Humor here appears to signify another limit: the economy of ›love‹ at its limits between shelter, *Bildung* and (sanctioned) abusive violence. Humor, as a rhetorical device, ultimately, seems to open up the bunch of non-knowledge and power-lessness that contours, carries and invokes tragedy, which also shows the transferable, dynamic connection between humor and the tragic at the liminal of philosophic literary texts.

It is notable in this regard that with Socrates' speech the focus is redirected from pederasty and in fact tabooized abuses of queerness, to the female figure of Diotima as Socrates' teacher of ›love‹. Geisenhanslüke considers this as a shift in gender politics within *The Symposium* (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 60). This shift, though, can also be seen with regard to the topic of *The Symposium*, in conjunction with the question of *Eros* and the foundational quest of rivalry between reason, affectivity, non-knowledge, and power-lessness. According to Diotima's teachings, in contrast to Agathon's praise, *Eros* is not only ›beautiful‹ but also what would amount to ›ugliness‹ in a sexual, bodily sense, less pure. In *Eros*, however, according to Diotima/Socrates, »[...] we see, the old familiar *erōs*, that longing for an end to longing, that motivates us here to ascend to a world in which erotic activity, as we know it, will not exist« (Nussbaum [1979] 1986, 183). In Socrates' account of Diotima, then, a more ambivalent image of *Eros* emerges. As Geisenhanslüke points out *Eros* signifies a demonic cross-border figure, a threshold figure of transference and translation that stands in-between human beings and the goddesses*. *Eros* appears, furthermore, himself a product of rape. Interestingly, this is a rape that is committed by a female goddess*, by Penia. Penia is not only a female figure. She is also a figuration of poverty. The female goddess* Penia who commits the crime of rape, is also poor.²¹ Here, gender and class intersect and invoke sexual abuse that is delegated to a poor goddess*. As Geisenhanslüke denotes, in Socrates' Platonic narrative, ›love‹ is put into a reversed gender-crossed, eroticized, intoxicated, Dionysian context (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 61) – albeit it is the poor and needy Penia who rapes, not the drunken Poros; sexuality is thus mixed up with a threat that comes from the (poor, ›low class‹, that is, underprivileged, female) other; *Eros* as a *son* and figure of ›love‹ is linked to abusive sexuality and to rape,

21 Penia sexually abuses the inebriated Poros, the figure of invention: On Aphrodite's birthday, when Poros has fallen asleep drunk in the garden, Penia appears, molests him, and conceives (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 60).

committed by his *mother*.²² Because of this genealogy, *Eros*, according to the account of Diotima/Socrates, is always doomed to be needy and eager. Diotima appears in this central and yet marginal representation as a kind of (frustrated and furious) ancient Mrs Robinson, a seducer and mother/teacher-figure of (innocent) (young) men (who are either intoxicated by wine or ›love‹ and, as a consequence in this narrative, let themselves be seduced, are even raped by a woman). In this image of ›love‹ that Diotima seemingly proposes, there seems to be latent another (female) disappointment and pain that can be read as a consequence of sexualized enforcement, or indifference and carelessness invoked in the bodily, less pure side of ›love‹. The violence (coldness) of abusive (and yet legitimized) sexuality that encompasses gender as well as class and social othering in this figuration of *Eros* is transmitted and exerted by a double figuration of femininity, in the sense of the ›teacher, educator‹, quasi mother-figure, seducer, Diotima, and the figuration of Penia as poverty/desire/rape. Sexual violence is in this way linked to (›knowing‹) femininity (that cannot speak for itself in *The Symposium*) and to not-knowing (desire), as well as to (›low‹) social class – through female incarnations. The figure of the absent Diotima as the female and (›knowing‹) transmitter (mother/teacher) of this narrative legitimizes this understanding, furthermore, as correct (›knowledge‹) and as ›truth‹, as the mother-speech (of the super-ego?). Masculinity is in this way separated from sexual abuse, is excused, and, in fact, by the ›knowing‹ mother-figure, cautioned with regard to matters of (female) ›love‹. Such an image firstly, legitimizes to an extent (masculinist) sexual abusive behavior, and secondly, also indeed begs the question of sexual abusiveness that may be exerted by female actors (on, at least, young men/children?). And, thirdly, it also begs the question whether we always have to begin (yawning) with Freud's castration-angst and the alleged penis-envy (no really don't waste your time on that) with regard to the female sex to understand the quest of the phallic? Perhaps there is also (and not only for the male child) a certain angst towards the mother-figure as an ambivalent figure of ›love‹ and care but also of intimidation, hinderance, not-becoming, of authority and power? Without any (ill) ›intentionality‹, the mother-figure may also signify an ambiguous, perilous (super-ego) figuration of hate/›love‹ that not only in the case of the male

22 And as a consequence of the exuberance that characterizes his father. Another interesting understanding can be derived from Sarah Kofman's reading of the figures of Poros, Penia and Eros in *The Symposium*. In her study on the meanings (and resolution) of ›aporias‹ Kofman takes the meanings of the names as a starting point. Her reading can in fact be used as a counter-narrative to Plato's understanding of ›truth‹ – and in effect philosophy – as unambiguity, making it possible to read them against the grain. Kofman points out that *poros*, means *exit* in Greek. Plato understands Poros in *The Symposium* as the personification of abundance and wealth; but Poros was the son of Metis, the goddess* of complex, subtle, and implicit ›knowledges‹ (even magical and trickster-›knowledges‹ is connoted by her name). Therefore, philosophy then must be understood as the ›knowledge‹ of the complexities, and possibilities of different forms of exits rather than as a mere subjugation of all forms of ›knowledge‹ to one form: ›reason‹. Kofman takes a slightly different path in her reading; she focuses on Eros as the son of Poros and grandson of Metis, and by alluding to philo-*sophia* as ›love‹, she concludes that Eros must himself be a philosopher. In her text, Kofman also takes into account the difficulty of translation and the ›family-composition‹ of the two words (*poros* and *aporia*), as well as the richness of their semantic possibilities of understanding. In this sense, it can indeed be concluded that *aporia* might be understood as an intractability that comes from the multiplicity of possibilities rather than from the absence of possibility. See Kofman (1983, 14 ff.).

gender may trigger both affective specters with regard to feminine-parental-*authority* (inscriptions in ›the self‹ as ›o/Other‹), and may be part of ambiguous (only male cis-normative?) images of (parental?) femininity that needs to be further explored.

In any case, the vulnerability of (queer, male, female) sexuality as a *touchy subject* seems to stand at the center of the dialogues in *The Symposium*.

It may indicate vulnerability, as a kind of call for protection and the quest for non-abusive sexual fulfillment. It also may mark the limits of humor that is not taken up in order to deal with the abusive limits of sexuality, but rather is used to disguise allusive addresses that touch those intimate yet equivocal realms of affectivity, (unbearable) thought, and experience in order to carve out a space to talk at all about the uses and abuses that the affectivity and economy of ›love‹/desire within intersections of the constitution of a stable self and its other, evokes. ›Reason‹, the way Socrates proposes it here, appears as a shelter, an anchor, a demarcation, and as a line of flight from (experienced?) forms of (sexualized) abuse.

What is erased in this movement that privileges ›reason‹ is firstly, the violence that it exerts by silencing all other forms of (*reasoned*) ›knowledge‹, laughing at them, claiming the right to represent them, and establishing itself as the ultimate power (of understanding) (see also Gill 1999, xxxv). Secondly, it erases the avenues of affectivity as forms of non-knowledge and power-lessness, by which ›reason‹ is also informed and shaped and from which it too speaks. Affectivity, as a sphere of ›knowledge‹, in this way is pushed away from the workings of thought and into a shady side of human inaptitude that has to be controlled (by Socratic ›reason‹). This shift to ›reason‹ makes it impossible to foreground the workings and ›knowledges‹ of affectivity that come up and reside within language, thought, and which also shape philosophy, literature, psychology (any text) as implications of (non-)knowledge and power-lessness.

The tacit connection of non-knowledge and power-lessness is also implied (and in fact opened up, affirmatively proposed) at another point in Geisenhanslüke's approach.

In many of his follow-up readings of literary and philosophical texts that deal with the affectivity of ›love‹ (like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) in which Geisenhanslüke tries to renegotiate this reasonability that he sees caught up in a Dionysian-Socratic dualism at the rims of non-knowledge, he, on the one hand, challenges Lacan's psychoanalytical understanding of ›love's‹ transference as lack, unfulfillment and displacement; on the other hand, by considering Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Geisenhanslüke comes to a conclusion at the threshold of a Lacanian understanding. While in Freud's foundational text he discerns death as the origin (*Ursprung*) and limit (*Grenze*) of a manifold symbolic order of ›love‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 213), he closes his reflections by considering Goethe's *Elective Affinities* as the end of the long (his-)tory of erotic transference since Plato's *Symposium* (a quite linear, quite bumpless road) (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 218). Instead of refuting the psychoanalytical claims, though, Geisenhanslüke subtly gives over any claim to ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹ to a starry night (over the Rhone) view by alluding to the possible conclusions of the texts themselves. Instead of establishing a (reasonable) ›truth‹, a conclusive predication is transferred to a space of not-knowing (and power-lessness) that (must) await(s) a future and abide the inconclusiveness. *Death*, here, seems to mark the im/possible power-

lessness of non-knowledge that is given the virtue of an awaiting, which seems, then, to mark any power and ›knowledge‹.

The question how affectivity enters the workings of language and sews the (witty) borderlines of non-knowledge (and power-lessness) can be traced in the reading of the two major literary works which have been foundational for Freud's conceptualizations of the work of and in the unconscious, namely the already mentioned *Oedipus* of Sophocles, and the mythical figure of Narcissus, especially in Ovid's rendering of it.

Geisenhanslüke offers an intriguing approach to understanding the processes and relationships involved in the production of ›knowledge‹ and the vast array of non-knowledge, as well as its connectivity within the self and discourse. Here, too, powerlessness comes into view in the triple reading of philosophical, psychoanalytical, and literary texts. In addition to Freud, Geisenhanslüke considers Hegel's philosophical and Hölderlin's literary approaches. While Hegel's connection of ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge in tragedy is emphasized (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 58 ff.), Hölderlin's link between Oedipus' anger (*Zorn*)²³ and language is illuminated, as well as a curiosity that grows out of this sense of affectivity and that guides Oedipus' actions, and informs the poetics of the conjunction between affectivity, non-knowledge, and powerlessness. Three aspects of the text, the connection of affectivity and non-knowledge, the connection of affectivity and language (as utterances as well as the narrative plot generally), and the link between affectivity, language, and agency that Freud ignores, are especially significant in this regard.

The process of experiencing affectivity, especially *Zorn*, can be considered as a form of ›knowledge‹ that works from within the unconscious. It is Oedipus' (*knowing*) anger, Geisenhanslüke proposes alongside Hölderlin, which is mirrored in language in a double and bifurcated way, and which leads him to investigate the murder of his father and to search for the ›truth‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 63). *Zorn* appears here as a triple sign of (non-)knowledge as well as power-lessness, at the threshold of un-conscious-consciousness, which, firstly, drives Oedipus to act, which secondly, un-hides the catastrophe that he will be discovering, and which thirdly, finally, leads him to the willingness (opening?) to confront such avenues of non-knowledge and powerlessness, to get to know what he unconsciously may already know. Only the insight about the confinement of his ›knowledge‹, its attachment to nonknowledge, which Oedipus experiences, disturbs a straight-

23 Coming from the Olympus of Greek mythology Geisenhanslüke uses here the German word *Zorn* rather than the more common term *Wut*, which, I think, is closer to ›anger/rage‹; in *Zorn* a much stronger nuance of angeriness can be discerned than in *Wut* – the way it is, for example, evoked in terms like *Götterzorn*. In this sense, it might be closer to the English word *wrath*, which, however, also carries a negative, outdated connotation that *Zorn* lacks. *Zorn*, while on the one hand, may be more connoted as an (archaic) (masculinist?) expression of anger (albeit not in its use as an adjective, *zornig*), at the limits of violence, signaling forceful actions that will take place, linked with images of overwhelming that by far exceed mere threats, the term, on the other hand, also bears the imprint of a stark enablement, and effective power and powerlessness in an enactment that is ready to overturn the (conventionalized) order of things. Furthermore, *Zorn*, while signaling both power as well as powerlessness, is not necessarily associated with an ›unjust outburst‹, the way ›rage‹ may be. *Zorn* may therefore qualify more to depict the enabling effects of the fierce force, which resides in the affectivity of ›anger/rage/Wut‹.

forward understanding between self and actual ›reality‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 59). But it is its powerless side that makes him realize it and give in to the power-lessness of the trajectory of things beyond his immediate control and thus ›knowledge‹. What remains to be faced are non-knowledge and power-lessness themselves that nevertheless structure the way we act and that rattle our perception of ›knowledge‹ – an ethical deliberation towards life, each other, the other?

But for Geisenhanslüke, *Hamlet* is in fact the figure that more elaboratively and significantly than *Oedipus* can represent Freud's neurosis paradigm,²⁴ which he sees mirrored in the affective economy of the play. The figure of *Hamlet* is read as a nodal point that connects affectivity, specifically melancholia, with the rhetoric of ›irony‹ (within the sweet comfort of a monolithic inwardly directed flood of words) and the self-precarious wonderings of narcissism at the rims of not-knowing (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 80–90) – that also reveals a state of realizing total power-lessness, coming to ›knowledge‹ and inner empowerment to act, but still in a powerless state of not knowing how. In the middle of this nodal point, then, is an adjunct mechanism of not-knowing and power-lessness. This power-less non-knowledge unfolds on a meta-level of signification where different modes of reading and discourse meet, beyond the literariness of the text as well as within the plot. Without either agreeing with Freudian interpretations of *Hamlet* nor challenging them this approach considers the possible functions of the literary work in its linguistic, philosophical, literary as well as psychological unfoldings. *Hamlet's* ›irony‹ can be read in this way as a rhetorical tool that not only affectively generates melancholia in the text; it also is the complicated and tangled space of non-knowledge and power-lessness. ›Irony‹ entails an ambiguity because it mirrors the obstructed way of the neurotic: »Hamlet's witty language (*Sprachwitz*) thus results from the fact that ›the straight path is barred‹ to him and that he has to make detours, which he has chosen though in a well-calculated form of disguise« (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 83). In response to questions about his beclouded disposition *Hamlet* answers with the utterance »Not so much, my lord, I am too much in the son« (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 83). According to Geisenhanslüke this peculiar reply anticipates the psychoanalytical interpretation. *Hamlet's* ›irony‹ rejects any roles that are imposed on him. He always seems to already distance himself from any fixating interpretation (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 83), or rather it can be said that the literary text shields away from any imposition of ›truth‹, that it occupies a place of non-knowledge and power-lessness, which indicates something beyond certainty, offering instead the possibilities of different readings that escape in the manyfold, allegorical as well as humorous implications any interpretative authorization or end, but rather invite for pensive reflections and affective involvement.

Geisenhanslüke speaks of ›disguise‹ (*Vertellung*), which to some extent evokes intentionality in the text. But this concealment, which is palpable in the text's ambiguity, might in fact be what the text's affective ›irony‹ produces within a complex amalgamation

24 Geisenhanslüke's rereading of Freud and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* entails a highly condensed and yet expanded discussion of Nietzsche's and Benjamin's approaches to *Hamlet*. This interlinked triangle reading links ancient Greek literary works with modernist writing, philosophy, and the psychoanalytical, as well as literary functions that affectivity, especially melancholia, occupies in these texts, which unfortunately cannot be dealt with here; Cf. Geisenhanslüke (2008, 72–80).

of conscious and unconscious errands of non-knowledge and power-lessness that remain interred in the text. Rather than promising solutions, these proffer the pleasure-mélange of humorous-melancholic reflections, which may come with self-realizations in the long run, within memorized and later retrievable instances.

Non-knowledge is not only connected to the drama of the play, to its dramatic plot as a result of processes of knowing and not-knowing and power and power-lessness. Hamlet's ironic restraint can also be read as an indication of (a narcissistic) anxiety through which Hamlet tries to hide his feelings, in order not to weaken his position (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 84–5), and it could be added that ›irony‹ is also a rhetorical tool, which transports an affective trait that helps to veil his fragile, precarious inner self(-image). This movement, too, within the errant tenors of non-knowledge and power-lessness, encompasses conscious and unconscious poles that show themselves in the ambiguity of the tragic-humorous allusion.

That this ›ironic‹ or humorous play, within the economy of non-knowledge and power-lessness, encompasses a spectra of affectivity, sadness, mourning, as well as pleasure, is also part of the text's and Hamlet's relishing self-fulfilled, narcissistic monologue. Geisenhanslüke hints at these excesses of affectivity when he speaks of Hamlet's melancholia, his self-›love‹, self-doubt, self-mirroring as well as his ›real mourning‹ (*echter Trauer*) at the end of the play (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 84 ff.) – in addition to the fact that the tragic language of the play entails tendencies to the comical (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 80).

This appeal to non-knowledge that reveals the power of powerlessness is what the tragic-comic as a literary instance in a multilayered complex ›ironic‹ rendering seems to propose and to perform here. It shows the connection of the tragic-comic to the un-knowing and power-less rhetoric and epistemology of humor. Moreover, affectivity seems to occupy a pivotal knot in-between the work of the unconscious, the oscillation of a ›knowledge‹ that is not known to consciousness but may be known to the unconscious, the intrusion of this non-knowledge and its attendant power-lessness into language and its effect in the form of pleasurable self-distancing and self-observing contemplation that illuminates the limits of thought, certainty, power, and the knowable. Furthermore, this conjunction of non-knowledge/power-lessness appears to be what guides the (literary) text, and which itself remains (always already) to be deciphered, between knowing and unknowing effects, empowered and disempowered by them, as the infinite movements of and in perception – and even in life? Affectivity mirrors the space of the oscillation of non-knowledge and power-lessness – which also means that it remains without any guarantees as to where it might take one; it is only in rare cases, like the myth of *Oedipus*, where the ›end‹ shows finality, and even here it remains an open question what this may mean within the narrative itself and beyond it. What can it mean to acknowledge non-knowledge/power-lessness in affective movements of thought and perception? Can such a disposition not generate a different basis for thinking and epistemological endeavors? Can it not make us more aware of the possibility of thinking differently, of being open to all other possible conclusions? To shape the world we live in in a way that is more receptive to, and in the light of, the needs of all? So that it can strive for something that could be called ›justice‹? An infinite task? In which we must remain

attentive and careful as a most fundamental and basic attitude? Always aware that we *cannot master things*?

In contrast to the literary reading and the realm of the aesthetic, both other approaches, the philosophical and the psychological one, appear as readings with a confined knowledge-strategy as they bring the (literary) text, thought, to a halt. Hölderlin's poetically inspired reading, in contrast, comes into view as an insightful criticism as it pays attention to the expressiveness of the literary text itself, working at the liminal of its knowing and not-knowing, empowering and disempowering traces that do not squeeze the narrative into the tube of a preconceived reading, which claims to be knowing (and have power), but which becomes reductive, not-knowing and disempowering as it considers only slices of the text within a specific trail and system of thought.

The link of the tragic(-comic) to *NichtWissen* and *OhnMacht* seems to me to lie, then, not only in what these are, the wide, infinite field of the im/possibilities to come to unambiguous decisions. There is a reciprocal relationship between literature, or rather literariness, and non-knowledge and power-lessness. On the one hand, *Nichtwissen/OhnMacht* appear as a *form* of contemplation. It is a *form* of pondering in the literary sphere. On the other hand, this literary form *mirrors Nichtwissen/OhnMacht*. The tragic and the humorous are two ways in which these literary forms of contemplation and mirroring of *Nichtwissen/OhnMacht* take shape. The tragic as well as humor can therefore be regarded as such two *forms*, as the poeteological *Gestaltgebung* of the rhetoric of the intertwined relationship between contemplation and *NichtWissen/OhnMacht* within the (literary) text. The poetics of the texts refers to both, to the art of the narrative as well as to the epistemology that thereby arises in the *choice* of the rhetoric tonality and its content. The *tragic* has a peculiar semantic closeness to the German verbs *tragen* (carry, bear), *austragen* (bear, resolve, sort out), *ertragen* (suffer, endure). Tragedy understood as a sign in the neighborhood of these layers of meaning comprises not only drama, a form of narrative, and a performance, an event, but also entails a corporeal aspect, a closeness to the body. It is *born*, it *gives birth* and it *faces an unknown* and uncertainty, but it also *suffers* and can be imbued in pain. The same is true for humor, especially when it is regarded with the complex affectivity that it carries as well as its dynamic, often aporetic work within the body. Both are planes ((*Aus-*)*Tragflächen* of and for inner and outer negotiations within a poetical as well as a rhetorical knitting of the moments and effects of *Nichtwissen* and *OhnMacht*, which seem connected and belonging together, reaching into the intertwining of the sphere of the body and the mind. In contrast to the philosophic, rather formalized way of approaching thought within successive laws of interpretation and access, literature in its knitted way not only opens up a variety of ways to deal with thinking, but also to the different forms it thereby can adopt. It appears as more open to different possibilities to think, going beyond thought, always at the vicinity of *NichtWissen/OhnMacht* also as a field of and for the poetics of affectivity. *NichtWissen/OhnMacht* not only mark the productive undecidability of the poetics of literature, they also make the literary more accessible, as they do not enforce a specific meaning, but rather *invite* to the infinite singularities in thought and mind, which in this sense, might also be painful and ridden by chaotic and contradictory spirals of affectivity, the motor and drive, perhaps, of perception and epistemology per se that empower and disempower and encourage, in this sliding way, to find some form of a stand(point) and to question it at the same time, pro-

ducing *wondering*, thoughtful, rather than *knowing* agents and subjects. – This might be the reason why literature, on the stage of power-relations, is seen as ›less‹ philosophic (and as having ›less‹ power) than a conventionalized philosophical understanding, which claims to seek and, ultimately, to ›know‹ (and to know *how to formulate*) the right path to ›truth‹.²⁵

It remains open, though, whether affectivity is to be regarded as a conglomeration that entails non-knowledge/power-lessness or whether it is another, deeper form of non-knowledge/power-lessness that mirrors itself as affectivity and which may reside in-between antecedent events of injury and care, in the becoming of the self or of history – or both.²⁶ Affectivity could also be read in this sense as an informative residue in the psyche, as an ›initial form of forgetting‹; such an understanding could be deduced from Geisenhanslüke's discussion of Freud's beautiful term ›memory residues‹ (*Erinnerungsreste*) as continuous traces (*Dauerspür*) of unconscious memory (*unbewusste Erinnerung*) (Geisenhanslüke 2008, 122); here, consciousness, on the one hand, comes into being at the borders of unconsciously saved memory, and, on the other hand, these residues can be conceived as an archive of marks of inaccessible (traumatic) events in-between the work of *NichtWissen* and *OhnMacht* that the psyche incessantly undergoes. This archive within the ›animated organism‹ is protected by what Freud calls a cortex, a protective barrier (*Rinde*), but can be perforated by outward stimuli that may burst through the cortex's protective membrane. It could be said though, hypothetically, that affectivity as a trait of the tragic and humorous rhetoric in literature (and any text?), in effect, entails a movement of slowing-down thinking and contemplation by evoking sensibility and thoughtfulness. In contrast to either suspicious or rationalistic/hermeneutic readings, such a claim goes against any straight forward understanding of what the text explicitly says, or any ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹, insofar as it, rather than to claim a specific meaning, spurs an alertness that it may be a win, in the end, to be attentive to non-knowledge and power-lessness, to the otherwise indications of possible meanings and the im/possibilities of their effects.

Such a reading, in a narrower sense, may reveal how in affectivity, unconscious ›knowledge‹ and the economy of power-lessness show themselves within language

25 For a discussion of the different understandings of literature, philosophy and their links to ›truth‹, see Geisenhanslüke 2015a; while the introduction illustrates the transmitted division of the two fields, the book further explores this divide along exemplary works throughout European thought up until the contemporary era.

26 See Geisenhanslüke (2008, 122 ff.). Another understanding of the un-knowing/power-less affectivity is latent in the Platonic text itself and mentioned in Geisenhanslüke's reading. It considers ›knowledge‹ as a form of remembering as part of an *anamnesis*, as things formerly seen/experienced by the soul (which should find its echo cross-culturally in many other gnostic, mystical approaches to the un-known). For a discussion of the *Platonic anamnesis*, see Geisenhanslüke (2011, 129 ff; 2016, 178 ff.). Geisenhanslüke, though, critically traces *anamnesis* in other ways, in Socrates' argumentation and how it is systematically put forward against the Sophists, which is in so far relevant as it could otherwise have been, in fact, understood as a (tragic form of) Socratic reasoning. *Anamnesis* according to Geisenhanslüke is used by Socrates to link his claim *not to know* (and to be powerless?) by justifying it as a recurrent *memory* and hence as ›truth‹, and in effect, as ›knowledge./power. *Anamnesis* thus is used to turn the questioning and opening idea of potential non-knowledge/non-power into a ›latent form of knowledge‹ – and therefore power; cf. Geisenhanslüke (2011, 127–130, 129).

before it becomes an aware utterance. Thus read, affectivity can be understood as a form of setting-to-work of non-knowledge and power-lessness, as an intertwined, invisible motor in the generation of language, be it in the form of the spoken word and utterances as well as in writing generally. The text (any text), then, is never a (completely) thought-through and worked-out rhetoric of ›knowledge‹/power, but rather shows the effects and maybe mechanisms of non-knowledge and power-lessness. Such an approach makes any text also a poetic endeavor. Texts can be seen as having multilayered meanings and ›knowledges‹/powers (also unknown to themselves), and as producing non-knowledge/power-lessness within language and discourse, whether spoken or written, and not necessarily as a however motivated, conscious *plan* that is laid out. Texts in this sense can be seen as already dispossessed by this undecidable swaying movement of non-knowledge/power-lessness that remains hanging in the literariness of language and writing. In this way, the complexity of texts and utterances can be considered and may not easily fall prey to violent or hurting forms of reading, but read differently.

It is, furthermore, possible to trace a link between subjectivity, non-knowledge and power-lessness. Subjectivity emerges as a lingering, dynamic component of subject-formation that is shaped within the process of contingencies between affectivity, thought, language, and agency in the economy of the oscillating routes of non-knowledge and power-lessness. This allows to perceive, even *to watch*, how subjectivity takes shape as a current in the text; subjectivity thereby comes into view as not absolutely bound to the infantile formation of the self/O/other relation, nor to the discursive and sociopolitical position and self-positioning. Instead, instances of *willed* detachment can be assessed, shedding light on the singularity of subject-formation, which, although mosaic-like colored by those inner and outer processes of construction, is always *recomposed in the errands* of non-knowledge and power-lessness between consciousness and the unconscious and their paths – affectivity, thought, language, the im/possibility of agency. This varied reading enables other venues to think subjectivity beyond the quite sterile and rigid understandings of either the workings of psychoanalytic or discursive determinations of the subject and their latitudes.

Humor as the Nexus of Non-Knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and Power-lessness (*OhnMacht*)

The capacity of *affective humor* within rhetoric, deconstruction, affectivity, and the poetic possibility of language to bring forth what looms in the corners of the unthought, is understood here as a *poetology of non-knowledge (NichtWissen) and power-lessness (OhnMacht)*.²⁷

27 I am drawing here mainly on Achim Geisenhanslüke's discussion of non-knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) in relation to how ›stupidity‹ and ›wit‹ are deployed as antonyms, especially since modernity. Based on Immanuel Kant's philosophic considerations of *wit*, Geisenhanslüke's focus is a »genealogy of knowledge along the lines of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault«, whereby a Freudian, psychoanalytical stance in relation to wit and ›the joke‹ is thematized too (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 10, see also Geisenhanslüke 2012, 27 ff.). The literary works that Geisenhanslüke takes into consideration here include Petrarch, Goethe, and modernist writers, ranging from Flaubert and Dostojewski to Thomas Mann, E. T. A. Hoffmann, to Jorge Luis Borges, and Robert Musil. In terms of non-

I argue that non-knowledge, a variety of instances of *not knowing* in a wide sense, hangs around and remains entangled with power-lessness (*OhnMacht*) as its invisible companion in oscillations of moments of ignoring ›knowledge‹ and power, *facing* ›knowledge‹ and power, coming to some form of ›knowledge‹ and power, and losing ›knowledge‹ and power (in a productive, anti-dominant sense) within instances of affectivity, thought and agency – in the economy of humor. Power-lessness, then, like non-knowledge, is seen in a dynamic of relationality within the self and within the other, within thought and affectivity, always referring in an utterance to another place that may or may not be occupied, making any utterance potentially an always dialogic but also dilemmatic endeavor.

As Achim Geisenhanslüke cautions in his approach to non-knowledge, the conventionalized (and convenient) understanding of ›knowledge‹ – meanwhile in its globalized formations – and of how thought, theory, affectivity, sensuality (and, in effect, an analysis of the global condition) are understood and constituted is not without harmful effects. His approach aligns well with postcolonial reasoning and formations of ›knowledge‹, which try to show how ›Europe's‹ others have been transfigured into a (primitivized) and (sexualized) sensual consortium in total distance of any (noteworthy) ›reason‹ (as the foil of the transference of what ›Europe‹ tried to separate from itself) and, according to this image, need developmental guidance to overcome this ›backwardness‹.²⁸ As in *The Symposium*, ›reason‹ is used as an alibi for absolutized and ethically legitimate forms of domination (in the ›outer‹ world).

Within a Foucauldian-informed genealogical search, Geisenhanslüke aims at ›detecting forms of the non-rational in pre-modern and modern culture in order to arrive at a critical revision of the hegemonic claims (*Herrschaftsanspruch*) of modern reason‹

knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) and the work of humor, specifically ›the joke‹, see also Bettine Menke's insightful discussion (Menke 2021: xxxviii, 501 ff.).

- 28 Whether this is already a stable or only a *possible* part of Platonic philosophy, which is solidified *retrospectively* over the course of Christianity, and especially European colonialism, when ›reason‹ is firmly established in European philosophy and sensuality is projected on ›Europe's‹ others, and both are used to constitute a European ›identity‹, may be the underlying question – another task that awaits its disinterment. Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) anchors this binary dichotomy within Western formations of academic knowledge and classification as part of its colonial legacy, while Homi K. Bhabha's earlier work (1994) purports its incompleteness and ambiguity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, on the other hand, shows in her work how the other's other is (almost) silenced within the mechanisms of overpowering that this often (cis-masculinist) imperial battle for ›truth‹ has set into being and how it may be challenged (see for example Spivak (1993, 1999, and 2012), where she, in fact, turns European ›knowledge‹ into another ›knowledge‹-proposition by disclosing and using some of its side-[effect]s) to dis-empower. Spivak's work comes close to a display of a dismantling of ›knowledge‹ as it lingers around the question of *unlearning*, though its main focus is on shifting ›knowledge‹ in a deconstructive way. She is accompanied in this work by a number of other feminist Black and postcolonial writers like bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Sara Suleri, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sylvia Wynter, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – just to name a few. Other thinkers like Frantz Fanon, later Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, as well as Annibal Quijano, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, have, likewise, tried to implicitly open up venues in their own different works, to rethink ›knowledge‹ – within future-related endeavors. Most poignantly this approach can also be seen, in the work and biography of Jacques Derrida from within (and without) European thought and histories of domination; see, for example, Derrida ([1967] 1976).

(Geisenhanslücke 2011, 11). Geisenhanslücke thus more explicitly links ›knowledge‹ to its meanings as *mastery* and *domination*, and uses the Nietzschean reading of tragedy that combines ›Dionysian‹ and ›Apollonian‹ elements, as a critical lens for questioning the (Socratic) culture of ›knowledge‹, in which non-knowledge is also *reconsidered*. Nietzsche thus anchors this search in the realm of aesthetics, especially in the field of literature, which Geisenhanslücke regards as a kind of unintentional repository, a kind of unordered archive that deals with othered forms of the non-rational (›madness‹, stupidity, ignorance) but does so differently than philosophy and other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 11 f., 119).

Nietzsche abandons himself to the unfoldings of non-knowledge (– and thus powerlessness –) and speaks of a ›pessimism of strength‹ (*Pessimismus der Stärke*) in contrast to the ›Socratic optimism of science and reason‹ that he criticizes (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 150, see also Geisenhanslücke 2012, 34 ff.). Nietzsche's pessimism, thus, takes pleasure in not-knowing and the welcoming of an unknown. Geisenhanslücke calls Nietzsche's approach ›the objection of the tragic myth‹ as the literary form of critique against philosophy's more unambiguous search for ›truth‹ (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 150). Nietzsche's turn to non-knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) therefore not only appears as a critique of a Socratic quest for ›truth‹ but as one that emphasizes the dimension of the aesthetic and the sensual, claiming that there might be more ›truth‹ in the untruth (*Unwahrheit*), in which humans are embedded and which may show itself, more unconstrained, in the realm of the aesthetic. Nietzsche interlinks art with the ›lust for lies‹ (*Lust an der Lüge*) and ›lust for blindness‹ (*Lust an der Blindheit*) of the poet-folks (*Poetenvolk*). His understanding of the ›lie‹ describes a desire »not to see something that one does see; wishing not to see something *as* one does see it.«²⁹ In this way, a space is carved out for seeing and sensing things differently – from how they are thought and represented. Nietzsche does not distinguish between philosophy, poetry, and politics, which he sees (ideally) intermingled in the pre-Socratic period, when ›man‹ (*well...*) instead of ›God‹ was the measure of things (Gillepsie/Strong 1988, 7); it is only with the beginning of Socrates' thinking, and eventually Plato's *Republic*, that poetry is subordinated to philosophy. For Nietzsche, poets and philosophers are indistinguishable from each other because »[t]hey seek to put their stamp on the world, to reshape it in their own image. ›The philosopher seeks to hear within himself the echoes of the world symphony and to reproject them into the form of concepts. What verse is for the poet, dialectical thinking is for the philosopher‹. It is in this sense that they establish laws and customs for humanity« (Gillepsie/Strong 1988, 7; see also Geisenhanslücke 2015a, 9–27).

Nietzsche's critique thus reads Socrates against the grain. Non-knowledge comes here into view as a variable that levels at the transformation of an understanding of ›knowledge‹ as such along the ways ›reason‹ (*Vernunft*) is constituted at the borders of what is excluded or marginalized as unreason (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 81 ff). Here, too, sensuality becomes a kind of receptacle or tank for and of the infinite sites of non-knowledge and powerlessness, that also contain the uncertain errands and work of thinking and ›reason‹. In this way, sensuality becomes the *material dimension* of the quite abstracted discourse that takes recourse to ›affects‹ and, in fact, thought.

29 Nietzsche quoted here from Kofman (1988, 176).

Nietzsche's approach also finds an echo in the sensuality of ›laughter‹ and gaiety as affirmative attributions of life despite pain and suffering, so that a tonality of humor seems to prefigure this intertwined affective gestalt of non-knowledge-and-power-lessness.

In his fierce critic of Socratic reasoning, Nietzsche tries to overcome the duality of ›reason‹-sensuality in ›Western‹ philosophy by emphasizing the work of (attic) tragedy; non-knowledge is thereby not understood as an opposite to ›reason‹ but in relation to tragedy, as an opening of thought to other forms of acquiring ›knowledge‹ beyond ›mere‹ ›cognitive‹ or ›rational‹ endeavors, in which both dichotomized instances of (Western?) philosophical thought become effective (Geisenhanslüke 2016, 23, 117). Geisenhanslüke sees this duality also at work in the separation of intuition (*Anschauung*) and sensuality (*Sinnlichkeit*), what he calls the ›art of division‹ (*Trennungskunst*) (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 117). This division, which is then erected between a sensual world of evanescence (*sinnlichen Welt der Vergängnis*) and a pure realm of thought (*reinen Bereich des Denkens*) constitutes and justifies the formation of two fields, the field of ›knowledge‹ that is seen as certain and unequivocal and its other where ›reason‹ cannot be extended (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 118). Geisenhanslüke thus centralizes the *link* between tragedy/the literary text, sensuality, and non-knowledge. In a first step, he connotes ›sensuality‹ to corporeality (*Koerperlichkeit*), to denote it in a further step with the ›sensual world of the aesthetic‹ (*die sinnliche Welt des Aesthetischen*) (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 118). What is emphasized in Geisenhanslüke's reading is not the negation of different spectrums of affectivity as ›bad‹ or dangerous liaisons of thought or bodily perceptions, nor does he link finitude to it or pit the cosmologies of different discourses and their textualities (like philosophy, literary theory, or psychology) against each other; rather, following Nietzsche, the attentiveness to tragedy and *Nichtwissen*, in this understanding is a gesture that makes the envisioning of other possibilities of (non-)understanding accessible and that allows thinking to flow beyond the ›knowing‹ and recognizable.

In Nietzsche's critique thus a ›nevertheless-optimism‹ can be seen that is turned against a form of ›reason‹, which, in its search, has to exclude everything that could be an obstacle and against its (alleged) supremacy. The Dionysian – a sensual affective, creative, ›mad‹, maddening, birthing, and indeed, *feminine*/and transgender empowering angle, that which queers orders, and often enough from a position of power-lessness – appears as an important site that endorses the senses as well as cognitive experiences of rupture and goes beyond rational apprehension in the narrow sense of a (pre-understood) ›rational mind‹. The Dionysian can be seen as a form of ›understanding‹ that also ›knows‹ the tragic, the taste of irreparable loss, and that emerges out of it, despite it, and that, out of this understanding, affirms life from a state of not-knowing and power-lessness. It is thus not the sensual per se, or intoxication, as it were, that is idealized and put against ›reason‹, which still appears in the Apollonian as some form of ordering and regulation. Rather, the Dionysian as sensuality and corporeality, as a way of sense-making that is *also* embedded in European thought, is *reinvoked* and seen as a relevant part of and supplementary counter-argument to the rule of an absolutist, allegedly unaffected understanding of ›reason‹, which in its vigorous claims to ›truth‹, appears as confined and obstructive to what could be captured as ›knowledge‹ – the vast plane (and possibilities) of non-knowledge (and power-lessness) for ›understanding‹.

An absolutist claim and universal definition of ›reason‹ is then refuted, and instead a not-knowing, power-less, moving, unfinished one is considered rather than asserting ›truth‹ and power – that remain bound to specific subject(-ivity)s.

Yet Nietzsche compares the philosophical desire for ›truth‹ within a quite ambivalent imagery of femininity that remains unchallenged by Geisenhanslücke. He uses the figure of ›woman‹ (as a male cis-normative) desire (›love‹?) to describe the philosopher's search for ›truth‹ as (an always failing) awkward courtship of a ›woman‹. ›Woman‹, here, occupies the place of ›truth‹ (*Wahrheit*); as *Wahrheit* here does not denote something ›good‹³⁰, this seems not very far away from Nietzsche's at times misogynist claims.³¹

30 Nietzsche's conflation of ›woman‹ and ›truth‹ has so many antecedents in (only Western? Male?) philosophy that it feels tedious to try to follow its thread back to those forgone, forlorn days (or nights) when things might have gone wrong – and remains a work for itself. Yet it might counter-intuitively invite one to think twice, to separate, at least for a moment, the figure of ›the phallus‹ from thinking and (psychoanalytic) perception, in an attempt to shift things away from male-centered analysis – for in ›truth‹ is already the possibility of misconception, and thus of failure. So, there might be an unmentioned fear connected to the (philosophic) desire ›to know‹. It also seems tedious to try to figure out where this fear might come from. (Doubly speculative, I *know*. But, then, this is a footnote, and a special playground for thought, to read or not to read, especially if you fear that it's not important at all, and it takes too much time for nothing, don't read it, but don't tell me you didn't understand what I was trying to say ... – of course, without guarantees. And sometimes footnotes just make themselves independent. Psst now! The footnote of course, sorry!). But such a fear could be seen as prior to a male castration-angst (if there is one at all); it can be seen as part of being born per se, a fear that comes with life, and of experiencing life at the border of bare life: The most needed and necessary: attention, care, and ›love‹, may fail to show themselves. The (maternal, paternal, parental, familial, ›national‹) warmth may fail to show itself, or may be on the verge of refusal and rejection, or loss, or might, in fact, have been lost on the way. The castration-myth might itself be grasped in this way, as part of a (modernist?) Western (?) masculinist (?) fear – within a symbolic order in which femininity and queerness are foreclosed as other(-ed) experiences – of avoiding to disclose itself to the need of the other or to sensuality and to be exposed to it, questions that are at the heart of humor with its bodily/sensual as well as ›affect‹-laden characteristics and arousals – which may be the reason why humor forms a kind of outlaw in philosophy. This ›experience‹ can be seen as a double (especially male?) transference of fear to what one desires, wants, ›loves‹. Especially male because, within the symbolic order, femininity is ›allowed‹ to, maybe even ›forced‹ to, or still able to redo the failure and fear of loss by acting it out e.g. as a mother figure or a ›loving partner: who can devote herself*, who can give herself* the right to ›love‹ the O/other, and of being a ›love‹-giver, as a sense of responsibility, as a form of compensation for the fear of loss. The fear to come to know that one may have failed might be triggered by such an archaic fear to lose, or to be abandoned, which is transferred to the scene of ›love‹ as well as ›knowledge‹/philosophy. Being born also encompasses the primordial possibility of losing life/one's self; it also is part of the vast array of another ›knowledge‹, the ›knowledge‹ about not-knowing that protrudes the field of ›knowledge‹, any form of ›knowledge‹, a thorn, reminding one of one's instability and evanescence. Woman* in this sense of the other (of ›knowledge‹) may represent also, in masculinist fantasies (?), this hidden, silent, uncanny, painful fear. A female* transference of this fear may be in being seen as a machine of reproduction and/or of losing one's ›child‹, or precious ›things‹, which are not just fetishized objects of one's desire but ›things‹ one is emotionally attached to, be they an object of erotic/romantic ›love‹ or another aspect of one's life.

31 Within the (more Western) tradition of feminist readings of (masculinist) philosophizing that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak summarizes as ›the discourse of man‹ for the metaphor of woman‹ (Spivak 1983, 169), and which always seems like a thin path along this abyss, Nietzsche's ambivalent

stance to femininity and his different, often class-biased terminology (*Weib, Weiblein, Ewig-Weiblichen*) have been read critically, but within very different statements in feminist debates; he has been seen as an (Oedipal) philosopher who repeats patriarchal misogynistic positions as well as a feminist philosopher par excellence; Kelly Oliver's feminist critique has not suffered much over the years, I think. It sheds light on and warns against another form of representing and silencing of ›women‹ and feminist scholars/intellectuals by poststructuralist (philosophical) notions; in one of her works, she discusses explicitly the idea of ›truth‹ and its metamorphization as ›woman‹ in Nietzsche's work and Derrida's discussion of it in *Spurs* (1979). Kelly Oliver (1984, 1988, 1995). See also Oliver/Pearsall (1998). For my ›taste‹ at least, Kelly Oliver's reading of this kind of spurred feminism, although harsh at times, and sometimes appearing to essentialize ›womenhood‹, still has not lost much of its strength; rather her work echoes a warning that seems, summarized in a nutshell, as follows, at the end of the text: »Big books are big sins«, says Krell, ›but big books about Nietzsche are a far more pernicious affair: they are breaches of good taste‹. Big claims that two male philosophers (Derrida and Nietzsche) can save women from philosophy are at least breaches of good taste, but the claim that a man (Nietzsche) writes with the hand of a [transgender] woman is far more than pernicious: it is politically dangerous«, (29). Nonetheless, Nietzsche's ambiguous writings can be used and activated within an ongoing, unfinished feminist and queer agenda. In other, more recent works Nietzsche is even praised as a queer thinker, which he, indeed, may have celebrated. Verkerk portrays Nietzsche as a transgender philosopher, concluding: »[a]s a writer, Nietzsche is made into both a male mother and a phallic woman by Derrida and also by themselves. Nietzsche praises both male mothers as creative types and phallic women, namely women who master the masters, women who are great actors, and women who take as they give, and Derrida recognizes this. In addition to these movements acting to de-stabilize woman and with it gender as a metaphysical category, Nietzsche is attempting to become woman in so far as they are the one who challenges the coherence of truth. This becoming feminine as a writer defies the notion that there is one correct way of reading a text. Potentially, it also challenges the notion that the category of woman is one that is exclusive to those designated as female at birth. While this enactment of the feminine through Derrida's reading of Nietzsche remains problematic because of its misogyny, today it may offer us new productive ways that align themselves symbiotically with those transgender thinkers and activists who want to disrupt and expand the category of ›woman‹«. Although this seems a great, *dephallic* way to read Nietzsche, it does not disclose itself to me to what extent the always already contested and incomplete figure of ›woman‹ needs to be disrupted anew, and whether such a celebration of a queer-empathic-approach does not reestablish quite conventionalized and normalized images of ›woman‹ and ›man‹, and in fact ›queerness‹/transgender? Sarah Kofman has already challenged Nietzsche by considering his partly misogynic stance as a form of disappointed ›love‹, especially with regard to his mother. But perhaps this is too causal? See Kofman (1988, 198). Yet this appears to me to be more cautious and may give Nietzsche the freedom to just be human (all too human) instead of taking on the Harold role and the exciting villain of Europeanized thought (considering the role of Zarathustra in his writing, he might have liked to think of himself as ›from Afghanistan‹, actually, and not European at all, or only to an extent – but this is just in order to pick up and repeat the playful line of possibilities of who we ›are‹ or can become – although, in fact ... are themselves part of tragic-comic economies).

(And I am indeed speaking as a footnote, and I think we may, indeed be the most important aspect of thought in writing... Oh goddess* please! Can you make *him** quiet, pleaseeease!... This is not fair. Yah, but I am a period. You have had a whole page to yourself. I only have myself. Ohhh, how sweet! Oh, come on now ... They are everywhere, just mostly invisible. Yeah, just like you! Here, there are three periods...Hey, you know what, I'm a semicolon, let's talk about that later; there are books on semicolons ... and only one on footnotes! And I'm a footnote! And I have the right to exist, you cannot lighten writing without me! You just make things shallow! – Okay, you know what, just leave it there. There may be some truth in what *he** is saying... – And I am not a *he**! And I don't want to be

By linking ›truth‹ (*Wahrheit*), furthermore, to seduction (*Verführung*) (in the sense of enticement) to (find) ›truth‹, apparently an act associated with femininity (*whaa-hattt???*), Geisenhanslücke characterizes this (male, cis-normative) philosopher's search for ›truth‹ as a ›genuinely erotic‹ relationship, in which the philosopher-lover seeks what *he* (*der Liebende*) (sic!) does not have and longs for³² (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 151). Although ›seduction‹ pursued (in general) by ›women*‹³³ can be understood as a subversive political strategy (against conventionalized cis-masculinist claims of normativity), its use

put in parentheses! (Sorry, folks!) Yeah, right, just continue! We will see where this ends, namely, if it's good, in the next footnote!

- 32 While in this publication Geisenhanslücke's conception of ›love‹ is more indebted to a Nietzschean-Derridean path that conflates (however elegantly) femininity with (cis-normative male) desire, in some of his other works, such as *Das Schibboleth der Psychoanalyse* (2008) as well as *Die Sprache der Liebe: Figurationen der Übertragung von Platon zu Lacan* (2016) cited above, he pursues a critical and gender-sensitive approach that even seems ready to challenge a psychoanalytic, Lacanian approach, on the verge of declaring it a failure, and to transport and transpose a more open and attentive image of ›femininity‹. This can be also deduced from how he perceives and reads the figure of the Medusa as a symbol, namely as female resistance and self-sheltering against masculinist violence and atrocities (Geisenhanslücke 2016, 105–112). It can also be seen in how he, for example, reads the ancient myth of Narcissus and Echo considering it subtly as equivocal voices of a fulfilled love: in which Echo appears as empowered, by alluding to the figures' (almost) merging voices at the end of Ovid's rendering of the story, and by alluding to Echo as an agent rather than victim of the narrative (Geisenhanslücke 2008, 91–99); see also in this regard Derrida 2005, xi ff.; DeArmitt 2009). Geisenhanslücke, at the same time, critically points to the quite exploitative reading of female figures in Greek mythology, marking a masculinist imagery that appropriates the creative reproduction inherent in the use of figures such as the Medusa as well the sirens, especially in the work of Nietzsche and Kafka; see Geisenhanslücke (2016, 109–112); in this passage, though, it seems as if he drops this caution. This may be the case, because the initial point he draws upon here, is the (tricky) quest for the prospect of ›truth‹, – the desire to seek something, be it in language or philosophy, behind which gender vanishes as a structuring aspect of the question, veiling maybe desire itself, – which is then, as indeed *the Language of transference*, projected onto the object of desire.
- 33 Although the issue of ›seduction‹ is so very old and almost always interlinked with femininity from a cis-normative male perspective (or maybe because of that), aside from a postmodernist interest in its subversive sites (which is itself a judgement that seems lopsided to me), it is not a major area of research and scientific or philosophic endeavor nor, especially, a *trope* to be scrutinized. This is stunning, as ›seduction‹ forms part of so many different narratives and also plays a major role in the construction of gendered imagery as well as representations and the fixation not only of masculinities, and femininities, and queernesses, but also when it comes to the public space and the access to language, ›law‹, ›knowledge‹, psychoanalysis, religion etc. Rather than considered as a concept to be analyzed for its political and formative power, it is often taken for granted or itself seen as an act of ›seduction‹, which seems to be tabooed, shielded, as if it would lose its ›secret‹ if talked about. There are only a few works that pay attention to the subject from different angles, such as Søren Kierkegaard's, but especially so Sarah Kofman's critical work on ›seduction‹ (1990), see also in this regard her interview based on this book in *Du jour au lendemain*, a French radio podcast series, from February 15, 1990a. See also Schocket (2005); Shoshana Felman, as mentioned above, also draws attention to (the forgotten effects of) language and (humorous) rhetoric, and the pleasure inherent in and derived from them as forms of ›seduction‹ (Felman [1983] 2003, 15) thus subtly separating the figure of ›seduction‹ from the figure of ›woman*‹. ›Seduction‹, as well as its (phallogocentric) blame, can entail painful and harmful effects as part of (abusive) affective strategies/behaviors that are rarely, if at all, at the center of the debates.

in this context is not unproblematic, since at the same time it also invokes femininity* solely as a form of deception and generalizes a figure of ›woman*‹ that wants to please. At least to an extent, such a gesture, willy-nilly, repeats, carries, and normalizes an objectifying image of femininity*, one that is always in accordance with (a nonetheless homogenized and norm-alized) cis-masculinist desire and subjected to it.³⁴

Notwithstanding this juncture of femininity and ›seduction‹, which can be disconcerting, at least from a feminist angle, Geisenhanslüke's main point derives from elsewhere; he speaks of a secret correlation (*geheimen Zusammenhang*) between a supposed unconditional understanding of ›truth‹, on the one hand, and non-knowledge, on the other hand – like a struggle between two asymmetrical powers: a confident and assiduous ›reason‹ and an imperturbable non-knowledge. This is what Nietzsche seems to try to open up. And this may be why Geisenhanslüke seems to turn to Nietzsche and the traces of unknowability in the tragedy – that inevitably also entails tragic-comic sides, as is discussed below, and which Simon Critchley, too, hints at. Critchley in his discussion of Lacan's understanding of tragedy, on the one hand, and what he calls *German*, in fact, *Szondian, philosophy of tragedy* (Critchley 2009, 219, see also Amir 219, 2), a line in which Achim Geisenhanslüke's pursuit must also be placed, gives an implicit answer to an interlinked triangle of affectivity, tragedy – and humor – by emphasizing the search for the meaning of humor as part of the debacle. According to Critchley, tragedy serves as a kind of aesthetic stopgap in the (complex and contested) *Szondian philosophy of tragedy*, in whose tradition he curiously also places Lacan, who in this way, according to him, gives a heroic and ethical stance to finitude. Critchley sees this especially mirrored in

34 The idea of seduction is thus gendered; it can also signify a (male) fear to being overruled. It furthermore reduces ›woman*‹ to the faculty of ›seducing‹ ›men‹ (philosophers?) – as if this is her* only function and goal, and the only way to come to terms with masculinist structures of power-regulation. It moreover tacitly exposes the figure of woman* to a (masculinist) evaluative sociopolitical scale as some kind of threat or an *issue* to be dealt with – objectifying the female body and relegating sexuality, but also sexual violence, to the figure of woman* while absolving the figure of ›man‹ from responsibility. ›Seduction‹, in this sense, is at the same time also a signifier of the fragility of masculinist and patriarchal orders, behind which other, alternative possibilities of ›ordering‹ can be assumed. *Affective humor* shares this style of dispossessing with the figure of ›seduction‹: It opens up the possibility of other avenues of knowing, whilst shifting hitherto ›knowledges‹ subtly aside. This may be another reason why humor is rather excluded from philosophy, because it has a ›seductive‹ dynamic that questions and overpowers ›reason‹ and, furthermore, often comes with a bodily sensation of gaiety that cannot be controlled, comparable to intoxication. The term ›seduction‹, however, is not an innocent appellation of erotic (feminine*) play. It is also entangled in disempowering politics. Not only on a smaller, private space can it be used to perpetrate abuse, rape, and violence, it also – and still – rules images of femininity* and the female* body on a larger, public and discursive scale, as well within the agendas of coloniality; it can, furthermore, dictate hidden (and sometimes open) ›laws‹, for example, what ›women*‹ should wear in which spaces. Especially, with regard to ›woman*‹ as a political figure and counterpart of masculinity*, ›seduction‹ is the unassigned trait by which power imbalance in the construction of gender as well as (cis-male) sexuality is naturalized and legitimized. It is not only a stark political rationalization of gendered images. As an open ›secret‹, it affects how femininity* is signified (and how each woman* acts around the notion – accusation – and bias) per se in public spaces, which fixes and determines female* bodies – the only surface on which ›women*‹, in more immediate forms, can express agency, ›identity‹, ›selfhood‹, subversive forms of ›sexuality‹, aesthetics, a flavor of ›being‹.

Lacan's discussion of the *Antigone*-figure and the subsequent psychoanalytical principle *to control affectivity* rather than to concede to its moves and impulses. Against this understanding Critchley paradoxically brings in humor as a (philosophical?) insight that goes beyond the tragic and acknowledges presumed finitude as a kind of resigned empowerment (Critchley 2009, 217–228). This is in so far itself heroic (and paradoxical) as humor has not such a good footing in the realm of philosophy (where Critchley firmly stands).³⁵ Critchley's insertion thus, by implementing humor as a category of thought not only widens and questions the ground of philosophy but also carves out space for humor as a meaningful philosophical endeavor (see also Critchley 2019, 56 ff.).³⁶ Whereas Critchley makes out the idea of finitude in the philosophy of aesthetics that, according to him, addresses the loss of divine power, of meaning, Geisenhanslüke pays attention to the correlation between tragedy and non-knowledge that he brings to the point more succinctly elsewhere. What becomes palpable in his discussion is the dis/empowering trajectory of non-knowledge that seems to mnemonically accompany all actions and all thought, life, and can be defined as an ethical and political stance: »[T]ragedy presents the contingent experience of non-knowledge as the basis of human existence that cannot be transcended. In tragedy, non-knowledge is mainly defined in terms of privative concepts such as *anoia* in order to narrow the sphere of human reason« (Geisenhanslüke 2012, 34). Tragedy as such a site of aesthetic sense-making, in contrast to a philosophical reading, shows humans as errant, as limited, because their capacities to see and to foresee or even to gauge their own actions, and how these may develop in a time to come, are displayed as narrow and confined. Human beings are shown as exposed to other (e. g., natural) forces.³⁷ Humans, Geisenhanslüke continues, appear to be subject to error and deception, which is due to a temporal dimension, the unknowable future (as well as the past), and they also cannot *know* the ethical dimensions of their deeds; death, the end of a life, a phenomenon that all entities inevitably experience, too, remains linked to not-knowing (Geisenhanslüke 2012, 34ff.), which can then also be seen as a reminder about the parochial power of ›knowledge‹.³⁸

35 According to Critchley, firstly, the aesthetic, beginning with the tragic, ensues as the field of sense-making. Secondly, within this *philosophy of the tragic*, as Peter Szondi calls it (219), ›finitude‹ often is disfigured as ›heroic‹, whereby, thirdly, Critchley goes on, the ›comic‹ is marginalized and subordinated to the tragic; see Critchley (2009, 219 ff.).

36 In this he is not alone. Lydia Amir, too, links tragedy to the German tradition, to Friedrich Nietzsche and Peter Szondi. Citing Szondi, she claims that while there has been a poetics of tragedy since Aristotle, it is only with German idealism that a *philosophy* (or we may say: *theory*) of tragedy emerges (Amir 2014).

37 This understanding of tragedy stands in contrast to, or rather breaks with, Simon Critchley's insight that the ›post-Kantian‹ epistemologies of tragedy, especially in the German (philosophical, theoretical) context, in the passage from the religious to the aesthetic, which begins with the tragic paradigm, pursues the question of ›finitude‹. In contrast to Critchley, Stanley Cavell considers tragedy not as a German peculiarity, but as part of a philosophic question to come to terms with (the being and not being of) ›truth‹ and how it can be seen or implemented within philosophic thinking (which, nevertheless, contaminates philosophy with literature, or rather must confide its contamination). See Geisenhanslüke (2015a).

38 It is interesting how paradoxically ›literature‹ is dealt with in relation to (non-)›knowledge‹ and ›ignorance‹. While in Greek philosophic texts, themselves seemingly caught in a liminal space then

Non-knowledge in this way keeps the imagination within the poetics of language, as literature *literally* open. Rather than to signal completion and *finitude*, it allegorizes a beginning at the ruins of understanding. The ›knowledge‹ of power thus appears as limited and potentially open to power-lessness. At the unmentioned core of this effort, therefore, also the (self-)perception of *power-lessness* appears, in a negative sense, that philosophy wants to overturn and transform into a state of stability and *power*, with the elimination of the *-lessness*, and a turn to ›truth‹, which in effect abandons the self and stabilizes a monologic culture. ›Truth‹ as a form of accomplishment and achievement, as well as a competitive search within the parameters of the quest for ›knowledge‹ and the struggle for power, is what is inherently denied – and also mocked – in tragedy, which to a certain extent questions the meaning of ›success‹ and separates it from any certainty or *finitude*.

With the tragic, then, humor as a rhetorical, affective, and aesthetic category is also evoked in different ways in the discussion: On the one hand, a tragic-comic shade can be seen in the forlornness of (philosophic) thought as such that tries to find safe anchorage, in a world not shaped by any certainties. On the other hand, humor is invoked as part of the Nietzschean critique that attempts to argue against a dogmatized status quo of (conventionalized) philosophical thinking, which also has its tragic side, as it appears as a futile Sisyphean task. At the same time, Geisenhanslüke's elaborations are tinged with a subtle humorous tone, which, unobtrusively plucks at the various entrenched discourses and attaches them to other, wider, and more open lines of thought. The tragic, then, contains humor in an affective way, as in Freud's *Jewish Jokes*: It is somehow liberating, the absurdity of everything in life, including ›knowledge‹, is liberating in its fascinating inevitability, and yes, perhaps there is a lurking curiosity about what this might mean in the end. Maybe not an end, in fact, but Nietzsche's curious speculations and recurrences. Something to look forward to ... maybe. Or at least *it won't bother a great mind* to think so ...

The tragic-comic also appears as the tacit bittersweet liquor that comes with the epistemology of non-knowledge, which lies in its fundamentally delaying and Sisyphean form of power-lessness, that is disempowering as well as empowering, as its ethical as well as political denotation.

between literature and philosophy the figure of Socrates specifically stands out as a personification of (wise) ›knowledge‹ and (wise) ›ignorance‹, for Plato poetry is nothing but lies. In the *Routeledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (2015), edited by Matthias Gross and Lindsey McGoey, two essays, as another contemporary example, deal with literary's ›ignorance‹ in diametrically opposed ways. Andrew Bennet points to the insightful, self-evident gesture of literature/literariness that immanates from its supposed ›ignorance‹ (41 ff.), Devjani Roy and Richard Zeckhauser, in contrast, want to utilize literature in their approach as a resource of experienced and archived form of ›ignorance‹-processing that can be exploited in an immunitive way, and as a kind of forecast, as it were, against the probabilities of difficult decision-making moments and conflicts, in life in general as well as within (global) sociopolitical developments in particular. Both articles seem to be in an implicit dialog with each other in their poetic style and literariness. And I wonder whether a sentence that caught my attention in Bennett's text in this regard would be a suitable response to that: »Woe betide the reader that tries to use the novel as his [!] sole guide [...]« (Bennett 2015, 39). And yet, in unprogrammable ways, perhaps, we may cherish literature for such – however elusive – insights into something like a hope for immunization, prediction, and processing? For the quality of the tragic-comic of the power-lessness that lies in non-knowledge?

A genealogy of non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*) thus initializes the opening of different paths to expose othering and silencing, and to enable the multiple (though hidden and unrecognizable) movements of resistance, as well as to reveal the pain and suffering associated with processes of exclusion, to indulge in the provisional and uncertain ›knowledge‹-power of non-knowledge (and power-lessness) on their infinite journey. This may be tedious, but it may also be a more pleasurable and sensual, attentive movement, a *reparative reading*, into unknown futures.

The emphasis on an inclusive understanding of non-knowledge and power-lessness that also takes into consideration thinking as a liminal state of different bodily, affective, sensual experiences and processes, and, in a much more straightforward way, humor, can be seen as a point of connection between Nietzsche and Freud.

There is also a Dionysian element in Freud's thought that works in two ways: On the one hand, the effect of humor is linked to language, to a poetic element that Freud calls *disiecta membra*. This linguistic label, according to Geisenhanslüke, captures well Freud's witty approach to ›the joke‹-humor (*Witz*) as opposed to the idea of a holistic, aesthetic theorization of humor, which is undermined in this way. *Disiecta membra* resists philosophical claims to grasp and understand everything by and through ›reason‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 208 ff.). Instead of seeing ›the joke‹, for example, as an ingenious, intellectual phenomenon, Freud connects it in this way, to corporeality. This corporeal site of humor is particularly evident in ›jokes‹ that depict obscenity as well as in Freud's already mentioned ›hostile jokes‹ (Freud 2024.8, 85 ff.; Geisenhanslüke 2011, 208); their effect is *literally* associated with ›laughter‹ as a corporeal disintegration. On the other hand, *disiecta membra* is thus given an aspect that exceeds language and mind and is related to the whole body. Not only is a corporeal aspect emphasized in this way, but also the dynamic against an all-encompassing ›rational‹ ›truth‹ that is in control.

Freud above all dispenses with an aesthetics of affectivity or sensuality bound to the idea of ›the sublime‹³⁹ that seems fractured by the (psychotic) unknowing-power-less work of humor. In contrast to a Kantian emphasis on the sublime and the aesthetic of the beautiful, with its emphasis on ›morality‹ (*Sittlichkeit*) that can be invoked and is accessible only through indirect representation (*indirekte Darstellung*), and which with regard to its sublimity supersedes sensuality and reaches the realm of ›reason‹, Freud uses the idea of ›indirect representation‹ (*indirekte Darstellung*) inherent in humor to point to its subversive character; this is also the moment in which non-knowledge emerges in the work of humor. Freud emphasizes the destruction of the sublime and the rational through humor (*Witz*) and through the small (*dem Kleinen*) (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 212). Humor opens up another realm that is not accessible to ›reason‹ or ›morality‹ but is conceivable in this indirect way of rendering, through the breakdown, the undoing (*Zerfall*) inherent in ›laughter‹ (*Lachen*). ›The joke‹-humor (*Witz*) ›tears down the principles of reason and exposes them to ridicule‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 213) and seems to describe per se a moment of not-knowing and power-lessness.

39 Although following the path of enlightened thinking, both thinkers stand beyond rationalistic conclusions and, thereby, abide, even invite, the vast and vague possibility of non-knowledge (– and implicitly non-power) to enter thought and epistemology.

Freud's discussion of ›the joke‹ emphasizes the workings of non-knowledge inherent in humor that regulate ›knowledge‹ (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 208). Power-lessness also comes into view in this double work of humor: It can be seen in the deconstructive, disassembling and dispersing of meanings, and in the gain of subversive powers, which remain liminal, because they do not establish another ›truth‹ or authority.

In contrast to the work of dreams, Freud adds humor to the sensuality of affectivity when he speaks of a pleasurable gain, on the one hand (*Lustgewinn*). On the other hand, as Geisenhanslüke also reminds us, Freud specifically alludes to and centralizes the sociality or conviviality of humor, especially in the discussion of *Jewish Jokes* (Freud 2024, 98 ff., Geisenhanslüke 2011, 209). It is thus a specific form of ›joke‹-humor that Freud emphasizes, based not only on a common linguistic understanding but also on the experience of sociopolitical marginalization⁴⁰ through antisemitism and its affective web as part of a cycle of ›sensations‹ of pain and (self-regulating) attempts at healing that are dealt with in a displaced way, which »alter the train of thought« (Freud 2024.8, 45). These are also shifting forms of epistemological and sociopolitical critique that intervene in discourse and remain faithful to thought and critique itself. The affectivity and joy that humor involves, thus, must therefore be based not only on pleasure alone but also on the pleasure of undoing the tragic, of recognizing and decoding the pain that results from it, for example, as (often socially accepted) hate speech, which is processed in this dis/empowering way that takes place in humor as a possibility of speaking back. ›Joke‹-humor appears in this way as »a transgression of a law that is acknowledged and, at the same time, annulled« (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 214).

This aspect of humor is implied in Freud's account of the unconscious mechanisms of *making* and *listening to* ›jokes‹ (Weber 1987, 701 ff., Geisenhanslüke 2011, 220) when he considers the deferred and *incongruent* character of humor. As Samuel Weber points out, the very moment in which humor is at work has a temporal character – one in which we must include the incongruity inherent in the language and discourse-related transaction of humor. This means that there is also a *spatial* characteristic to the incongruity of humor, which Weber actually mentions, without further problematizing it, by saying: »[...] everything seems to be situated in or around the present tense, and yet, that present tense describes a *space* that precisely is not present to consciousness« (Weber 1987, 702; emphasis mine). Weber draws attention to the German adverb *unterdes*, which Freud uses to describe this temporal (and consequently, spatial) mechanism, and which Weber translates as ›in the meanwhile‹: While the humorous tonality of ›jokes‹ seems to speak of an apparent meaning or situation, *in the meanwhile* it unfolds another meaning in another place, beyond where humor takes place – in the senses and in the imagination maybe. This meanwhile-side of humor subtly transposes meaning to another field of reference that awaits further thought and reflection – and that may demand, require,

40 As Geisenhanslüke states, Freud shows the psychological work inherent in this process in the discussion of sexualized and/or obscene ›jokes‹, in which (socio-cultural) inhibitions are suspended by ›the joke‹ and the negative energy is transformed into pleasure; see in this regard Geisenhanslüke (2011, 2014, 2018); however, to what extent these tendentious ›jokes‹ comprise misogynist tendencies and display masculinist thinking and sociopolitical uncertainties is another question that still awaits further unearthing.

a reciprocal, shared, sensuality and affectivity as part of an understanding that goes beyond mere ›reason‹. Freud, indeed, concludes that ›jokes‹ cannot be ›known‹, but that they are somehow ›sensed‹ (Weber 1987, 703). He also points to the proximity of humor and non-knowledge by shifting the process of ›joking‹ not only to the unconscious but also to a *non-knowing subject of narration*, to a *non-knowing subject of listening*, and an ›implied audience‹ that may or may not get ›it‹, when he claims that it is not clear what it is that is being laughed about and how ›jokes‹ are generated in the first place (Freud 2024.8, 145, Weber 1987, 702, Geisenhanslücke 2011, 219–221). But not only that, Freud even links ›jokes‹ to non-knowledge as a sphere of immanence in saying:

»Jokes possess yet another characteristic which fits satisfactorily into the view of the joke-work which we have derived from dreams. We speak, it is true, of ›making‹ a joke; but we are aware that when we do so our behaviour is different from what it is when we make a judgement or make an objection. A joke has quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us ›involuntarily‹. What happens is not that we know a moment beforehand what joke we are going to make, and that all it then needs is to be clothed in words.« (Freud 2024.8, 145; emphasis in the text)

Humor is, in this way, linked to an intellectually salient moment, and at the same time, is described as a sudden *release of intellectual tension* and as an *absence* that is also somehow ›undefinably‹ sensed.

This must apply all the more to humor in the more general sense, as ›jokes‹ – in a narrower sense – are specifically bound to expectations, as someone *is telling a ›joke‹*, and ›the listener‹ is *anticipating its punch line*, while in humor more generally the suddenness of being taken by surprise is even higher, as are the possible indications of hidden packages of signification that it brings with itself. Using Freud's own vocabulary, Weber, on the one hand, links the mechanism of the humorous works also to what is *omitted*, not mentioned in the process of telling, of narrating, what Freud calls *Auslassen*. On the other hand, he speaks of *absence* and even the *absence of signs* that occur in the humorous moment on which ›the joke‹ depends, on the part of both the maker and the listener of ›the joke‹ (or any humorous inclination, we must add) (Weber 1987, 703). Weber also points out that, according to Freud, this is not to be understood as a conscious process. Rather, Freud speaks of an unconscious event, and interestingly, on the part of both the maker and the receiver. He therefore speaks of ›the joke‹/humor as an *incidence (Einfall)* and a *gift* (Weber 1987, 703–704, see also Menke 2021, 356). It is therefore possible, I think, to describe this work and the mechanism of humor as a form of non-knowledge, of not-knowing on the threshold of *knowing something* that may show itself in delayed and displaced ways. Geisenhanslücke brings this to the point, even radicalizes it, by locating the work of humor in the realm of non-knowledge (and in fact power-lessness) as an instance of the unconscious that ›categorically withholds itself from any positively traceable knowledge‹ (Geisenhanslücke 2011, 221, Menke 2021, 514).⁴¹ Contrary to Weber, therefore, I think that

41 It is interesting in this context that Freud questions his theoretical approach to ›the joke‹ (Witz), fearing that he might have only imposed his dream-theory on it and thus ascertained what he expected (Menke 2021, 513), but does not doubt his dream-theory, as his ›joke‹-theory in fact opens up theory as such to doubt. Could this also be read as an unconscious tendency on Freud's part

humor comes *with* signification rather than *without*, or that this *without* is endowed with seeds of meaning to be explored in the future, signaling the deferral and postponing site of humor.

The form of ›giving‹ that characterizes humor/›joking‹ is not to be understood as the opposite of ›taking‹ rather, as Weber points out, this understanding of ›giving‹ inherent in humor must be placed outside the economy of supply and demand, and thus outside the success and achievement that are connoted with ›knowledge‹. Drawing on Freud, Weber speaks of a form of ›giving‹ that *gives* to both, to the maker of the humorous injunction and the ›listener‹ (Weber 1987, 704). This gift of ›giving‹ must then be ascribed to the creating and creative, as well as the affective, sensual trait inherent in the sphere of non-knowledge and power-lessness. What can be emphasized, then, is not so much the sensual, affective field of not-knowing as such, but what it lays open for further reflection, which would be its fertile, inventive side – a realm in the economy of power-lessness, of gaining and losing beyond ›success‹ and ›achievement‹.

Humor, then, already works in the liminal space of non-knowledge and power-lessness, which it keeps open. It thereby, follows a pattern of concealment, displacement, and rendering that does not happen in the virtual sphere of the singular mind but in an inter-subjective space, within the sociality and external-internal field of language (Freud 2024.8, 77–78, Geisenhanslüke 2011, 209 ff., Carey 2002, xxi).

Humor thus embraces different affective aspects, sorrow as well as enjoyment, and seems to emerge from *showing* solidarity and conviviality of and in pain while transcending it by drawing on this affectivity that reveals a poetology of non-knowledge and power-lessness – which has meaning-creating, empathic, and communitizing effects through processes of deconstruction that lie in the very work of humor. Humor performs a corrective function, righting wrongs. It develops other energies of meaning that derive from entangled powerless and unknowing instances of incongruity that are disarming and ›giving‹ beyond a market economy of profit-making in which ›knowledge‹ enabled by ›reason‹ seems to reside.

Freud also considers ›naivety‹ as a site of humor that echoes not-knowing (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 222) – and that can, and even more so, be extended by power-lessness. For Freud, ›naivety‹ is an ingredient of *doing humor* that transcends psychic constraints. Geisenhanslüke even regards ›naivety‹ as a subversion of the sagacity (*Klugheit*) that supposedly characterizes wit, and as an ambiguous figuration, representation, and distinction of knowing and not-knowing (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 222). Following a Foucauldian line Geisenhanslüke also points out that ›reason‹(-ability) as the nexus of ›knowledge‹ and

to protect his (dream-) theories from being questioned and doubted? This would at least align itself well with the treatment of humor in philosophy, and, for example, Plato's or Bergson's efforts to abandon ›laughter‹ and ›joking‹ per se as serious epistemological possibilities of acquiring ›knowledge‹. In her valuable, critical, psychoanalytically informed reading of Freud's ›joke‹ theory, Sarah Kofman goes one step further, drawing parallels between Freud's ›joke‹ theory and Wilhelm Fliess's charges against the humor inherent in his theorizations of the dream. Kofman speaks of a figurative ›patricide‹. She also highlights Freud's paradoxical resentment of his own ›joke‹ theory, which he tried to deflate. What Kofman is suggesting is the power-sensitive economy of Freud's ›joke‹ theory, against which he also had to protect the theoretical structure of his psychoanalytic theory as a whole, and himself, from being made fun of. Cf. Kofman (1986, 16ff.).

power was (is?) used in its practical, world-making scope to detain people who were condemned to be deprived of it and considered to be mentally ›deficient‹, whereby ›naivety‹ displays an essential layer of intellectual richness and wit that can simultaneously be seen as threatening (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 224). ›Knowledge‹ can thus be viewed as a kind of heteronomy as well as a category and categorizing judgement of othering from positions of power, while non-knowledge remains the place and space of the other(-ed) and of the gaze back that turns power-lessness into an ambiguous challenge for the Other by its mere being.

For Geisenhanslüke, ›naivety‹ also describes an aesthetic phenomenon that is anchored in the sociality of life, and that contains a liminal, aporetic position, since it marks, on the one hand, a process of unawareness, of not-knowing, and, on the other hand, a source of highest aptitude and intelligence (Geisenhanslüke 2011, 222).

This understanding, in turn, can be extended to meanings of powerlessness, as ›naivety‹ can be a figuration of impuissance per se. And yet, on another level, ›naivety‹ is powerful in indirect ways through its effectiveness, the meanings of altruism and the value of something like ›withdrawal‹ that it triggers and echoes; it seems sacrosanct, untouchable – which are all meanings that remain at the margins of structures of power, marking them yet also challenging them in unobtrusive ways.

This aesthetic trait of ›naivety‹ can also be seen as effective beyond expectations and notions of ›success‹ and ›achievement‹. ›Naivety‹ therefore represents the figuration of basic ethical values, especially as it also carries a note of vulnerability. ›Naivety‹ can display *false humor*. But it also represents the mechanisms of power that, in the interpellation, try to subjugate and determine it. ›Naivety‹ as a figuration of non-knowledge and power-lessness also exposes the aporetic, paradoxical, and violent meanings bound to it in relation to ›knowledge‹ and power. In this sense, ›naivety‹ can be a refuge and a source of creativity and freedom, as well as a state that can be exploited and abused – from positions of power that it also dismantles. ›Naivety‹ as an affective humorous figuration that also exhibits non-knowledge and power-lessness can drift in different ways from understandings of ›stupidity‹ to ›wit‹, and can be praised or read as a thread that endangers a sociopolitical order, both of which are judgments that expose the limits of ›knowledge‹ and its embedding in structures of power.

In a critical sense, then, ›naivety‹ could be understood as an un/protected playground within sociopolitical laws and relations of power on which humor constructs itself in and as a process of oscillating threads that signal non-knowledge and power-lessness, and question ›knowledge‹ and power.

In all of these instances, humor can be seen as unfolding a poetic relationship in affective ways to non-knowledge and power-lessness. It frees non-knowledge from the restricted and violent rule of reasonability – and its power and is in this sense also empowering as it opens up other possibilities of ›knowledge‹.

Non-knowledge and power-lessness can thus be perceived within two fields of meaning. Non-knowledge and power-lessness can be regarded as the vast, powerless field of unknowing that magisterially surrounds and contains any (certainty of) ›knowledge‹ and power (and, in this sense, can it not also mean and encompass Jacques Derrida's arche-writing, which engulfs the infinite vastness around philosophy as an insular (e-)state?).

Their nexus is part of any linguistic and discursive claim, and its challenging cancellation. Both signal figurations of liminality in terms of ›knowledge‹ and power. Non-knowledge allows power-lessness to be part of ›knowledge‹ and carves out space for the other to enter the scene of speaking in infinite ways.

Furthermore, ›knowledge‹, the desire to (make) known(-n), to fix (and indeed to imprison – in all its immediate and derivative meanings) is a contested endeavor that goes hand in hand with mechanisms of overruling and overpowering, all of which are embedded within linguistic and rhetorical struggles that reflect the depths of power-lessness and non-knowledge as traits of acting (in-the-wor(l)d).⁴²

Affective humor links the spheres of these major and minor fields of non-knowledge and power-lessness by taking recourse to the poetics that different (con-)texts produce, however subtly or explicitly, as the space and spacing in which the traces of these interlinked conditions reside as an exhaustless and sustainable as well as im/possible presage and residue that comes into surface through words or conscious or unconscious practices.

Affective humor, it is argued then, works at the margins of what is regarded as ›reasonable‹, as ›truth‹, and as ›unreasonable‹ and ›untruth‹. It is guided by a desire to reach the field of non-knowledge within procedures of powerlessness and coming to power, to unbutton and open up the fenced-in area of ›knowledge‹ to a field of multi-layered meanings that are embedded in the non-knowing structure of language and signification, and their materiality. Understood in this way, *affective humor* touches a limit to the poetics of non-knowledge/powerlessness, the vast field of non-knowing and the unknowable against which we appear powerless, as well as the more immediate, complex, dynamic structure in which non-knowledge and power-lessness is enmeshed in language and discourse, in the self and in the other, and in the interrelated, historically driven sociopolitical web. An understanding and analysis of *affective humor*, enmeshed in such processes, can thus firstly, explore how it is constructed and used, how it possibly opens up and reshapes historically driven conventionalized meanings and discourses that function as forms of ›un-truth‹ and frame (dominant, hegemonic) discursive (symbolic) orders, at the liminal of other understandings. Secondly, such readings can shed light on ›knowledge‹ from a poetological angle as a surplus and effect of the work of language as a liminal space that opens up to non-knowledge and power-lessness – so room is generated for and in thought. Thirdly, rather than using ›knowledge‹ as a weapon of overwhelming and power, *affective humor* dwells at the threshold of mechanisms of overpowering, making use of disarming, affective-sensual, and rhetorical devices of and in language, hinting at them by setting them to work and, thus, without enforcing them as ›truths‹. Looking at *affective humor* as a gateway to the many dimensions of a poetology of non-knowledge and power-lessness then describes a proposition for the epistemological implications that this gateway might have in terms of encountering and relating to the other, and the question of what insights this may bring to the analysis and reading of (con-)texts, as an ethical quest, beyond their immediate humorous and affective effects.

42 It remains an exciting question how this topos of the poetology of non-knowledge is to be understood in conjunction with Friedrich Schlegel's concept of incomprehensibility (*Unverständlichkeit*).

The palpability of non-knowledge and power-lessness that the (literary) text, in its tragic and comic guises, may leave behind though may itself be the ›pay-off‹, the aesthetic value, the ›beauty‹ that is set free, one that works not only by arousing different nuances of affectivity and confusing the senses but that implicitly opens up and displays different unresolved and contradictory threads of thought, and of the ways in which things have materialized, ended and are about to vanish. Its effect may be gauged in an afterwardsness⁴³ in which one tries to gather up the ashes of such experiences and ›knowledges‹ that may be marked by the attempt to bear forlornness. And yet, in the long run, losing the plot may mean winning, learning something, staying open to what comes – as an enabling experience of speaking (up) if one wishes to, while sometimes one may just prefer not to – a preference in which non-knowledge and power-lessness remain preserved in the chest and may be opened up someday, in ways unforeseeable.

The nexus of non-knowledge and power-lessness appears as a never exhaustive, always persistent formation of (non-)understanding that, while also structured by the sensuality of affectivity and cable-knit interpenetration of cognition and historically shaped sociopolitical epistemes, cannot be captured positively and permanently but nevertheless remains a relevant basis for understanding (something) at all, albeit in however contingent ways.

Affective Humor – A Configurative Synopsis

Affective humor can be understood as a rhetoric in the economy of the poetology of non-knowledge and power-lessness that opens up those chests, for a brief period of time, before they snap shut again, inducing the aroma of different affectively inducted senses, transposing the mind to another vanilla place, to ponder about meaning and pain, in the quiet of and in dialogue with another's thoughts and images. *Affective humor*, then, entails a form of ›touch‹, in the economy of non-knowledge and power-lessness that can generate avenues for thinking otherwise and for otherwise thinking.

The poetics of *affective humor* as non-knowledge and power-lessness, though, does not only have an epistemological quality that is triggered in the text. The entanglement of non-knowledge and power-lessness also describes *the form of pondering* that is evoked rhetorically and poetically in humor and that encompasses not only contemplation in a cognitive sense, but also thinking as imbued with affectivity and sensuality in an (always situated) narrative and historically driven discursive web. In particular, the opening up, deconstructive rhetoric of humor, with its poetic dimensions, represents *a form of NichtWissen* and *OhnMacht* as a poetological epistemology that encompasses affectivity as well as sensuality, but that also includes the historical as well as the singular situatedness of the speaking and listening subject.

43 Afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*) draws on an inversion of the belated emergence of (sexual) trauma that Freud makes out in the displaced, timely errands of the psyche. Teresa de Lauretis calls attention to the ways in which Freud uses literature to give shape to this concept. She thereby argues that Freud's idea of *Nachträglichkeit* is influenced by the proleptic and analeptic movement of the narrative time in Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Cf. De Lauretis (2010, 118).

Affective humor is an overarching term for various modes of humorous tonalities. It is understood as a performative rhetoric of deconstruction within processes of affectivity. Rather than generating meaning, it opens up a spectre of different meanings that are part of the allusions and incongruities that it consciously and unconsciously touches upon, unleashes, or dismantles. *Affective humor* is not only effective through incongruity, through the shifting of meanings or the difference between what is said and what is meant. It also operates in the relational space of meaning construction and dialogicity, where one meaning is connected to another and where these connections, emerging in the text, are touched upon. *Affective humor* can be accompanied by overt or covert bodily effects that signal a transfer of ›knowledge‹ or insight into other possibilities of understanding. These signs can also be found in implied bodily disruptions such as ›laughter‹, but need not be explicitly stated in the text or explicitly defined in the body.

Instead of assigning new meanings, *affective humor* disrupts meanings and exposes free spaces for (re)thinking. A conventionalized understanding is broken open and filled by a shift in meaning that can reveal the falsity and inadequacy of previous beliefs. Paradoxical ›affects‹ such as amusement/sadness/joy/pain/pleasure/pensiveness, which can be experienced simultaneously along the work of *affective humor*, are invoked by the undoing of previous meanings. The rhetoric of *affective humor* thus induces a liberation from thinking according to the pattern of a symbolic/systematic order and the confinement of a given structure. Meaning is postponed and shifted, and this form of slippage in meaning also has the effect of movement in thought. *Affective humor* celebrates the possibility of such gaps, the deferral of meaning, and the possibility of change. In this sense of a particular rhetoric of and in writing, *affective humor* is also understood as a drive of/for narrative that regulates the form of a text through the way it is presented. In a narratological sense, *affective humor* makes it possible to consider the affectivity of a text's rhetoric, its narrative tonality in this sense, and the techniques by which it is structured and enacted in the text.

Affective humor is also bound up with questions of subjectivity. In the workings of humorous rhetoric, subject-formation and subject-positions emerge and take shape, while the literality of the word is unfolded in its inner and outer dialogic formations within a reading-writing that can be reparative. An analysis of *affective humor* makes it possible to consider these different subject-formations that are assumed in the text and that to some extent determine the meanings that are undone. This does not mean that there is a form of intentionality hidden in the structure of the text. Rather, it can be concluded that in *affective humor* the (writing) subject falls into its unconscious and conscious parts, that subjectivity is thus revealed as a fractured, broken, and composite processual phenomenon. It is triggered, shown and produced by the text. A relational negotiation takes place between the different parts of the self that inform the humorous utterance of the speaking subject(s). Contrary to de Man's anxiety and Baudelaire's description, the subject of *affective humor* does not only fall apart, but is also restored in the aftermath of humorous allusions, albeit in a shifted way, and may also be transformed by them. *Affective humor* offers a situation to be mastered. The speaking subject of *affective humor* heals by deconstructing (oppressive) meanings within affective effects by rhetorically invoking other possibilities of understanding and opening up the vast field of non-knowledge. From the audience's perspective, too, *affective humor* evokes a process of surrender to its decomposing claims,

and this succumbing comes with a payoff. Its payoff is the affectivity of pleasure, of joy, of (sweet) melancholia, of gaining insight, of coming to terms with trauma, of a pensive state – all in the creamy and fluffy, unenforced space where imagination, non-knowledge, and powerlessness meet, and which is produced in the performing, deconstructive rhetoric of non-knowledge and powerlessness, sometimes at a pleasurable pace, and sometimes suddenly and violently. Seen in this way, *affective humor* can be negotiated, not only as a fall and a welcome disarming surrender, but also as a form of empowerment for the speaking subject, and, depending on their subjectivity and what is triggered by *affective humor*, for their possible ›audiences‹. At this level of reading-consumption, *affective humor* can also be seen as a non-compulsory setting to work of an affective, thought-provoking and epistemological critique that does not have to unfold immediately, but within a future timeliness. *Affective humor* also entails a moment in which it touches on power relations. It depends on whether the position of the subject who enacts or consumes *affective humor* is a position of power and a fixation of centripetal utterances or a marginalized position and thus an utterance of centrifugal forces that speak. However, rather than affirming any kind of power or ›knowledge‹, *affective humor* transposes the subject into the liminal realm of non-knowledge and powerlessness.

Affective humor thus describes a liminal experience (*Grenzerfahrung*). It is a liminal experience in three respects. It is an experience of the limits of meaning, where all meaning seems to collapse or vanish into meaninglessness; it is an experience of (psychic) crisis, which can also be a contradictory moment of dis/empowerment; and it is an experience of the brokenness of the self at the limits of the self and the other to understand and to understand otherwise. The liminality of *affective humor* describes an uncoerced opening to other ways and im-possibilities of affectivity, thinking, and sensuality that operate in processes of un-learning: the letting go of a conventionalized ›knowledge‹ and the coming to know of another possible insight.

Affective humor, as a performative, and rhetorical deconstruction, encompasses instances of telling as well as those of showing as it performs what it tells. In the gap between telling and showing, it performs the possibilities of affectivity and thoughtfulness that go beyond immediate narrative signification. It thus has two moments that merge into one another. On the one hand, it occupies the singular moment of the text that carries the entanglement of different meanings; on the other hand, *affective humor* refers to something that goes beyond the moment of the generated, performed, performing frame, opening up possible specters of understanding and the trace of meaning as a multiply folded arrangement to understanding. This rapturous work of *affective humor* in the undoing of meanings also supports suspense in a text, not only on the level of incongruity, however evoked, but also on an epistemological level of coming to understanding, which, as already mentioned, must not be immediate, but rather involves a temporal and spatial postponement. *Affective humor* is deconstructive in the sense that it keeps open a space of unlearning and epistemological inquiry (*Raum des Zerlernens*), presenting learning and the acquisition of ›knowledge‹ as possibilities of openness. In doing so, it decodes conventionalized meanings without reinscribing them. It trails a fleeting act of actuality in a performative way. What is left as its trace is not the new, different meaning, but the moving (in its double sense), queering, heteroglottic, and polyphonic character of meaning as such. Thus, what emerges with the rhetoric of *affective humor* is the im-

age of perpetual postponement, the movement of postponement in the construction of meaning, and the alley it opens up for other possibilities for comprehension, at least for moments, in expectations of some form of response within the self or from an other. In this sense, *affective humor* and allegory supplement each other, as both remain open.

Affective humor, in this sense, is a shifting, deconstructive, rhetorical installation of thought that is also bodily felt, that is sensually translated into the body in various ways. This process of acquiring ›knowledge‹ and remaining power-less does not take place in an empty territory of constitution and attribution of meanings but is, beyond the semi-otic and semantic interconnection of language and discourse, interwoven in a field of affective and sensual entanglement of meanings, where it opens up the possibility of an inquiring dialogue.

The use of humor, with its affective and deconstructive traits, can thus be described as a poeology of non-knowledge and power-lessness, opened up in different ways at the seam between what is considered ›knowledge‹ and ›truth‹ and what is not known or othered as non-knowledge within the poetic literariness of the text. It signals a form of disempowerment and empowerment that does not lead to fixed and enforced meanings, but rather remains without power.

It is a process of opening up the unknown sites of what is regarded and guarded as ›knowledge‹ and power in the poetic instances of the literariness of texts, which texts harbor as instances of non-knowledge and power-lessness within their conscious as well as unconscious dynamics, and which not only entail a specter of affectivity, but can also evoke affectivity and its material outcome in the form of sensual effects or even reorientations in thought and in practice.

In the rhetorical, performative gap that is generated in the poetics of non-knowledge and power-lessness, a space opens up in language where different meanings are *undone* and *redone* in unconclusive ways. *Affective humor* is thus the ›text's‹ desire to divert the reading process towards other directions, and it is a process of unknotting sense-making at the borders of all possible uncertainties that nevertheless may convey a feathery warmth.

Especially in literary texts, this silky trace of *affective humor* emerges and can be further deciphered. It is deconstructive and related to a movement in the production of meaning not only in language, but also in discourse; within this movement, *affective humor* exerts something like a tangency, a touch.

This question of touch, which seems to lie in the sensual, material, and bodily-mind location of *affective humor*, and which connects the (historically determined) materiality of words, discourse, and the body and how it can be understood, is what the next chapter deals with.

The Fissured Meaning(fulness) of Touch

Although it can be stated that touch has been an issue in literary theory for a long time, especially when it is related to the concept of *emovere*, more recently it is also studied in literary works as a haptic endeavor of the hand or the eyes, linked to affectivity and thought, and depicted as a relational figure of *grasping*.¹

- 1 See, for example, Garrington (2013); Sarah Jackson's *Tactile Poetics* (2017) more explicitly overrides hitherto perceptions on touch. In considering the work of Cixous, Nancy, and Derrida, Jackson attaches touch to the body and the body of texts (and the text as body). Following Robert Steppard, Jackson also relates touch to the text(-ure) of text(-uality) coming close to an understanding of non-knowledge; see also, on touch, Erwig/Fluhrer (2019); Erwig/Ungelenk (2021); and Sohns/Ungelenk (2021). Thus, while the haptic in a more explicit sense of the tactile still receives prominent attention, in recent years scholars from various fields (natural sciences as well as philosophy) speak of a sixth sense (one of the first to problematize this is Maurice Perleau-Ponty). This sixth sense is not to be understood as a sense of prescience; rather the sixth sense, called proprioception or kinesthesia, refers to the interrelated, configurative conglomeration of bodily motion within space. When we place something somewhere, we do that by activating this sense (which is not far removed from prescience, by the way?), that helps to place an object by a specific bodily movement: to put the coffee-mug on the table, I stretch out my arm, and at the same time, by ›automatically‹ considering the forces of gravity I can locate the table or other surface on which I want to place it in a very precise way. As ›normal‹ as it may sound, it is not that obvious, but requires this other sense in order to be done. See for example, Garrington (2010). In this discussion, it is not so much an understanding of the haptic that is revised; rather the haptic as related to tactile-touch (translated into the body as ›skin‹) is supplemented with this other ›sense‹, although it seems more appropriate to me to speak of ›sensing‹ in a more general form, which can be explicitly or implicitly linked to touch. Garrington's text goes in the same direction but speaks of the ›haptic sense‹, emphasizing the haptic rather than the touch (815). Garrington shows how literary texts *use* the haptic in a much broader sense. The question remains, though, whether in these discussions, including Deleuze's and Guattari's approaches that are mentioned here, the (diasporic, ›nomadic‹) *other* is not appropriated as a resource for finding an *other* understanding that once again makes the seeing and writing (*white* or, in general, *dominant*) subject (of speaking-writing) transparent and reaffirming othering on a high-theoretical level – although, in these discussions, the importance of the *body* and the *skin* as a surface of meaning(-production) is emphasized (811). What often remains underdiscussed is a historization of touch within a more subject-related analysis that is politically informed and historically situated and that would also discuss writing about it in a ›disinterested style‹. Contrary to these approaches, Sara Ahmed, for example, begins with

In this study, touch is approached in three different ways: it is seen as an entry to a certain matter, as a carving out of space in-between words and meanings, and as an opening up of a space in which the possibility of ›dialogicity‹ sets in, allowing for spectral and material reflectivity within language and discourse, within thought as well as within interrelational understandings of self and other. It is, furthermore, understood as a *movement of orientation*. It orients the self from within itself towards othernesses – often at the margins of (con-)texts, which is seen as anchored in the transformative dynamic and processual becoming (and falling apart of) the self.

The touch of *affective humor* thus is regarded as setting into work a double movement from within and without that has at least two floating points of orientation, an ›inward‹ and an ›outward‹. This ability of *affective humor* to touch is problematized as creating two forms of spaces: As opening up a space of encounter in which a touch occurs, and as opening up, within this touch, a spacing where meanings, and ›selfhood‹ and ›otherhood‹ are negotiated.

This threefold movement of touch that I regard as bound to *affective humor*, with its deconstructive traits, is thoroughly explored in the works of Jacques Derrida, especially and distinctively so in his treatment of the touch, which is central to this study and remains centralized in this chapter.

Derrida's access to touch links, in subtle ways, deconstruction with affect theory and aligns both with what could be called ›cognitive sensuality‹. Although, as noted above, there are some works in literary studies that pay attention to touch by picking up some of the traits mentioned by Derrida, these approaches predominantly deal with the haptic touch and the touch of bodily organs like the skin, the eyes, and the hands. Derrida, though, while also considering this long history of touch, especially in philosophy, unlinks touch from however conceived ›physical‹ experiences in a narrow sense or rather extends the meaning of the physical to also encompass cognitive, psychical, almost spiritual sides and insights. Without denying the different possibilities of the haptic touch in a narrower sense, Derrida translates touch as a bodily, material, but also epistemological experience. He places touch within a web of language-thinking-sensuality entwined in *affectivity-auto-bio-graphy*, as an experience of *performativity* and in(ter)vention that ensues from and in language, as well as the senses (in all their possible meanings),

how the very ›touch‹, ›the laws‹ of touch, which Derrida, too, as we shall see, depicts, are linked to images and an imagery of racialized and ›norm-alized‹ ›national‹ subjectivity; see Ahmed ([2004] 2014). In *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed discusses racisms in relation to touch, using it in a more explicitly haptic sense; it becomes clear, however, that more than the haptic is involved in the staging of the other, but this discussion of touch shows the liminal place of epistemology that is bound to the body as a written texture and the concept of ›race‹ that underlies it. Ahmed speaks of the encounter as the ›relived‹ moment of ›metonymic slides‹ that have a history and are already inscribed on bodies. Cf. Ahmed (2000, 38 ff.). See also Steppard (2008). Steppard links touch to literature by theorizing it as an essential form of poetics, understood as the praxis and theory of epistemology and literary (sensual?) writing. This approach moves in the direction of Achim Geisenhanslücke's work, see Geisenhanslücke (2018, 2021). Here, especially in the latter, Geisenhanslücke seems to perform this poetological conjunction of theory and poetry, as a poetic, *sensual* endeavor – a poetics of making *sense* in the different meanings of the word.

coming somehow from an other, without necessarily any direct involvement of hapticity in a conventionalized understanding. Derrida's touch shifts the (quite postcolonial) claim of historical attention, in as much as, by evoking *auto-bio-graphy*, it also prefigures and considers the singularity of subjects and of subject-formation despite a historically driven, given sociopolitical context,² it thus asserts and fissures subjectivity simultaneously. Derrida's attempt is a critical stance that, a little perplexed and maybe a bit fatherly and *enfant terrible* at the same time, maybe out of the memories and remembrances of »a little black and very Arab Jew who understood nothing« (Derrida 1993, 58), looks at presumed parameters of the discourse on touch *after* deconstruction, but with an urge to deconstruct them (to understand), coming back to deconstruction and subtly proclaiming its ›beginning‹ or ›never ending‹, as a procedure of reading that cannot come to an end and cannot be *post*-ed as such. Derrida's critical stance, then, can be described as a move towards an invocation of the meaning and value of what criticism and analysis

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- 2 Derrida historicizes his work, as it were, by alluding to *auto-bio-graphical* moments, the inventions, interventions, and inscriptions of the self; in this way, he *disentangles* history as well as rigid understandings of postcoloniality, subjectivity, and epistemology from universalist or generalizing stances and maybe tries to protect his work from easy, consumptive gestures of categorization along ›history‹ or ›identity‹, while looking at the atrocities of history and power that establish margins, which are reflected and mirrored in language and thinking and can (only?) be altered from there. As an effect ›Derrida‹ as a figure of thought and of dislocating-thought remains open to the world within always fissured ›identities‹, which may also explain why a kind of struggle seems to remain in scholarly works devoted to Derrida's oeuvre to lovingly (and sometimes not so lovingly) position him either as ›European‹ or ›Jewish‹ or ›Arab‹, or ›Middle Eastern‹, ›African‹, ›Algerian‹ or ›French‹ ›intellectual‹, a ›Marrano‹, another kind (or rather caliber?) of ›philosopher‹, or even as an author of ›literary works‹, and so on (I like to think of him as an Afghan*, which signals unruly subjecthood and also an infinite kaleidoscope of fractured combinations and im/possibilities of free floating subjectivity and interspersed ›ethnicity‹ – which he perhaps may not have minded, hopefully with a laugh). This shows that Derrida's work remains a form of thinking at the borders of things, always considering different forms of marginalization, be it in philosophy, literature, or politics. Derrida accomplishes this by paying attention to language, where these movements reside and reveal themselves. He opens up all these borders for thinking, but in doing so, he also combines and unites them anew, a trait that may not belong to his work and may not be its effect, but that marks his *auto-bio-graphy* in historical as well as experiential, and epistemological ways – he seems to have literally *lived* (through) these seemingly impossible lines and *extendable unifications*. As Jane Hiddleston states: »In this context, Derrida is not simply continuing long-standing debates on the interaction between the individual and the community, but refiguring the resistance of the singular as a stain on the universal that has no position of its own. In his own words, then, the singular autobiographical subject is endlessly elusive, and the apparent self-exposure of autobiography is ›l'exposé de ce qui aura fait obstacle, pour moi, à cette auto-exposition‹. Furthermore, the merging of philosophy with autobiography conveys a reservation towards rationality and argument and shows the contingency of philosophical genesis. Memories and affects that rational language tried to exclude, invade and displace that original pretension. [...] Autobiography here is precisely a genre where the subject's slippery relationship with language becomes visible. It sets up a confusing and ambiguous relation between the experiences recounted and the writer's voice. While it appears at the outset to construct and define the self in language, autobiography finishes by splitting or dividing that self in its very imposition of an artificial representational framework. It is this unsettled and dual subject that serves to disturb the assertive, rational voice of the philosopher« or any thinker, even any humanimal, it may be added. Cf. Hiddleston (2005, 296).

(should) imply. It resembles the echo of Edward W. Said's essay *Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism* ([1976] 1983). Said writes: »How do authors imagine for themselves the ›archive‹ of their time into which they propose to put their text? What are the centers of diffusion by which texts circulate? [...] An earlier tradition, which lasted until the middle of the eighteenth century, was for scholars or critics to consider their life as having exemplary value; scholarly biography was a recognized genre. [...] I draw notice to these historical aspects of critical practice in order to approve their value for the future of critical discourse. Pedagogically, there is every good reason for regarding the choice of a subject and its formulation as being not only the beginning of a critical project but also the critical project itself« (Said 19983, 153). Derrida, too, formulates a warning with regard to approaches to touch – touching, (re)orienting the discourse on touch and, at the same time, emphasizing their main philosophical critique, which lies in the abilities and enablement of deconstruction as a praxis of reading against power-normatives. Derrida, thereby, places touch, paleonymically, within a net of tangency with other terms, the embodiment (of discourse) and its material worldliness, and with the question of power (asymmetries), (*auto-bio-graphical*) history, and the idea of the self and the other, within which an author/critic writes and enables the discourse. Derrida's approach to touch in this sense criticizes along, against, and with Jean-Luc Nancy a coming-back of ontological tendencies within thinking, and, in this sense, ironizes the idea of a *post*-deconstruction epoch that he evokes, but only to assert that it is impossible if things are seen as relational ties of differentiation rather than, in the more usual ontophilosophical tradition, ›for themselves‹. Derrida's approach to touch therefore confirms the ethical relation that is part of deconstruction and that seeks to carve out space for a relationality of a selfhood that is always already bound to an otherhood, to alterity. As Simon Critchley writes: »[O]ntology is the movement of comprehension which takes possession of entities through the activity of labour; it is the movement of the hand, the organ of grasping (as in the linguistic chain *greifen*, *Griff*, *begreifen*, *Begriff*), which takes hold of (*prend*) and comprehends (*comprend*) entities in the virility of its acquisition and digestion of alterity« (Critchley 2014, 6). Touch seems not (only) a form of sense as well as of sense-making but in the first place, as a reminder of the other and a negation of ontology. It could be stated from the way Derrida approaches touch that touch, not ontology, enables the possibility of meaning. Touch always comes already within a space in which time, as well as the self, and the other are differently enmeshed. Touch can therefore be regarded as the a priori ground from where orientations as well as the desire for the production of meanings takes place. Already Derrida's approach to touch also performs it. As will be seen, rather than to define and categorize touch as such, Derrida establishes a (private and political) relation to it via the name of ›Nancy‹, a friend and fellow philosopher (of *Christian* decent).

Derrida discusses touch in his typical meandering style and within an invocation of affectivity that also encompasses sensuality in language, whereby he uses the terms almost metonymically. In this section, I will thus first linger on the meanings that Derrida considers and opens up in touch. In the final, more focused part, I will discuss Derrida's attention to the image of ›laughter‹ that evokes humor.

Throughout the texts, Derrida uses an affective humorous tone on touch, which gives a specific flavor to the deconstructive angle from which he approaches it and which will also be looked at.

Derrida addresses the question of touch explicitly, first in an article with regard to Jean-Luc Nancy's work (Derrida/Kamuff 1993), and later in a book that is an extension of the article and a more encompassing elaboration on touch (Derrida [2000] 2005). Although in both texts the name and work of Jean-Luc Nancy are explicitly mentioned in the title and to an extent determine Derrida's approach, both works, his 1993 article as well as the book, originally published in French in 2000, are not about Nancy as such, but rather are a critical engagement with and reflection on the concept of touch. Rather than determining a definite meaning of what touch or its (sensual or psychological) affective senses may be, this movement unfolds around a spectrum of other signifiers to which the idea/act/concept/corporeal and psychic enactment/sociopolitical discourse and geopolitical scope of the term are metonymically, metaphorically, philosophically, and ethically attached. Derrida's elaborations thus fan out, opening up a web of possibilities of the meanings of touch and the structures that make these (and other) meanings possible within (infinite) specters of sociopolitical, historically conditioned con-textualities, crocheted in the processes of writing and materiality. This unfolding refers not only to quasi-definitions of what touch is, but also to its limits and borders, and to what borders it. The elaboration touches on its own aporias as well as on what it cannot be, thus also touching on the question of the untouchable and that which cannot be touched (which presupposes the im/possibility of touch and makes it possible at all).

Touch, being touched and the reverse, can, in this way, be understood as a (sensual) act or event that seems to precede affectivity; affectivity is not invoked unless you are touched by an other('s touch) which makes you enter into a haunted search for meaning, for a sense, within an endless chain of signifiers. Touch is thus understood as an *ur*-phenomenon, and at the same time, as always already with its own traces, so that it is neither a beginning nor an act that can be experienced by the self alone. Touch always already requires an other to be one. Touch in fact appears to be Derrida's *a priori* concept, entailing all other terms which play a decisive role in his thought: touch is about the trace, about friendship, hospitality, heritage, the rogue, about ›the law‹, about justice, the other, the third, messianism, the secret, the quest/ion of ethics, and about the rupture inherent in a deconstructive reading – which all seem to follow from one another and emerge, folded together, all at the same time, in touch.

Not surprisingly, Derrida first links this movement of and in touch (and in being touched) to the signifying field of language, which unlike its algebraic figures make belief, indicates an infinity rather than a finitude:

»But one certainly feels (as will be verified, and verified precisely by testing the very senses of the word ›sense‹, of the French *sens* or *sentir*, which tend to come down, though not reductively, to the word ›touch‹) that from Aristotle to Nancy, aporias (originally Aristotle's word), as aporias of touch, lead us to think the essence of touch only through language that paradoxical, more than contradictory and hyperdialectical

(x without x, x = noun – x, x = conjunction and/or disjunction of x plus and minus x, and so on).« (Derrida 2005, 68)

Derrida's approach thus lends itself obviously to the theorization and the analysis of written texts (novels). He sees touch within the layers of language. Touch for Derrida is already part of beginnings and lines of flight that are evoked here by the ›hyperdialectical and geometric signs, but he also relates it to an outside, to a sensing and sense-making other, and thus makes it possible to situate the (literary) work outside of its text, within a larger textuality. The touch of and in language, in the above sense, is also imbued with otherness. His approach also subtly evokes material and discursive forms and limits that texts entail up to their margins where readers are implicated in what the text utters and where it is hoped, they hear its echoes, touched in numerous x-w/rays.

The explicit name of Nancy in the title of Derrida's work on touch already indicates these doublings and layers of touch and its affective and sensual effects through language. On the one hand, it shows a form of indebtedness to Nancy and his work. On the other hand, it is a beginning of a search for this paradoxical (un-)touching of touch: Derrida also shows where in Nancy's work touch is not explicitly mentioned but is still part of it and drives it. At the same time, the text, within its paradoxical, witty incongruity that, as it seems, endlessly radiates within philosophical texts, touches back and forth on different meanings that are attached to touch. Derrida's rhetoric, therefore, sometimes bears an almost unnerved tone, sometimes a humorous twinkle at the corner of the eye; it is full of affectivity. This rhetorical tonality and engagement, which transports a taunting as well as serious critical engagement of Derrida with Nancy throughout the book, comes through as quite impatient humorous allusions as well as self-questioning, reflexive formulations, deconstructing the self, at the limit and border of touching the words of the other. In this case the other (in the figuration of ›Nancy) is both, a friend, *almost* outside of discourse, an inner invocation. And it symbolizes a figure on the fringes of dominant discourses (*white, Western, Christian* heritage?), and may also be thought of as Other with a capital O that denies touch its qualities, diminishing it, excluding others to formulate ›proper‹ ones.

Derrida's Touch

Derrida begins his consideration of touch by invoking and describing a scene represented by an epigraph. This epigraph, his response and entry point to Nancy's *touch*, as it were, is illustrated in the form of a (very poetic) question at the beginning of both of his two texts:

»When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?[*Quand nos yeux se touchent, fait-il jour ou fait-il nuit?*].« (Derrida 1993, 122; Derrida 2005, 2)

This question that Derrida puts at the beginning of his own reading of touch, alongside and counter-intuitive to Nancy's approach, already encompasses different entanglements of touch that he ponders upon and at their limits, in the epilogue and throughout

the book, reproaching in a way Nancy for trying to seek ›exactitude‹ regarding the question of the touch, and confronting Nancy's apparent desire for ›exactitude‹ with a trail of traces that fissure any stable, exact ›knowledge‹ of touch (Derrida 2005, 15). This delicate question encompasses an affective trail, it evokes affection and is also about affection and sensuality. At the same time, it seems to be the question of *bare life*, of birth, of encountering pure, the question pure of philosophy *as bare life in the face/in the presence, im Angesicht*, of the other.

With this question, Derrida implicitly disentangles and queries the relation between touch, the haptic, and the sensual as acts of physical senses, but also between philosophy literature, and philosophy and politics, philosophy and its politics, philosophy's texts and philosophy as a text, as written and read signs.

He also seems to ask whether a touch *must be* a haptic endeavor, whether it *is/must be felt* through the skin or the eyes, and what else it might come to mean. Derrida formulates this question not merely as a philosophical question (at the threshold of literature). Rather he invents a story around this question. The other is presumed through their trace: Derrida *finds* the question – or rather the question maybe finds Derrida. The question, this epigraph, is written on the surface of a Parisian wall and crosses Derrida's path. It is thus itself a trace without an origin, since as a trace, it is already marked, touched by the trace of an other's touch. The written question is then itself a mark of touch, of being touched, that touches (an other), by facing Derrida, who faces it. ›Derrida‹ *lets it* face him; he is open to being faced by it. There must be, therefore, also an openness and a reciprocity in this movement of touch that the scene invokes.

Interestingly, one of bell hooks publications, *All about love – New Visions* (2001), begins similarly, with a sentence from graffiti on a wall that also spawned a book. Had it not been in New York – or if we could think of time and space in a way that is non-geographical (which it is, too) – it would be possible to imagine her standing on the other side of Derrida's wall with the inscription. The wall may thereby mark the figure of translation. On the other side of this wall – in New York – the inscription for bell hooks – perhaps an English translation of the same French sentence, then – reads:

»The search for love continues even in the face of great odds.« (hooks 1993, xv)

Unlike Derrida, bell hooks writes about her affective state and her inner circumstances when she came across this inscription just by chance one morning, at a time when she was »overwhelmed by grief so profound it seemed as though an immense sea of pain was washing my heart and soul away« (hooks 2001, xv). As she explains, it is a grief from experiencing a major loss. At the beginning of this introductory chapter with the graffiti is a citation on an otherwise blank page, like an inscription. This time we have an author named below the citation. The quote is from Jack Kornfield, a psychologist, author, and Theravada Buddhist of Jewish descent. The quote takes up a word – an organ, in fact – that, as we will see, also has a central place in Derrida's book on touch:

»It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have

become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have lost this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart.« (Kornfeld quoted after hooks 2001, xii)

bell hooks titled this quotation offering a specific analysis and reading of it. She titled it »Grace: Touched by Love« (hooks 2001, xii). It is almost comical how, in her honest, sensible, and dry way, hooks speaks of how, when she began to speak of the need for ›love‹ people around her eventually told her to go and seek a therapist (hooks 2001, xvii ff.). So, in this beginning of this encounter with an inscription that takes place randomly within an urban space, grief, ›love‹, friendship, and the heart are evoked – and bell hooks brings these words into a line, suggesting that they mean ›grace‹. hooks defines ›grace‹ as »a touch of ›love‹« – a definition that engenders almost religious, mystical traits, and a word to which we will return later. While the words that Derrida and hooks engage with across the wall differ, there are some parallels in their writings. Whatever ›love‹ or touch may mean, both seem to evoke an other, maybe an otherness beyond ourselves, knotted deep within our inner selves, somewhere at the threshold between body and mind. In any case, in both Parisian and New York inscriptions, others and their words are invoked.

Thus touch also presupposes a willingness, an openness, or maybe a capacity, the faculty, to let oneself sense it, and an openness to what it might trigger in one. While hooks continues to muse on the meanings of ›love‹ in New York, we will follow Derrida's search for touch in the streets of Paris. The question about touch on the Parisian wall obstructs Derrida's way, crossing his path. Derrida happens to see and to read it and let himself be touched by it, impregnated by it, touching now (and therefore?) the question of the touch. The touch of the other, it could be argued, *orients* Derrida *towards* thinking, with an other (in mind) about touch. Derrida's self is marked by the trace of the touched other who has sent out this question on the wall. Touch appears as an impress of the other,³ placing itself in (an other) self within a random everyday moment in which a *space* of encounter is initialized. Derrida at the same time performs this (hypothetic?) possibility of the sentence on the wall that crosses his way, making it ›reak in the sense of reeling it eidetically within the frame of a narrative episode.

The question, based on the linguistic fact that, in French, it has a feminine article, *la question*, is personified as a ›she‹. And she* faces, confronts Derrida, while Derrida is about to read and explore her* touch.

3 In *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, [2004] 2014, Sara Ahmed, taking David Hume's term ›impression‹ as a starting point for an understanding of ›contact‹, links affectivity to ›impression‹ as well as to its more violent verbal form ›to press‹. She writes: »We need to remember the ›press‹ in an impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me. I will use the idea of ›impression‹ as it allows me to avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be ›experienced‹ as distinct realms of human ›experience‹«; Ahmed further relegates affectivity to ›orientation‹. This can be extended to include touch as an experience of impression, expression, pressing, as it includes bodily as well as psychic involvement and has the potential to angle and orient one toward something or someone else (6 ff.).

The story of this encounter, whether it is an invention, or a true, ›real‹ event, we do not know (as a text, it is already ›real‹ – and as such blurs the distinction between *happening*, narrating, remembering, telling, writing, and ›reality‹), plays at the limits of humor and sobriety as well as at the limits of reality and fiction, and finally, at the limits of philosophy and literature, as it were, and plays within the ideas of the transphenomenal.⁴

The question involves an other, is in fact a story that comes from the other, as if it were awaiting Derrida's entrance. This *Angesicht* of the other, here, is not a face, it is a text on a wall. It can be read as a historical trace that raises the question of responsibility regarding history as well as regarding former texts. It can also mean one's ancestry and *auto-bio-graphy* and *geo.graphy* – the traces (and spaces) of O/others in oneself, and in the architecture of one's wor(l)d.

In recounting the scene, Derrida emphasizes the other as an *a priori*, as the one who has been there before him and »has henceforth the right to watch over« ›the story‹ (Derrida 2005, 1). Derrida not only recounts the incidence of an *ur*-encountering and of an *ur*-touch as well; he also gives the right to conceive of this touch, to define it, to the other, instead of ruling over it:

»And I would have even lost the right to say, *sensu stricto*, that ›she‹ came to or from *me* – as if I assumed that a question come to me thus came *from* me. This question could not happen to me except being said as much as touched upon – by the other – belonging first to the other, come to me from the other, who was already addressing it to the other. First, ›she‹ beholds and is beholden to, the other.« (Derrida 2005, 2)

There are five aspects related to touch that arise from the encounter. First, in Derrida's story, the encounter happens between two unequal entities, between the other's trace, a gendered question, allegorized as a ›she*‹ and the wa/ondering and reading Derrida. This intertwinement thus does not happen strictly between two subjects or two surfaces or things of the same or different material. It emerges between the mark of an other, a

4 Derrida does not exclude what he calls, for example, telepathy from his philosophic endeavor; he in fact places it at the heart of psychoanalysis. He thereby not only invites to *rethink* psychoanalysis from another standpoint, which may be indeed necessary, but discloses another space, the space of the ›colonial other‹, of ›woman‹, of ›witches‹ of ›magic‹, of ›death‹, of another form of psychic encountering and touch from any kind of ›distance‹ that may be subtle and yet ›deeper‹, more immediate and intimate than what can be grasped from the surfaces of bodily and psychic processes. Alas, along the path of this discovery, his style of looking out for the secret, it seems, leads him onto a rather cis-masculinist track, perhaps confusing something that could be called ›affectionate enchantment‹ with the sign of ›woman‹ as a metaphor for (telepathic?) ›seduction‹ per se – out of a desire to be seduced maybe, confining her* to another (witchy) ›kitchen‹, as it were, which at times makes it difficult to read the text without becoming impatient. This could be the famous ›seduction‹ – so often noticed by ›women*‹, although not always written out, since they (continue to) have no access to writing in the narrow sense, everywhere and in the same way and space as their cis-male counterparts. Derrida has laid out his reflections on telepathy, for example, in a text explicitly called *Telepathy* (trans. by Nicholas Royle). Cf. Derrida ([2003] 2007, 226–261); see also Sartiliot (1989). Nicholas Royle links telepathy to literature as a form of second sight and regards literature, in the sense of power-less not-knowing and not-addressing, as a ›metaphor for reading‹. Cf. Royle (1990). See also Marc Redfield's distinguished review (1992) of the book.

question on the wall, that orients Derrida to itself, and to ›Derrida‹ as an animated subject, and a homodiegetic narrator. Yet, through the narrative form, ›Derrida‹ as well as ›the question on the wall‹ become both figurations as well as abstract signs within the pages of the book. The difference between animated and unanimated, ›real‹ and fiction, material and imaginary or mental is erased in and through language and writing (and not to forget: the question comes also as a *written* question on a wall). Derrida places this touch between himself and the question, in-between an open space, a road that conditions its im/possibility, and emphasizes, in this way, its political trait: For Derrida touch takes place within an open space between the question on the wall and his (astonished) reading, within a certain distance. It is a public space in a metropolitan (central European and postColonial) street.

This historically conditioned *ur*-story of touch of the other has affinity with the concept of chiasm that Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenological work invokes as an intertwining. Merleau-Ponty's metaphoric notion of chiasm is embedded in what he calls *the flesh* (*chair*) (Thomas-Fogiel 2014), a concept that he uses for the texture, which binds and relates ›existence‹ and the day-to-day-world in its material and immaterial senses as a single substratum. For Merleau-Ponty, touch takes place in the folds of the flesh, in its intertwining, where it touches (itself) reciprocally in an (at least momentary) unity. Derrida reorganizes Merleau-Ponty's rather lumpy and lifeless metaphor of *the flesh* by placing touch into the ›worldliness‹ of the experientiality of everyday life, albeit he does so, or so it seems, within a poetically invoked contemplative (philosophical?) narrative. Derrida, probably unintentionally, thereby not only deconstructs his own categorization as an abstract, nihilistic thinker as well as Merleau-Ponty's classification as a phenomenological philosopher bound to experience. He also deconstructs, or *touches*, the limits of literature and philosophy and their functionality with regard to ›understanding‹, making it a question of touch, of *be-greifen* without fingers and a hand, or thoughts that *first* reflects what is to be understood. Touch appears in a performative way as a linguistic, literary, as well as philosophic *grasping* without a visible and actual touch or thought. It is *performed* in the text as well as in the textuality of the everyday experience, without an apparent form of touch, just in the process of writing and reading. Although an organ, the eyes, seeing, is involved in the epigraph, it is not the eyes that come to this perception of the encounter and that hold (on to) the question. Derrida binds these silent instances of touch to an ›inwardness‹ that takes place in the self, and he places them in the political *auto-bio-graphic* subjectivity of the narrating character who he has become in telling the story. But he also places touch, first of all, within the call of the other, as the other's trace. The touch of the other thus is not to be confounded *with* the other. The opening space that emerges in the encounter comes with an orientating movement, which sets the self and the other in a relation to each other; at the same time, in this fleeting encounter an empty space in-between the two entities is opened up as an effect of this liminal touch: While enmeshed in a touch, the other and the self, remain different entities and are not and do not become the same⁵ or an inseparable unity, although something, a touch, seems to have united them in ways unforeseen with regard to their past

5 For a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's rather totalizing idea of relationality in alterity and the sensible, see Mickey (2018).

as well as the future. Derrida depicts the touch, furthermore, out of a written text that he reads (the question on the Parisian wall), thus within the process of reading a text (in a given context). In doing so, he subtly situates touch and responsivity to the touch as phenomena of writing and reading.

Second, the question evokes touch, on the one hand, as a sense of sight, as *seeing*. On the other hand, it interrogates the meaning of sight, vision, seeing, and thus also enquires what touch with regard to eye contact means and where and how it happens. In another related passage Derrida disassembles these, not at all *apparent*, meanings of an eye contact and of sight:

»Now, in the first place, this presupposes that these eyes see *each other*. – These eyes of these gazes? You're going from one to the other. For two gazes, more than two eyes are often needed. And then there are eyes that no longer see, and eyes that have never seen. Aren't you also forgetting those living without eyes? All the same, they don't always live without any light. – Where we are – this night – seems even darker then. Don't we have to make a choice between looking or exchanging glances or meeting gazes and seeing, very simply seeing? For if our eyes see what is *seeing* rather than *visible*, if they believe that they are seeing a gaze rather than eyes, at least to that extent, to that extent as such, they are seeing nothing, then, nothing that can be seen, nothing *visible*.« (Derrida 2005, 2)

Not only are the borders of dis/ability made porous here; the metaphysical dualism between light and darkness, *literally*, power and powerlessness, is also destabilized. In doing so, this question of seeing, as well as of bodily touch and of grasping, in the sense of *be-greifen*, also refutes any dualism between light and darkness and Enlightenment and ignorance, and, in this way, also questions knowing and notknowing as determining, apparent, and conceivable. Here, a play may also be at work with a passage in Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates, in a straightforward dualistic manner binds light to ›knowledge‹ and the sight to seeing and power, in a quite clearcut, corporeal understanding and darkness to notknowing, blindness, and being powerless. It is also a passage where Socrates makes use of ›laughter‹ to gauge the capacity and thus power of knowing, and the powerlessness of notknowing⁶ (Plato 1980, 517 a–b). According to this passage, ›laughter‹ is milder when it comes from a state of knowing, and thus power, it is right – and right out of control, leaving one powerless when it does not know. But this ›knowledge‹ that

6 Here is the whole passage of the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon from the *Republic*, Socrates is speaking: »Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in ›evaluating‹ these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark – and this time required for habituation would not be very short – would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worthwhile even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him? They certainly would, he said. This image then, dear Glaucon we must apply as a whole to all that has been said, likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear.«

Socrates employs here, is the ›knowledge‹ of an allegedly ›knowing‹ subject, and its mild form and ›laughter‹ indicates, therefore, a position of superiority. Interestingly, Socrates does not bind ›knowledge‹ to a state of not-knowing and wonder – in front of which he would be powerless. Plato's Socratic dialogue remains, in so far, an imprisonment within the logic of a subjectivity that claims and *firmly believes* to have not only sought ›truth‹ but to *speak* ›truth‹ as well. The interlocutor always stays in a position of inferiority towards that presumably fake-questioning allegedly, knowing subject. Platonic dialogicity, thus, seems like a master's mask and not the space of convivial exchange on equal grounds, or one that is interested to hear the other, presumably inferior side, listen to them, or in order to *stay in touch* (for a dialogue maybe), but rather to refute.

Derrida's above cited passage, in contrast, rather unfolds as the sensitive trace of not-knowing; it shows itself in an in-betweenness, an empty space of an endless dialogic negotiation. In differentiating various terms of and for the visual, the un-seeing touch of the eyes becomes a complex metonym as well as a metaphor for the haptic that, however, is neither based on the faculty of seeing nor on the logic of ›reason‹, but rather on the singularity of contact between two entities who (are) read/ing someone/something/each other within the interruptive moment of an encounter, in an affective spectra, sensual space (and historical context) that is opened up in a touch; and not only that. Derrida also prompts to think about the *quality* of touch that lies in the gaze of un-seeing:

›If two gazes look into each other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact – the one with the other? [...] If two gazes come into contact, the one with the other, the question will always be whether they are stroking or striking each other – and where the difference would lie. A benediction bordering on the very worst, as always?« (Derrida 2005, 2)

It can be argued that Derrida stays at the threshold of a rhetorical question that seems to know more than it is willing to disclose. Platonic dialogicity appears as part of the desire that unwittingly shows itself in language. But there is more in the passage. Although the passage implies a sensual affectivity within the encounter and its touch, these ›affects‹ amount not only to ›good‹ ones of ›love‹, friendship, and hospitality, but also imply ›bad‹ ones of disgust, contempt, hostility, and violence. Circumcision as a religious rite but also as a corporeal enactment and metaphor/mark of censorship that comes with the gift of being an accepted entity, also seems to be evoked. It is one of Derrida's central *auto-bio-graphical*-philosophical concepts: ›love‹/acceptance and circumcision/pruning, a metaphor that is at the heart of a ›loving‹/violent, corporeal, conceptual, philosophical, religious, sociopolitical, historical, and also psychic touch, between the self as other and the Other. It entails an aporetic affective ray – thoughts, enactments – and one that is inscribed on the (male) body (often also enacted by women).⁷ It is a violent and an

7 Derrida refers to the act of circumcision with reference to his mother and the ›love‹ that he feels for her, where this instance of circumcision has inscribed itself in his memory, just like the ancient texts. Circumcision seems to become a metaphor that entails not only Freud's famous male castration-angst, referred to above. It may also stand for sociopolitical castration and hindrance from within the very same society to which one belongs, and which nurtures one, a *motherland's* confinements in which one is (made) the other, violated against, for the sake of some common good.

abusive rite, and yet one that is done with great care and out of ›love‹, two paradoxical approaches, which are interwoven in one another. This contradictory affective knot is evoked here by the distinction between ›stroking‹ and ›striking‹ that becomes almost indistinguishable in the same act, and yet may also be experienced conversely – what for one party may be stroking, for the other might be striking, and vice versa. The image of the borders of ›benediction‹, emphasizes the aporetic experience of touch. ›Benediction‹ not only evokes religion and religiosity, which can go wrong in its well-intentionality when the spirit of the text, the spirit of textuality, is transformed into profane, confining authority, serving specific interests and readings, enforcing itself on others, and thus a form of power-imposition, which, then, has to try hard to maintain itself and, therefore, dominate, even eliminate, others. It also can be connoted as *doxa*, as any form of fixity and the proclamation of an end, of ›truth‹ (in this sense in fact, becoming blasphemy, its other, as textual ›truth‹ is replaced by a specific reading that must potentially remain ›untruth‹). Derrida in this way releases touch from an essentialist and romanticized ›touchy-feely‹ approach. The chiasm of touch rather encompasses simultaneously the chiasm of different, aporetic meanings of ›love‹ and violence, the violence of ›love‹, of a specific ›love‹, in the name of an Other, that paradoxically others, and thus reveals its falsity when the gates of and towards the dialogic – the closest one gets to textual ›truth‹ – are shut, silenced. In this way, as paradoxical as it may seem, neither ›love‹ nor violence are separated and seen as contradictory. Both concepts are rather considered as two sides of the same will/desire, movements in closeness, intimacy – reading. In a more general sense, this relation evokes Derrida's reading of the pharmakon as medicine and poison within the sociopolitical realm. It is thus at the heart of any idea of togetherness, neighborliness, and earthboundness, and therefore worth exploring – and thinking through how, on which basis we can, we are allowed, to give form to being and living together, with such precautions and affective frames in mind – when at any point ›good‹ can change into ›bad‹ – to remain in dialogue, in reparative rather than hurting ways.

Third, as mentioned above, Derrida envisions his response (to touch, to being touched, and to touching) in and as writing and reading; the encounter takes place between the self and a sentence, a question written on the surface of a Parisian wall, a public space that has written itself into Derrida's book on touch. Derrida places touch

It may also stand for a state of coming of age and disillusionment, out of (historically) experienced (life-)events that leave their mark on the body and (discursively) inscribe the body by injuring it. Derrida uses the term ›recircumcision‹ to refer to the process of (*auto-bio-graphical*) writing in which one castrates oneself, but also as an aporetic process of a complex, laborious affectivity through which the writing emerges, or that rather gives birth to writing. See Derrida (1999 a, 215 ff.). The figure of the mother appears, thus, as ambivalent, with reference to the male*-gender; as the voice of the super-ego that is archived in the self, the mother-figure is also seen as a powerful and in this sense violent/violating and indicatory site of curtailment and ›culturing‹ in specific affective, sensual, corporeal, as well as cognitive ways. Circumcision, thus, and paradoxically, stands for the powerful site of the mother-figure – who becomes an executive party, without decisional power, a weapon, and protective shield of patri-lineal symbolic orders that hurts her* the most and hinders her* becoming, – as well as, it could be argued, the reverse and (male*, masculinist*) revenge site of sociopolitical and discursive gender-roles that mirror themselves in the symbolic order when power shifts from the mother to the son/man.

not only in writing and reading. He also show its contamination by the spheres of the public and the private that are subverted by it. In this way, writing and reading are shown as enmeshed in an inner and an outer world. This stresses the ›liveliness‹, the sensuality of discourse and ›philosophy‹ and their link to and in the process of writing and reading. It configures touch through writing as an encounter within the text itself – but also as a sociopolitical process: The inscription is written on the wall, while the text, in the narrow sense of writing, is written on pages. The senses of touch, its abstract, absent and immaterial sense, as well as its sociopolitical sense, are taken up in one stroke as the trace of the other's inscription in the self, and interlinked with the material worlding. Touch, its sensuality and affectivity, moves from the meaning proper to the realm of discourse, to the (lived experience and *written*, told, abstract, supplementary) realm of language in the conglomeration of different, contradictory other meanings within the frame of a (her*-)story. This also anticipates the paradox of fiction (Redford/Weston 1975; Feagin 2007) always already as ›fiction‹ as well as ›paradox‹, as any touch, affectivity, maybe even sensuality, is further explored, positioned, in an afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*), in the haunting that follows, and is sometimes expressed (or is poured) into language, while in its *immediate* momentum – the presence of taking place – a touch with all its attendant sensual-affectivity is as such always already almost undetectable, gone. Touch is sensible only as a trace and orientation that is evoked by the relational movement that ensues from an encounter, in lived experience, as within writing/reading. From both ends it appears woven within a texture that is sociopolitical as well as textual.

This indeed is one of the premises with which Derrida approaches Nancy's work as well as the tops of the touch generally. Writing in parenthesis, interrupting his analysis in an interval, Derrida opens up a space in the encounter with Nancy's texts, in which he places his motivation for the book, interlaced with a spectra of affectivity, his reciprocal touch, touching Nancy, being touched by him. This intertwining of touch, is a performance of the trace of touch in the texture of a (private) life (friendship), in the texture of thinking (philosophy), as well as in the texture of (historically driven, sociopolitical) discourse that indicates, *calls* for a different futurity to think, touch as the beginning for an other approach to worldliness and becoming –:

»(Metonymies are in mourning, at least, for a proper sense or name. And we shall see that this book is also about the metonymies of touch. It started out as an offering for Jean-Luc Nancy, for him alone, quite uniquely for him, and by running the risk of publication, it is already exposing itself to so many other metonymies. Hence the worrying in this unsteady gesture, in its tonalities and affect.)« (Derrida 2005, 17)

This ›worrying‹ metonymizes the complex entanglement of different sociopolitical, private, as well as affective effects that are attached to discourse, the discourse of touch, and the touch of the other and the touch upon a subject-matter. What Derrida calls an ›unsteady gesture‹, in fact, may be what accompanies the parergon-discursivity of touch as well. This is not a casual, *parenthetical* remark that Derrida makes, but an awareness that he draws from *addressing the question of touch* (in both its discursive, as well as its figurative, senses).

Fourth, Derrida envisions this tangible response in the form of the personification of the question as a ›she‹. ›She*‹ signifies not only the feminine pronoun but also the marginalized other that arises, as if from the self's indefinite unconscious. ›She*‹, however, is not only the human (or dehumanized) other. ›She*‹ also is a question, an other, who is, not always presumably human, ›she*‹ is also and above everything, a written as well as inscribed sign, ›she*‹ is part of language and discourse, and, therefore, a specter of meanings. She* knocks on Derrida's door reminding him of herself*:

»She‹ didn't come to pay me a *visit*. In other words, ›she‹ didn't *alight* to *see* me, as if I had *invited* her. No, as I said, ›she‹ took hold of me, ›she‹ invaded me even before I had seen ›her‹ coming: ›she‹ touched me before letting ›herself‹ be seen.« (Derrida 2005, 1)

The question, the call for a (re)orientation comes from the other who seems absent but has left a question at the doorstep of the one approached, as a sign and reminder of her* absent-presence. With this invocation of the other at one's doorsteps, of the self and the wall, the self's (inward and outward) architecture, Derrida also implements touch as a trace that has no detectable other end. It already comes from the unknowable before it *somehow* enters the self, knocking, sometimes violently, questioning (the gendered) subjectivity of the self.

Derrida alludes in this way also to the exclusion and silencing of the other in the meta-physical organization of language and discourse. This other is also the always already gendered, excluded stranger who comes as ›an event‹ to the Other (power), challenging it – and Derrida lets her* in to take part in the discourse (on touch). He does not disbar her* from the discourses of touch, critically pointing to the (Western?) anthropocentric as well as cis-masculinist, »teleological hierarchy« (Derrida 2005, 152). In staging the question as the excluded, gendered other, Derrida also carves out the submerged space for the other to speak for herself* within the topos of touch. ›She*‹, thus, is set as an agent, as an *agens* and not as an object of touch that is spoken about.

Derrida nonetheless enables a double approach to touch that, on the one hand, binds the other to the still unresolved and ongoing question of gender, and that, at the same time, liberates it from any essentialization of gender as well as otherness by evoking the other as a question (of the psyche? Of consciousness? Of an inanimate thing? Of humanimals?), as a sign that the (muted) other has left in the face of the (dominant) self?

Fifth, Derrida's story *around* this question, this epigraph, is told within a humorous and self-ironizing rhetoric that distorts not only any ›truth‹ about the incident, but also about the borderlines of factual and fictional writing while exposing the irrelevance of such a distinction in writing and the (possible) value/virtue of the effects of writing about an (im/possible) incident of touch. It also undermines any authoritative approach that Derrida may have inadvertently implied in writing and announcing the episode. The (phallogocentric) logic of *what is* is shifted to the logic of *what is un/said, saying* something else in depicting the enmeshment of historically determined (biased) meanings and their systematization within language. The humorous tone plays on the borders of meaning, deconstructing the question of factuality and ›truth‹ that feels obliged to itself, as irrelevant in the face of a (possibly) hypothetical ›truth‹ that takes into account surrendering to the words of the other:

»I barely dared sign such a question, not to mention its gloss [...] and for a moment I thought of inventing a history, or, in fact, since we have said goodbye to history, of pretending to *invent* a true story. This one: unlikely though it may seem, I thought I deciphered this anonymous inscription on a wall in Paris, as if it had journeyed there from the shores of another language.« (Derrida 2005 4)

Derrida intervenes in the discourse of the touch, paving the way for a space and time related, (future) intersectional approach within and beyond the human perception of what touch (might) mean(s) in the context of ›life‹, of history, of writing, restoring the subjectivity of the (unknown) other. In presuming that the question might come from ›the shores of another language‹, this subjectivity of the other is not only considered within gendered sociopolitical bias, but also within racialized and underprivileged colonial ones. The other speaks (out) on the wall of metropolitan Paris, queering the question of touch, queering the certainty of the self – and through writing on the wall, queering the space as well as reclaiming space for itself, in a quite timid form of a (wild or rather free) inscription of a memory or reminder. The wall, and writing on the wall, not only invokes the (excluded) other (of ›Europe‹); it also reinvokes ›revolution‹, not only ›the French Revolution‹, but the 1968 ›revolution‹ when the walls of Paris were used to propagate a revolution by the inscription of (philosophical) slogans on the walls of the city, the polis.⁸ The trace of the other is, thus, also their double form of agency – the trace of their exploitation and the trace of injustice that accompanies it, in which the architecture of writing is written. It comes with a historically conditioned sociopolitical context, and *here*, on the walls, in the architecture of power, domination is always connected to its other, in unseen ways, in the bones and *skin* of its polis, on the surface of the metropolitan cities that are built and kept with the (psychic and physical) capacities of the other(-ed).

In Derrida's encounter, touch becomes an elusive trans-sensual event that comes from the past-present of a history of dominance, which Derrida has himself experienced all too vividly from different directions within his bones and skin. In reading the inscription on the wall, Derrida is moved (as if reminded?), touched, (inwardly) (possibly) going into another direction, reaching out into the future (of a book) and its possible disseminations. ›From the shores of another language‹ in a Parisian context – can mean Arabic, or Algerian, or the Jewish-Arabo-French, or the *banlieue*-kids, or Caribbean French. It may also depict in a subtle, imaginative fashion, the figure of Hegel's sister, Christiane Luise Hegel, as a street-child, the one Hegel sister, who, in another im/possible constellation, would have had ended up on the streets of Paris, crying maybe mournfully, and writing her philosophy on the surfaces of the city walls.⁹ A wall also indicates a non-passage,

8 Robert Young at least argues that the 68s movement had a specific place in Paris, which was the streets of the Latin Quarter, »which at that time was a little third-world itself, full of Vietnamese, Algerians, and West Africans, and their lively cafés and restaurants. Into this mix, the political and theoretical ferment of May '68 was animated by the populist politics of the contemporary Cultural Revolution in China: »nous sommes le pouvoir« (*we are power*), as the slogan put it«, and which also had their place: the wall. Cf. Young (2021, 433, 446).

9 In *The Phenomenology of the Mind* Hegel refers to the interrelatedness of dark and light as well as the possible meanings and understandings of the sensual. Hegel refers here not only to the sensuality of ›seeing‹ and ›blindness‹ and their limitations and intertwinements; his argument evolves

a border. A wall can be seen by everyone and yet, is so mundane, it is regularly overlooked and overread, a neglected place and borderline of not belonging. A wall also indicates an aporia that questioningly speaks to the reader/viewer/counter-part as (an asymmetrical) face-to-face encounter, also touching (on) the question of an ethics of encounter. It begs the subsequent question of an ethics of touch, implying touch as an ethics of openness to the other. This speculative de/liberation on touch also encompasses the language of the othered other(-s), and the language of marginality, the language of violence, and the violence of the encounter of colonization and its discontinuities, respectively, which are also part of language and discourse and which from within, like the question of the wall, implicate the ethics of memory and remembrance. This is also about where to place touch, how to scrutinize touch when it comes to historically entrenched forms of exclusion and violence that have shaped language and discourse, the city walls and the walls within the city, which are fraught with obstacles and conspicuous absences.¹⁰

Elsewhere, Derrida speaks of this space of an absolute (other) encounter with the other, of this touch, in an almost mystical way, defining it as an *affirmative* »act of messianic faith – irreligious and without messianism« (Derrida [2003] 2005a: xiv), a quasi-religious or super-religious act, a *trans-cendentality pure*, one might say, that seems to open up religion *so it can be religious* at all. And here, again, Derrida is critical of an Enlightenment that remains within the confines of »Christianity« and thus is incapable of advancing an understanding of »knowledge« that also embraces – not oppresses – the other(-ed). Derrida imagines this act within *a place* that he calls *khôra* »which means a *locality* in general, spacing, interval«. He describes *khôra* as that which *gives place without actually giving*, and which allows that something (like an encounter?) *takes place*; even such an incidental encounter (with the wall) thus must be located in an act with an (unknown) o/Other, which comes with the possibility of *khôra*. *Khôra* appears as a kind of *ur-space* of touch of the (unknown, unseen) o/Other, a third maybe that is neither a subjectivity that

into a reflection about the supersensible (*das Übersinnliche*). *Das Übersinnliche*, in Hegel's vocabulary, in fact becomes the inner truth (*innere Wahrheit*), which is inconceivable within the narrowness of the mind (*Verstand*). Maybe Hegel will be and can be read in the future with regard to such forms of the (*über*-)sensual and what they may mean. Cf. Hegel 2015, 60 ff. and 85 ff. Derrida's allusion to the shores of another language, might thus also mean Hegel (or unconsciously Hegel's sister, whose lyrical work is missing). »Hegel« appears here as the forerunner of the sublation of dichotomic understandings per se, as well as one of the earliest thinkers of poststructuralist thought in European modernity (whatever – or whoever? – (not-European) might have triggered these thoughts in him?). Also, with regard to sensuality, Hegel still remains interesting, as he considers the *Übersinnliche* as a form of appearance, if not the purest form of it. The shores of another language may therefore also refer to German and may encompass not only Hegel but also Nietzsche and the rift, which the latter further examines in the analysis and critique of the dictates of the Enlightenment and the regime of »reason«. The role of the other, especially in the invocation of the figures of the »Jew« or the »Black« as the other(-ed) par excellence (which are to be thought and analyzed by considering gender, class, and sexuality), in European philosophy, and their role and function, still need to be uncovered in European texts – the way Toni Morrison, e. g., has outlined the figure of the African American for the establishment of the imaginary of the (*white*) U.S.-American novel/literature in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). See also Sander L. Gilman (1980).

10 For a discussion of Derrida's approach to touch and the colonial concept of »race« and racism, see Shirley A. Tate (2016).

can become a superior self nor a subjectivity that can rule. The two entities face each other on equal grounds in (the) *khôra* (and thus must come to terms with each other, on equal grounds, no matter how ›unequal‹ they may seem, it could be concluded); at the same time, Derrida ensures that this thought is not sublated into another form of *theology* or ideologization, and that it remains *untouched* and *free*:

»No politics, no ethics, and no law can be, as it were, deduced from this thought. To be sure, nothing can be done [*faire*] with it. [...] On it, perhaps, on what here receives the name *khôra*, a call might thus be taken up and take hold: the call for a thinking of the event to come, of the democracy to come, of the reason to come. This call bears every hope, to be sure, although it remains in itself without hope. Not hopeless, in despair, but foreign to the teleology, the hopefulness [...], not foreign to justice, but nonetheless heterogenous and rebellious, irreducible, to law, to power, and to the economy of redemption.« (Derrida [2003] 2005a: xiv-xv)

It is, as if Derrida here, in a quite poetic form that in fact tries to express a philosophical, almost utopian, *trans*-cendental vision, would circumscribe ›literary writing‹, the literary form, literariness, itself as a *khôra*, a *place for a quiet encounter*, dialogue and pensiveness. Literature or the literariness of the text, even in the sense of social textures of the everyday, of the materiality of the world, appear enmeshed in writing and as writing, and can provide such a fleeting *khôra*, such a place for the possibility of encounter that might touch passersby, readers, you and me, in this almost ethical, quasi *trans*-cendental sense, where a touch of reorientations can take place, without any explicit intentions or directions, by just *coming into being*, *being there* (from out of historic and perhaps non-historic entanglements), and *occur* (or take shelter?). The scene of reading in which Derrida sees the epigraph on the wall comes close to a narrated literary depiction of such a *khôra*. *Khôra* may then be the place where an enactment of touch is invoked. It is a place that cannot be made, but one that unexpectedly appears – is given without being there. *Khôra* seems like the heterotopic place that the literary imagination can evoke and that is always invoked differently in the reading process, which makes reading, within its simulacrum and repetitions, always anew a singular moment, even within the always same text(-uality), and thus always open, a chance for ever new beginnings. *Khôra* thus may be the aesthetic value of literature, literariness, its ever anew possibility of touch. This singularity of the reading process is chiasmic; it also enables the possibility that a *khôra* arises, that a touch ensues within a reading process. *Khôra* can also be conceived as the place of non-knowledge and powerlessness that derives from (literary) writing, as a potential possibility of *there is* (Derrida 2005 a: xv), this ›place without age‹, ›another ›taking-place‹, a ›desert in the desert‹ (Derrida 2005 a: xiv–xv).

Khôra, thus, appears as the interlinking place between (the literariness of) ›writing‹ and non-knowledge and powerlessness, and one that ensues, takes place in the texture of the text, not only the literary one, but in the text we are written in, the historically determined, sociopolitical, material one, which Derrida evokes by the image of the sentence on the wall.

Literature does not thereby annul the everyday-text, nor does it superimpose itself on it or is a form of mimesis, but rather may constitute a parallel engraving, echoing

an other voice. The everyday-text, like the literary one, are two different pages, out of two different materialities that are in constant *contact* with each other that constantly touch each other, like a crochet loop stitch. As the (literary) text is not limited to one scene of writing but is, like Derrida's book on the touch itself, a constant reprography in different ways, of words and signs, those *khôras* that are there in the text and which one can (potentially) come across in the text, hook into each other and extend into a fabric of (possible and infinite) production of meanings and possibilities (of reading, of rendering, of agency, of not-knowing, of power-lessness). *Khôra* thus seems part of, enmeshed in, the texture of our texts in both their senses, of the everyday as well as in narrated, written texts in a narrower sense, philosophical as well as literary ones. This becomes even more evident, with regard to another passage in *Rogue* where Derrida explicitly takes up this niche, the *khora*, this ›there is‹, »es gibt« (Derrida 2005 a: xv), this place in the space of a materialized space. *Khôra* shows itself, or rather can be seen, grasped, in the ›city‹, the mundane everyday-space, not just in Plato's cave and abstract sophisticated philosophical thinking. *Khôra*, thereby, is not just any space, or rather spacing; it is one that makes the encounter with an excluded other, the other even within what is called democracy – a goal rather than an accomplishment – possible. It is the place of the encounter with the one who is deemed (by someone, by the superior self) a ›rogue‹. In *Rogues* thus, in the figure of *voyou*, where Derrida's emphasis is on the idea and critique of an understanding of democracy, and, coming from the French background against which he speaks in the first place, of assumptions that foreground it, imbued in expressions like ›the French Revolution‹ with its mottos, one of which is »brotherhood«, ›the rouge‹ is a male figure. Remaining with this conclusion, in *Rogue* Derrida problematizes inclusions and exclusions within the rhetoric of democracy that makes different people *alike*, but that also produces trajectories of notbelonging (Derrida 2005 a: 63). In *On Touching*, all the central concept-metaphors¹¹ with which Derrida engages himself seem to be repeated in related

11 It seems slippery to speak of ›terms‹, ›concepts‹ or ›metaphors‹ when it comes to the work of Derrida and what he tries to (un-)fix in negotiating a point; I think, though, that in the end he has a point: Even a metaphor is within a chain of metaphoricality, and not confinable to a specific shift, as meaning is dependent on so many different aspects. It is, therefore, not controllable as such, (which does not mean that there is no ›right‹ or ›wrong‹ or only not-understanding); Derrida tries to bind this evaluative strain that goes against any arbitrary relativism and simulacrum in meaning production to the idea of ›the third‹, to alterity and the question of the other, and to what seems to be two ends, two poles of argumentation: the conditional, context bound question, where a decision has to be made; and the virtual contextless, infinite context in which the pristine meaning of a ›value‹ has to be released again as unconditional. The ›unconditional‹, though is also bound to the idea of the third, to alterity and thus, remains a question of the ethical. While this boundless, unfixability of meaning-production, nevertheless, seems tedious and appears nihilistic at first glance, and might evoke frustration and some kind of intellectual rage – Derrida's always opposing, and therefore, in its alluring illuminations always somehow dominating thinking, often has aroused different forms of resistance, exemplary are in this regard Searle's and Ricœur's rejection of parts of his work (in Ricœur's case especially with regard to the understanding of metaphor) – it also is a liberating and empowering way of setting new ideas, approaches, and (marginalized) understandings into work. At the same time, Derrida's thought has a regulatory function in terms of the machinery of power and dominance that, too, reside in the creation of all, however confined and carefully established ›truths‹ of any kind. His own work is therefore not an exception to this rule, which may be why Derrida's work and language often touch the shores of the literary (as the

ways, and this is also the case with the term ›repetition‹ as such. This relation can be seen within three aspects that refer to the issue of exclusion and alterity, and they are conjoined here as the question of touch. Firstly, the other, the rogue, here appears as the (pronoun and) figure ›she‹. It seems to be the gendered question of the rogue that he thematizes: »Here, finally, is the first question: can one and/or must one speak democratically of democracy?« (Derrida 2005 a: 71). Secondly, it is the *context* that he evokes, the space. It is the place of an imperial city (and the polis, right at the heart of (Western) philosophizing) in which he places the question of the other and, in doing so, also makes it a (socio-)political question, when he for example says:

»The word *voyou* has an essential relation with the *voie*, the way, with the urban roadways [*voirie*], the roadways of the city or the *polis*, and thus with the street [*rue*], the waywardness [*dévolement*] of the *voyou* consisting in making ill use of the street, in corrupting the street or loitering in the streets, in ›roaming the streets‹, as we say in a strangely transitive formulation. This transitivity is in fact never very far from the one that leads to ›walking the streets‹.« (Derrida 2005 a: 65)

Transitivity sometimes seems to hide both subjects, the one who speaks as well as the one who is looked at – and who cannot speak themselves, although both are generated in this way – with the in/accessibility to the performativity of language and the ordering of discourse. (This does not mean, of course, that other(-ed) subjects are not speaking with humorous tonalities, with or without the transitivity that is trying to denote and generate the wor(l)d in specific ways.) And this, *walking the streets*, in fact, following Derrida, could it not also be understood as the possibility of another (future, heterotopic) form of (*democratic*) ›freedom‹, from which we seem very far away?

Thirdly, finally, Derrida problematizes language as another realm of alterity, exclusion, and spacing, and at the same time, as the realm that speaks (with) power:

»Between power as force and power as right or law, between law and justice, between *kratos* and principle [*le droit*], between the constative, the prescriptive, the normative,

legitimate open space of all unconfined possibilities), while he seems to courageously resist to surrender to it, and, rather, to hold his foot on the surface area of ›philosophy‹, in theorizing it anew; this, too, can be read as another form of resistance (from a marginalized space) as he has to fight in order not to be othered as ›the Jew‹ who is more into ›literature‹. His not letting go of philosophy might not only have something to do with a desire for change (and a desire for the powerful that also always looms in there), but may also be a strategy that this change still requires, in order to be made – (while it sustains an open end beyond the strict configurations of what philosophy and what literature are). This approach, though, is not and should not be confined to literature (and literature should, therefore, not be confined to a thingness, to ›itself‹). This seems only the case and possible (and appears ›logical‹) as ›the laws‹, and boundaries of disciplinary separation are guarded jealously (especially by ›philosophers‹ who would have something to lose (power?)); if these ›the laws‹ should (one day) be suspended, and one could enter the sphere of sublation then we might end up one (other) day without having any boundaries whatsoever, globally, and only a *Geschwisterhood* within the vast field of literariness with all its reflections, sensualities, affectivity, and embrace of the *future* – a task and inclination that still awaits its future realization (and hopefully not just in the confinements of the digital).

and the performative, a whole panoply of differences and nuances unfolds and then folds back in on itself.« (Derrida 2005 a: 72)

The *rogue*, the *voyou*, in the city, thus also implies classed and racialized subjectivity. The question on the wall repeats the question of the *rogue*, of forms of exclusions within the frame of ›democracy‹ by also indicating ›race‹, gender, queerness, and femininity as forms of otherness (transcending an assumed ›brotherhood‹). The question on the wall is not only one that depicts and interrogates the meaning of (romantic) ›love‹, of genuine closeness, but can also be regarded as *the* quintessential question of an ethical relationship that is part and parcel of and lies at the heart of power and *polis*. It also implicitly renders power as a relationship, which is not necessarily only bound to forms of exploitation and labor, but also within a relationship that is through and through shaped by the sensual and by affectivity. In this way, power is problematized in a way that goes marrow-deep into the body-mind substance of (the humanimal) *being in the wo(rl)d*, in complex, aporetic, chiasmic ways, one that lies in the economy of non-knowledge and power-lessness, where power and ›knowledge‹ are indeed questioned.

In fact, in *Adieu to Levinas* (Derrida 1999), Derrida defines the question as *the third*, and the (necessary) *question of justice*. *The third* is a necessity that comes ›as early as the epiphany of the face in the face to face‹ (Derrida 1999, 32). Without the third, violence would threaten the fragile encounter of the face to face (Derrida 1999, 32). However, despite the third, the encounter enters into a double bind, as the third, in the sense of justice/ethics, signals an ›initial perjury‹ that has been committed to the face-to-face encounter. The desire for justice thus rests on a violation that has already been perpetrated. Justice can only be conceived as a contingent moment; it is limited by ›the law‹, which has to decide and, and thus returns to the circle of ›perjury‹. Justice and ›the law‹, for Derrida, link the conditioned and the unconditioned, which nevertheless, make ethics, the question of ethics, possible. The ethics of touch entails both, the possibility of striking as well as of stroking, while both can turn into possibilities of ›love‹ or perjury, of parts of a ruse. *Justice*, then, must, always be separated anew from ›the law‹ as such, in order not to be corrupted in this economy:

»It is necessary that this threshold not be at the disposal of a general knowledge or a regulated technique. It is necessary that it exceeds every regulated procedure in order to open itself to what always risks being perverted (the Good, Justice, Love, Faith – and perfectibility, etc.). This is necessary, this possible hospitality to the worst is necessary so that good hospitality can have a chance, the chance of letting the other come, the yes of the other no less than the yes to the other.« (Derrida 1999, 35)

This ethics of touch, this letting in of the other, independent of the *quality of the touch* that may result from the encounter, speaks to bell hooks' call for humor within ›meaningful revolutions‹, as discussed in the beginning. (*Affective*) humor, as laughing at oneself and one's discourses, reveals the porous limits of the historically conditioned language and discourse, of the texture, of our entanglements, of the perjuries and ›the law‹, and is, in this sense, also an entry point to *justice*, to touch as the im/possibility of ethics within this textural, material, and immaterial encounter. The question, the mark of the other

on one's doorsteps, does not guarantee a *just* process, some revelation of ›truth‹. But its touch can lead to an orienting and formative search. And that alone seems to be the value attached to it, which makes it worthwhile; Derrida's encounter with the question and the trace of the other within one's reach is an engagement with the call of the other from where the self enters a dialogue within itself as well as within discourse in an attempt to carve out space for the other's question without the possibility of (ever) having access to it as such. With her* entry, ›she*‹ just leaves a mark within the self, questioning the (cis-male?) self.

The insertion of Derrida about the shores of another language is not found in the 1993 article on touch, but it completes the question of the other with respect to the touch of history, the question that comes *from* and *as* the historically formed, marginalized other. ›She*‹ is queering any understanding of a self-sufficient subjectivity that ponders upon touch without imagining *himself* as touchable/seeable by the other. Derrida asserts that (colonial) discourse and its gaze are violent when he speaks of the touch of the eyes. Touch always already entails an ambiguous instance and an unstable space. It is threatened by the undecidable liminality of the gaze that can be »stroking or striking« and the question »where the difference would lie« (Derrida 2005, 2). The violence of touch also maintains an eroticized accent and is implicitly also evoked as part of loving/rejecting, longing, and desire in history and discourse, in relationalities within the self as well as outside of it.

The ›anonymous inscription‹ in the above passage also implies untouchability as a form of (epistemic) violence in the sense of ›sanctioned ignorance‹ (Spivak 1999, 2). To ignore the other's call and thus silence it within discourse is to turn away from the other's touch¹²: The sentence written by an unknown other (not part of the established discourse), is not on a page, but on a wall, as the excluded and unmentioned space and trace of philosophy, history, language, and power in the ›polis‹. The wall is used as a page-surface and a (counter-)archive of the naïve (wilderness-)street philosophy of the excluded, from the outside-within. Spivak's term ›sanctioned ignorance‹ reveals a structure of walls in U.S.-dominated academic discourse that forecloses the possibility of an ethics¹³ that would remain open to otherness, and that prevents discourse from adhering to the inclusive possibilities of language and thought. Touch always involves reciprocity and responsiveness. This, then, allows for the possibility of an ethics of responsibility. The wall, with its question, must be thought of as a *mise en abyme* that always depicts an other. Otherness does not coincide with or signify the metropolitan other or the ›native informant‹, but must always be *rethought* within different, often overlapping structures of exclusion.

12 Within the discourse of colonialism and Blackness, Shirley A. Tate calls this, citing Derrida's expression ›touching without being touched‹, the ›refusal of touch‹. Cf. Tate (2016, 71).

13 Spivak uses the term *florenclosure* from Lacanian psychoanalytic terminology. Lacan links the father's entry into the mother-child relationship to the child's development within the symbolic order and the subject's ability to connect the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic. When the father is excluded (*verworfen*) from this relationship, the subject allegedly cannot develop this conjuncture and enters into a psychotic, delusional relationship with ›the world‹, which it cannot read (in the constituted manner and order of the symbolic?) (And which may also have its good sides?). See Spivak (1999, 4).

Psyche's Touch 'n the Self

Derrida's personified and gendered question comes with an insisting violence ›at its fingertips‹; it can be regarded as an oscillating figure in-between the other of history as well as the (unconscious) other of the self: »One day, yes, one day, once upon a time, a terrific time, a time terrifically addressed, with as much violence as tact at its fingertips, a certain question took hold of me – as if it or ›she‹ [*la question*], came of me, to me« (Derrida 2005, 1). ›She*‹ may not demand a response, but ›she*‹ hammers a question on the wall of the public space that enters the inner space of the thinking philosophy. It is these ›fingertips‹ that apparently have led to the book and its different tangents laid out in the book chapters on touch.

Derrida hears, *senses* ›the question‹ *from* and of the other, her* uncanny absence-presence, punching on the door of the discourse of touch (within himself?). ›She*‹ poses herself* in-between the production of ›knowledge‹ and its absences and silences.

Derrida's ›she*‹ may have emerged in response to another ›she*‹ in a text by Nancy, *Psyche* (1993), a text that Derrida ponders upon in this book. In Nancy's text, *Psyche* becomes a personified ›she*‹-figure and a ›story‹ – a story that might have more in common with a traditional eroticized cis-masculinist imagery of ›feminine passivity‹ than with ›psyche‹ as the place-holder of the immeasurable, uncanny unconscious, or with Apuleius' *Psyche and Eros*. Nancy's *Psyche* is based on a late equivocal sentence of Freud: »The psyche is extended, knows nothing about it« (›*Psyche ist ausgedehnt, weiss nichts davon*‹; Freud quoted in Derrida 2005, 12).¹⁴ While Freud's phrase can be understood as the unintentional, all-encompassing structure or energy (throughout space and time?) of something called *psyche*, which indeed echoes a state of not-knowing and power-lessness, Nancy tries to figure out what this extension may exactly mean. *Extension*, then, is a word that Nancy uses on the basis of this Freudian expression and that Derrida continues to engage with, along with other prefixes of the *ex-* in Nancy's work. Derrida seems to warn against structures of silencing that constantly overlook and exclude the other, prefiguring *ex-* as a prefix of exclusion and emphasizing that a fixation of meaning as a quasi ›final end‹ only describes a structure of exceptions [which is why it inevitably remains open to deconstruction]; ultimately, it could be said, that no form of totalitarianism can be total and that it inheres its own failure; Derrida's reading therefore also seems to be a warning against the desire to fix ›knowledge‹ and the knowable more generally, and one that conveys ›knowledge‹ to the shores of non-knowledge, to another language – that then must also be perceived as power-less, inhabiting power and not inhabiting it at the same time.

14 The phrase is taken from some late notes of Freud's that were written as disconnected paragraphs and that he had headed »Findings, Ideas, Problems« in 1938: »August 22. Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychical apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant's *a priori* determinants of our psychical apparatus. Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it.« (Freud 2024.23, 275). Maybe this psyche can be thought of as telepathy; an unanimated entity that synoptically interlinks itself with its other ›parts‹; psyche as an outstretched material in-between matter, conglutinating it together. A form of intimacy that is infinite and that can be activated, that can tug itself by itself in its many parts like Merleau-Ponty's *chair*.

In contrast to the ›she*‹ that pays Derrida a ›visitation‹ at the beginning and actively takes hold of him with her* insistent fingertips, reminding him of herself* (and *himself*), Nancy's *Psyche* is presented as an unknowing, unconscious female figure. (This seems an oxymoron – for *Psyche* may simply not know how much ›she*‹ knows at the shores of another language, which is not the same as unknowing). In contrast to the pervasive Freudian understanding of unconsciousness, as the driving signifying system of an other within the self, Nancy's *Psyche* is a passive and vulnerable, stretched out female body rather than a motor and drive of and in life and thought. Her* (apparently dead) body is exposed to the gazes of those surrounding her* (apparently cis-male figures?). One of these gazers is Eros, who seemingly contemplates *Psyche*. Citing this scene from Nancy's text, Derrida notes and wonders how Eros can contemplate *Psyche*'s stretched out dead body »[a]pparently *without touching her*« (Derrida 2005, 13; emphasis in the text). The others, »those around her, peripheral to her«, are »not *touching* her while gazing at her all the same«, Derrida asserts (Derrida 2005, 15). Derrida thus has a close look at those surrounding (the discourse on) *Psyche* and wonders about their touch that bears some (striking) violence in its (stroking) mourning, as *Psyche* is gazed at while ›she*‹ seems defenseless and unconscious about herself* and her* supposed defenselessness. Derrida also implicates the possibility of contemplation, which encompasses thinking as well as looking and analysis, as a form of touch. This form of touch, Derrida implicitly claims, requires that the other be given the space for agency – and he makes out this space for agency in Nancy's terminology, in discourse, and in contemplation itself. *Extension*, Derrida concludes, refers to touch/ability. It is a sign of the possibility of touching the other, *because* ›she*‹ is extended (encompassing) and in her* extension, touches the (porous) limits and texture of the selves and things around her*; rather than to be the »submissive subject (extended object), the support or subjectile of their knowledge [those around her*] but not of her own« (Derrida 2005, 16 ff.). Even in death thus *Psyche*, in this way, can be considered as an agent that can touch a self and set something (thoughts, affectivity) into work.

With this reading of Nancy's *Psyche*, Derrida turns to three questions at once. Firstly, he understands mourning, gazing, and being around an other as forms of touch. Especially so, when this other is named *Psyche* and when ›she*‹ is the (extended, adjacent) subject(-matter) around whom thinking and mourning takes place. As a figuration of *Psyche*, ›she*‹ is thus gendered and ungendered at the same time, and the question of gender as well as the unconscious are seen in related ways, against dominant, phallogocentric representations that proclaim some form of ›truth‹ by using a ›realistic‹ rhetoric as a tone of reference. Furthermore, Derrida implicates death as an active rather than passive (and passé) form of touch, blurring the distinction between the animated and the inanimate. In this way, Derrida introduces other forms of touch that do not derive, *sensu stricto*, from the senses (though not entirely detached from them as well) and as haptic understandings. He implies, moreover, that affectivity (mourning) as well as *acts* that accomplish this affectivity (looking, standing around (someone), contemplating) presuppose a transitive relation to an other as forms of touch. Furthermore, Derrida develops an understanding of touch that seems to reach out almost beyond death and is related to futurity, by including imagination as a form of touch:

»Can we imagine an extension [an outstretched body] that is untouchable? Imagining is neither thinking nor knowing, to be sure, but it is in no way a complete absence of thought or knowledge.« (Derrida 2005, 16)

Secondly, and following from this, *in relation to* also indicates a reciprocal touch from which affectivity and activity emerge, even when this other seems absent or dead. A dead body, a (seemingly) absent body is regarded as a *touching* entity, a ›subject‹ with (an outstretched) self that may (choose to?) stay in touch or touch one. If *Psyche* as other is outstretched, ›she*‹ may touch the self through her* (bodily, material) extension and/or by her* absent-mindedness and/or her* exposition, which means the whole plethora of meanings that are *attouched* to her*, and what ›she*‹ herself* may (silently?) want to signify, touch upon, in response to that. The touch of *Psyche* is thus dialogically placed at the threshold of a self and of transcendence, as the unknown (touching and touchable?) ›beyond‹ the known and immediacy of sense. And it also implies transcendence as *feminine**, and thus as othered. It is not a rejection of transcendence as such, but of how it is perceived within a phallogocentric framework. (And one wonders *what, whether* and *how female* transcendence* could be imagined, and whether it would make any *difference* to the imagination, and to how we would structure (around) language, and how it would materialize itself around us).

Following from this, thirdly, the passage implies that understanding the other as a dead subject(-matter) and absent-minded, and to touch (upon) her*, while imagining her* as senseless, amounts to a rejection of her* agency and is a form of othering »[...] on her own she knows nothing of herself [...]. In other words, those around her, peripheral to her, who are touching her while gazing at her all the same – they know something about her« (Derrida 2005, 15). The seemingly untouchable and unknowing, outstretched *Psyche*, the object of the allegedly knowing gazes, Derrida concludes at the end of his musings on Nancy's *Psyche*, can at least be *imagined* as seeing herself*/the scene/the ones' looking at her* exposed body. To think the other without imagining her* to know it and to touch (back), to think her* without an agency of touch, and if ›only‹ through her* absentminded extension, becomes metonymic to the point of expropriation:

»Now, Nancy's *Psyche* sees herself treated like a dead woman. This will have consequences, both close and distant ones [...]. The principle or drive to expropriation introduced there forthwith by death, the other or time, is certainly hard to tolerate, but, as we shall see, it's less resistant to thought than what complicates an *incarnation* even more, which is to say, the prothesis, the metonymic substitute, the autoimmune process, and *technical* survival.« (Derrida 2005, 19; emphasis in the original)

Derrida thus steps back from looking at the outstretched *Psyche* to turn around and face her* (incarnation) questioning the scene. One of Derrida's well-known (outstretched as it were) seminal works, *Psyche – Inventions of the Other* published in 1987 (2003) and in a second extended edition in 1998 (2007), explicitly discusses ›Psyche‹ as traces of the other that speak out of the self. *Invention* in this line of thinking is also always a structure of the work of both O/others within the self. The O/other is Derrida's implication and intervention in and within deconstruction. Derrida's defense of *Psyche* is also a defense

of inexactitude in its inclusiveness that maintains the possibility of dialogue *per se* open, that always speaks in anticipation of a *possible* response. Exactitude makes a post-deconstruction which – again – claims to oversee its exclusions, a strange endeavor. This strangeness is not so much affective and humorous, but *komisch*: it marks the liminal threshold to the uncanny where power resides (right next to the power of non-power). With this allusion Derrida also ironizes the promise of a post-deconstruction that means to be deconstructive and to go even beyond deconstruction while, in doing so, foregrounds its own return to structures of exclusion. In Derrida's approach, *Psyche* encompasses different meanings; it entails the dynamics of touch upon the self, the work of touch within the self in relation to an O/other, as well as the feminine* figure of an ancient narrative that still haunts (philosophical, psychoanalytical, and literary) discourse. In French, furthermore, *psyche* is the homonym of a large cheval mirror (*psyché*); this meaning of *psyche*, finally, echoes Lacan's mirror stage and the construction of the self through its reflection in the O/other and the reflection of what this other sees in (her*-)self (Derrida 2007, 18).¹⁵ In exploring *Psyche* and her* inventiveness upon as well as intervention within the self, Derrida touches upon the other's touch as he feels touched by her* without making this reciprocal touch explicit; a gesture that he discerns in Nancy's text. In fact, a major thread of Derrida's argument in *On Touching* is to demonstrate how this process of touch constitutes Nancy's earlier texts, without Nancy's conscious awareness – as if Nancy were touched by *Psyche*. In this way touch becomes an unconscious structure of that which one welcomes, that which speaks to one and that which directs one (to themselves).

Along a critical reading of two of Nancy's texts, *Psyche* (1978) and *Ego Sum* (1979), Derrida conceptualizes a locus for the incommensurable extension of *Psyche* or thinking, on the one hand, and the extension of the body on the other hand, which he depicts as ›spacing‹,¹⁶ a process of opening (the porous, permeable passages, perforations, within text(-

15 In none of these meanings is *psyche* a synonym for passivity or absence; on the contrary, *psyche* is an autonomous site, the other that operates within the acts, thoughts, and language of the self; and as such, it is an entity in its own right. However, in this passage, while appreciating Paul de Man, Derrida (re-)uses the image of *psyche* as a metaphor for ›woman‹, connoting it furthermore with ›beauty‹, ›looking at oneself‹ and, with regard to Paul de Man's reading of Wordsworth's *Lucy Gray*, as a (negative) image that encompasses the resigned ›man‹, which is discomfiting rather than consoling. In this respect, Derrida's language seems, at least for a moment, to brush aside concerns about anti-foundationalism and linguistic fixity, where it appreciates a (cis-male) friend's text. Interestingly, this essay (*Psyche – inventions of the Other*) (Derrida 2007) is dedicated to the memory of Paul de Man. For a discussion of deconstruction, feminism, and the other, see for example: Spivak (1983) and Jarratt (1990).

16 Spacing is one of Derrida's earliest terms. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), he uses the term as an effect of the trace within writing in the sense of arche-writing that encompasses all chains of signification. Arche-writing is the a priori written trace of signification *per se*; it is a trace of signification in a ›sensible‹ and ›spatial‹ form that Derrida calls the ›exterior‹ of philosophy that by which philosophy, as it were, is girdled. He describes this trace as an opening ›of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside‹ (Derrida [1967] 1997, 70). Derrida distinguishes this exteriority from the ›outside‹, ›spatial‹ and ›objective‹ exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, [which] would not appear without the grammé, without différance as temporalization, without

ures)?). He thus relegates *extension* to an in-betweenness of an encounter. An ›extension‹, corporeal or of the psyche/thought, needs a place,

»a locus, that is reduced neither to objective extension nor to objective space. This place must be a spacing before it is space; it must open an opening, as it were, an interval, which is to say an apparently incorporeal, though not intelligible, extension – thus neither sensible nor intelligible.« (Derrida 2005, 24)

This ›spacing‹, this *khora*, is the (processual, setting-into-work of a) locus where the possibility of touch can take place. Derrida, thus, reads the idea of touch in Nancy as he traces deconstruction in his reading of Rousseau within a double gesture:

»As always Derrida reads with two hands, following assiduously and defatigably the unstable limit that divides what we might call the logic of a text – its fundamentally aporetic or undecidable basic concepts and distinctions – from the intentions that attempt to govern that text, the authority that tries [to] dissolve or control those aporias. As is so often the case, Derrida focuses this double gesture in the ambivalent usage of a specific word by the author he is considering.« (Critchley 1999, 145)¹⁷

Here, however, this is done with a difference. Here, Derrida *post*-deconstructs Nancy in that he opens up the *possibility* of the touch in Nancy's work within and beyond the text itself. This reading of Nancy or along Nancy differs from Derrida's previous double gestures of reading in the sense that it does not follow a ›pure negativity‹ of reading of not-there, not-this. It is a reading that *positively attaches* Nancy's text to touch, even though the concept as such is not *sought*, not mentioned, not written out in these earlier texts of Nancy. In this way, Derrida, in fact, *makes* Nancy the ›philosopher of touch‹ for what he has *not* written on touch per se, but by which his work is starkly influenced; Derrida rather reads the moved, touched trace that Nancy's text relies on to acquire meaning. In a beautiful newspaper interview with the German *taz* published on May 25th 2020, Nancy in fact hints at this Derridean move (Nancy 2020); he speaks of being ›baptized‹ by Derrida as the philosopher of touch. In this characterization a manifold specter of affectivity, affectionate humor and counter-reproach reverberates and takes (its) place – making room for a space of addressing Derrida and bringing him back to discourse. Nancy's address interlaces humor, pain, friendship, and critique. In this sense, it could be seen as the most accomplished form of what is called ›love‹, whose corporeality lies somewhere deep and hidden, and secretly in-between the folds that the utterance as an address of *touch*, as well as an *attachment* to Derrida, seems to imply. Derrida not only has made Nancy the *philosopher of touch*. He also made Nancy the heir and guardian of his thought and of his philosophic enterprise and empire. This is Derrida's handover, a *gift*, a handshake and a plea, a heavy burden, and a limit where the German and English meanings of

the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death, as the concrete structure of the living present« (Derrida 1997, 70).

17 On Derrida's double gesture, see also Kakoliris (2004) and Wise (2009).

the word *G/gift* touch each other and only by this (stroking-striking) touch acquire their full, undecidable meanings.¹⁸

This (quasi retrospective) movement of Derrida can be called post-deconstructivist because, on the one hand, Derrida deconstructs Nancy's text by reading out the marks of ›touch‹ in his text, where Nancy had not seen or wished to detach it in his own text. What James M. Edie says with regard to Derrida's reading and criticism (deconstruction) of Husserl's texts is also applicable to Derrida's reading and deconstruction of Nancy's texts (and maybe of his form of reading in general), in as much as it reads out specific important aspects of the other's text that are not the texts' unconsciously ›intended‹, explicit meaning: »Sometimes in reading what Jacques Derrida is setting up as a serious criticism we learn something very instructive about Husserl's real intentions« (Edie 1990, 111). In Nancy's case this appreciative tone seems to be expressed in an even more positive (and positivist?), explicate, and straightforward way: Derrida shows how Nancy's text has been pregnant with the touch all along – a philosophical ›gesture‹ that could be described as a tenderly humorous appreciation of Nancy – a stroking form of touching Nancy, and a reversal of Nancy's touch upon Derrida. On the other hand, Derrida's reading is post-deconstructivist because, within this *positivity* rather than negativity of a deconstructivist reading, which Derrida in turn borrows from Nancy (reading Derrida's deconstruction), he (re-)opens (up) the topic of touch in opening Nancy's text, again, by first honoring his ›touch‹ and *then, afterwards*, in a third step, alluding to its (metonymic, psychic as well as corporeal) *trace* rather than to a ready-made concept of what his understanding of touch is (Derrida 2005, 25 ff.), striking Nancy with (›the law‹) of his touch. Derrida thus deconstructs post-deconstruction. It is this third ›gesture‹ that could be described as a (postponed and differentiated) (affectionate and well-intended humorous) reproach of Nancy. For Derrida, Nancy's approach to touch is still too metaphysical, too determinative – yet, at the same time, in this positive, affirmative, triple gesture of reading, he *acknowledges* the touch that came *from* Nancy as the other and that has oriented Derrida, that *moved* him in different ways. Derrida also *performs* this triple movement of touch in his own text and through it. He inscribes it into the discourse and into Nancy's text, and presents it performatively in the very act of philosophical reasoning as an act of reading and writing, of thought and sensing. Touch becomes a constative and performative utterance and act, and thus haptic in a non-physical way within writing, within thought, within the texture of the materiality of the text, in-between the convivial mundanity of friendship and the formality of (professionalized) philosophical dialogue.

And fourthly, one further meaning can be drawn from Derrida's critical reading of Nancy: The ›outstretched‹ *Psyche* evokes a double meaning as a movement of the unconscious. An extended *Psyche* whose touch is not ignored can orient the self through her* extension. By ›orient‹, I am not only alluding to the movement inherent in touch; I am proposing a consideration of the touch of the ›Orient‹, this imagined place, the touch of the other, which signifies the constructed and concealed other of (Western?) thought (and philosophy), through which its self is established by various forms of structural exclusion of ›knowledge‹ and corporeality, as well as the devaluation of other(-ed) ›knowledges‹

18 Now that Nancy too seems absent, gone, the question remains as to how this legacy of the two philosopher friends can and will be carried on. Nancy, in his quiet way, did not name any heirs.

and ›knowledge‹-systems based on concepts of ›race‹ or geo-*graphic* imaginery and its effects and implications. The other of Western thought is also enmeshed in the mapping and inscription of psychic as well as geographical spaces as othered and fantasized spaces. ›Derrida‹, coming from somewhere else, (›the (colonized) African-Orient‹ (with connections and connotations to ›Latin America‹, itself a liminal space), signifies not only through his multiply interrupted biography, but also through his interrupting, deconstructing reading, a trace of the other in Western thought, touching upon and moving at its borders and thereby alluding to its constructedness and alterability. And yet, this *gesture* remains generizable in relation to dominant discourses everywhere and at all times. It is a Derridean touch from within the amalgamation of these spaces, ›Africa‹-›Europe‹-›Orient‹ (and in an extended sense also – ›Latin America –), which are not thought of as ›ex-clusive‹ to each other. This is a form of (feminist and deconstructivist and (Jewish-)postcolonial) phenomenological ›existentialism‹ whose *subjectivity* and *experience* do not exist per se and for themselves. Rather this form of (deconstructive) subjectivity and experience of the self and the other(-ed) are enmeshed in the historical and sociopolitical texture and are not only temporal but also spatial; it is within its structure as well as in its parts, its lived moments of singularity, where the possibility of an encounter, of the self and the other, within a change of directions, may ensue. This possibility, triggered by the subjectivity and experience of the othered, an extension of this other that, in Derrida's terms, is not ›intelligible‹, ›apparently incorporeal‹ and thus ›insensible‹, speaks in the momentum of the touch, symbolized in Derrida's reading of the epigraph, a text; but it also implies that the self is seized by the other's touch, is filled with it, whether or not the self allows this touch within its borders and allows themselves to feel it. It is a relation that constitutes not only the historically conditioned sociopolitical relation of the (Western, *white*) self to the other, but also and at the same time the relation of this self to itself. Derrida indicates here the splitting or a doubleness of the self in the touch, the ›I‹ that also belongs to a ›you‹, is of the other, and that in a reciprocal sense, self and other are enmeshed in an encounter in which the absolute Other,¹⁹ the third, must also remain as an other possibility. The space of touch thus opens up the possibility of an epistemological reorientation that dislocates the other as well as the self within a momentum spacing in which historically structured sociopolitical conditions as well as their performatives within a material ›everyday life‹ can come into contact and can undergo a transformation.

19 This Other, here, might be considered in a sociopolitical sense as the fundament of language (acquisition & the symbolic order), but also in the Levinasian sense of the sacred, as the ›almighty‹ ›energy‹, in a catachrestic sense, that energizes and witnesses everything everywhere. Such an approach does not suspend religiosity from affectivity, thought, the sensual and is inclusive; the Other, furthermore, also refers to an openness, to the potential of thinking beyond the known and the imaginable. It thus gives a *khôra*, a space, and a timeliness to this potentiality, which makes it appear attainable, graspable as a possibility.

The *Untouching*, *UnHaptic Touch* 'n the *Leib*

By considering different terms that depict liminal spaces and signify the body and the mind, Derrida also discusses touch as a *crossing* effect, as a transference of bodily, psychic, singular-*bio-graphical* as well as historically driven (sociopolitical) movements that take place in the self as a *crossing space*. Touch can thereby be conceived of as a term under erasure; it is used in a crossed out and yet necessary catachrestic sense. This entangled temporal and spatial meaning of touch is well conceivable when Derrida speaks of ›memory‹ as a form of touch; touch appears in this way as a repetition, as an inscription within *biography*, the various inscriptions of experience in life as well as in history. *Memory* allows for an understanding of touch that can be considered as a singularity and a collectivity, and it also leaves space for a non-experience, for lack, on which it is necessarily built and which renders it also flexible and connective to further, to other, to future shifts. This lack or absence in memory is a displaced mark of something remembered or absent (which also will have its meanings). As so often in this book, Derrida alludes here to the heart-transplant of Nancy and to memory as a property of thinking, remembering, and appreciating. Heart/memory is thereby used as a signifier for *protheses* and, more generally, for metonymy, but also for affectivity and its effects in the form of friendships or ›love‹ that indicate the relational ties of the self to an other within a texture. It can also signify the formation of ›identity‹ as something not only unstable and arbitrary, but as fundamentally indebted to an other and otherness beyond itself – that would also mean an inherent debt of responsibility, of attentiveness towards *any form* of otherness in *any* encounter that inevitably constitutes life (and death).

In this sense and instance, Derrida also acknowledges his indebtedness, as well as the indebtedness of the philosophical discourse, to the work of Edmund Husserl, placing him at the heart of such an insight, at the heart of modern thought, at the heart of touch:

»Il se tutoie‹ signifies that he is saying *you* to himself or itself, or he or it is being addressed in this way – he is *tutoyable*, addressable with *tu* (by any other whatsoever). He is already, as ›I‹, like ›I‹ the other's muted, still ›you‹, and his properly own still you. ›Se toucher toi‹ ›to self-touch you‹, Nancy will write. Later. The syncopated convulsion, this contradiction of the inside and the outside, is also this (still and spoken [*tu et dit*] discourse, a difference at the heart of the I, the articulation that can be disarticulated of an ego, an ego capable of touching it to the heart in touching its heart. Isn't the heart memory? Isn't it thinking *of* memory? Thinking *as* memory? We shall safeguard the recollection, the cardiogram of this cardio-logy from one end of this book to the other – as it also writes itself or is written on the heart – especially when we lend an ear to a certain heart sensation in Husserl, his *Herzgefühl*, in the haptological moment of *Ideas II*.« (Derrida 2005, 34)

Reminiscent of the discourse of touch in Husserl's phenomenological work, Derrida complicates touch by linking it to a (phenomenological) antecedent question of Husserl at the border between the haptic and an organ that cannot touch – the *heart* – and the sensation of the heart. This *heart sensation*, *Herzgefühl*, indeed binds affectivity to an inner place in the body as well as to *psyche* as the other in the self that has a no-place

in the body, that marks as such a displacement, that represents an invisible regulating and orienting effect on the self, or so it might be imagined. The *heart sensation* is *sensed*, always translated into a ›sense‹. Husserl's *Herzgefühl*, the touch of and in the body (*Leib*), ›understood as the organ of intentional perception that has its source in the soul‹ cannot be traced; *Herzgefühl* feels by itself and feels itself (Bernet 2013, 48).

Husserl connects this displaced mark of touch sensibility (*Empfindnis*) – as a form of maybe unintelligible, not-knowing and power-less ›understanding‹ of affectivity. He regards this instance of touch that takes place in the self as the most innate locus within the sensual bodily layers, which extend into a larger non-space of the inner body, and which he attributes in its most intense form to the intersection of body and mind, the *Leib*, understood as an inwardly intimate place of *unorganicity*, metaphorically associating it with *the heart* – an organ that is neither touchable nor one that can physically touch. Here, too, thus a form of touch is envisioned that is ethical, insightful, and relational, but it is one that happens without an apparent touch. Nevertheless, as Derrida critically notes, Husserl, still and contrary to his own observations, ties this form of touch to the haptic, especially the hand and/or the eyes, as a compresence (of the other's touch), felt within the body. The other's touch is linked to the immediacy of appresentation and is *then* perceived as a bodily touch. Only then, according to Husserl, after the appresented touch of the other, *Herzgefühl* sets in as an *auto-affection* within the self (Turnheim 2003, 226). Derrida wonders how, on the one hand, the other can be ›there‹ in an imagined and appresented way, and, how, on the other hand, Husserl constitutes *Herzgefühl* as an *auto-affection*. Reading Husserl's text deconstructively, Derrida concludes that the other must already be present in the self in some form, some trace of an earlier touch, in order for this (the new experience of) touch to be felt at all. In this way, the phenomenological appresentation of a counterpart is circumvented. According to Derrida, *Herzgefühl*, although it is an extended, but intense and immediate inward bodily touch, *felt* in the self, it is not *auto-affective*, but the mark of an earlier form of touch, bodily felt within and beyond organs, a touch that is itself not touchable,²⁰ but is the mark, the (always already, maybe even existential) opening of a space, triggered and left behind within the self by an other. Derrida thus points out that in touch there is no pure, immediate experience of the body proper to be felt. Rather, the self is already ›constitutively haunted, by some hetero-affectation related to spacing‹ that comes from the other ›and then to visible spatiality‹ in which the other, in one of its forms, enters. The encounter with the other thus rests on an already past contact with some form of O/otherness.

In this argumentative manner, Derrida emphasizes that a touch, even as *auto-affectation*, (always) requires a prior touch, maybe the experience of touch, to be perceived. The faculty of sensation ›does not sense *itself*, it does not auto-affect itself without the motion of an exterior object‹ (Derrida 2005, 6). The other can be an intruder, ›a host, wished and unwished for, a spare and auxiliary other, or a parasite to be rejected, a *pharmakon* that already having at its disposal a dwelling in this place inhabits one's heart of hearts (*tout for intérieur*) as a ghost‹ (Derrida 2005, 179 f.); the other's touch can thus be ›good‹ or

20 Derrida discusses this *Herzgefühl* in more detail in the chapter dedicated to Husserl – (ibid., 177–179).

›evil‹, it has a pharmakon quality (depending also on how one *wants* to perceive it, perhaps?), but *there* is an a priori mark of an other in the self, as a place of anchorage for any touch. Once the self is marked by it, it is haunted by its *ghostly* presence, traversing and pervading its corridors.

Touch thus marks the ghostly trace of an intrusion, the mark of the other in the self, as a heart sensation. It is a relational phenomenon of unconscious memory and signifies that the other has already been at work in the self (Derrida 2005, 179; Thurnheim 2003, 226). In this sense, touch cannot be perceived as a question or phenomenon of the senses in the ›proper‹ sense, but rather as »the outside itself, the other, the inanimate, ›material nature‹, as well as death, the nonliving, the nonpsychical in general, *language, rhetoric, technics* [...]« (Derrida 2005, 180; emphasis mine).

Understood in this way, touch can be perceived as a metonym for language as well as rhetoric: fleeting and vague utterances that trigger an emptiness in the self, the *spacing* of a ghost-intruder, as a site for the possibility of repositionings and reorientations. Touch in this sense can be actuated by language and rhetoric. *Language, rhetoric, – poetics* – appear as the dialogic, overlapping, intersection of exterior and interior crossroads between the other and the self. The *quality* of the movement of touch is thus a trigger, a performing repetition. Only in this sense can touch take place as a renewed touch in the traits of former O/others (Derrida 2005, 179 ff.). Citing Aristotle, according to whom »[t]ouch may well exist apart from the other senses« but »without it, no other sense would exist« (Derrida 2005, 24), Derrida places touch, with all its complexity, entanglements and dynamism, in a relation within and outside the body and its psychic and linguistic machinery, rather than within a specific organ or sense. This description of touch embraces Husserl's *Herzgefühl* as a metonymy for memory and remembrance as forms of prior (striking and stroking) touches that unleash affectivity as well as thought and access to language. *Herzgefühl* is, in this way, a (historically conditioned) enmeshment of the sociopolitical within the *auto-bio-graphy* and corporeality of the self, both inwardly as well as outwardly.

The M/Other's Artificial Organity – Lips – Mouth – Tongue

Derrida, in this way, also binds touch to the antecedent touch of the mother-figure and to the giving of birth as the site of this spacing where touch is initialized. This quasi *ur-touch* is not only a space of chiasm, but also the place of separation within touch, through which the self emerges from the mOther, »a noun a name Nancy never pronounces«, as Derrida reproachfully notes (Derrida 2005, 28). Along Nancy's non-reading, Derrida traces back this image of the opening in touch, first, figuratively, to the mOther-figure. But not the figure of the mOther as such stands here as the place of spacing in Derrida's consideration; instead the mOther as the artificialized machine-figure of reproduction and care seems to be evoked, configured in bodily organs, as »the lips« that open up in giving birth as well as the child's lips that open at the mOther's breast. Derrida calls this figure of ›lips‹, ›mouth‹, and ›breast‹ where touch happens in binding and separating forms of touch, as a »place and non-place« and the ›locus of dis-location, the gaping place of the ›quasi permixtio‹ between soul and body, which is to say the incommensu-

rable extension between them and common to both, since the mouth – any mouth, before any orality – opens an opening« (Derrida 2005, 29). ›The mouth‹ is thus the space of the outward-bodily ›organity‹ that Derrida attaches to touch, sensualizing touch without invoking a specific sense, and materializing *khora* in the body without solidifying it into a stable form. Both remain *attouched* to each other in the movements of openings.

The relation to the mO/other figure considers two different aspects, and thus the liminal space that it occupies. These are the figuration of mOther as an instance of authorization within the symbolic order and mother as women* and as the ghostly, enigmatic representation of otherness within discourse and the social order. In this bodily parting of the mO/other that also gives birth to the touch, the self is, too, forever bound to the mO/other's imprint of touch. The mO/other signifies not only the affectionate and singular relation between ›mother*‹ and child, but encompasses as well the relation of this mOther figure to a signifying order to which ›she*‹ also belongs and is created by, and which ›she*‹, to an extent at least, also represents and obeys. The mO/other figure in this way symbolizes not only the singularity of an ideal relationship but also ›the laws‹ of the (historically driven) (cis-›fatherly‹) symbolic order of language and of the sociopolitical to which this image of the mO/other and the mO/other-child relation thus belongs. Derrida, on the one hand, emphasizes the pivotal place of the mO/other-figure, revealing and acknowledging its trace of otherness. On the other hand, he approaches it in an almost mythical way, giving a quasi-female* touch to otherness treating it as a kind of ›originary‹ or eternity, yet it is not so much an idealization of femininity* or the figure of ›woman*‹ that he deploys. Instead, Derrida, places the mO/other as the allegorical, rather than symbolic, figuration of this ghostly otherness, of an *ur*-memory, at the beginning of the im/possibility of an ethical impulse that shows itself in the Levinasian encounter of ›the face‹, binding it to the experience of femininity* and otherness in this sense: ›If it is the mother, in any case, who opens the bordering edges as well as the lips of a mouth first described as an opening, then this happens before any figure – not before any identification, but before any ›identification with a face‹« (Derrida 2005, 28). The mO/other thus becomes a figural requisite for Derrida to read the imperative of ethics that precedes Levinas figuration of a ›face‹. It prefigures the face, alluding to an opening of ›the lips of a mouth‹ (Guyer 2007, 74), where touch appears in stroking as well as striking forms and gives way to an (embodied) subject from within another subjectivity that seems, however, almost artificial and subjectless as if it were a mark of something else.

In this quasi-originary spacing that foregrounds the mO/other's touch, Derrida, maybe in an attempt not to essentialize it, deals with the figure of the ›mOther‹ as almost separate bodily components. The mO/other becomes a somatic part and a locus for the possibility (of the (cis-male) self?) to experience a quasi ›originary‹ mO/otherness. The mO/other-figure remains thereby strangely othered as an empty, dislodged entity, as fragmented parts for the self-experience and the experience of touch, and seems detached from her* own personhood, bodily(-experience), from a subjectivity. ›She*‹ becomes a sign of a sign, without being a replacement. What gets lost in this image is that this parting, this spacing of birth-giving, is a becoming for the mO/other as well, and that this parting and becoming not only is a caressing, stroking, pleasurable form of touch, but can also be, and in fact, in the act of giving birth at least is an insicive, striking

form of touch as well. Both entities can become traumatized in the spacing that opens up onto the touch and that, to an extent, begins to structure their subjectivity as well as their relationship to themselves and to each other; joy and pain also co-reside in this touch that remains intersubjective in the however affectuated encounter. The always already presupposed touch of the mO/other within the self, or of becoming, can thus also be the mark of a strained relationality and, as an effect, it may also imply a strained relationship between the self and the other. Furthermore, if we confer the mO/other to the birth-giving that resides in the productivity of power, the MOther, what kind of subjectivity and ethics is it that would have to be considered within the striking and stroking touch of the MOther then?

Elsewhere, Derrida evokes (however respectfully) another quite mythicizing gesture towards ›femininity*‹, or so it could be read, by alluding to and evoking *the* organ that stands for it, the vagina, to make his point, thereby falling into the pitfall of centralizing ›Western‹ philosophy as if it were philosophy (and philosophizing) *per se*, and notwithstanding the fact that even within this philosophizing that he critiques (not only) the (feminine*) other also already matters as a (contaminated) mistress* (in all its meanings) – and as the secret center and the »unlisted traces« (Spivak 1999, 6), around whose marginality the center circles. Here, a figurative transgression of the limits of touching the mO/other (in writing) (well known to her*), arises:

»To touch is to touch a limit, a surface, a border, an ›outline. Even if one touches an inside, ›inside‹ of anything whatsoever, one does it following the point, the line of surface, the borderline of a spatiality exposed to the outside, offered – precisely – on its running border, offered to contact [...] and on the exposed, or exposing, edge of an abyss, a nothing, an ›unfounded: unfathomable, seeming still less touchable still more un-touchable, if this were possible, than the limit itself of its exposition. Philosophy will have ›touched‹ [...] upon the un-touchable twice, both on the limit and on the unfounded abyss opening beneath it, beyond it – under its skin, as it were.« (Derrida 2005, 104)

If this can be read, as suggested, as an allusion to a female* organ (which, by the way, is quite limited and assessable – but the *abyss*, despite all (feminist) discourses, seems to maintain its position), the question arises, why it is not possible to regard the (bodily) con-tact of (sexuality, erotic, ›love‹ – and philosophy, in their stroking and striking features) *as such* as an abyss, as an offering and exposition on *all sides* of the gendered, bodily and disciplinary (asymmetrically) structured divide? Why this repeated touch at the border (of the m/other) itself, overriding it? What kind of ›affect‹ is this desire driven by, and what ›affects‹ and (biased) meanings does it (re-)produce? Perhaps there is more (normalized) striking than stroking at work here, and more ›evil‹ than ›good‹? Although Derrida's work can be said to be informed by otherness (in both senses: as forms of historically conditioned experiences of antisemitism and othering, and as an openness to the other), Derrida's elaborations here become almost corporeal, invoking touch in hap-

tic senses that include skin contact; yet he does not mention Luce Irigaray's also quite body-essentializing metaphor of »lips« as female organs per se that »self-touch.«²¹

Nevertheless, with the figure of the mO/other, Derrida establishes an (intimate) connection of the self to an otherness outside the self, at the limit of the self and at the limit of subject-formation, within a sociopolitical context of becoming where subject formation develops in an already entangled wor(l)d. It is possible to render this stroking and striking birth-giving as a response and as an affirmative act that establishes an ambiguous basis for the emergence of subjectivity as well as for the meanings of touch. In *Adieu to Levinas*, Derrida describes this response as follows: »We must make the best of this aporia, into which we, finite and mortal, are thrown and without which there would be no promise of a path. It is necessary to begin by responding. Thus, at the beginning, there would be no first word. The call is called only from the response. The response comes ahead of or comes to encounter the call, which, before the response, is first only in order to await the response that makes it come« (Derrida 1999, 24). The thrownness and the response also presuppose a subjectivity behind the response, an unfinished but inscribed (embodied) subject who act upon the call within the texture, the given context. The call/response can thereby be seen as a metonymy for the other's touch. Touch, then, for Derrida, it seems, must be a required ethical mark, so that »the face« of the other can be envisaged at all. Only upon the already placed track of the touch within the self can the ethical encounter of »the face« set in.

But instead of the figure of the mOther, which seems too loaded with meaning to serve as the placeholder for the innocence of myth and »woman*/other«, it should nonetheless be possible to locate this other, this call of the other within the self as an a priori touch. Derrida, linking Husserl's *alter ego* to Levinas »paradox« of the enigma of »the face«, actually mentions this possibility, calling it »an interruption of the self by the self as other« (Derrida 1999, 52; emphasis mine).

The other, as an other of the self, a self that is called upon differently, and thus as a divided self is already infinitely othered within itself.²² Such a beginning opens up the possibility of identification far beyond one-dimensional and narrow biologist or political understandings to embrace the entwinement of historical encounters on different levels, religious as well as linguistic and »cultural« points of touch. What can be targeted, in this way, are the »values« we attach to things and thought in the mechanisms of power and domination. It is no longer »who« someone »is« that can be a decisive factor for understanding, but our openness to the O/others that we are in (different forms of) rela-

21 For a reading of Irigaray's idea of touch, cf. Ungelenk (2021, 39 ff.) and Sohns (2021, 77 ff.). Sohns, drawing on the work of Irigaray, drafts a subjectivity of touch/ing that does not only center upon gender but also upon sex and genitality, but that, seems also to construe a coherent (*white* middle class?) transparent form of female subjectivity (and body). Of importance remains in this regard Gayatri Spivak's critique on universalisms inherent in what she calls »French Feminism«; see Spivak (1988).

22 This idea is part of a psychoanalytical approach with the not very exciting (and maybe misleading) name – Internal Family Systems Modal and which deals with the psyche as a »relational milieu« populated with independent parts of the self that protect an internal system (often in conflict with itself) within the umbrella of a managing main-self-part who is always on the verge of a struggle to maintain its embattled position, to discuss, to hold its ground; see Schwartz/Sweezy (2020).

tions, beyond any logic of victimhood or victimization. This must not mean the erasure or replacement of ›identitarian‹ politics, which remain sometimes necessary against more immediate forms of oppression. But it may allow us to broaden our concepts and their scope, so that we can also perceive our ›selves‹ as figurations of both O/others in all possible kinds of relations and relations of dominance and underprivilege, and build bonds not only of *alliances* but also of *reliances*.

With Merleau-Ponty's notion of *chair* (flesh) and Derrida's poetics of touch as an experience of the everyday, it could be further argued that touch is already predestined in the texture of history/life/discourse/affectivity/thought. In this texture ›the same‹ is not alike, it is already divided into parts and molecules of its tissues. Such an understanding comes close to an image of language and its particles, like the pronouns, which are also from the same fabric but split within themselves. The ›I‹ already entails ›you‹, sameness and subjectivity are always already displaced, without a center or unification, yet within a structure of equity. The texture of this woven fabric is not ›smooth‹; it can be understood as what Nancy calls an *ectopic corpus* (Nancy 1993, 203; Landes 2007, 87) – it is already within itself an endless insameness, a divisiveness. Self and O/other, while sharing the same texture, the poetics of language, the poetics of life experiences in synchronic and/or diachronic ways, depending on the context of the spacing of the touch that takes place between them, are already infinitely split, divided within themselves. The other and the self in this sense share the quality of the poetics of this texture and its ectopic deferral. Such an ectopic, an ever transitioning material, although bound to the historically determined spatial-temporal context, and also able to react differently to any form of touch, of contact, remnants of the same dusty particles, the same substance – can still produce other forms of contact.

In this ectopic tissue of equity, the other, furthermore, is not only an other for the self, but also, by its own enterprise, a self, and also an entity capable (at least potentially) of othering, or already involved in processes of othering and compliance. Power is not centered, but rather diffuse – which also makes it, at least to an extent, powerless, assailable, notknowing. Within the poetics of such an ectopic corpus, then, a static relationship between self and other is suspended. It rather hints at the otherness of the self and, the selfness of the other and, with regard to Nancy's image of the ectopic, to an endless and infinite dynamic (temporal as well as spatial) field full of possibilities of *relations of reliance* in difference. The touch of the O/other thus can also be the touch of another part within the self that is never complete and monolithic, and not formed of a single large block. While the ectopic self/other has a subjectivity that arises within a historically specific context to which it is bound, its subjectivity also involves a ›free zone‹ of singularity through the emergence or/and involvement of specific self-parts that prompt the self/O/other to act in a specific way, which can be performative and destabilize the order within or outside the self/other, or act in stabilizing ways, discernible in its corroborating effects – that still remain ectopic.

Indeed, in a footnote in *On Touching*, Derrida refers to this incalculable relational act and substitution between the self and the other. Not only does he refer to the embodied self/other, but with reference to his understanding of dissemination, he returns to the idea of touch as the intertwinement within texture as *writing* – which can be understood as an ectopic dimension. Derrida thus connects and binds the embodied, material

texture of self/other, in which touch takes place in its discontinuous movement, to the sphere of the text in the narrower sense: Touch happens through the poetics of dissemination, through language/discourse – which also means through (*auto-bio-graphical*) experience:

»In [...] reading and writing and the very experience of text call on this interlacing of a woven web and what remains to be *touched* no less than seen: against a kind of criticism that is deluding itself in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the ›object‹.« (Derrida 2005, 339; emphasis mine)

All reading and writing involves already a form of touch (Derrida 2005, 123–4) – Derrida extracts this idea from Hélène Cixous's essay *Savoir* in their autobiographically inspired joint publication, *Veils* (2001), that further spins and orients this text(-ure). ›Text‹ is here the very much Derridean sense of the infinite and intertwined fabric of ›world‹ as text: history, language, and context-dependent, *life-writing* subjectivities (also in authorship and readership), as well as the endless process of reading-writing and its effects and resonances, and materializations. This process, in which touch is involved, is *not* a smooth and immediate continuation. Rather, Derrida here demystifies touch, declaring that:

»[t]here is never any pure, immediate experience of the continuous, nor of closeness, nor of absolute proximity nor of pure indifferenciation – no more than of the ›smooth‹ [...]. Where has experience ever encountered (perceived, seen, touched, heard, tasted, *felt*) the purely smooth? [...] A ›deconstruction‹ begins in this very experience; it is, makes, and bears out the experience and experiment of this aporia. The concept of the smooth is not smooth [...].« (Derrida 2005, 125)

Touch is not an unruffled experience, even in its haptology of the hands and the eyes, which are centralized in the phenomenological as well as, to some extent, in Cixous' approach to not-seeing and the Nancyian post-deconstructivist concept (Derrida 2005, 26). Derrida points to the discourse and how it is imbued within anthropocentric, centered traces and threads of thought that obfuscates its (internal and external) other(s) in order to establish a (more or less gendered, stable, sleek) self:

»And so we at our own pace approach the place of a resemblance that we can already guess: a hand and especially a hand of ›flesh‹, *a hand of man*, hand always begun to resemble a *man's hand*, and thus a fatherly hand, and sometimes, more ›originarily‹, the hand of the merciful Father, which is to say his Son – the hand that the Son is, according to the Logos or Word of Incarnation.« (Derrida 2005, 182)

Coming ›from the past‹ of deconstruction, as it were, already othered by the post, in post-deconstruction, Derrida reiterates the question of the touch, touching on philosophy's reassurance with the name of ›Nancy‹ in a deconstructive way. Touch appears to be an orienting ethical interruption that cannot be configured in a ›smooth‹ way, and that, in its immediacy, develops its own tenor. Here, Derrida, critically, also refers to two things: Firstly, he refers to the quasi-*Christian*, back-to-normalcy ›gesture‹ of Western discourse that wants to abandon deconstruction once and for all, and secondly, he points out that

Nancy's texts are part of the very same tradition with the baggage of a (Western, at times, very antisemitic and racist) heritage. This also means that Derrida seems to be warning against a post-deconstructive philosophy and premises, which it may have forgotten or wishes to ignore. Such an effort would have to include the acknowledgment of an a priori touch as an orientation, and that it is this prior touch that influences the relation of the self to the other.

Thus, in this way Derrida's critique, reestablishes deconstruction itself as a prerequisite and indispensable form of touch, questioning the self as an autonomous entity.

Humorous Frames – The Debt of Touch out of *Tact*

Although Derrida regards Nancy as an important ›post-deconstructivist‹ thinker of touch (one can never be sure whether there is (not) a humorous mocking tone in this designation), his approach to Nancy and this way of approaching Nancy already indicates and angles his understanding of touch. Derrida's approach to Nancy is also determined by his critique of *Christianity* that he still sees at work in Nancy's distancing from it, which still reestablishes its centrality in another guise. Derrida, on the one hand, expresses his utmost admiration for his fellow philosopher. He more than once mentions that he regards Nancy, besides Aristotle, as *the* philosopher of touch. Whether this is meant seriously, teasingly or even with the slightly mocking attribute of a former teacher and (older) friend, or/and as an act of a philosopher who *nevertheless* wants to rescue ›the wor(l)‹ from mis(-sed) perceptions, is not discernible. On the other hand, the tone of his admiration almost comes across a bit disgruntled – as if he would have expected Nancy to know better, as if Derrida somehow felt betrayed and hurt. In the preface to the book, Derrida explains that he hopes to ›touch someone *in him*, a stranger perhaps?‹ (Derrida 2005, ix). In this way, his praise at the same time also enables a complicated form of *tact* with which he wants to approach Nancy, and that accompanies his critical reading of Nancy's texts:

»It inspired me with the desire, pure and simple, to trot it out, to make it an epigraph to what I had long wanted to write for Jean-Luc Nancy, the greatest thinker about touching of all time, I tell myself. – Of all time, really? – Let's put it differently, to avoid sounding pathetic and excessive, even when speaking the truth – precisely for want of tact: not of all time, perhaps, but ever since Aristotle suddenly hit on the manifold aporia of touch [...] touch isn't clear ... it is adélon, inapparent, obscure, secret, nocturnal. [...] I dream that one day some statistics will reveal to me how often I made use of them publicly [meta-words, like soul, mind, body sense, world] and failed to confess that I was not only unsure of their *exact* meaning (and ›being! I was forgetting the name of being! Yet along with touch, it is everywhere a question of ›being‹, of course, of beings, of the present, of its presence and its *presentation*, its *self-presentation*) but was fairly sure that this was the case with everybody – and increasingly with those who read me or listen to me [...].« (Derrida 2005, 4–7)

Derrida seems to be touched in all of these senses – not only in a pleasant way, but somehow also violently – by the approach of Jean Luc Nancy to touch and he (just(-ly)?) echoes

the movement, the affectivity of being touched in these different ways,²³ linking in this way tact and touch with affectivity as well as thinking, and tracing their mark in his reading and address. Although Derrida writes along the texts of Nancy, touched by him, as it were, he nevertheless moves along his own path in a segmented dialogue with Nancy. Derrida, thereby, molds the frame of his approach, his touch of Nancy and his touch of the touch, by expressing a number of concomitant effects that are a result of Nancy's impression on him, as well as an answer to the impact of Nancy's texts within an inner dialogue, and that have taken shape and now surface in his writing, in a labyrinth of (affective) thoughts. Derrida therefore speaks (self-critically) of his own desire to ›trot it out‹, an expression that refers to uncertainty but also diminishes the (negative) power of his approach to Nancy's work. On the one hand, he asserts an admiration for Jean-Luc Nancy, although opening a dialogue that is not quite on even grounds, and rather taunting. In this way, he also opens up in his writing a bundle of affective effects as responses to Nancy's touch that drive this desire. On the other hand, it is a strategic, performative approach within a sphere of *tact*, a sphere of (unwritten) ›laws‹, in the chamber of the threads of power within academic discourses, that shows the fringed undecidability that the economy of touch leaves behind in the self. It does not result in an even form of contact and responsiveness. Rather, it leaves behind multifarious facets of impressions and possibilities of response. Derrida therefore speaks of the uneven ›nature‹ of dealing with touch and the uneasiness to deal with it in an ›exact‹ way. Here, too, Derrida depicts the scientific idealization of what is understood as scientific ›knowledge‹ that he links to Nancy's desire for exact-ness, a word that he describes as Nancy's ›masterword‹, as ›his word‹, ›his thing‹, as the ›probity of his signature‹ (Derrida 2005, 8). For Derrida, such a search amounts to imprecision and reduction, to a monologue rather than the presumption of another living entity that one inevitably faces in speaking or writing. He critically points to ambiguity rather than precision. Derrida's seemingly mocking critique of Nancy's ›exactitude‹, though is not an instruction, he is not lecturing him (though perhaps on the verge of, although someone in *him* may have wanted to ;-)), but an enactment of exactness. Exactness leaves out so many other spots that call for exactness, in an endless texture, that coincides with Derrida's writing (this book), and thus ends in an exact chiasm with Nancy, while both deploy their own exactness, which is not the same. This touch, however, although it seems to fall into a precise fold, and as intense as it may be, engenders a new mesh, changing the texture of writing on touch.

One of the main points of Derrida's critique that he humorously and in a self-ironizing way characterizes as a »murky, baroque essay, overloaded with telltale stories (wanting to spell trouble), an unimaginable scene that to a friend would resemble what has always been my relation to incredible words« (Derrida 2005, 7) is, as discussed above, around the metaphoricity of phallogocentrism and the metaphysics of presence that he sees *reinvoked* in Nancy's texts, but also about how to approach this critically and yet *tactful*, within the boundaries of ›the laws‹ of *tact*, ›the laws‹ of touchability. *Tact* itself is thus problematized as the figurative and shadowy unwritten jurisdiction of touch. Although there may sometimes be an almost aggressive tone in Derrida's humorous approach, as

23 For an understanding of Derrida's indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty's idea of chiasm and the touching of hands as well as his approach to Nancy's work, see Bennington (2010).

when he speaks of his relation to ›incredible words‹ that ›a friend‹ should know, with the implication that a friend (a word that in this passage strokes and strikes: It is, on the one hand, a confession of closeness and indebtedness, and, on the other hand, a reproachful apology in advance that ›a friend‹ will therefore pardon him for what seems to be offensive), there is also an affective chaperoned, self-critical framing implemented in his critique in this humorously masqueraded rhetoric, which contextualizes the critique, explains it, and at the same time, asks for forgiveness. Derrida in this way shows the reciprocal meaning of *tact* as touch in performance. This humorous, self-ironizing but also painful address, a statement that is both serious as well as (self-)comical, reframes the critique in a performative, deconstructive rhetoric. This allows Derrida to articulate his arguments affectively and situate them within the discourse and *tact* of the touch without overstating them or forcing his critique onto Nancy's text, which he has already put out of the way through his praise; Derrida, in this way, writes along the contours of Nancy's elaborations on touch and in *view* of them, *considering* them *within* his own self, his own thinking, which illuminates a track-path of the other's touch, of *Herzgefühl*, within a philosophical discourse.²⁴

The affective and humorous rhetoric of and in Derrida's approach thus carves out space for the *speakability* of this critique; it is in this spacing that he can show the mark of touch that Nancy has opened up and left behind in his self – as in his writing. The name ›Nancy‹ not only represents a ›friend‹ for Derrida (and also a kind of betrayal of friendship in deconstruction, as it were), it also seems to constitute a double representation: Of the dominant discourse in philosophy as well as of an aberrant move in deconstruction (back to the metaphysical roots/routes) that Derrida seems to resent and against which he writes. However, Derrida's resentment, his double touch between stroking and striking, also implies an ethical instance of debt to the very discourse he is criticizing; his critique can be described as a touch, an act of responsibility towards this inheritance. As Geoffrey Bennington points out, Derrida's ethical reflection on responsibility is a form of acknowledgment of the inheritance from others:

»Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task. It remains before us as contestably as the fact that, before even wanting it or refusing it, are inheritors, and inheritors in mourning, like all inheritors. [...] All questions about being or what one is to be (or not to be) are questions of inheritance. There is no backward-looking fervour involved in recalling this fact, no traditionalist flavour. Reaction, reactionary or reactive are only interpretations of the structure of inheritance. We are inheritors, which does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that, that a given inheritance enriches us one day with this or that, but that the *being* we are *is* first of all inheritance, like it or not, know it or not. [...] It follows from this situation that reading-as-inheritance is not only itself an ethical relation, but that it can be taken to exemplify the ethical relation as asymmetrical relation to an unmasterable and unassimilable other.« (Bennington 2000, 67)

24 This is especially the case with regard to Nancy as well as others whom, from Derrida's point of view, Nancy should have mentioned, who touched on touch, who touched Derrida, the thinkers Derrida mentions, critiques, and appreciates in this book along with Nancy: a performance of touch in stroking and striking ways.

Derrida's touch on touch thus means an orienting, dynamic, kinetic, contradictory and conflicting track of a (multi-layered) O/other in the (multi-layered) self. Quite at the beginning of his work Derrida already singles out Aristotle, in this sense, as the one who »hit on the manifold aporia of touch [...] ever since he foresaw all the obscurities of the tangible« (Derrida 2005, 4).

It is possible that Derrida mentions Aristotle, on the one hand, to use his name as a shield in his criticism of the Western discourse on touch, to legitimize his approach in general, his entry-ticket into the *tact* of Western philosophy. On the other hand, Derrida uses this name to offer it to Nancy, to justify his rebuke and to remind Nancy of a predecessor, of an inheritance. In addition to the functional and rhetorical weight of Aristotle's name that Derrida deploys, the former's considerations on touch are important points of departure for Derrida. With regard to Aristotle, Derrida asserts that touch is not to be understood as a ready-made transposable and consumable philosophical ›exact‹ ›concept-product‹, but that it should rather be seen in all its ambiguities and contradictions. With Aristotle, Derrida subsumes a number of traits to touch, which contradict and resist a definite and precise understanding. Within this Derridean/Aristotelian apprehension touch remains aporetic and ›nocturnal‹ (Derrida 2005, 4).

Along these lines, Derrida also dissociates touch from a specific sense or the experience of other senses. With reference to hearing, Derrida traces and places touch in the silence that comes with the *distance* and which leaves enough room to link (at least two) speakers to each other – a thought that could be theorized within a wider understanding of the multiverse, or even the relation of death and life; Derrida starts in a much more cautious, more immediate ›presence‹. He refers, for example, to the telephone that links people to each other (and the realm of digitality could be added to that, as another example, with other forms of silences and distances of its own). In the quietness and the hollow void of such a distance, touch can be felt even more intensively than in a sensory, direct form, he resumes (Derrida 2005, 112 f.). Drawing on Aristotle and with hindsight to this approach to silence, Derrida again questions direct contact in touch, and at the same time, emphasizes that the sense of contact extends beyond any immediate form (Derrida 2005, 5). Contact and touch are rather placed at the limits of imagination and the imaginative. In this way, Derrida locates ›the real organ‹ of touch ›farther inward‹ rather than in the faculty of sense-making, sensing, and perception. The materialization of touch between two disparate entities can thus occur without any material, and independent of time and space, as if in suspension.²⁵

Any form of touch thus happens within a reinvocation of a tacit dialogicity that it seems to represent. Like Bakhtin's understanding of the ›word‹ that is already dialogical and divided in itself, touch in Derrida's understanding, too, is exact only in its imprecisions and aporias.

25 In Derrida's allusion to the telephone, lovers sense their connection despite the distance, experiencing it in the silences of the call rather than in an actual conversation. This intertwining thus creates a void, a space, within the connection, as a touch, which may mean that touch also occurs in the ›blindness‹ of seeing and in the ›deafness‹ of hearing, which describes as well the processes of writing and reading that take place without ›direct contact‹.

In line with Aristotle's views, Derrida, moreover, stresses that it is not clear what *sense quality* could be attributable to touch (as the sound is to hearing and sight/image to seeing) (Derrida 2005, 4), but emphasizes the centrality of affectivity to touch per se, so that affectivity, the capacity of *sensibility*, becomes the sensory quality of touch: »Touch may well exist apart from the other senses, but Aristotle stresses, that without it, no other sense would exist« (Derrida 2005, 24). Understood in this way, touch appears to be the condition for perceiving affectivity, sensibility, or meaning. At the same time, Derrida emphasizes the multilayered sensuality of touch as it, on the one hand, can encompass different sense-organs (skin, eyes, ears, heart), and as, on the other hand, cause, sense, sensation, and organs are sometimes attached to each other within touch, or without any form of touch, within the silences and distances of non-sensing.

One such sensual texture is the tongue. If there were an organ to describe touch, from out of a Derridean plane, it would be this organ. The tongue appears as the ideal metaphor and metonymy for touch. It is an organ of touch in touch, it is an organ of taste, it touches and is touched, it senses and is sensed. The tongue embodies the perforated texture of touch. It can be visible as well as invisible, it takes place outwards as well as inwards. »Tongue« is also another name for language, which can touch in all possible senses and is un/touchable; it gives materiality to things, but can only be perceived in-between the lines, in the act of its contact, between the relations it implies, it is the trace of (in-)exactitude as well as the O/other. While »taste« in a narrow sense and touch in a narrow sense require direct contact, or as in the case of the eyes and of hearing also happen »over a distance« (Derrida 2005, 5), with reference to Aristotle Derrida perceives the tongue/language as the object as well as subject of touch per se, in tangible as well as intangible ways (Derrida 2005, 6), as accessible as well as inaccessible, regardless of its sensual circumstances and con-text. As a subject/object, the tongue/language can also trigger a heart-feeling, *ein Herzgefühl*, circumscribing the almost in/accessibility of the other in the self as well as the almost in/accessibility of touch. While tongue and heart denote the two, apparently contradictory organs of touch, language as an inorganic organ constitutes both and is constituted by both. The touch of language thereby also appeals to and requires *tact* with regard to the untouchability inherent in the touch that conditions it and makes it possible (Derrida 2005, 6).

These are the movements that Derrida not only points out, but also performs in his writing. In this sense, Derrida problematizes the limits of and in touch, as well as touch as a limit to what is knowable and what is unknowable, and its power-lessness that apparently lies in this undecideable oscillation at limits and borders.

The metaphor of the limit already occupies an end as well as a non-presence:

»We can only touch on a surface, which is to say the skin or thin peel of a limit (and the expression »to touch at the limit«, »to touch the limit« irresistibly come back as leitmotifs in many of Nancy's texts that we shall have to interpret). But by definition, limit, *limit itself*, seems deprived of a body. Limit is not to be touched and does not touch itself; it does not let itself be touched, and steals away at a touch, which either never attains it or trespasses on it forever.« (Derrida 2005, 6)

Touch in this manner appears as an intimate, critical and always singular engagement, and as another stitch within the texture of the net that opens up space for other, future stitches as the quilt grows longer and wider. In this texturing of touch, Derrida exerts a reversible, chiasmic touch by remembering and *thanking* different thinkers, establishing *thanking* as such as a form of touch at the limit of another. By engaging with the other's words, with other languages, in an explicit as well as implicit, figurative sense, the other is constituted as constitutive for the formation of the thoughts of the self. As Christine Irizarry writes with reference to her translation of *On Touching*, this intertwining of touch is also a form of acknowledgment of the other's thoughts in the self, which lead to self-reflective movements and, ideally, to the self's internal displacement or opening to the other. It is a forked dialogue within the self as much as it is a dialogue with the O/other:

»How can you say thanks to a thank you? Perhaps you can't – or it becomes infinite thanking for the thanking for the thanks ... I thank you thanking me thanking you, endlessly. Or perhaps ›thanking‹ is really ›thinking‹, which has an affinity with it in English and German, Derrida tells us: ›For example, concerning thought, the affinity between *denken* and *danken*, and ›thinking‹ and ›thanking‹. And so, yes, by letting me translate ›mercí into ›thanks‹ and ›thanks‹ into ›thinks‹, Derrida has kept his promise to the translator, who thanks-and-thinks about this passage into philosophy.« (Irizarry 2008, 199)

Besides Nancy and Aristotle, other thinkers are also mentioned. These are, for example, Descartes, Kant and Husserl, who especially occupies a central space in the book (Irizarry 2008, 196). It is also a tender remembering of Emmanuel Levinas – the chapter that begins with and remembers Levinas is named *Tender* – a chapter that comes with the question of the other, a question that finds a continuity in this book. As Simone Critchley points out, there is a chiasm in Levinas' and Derrida's thinking, the chiasm of a touch that takes place between them or their thinking, but which ensures space for alterity (that both represent and *configure* to each other), and which leaves the other intact, that is, without digesting it into sameness. The chapter's subtitle »This is My Heart, ›the heart of another‹« not only reminds Nancy and philosophy more generally not to forget the depths of influence that come from the o/Other within the self, within thought and thinking, prefigured in Nancy's heart-plantation (– a delicate issue, which requires much delicate sensitivity at the fingertips; whether Derrida accomplishes that in and through this book remains undecided), but that also reinvokes the chiastic, entangled touch between Levinas and Derrida, where Levinas' words to Derrida in *Wholly Otherwise* ([1976] 1991) are evoked in Derrida's tender remembrance of Levinas as an imprint at the center of his philosophy of touch that echoes Levinas' words:

»Indeed the ridiculous ambition of ›improving‹ a true philosopher is not our intention. To meet him on his way is already very commendable and is probably the very modality of the philosophical encounter. In underlining the primordial importance of the ques-

tions posed by Derrida, we wished to express the pleasure of a contact made in the heart of a chiasmus.« (Levinas 1991, 8)²⁶

If reading and writing are considered as forms of touch and being touched as a permanent process of translation of the traces of the O/other in the self, and intimate, close readings that write themselves in the infinite relations of the self and the O/other, then reading as well as writing become a dynamic engagement of thinking and thanking, of remembering and of (ideally, self-reflecting) humor within dialogic traits and thoughts between the self-and the O/other, almost traceless and not verifiable and yet there. Derrida shows that the process of thinking/reading/writing/self-reflecting is linked to processes of indebtedness, even when it generates contradictory outcomes, which nevertheless orient the (haunted) self in its pursue, which keeps the self angled to itself and, at the same time, at bay.

The name of Nancy in Derrida's two explicit works on touch thus seems to signify a past and a future relation towards thinking touch. Derrida remains indebted to Nancy, and issues this debt as a fundamental critique at the limits and limitations of this inheritance. ›Nancy‹ is, in this sense, the touchstone for and of the idea for the book that Derrida reconfigures from such a genealogical linearity by continuing to *perform* a philosophical touch. In choosing to title the book in English *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*, Derrida stages a welcoming of Nancy in the sense of a »Salut!«.²⁷ As Irizarry notes ›salut‹ is a form of greeting on the verge of a doubleness. Not unlike the *pharmakon*, it signifies a sending off that is both a good-bye as well as a welcoming, or the thanking for a long journey of companionship in parting and the cautious promise of the possibility of a reunion. This is especially touching as Derrida's first essay on the touch (1993) was written just before Nancy's heart-transplant, and as Nancy's eulogy for Derrida, enclosed in Derrida's *On Touching*, is titled ›Salut to you, salut to the blind we become‹, which thanks Derrida, and welcomes his critique and also says good-bye to him. ›Salut‹ touches on the idea of the touch and refers to the touch of the other being touched by it. It introduces touch as holding on to the other as well as letting go of the other, within an uncertain and *ungraspable* promise of a *reencounter*:

»Jacques Derrida gives a little bit of his heart to Jean-Luc Nancy and he gives him this ›salut‹ – and then Nancy in this eulogy gives Derrida a ›salut‹: a ›salut‹ that traverses death – as if ›salut‹ in French were the only passage not into philosophy but into life from death or death from life.« (Irizarry 2008, 198)

In this way, Derrida, rather than to discuss Nancy's work on touch *per se*, graphs, traces Nancy's *touch* within his self and in his thoughts and writing. The title of Derrida's first essay published in *Paragraph* (1993) ›Le toucher: touch/to touch him‹ makes this move more

26 For a nice discussion of the idea of tenderness as ›respect‹ within alterity and the thought of the other, see Critchley 2014, 4–13, where he addresses Levinas' and Derrida's respons(e)iveness to each other.

27 For a discussion of the genealogy and semblance of the term, see Irizarry (2008, 196–198).

apparent. As Peggy Kamuff points out in her translation in a footnote, *le toucher* encompasses not only the double meaning of *touching* and *touching him*. *Toucher* as shown above also touches upon other senses of the term, which encompasses touching on, tampering with, violating, having a word with someone, a passive understanding of being touched or a reflexive sense of touching oneself:

»As the author will point out several times in the course of what follows, ›le toucher‹ is not simply translatable, hence the doubled title, to be read throughout. The reader should also be aware, and here and there reminders will be inserted, that the verb *toucher* has an idiomatic extension in French which can only be approximated in another language. For example, *toucher à* can mean both to touch on, but also to tamper with, even to violate (cf. Mallarmé's famous exclamation: ›On a touché au vers‹). In another syntax, *toucher un mot à quelqu'un* has the sense of talking to someone, mentioning, saying a word to. Finally, however, the most recalcitrant syntactic formation is the pronominal form, *se toucher*, which can be either reflexive or reciprocal in the third person or the infinitive, but may also have the value of a passive voice (cela se touche, i. e., it is touched). To a very significant degree, the essay may be read as a putting into practice of these possibilities, while analyzing their implications as they have been made evident in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.« (Kamuff 1993, 152)

In the foreword to the book Derrida extends these meanings and alludes to other terms that he connotes to touch. In this context, he also problematizes the title that he has chosen for the article as well as the book, *le toucher*, and his uneasiness with it. *Le* as a definite article indicates not only a fixed meaning of a word, it also is the masculine personal pronoun and thus refers back (not only to the praise of Nancy, but also) to (the praise of?) phallogocentrism. *Le toucher* thus sways between the meanings of ›to touch him‹ and ›on touching‹ forming, performing, and following critically phallogocentric traits – on the verge of repeating them, in a way. Derrida suggests interventionist deconstructions of these senses of the touch: For Derrida ›to touch‹ also encompasses critique, agency and the possibility ›to change, to displace, to call into question; thus, it is invariably a setting in motion, a kinetic experience« (Derrida 2005, 25).

To touch is, then, also a (rhetorical) form of *emovere* not only in an affective sense, but also within thought and epistemology. But Derrida's *le toucher* is also an act of singularity that approaches Nancy as well as Nancy's other:

»[I]t is easy to recognize [these] two indissociable gestures [but] was it not necessary also to touch him, and thus touch someone, address oneself to him *singularly* [...]. However, by thus privileging one perspective, let us even say one sense, one of the senses, don't we undertake to choose, to unfairly leave in the shadows everything excluded by that one sense, indeed, by the senses in general, in and of themselves?« (Derrida 2005, ix–x)

Derrida thus not only links touch to ›the beginning‹ in philosophical thought, he also sets an end to it. He not only frees touch from specific delimitations but also sets new limits to it and to thought generally; like the beginning of thought at the touch of the other, its limits are the boundaries at the touch of the other as well. These are the limits that

the other, which has to be faced within any utterance, poses because one has to await the other's reply to one's words, so that these take shape, become meaning, by their touch. Without touch, all remains meaningless, absolute nothingness. This seems to be Derrida's *categorical imperative* that constitutes the *a priori* relation of the self to the other, no matter who this O/other is. Nancy's efforts to expand on touch in order to seize and to fix it »at the risk (to me)«, he says, »of venturing with this toward the unpredictable or losing it there« (Derrida 2005, x), are explored differently by Derrida. It is a warning reminder of the unknown and *not-knowable* ›face‹ of the other, that which marks power as well as powerlessness. Derrida's consideration of *le toucher* thus develops along these lines as a touch, in a dynamic and endless process of closeness, separation and reconfigurations, which cannot be connoted with any sense-making in a proper sense; touch, he seems to propose instead, can rather only be seen within the configurations of its (historically conditioned sociopolitical) contexts, ›laws‹ and rhetoric in relation to the other and the other's call – and response.

By using the article *le* in the title of the text, Derrida sets these meanings of the word into work and ironizes his approach, not only with regard to the term and concept of touch, but also with regard to Nancy. This humorizing tonality and teasing tone in Derrida's choice of approach, rather than explaining the ›true‹ nature of touch, functions like a reminder of what remains missing; its *affective humor* opens a void; it is the deconstructive rhetoric within his approach, even before the operation of his arguments unfold. This teasing, critical reminder, on the one hand, dialogizes Derrida's approach to Nancy as well as to touch, showing its fissures, splitting it up. On the other hand, it takes out the sting of his reading and makes his own text a footnote to Nancy's work, a gesture of generosity – and of friendship (Derrida 2005, x) that allows Derrida, nevertheless, to utter his critique; this form of critique constitutes a double responsibility in ›the face‹ of Nancy and the discourse of touch – describing a form of *tact* in philosophical discursivity that is never only public but also private, referring to the complexity of affectivity and thought that are part of discourse, but mentioned or taken up as vital ingredients of thought.

The text thus also *performs* touch between ›the laws‹ of *tact* and *con-tact* (Derrida 2005, 45; 228–230; see also Bishop/Goh 2011). Derrida separates *con-tact* with a hyphen. In this way, he problematizes touch with reference to Husserl's phenomenological reflections, as a syncope that is conditioned by non-touch and non-contact.²⁸ Based on this consideration Derrida also reconfigures touch as »the spacing of a distance«, as a »différance in the very ›inside‹ of haptics [...] Without this différence there would be no contact as such; contact would not appear« (Derrida 2005, 229).

Seen in this light, touch is conditioned by non-touch as by the untouchable, a double understanding of *con-tact*. In both senses though, non-touch refers to an other that is actively ignored. Even the intangible and the untouchable emphasize the irreducibility of the other and its relation to the self. Yet while touch happens at the limit of the other, it cannot penetrate or assess the other:

28 The syncope is based on Husserl's idea of *epokhé* that premises the exclusion of ›the real‹, of everything around a thing, a phenomenon; at the same time, in reflecting the thing as such, a distancing from this other/object and its immediate experience takes place, ›inscribing an anesthetic interruption into the heart of aesthetic phenomenality« Cf. Derrida (2005, 229).

»[T]his *différance* of the *between*, this elementary *différance* of inter-position or intervals between two surfaces is at the same time the condition of contact and the originarily spaced openings that calls for technical prosthetics and makes it possible.« (Derrida 2005, 229)

Derrida emphasizes not only the independency of a meaning of touch from the senses in an explicit way, by way of introducing *con-tact*, a term that denotes tangency without touching in a proper sense. He also emphasizes the impossibility of touching the other. If the other would be touchable, touch, in any sense, could not be performed. Touch is a limit, at limits: »To touch on the limit is not, for contact, just any experience among others or a particular figure: one never touches except by touching a limit *at the limit*« (Derrida 2005, 297; punctuation as in the original).

Tact, then, also signifies a form of contact, a form of confronting one's friend, in the most immediate sense, by calling upon them, by calling their name. This also situates the critique within a specific spatial, temporal, and thus historically conditioned, sociopolitical context. At the same time, it depends on the singularity of these contexts – Derrida's critique of Nancy is an act of singularity in terms of reaching out to Nancy's thought as a friend and close, ›professional‹ philosopher, as it were. But his approach also occurs in more general terms. It is a critique of reading. It opens up the possibilities of reading (philosophical) texts and shows the pitfalls of tunneled readings against the backdrop of specific patterns of thought that ignore, or read in the habit of ignoring, and therefore exclude other connections that texts may also entail besides straightforward readings, besides readings that one can *see* and that pop up before one's eyes. It opens up the sense of reading, the sense of touching texts, beyond immediate sensualities.

Derrida's word for this form of *tact*, of restricted reading, that fixes the limits and conditions the possibility of touch, is ›the law‹ »which is [itself] the untouchable, before all the ritual prohibitions that this or that religion or culture may impose on touching« (Derrida 2005, 66). It is always a question of (sociopolitical) ›laws‹: how to pose a critique, how to touch upon things, upon an other. It is also ›the law‹ that determines who can touch whom and in which ways. The unwritten ›laws‹ of touch also determine what is not touchable within *con-tact*, what is not sayable (by whom to whom).

›The laws‹ of touch, it can be deduced from this approach, rule how it is regulated with regard to different subjectivities as well as subject-matters. The ›law‹ is not only ›the statue‹ of the symbolic order, but also the sociopolitical structures of power relations and dispositives. Derrida's use of the term ›law‹ also introduces his *concern* regarding the possibilities of touchability in the discourse of ›touch‹ when it is understood as a proper name. It is an intervention in discourse that questions the understanding and scope of other ›laws‹. *Tact*, in this sense, too, refers not only to this form of sociopolitically determined, binding of touch without touching, but also to unwritten ›laws‹, to what is allowed to say/to think/to perform, to what extent, and in what way: It »*confines* to the origin and the essence of ›law‹. And in the sense of knowing how to touch *without* touching, without touching *too much*, where touching is already too much« (Derrida 2005, 67). *Contact* that always happens within these ›laws‹ of *tact* is a form of reaching out to the other, a movement in touch that is not recognizable by a physical or sensual touch, and yet, in contrast to *tact*, can be measurable, countable. It is in this sense, discernible, and

always a singular touch, that may also go against, or beyond ›the laws‹ of *tact*, suspending, subverting or transforming them.

That this *con-tact* of touch with all its ›laws‹ is not only inscribed, in European philosophy/language but defines ›Europe‹ in its (biased) Self-understanding (and in its hierarchized distinction from *the Rest* as *other*), and might not be a global, universal spectrum of Self-understanding, can be exemplified from within Derrida's text itself. Derrida holds up a mirror somewhat fretfully (or painfully?) to the ›Western‹ historical framework of philosophy that has also colored and shaped his language in the first place:

»And what if this word [touch] did not keep any value, or sense, precisely, any *justification*, except where a *solely* ontophenomenological status – in an absolutely *empirical* fashion and ›in our eyes‹, *solely* loaded with verbal memory and logico-rhetorical culture – were what reassures us in the confident *use* of such a term? And so, it is our very old habit in this or that historical culture, ›at home‹ in the West, to make use of these terms (the ›logic‹ and ›arithmetic‹ of the five senses, and so forth) as to adjust them more or less well (and often not very well at all, as we are experiencing it here, and that is all of philosophy) to suit some pretended ontophenomenological evidence in ›our body‹. Empirical ontophenomenology + historical legacy + language of a culture: perhaps this makes a common habit, a way of being social, a praxis, a pragmatics, a consciousness, and so o forth.« (Derrida 2005, 106)

While criticizing this codified and canonized ›body‹ (of texts), Derrida again ironizes and humorizes, and in this way, deconstructs his own approach. The tone of his humorous inclination is somewhat frustrated (or painful?). It is a solemn yet definite, unyielding endeavor within this same philosophy, but at its margins that evokes North-Africa, but maybe also Jewishness, Islam, other religious backgrounds, as ›Europe's‹ and ›the West's‹ borders, which, reciprocally, in the words of Derrida and enveloped within his voice, extent themselves to touch, and to (*re*)define ›Europe‹ and its relation to ›the Rest‹ – ›the world‹ here once (again) – and for all?? – a critique that touches on the habituation of dominance and supremacist thinking *per se*:

»And in an aside you tell yourself: what a funny, admitting, and grateful salutation you're addressing to him, to Jean-Luc Nancy. What a peculiar way to pretend you're touching him while acting *as if* from now on you wanted to put his lexicon about touch out of service, or even banish it to the *Index librorum prohibitorum*. [...] Like the messiah. What a funny present, indeed! What an offering! Altogether as if at the moment of calling others so that they will become ecstatic before this great work and this immense philosophic treatise of touch, you whispered in his ear: ›Now, Jean-Luc, that's quite enough, stop touching and tampering with this word, it's prohibited, you hear. [...] And besides, if I may remind you of this again, haven't you yourself said ›there is no ›the‹ sense of touch? Therefore, don't keep pretending, [...] that there is something that one could call *the* touch, an understood ›thing itself‹ [...] Knowing you, I don't think this objection will stop you, I tell myself. No, you just go on, and so do I – thankfully in your steps.« (Derrida 2005, 107)

Derrida provides a reading of his own text and aporetic desire. It is a ›weak theory‹ in which he proposes his counter-reading. *Weak-theory*, in Sedgwick's sense, of not engulfing, of merely offering, on the edge of an affect-laden enforcement. Derrida uses the affective rhetoric of humor to declare his position as well as the strong and powerful advancement of and in philosophy to give impetus to this weak but effectively *weakening* movement from within philosophy, which he is not willing to let go once he has entered or rather has been given admission to its playfield; he also uses this humorous rhetoric to change the sober tone of the philosophical text that *pretends* to seek ›truth‹ into a joyous, playful (›literally‹?) one that reads itself against the grain of the philosophical text and remains truthful to itself (and thereby to ›truth‹, if there is any such thing). In his humorous underpinning Derrida alludes to ›the present‹ in a double conjuncture, offering his present, his gift, as (an explosive) sugar-bomb (›What an offering!‹), and at the same time pointing to the pettiness and yet pernicious effect of the phallogocentric habit of clinging to the mode and power of ›the presence‹, the ›it is‹, that nullifies other forms of ›being‹, but above all to its (repeated) *presentations*, destabilizing the code:

It is the relation of the other to ›the law‹ as well as to the trace that this other has left in ›the law‹, which determines its borders and at the same time makes them unstable. Derrida problematizes this touch also as thought, as the thought of the other. It is in thought that something/someone is touched. And again, it is the other whose thought first touches one, is there, before oneself begins to think. Thinking is resonating, echoing the other's touch. Thought, reluctantly [*a son corps défendant*],

›thinks only there where the counterweight of the other weighs enough so that it begins to think, that is, *in spite of* itself, when it touches or lets itself be touched *against its will*. That is why it will never think, it will never have begun to think *by itself*.« (Derrida 2005, 299)

Within this trajectory the possibility and *act* of not-touching also becomes graspable. The untouchable must not only allude to the impossibility of touching the other. It also alludes to exclusion in the sense of what is prohibited to be touched by ›the law‹, and thus that which ›weighs‹ ›not enough‹ for the self, to be touched by it. This allows to think touch as foreclosure and also as prohibition (brought about by the historically driven, sociopolitical order that determines ›the law‹ of touch), and *nevertheless* to leave out space for the possibility of being touched if ›the counterweight of the other weighs enough‹ when it touches or ›lets itself be touched *against its will*‹ in the instances of the singular and the performative. This consideration, furthermore, as it implicates singularity *in spite of* ›the law‹, as well as collective *acts* of the performative, allows to think touch beyond the confines of ›the law‹ on both sides of the spectrum. The self can thus be touched by the other *despite* the prohibition of ›the law‹ and its effects on the self, when the weight of the other's touch/thought ›is enough‹ for it to orient it to itself. Vice versa, the other can touch the limits of the ›law‹ and change it, when it has ›enough weight‹ on it. In this context, Derrida also mentions explicitly language and its effects as components of the kinetic of touch. Here, he again sees *rhetoric* at work as an integral part of touch ›which would be more than a rhetoric, when, with each figure, it crosses the limits between the sensible and the intelligible, the material and the spiritual – the carnal of the ›body proper‹ find-

ing itself by definition on both sides of the limit« (Derrida 2005, 299). These both sides of the limit do not only mean the self and the other. They also mean the contingent and yet infinite play of signification at the limit of the ›body proper‹ and ›the text‹, ›the material‹, the ›intelligible‹ as well as the ›spiritual‹. Touch thus conceived, permeates and pervades the border of all surfaces, limits, limitations, and ›laws‹ through thought, through writing, through the senses in its double sense, and through ›bodies proper‹ – without fully encompassing or fixing any of them. Touch is thus an orienting movement within the (historically conditioned) thick text(-ture) of language, discourse, and belief systems that comes from the other, sometimes the Other, with the potential to intervene, to *displace*, to *change*, and critique at the limits of materiality and the rhetoricality of con-*tact*, even beyond its ›laws‹.

Affectivity *without* Touch

Derrida's elaboration on touch and his approach to the work of Nancy also contains a specter of affectivity as traces of anxiety, anger, ›love‹, respect, care, and circumspection that are sometimes embedded in the tonality of a humorous rhetoric. While this affectivity can be seen as marks of touch, no explicit distinction is made between the terms touch, feeling, and ›affect‹; rather, they are used metonymically (Derrida 2005, 204; 209). Derrida's apparent indifference to the use of these terms becomes apprehensible when affectivity is considered as an emergence through language, and thus as a rather constructivist enablement without permanently fixed, determining meanings; yet there seems to reside a temporal order between touch and affectivity. The self grows out of affectivity, *after* being touched by an other.²⁹ As Judith Butler writes, echoing the phenomenological experience of ›feeling‹ touch that Derrida's approach, too, with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is informed by: »I can feel only what touches me«. This succession sets into grammatical form a grammatical impossibility insofar as the touch precedes the possibility of my self-reporting, provides its condition, and constitutes that for which I can give no full or adequate report« (Butler 2015, 41). In this order that is in play between touch, affectivity and the formation of the subject, the meaning of touch, its effects in the subject takes shape and enters language. The ›I‹ that feels *touched* and »speaks its feelings« constitutes the meaning of touch via language and the affectivity that emanates from it as well as the relation to the O/other – the Other as power, and the other as the excluded other of the self, as well as the excluded senses within (dominant, centripetal) discourse.

For Derrida affectivity has the fragile character of processes of binding and bonding of the self and the other (Earlie 2017, 394), an other we have to think and assume as both O/others. This binding and bonding resonates well in Derrida's understanding of *without* (*sans*) (Hart 2007). In *Parergon*, an essay in *The Truth in Painting*

29 In this, Derrida seems to follow Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically inspired apprehension in *The Visible and the Invisible* ([1964]1968). Following Nicolas Malebranche, however, Maurice Merleau-Ponty locates feelings as effects of being touched: »Malebranche writes: ›I can feel only what touches me. Merleau-Ponty cites these words to show that the ›I‹ who feels comes about only consequent to the formation of the feeling self« (Butler 2015, 42).

([1978]1987) for Derrida *without* seems to represent a conjunction that binds a thinking subject and thought to an O/other *without* which it would not have emerged. At the same time, *without* also signifies the absence, the trace of this O/other *within Leib/feeling/thought/language/discourse/term*. *Without* thus describes a *within*. It marks subjectivity and authorship in a conglomerate of relations and traces of the O/other in the self:

»And if you were to bide your time a while here in these pages, you would discover that I cannot dominate the situation, or translate it, or describe it. I cannot report what is going on in it, or narrate it or depict it, or pronounce it or mimic it, or offer it up to be read or formalized without remainder. I would always have to renew, reproduce, and reintroduce into the formalizing economy of my tale – overloaded each time with some supplement the very indecision which I was trying to reduce.« (Derrida 1987 a, 2)

Without is another name of the parergon, *in* writing and *within* writing and as such the mark and the trace of an O/other that ›I‹ touch (upon), and also the seam for how ›my‹ word blends in, in the texture of the text where it finds its positioning, while all the while leaving its mark in the fabric in entangled ways. The parergon, indicated by the small linguistic conjunction *without* that signals a presence as a *determining absence*, links thinking and writing to the undeterminable or inaccessible as the unmarked mark of an ›absolute interruption‹ (Derrida 1987 a, 87) that marks, in absence, critique:

»This showing of this pure interruption – the making of an edge – creates beauty, an event marked by the word ›without‹ [...]. Moreover, the ›without‹ is not the appearing of a phenomenon that could invite theoretical investigation but a starting point of transcendental critique, the determination of grounds and limits of judgement.« (Hart 2007, 420)

Without thus, in not-knowing and powerless ways, indicates the trace of an O/other as an immanent constitution as well as interruption of the self. It remains silent, and happens in silence in the shadows of a knowing self, questioning it, and questioning the power of its text. *Without* is the mark of the other's touch that marks *within*. It is the necessary thread *without* which no texturing, no encounter, and no dialogue (no word) would be possible. Derrida uses the expression *continuous variation* to signify the effect of this interventionist movement of touch within the text(-ure) that signifies rupture, an interruption, but also an addition to the very same text(-ure). Its »orientation, landmarks, and linkages are in *continuous variation*; it operates step by step [*de proche en proche*]« (Derrida 2005, 125).

This step by step, *proche en proche*, allegorizes a temporal and spatial setting to work that is triggered by the touch and is at the same time the reinvoication of *différance* in Derrida's proposition and understanding of touch. But it also makes apparent vacancies, void spaces, in the text(-ure), spaces that, on the one hand, signify the uncanny absence of others from the (mainstream) discourse, and which, on the other hand, as open sites, welcome the possibility of the others' entrance. In this sense, texture can be configured as a mesh that, rather than to be a contingency or continuity, loses and binds its fabric at

the same time on the paths that are taken up. Touch thus would be the animating force of the (open) detours that inscribe the texture of life/writing. As the mark of the other's touch always leads to an opening in the mesh, to a question, in the unfinished fabric, to touching spaces that open up the texture (of inscription, thought, and writing) to unforeseeable spaces in the braiding of the mesh *within* and *without*.

Touching on Humor

Derrida evokes humor in different works, in different ways, and by using different terms like ›irony‹ and ›laughter‹.³⁰ Deciphering the humorous style in his oeuvre remains a worthwhile work of its own. As it would go beyond the scope of this study, I will deal here only with his evocation of humor regarding touch. By way of an example, though, I refer here to one such instance where I see humor at work in one of his texts, before I turn to touch and humor in a narrower sense.

The passage is from *The Post Card – From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* ([1980] 1987), a text that is seen as one of his most ›literary‹ and at the same time most humorous writings. Here, Derrida plays with a tonality of address. Quite at the beginning of the book he calls for readings that do not stay within the intelligible and instead question taken-for-granted assumptions:

»Accustomed as you are to the movement of the posts and to the psychoanalytic movement, to everything that they authorize as concerns falsehoods, fictions, pseudonyms, homonyms, oronyms, you will not be reassured, not will anything be the least bit attenuated, softened, familiarized, by the fact that I assume without detour the responsibility for these *envois*, for what remains, or no longer remains, of them, and that in order to make peace within you I am signing them here in my proper name, Jacques Derrida.« (Derrida 1987, 5)

The last sentence »[...] in order to make peace within you I am signing them here in my proper name, Jacques Derrida« is supplemented with a noteworthy footnote. The footnote plays, firstly, with the instability of verifiability of the ›scientific‹ supplement, and with signature as a sending off of texts that develop their own path. Secondly, the passage plays with the idea of signature as authorization, as well as, thirdly, with the *form* of scientific writing: The footnote is transformed into a publically retrievable, secret space of encounter held in a humorous, flirting address to a *you* as a possible ›real‹ and implicated (singular) reader of his text, after the nonchalant remark »to make peace within you« that sounds provocative and teasing. And it goes on:

»I regret that you [*tu*] do not very much trust my signature, on the pretext that we might be several. This is true, but I am not saying so in order to make myself more important by means of some supplementary authority. And even less in order to disquiet, I know

30 One such work remains *Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce* (Derrida/Attridge 1992, 253–309) and can be seen as a work in which Derrida deals with ›laughter‹ (and a literary text) and its unsettling internal and external meanings with ›yes‹, a word, accompanying both texts accompanied by it – that may be a quasi-translation of the other's touch brought to language.

what this costs. You are right, doubtless we are several, and I am not as alone as I sometimes say I am when the complaint escapes from me, or when I still put everything into seducing you.« (Derrida 1987, 6, footnote 1)

Humor is firstly engendered here through the form of the address, which is pronounced in a footnote – the first footnote of the book – that usually stands for scientific clarification and further insight. Derrida plays with its ›supplementary authority‹ – which here is altered into an aside, a rather intimate space of encountering that touches upon this function of the footnote with a twinkle of the eye. And it does so, on an other, *personal*, *private*, rather than ›objective‹ level. It is as if, in the footnote, someone is taken, drawn aside, an intimate gesture that is stressed by the use of the singular pronoun *you*. This someone – *you* – is told secretly, within a hall of public chatter and discourses going on, something of specific importance, or so it seems. The flirtatious and *personal* and *private* stance is, secondly, further stressed by what apparently is a *confession*, an attempt to seduce the addressee, *you*, the reader. An (old) question can be assumed behind this gesture, namely, whether writing the way it is presented to us and the way ›we‹ are accustomed to it is not a rhetoric of seduction rather than the production of scientific ›truths‹? It also can mean that this allusion in fact might be closer to ›truth‹ than a seduction ›proper‹ may indicate, as it implies that there might be some ›truth‹ in it, – and as there might also be some seduction in the attempt to speak (to) ›truth‹. ›Truth‹, it further indicates, is always spoken from *someone* to *somebody else* – and most probably in moments where instances of power within relations of affectivity flare up that do not reveal as such, in whose favor a dialogic instance will develop, but also how this competition of power, however tender, may end, and how the apparently *dynamic*, *affective distance* that emerges in this *space of touch without touch* between the interlocuters has to be *grasped*. A text, then, writing more generally in its inevitable address, addressing *you*, opens up a space of touch within indeterminable instances of not-knowing and power-lessness – that can go far beyond the moment of the encounter as such. *Confession*, another understanding of an aside, furthermore plays an important role in the writings of Derrida. It alludes not only to an old writing style in literary and religious as well as philosophic texts, but also constitutes an address to an *a priori* assumed absolute OTHER, as an other YOU, spoken in a state of notknowing and, at least internal powerlessness to an unknowable, who nevertheless presumably remains close to the self. In fact, is *within* the self *without* being there, *within* the text and texture of the self without being there, a touch away *within* and *without* touch, *within* its (textual) body *without* ›being‹ (there). A *confession* signals an unequal relation of power, at first sight, but while it is uttered, one wonders whether it does not shift in favor of the presumed confessing one? Is confession not only a form of critique of the very same O/other one confesses to because, one is made to confess, to rethink one's decision? In the moment of confessing the uttering subject confesses about transgressions that question those very limits set by ›the laws‹, showing their limitations, asking for commonly generating new ones? And the question also comes up whether this otherness to which we presumably remain angled in the text(-ure) of writing has to be corporeal, or whether the materiality and corporeality have to also be *rethought* as being *without* material immanence *within* materiality, as other ›materiality‹, within one's inner eyes *without a sense* of seeing and sensing, *within* a touch, *without* touch? A *confession* reveals an unequal re-

ciprocal encounter that aspires to something regarding the O/other who is, in one's own call, in one's voice and discourse, part of the self, part of the ›I‹, and yet wholly O/other, which may even be a hostile part of the self; the *confession* either seeks an apology or forgiveness (Schumm, Schönherr 2015, 729). It thereby is performative, and rather than to tell a ›truth‹, is ›doing truth‹ (Robbins 1995, 28, Kronick 2000). As a written text, a document within discourse, a text within a wider textuality surrounding it, it can also be understood as a form of *resistance* toward an authority and power (Vice 1997, 151) that called upon it, authorized it. A backchat with an O/other in the form of an aside. Derrida's aside also marks *you* figuratively as a singularity, an individual, as well as a singular moment and encounter between two different entities who have a common secret that is part of the performance of their encounter and opens up a space of intelligibility. It is an address and confirmation that affirms the (pre-given) other in its difference to the self and confirms *differance* even in spaces of intimacy, in spaces of touch. It furthermore produces an ›implied reader‹ as an absolute O/other (future) reader, whose counter-sign, whose response is asked for, so that the text (and the address) can be acknowledged and make sense at all. Bakhtin understands a confession also as a form of ambivalence and irresolution (Peterson 2000, 32) from which this resisting sense of humor can be understood to emerge. Thirdly, the humorous tone is produced by what the address seems to say: that an infinity of readings can still be deduced from this authorization by the signature because, although the ›real author‹ through their own invocation by addressing the O/other, *you*, and implicating *you* in the text, has signed the text with a name and authorized it, this does not stop the text or the reading from being understood differently from how the ›real‹ and ›implied author‹ ›Jacques Derrida‹ might have wanted it to be read, may even not be able to disclose the ›real meaning‹ and O/other behind it; the signature gives us no certainties about the name ›Jacques Derrida‹ nor about the meaning of his text, but rather leaves us, despite all due information, clueless, suspended. The humorous, fourthly, ensues from how the address multiplies and engenders the possibility of an unrest, as it also can be read as an address of a specific, secret, ›implied reader‹ that the ›implied author's‹ (wider, implicated) readership cannot be aware of, or of another secret ›implied reader‹ behind this secret ›implied reader‹, or of another ›Jacques Derrida‹ in dialogue with one of his selves at the threshold of a complicated O/otherness that it encounters *within* itself *without* encountering *within* the texture of his text and *without* it. As this address is held on a meta-discursive level, ›the implied reader‹ as well as the possibility of a ›real reader‹ seem to coincide in the pronoun *you* that depicts the other, the non-I, and splits the subject of enunciation and enunciating but refers back to both in the name of ›Jacques Derrida‹, and thereby already implicates a space of relationality and narrativity in a dialogic way within the discourse of the text as well as within the discourse outside of it that has found its way into the text via the enunciating of the subject of enunciation. Besides all this, no doubt, it may not be wrong to discern here some kind of a silken phallic-mafiosi-author-itative tone in the ›implied author's‹ words (does it declare and confess itself in the footnote?), who approaches *you* and takes *you* aside to have a word with *you*.³¹

31 For a flattering response to Derridean (compromised as a name of a father of/in philosophy?) phallogocentric-seductive work at play, see Spivak (1983). See also Gorsz (1997), and Kamuf (1997).

In the famous interview with Derek Attridge with the title *This Strange Institution Called Literature* ([1989] 1992), Derrida in fact acknowledges the deconstructive trait inherent in humor and he links it explicitly to the humorous work of ›literary‹ writing. Derrida uses here the term ›irony‹. As earlier discussed, ›irony‹ can be regarded as another term, a code name for humor that has acquired a sophisticated place in philosophy and literary theory, and that as such a term is in fact also questioned in Derrida's response. But Derrida, in any case, makes clear here that he considers the analysis of these rapturous humorous (literary) elements that go against ›metaphysics‹ and repressive formations of ›truths‹ as an important task of (literary) writing per se:

»Although I did not always, or in every respect, agree with him on this point, Paul de Man was not wrong in suggesting that ultimately all literary rhetoric in general is of itself deconstructive, practicing what you might call a sort of irony, an irony of detachment with regard to metaphysical belief or thesis, even when it apparently puts it forward. No doubt this should be made more complex, ›irony‹ is perhaps not the best category to designate this ›suspension‹, this *epochē*, but there is here, certainly, something irreducible in poetic or literary experience.« (Derrida 1992, 50)

If we translate this »more complex« that is in the poetic by alluding instead of ›irony‹ to humor as an affective rhetoric of deconstruction that gives way to a poetology of non-knowledge and power-lessness, we might create a snag through which it may be possible to state that (the work of) humor in fact may be a central pleasurable matter of concern for Derrida. In this sense, humor from a Derridean understanding, can be seen as an important element of his thought (and the work of deconstruction) per se.

A humorous undertone is also part of Derrida's elaborations on touch. In his allusions to Nancy, Derrida, following Nancy's reading of Charles Baudelaire's poem *The Desire to Paint*, also explicitly deals with the touch of humor by depicting ›laughter‹ as an effect (of whatever sort) that occupies a central space in this prosaic poem. Derrida thus deals with humor's rapturous touch in the texture of this poem, in the texture of art. In this discussion it is not ›laughter‹ or what causes it that is taken up, but rather touching *impressions* of ›laughter‹ and the alluring and haunting desire that it may invoke, albeit, from a cis-normative perspective upon a sexualized and racialized image of a laughing (Black?) woman (a woman of color?), the significantly absent-present other *par excellence* – in (only Western?) philosophy?

Humor in Touch

Nancy calls Baudelaire's poetic image of ›laughter‹ in *The Desire to Paint* (1869), the desire for the beautiful, »the philosophical eroticism of aesthetics, and the sublime aesthetics of eroticism« (Nancy 1993, 372). This image and discussion of the poem seems to be haunted by Hélène Cixous' decolonial, feminist elaborations of what (feminist) ›laughter‹ might mean (*The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1975), a text that neither Nancy nor Derrida take up here. ›The law‹ of reference, touch and *tact* here seems to follow a masculinist philosophical tradition where it does not matter (so) much whether feminist interventions are considered or not. This reveals once again a gendered discourse on touch and humor, which has its

own ›irony‹. It reveals itself as the reiterated *absence* of what Derrida bemoans, the absence of the other who occupies, *literally*,³² the center of philosophical discourse within a (cis-masculinist? and) cis-male dominated projection that also haunts the discourse on humor and touch, indicating the work of the *without* in its more immediate material effects, its legitimized exclusions. This other's absence is implicated in three ways. It is implicated by representation. It is implicated by the absence of any reference to gender or (male-masculinist) sexuality, and it is implicated by the very structure such an entry point may provide for the approach of the poem.

While Nancy's opening of the poem ponders on the sublation of the division of art and *technē*, and while he uses ›laughter‹, touch as well as philosophy's desire for the other to make his argument, he does not bring these loose ends together. Furthermore, and much to Derrida's dismay (Derrida 2005, 114 ff.), Nancy seems to reestablish a metaphysical approach to ›laughter‹ by seeing it as the ›bursting of presences‹ (Nancy 1993, 389). In his elaboration on the poem, Derrida opens up this approach by linking ›laughter‹ and touch to the other, to eroticism, to touch within the text, to touch and worldliness, in the arts as well as in philosophy (Derrida 2005, 111). Derrida interestingly brings together some of the different terms that he has already mentioned before regarding touch, and groups them around his discussion on the touch of ›laughter‹. These terms are: ›feeling‹, experience, self, other, and syncope (Derrida 2005, 111 f.).

But first the poem. Baudelaire's prosaic poem *The Desire to Paint* is the thirty-sixth poem of the collection *Le Spleen de Paris*, which was published posthumously in 1869, and which is often regarded as a modernist reflection of everyday-life, momentums of thoughts and sensory impressions. The text goes as follows:

»Unhappy perhaps is the man, but happy the artist, who is torn with this desire. I burn to paint a certain woman who has appeared to me so rarely, and so swiftly fled away, like some beautiful, regrettable thing the traveler must leave behind him in the night. It is already long since I saw her. She is beautiful, and more than beautiful: she is overpowering. The colour black preponderates in her; all that she inspires is nocturnal and profound. Her eyes are two caverns where mystery vaguely stirs and gleams; her glance illuminates like a ray of light; it is an explosion in the darkness. I would compare her to a black sun if one could conceive of a dark star overthrowing light and happiness. But it is the moon that she makes one dream of most readily; the moon, who has without doubt touched her with her own influence; not the white moon of the idylls, who resembles a cold bride, but the sinister and intoxicating moon suspended in the depths of a stormy night, among the driven clouds; not the discreet peaceful moon who visits the dreams of pure men, but the moon torn from the sky, conquered and revolted, that the witches of Thessaly hardly constrain to dance upon the terrified grass. Her small brow is the habitation of a tenacious will and the love of prey. And below this unquiet face, whose mobile nostrils breathe in the unknown and the impossible, glitters, with an unspeakable grace, the smile of a large mouth; white, red, and delicious; a mouth that

32 On the ambivalent and dialogic meaning of the ›literary‹ see Achim Geisenhanslüke (2020), raising questions about the dilemmas of literary meaning, which challenges its own agenda and broadens (and thus questions) the discourse on and the sense of *literariness* as a liminal, playful (or volatile) counter-sign to another meaning(-fulness).

makes one dream of the miracle of some superb flower unclosing in a volcanic land. There are women who inspire one with the desire to woo them and win them; but she makes one wish to die slowly beneath her steady gaze.« (Baudelaire 2020, 84)

This beautiful poem seems in synchrony with Derrida's unfolding of touch. Derrida's exposition has (at least) three dimensions. On the one hand, and in a more general (public) tone, Derrida ponders upon touch in philosophy and the philosophy of touch. On the other hand, and in a more specific (private) tone, he speaks about an other's touch, on Nancy's touch that has let him, more or less, to consider this touch of touch. On a third level, finally, he brings these two sites of his observation together by negotiating Nancy's understanding of touch, what it encompasses, what has fled Nancy's attention, why this may be the case and what this means for philosophizing and for deconstruction (*as philosophy (per se?)*). In all these dimensions of address, Derrida's elaboration, rather than to follow a typical, prescribed philosophical style of demonstration, has a performative character; it happens within the unfolding of his reading and his response to this reading, his language, and in his writing. Derrida shows in this performance the different layers and meanings of touch, its rules of tact and contact within the material outside and the material inside of the text and its texture. These are his friendship to Nancy as well as an implicit problematization of touch in philosophy. All these strokes and strikes are mirrored in the conglomerate of meanings that are evoked by the above poem: The poem is about touch while it also performs *and* prefigures it. This impression of a touch is expressed in language, touching on touch, like a tongue, but the poem is not the place where it takes place. The poem is just a reminder; it heralds the possibility of touch in a past horizon, as an echo in the presence of being read. This echo bears the imprint of a bygone touch, which has occurred without an apparent, physical touch, and yet has turned the lyrical I towards itself, has influenced its futurity in affective, sensual, and epistemological ways, has formed its language, ending up in a caress with the speaking tongue embracing it. In evoking the remembrance of this touch, touching upon it, the poem reaches its own limits, must acknowledge its own insufficiency. It in fact exceeds its energies and possibilities to capture the touch. Rather, the poem relegates it to an other place of expressibility of the inexpressible, to painting; this deferral places any understanding of touch within the ungraspable, incomplete, and infinite epistemology of the arts, with their own peculiar forms of touch, and places the arts in the sphere, and at the limit of the experience of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It is in this oscillation, in-between the arts, it seems to suggest, where non-knowledge and power-lessness, as the echo of the touch of the other in the memory of the self, unremittingly take shape, however fleetingly. Touch thus is deferred to the otherness of another language, a transplanted *heart*, if you will, to painting as the poet finds their faculty almost exhausted for what they want to express, and they hope, the painter will find the capability to give a more accurate echo to this touch; all the while, however, it is the poet who has changed into a painter, painting their image with their words. The touch of *laughter* thus has changed the speaking, the remembering, the grieving subject. The subject is transformed into another subject who speaks with painted words. Almost gone, evoked in its schematic outlines, it points to an uncertain future, to a search. The touch of *affective humor*, thus, is also imbued in the tragic abyss of loss that it too symbolizes. It is not only an experience of losing oneself,

and, at least for moments, one's orientation, but also a moment of capturing, of grasping something, grasped by it. The poem paints the mournful elusiveness of this touch. It, in turn, touches back what the other has left behind, within an uncountable and unreachable distance that is also a deep closeness, it happens simultaneously within the outward as well as inward space of the self. The poem with its laughing wide mouth folds in with Derrida's sentence on the wall that evokes and questions touch at the same time and gives orientation to his question, reorienting him towards itself.

It is not clear (to me) whether Derrida is tracing the poem, or the poem is tracing what Derrida has done within his discussion in this book. Derrida's pursuits, however, do resemble this poem in a way, in his circling around the importance and in/expressibility of the other's touch, of affectivity, and expression, which the open and vulnerable laughing mouth of the other holds together, while signaling (around) a void.

Derrida describes ›laughter‹ here accordingly as a *syncope*, »which is to say, a certain interruption in contact« (Derrida 2005, 111, 113) – an interruption in contact with the other as well as with the self, an absolute openness to the other. Three important elements that trigger touch and the space it opens up are emphasized thereby: The joyful, open mouth means an interruption within *contact*. While it remains all the same in contact, touching an other, it also surrenders to an other's touch, and in this surrendering, the laughing mouth, humor's most obvious bodily symbol, opens itself up. This openness also symbolizes an openness to the other, whom it invites for openness. Syncope means obliviousness as well as vulnerability. Thus, the touch of *affective humor* emerges out of an uneven but chiasmatic impuissance. It takes its formation out of the acknowledgment, risk, and vulnerability of power-lessness (*OhnMacht*) and non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) as the nexus of the most challenging, present-absent form of *syncope*. It indicates openness and, at the same time, triggers it in the other. It is intense, in chiasmic *contact*, and nevertheless detached, uncoupled. It symbolizes a joyful brokenness before the eyes of an other that this other has triggered, and is exposed within an other's *contact*. It thus must encompass and symbolize reliance and alliance while making vulnerable, letting the self lose itself. Its power thus lies in complete powerlessness and unknowing, which it opens up before an other's ›eyes‹, opening an other's ›heart‹, touching a most hidden *ur-space* there. *Affective humor*, thus, must involve at least two entities that touch each other without touching, within a space that induces distance as well as *contact*, molding a void, an in-between space where potentially anything can happen between violence and ›love‹, and both. *Affective humor's* touch thus means trusting in the power of vulnerability and surrendering to the not-knowing opening that an other triggers in the self. Its powerlessness is its power and notknowing its most possible and treasured ›knowledge‹.

Derrida, furthermore, speaks of a multiple opening: »The opening in question may be presently visible and significant in the burst of laughter, or it may not; it is indispensable. For laughter as for so many other things, more than one opening is needed« (Derrida 2005, 114). *Affective humor* is relational and thus is the poetology of its non-knowledge and power-lessness that indicates both forms of not-knowing and power-lessness, one that is conditioned by the encounter of the humorous touch, and one that comes into sight at its horizon as an endless opening. The interruption of *syncope* is the spacing that opens itself up in the (laughing) mouth as well as in language and the wide field of signification from where it may get its insights: The joyous, powerless, and in its powerlessness most

powerful, open mouth in ›laughter‹, symbolizing humorous inclination, not only touches the heart and is not only affective with regard to the spectral affectivity it triggers but it also opens up *the possibility* of non-knowledge *to know*, it indicates the wide field that the poetology of non-knowledge and power-lessness represent, as a *possible field of* insight, which opens up power, – reminding? –, to the immense sphere of powerlessness, echoing, touching, its limitation.

Derrida also refers to the erotic implications inherent in the meaning of self-touch, *se toucher*. This encompasses touching ›one's body as an experience of oneself as other‹, as a limit. Within the context of *affective humor*, *se toucher* comprises the touch of limits, touching a self as well as an other at their limits within an encounter. At the same time, this ›self-touch‹ is always also the touch of a limit and thus a giving over to an other at one's limits. Derrida calls this the experience of experience per se: ›[...] feeling itself touching a limit, feeling touched by a limit, and its own limit‹ (Derrida 2005, 111). ›Touching oneself‹ thus is not a beginning, but an end insofar as, at the limit of the self, is an other. ›Laughter‹ here also symbolizes this limit that signifies the other's touch at the limits of oneself. ›Laughter's syncope, furthermore, hints not only to an interruption, but to an outage of the self; the self, for a short period of time (of interruption) disappears from its own memory and presence. When it comes back, the self is a slightly different and differed self, and may look ›at the world‹ in a slightly other way, touched by the other, by this limit that links both entities for the moment of the immediate touch, but that also engraves itself in the self as a memory. The image of an outage, of a syncope, also refers to the affective touch of that which the rhetoricality of humor invokes. This can be an expression of humor such as ›laughter‹ or a smile, a twist of the mouth, or it can be an impression, which shows itself in another form of ›opening‹ that may not be visible, but may be an insight or a shift in perception. Humor here, personalized, imagined, and at the same time, textualized with all its implicated affectivity, shows itself in the literariness of language and the desire that is evoked and shaped in the non-knowledge and power-less sphere of the arts. In this textualized image, the affectivity of ›laughter‹ remains a residue of a reciprocal touch and one that haunts the self. The spacing of the mouth in ›laughter‹ thus also signals the humorous, affective relationality through which the other and the self are linked to each other, oriented to specific directions in this syn-copated moment of total distance. Though they may not touch each other haptically and the space between them may be insurmountable, like a past time, different continents, or different languages and ›cultures‹, they seem to remain closest to each other in this instant. *Affective humor* symbolizes touch in both ways: It shows the powerless vulnerability of being touched (also while inhabiting power) and the power to touch (also while inhabiting positions of powerlessness). It also shows an ethical inclination, as that which the self longs for: Response as well as responsiveness, is triggered by the other's powerlessness. Not power but powerlessness thus merges the self and the other in *meaningful*, and yet *ungraspable*, undiscernible ways. *Affective humor* is thus liberating at both, all ends of the encounter. In its empathic and passionate touch, it interrelates (at least) two subjects without overriding their distance and difference. ›Laughter‹ as the possible after-effect of the touch that emerges from the *contact of affective humor* gives impetus to the movement and motivation of the ›reading‹, observing subject.

In this poem, however, three male thinkers problematize ›laughter‹ by depicting a potentially Black woman*, a woman* of color, in a rather vulnerable state. And here is where the politics that engulf the touch of *affective humor*, too, appears and is presented on a backstage.

The othered female ›laughter‹ may stand for other meanings as well that are not part of Derrida's, Nancy's or Baudelaire's contemplations. It may laugh at the image that is put up at her*, it may be a joyous as well as a pained ›laughter‹, a loving as well as sad ›laughter‹, one that may be full of different ›affects‹, and one that therefore must entail a sense of wit, and maybe good-hearted, nevertheless-humor. Perhaps ›she*‹ laughs at the non-knowledge of this O/other who confounds her* sight with happiness while ›she*‹ may be laughing at her* misery. ›She*‹ may also laugh, shyly, at the possibility of happiness that is triggered in the look of a loving admiration. But she* may also be laughing sadly at the limitedness of her* own desire. ›Laughter‹, as the utmost limits and image of humor, and humor as the limits of language, discourse, and thought, touches upon the open place at the liminal of affectivity and the production of meaning, at the borders of non-knowledge and power-lessness, where pleasure, desire, power, and resistance, the self and the other meet, and come into being and are set into work in (im/possible) infinite ways, instead of signaling ›ends‹. This is what *affective humor* may have in common with tragedy.

The poem seems to articulate in the image of ›laughter‹ a demonstration of Derrida's metonymic metaphoricity of the touch. It touches upon the division of the subject, its gender, and its relation to art, and as art, it touches upon the phenomenology of relationality, upon the arts as writing in painting and the painting in writing, and their function, to find some undetectable ›truth‹. At the same time, the poem may display the figuration of a Black woman* or a woman* of color, as the representation of the other's touch as a desire for affection, and as the humorous (loving? wondering? wondering-loving?) touch that moves the male, cis-normative self (?) to desire and to dream, and to paint, and to be restless in *writing*.

But this woman*-figure's ›laughter‹ may be another shade of Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa*. It laughs back from the mirror-image of a male dominated discourse. The painted poem, in gazing laughingly back from an exclusive but also excluded and marginalized other space, and the space of the other – which also is the space of the arts and of aesthetics – stands in a heterotopic non-place; it is a spacing in-between ›reality‹ and the unreal. From this place the other's ›laughter‹ ironizes discourse, while also ›loves‹ it for its alleged power/›knowledge‹ and naïve non-knowledge and powerlessness, and for a future where it could be unfolded differently. She* speaks and enters the sphere of the safeguarded supremacist power and ›knowledge‹, already touched by their limits, and replies, presumably as a racialized, classicized, and gendered other(-ed) through ›laughter‹, the arts, and more specifically through literature. Like *Psyche*, her* absence is the stencil, the subjectile, Derrida may say, for what constitutes the wor(l)d – and the possibility how it might be re-configured differently.

It seems to be Eros himself who willy-nilly learns to yearn for her* and tries, against his own will, to bring her* back to discourse and language by letting her* laugh at everything that he might symbolize or wish for. Read in this way, the touch of *affective humor* in and from this heterotopic non-place of the arts marks a freedom *from* as well as a freedom

to (Arendt 2017). It apparently stands for what the touch of *affective humor* with its ›laughter‹ does: it performs a poeology of non-knowledge and power-lessness that comes from its affective humorous signification, which seems to be at the margins of any serious and fixating construction of meaning, and whose seams already dissipate in the alluring bodily expression of a not-knowing, powerless mouth. The desire to cherish this ›laughter‹ in the painted poem also stands for and symbolizes the imprint of touch that the encounter has set in motion, and that indicates the possibilities of other ›knowledges‹ as an intertwined poetics of non-knowledge and power-lessness. What may be described, then, by all three thinkers is perhaps just an impression, *a touch*, of ›grace‹.

And here, again, bell hooks' encounter with the painting on the other side of the wall in New York comes to mind. The ›grace‹ she describes as ›a touch of love‹ resides in the aesthetic response of a painting that is at the same time a written sentence on a wall in a public space. Perhaps, then, touch in *affective humor* is the graceful sight and insight of the aesthetic – a silent, unknowing, power-less, and liberating affirmation – like Baubo's solace in the face of loss that triggers ›laughter‹, hope.

Literature, painting, the painted poetics of an other's ›laughter‹ appear as metonyms of a reflex that always already, not-knowingly and powerless, points to the dialogic, to the response of the other. It deconstructs and at the same time shows the hidden, affectionate desire *within power* as another part of it – a desire that the other may speak (for themselves) that the nexus power/knowledge also yearns to be freed from itself to (re)enter a stage of powerlessness not-knowing to create itself anew, differently. This is a ›selfish‹ as well as an ethical desire for an other that shows itself in the touch of *affective humor* and in the sphere of the arts where *affective humor* is not an abstract entity, but a molded, artful, poetical composition that is *willed* to touch in interruptive ways. Here, in the philosophic elaboration of Nancy as well as Derrida, it is the poem that stands for what they try to elaborate on, interrupting their thoughts by its otherwise poetic humorous touch.

In Baudelaire's text, it is not the grotesque that is depicted as the subversive power of ›laughter‹ as humor's maybe most subversive signature. It is ›laughter‹'s haunting powerlessness as the imprint of loss. The painter-poet-philosopher does not know why the woman* -figure is smiling. The humor behind her* smile remains a secret that only ›she*‹ herself* might know. *Affective humor*'s touch thus does not open the other to ›knowledge‹; it opens the self to unknowing and powerlessness, by leaving its imprint in their subject(ed), self, willing to surrender to the touch's power-lessness and not-knowing. For the reading subject, the smile may represent ›love‹, wonder, seduction, and haunting, but not necessarily for the subject who laughs (at her* self as much as the one looking at her*), while ›she*‹, too, remains surrendered to the call for her* to appear. The painted ›laughter‹ in words, the touch of *affective humor*, thus reinstates the arts, literature, and painting, in the middle, at the heart of philosophic sophistication, and in the melody of ›laughter‹, its music, from an objectified status, in which it turns itself into a (singular) subject through ›laughter‹, indicating as her* home the power-less sphere of non-knowledge, symbolizing the rich possibilities that lie in powerlessness and not-knowing. Not only do the arts, and literature, specifically regain a form of knowing-agency beyond the reading and beyond the artist, in this affective humorous touch, but also the other within her* touching, reciprocal ›laughter‹. Like Cixous' *Medusa*, this subject's laughing might, in fact, be out of the specter of affectivity, of a wondering pleasure and a wondering pain,

at the chasm of ›life‹, at the abysses of discourse, encounter, and mistranslation, at the striking touches of ›the laws‹, orders and gazes in which ›she*‹ is regarded as the object of (cis-male?) desire, enticement, and elusiveness – othered as if ›she*‹ could not speak (back), which ›she*‹ in fact may choose not to do, and instead to laugh at that all, wondering, and out of *tact*, in both its senses, not knowing how to react to this misery; the very act of ›laughter‹ thus conceived signifies an attempt of disarming as well as empowerment. Out of such a way of looking at ›life‹ with all its sorrows and fragile pleasures, *affective humor* emerges as (another) ›philosophy‹. Painted in language, this other's humor, itself othered, bursts conventionalized meanings, ›laws‹, orders, and colors (of gender, ›race‹, and class).³³ Medusa's ›laughter‹ as well as Baudelaire's poetic laughing *woman** can be conceived as the reparative sides of the other's (pained and yet healing) humor – with effects that might derange and destabilize dominant discourses/meanings, while simultaneously empowering a weak, unforceful search for meaning. Laughing at those who want to fix things and fix her* in their gaze, ›she*‹ senses that such an act is impossible and illusory. However, ›she*‹ does not centralize this ›knowledge‹ as some kind of ›truth‹ – instead, ›she*‹ just laughs, wondering.

This opening of the mouth does not only stand for deconstruction; as the mouth is also an organ, and as it is an organ that can be opened up (by oneself or others) it also signals exposure and vulnerability. Thus, it also stands for the vulnerability inherent in any opening, in speaking, in language, and in deconstruction. Language and discourse, while occupying the place of ›the law‹, of *tact*, and of centripetalism, also encompass a triple vulnerability: the vulnerability of power-lessness as well as the vulnerability of subversive and centrifugal forces inherent in the movement of *contact* (in-between which power-lessness resides), touching upon something that is part of language-related and discursive rhetoric, and lastly, the vulnerability and exposure of the body and the ethics that is bound to it. As Geisenhanslüke discusses with regard to Freud's dream work, the rhetoricality of humor or, to take up Geisenhanslüke's non-metaphorical metaphor, the poetology of humor's non-knowledge (and hence power-lessness), also functions as an opening to a dilemmatic experience of ›knowledge‹ that is non-knowledge. The vulnerability and exposure is implied in the rhetoric and literariness of the text and can be accepted, rejected or ignored. This is the forceless side of the poetic performativity of touch inherent in *affective humor* as a rhetoric of deconstruction and the lingering clang of its ethics, which always resides at the edge of withdrawal. There is a certain uncertainty about its existence and (its) (dizzying, possible) allusions, its *Aus-sagekraft*.

The figure of the mouth that Nancy depicts as the place and organ, as it were, that binds ›psychical thinking‹ with the body, the mouth, is the image and the place that interlinks thought, language, the body as well as the other and the self within an opening that is released by the humorous touch and that, at the same time, encompasses it. *The Desire to Paint* does not only refer to the mouth as the place of touch (of desire and the desire to speak) and to affection. It also is the place of the poem and of a joyful, humorous tonality. The poem in this regard also represents the tongue, the organ of touch that

33 Nancy, though, seems more critical in his (deconstructive) reading of Baudelaire's amorous, yearning text, ›lowering‹ it to prostitution and the ›vulgarity‹ of the senses (and sense-making?) (Nancy 1994, 390 ff.).

touches with language. *The Desire to Paint* stands in a metonymic counter-relation to discourse but nevertheless within the vast (not-knowing and power-less) field of (literary) language. From here, in the glaze of the poem, language, this self-touching tongue opens up a space, to enter another one, touching an other, participating (laughingly/lovingly?) in a dialogue, queering it.

The image of the ›mouth‹ links a bodily organ to touch and to an affective humorous tonality. It resides in the joy and pain of ›laughter‹ within a metaphoricity, which is abstract, poetically theorizing, philosophical. By centralizing the poem as the source to elaborate on this, the philosophic discussion is transformed. It becomes material, historical, political, and poetological. It links touch to time and to space, and, at the same time, frees it from the immediate event around which it has chosen to circle, by hinting at something more general that it entails as well. The poem touches upon an event in the past that haunts the present and that evokes, in the image, the future. It implicates in this process of remembrance, corporeality, an aporetic specter of affectivity, encompassing compassion as well as pain, subjectivity, resistance, unavailability, and unintelligibility, and above all, the inconclusive and ambiguous aesthetic epistemology of art – as (poetological) philosophy. The mouth, the opening touch of the poetic expression, can, in the process of reading and remembering, physically touch, but it must not do so to touch. It can remain ›language‹, an image, inaccessible, shut. It must not speak to everyone and does not enforce a meaning, but may only have something to say to those who (can) return its touch by responding to it in different, infinite ways; while it remains vulnerable all the same, its inaccessibility also makes it unavailable and thus untouchable to possible violence. In this way, the work of art, poetry, and its epistemology, always remains *intact* and keeps its almost other-worldly sovereignty. This is the protective coat of poetic language. A mouth in silence (like ›laughter‹) stands for ›dumbness‹ and ›silliness‹ as well as for ›intelligence‹ and ›wisdom‹. In its roundness, digesting, reproducing, echoing, depth, and surface, the mouth combines the whole circle of life – life, death, rebirth – and its im/possible nuances. As Nancy declares in his reading of the poem, ›laughter‹ «completes without completing» (Nancy 1993, 383). The mouth thus combines different aporetic paradoxes (Derrida 2005, 114 ff.) that are part of language but that become conditioned, regulated and arrested in history, discourse and philosophy. These are set free in the poem and symbolize an act of response, liveliness, survival as well as eroding, which in ›laughter‹ bursts into parts, becomes fragmented, loses its meaning. Rather than to acquire immediately a new, arrested meaning, it indicates the possibility of other meanings that can be acquired if one cares to seek them. »Of course, even if it shakes up the whole body« Derrida insists,

›laughter is a thing of this mouth – and the open mouth, toward which the question of touch and self-touch incessantly leads us back. The mouth touches, touches itself is touched, not only because the lips touch, and not only because one would not speak – to have a word with a friend [se toucher] if this auto-affection of a mouth, this contact interrupted and repeated between the lips, the tongue, the palate, and so forth, did not impart speech. We must have a mouth for laughter and for laughing. Surely, we can laugh with our eyes, but it is difficult (even if it is not impossible) to imagine a liv-

ing being laughing without something like an opening other than the eyes.« (Derrida 2005, 113–114)

One can also laugh with one's eyes or with one's skin, which, too, in the act of reading and in the act of touch, execute the work of the tongue. These can become a ›language‹ in dialogue with an O/other. The eyes mirror and touch with delight, pain, and amusement and can be a bodily synecdoche for understanding as such, for *insight*, understood as an opening to something not known before, by the touch of an other entity or a space around themselves. The mouth's opening in ›laughter‹ signifies the opening of and the openness to an insight, to and through the other, the arts, the (literary) text, the image of oneself in the O/other, the other at the limits of oneself or within one's memory; this cognitive process is a bodily process rather than an abstracted understanding of *logos*, which is only a notch in the capability of the self's *eccentric positionality*. In this intertwined way of affectivity and cognition, *humor's touch*, its opening sets something into work within the (reading) self, within thought, discourse, and language, and maybe even in *herstory**. *Humor's syncope*, on the other hand, signifies a cognitive shut down in which all (known) meanings disappear. In this almost placid, figured attentive description, it is not the hands, the eyes or the skin but the mouth that functions as an organ of touch as well as of affectivity and cognition. It feeds, eats (away), swallows up, digests and replies. The mouth denotes affection, auto-affection as well as hetero-affection. The mouth also denotes self-touch, touching itself, in some form of unconscious consciousness, »the self feeling one's self touch« (Derrida 2005, 111). In the interruptive image of the laughing mouth, and most visibly so, touch is also, at the same time, a loss of consciousness, a disempowerment, complete uncertainty, but not in a ›bad way‹ or as a ›bad mood‹. It is a joyous and pleasurable uncertainty, one that might be aware of the prefix *un-* that is attached to it. It signifies a falling apart of meaning, which only *seemed* to belong together. It signals a letting go, a form of liberation and setting free. This loss of power, therefore, also signals empowerment because of the possibility of another insight that might be triggered by the falling apart of meanings and alleged certainties. It thus signifies the opening of a liminal space. If we regard ›laughter‹, furthermore, as a sign of an affective rhetoric of humor, as a tonality at the nexus of non-knowledge and power-lessness, we can acknowledge a specter of different affective senses and sensitivities that evoke and accompany thought and epistemology while these begin to form shape and contour.

This emotive, moving tonality and productivity of humor's laughing rhetoricality in the poetics of the text gives way to a kinetic understanding of ›knowledge‹ and power. It is an all-encompassing sensitive procedure that remains *attouched* – touched by and attached to – affectivity, and part of the nexus of non-knowledge and power-lessness within history and beyond it, within language and discourse.

The laughing mouth, touched by a humorous tonality, also disrupts and loses sight of itself, touching back laughingly while it simultaneously touches someone or something in itself, touching upon something within and without.

The touch of this self-multiplying, affective humorous tonality thus entails, three elements that Derrida connotes to touch: touch as a departure from something (known), touch as a spacing between the self and the other as well as within the self, and touch as separation, as a condition for the possibility of touch.

If we consider touch in humor, in the poetics of words, signs, and (intervening) effects of discourse, it is possible to think it not as in opposition to the intelligible but as an opening of the intelligible. In this sense touch comes close to the idea of *movere* as an impetus (of the other) that sets something in movement within the self, a movement that must not be effective immediately. The laughing mouth is just a possible, epitomic image that Baudelaire's poem offers. As the touch in the humorous poetics is accompanied by a timeout, by unconsciousness, it also is delayed and may set in another time within the affected self and in its outward and inner agency.

Baudelaire's desire for painting and Derrida's touch are in a sense *reinvoked*, animated, in bell hooks' understanding of humor as a welcome trait of language, so it can be ›meaningful. With her reference to the self-deconstructive work of humor, bell hooks touches on the possibilities of language, not-knowing and power-lessness as forms of power and (meaningful) empowerment that remain self-critical and open to not-knowing, to the O/other that the self has, to an extent at least, constructed for itself and also worships in different ways. They also touch on an ethics of encounter that is enmeshed in the wor(l)dliness of discourse. It is released in the laughing mouth/language towards an O/other, almost embracing it, where it touches ›the laws‹ of tact in stroking and striking ways, in careful, critical, smiling inward and outward gazes, and where it may open hearts, mouths, memories, opening them with the affective poetics of touch, through which other insights may be gained from the same text and texture ...

Humor - In-Between Touching Spaces and Affective Attachments

Touch describes the inscription of relationalities in oscillating kaleidoscopic, inward and outward movements. Touch can be thought of in three different ways that supplement each other. All three meanings of touch are already part of language. Touch can be understood in an abstract sense of *touching upon*. It can be understood in a *haptic sense* of touching the materiality, the surface of an entity/an other. It can be understood in the sense of being touched within an *inner level of un/consciousness*. The poetics of *affective humor* involves these traces of touch in intertwined ways, evoking a process of epistemological movement and change that is also corporeal. Touch, then, is sensual as it is already a sensing, a form of recognition, a threshold form of not-knowing and power-lessness. Touch thus conceived is a pre-linguistic form of (not only bodily) *acknowledgments*. Its written or spoken meanings follow from an afterwardsness. Touch is a phenomenological sensing of the wor(l)d and the self in an *attachment* to the other. This phenomenology (of experiencing) is also bound to what is already there, in the gaps within the strings of subjectivity, language, discourses, materiality, history, structures of power. At the same time, touch is also an experience of singularity. It links something from the outside to the inside of the self, it happens in a space at the limit of oneself and thus engenders the possibility of experiencing the self as an other as well as an other at one's limit in a relational, dialogic field, as a self. Although touch is a singular sense, it is also infinite and at work in a multiplicity of singular acts within the multifarious fields of the self and its outer wor(l)ds. Touch is a movement that turns and orients entities. It is a dialogic movement. It comes along in the process of ›reading‹ without making itself known in explicit ways, but rather unfolds in an afterwardsness in un/conscious ways. Touch sets a movement of

turning or of tournaments into work. It comes with an *auto-bio-graphical* space-time-related orbit, a rhythm of already historically marked traces. It is a form of movement that can best be understood as a centering on decentering, a dynamic hold in-between one's movements, a *returning*, a turning of the self as well as a turning to an other. This deconstructive movement of meaning production is set into work in the dynamics that the performative poetics of *affective humor* as a rhetoric of deconstruction releases and offers as a space as well as a stage for the touch to take place. The poetics of touch is relational and gracious.

Derrida disassembles this trace of the touch in such a fundamental way that he almost betrays his metaphor of the trace. What differentiates and ›rescues‹ his approach from a metaphysical placement of touch as a *ur-beginning* and *ur-origin* is the relational, moving movement that inscribes, first, the O/other's mark in the self. Touch signifies ›identity‹-formation as ›etiologically‹ *disidentitarian* movements within the very act of self-structuring that must therefore always fail for itself. Self and O/other remain inseparable from each other and in infinite ways. This is perhaps the ethics and hope inherent in touch.

It not only signals a physical movement but also a psychological one. Touch may be an impulse, a corporeal, cognitive as well as unconscious effect in an encounter. It is an enactment triggered by an other, which must not be immediately effective but may develop a dynamic beyond the encounter. The touching poetics of *affective humor* in its rhetorical performativity opens such a space in which a relationality (re-)appears and is (again) set into work. *Affective humor's* touching poetics is understood in this sense as an opening of a space and as an opening that is corporeal-sensual, psychic, material, and epistemological. It is synonymous with the mouth and the tongue, with language and a desire to speak, to offer a dialogue or take part in one. Its touch is affective within the complex and multifarious spectral of affectivity. In this triple ephemeral, fragile state that interrupts and can be interrupted, the touch of the poetics of *affective humor* is a tasseled deconstruction in multilayered guises within the passing passage of a (cont-)text. ›Passage‹ denotes not only a paragraph but also the passageway to another part of the text and to another meaning. The touching space of *affective humor* turns itself into an unwritten *para-graph* that inscribes the body and the psyche by offering them the intertwined poetics of non-knowledge and power-lessness as an entry point for dialogicity. *Affective humor* touches poetically in an interruptive way, it is a syncopic parabasis, the rapture that comes from an other wor(l)d, be it in the texture of ›life‹ or in the texture of the ›text‹, which it decently, endlessly, movingly connects to build ever new meshes.

Section II – Readings

Reading *White Teeth*

White Teeth – A Contextualization

White Teeth (2000) is Zadie Smith's much appraised debut novel and a »huge human fresco« (Ledent 2016, 81). The novel is about three British families in London, the Jamaican/white Jones, the Bengali Muslim Iqbals, and the Jewish/white Chalfens. Because of the conjoined paths and experiences of the three families and family members, around which the novel revolves, *White Teeth* is more often than not categorized and regarded as representing »multiculturalism« (Moss 2003; Thompson 2005; Korte 2009; Matt 2009; Perfect 2014). »Multiculturalism« refers to an embattled discourse, and the various facets of cultural lifestyles that are fostered by the histories of Europe, initially, religiously grounded, othering, colonialism, imperialism, immigration, and immigrants that pose a challenge to dominant, monolithic understandings of *the nation*, and whom it should include and with which consequences (Kirpikh 2017; Baglama 2019, Kershaw 2021). Used in praise or disavow, such a term though appears as a reduction of a complex amalgamation of dynamics and strategies of exchange and encounter, of a *worldliness* that is interlinked with this long internal and external history of »Europe« and its after-effects, which are still marked by discursive and socio-economic ties.¹ *White Teeth* rather »redefines culture as unstable and open to new formations« (Sakiz 2023, 25). The novel »[...] shows a society yet to achieve this multicultural success« (Kershaw 2021, 869). Instead of reducing the complexity of the novel to this topic, I would therefore like to take a closer look at the orchestration of the evoked *life-worlds* of the novel. *Life-world* (*Lebenswelt*)² (Husserl/Hua 1976 VI: 48) is a critical term coined by Edmund Husserl that depicts the world as fundamentally *experienced*, as a historically driven, spatially situated *life-context* which is constitutive for the formation of subjects and subjectivity, and from which meaning/knowledge/power-lessness is deduced as well. Husserl's student Merleau-

- 1 Dominic Head locates this more classical reading of »multiculturalism« within a historical, generational self-understanding as different adaptations of a multivocal construction of »culture«. Cf. Dominic Head (2003). Another more recent critical entry to this discussion is offered by Justin Omar Johnston who problematizes the term by considering biopolitics and discourses on »security« and neocolonial strategies to mark and subject People of Color in specific panoptic ways. Cf. Johnston (2021); see also the critical approach of Hannah Kershaw (2021).
- 2 For an overview of the discussions on Husserl's different problematizations and understandings of *life-world*, see Lee (2020).

Ponty also stresses the formation of subjectivity and the subject-related meaning of *life-worlds* as corporeal, bodily inscriptions, and as the way we learn to ›know‹ (Brinkmann 2022; Said 2000, 9). Merleau-Ponty also interlinks subjectivity to a process in which, not only a self but also an other is constituted. As Edward Said in *The Labyrinth of Incarnations* (2000) argues:

»Merleau-Ponty's answer to charges against his blatant subjectivity is always that subjectivity is itself a universal which means that intersubjectivity, or the whole of all existing subjectivity, is the only transcendent value. ›By myself I cannot be free, nor can I be a consciousness or a [wo]man[st]; and that other whom I first saw as my rival is my rival only because [s]he[st] is myself. I discover myself in the other, just as I discover consciousness of life in consciousness of death, solitude and communication, which is heading towards its resolution.« (Said 2000, 9; Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Said)

Lebenswelt thus emphasizes the subjective formation of singular and intersubjective lives in specific historically conditioned sociopolitical, *experienced* contexts but also acknowledges their inter-relation, connectivity, and crossing (Guignery 2014, 19). *Life-world* thus refers to the *rhythm* and infinite formation of *different* subjectivities along historical and institutional structures of power. *Life-world* is therefore taken here as the interlinking, historically driven life-context that organizes the social web of *White Teeth*. The lives of the three families mirror »the lived experience of a locality« (Brah 1996, 152) and are also shaped by historically conditioned, colonial, antisemitic, racist, postcolonial, and diasporic forms of othering and experiences of »trauma, separation, and dislocation« (Siccardi 2020, 215, Tew 2014). These experiences operate along minoritizing attitudes through *different* processes of othering (Kirpikli 2017, 217). *Life-world* thus also encompasses the processing of othering in the formations of subjectivity in singular as well as inter-related, inter-subjective ways. In one of her more recent collections of essays, *Intimations* (2020), Zadie Smith explicitly refers to ›real life‹ and to writing as an after-effect that attempts to make sense of life experience as a form of resistance:

»Writing is control. The part of the University in which I teach should properly be called The Controlling Experience Department. Experience – mystifying, overwhelming, conscious, subconscious – rolls over everybody. We try to adapt, to learn, to accommodate, sometimes resisting, other times submitting to whatever confronts us. But writers go further: they take this largely shapeless bewilderment [the experience of what she calls ›real life‹] and pour it into a mold of their own devising. Writing is *all* resistance.« (Smith 2020, 6)

Life-world, as a concept that pays attention to this ›bewilderment‹ that the experience of life is, may therefore be of special importance for the way *White Teeth* displays the figures and sociopolitical structures that surround them as well as pivotal for how these are organized and narrated in specific ways.³ In *White Teeth*, the *life-world* of these three fam-

3 Pallavi Rastogi refers not only to an ›ironic tone‹ as a typical feature of Smith's oeuvre that they also describe as characteristic for this book, but also to the importance of the liminal, overlapping spaces of intimate, inner, and public outward experiences. Cf. Rastogi (2022, 242; 254 ff.).

ilies and their family members are problematized along »the endearing qualities of [the author's] sharp-eyed but warm-hearted book« in connection with the »ludicrously out of date« workings of antisemitism and racism (Taheri 2018, 114; Chisholm 2002; Moss 2008). By considering the protagonists' *life-world* as well as the subjectivity of the different ›authorial‹ instances of the novel, I wish to look at the affective economy and humor that the novel sets into play to see what they may mean and problematize.

To an extent, the (postcolonial) humorous tone of the novel has been given some attention, most often in conjunction with the ›comic English novel‹, whereby Zadie Smith is often compared with well-known literary British authors like Evelyn Waugh, Salman Rushdie, Laurence Sterne, Charles Dickens, and last but not least, E. M. Forster (Lane/Mengham/Tew 2003, 2013; Ramsey-Kurz 2005; Ross 2006; Tynan 2008; Sutherland 2010; Tolan 2013, and, critically, Tate 2016). Especially E. M. Forster has a decisive role in this regard as he is highly appreciated by Smith as a role model. She even considers her third novel *On Beauty* (2005) as an *hommage* to E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910) (Smith 2005, 1).

Thus, humor in *White Teeth* seems so obvious that it has received some scholarly attention. But despite its overall centrality in the novel there are only few works that pay closer attention to *how* it is used in the novel and *what* the reasons for its evocations may be beyond its ›British comicality‹ (Tew 2010, 94; Smith 2001; Wood 2001, 2005; Seeber 2010; Wille 2011); the aesthetic, epistemological as well as affective possibilities that may lie behind and be connected to the use of humor in *White Teeth* and what it may signal, are sometimes mentioned in passing but not further pursued. By considering Smith's fable for the work of E. M. Forster, in the following I propose to look at the humor employed in *White Teeth* but not just for itself (Tancke 2013) nor in order to pay attention to its ›Britishness‹ and intertextual references and indebtedness, arguments that go in the direction of construing ›national‹ literary boundaries and traits (Rupp 2010; Tew 2010; Thompson 2005; Tolan 2013), in an attempt maybe to embed and expand the scope of this canon to include works by Black British and other(-ed) writers of Color. Instead of such angles, I wish to look at the different *uses* and *functions* that the humorous inclinations and affective economy of *White Teeth* set into being within its rhetorical and narrational instances.⁴ The humorous tonality of *White Teeth* as a »comical novel«, to cite Smith (Smith 2003), entails complex poetic and poetological instances. The novel evokes different spaces of touch in affective as well as epistemological ways on different levels, through which it sets a multiplicity of meanings into play.

In *Love Actually* (2003), a non-fiction text by Smith, which is based on her *Orange Word Lecture* at Harvard University, she describes the novel as an ethical space. In this text, Smith also makes references to humor, especially in the literary writings of Forster.

4 Against this narrowing down of her text also stands Smith's stance towards language as an uncontrollable matter even in the hands of the author: »To me writing is deeply irrational, idiosyncratic, because its medium – language – has so much ambiguity built into it. That argument that Alice and Humpty Dumpty have about the instability of meaning that's the epigraph of a million graduate dissertations ... Language is the absurd bit of writing that can't be entirely suppressed or controlled« (Smith quoted in Tew 2014a). This unruly aspect of language may well come into sight in the deployment of humor in the text. See also Phillip Tew's overall critical assessment of the reception of Smith's often underestimated works (2014).

She further discusses Forster as a writer who brings in a *muddled* version of the *ethical mess* into the novel in which the characters are caught up (Smith 2003; see also Tolan 2013, Amelvoort 2018), a trait of Forster's novels that she highly praises. Smith particularly emphasizes Forster's humorous strategies and distinguishes them from those of Jane Austen's rather ›proper‹ narratives considered to be humorous. While according to Smith, Austen's characters engender humorous traits through (conform?) rationalistic readings of the world and other people around them, »Forster's folk are famously always in a muddle: they don't know what they want or how to get it« (Smith 2003). Smith sees in this ›muddle‹ that the figures enact the creation of an ethical quest and calls this trait the ›ethical strategy‹ of the novel as a »good« and a »value« that every author/novel must find out to bring to the fore in the text, in one way or another. Smith vaguely also speaks of Forster's attempt to bring ›Freudian‹ features to the novel, by which she may refer to aspects that show unconscious elements, which are evoked in the acting of the figures. These psychic tendencies indeed show themselves in *White Teeth* in the processes of decision-making, (mis-)speaking, and the errantry of memories, encounters, and experiences, which give impetus not only to the plot and its humorous inclinations, but also to the affectively riddled agency and performance of the characters. Such subconscious threads, the *clueless muddle*, can be regarded as a perplexity, which surfaces in the text, in writing, as forms of not-knowing (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*) (*what to do how*). Smith also binds two further aspects to the *ethical* epistemology of the literary text. These are, on the one hand, a novel's *affective traits*, which she considers to be underestimated aspects of meaning and sense-making, and, on the other hand, unresolved, *open ends* rather than ›good‹, or ›comprehensible‹ ones (Smith 2003).

This ambiguous affectivity and undecidable transparency indeed lend *White Teeth* an infectiously humorous tone, inviting more often than not, bursts of ›laughter‹, but also pensiveness, as the text opens up myriad complexities by alluding to unconscious as well as questioning traits. Smith stresses the complexity of the process of reading and seems to aim at a form of writing in which this complexity, in unresolved ways, may resonate from out of the literary text, not in order to mystify ›life‹, but in order to show its chaotic, aberrant, amalgamated, messy sites.

The novel also entails those aspects that Smith admires in Forster's work: Rather than to follow an intelligible trajectory of considerations, the characters in *White Teeth* appear in a *muddle* of ambivalent and contradictory trails of affectivity, and their actions, too, are more perplexing and baffling than ›reasonable‹ decisions. Even when they seem ›reasonable‹, they also encompass other stray and paradoxical elements. This is not only true for Archie Jones, one of the main characters in *White Teeth* – a *white* British protagonist, who due to class-based preconditions, could not attend college. The same is true of the educated characters with university degrees, such as Samad Iqbal, Archie's friend, and another central figure in the novel, as well as Marcus Chalfen, a Jewish British scholar and scientist and a third central male character. On the other hand, Alsana Iqbal, Samad's wife, who does not have an academic degree, appears more astute than the *white* educated writer of non-fiction books, Joyce Chalfen, Marcus' wife, who follows the wisdom of conventional, mainstream ›knowledge‹. Yet, in spite of these *redeployments* of ›knowledge‹, the novel does not adhere to another straightforward understanding of a ›good way‹ of reasoning; instead, it offers the humorous opening of these traits to ›understanding‹. It

also forges an ethical approach towards the various characters who are not weighed and valued by their ›ethnic‹ or educational backgrounds. *White Teeth*'s humorous strategy lies in the spaces it carves out by denormalizing prevalent beliefs and notions.

Yet, as Smith herself points out in another essay, *The I Who is Not Me* (2018), although there resides in an author a desire to write as if they could represent and echo any possible ›voice‹, these voices are nonetheless also bound to the subjectivity and experiences of the writing self. Smith writes:

»This is the kind of fiction I have always loved to write and read: worming itself into many different bodies, many different lives. Fiction that faces outwards, towards others. But after my book [*On Beauty* (2005)] was finished and I had a chance to reflect upon it, I could see more clearly how the I who is me ran through it all in a subterranean way. *On Beauty* is not my life, but it's certainly full of my loves, my interests, my ideas. [...] The novel is a record of my preoccupations, although they are mapped on to strangers. Meanwhile the strictly autobiographical, if it occurred at all, was deeply buried and almost entirely subconscious. But it was there.« (Smith 2018, 335)

It must be assumed, then, that this *subconscious voice* and the preferences and experiences of the ›real author‹ are close to the evocation of an ›implied author‹, and are also echoed in the activities and voices of the characters as well as the narrator, and that these voices represent and give impetus and orientation to the *epistemological* directions, the (not only humorous) tonalities of the novel take. This does not mean that the humor or epistemic *unfolding* that the novel offers is monolithic or one-voiced but that the *subjectivity* of the writing subject pervades the signification economy that the novel attempts to set into work.

White Teeth is embedded in a postcolonial sociopolitically asymmetrical world. The story is depicted here in the framework of the encounter of the two main protagonists, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, and their evolving, Quixotic friendship⁵ as a foundational

5 I am grateful to Achim Geisenhanslüke for the reference to the parallels between the friendship of these two characters and the relationship between Alonso Quijano and Sancho Panza in Miguel de Cervantes' epic novel *Don Quixote* (1605/15); another indication of affinity between the two works is Samad's and Alonso's war-disabled arms. On the hand as a structure of signification originating in Cervantes, see von Koppenfels (2002). Another semiotic and historical continuation may indeed be implied in these parallels, in particular with regard to the meanings of ›Jewishness‹ and ›Muslimness‹ in a European context, which seem to merge and continue here: Cervantes family line is linked to Converso origins, and it is also considered plausible that Cervantes was a Converso and thus of Jewish background, who had to hide his Jewish origins. Along these lines it is thus also possible that his novel's hero, the first European novel-protagonist ever, represents a cryptic, resistant, subversive, and self-ironic self-assertion of this lost Jewishness and Jewish Spanish history, however consciously or unconsciously evoked with the figure of Alonso Quijano (and surely not exhausted by it –). With Samad Iqbal, another character understood as a ›Muslim‹ figure takes on a similar role of social devaluation that is being ironized. This portrayal and allusion to Cervantes' *Don Quixote* figure may critically refer to a palimpsest-like resurgence of primordial forms of colonial othering of ›Jews‹ and later ›Muslims‹ (and eventually other others) – although the roles that ›Jewishness‹ and ›Muslimness‹ have historically occupied in relation to each other are of course another field of inquiry and must be seen in their asymmetries and dependencies, even within ›Muslim Spain‹. More in-depth studies on Cervantes' Converso background and its underlying dis-

cornerstone of the novel (Perfect 2016, 257; Ledent 2016, 81), which also opens up other friendships within their families: those between the two figures' wives, Clara Jones and Alsana Iqbal, and later between their children, Irie Jones, Magid and Millat Iqbal and Joshua Chalfen, and also between the scientist Marcus Chalfen and Samad's and Alsana's son, Magid Iqbal, who, it is implied, will become a lawyer and poet with Marcus Chalfen's support. There are, furthermore, other central figures in this *life-world* who are Alsana's lesbian niece, Neena. And there is Irie's Jamaican grandmother Hortense Bowden, a Jehovah's Witness. And somehow, it seems, they all grow into a big, close-knit, patch work family – that may, in spite of all atrocities and miseries that seem to divide and separate our earth, already mirror (*and* nurture?) some wonderfully growing niches of our existing and experiencing world, also on these sides of the book.

Archie's and Samad's encounter touches (in various ways) upon the history of British colonialism.⁶ Colonialism is the violent source of causation, as it were, for their encounter as well as its continuance and development in *London* as a postcolonial hub, a meta-place of different, overlapping historical trajectories. *White Teeth* thus is also a counter-narrative of and challenge to nationalist(-ic) representations of a *white* and *Christian* Britishness. The narrative of friendship evoked in *White Teeth* is accompanied by an affective humorous rhetoric within the voice of an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator. To rephrase in another way: *White Teeth* is a novel that *unfolds* the effects of antisemitism, racism, and ›race‹ as still significant sociopolitical categories within an affectively and epistemologically loaded humorous tonality; this tonality emerges, touching upon the spaces and unwritten paths, and meanings that the term friendship harbors. Without losing track of a stereotypical imagery that is bound to the (post-colonial) other, the novel traces and displays other *folds* of togetherness and *humanity*, engendering another imagery.

Folding can in fact be regarded as an immanent humorous signifying theme in the book; it is an *image* and *act* that combines humor and spaces of touch, relegating ›reality‹ as a *life-world* with the *life-world* of the novel. Although *folding* as such is thereby humorized as a monotonous activity in the novel, it is also praised as an almost meditative,

course would be a valuable contribution to these questions. See for example the following works in support of Cervantes' Converso background: McGaha (2004), Wolski (2009), and Foss (2018). For a general discussion within Cervantes Studies, see Presberg (1999).

- 6 The similarities and differences between historical writing and fiction are thoroughly discussed and also still ongoing issues; I am alluding, on the one hand, to the authoritativeness of the factualization of texts and what they say and unsay, and on the other hand, to the ways historical events like colonialism have formed materiality and have given meaning to ›the world‹, to subjectivities, to ›things‹, and to bodies (in different ways, according to different con-texts). While some of these aspects have been discussed on a theoretical level as well as with regard to specific novels, especially in so-called ›postcolonial literature‹, critical acknowledgments and analysis that would inform narratological and more formalist concepts and terms as such are still rare. To my ›knowledge‹ these have not been established within narratology and literary analysis or theory in a systematic way or are dealt with in a rather ghettoized sense with regard to ›Postcolonial Theory‹. Hayden White's essay *Literature and Social Action* is still an important entry point to the question of literature as a historical text (and the historical text as literature) and its presumptions as it challenges the concept of perspective and *form* of (historical vs literary) writing/text(s). See White (1980), see also Young ([1990] 2004), Hutcheon (2005), and Fludernik/Falkenhayner/Steiner (2015).

cautious, pensive, and meaningful form of creation and *ordering*. Archie, who throughout the novel represents an uneducated simpleton but also a not-knowing, powerless yet good-willed (anti-)hero, is depicted as the folder, *folding* indeed being his profession. After the Second World War, uneducated and with war experiences that no one wants to hear about, Archie gets a job because he:

»[s]till had a good eye for the look of a thing, for the shape of a thing, and that's how he had ended up in the job at the Morgan *Hero*, twenty years and counting in a printing firm in the Euston Road, designing the way all kinds of things should be *folded* – envelopes, direct mail, brochures, leaflets – not much of an achievement, maybe, but you'll find things need folds, they need to overlap, otherwise life would be like a broadsheet: flapping in the wind and down the street so you lose the important sections. Not that Archie had much time for the broadsheets. If they couldn't be bothered to fold them properly, why should he bother to read them (that's what he wanted to know)?«
(Smith 2000, 15)

Folding can be understood as a double-edged metaphor for how meaning is *folded in* within processes of signification: You have a surface meaning while the trace of the words and significations are *folded in* on themselves, within *the paper*. The paper can be seen as a synecdoche for a Derridean, encompassing idea of *writing* and *text* in which traces of other meanings are housed, *folded* together, *attouched* to each other. *Folding* also stands for the *order* and the *ordering* in which things, signs, meanings (*re*) appear (to us). *Folding* in this way also signifies the aesthetic way in which meaning and discourse are construed and aesthetically packaged. The aesthetics of *folding* does not only depict pleasure and not only stands for the invocation of lust, a motivation (and manipulation?) of form to unleash *the desire to read*. It also speaks of a *transparent power*, a *subject* behind the folding who *decides*, who *has a feeling for how to fold* a paper in a specific way to make sure it is *read*. Archie as a *white*, male figure in his ›best years‹, years that symbolize power, activity, success, can, on the one hand, be considered as the figuration of (supremacist) *white* male subjectivity per se that is in this way mocked; on the other hand, Archie stands for a working-class, marginalized *white* position who is regularly made a fool of without his notice. This trait of not-knowing and powerlessness marks his subject-position amongst the other *othered* ethnicized positions. In Archie's case, whiteness is not a figuration of power in this sense. It depends thus how a meaning, an entity is wrapped and how it can be *unwrapped*, to get a meaning – there is not a pre-cooked meaning per se there. The novel here already inscribes and *unfolds* critically within the folds of anti-racist and postcolonial counter-discourses, another possibility of looking, as a decolonial strategy. This is not meant in the sense of excusing whiteness or its supremacist structures. But it does pay attention to instances where these three features associated with power in a postcolonial world (whiteness, supremacy, masculinity) do not collapse, and yet something else might be visible instead, here namely that (cis-male) whiteness may not always be dominant, and that it is not as stable as it seems, either, while the question of vulnerability always remains: A warning and a quest for the meanings of the ethical in the entanglements of ›knowledge‹/power. And maybe it is also a proposition to look at other forms of dominance as well, stressing the aspect of

dominance, which *we* – everyone and all of *us* – may be part of and occupy in different ways.

The fact that Archie does not notice the ridicule also shields him from embarrassment. As a narrative gesture this also upholds dignity as an ultimate safeguard and border of vulnerable subjecthood. In contrast to what is believed and seen in him, Archie may have unwillingly and not-knowingly understood, may have gained a (philosophic) insight that is more fundamental than any other rationale and capability: that things need to be folded so someone *wants to read them* at all, that *folding*, in other words, reveals firstly, the mechanisms of power, and here again Archie symbolically signifies this very power, but secondly, also an arranging subjectivity and subjecthood that stands behind the folding hands. *Folding* can thus be conceived as an elementary procedure of touch: The papers and meanings are prepared, cooked in the economy of ›laws‹ and ›bylaws‹; they undergo processes of internal and external permission and forbidding. Later in the novel, Irie, Archie's daughter, too, becomes invested in the *folding* business through a job as an assistant to the scientist Marcus Chalfen. Irie understands it as a ›folding policy‹ that organizes everything regardless whether one is in the business of ›world domination‹ or not (Smith 2000, 341 ff.). Adolescent Irie also represents innocence, youth, pure-mindedness, but she also is a strategic person that orders things nicely and neatly, which does not mean that everyone likes it that way. If Irie can be regarded as a possible proxy for the implication of a ›real author‹, and thus for authorial power(-lessness), it could be concluded that the novel itself stands for the *folding* and *unfolding* of meanings of a ›real author‹ in the paper work of writing, which is also a work *folded* upon itself.

Thus read, the novel seems to suggest to have a look at how we can deconstruct images of racialized bodies and histories without idealizing them or endowing them with forever fixed meanings and with an eye on the hands that *fold* their written, inscribed paper-meanings. Furthermore, *unfolding* can also be described as the affective, rhetorical, and deconstructive epistemological mechanism that lies in the work and performance of humor; it not only is a metaphor but also metaphorizes the work of humor. This mechanism of humor/*unfolding* is also invoked by another image that depicts repetition, difference and the possibility of change that lies in the performative; Archie is not only a folder, but also a cyclist:

»What else? Well, Archie hadn't always folded paper. Once upon a time he had been a track cyclist. What Archie liked about track cycling was the way you went round and round. Round and Round. Giving you chance after chance to get a bit better at it, to make a faster lap, to do it *right*. Except the thing about Archie was he *never did* get any better.« (Smith 2000, 15)

Tracking the traces of discursive paths, which may resemble Archie's track cycling, may be what we already do when we use language and meaning. Whether we are aware of it or just repeat them in other ways, *White Teeth* seems to suggest that the way Archie does by track cycling, we are holding on to familiar patterns. Maybe therefore repetition, the way it is represented in language, the novel seems to claim, is also double edged. On the one side, it is an attempt to find out one's faults, to succumb, out of processes of not-knowing and power-lessness, to the urge to find out what is wrong and paradoxically, to

find reassurance in the repetitive of the ›known‹, to have some form of power and control just in order to experience a selfhood at all. But in the end this self is *different* because each encounter, context, of the repetition may be different, which makes one react differently. That this psychic *automatism* might lie at the heart (or bottom) of the desire to know things is perhaps what repetition reveals, rather than a traumatic encounter as such or the desire to overcome it, the way a Freudian understanding of trauma suggests. Instead *With Teeth's* repetitive, cycled, *folded-in* claim may be that trauma is a form of non-knowledge (and remembering) that confirms itself as an experience of coming to power (and losing it on the way at some point), of selfhood and that it is just reassuring for itself. This is what it may have in common with the meditative quality of *folding*.

Folding also designates the very metaphorically utilized wor(l)ds of poststructuralist thought – another way of depicting the chasm of Merleau-Ponty's *chair* and Derrida's unfolding of the touch. Especially Gilles Deleuze refers explicitly to the fold (*pli, repli*) in many of his writings, and it is also the title of one of his works (*Le Pli*, 1988) in which he tackles Gottfried Leibnitz's monadic reading of the world/substance as an endless internal and external *unfolding* rather than a sample, a predetermined substance. Deleuze thereby understands the fold also as a relational connection between the self and the other, within the self (and its others) as well as outside of it, in infinite, unfinished ways. ›Identity‹ slides in this way into difference, infinitely. The fold becomes an encounter of selves and (their) others within specific but dynamic *life-worlds*. While Leibnitz can be regarded as a Cartesian philosopher who pays attention to scientific order and ordering, Deleuze in this book not only *rereads* Leibnitz but also what follows him, the Baroque, which he describes by relating it to the other of the Occident, to *the Orient*; in this way history, too, can be seen as an *unfolding* of *attached life-worlds*: »The Baroque does not refer to an essence, but rather to an operative function, to a characteristic. It endlessly creates folds. It does not invent the thing: There are all the folds that come from the Orient« (Deleuze 1991, 227).

›Archie‹ thus occupies an undecidable position in the book that empowers him in the same time that it disempowers him. This is the mechanism of the *unfolding* that also appears in Deleuze's text, it empowers and disempowers both, *the Orient* as well as the Occident, and in this way, shifts attention to *the endless processes of becoming* rather than fixities and fixed meanings – an idea that also accompanies Smith's *unfolding* of meanings through the deconstructive functionality of humor's rhetoric and its capability to create such spaces of touch.

In a review, the cultural critic John David Ebert speaks reproachfully of Deleuze's book, describing it as a book without teeth:

»I read Deleuze books because they have teeth. His books are the philosophical equivalent of a Francis Bacon painting: you will not walk away from the experience without a few bite marks left in your psyche. *The Fold*, however, fails spectacularly on a number of levels. It not only has no teeth, it has no skull. It doesn't even have a spine. There is, in short, nothing predatory about it at all.« (Ebert 2010)

White Teeth might be understood as this *unfolding* of the senselessness with which the other is depicted. There is nothing predatory about the other. The ›implied author‹ in

White Teeth seems to open another seam in-between Leibnitzian ordering and Deleuzean folds. It unfolds the materialized structures that have dis/entangled the wor(l)d and have inscribed themselves not only into the body and mind of the other(s) but also in those of the imperial Other(s) as well. The novel deconstructs such binaries as untenable and at the same time gives expression to another (othered) subjectivity.⁷ This is its gentle (and yet effective, I think) bite marks on the psyche. An ›implied author‹ in *White Teeth* thus touches upon presupposed wor(l)dings and meanings. In doing so, they do the impossible, they use the grammatology of *différance*: The work shows the effects of phallogocentric thinking in deconstructive ways by using the economy of *affective humor* as a rhetorical tool within the spaces of touch that come with friendships, which traverse the oceans of the everyday. Nothing remains but a trace of ambivalent meanings. Its affectivity, too, has a special task, it liberates the frozen parts of the (othered) self in pleasurable ways, be it through grief, joy, pensiveness, or other affective, epistemological responses.

White Teeth is divided into four chapters with five subchapters each.

The basic setting and unfolding for the development of the plot in the novel constitutes the encounter of the two protagonists. This encounter is taken up in the fifth and last subchapter of the first section of the novel. Archibald (Archie) Jones, 17, and Samad Miah Iqbal, 19, meet as British soldiers in World War II. Due to the events, they experience in the outskirts of this war, they develop a curious bond that begins with Archie's eyeing of Samad and Samad's talk-active speaking back to this eyeing as well as the racism that is at work around him. At the center of their friendship is a secret that further welds together their relationship and which is resolved in the very last chapter of the novel.

When Samad later, years after the war, decides to immigrate from Bangladesh to the ›little Island‹ with his wife, Alsana, he directly moves to London, trusting, that he has a friend there:

»[I]n the spring of 1973 Samad had come to England, a middle-aged man seeking a new life with his twenty-year-old-new bride, the diminutive, moon-faced Alsana Begum with her shrewd eyes. In a fit of nostalgia, and because he was the only man Samad knew on this little island, Samad had sought Archie out, moved into the same London borough. And slowly but surely a kind of friendship was being rekindled between the two men.« (Smith 2000, 12)

And so the friendship begins to flourish again, albeit while both figures are in quite destitute, marginal social positions. This ironic trait of their encounter around biased colonial perceptions in the mess of national/imperial understandings of otherhood and selfhood, and the bond between the two is further stressed by physical disabilities, which mirror the marks of sociopolitical underprivilege and marginalization that are inscribed in the

7 See also Derrida's *Dissemination* ([1972] 1981) and the vanishing not only of ›identity‹ but of difference as well. What remains is *différance* ›pure‹ and infinite. And yet Derrida, too, speaks from a specific (Jewish-Algerian-French) subjectivity and (singular) *aut-bio-graphy*, and his work is therefore likewise embedded in such experiences of unfolding exclusions within instances of non-knowledge and powerlessness.

body. While Samad's right hand is injured, due to a war accident,⁸ Archie has to live with a shell splinter in his leg as a result of a war injury. The grotesquery of this dis/ability is further emphasized by the characters' jobs/preferences, by what they *do*: Noteworthy is of course Archie's fable for cycling and profile as a (mediocre) track cyclist. *Track cycling*, understood as an almost obsessive repetitive movement, may signify here a metaphor for the intractability of social positions, of marginality, that cannot be overcome so easily. Samad is a waiter, a profession in which a disabled hand is conspicuous. Samad's injured hand also marks othering and speaks back to images in which the other is *made* to serve and to please, a position of disablement in society.⁹ It represents, in this sense, social hinderance as the real cause of dis/ability. Both injuries and activities may also stand for different forms of resistance as wounds that speak back to the constructedness of bodily as well as sociopolitical ableness.

The novel begins with Archie's suicide attempt. Archie wants to poison himself with carbon monoxide in his car after a divorce at Age 47. He is saved, however, by the Muslim butcher next door, who does not want any suicides near his place. Archie sees this as a redemption, drives around town and happens to meet his much younger (23 years) future wife, the Jamaican-British Clara Bowden, at a random party.

The other friendships around the two figures reflect the lives of three generations in postcolonial London: Alsana's and Clara's decision to stick together against the bulwark of their husbands' stark amity, which make them feel isolated. They regularly meet, often also with Alsana's lesbian niece, Neena. Although Alsana has nicknamed Neena ›Niece of Shame‹ and calls her in this way on a regular basis, Neena remains a respected and intimate member of the family; as she is an educated, intellectual, and self-confident young woman, Alsana often asks for her help, especially when it comes to the wider British society and the entanglements with the educated, middle-class Jewish/white Chalfen-Family: ›Sit down,‹ hissed Alsana, grabbing her by the arm, ›Sit down,‹ alright, point made, Miss Clever Lesbian. Look, we need you, OK? Sit down, apology, apology, OK? Better‹‹ (Smith 2000, 346)). Neena is, furthermore, an auntie-like family advisor for Irie, Archie's and Clara's daughter: ›Look, you are a smart cookie, Irie. But you've been taught all kinds of shit. You've got to re-educate yourself. Realize your value. [T]he truth is the Barbara Streisand cut you've got there ain't doing shit for you. The Afro was cool, man. It was wicked. It was yours‹ (Smith 2000, 285)).

A special friendship, furthermore, develops between Irie, Millat, and Magid, Samad's and Alsana's twin sons. They are born in the same year and grow up together, visiting the same school and sharing the same neighborhood. While in an extramarital affair, Samad repentant and afraid where this diasporic life in an un-Islamic surrounding might lead

8 See also annotation 5, p. 235.

9 O'Leary problematizes Samad's injured hand within traumatic psychic patterns that have a quite monolithic pathologizing tendency of traumatic experiences which she, in a straightforward manner, binds to Samad's sexual desire and libido; a reading that seems problematic to me as it conceives of Samad in a rather stereotypical way or can at least be understood in this way; she furthermore, instead of looking at Samad's situation in the UK, discusses their past, taking Samad's ›Muslimness‹ and relation to Islam for granted. In contrast to Samad, Archie comes off well; his sexuality and desire for Blackness and otherness is not pathologized or related to Christianity, European ›Enlightenment‹ or colonialism. See O'Leary (2013, 39–52); see also Taheri (2018, 114 ff.).

to, sends one of his sons, his ›favorite‹ son, Magid, back to Bangladesh to grow up in an Islamic environment with their grandparents at the age of ten (Mirze 2008, 193).

This is a disillusioning event for Irie as well as for Millat (not to mention Alsana), which is why they stick together even more. While entering adolescence, both Irie and Millat¹⁰ struggle with ›identity‹ issues that encompass their bodies as well as minds; in Irie's case it begins with the search for the ›right‹ hairdo and psysical appearance that is bound to images of femininity and the nightmarish experiences she makes, until she slowly can discern her beauty (Baglama 2019, 86, Taheri 2018, 115). Disillusioned though by her parents, Irie develops a close relationship to her Jamaican British grandmother, Hortense Bowden, and lives at her flat, for a while; at the end of the novel she even moves to live with her and her baby-daughter, and then lover Joshua Chalfen in Jamaica. Millat, missing his brother without knowing it, is moody and good-looking; he holds on to a ghetto-gangster prestige he has learned from the movies, gets involved in short-lived love-affairs but slowly loses track and comes into contact with a fundamentalist Islamic grouping named KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation).

The twins use different strategies to negotiate racism and othering. While Magid tries to become invisible by assimilating as much as possible, willing to change his name to ›Mark‹, which *marks* this desire *not to be* marked, to just *be* without much ado and to be as transparent as *white* children (making Samad furious and climbing the walls: ›I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL! [...] AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!‹ (Smith 2000, 151) – and of course there is a lovely reference to the very name of the very ›real author‹, involved in the novel, who sends her greetings with a twinkle in her eye; while Magid is later sent ›back‹ to Bangladesh and reappears as a perfect *mimic man* who, though not unlike Marcus Chalfen, tries to change things through science and ›knowledge‹ (both later develop a close *friendship* – and the image of the Muslim *mimic man* who becomes the poet-lawyer-to-be of the Jewish scientist Marcus Chalfen, is not without its own beauty and specter of hope), Millat's role model, in the absence of any meaningful other dark-looking idols with which he could identify, metamorphoses into a popular representation of the mafia figures he has seen and learned about in movies just when he is ›discovered‹ by the fundamentalist group that seems to offer him some kind of illusionary escape from unpromising and offensive social images¹¹:

»[A] confused pattern that transforms him from a street thug to a member of a group of young Muslim fundamentalists. The whole process originates in his awareness of the stereotypes projected unto him in England: He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and

10 It is noteworthy that Millat's figure, which is connected to the aberrant figure of the ›Muslim terrorist‹, is a much more discussed element than Magid, although they are twin brothers (also in a symbolic sense). See, for example, McMillan (2012, 617), who critically raises this point.

11 On the different meanings, images, and negotiations of radical Islam in *White Teeth*, see also Ringrose (2007).

earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. [...] Millat perceives such fantasies as attempting to simplify his existence by using labels, easy associations (curry, turbans, elephants) and a crystallization of the social order. [...] Even in liberal Britain, in cosmopolitan London, this process turns him into an [o]ther who, for the sake of cultural stability, needs to fit into a linguistic category so that he may fit into a social category.« (Ciribuco 2017, 4)

Here, too, although all three figures are drawn and shown in an empathic but paradoxical and funny display (Magid turns to something he is not expected to become, Samad despairs as he just cannot convince his children of ›their‹ glorious ›cultural roots‹, and Millat, while staying in the UK, becomes a (mafiosi) Islamic-fundamentalist), the grief and misery that accompany their becoming, is sensible, too. In this way, the affective humorous depiction remains a complex one, laden with different, aporetic meanings that indicate the messed up ›reality‹-update of historical threads, the workings of racism on the psyche and subject-formation of the figures, but also their ability to deal with it differently, in ways that are not only painful but also pleasurable and make them *feel*, to some extent at least, happy. The humorous depiction in this way, portrays their powerlessness, but also their historically determined power to act as *agents* rather than as victims of such historically driven *conditions of experience* that are centralized, while Millat's fate, staying in Britain, signifies a threshold of powerlessness and the collapse into sheer impuissance and vulnerability.

A major influence on all three second-generation children is the middle-class, Jewish, British Chalfen Family. The Chalfens consist of scientist Marcus Chalfen, his *white*, Catholic wife Joyce, a horticultural writer, and their four sons, Joshua, Benjamin, Jack and Oscar. Joshua is Irie's and Millat's classmate and, as part of a school disciplinary sanction, they are obliged to spend (study) time with the Chalfens twice a week after they have been caught smoking a joint.

Irie and Millat are both warmly welcomed by the Chalfen-parents who subconsciously *know* very well what it means to stand at the margins from where they still act, although, on the outside, seemingly fully assimilated and part of the greater (*white*) British society. Joyce feels attracted to handsome and vulnerable Millat and, neglecting her own children, also feels an urge to mother him (yet she can only do so within *white* axioms and prejudices – but can she do otherwise? *White Teeth* seems to ask, bringing in the problem of subjectivity once again to the fore from another angle). In the end, Joyce and Alsana, join forces and get *involved*¹² to open up Millat for other perspectives. Joyce would also like to see Joshua and Irie become more than friends (a wish that is eventually granted). While Marcus is initially attracted to Irie, compliments her in well-intentioned ways, to compensate for his wife's focus of care on Millat, he even offers her a job, suggesting that she could bring some form of *order* into his office (and Irie indeed can see a need for a proper form of *folding*, as mentioned...!), Marcus and Magid, who

12 Roupakia understands this joint involvement of the two mothers as an ethical entanglement »in the very webs of affective connections they have woven« as a »pragmatic result« and an act of responsibility towards the ones they are connected to and love. Cf. Roupakia (2015, 154).

is still in Bangladesh, soon become close pen pals and develop an intimate *friendship* inscribed in written words.

When Magid finally returns to London with the help of the Chalfens, Irie, loving both brothers, accidentally sleeps with both of them. Irie becomes pregnant, but at the end of the novel she raises her child with her grandmother and Joshua in Jamaica. In this way, all three families are blessed with the same grandchild, forever marking a new common lineage and kinship – within and yet beyond empire, ›Europe‹ – and the world, giving an (ancient? *life-world*) a new form?

The final chapter of the novel, however, brings the three families together in a building in the middle of London on the occasion of Marcus' presentation of his FutureMouse project, a genetically programmed mouse who is supposed to die at a specific time – to ensure life in the long run.

While most of the protagonists are invited to the event and are in the hall, Hortense Bowden, out of religious reasons, as well as Joshua, who has meanwhile joined an animal protection group, protest outside the building.

These other *friendships* around Archie and Samad negotiate different aspects within the coloniality and asymmetrical dynamics of a *life-world* and negotiate as well intersectional, diverse categories of ›race‹, class, gender, age, sexuality, and religion around antisemitism and postcoloniality. As these other stories ensue from the main story yet develop their own dynamics within a nexus of sequences of events, they can be regarded in a vertical sense as part of the main story rather than as sub-framed-stories. The interlinked stories symbolize a web of different forms of belonging based on the kinship of *friendships* and patchwork-family relations across ›cultural‹, ›religious‹, racialized generational borders in a modern 1945 and 1970s–1990s London setting.

White Teeth thus touches in this way upon different overlapping issues of a *life-world* within specific discursive configurations. Beyond the effects of antisemitism, racism, and coloniality, the novel tackles in humorous ways the intimate relationships of the characters, who all have their different historical traces. Antisemitism, racism and othering *are* and *are not* part of the ways Archie and Samad deal with each other, the way Clara and Alsana understand each other, the way the two families and the Chalfens get to know each other and grow together. The book also reflects the asymmetries of the humanimal relationship and thus other forms of othering, violence, and exploitation that structure our everyday attitudes and lie beneath discursive language and imagery. Not only is this shown as a still existing residue of scientific genetic experimentation, but also in the everyday cycle and the naturalized meatification of animals (Buchanan 2013; Johnston 2021).

The novel tentatively also problematizes how we can speak of ›stereotypes‹ when in fact images of the other are already inscribed in bodies and therefore naturalized and materialized aspects of the way we conceive of people and gaze at others. It looks back at the images and meanings of *white teeth* and dismantles violence and power, and through humor also thematizes the horror that is bound to this image in order to liberate, to an extent at least, other(-ed) subjectivities, histories, and bodies.

On the one hand, the characters can be read as a display of othering and embodied stereotypes, but, especially due to the dialogic direct discourse in the novel, they can also

be seen as singular figures that defy such imagery. In this way, assumed ›knowledge‹, mainstream stereotypical, representative agendas, are laid out and, at the same time, challenged and changed. Processes of othering are problematized, subtly displaced, and ridiculed, while the figures preserve their singularity – outside of such stereotypes. The novel thus provides a platform for reexamining and rearranging stereotypical imagery within discourse, making the task of reading, challenging on an epistemological level – which may be why the novel is often categorized, in simplistic fashion, as a ›multicultural‹ project, but because of its humorous tone, and rhetoric, also as pleasurable. The pleasure of humor, its wit and affective economy, thus develops touching spaces in the process of unfolding. The characters, in any case, as well as the setting of London as the place of the other (Perfect 2014; Pope 2015), carve out space for epistemological shifts as the humorous display unleashes into rapturous openings. This is not only done through the dialogic instances of the novel, but also through the way the characters act, and the way their despair and exasperation are configured in the voice of the non-character narrator.

Friendship encompasses, on the one hand, the figuration of the processual development of the different amities as a kind of displaced, abstract, *real home*, a heterotopia, in the form of a delicate edifice of affective relational ties that bind the figures through specific preconditions or events (Siccardi 2020). On the other hand, friendship is depicted in a more manifest literal meaning as *ships*, intimate spaces of encounter and forms of touch that *connect* different histories and different experiences of racialization/deprivation within a safe sphere where they cannot be pitted against each other. On the level of the story, these friendships form part of touching spaces that the novel evokes in an affective humorous tone. These spaces of touch are a narrative tool that deals with the material of friendship in conjunction with political chasms between different and differently referenced racialized communities. While the narrator's voice stays in close proximity to the characters, it also keeps a distance to the figures through a rhetoric that teasingly ironizes their acts, but in this way also refrains from victimizing them. It does so within the incongruity of *affective humor as Smith's ›aporetic aesthetics‹* (Bergholtz 2016, 543). In this regard, too, Smith's novel deploys what Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* terms an ›intensely, stifling human quality of the novel‹ that he describes within an ethical and sociopolitical touch of the novel in a nutshell in the following way:

»We may hate humanity, but if it is exorcised or even purified, the novel wilts, little is left but a bunch of words. And I have chosen the title *Aspects* because it is unscientific and vague, because it leaves us the maximum of freedom, because it means both the different ways we can look at a novel and the different ways a novelist can look at his work.« (Forster [1927] 2005, 39)

The *we* that Forster employs in the above passage as well as *the novelist* who, too, has a look at the work, signal a common as well as a distinct aspect between Smith's approaches and Forster's. While their aspiration towards the ethics of humor in the novel may be akin, their subjectivities deploy different threads in this ethicality in the literary text. Unlike Forster's characters, *White Teeth* is bound to the images of otherness from the other side of *white* (Christian-)enlightened Western European self-constructions. *White Teeth* may be read as a symbol of what Derrida in *Dissimulation* describes as an *E(a)st-West* rela-

tion as well as the relation through which ›the West‹, or maybe more generally dominance/supremacy, construes itself by hinting (and construing) its other in signifying processes of transference: of what it wants to be and not to be, principles of lust/unlust in which the other becomes a mirror for the constitution of the (colonial) self.¹³ ›The East‹ becomes a postponed way of what the West does or does not want to be. Smith tackles this a bit further by discussing the materiality of processes of othering and its effect on ›life‹, as it were, in the *life-world* of the novel. The question is whether it can be recognized and whether it matters:

»This technique is both paradoxical and precarious because its success depends upon the reader both recognizing that the narrator is mimicking the dogmatic certainty of her characters and *reflecting* upon the inadequacy of such structural certainty in addressing the problems dramatized in the novel.« (Bergholtz 2016, 542)

This includes the internal coloniality and violence that are bound to the experiences of Jewishness and antisemitism in Europe, and their overlap with the violence of other forms of colonialism, coloniality, and racism within and outside of Europe.

In these ways *White Teeth* touches on the abstract as well as materialized levels of the meanings and effects of concepts such as ›race‹ as a pillar of colonial ›knowledge‹ formation. From the cover of the novel, *White Teeth* is looking at (any and every) (colonial) gaze, questioning it and laughing (at it) with a wink. It is a liberating ›laughter‹ that rather than ridiculing or laughing down, affectionately and teasingly, but also undeterred and witty stands for another *life-world* beyond and yet within ›reality‹, in which the other is not victimized, but not heroized either, and instead remains an agent in liberating processes of *unfolding*.

Instead of denying or sugarcoating those injurious inflictions, *White Teeth* touches upon them in stroking and striking ways, driven by the desire, at seems, to carve out a space for other utterings and forms of experience that may reach into other futures. These, all quite existential, life-forming tracks are dealt with by a humorous rhetoricality and performativity within the different narrative levels of the novel as will be seen.

White Teeth – Paratextual UnFoldings

White Teeth, the title of the novel, may in the above sense be seen as a *folding* that borders the narrative. *White Teeth* is opened out in the novel through an enigmatic paratextual structure – a threshold instance between the narrative discourse and a meta-level, an off-text that comes *in* from *the outside*, beyond the bookcase. In doing so, the novel evokes a plethora of images and possibilities of reading. Different slices of its meaning seem to be chopped like uncooked vegetarian food for a delicious meal. With regard to the sensitive approach that the novel takes to questions of the humanimal, it may even be vegan.

13 This idea was taken up by Homi K. Bhabha to describe the function of stereotypes and the work of pleasure and unpleasure that is bound to the economy of othering. Cf. Bhabha ([1994] 2004, 94 ff.).

The title is not only a relevant paratext but also a poetological bulb. It is a bulb in two senses. On the one hand, it represents a bulb in a more literal sense because it has an enlightening effect as a connecting structural factor for the reading possibilities it offers. On the other hand, it is a bulb in a more hidden, *folded*, way. In this second sense *White Teeth* evokes meanings that are part of experiences of antisemitism and racism and is also an answer to them: For one thing, *White Teeth* seems to be a synecdoche for the workings of racisms on singular bodies as well as on a societal level of encounter. For another thing, the term ›race‹ itself is deconstructed, so as to avoid any renewed form of essentialization that would explain and *reset* thinking within the parameters of the concept.

The humorous allusive senses that *White Teeth* as a title arouses evoke different, ambiguous, injurious, and painful, as well as empowering and liberating images. In this way, the title dialogizes dynamically what it means to be O/other and self, rather than coming to rigid conclusions or a fixed alternate imagery. Humor works here as a technē that sets a poetics into work, which is versatile and *moving* in the sense of shifting meanings and in the sense of affective *rearrangements*. Thus, *White Teeth* does different things at once, and seems to encompass different literary functions as well in the text.

It metaphorizes the effects of racialization on the materiality of the body and in a conspiratory way, knowingly, lets the body smile at them, construing experiences of survival and invincibility. It clips together these two forms of experience and releases them within an undecidable rhetoricality that can indeed be understood as an overarching image of what the novel wants to circuit. *White Teeth* is a simple image with a complex trajectory like the novel itself.

The rhetoric of humor in the novel and the narrative voice of the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, the non-character narrator, stay in dialogue with the ›implied audience‹ as well as with the characters and the different voices of the figures, negotiating this complexity of the title in equivocal and pleasurable ways. In doing so, also historically determined, painful incidents that are part and parcel of the coloniality of antisemitism and racism are touched upon and find a place in the text. The novel in this way distances itself from uncritical celebrations of ›multiculturalism‹-narratives and instead *unfolds* historical and present, power-related vulnerabilities and biased discursive images, dealing with these from marginalized positions.

»If, with its immense rhetorical resources, narrative is an instrument of power, it is often about power as well« (Abbott 2021, 61). Porter H. Abbott not only refers here to narratives as the site of and for negotiations of power; later on in this book Abbott also makes the observations that »[...] narrative is a form of passionate thought« (Abbott 2021, 203). But against the backdrop of a postcolonial world, and more general, a world also knit in structures of dominance in which narratives are soaked within specific significations and imageries, power goes far beyond the notion of mere ›agon‹ or ›conflict‹ as Abbott calls it. What is negotiated in narratives is power in the far more encompassing sense of *dispositives of power*, (historically conditioned) discursive *regimes of meaning*, which are structured through different supremacist and/or colonial experiences and other forms of dominance, like cis-normativity or ableness, and which are mirrored in language and discourse in infinite forms of different *life-worlds*. Narratives thus are a testament to the impossibility of using language without making conscious or unconscious deployment of existing meanings and imageries.

The negotiation of power in *White Teeth* must also be understood against this economy of power-relations and the structuring of meanings. Therefore, the subjectivity of the narrating position plays a role: The questions *who* is centralized and *who* speaks (on behalf of *whom*?), and the question from which (however implied) political position a narrative is written. Humor can thereby be understood as a rhetorical tool to come to terms with the different, complex trajectories with which power is negotiated that rather than confirm another ›truth‹, offers power-lessness and non-knowledge as (liberating) forms of being in and experiencing the world. At the same time, this rhetorical tool in the poetics of the text unfolds as a kaleidoscope of affectivity as ›passionate thought‹. ›Passionate thought‹ in *White Teeth* means that the affective economy of humor in the poetic entanglements of the narrative is enmeshed with epistemological insights and their deferrals. It also means that ›passionate thought‹, evoked *through affective humor*, forms part of the narrative's pay-off and pleasure-promise.

White Teeth is about power as well as powerlessness, ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge that negotiate dominant beliefs. It plays humorously with such notions – which also means that humor can be regarded as an affective, rhetorical tool of the poetics of powerlessness as well as of the power-lessness of poetics: The novel deals with the different forms of dominant signification through the affective economy of humor by rhetorically evoking and *deinstalling* them throughout its dynamic poetic movements. Yet *affective humor* here remains a ›weak theory‹ in Sedgwick's sense, in that it does not enforce other meanings to arrive at other ›truths‹; rather, truisms and firm beliefs are deconstructed by way of thoughtful, pleasurable dialogues, multiple evocations, and possibilities that reside in the unfinished performative economy of humor.

White Teeth not only resonates in the chapters' titles but is also depicted in different and allusive ways throughout the novel in the narrative discourse.

In the first three of the four chapters, the title of the novel reappears in the subtitles in allusive forms, depicting the biological structure of *teeth*. In Chapter I three subtitles allude to teeth: *Teething Trouble*, *Three Coming* and *The Root Canals* of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal; Chapter II entails the subchapter titles *Molars*, *The Root Canals* of Mangal Pande; in Chapter III, one section is called *Canines – The Ripping Teeth* and another *The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden*. Only the final chapter, which is more concerned with the ›present‹ situation of the characters and alludes to the possibilities of how their future might become, does not refer to any imagery that would depict parts of *teeth*. But in the rest of the novel *teeth* evokes several meanings at once. On the one hand, *teeth* names the concept of ›race‹ as well as the effects of racism. On the other hand, the idea of ›race‹ is made nonsense of, without negating its multiple heinous effects. Also, as K. Nandhini observes, »[t]eeth are white no matter what a person's race, making them a universal symbol of humanity. By the same token, they are enduring and preserved in the skull long after we die. Therefore, teeth leave a particularly long legacy and connect people throughout time« and space, it could be added (Nandhini 2019, 47).

The metaphorical sense and dramatic expectations inherent in the title *White Teeth* and the allusions to it in the chapter-title *Teething Trouble*, which promise to disclose, to some extent, the meaning of *teeth* in the novel, stray off into other directions. Instead of a possible expecting meaning, its meanings drift apart into three complex trajectories: Not only does the evocation of ›buck-teeth‹ (ascribed to Clara) negotiate ›beauty‹, the

way it is expected from a ›beautiful‹ (*cis-male-desired* and exoticized) female body, and not only does it hint at how much ›beauty‹ is a construction with null basis; it also negotiates within this trajectory the shallowness of the concept of *roots*, which signals something like ›authenticity‹, as well as of *teeth* as a symbol of 19th century anthropological and ›scientific‹ racist gazes. *White Teeth* zooms in on the idea of ›roots‹ as bodily organs in *the mouth* (and thus as a mere word, an image), showing their shortness, which stands in contrast to what ›roots‹ often symbolize in the metonymic relationship to ›genes‹ or ›blood‹.

At first sight, the title of the first chapter, *Teething Trouble*, refers to anything but ›race‹; it introduces, as a matter of fact, a ›love‹ story. The chapter describes how Clara and Archie first meet and fall in love: ›There was Clara and Ryan for eight months before Clara and Archie were drawn together from opposite ends of a staircase‹ (Smith 2000, 27). And this love story, according to the narrator, has *really* something to do with Clara's *teeth*. Here, it is indeed the *congruency* that generates a humorous tone. According to the narrator, Archie and Clara fall in love at the two opposite ends of the staircase *because* Clara lost her (*original* front) teeth. But Clara's missing front teeth, an *actual* loss of teeth, becomes a ›chance‹ for Clara who can get rid of her (according to convention) unsightly teeth, and is much more comfortable with the false ones with which she can go through life now. The false teeth are those that are expected of her, and Clara wears them, and she is in an implicit way aware of the social value that they grant her. This not-knowing trait sets her in a safe state as a character and shelters her in a cloud of innocence and powerlessness. With the loss of her *teeth*, Clara, furthermore, is not any longer a stereotype-image of an exoticized beautiful Black body, but a singularity, an individual, a ›person‹ with a singular body that has a specific, singular history: Clara is first described as ›buck-toothed‹, but then she has an accident on her boy friend's scooter in which she loses her front teeth. After that incident Clara's then boy-friend Ryan, a doomed *white* figure, becomes more and more attracted to the missionary Jehovah's-Witness-preaching of Clara's mother Hortense. While Clara loses her ›original‹ teeth, Ryan loses some of his *white* male supremacy and succumbs to Hortense's religious faith – the colonial enterprise seems to be returned to the homeland in another peaceful way. Ryan and Hortense form a patch-work family of a different kind. It is a humorous yet touching togetherness as both figures represent social outcasts and yet find each other to form another family, which is a comforting image and also a desire that may be very common but not always fulfilled, its humor thus also satisfies such a secret desire – the promise of the possibility of ›love‹ lurking somewhere in the gray zones of life's light and darkness. Clara's now straight but artificial front teeth, rather than being a blemish, intensify her beauty. Within this process, she becomes more and more the center of attention and slowly tries to break off and flee the confining teachings of her mother's Jehovah-life-style; Archie standing at the end of the staircase seems to be the right candidate to do so.

But there is not only humor involved in this deployment and ridiculing of teeth. The tragic side of Clara's *teething trouble* is not only that she loses her teeth but of all things, also her *front* teeth, an image that evokes different painful fears and a feeling of uncanniness as well. Yet, in this way the novel underscores the social conditions that condition her possibilities all the more. *Teeth* as a symbol for good health, social background, and well-being, as well as female beauty, define her social value and show critically her dependence on gendered images.

That these imageries are always already racialized is evoked by her ›origins‹, which do not actually lie somewhere *else* or in the workings of ›race‹ as such, but in the fact that »[s]he had *roots*. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica)« (Smith 2000, 27). That Clara has to endure a withdrawn and secluded life is not only because of the marginality of her faith, but also has something to do with the mechanism of coloniality and the imperial enterprise that *relates* Jamaica to the United Kingdom in specific material senses, »[t]he Bowden living room sat just below the street level, and had bars on its windows so all views were partial« (Smith 2000, 29); the workings of class also put the Bowden family in a specific destitute material and social place in London, as well as on a discursive, representational level of imagery within mainstream discourse, in which the novel intervenes in intersectional ways.

White Teeth gets its persuasive power not only through these affectively rich and humorous evocations. And yet here, too, the novel does not satisfy any stereotypical images of ›Jamaica‹ or Jamaican immigrants, but displaces such imagery by an individual, singular story of the Bowden's Jehovian background. This, too, has the function of a gentle shift of imagery within an empathic humor that ensures that they are not ridiculed but affectionately fancied. At the same time this already humorized image of the Witnesses of Jehovah is interposed with a specific seriousness as the characters' stories and idiosyncrasies are centralized in the novel, and their religious otherness moves *naturally* into the background. It also makes it possible to sympathize with Hortense Bowden as she appears quirky and whimsical. In this way she is also ›protected‹ from negative images of a negligent, uncaring mother, whose daughter must endure to lose her (beautiful) front teeth.

With Lambeth being the *center* of London, moreover, the narrator suggests that Clara's ›roots‹ lie nowhere else in fact but in the heart of London itself. Her *teething trouble* is in this way relegated to her life in the UK. The injunction in brackets ›(via Jamaica)‹ again indicates the narrator's giggling, which sympathizes not only with Clara, but also with the insight that almost everyone in Lambeth is there via another location, which makes it a *natural* trait of London. The term *roots* in conjunction with *(via Jamaica)*, furtively smuggled into the text, as well as the magisterially evoked *Lambeth* as the center of London, but also as the place of the other, are combined and play humorously with the idea of rootedness and ›authenticity‹, which are taken to the absurd and shown to have something to do with class im/possibilities and effects of colonial capitalism. The simultaneous evocation of these contradictory images arouses an almost hyperbolic, hysterical humorous tone, *without* forgetting to capture the materially impoverished conditions that accompany these other Londoners' lives. And yet, the humorous poetics also paves the way for empowering and self-sustaining traits of sovereignty, which do not allow any form of benevolence and pity. Rather it is shown how the imagery of flawless body (parts) has deep sociopolitical *roots* that can also be traced in the materiality of the city's districts and *routes*.

White Teeth, in this way, is also a synecdoche for the body of the other that seems never complete and yet desired. The body of the other is always presented in an exoticized way and in parts. Against such imagery stand Clara's teeth as well as Samad's hand and Irie's discontent with her hair. Thus, while the grotesquery of the images evokes a humorous trait, their tragic side, the losses they symbolize, are ›touching‹, as is the ability to endure

the loss, to embrace it, and live with it in one way or another, which demonstrates dignity even within the humorous trait. Yet, *White Teeth*, as the title promises, is not about the other, it is about historically set structures and meanings, and about the effects of dominant images that shape the forms and im/possibility of relations: Even Irie, Clara's daughter, is embarrassed, frightened and feels betrayed about her mother's false teeth, which she literary stumbles over during »a late-night attack« when she gives her mother a bedtime visit in the middle of the night to get permission for a »year off« in the sub-continent and Africa«, which Clara is opposed to and refuses to give.

Irie discovers the meaning of *White Teeth* as the discovery of the falseness of everything she has taken to be *normal*: »Irie looked down to where the pain was. In any war, this was too low a blow. The front set of some false teeth, with no mouth attached to them, were bearing down upon her right foot« (Smith 2000, 376; 378).

The shrieking humorous perception of *teeth without a mouth* reveals Irie's shock, and makes Irie violently aware of the tragedy of the »falsehood« of »truths« and the belief in any kind of stability, certainty, and »knowledge« that like *teeth* seem to come with a function and purpose (and bite you in the end), right before they are lost. But Irie must also bitterly realize that this instability seems to be *attached* to their very immigrant parents:

»Oh what a tangled web we weave. Millat was right: these parents were damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth. These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she didn't want it any more, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender.« (Smith 2000, 379)

Rather than to make her desperate, though, this painful incidence ultimately shows Irie her own vulnerability as a limit and form of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It demands that she makes and finds her own *routes*, which brings her closer to her *origins*, her »past«, with Bus 47 and her grandmother's flat in Shoreditch, not the arty area it is today, but the infrastructurally segregated working-class area it was in the 1970s and 1980s, the *roots* of all »un-truths«.

The contention between Clara and Irie rests on a caution, a »knowledge«, in fact, on Clara's side that reacts allergic to notions in which other(-ed) parts of the world (catchword: »Africa« or »subcontinent«) appear as (inferior) laboratories for anthropologic gazes and spaces for benevolent acts (catchword: »year off«), and in which the other always remains an object rather than a subject of »knowledge«; Clara turns this around far beyond its logic:

»Even in the darkness, Irie could see Clara scowl. »Permishon for what? Koo go and share and ogle at poor black folk? Dr Livingstone, I presume? Iz dat what you learnt from da Shalfenz? Because if thash what you want, you can do dat here. Jush sit and look at me for shix munfs!« »It's nothing to do with that! I just want to see how other people live!« »An gek youshelf killed in da proshess! Why don' you go necksh door, dere are uvver people dere. Go shee how dey live!« (Smith 2000, 378)

(– And somewhere in the dispute comes Alsana's furious exclamation »*Are you saying my country is not good enough for your daughter?*« (Smith 2000, 376), which brings another (›internal‹-dispute and) critical dimension beyond the point into the same critical anti-colonial gaze.

That Clara is upset and speaks here vehemently without her front teeth is a charmingly disarming humorous trait that shows her in an impeded, vulnerable position and also shows how serious this matter is to her because she is nevertheless speaking with *teeth* and without. Being made *tooth*-less in this regard symbolizes also a form of silencing that other(-ed) people must endure, and shows how difficult it is to make oneself understood from such a forestalled position. The ›implied author‹ in *White Teeth* knows about these dynamics, and the novel carves out space for this ›knowledge‹ to be pronounced. As Clara, in her not-knowing and power-less way, nonetheless is one of the central figures in the novel, thus, signaling a position of power and importance within its framework, her impaired pronunciation, in addition to her *other* English accent, softens her argument, ›beautifies‹ it, empathically humorizes it and makes it more possible to listen to her annoyed tone and to record and think about what she says in a decelerated way that contrasts with her understandable anger.¹⁴ Clara's words are driven by two severe arguments: On the one hand, Clara wants to save her daughter from a ›knowledge‹-system with colonial historical *roots* (which means they can be changed) that still remain disrespectful to the other, and in which the other still remains a spectacle and human resource for ›acquiring knowledge‹. On the other hand, Clara's dismayed objection goes against dichotomized and biased images of ›us‹ and ›them‹, suggesting to regard ›the other‹ as ›oneself‹ rather than to gaze at ›them‹ from an unreflected position of dominance that *pretends* not to know and to be ›innocent‹.

It is an ethical claim that Clara demands from any approach to what ›knowledge‹ might be, and which empowers her powerlessness. Although Clara may be ›uneducated‹ in a meanwhile (global?) conventionalized sense, she *knows*, she can see through structures of dominance, and she *knows* other ›knowledges‹ that are not yet part of *education*, the ›knowledge‹-making system. Clara reacts out of this process of non-knowledge that critically questions naturalized forms of ›knowledge‹, rooted in colonial history. *White Teeth* thus also stands for the reconsideration of ›knowledge‹ and power. It can be understood as a counter-discourse and is the invocation of other unacknowledged ›knowledges‹ that are part of (the power of) powerlessness.

In this way *White Teeth* can also be read as an aspiration to begin to build such an *earthbound homeland* on equal grounds that can be safe for everyone and will let different ›knowledges‹ co-exist, and in which such different powers are valued.

Three Coming depicts the almost simultaneous birth of the three children of the two families, Irie, Archie and Clara's daughter, and Samad and Alsana's twin sons, Magid and Mil-lat. *Three coming* is a funny expression as it depicts the teething stage of babies. Its humor

14 On the role of language, especially English, and its polyphonic use, see Ledent 2016. Referring to Ryan's ›cockney accent‹, Ledent draws attention to the ways *English* is also shown in its various dialects to depict and mark *white* figures. Ledent (2016, 82).

also evokes a sweet baby phase, which is easy to relate to and which has a touching, humanizing, unifying trait. In this way the novel construes, through the affective economy of the humorous rhetoric, a *safe stage* on which the protagonists can appear and perform their way of life without being looked down upon. Furthermore, what enhances a humorous trait here, as well as a ›common‹ affective angle towards the characters that shields them *from* racist or racialized thinking, is evoked by the image of children as ›body parts‹, ›body parts‹ that quasi outlive the ›old teeth‹, which have already gone through life and endured its hardships. Imagining ›the babies‹ metaphorically as *coming milk teeth* generates a sweet, affectionate picture that makes one smile (in the hope, and presumed, that ›one‹ cannot *not* love babies). While describing them, the narrator speaks in close proximity to the expectant, mellow, and caring affective trail that the protagonists experience. In doing so, the narrator interweaves a vulnerable, moving, ›warm‹ tone in their humorous evocations, which again makes it possible to regard the characters not just as ›some funny immigrants‹ but as *people* who go through hard times and yet also share some happy, hopeful ones. That way, those ›foreign‹ and ›strange‹ people become one's close neighbors, just a handbreadth away in the book, next to you. The idea of ›roots‹, moreover, is in this way once again narrowed down to the body and to parts of the body, which in fact have *no* roots; milk teeth eventually just fall out, making space for the permanent *teeth* whose *roots* are limited.

The three other titles with allusions to *teeth* depict singular historical events that are important for the plot and the characters. These, too, interconnect the entanglement of historical and *autobiographical* trajectories: »The rest«, as the narrator proclaims, »that terrible thing: history« (Smith 2000, 363), without reducing the singularity of the characters' life *to* history or using them just to invoke historical themes.

These three titles depict the way Archie and Samad meet, »*The Root Canals* of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal« (Smith 2000, 83–122), the special family history of Samad as a part of history that never did find official recognition, especially so in imperial British historiography, and is, however, humorously mentioned in the novel, »*The Root Canals* of Mangal Pande« (Smith 2000, 244–261), and the special circumstances of Hortense Bowden and her place-bound yet singular connection to empire, on the one hand, and her life in London, on the other hand, as »*The Root Canals* of Hortense Bowden« (Smith 2000, 356–364).

Root canals as traits of family history within history, this doubleness of a contingent *moment* in history that nevertheless shapes the (internal, family) lives of people from out of external historical circumstances, is what is negotiated as *original roots*, events that have an impact on people's lives. It is as if a female* Frederic Jameson would symbolically raise her* hand and say: »Always historicize!« instead of presuming some ›natural‹ markers, because ›nature‹, too, after all has its genealogical (colonial) histories that make out its *roots* in its most literal sense.¹⁵ ›*Root canals*‹ are place- and time-bound, and this is their (only) *origin* within a historical continuum. *Root canals* thereby, rather than inferring a

15 This may in fact be another dimension of the novel, as through the figures of Joyce Chalfen in particular, but also her husband Marcus and their son Joshua, plants as well as animals, another *hu-*

›place of origin‹, refer to historically driven time-spaces where different threads meet in intersectional *striking ways* and change people's lives or give an(-other) orientation to them.

The first title of these three chapters, »The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal«, denotes a humorous tendency, which arises from a sympathetic naming of the two characters who do not have much in common. This subtle incongruity heightens expectations and suspense, mingling them with empathy and thus a playful humor. The humorous tone attached to the title is composed of four elements. Firstly, the character's full names are cited in the title, which functions like the appeal to an official invocation. Secondly, the parodying appeal of the chapter title to an official statement in its humorous function splits and doubles its effect: It announces the forthcoming of official, important, and factual information, and it derides the pretention of factuality and objectivity of official and authorized statements and documents. Thirdly, the chapter's parodic statement of an authoritative performance annuls at the same time, with regard to the story as a non-official, fictional space, its own claim to be official and reinscribes a (possible) instance of history of World War II that is missing in its official accounts. Fourthly, it exhibits a resignifying, affectionate, sympathizing resonance towards both characters as singular, non-stereotyped entities without romanticizing them or denying empire's effects and the coloniality of discourse.

As a paratext, the chapter's title, is a signification structure that alludes to the ›external‹, meta-level of the narrative. It suggests to assume a directing subjectivity behind the story, conjuncting the story with an ›outer world‹ from whence it is conveyed. The paratext indicates a subjectivity – ›behind‹ an ›implied author‹ who influenced the story's discourse.

However, the title is humorous not only because of its function as paratext but also because of what it signals, inducing and at the same time questioning the notion and category of ›race‹ by harking back to a metonymic insinuation and a bodily part that denote ›root canals‹, living but rather short parts of teeth. Again, while ›root‹ alludes to ›roots‹ in the metonymic chain of ›origins‹, of the biologized colonial concept of ›race‹ and of the construction of geo-political space and ›original belonging‹, ›canal‹, as a part of teeth and as a synecdoche for the body, is metonymic to how this idea is inscribed in, is *made part of*, the body. At the same time, the injunction of ›race‹ in a metonymic chain with ›root canal‹ ridicules racialized concepts as derivative parts of a (his-)story, *told by someone*, rather than evidence of ›authenticity‹ or a given ›truth‹. As Pérez Zapata observes with regard to Smith's displacement of any ›origins‹ and ›authenticity‹, »[d]iscourses around (in) authenticity can thus unveil the anxieties derived from lack of representation and/or misrepresentation and the assimilation that racial, ethnic and class hegemonies still enforce, as well as the anxieties that arise when confronted with forms of otherness that destabilise normative identities« (Pérez Zapata 2020, 187).

›Roots‹ as an assignment to define (geographical) spaces and nationalities is humorously shown as inadequate and hollow. The reference to ›root canals‹ furthermore not

manism seems to be represented, one that addresses the bitter lives and histories of other earthly beings as part of colonial history.

only refers to *White Teeth* and makes this section of the story one tract of the issues thematized in the book as a whole, but also links it to society at large. It moreover binds Archie's and Samad's story and the fictional narrative to the history of colonialism and the British empire as well as the materialized effects and meanings it has (had) on ›bodies‹, on the experientiality of subjectivity as well as on history-telling and on *storytelling*. ›History‹ and ›story‹ become convertible and subjectivized: A narrative is someone's story and history is someone's (authorized) narration. In this respect, the appeal to ›real history‹ also supports Bakhtin's distinction between centripetal (authorized, institutionalized, archived history) and centrifugal discourses (fictional and/or oral narratives outside of institutional archives that *deauthorize*, correct the former). The humorous tendency of the chapter title, then, inherits a laborious task of discerning and knitting together, a web of possible meanings that, as it is merely laid out before an ›implied audience‹, have to be decoded, albeit on a voluntary basis that emphasizes its deconstructive propensity.

Samad's anti-colonial family history entails a mutiny *against* the colonial British occupation but remains a shadowy event that is laughed at and that appears as a lie, as boasting. It remains a haunting matter of pride for Samad, but it is never recognized within official colonial, global, or national historiography or intimate relations – there is an instance, however, in the novel, where Samad, with the help of his nephew Rajnu, who studies in Cambridge, finds an entry about his ancestor in an historical compendium, written by an A. S. Misra, but even then, maybe because the author of the book does not have a *white* British name, no one believes Samad or believes that it is ›true‹¹⁶ (Smith 2000, 257; see also Kershaw 2021, 873). It is perhaps because of this colonial ghost that Samad remains trapped in and haunted by the past, and his actions are all impregnated by the *origins* of this haunt and its non-recognition, defining his life as a series of painful and disturbing failures, especially his decision to send his London-born son to Bangladesh.

This haunting that describes Samad, as well as Clara and Archie's daughter, Irie, in different, but related ways, is also a hunt *for roots* in the sense of *a home*. The narrator lets us know this by voicing Irie's disillusioned thoughts:

»No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningst of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page.« (Smith 2000, 402)

While humor is invoked in this passage through a focalization of Irie and the juxtaposition of those loaded concepts (soul, infinity) that have never found a satisfactory answer,

16 Hannah Kershaw indeed refers to a book written by the historian Anan Swarup Misra (1961), to which the novel may refer, entitled *Nana Saheb Peshwa and the Fight for Freedom*, which also features a portrait of Mangal Pande. Cf. Kershaw (2021, 873).

as well as these resentful thoughts of a touchingly angry adolescent who feels disillusioned and betrayed, are not in vain. They pave the way for Irie to indeed look for a *home* somewhere else. The quiet, reassuring humor also has a playful twinkle regarding an ›implied audience‹ that it ghostly evokes at the invisible rims of the narrative. The narrator hints at a narrative thread that, actually, connects Irie to Jamaica. It is Irie's *turn to Jamaica*, the first home of her grandmother on her mother's side, in a kind of back-to-the-ro(o)utes search to find some form of solace, which expands and broadens her notion of belonging to the world.

Thus, *root canals* not only questions *roots* and the violent concept of ›race‹, but with gloomy resignation also *the desire for origins* in those other ones, accused of not-belonging, on the other side of discourse. But the genuine place to which everyone assumedly belongs, *home*, remains hazy, *homeland* a mere fantasy, *attached* to notions of ›origins‹ and ›roots‹ and other places where people never arrive.

But the liberating, joyful side of this insight is that one's *home* can be *made* (Klaeger/Stierstorfer 2015, 1 ff.), which is an essential strategy against ›inner fragmentation‹ (Siccardi 2020, 218). It becomes a blank page that can be endlessly filled with unicorn-tales, with lived narratives, with *friendships* across space and time, something that *White Teeth* stands for, too. *Home*, thus seen, can be understood as a weaving of relations, a texture of life and writing, of life-writing, on the route, along and against historiography. *Home* in this way can emerge in internal ways as well as in external ways, by reaching out to others, who, too may be instructed to similar boats of non-belonging. *Home* thus invokes a relation to others that may also be the answer to it. *Home* also seems to be *a search* for those other(-ed) countries that remain connected to the myth of *origins* and to which one may belong as well.

In Hortense's case the *root canals* lead to nothing less than a narrative of colonial rape as the very *roots* of her existence. The colonial desire for the other is projected onto (female*) bodies – and all in the name of ›love‹; although the topic is painful, the narrator finds a cheerful tone to name it anyway, and to put it center stage as a relevant and common, abusive and gendered historical trait that is hardly ever mentioned in historiography: »([O]h he loves her [the white gentleman of Christian descent, Durham, Hortense's mother, Ambrosia]; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly« (Smith 2000, 361). Humor emerges by an ironic incongruity and a joyful tone that do not seem to fit. What appears and is named as ›love‹ is the naked exercise of power – the self-declared right of dominance. The tragedy and atrocity of this history is expressed in a leisurely humorous tone, evoked playfully by the image of lovers and the (unsafe) hierarchy that can accompany ›love‹ relations, and which is detrimental (not only) within colonial history but also on the psyche of those who have to deal with it, internally and externally, while in dependent relations. This is at least why Ambrosia and succinctly, Hortense find their *home* in religion (Siccardi 2020, 216). *White Teeth* thus also indicates the interlaced affective investment of colonial history and its traces. Hortense's very existence is the product of such a history and it is her mother's religion, an abstract God, with whose help from the background, as it were, Ambrosia (and eventually Hortense), can develop a decolonizing attitude in an attempt to break the power of the colonial tormentor who not only wants to own her mother's country and

her body, but also her mind; Durham wants to *educate* Ambrosia. But Ambrosia as well as Hortense choose to be educated in another way, by the belief in a day of relief beyond history, at the end of time (Smith 2000, 363). They choose *infinity* rather than colonial ›knowledge‹. This, too, is a form of decolonization process that takes place in the mind. It carries not only hope but also a critical, suspicious stance to power, on the one hand, and an openness to other forms of ›knowledge‹, on the other hand, to empower themselves in situations of powerlessness. Thus, the humor and playful tone that is evoked here is not a mere masking of injurious events, but also the tone of overcoming, triumph, a tonality within interstices of non-knowledge and powerlessness. On a meta-narrative level, it also is the tonality of critique and of a critical faculty beyond ›knowledge‹ and power.

This amalgamation of historical violence and the production of (scientific or ›truthful‹) ›knowledge‹ is also taken up in *Molars*. Three instances are thereby noticeable as unconscious and uncanny encounters that lead to affectively loaded, significant events. *Molars* seem to stand for the severity of those incidents and occurrences that remain hard to digest. It is shown throughout the chapter by small episodic miniature narratives and how colonial atrocities are in ghastly ways still sensible as part of lived experiences in the present and not necessarily as part of the past. The narrator here speaks of *trauma* as a repetition that is repeated from the outside and therefore cannot end:

»Because immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition – it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There is no proper term for it – *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all [...].« (Smith 2000, 161)

A trauma is also something that *reappears* again and again when its *sin*, injurious touches, still resonate in the sociopolitical structures and repertoire of thought, language, and imagery – within the very everyday.

An *affective humor* here seems to go beyond itself, miming another limit that lies somewhere beyond graspable comprehension, changing into something like a mania and oscillating somewhere between insanity and obsession.

Firstly, *Molars* depicts again another historical episode and indicates the genocidal meaning of *white teeth* in colonial history that resonates uncannily and menacingly from everyday experiences: Irie, Millat, and Magid visit an elderly *white* man as part of a school project with charitable character, to distribute foodstuff. Here the image of *white teeth* is depicted as a murderous marker for Black bodies. It is also one of the few passages in the novel where *white teeth* as an expression is explicitly used. Mr J. P. Hamilton, it turns out, had been in the British army and had taken part in genocidal campaigns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁷ He uses the term *white teeth* not only to refer nostalgically to his own youth when he could eat everything and ›philander freely‹, another suspicious

17 It is possible that ›Hamilton‹ in fact also killed the very allies who fought for the British army in the genocide. See Perfect (2016, 244 ff.).

name for ›love‹. Mr Hamilton connotes also his memory of *white teeth* to the genocide he was involved in; apparently the sight of the three ›dark‹ kids reminds him of this past: ›Clean white teeth are not always wise, now are they?‹ Mr. Hamilton recognized whom he was allowed to kill ›by the whiteness‹ of ›their teeth‹. And he adds: ›Poor bastards. Or rather I survived, to look at it in another way, do you see?‹ (Smith 2000, 171).

Humor deflates here into pure, unrepairable insanity. The murderous trauma caused by Mr. Hamilton haunts him, too, and has corrupted his soul, and yet there is a hint of a desire, palpable in this response, a desire to understand, to learn. Mr. Hamilton somehow knows that he has to figure it out, to look at it in a different way. Here, the resonates with the inclination to hope, striving to open up the possibility that there could be not only remorse in the feeling of guilt but also an awakening of responsibility.¹⁸ It depends, the novel seems to emphasize, on who uses humor and in which way to say what. And yet, still, the novel reaches out to Mr. Hamilton, giving him a place in its world, and somehow, by showing the horrors that still haunt him and have driven him mad, it opens up a space for something like the rehabilitation of his soul.

While Irie quietly begins to cry, Magid and especially Millat, shocked, ›red-faced and furious‹ (Smith 2000, 172), try to explain that their father had also been part of the British army (Perfect 2016, 242). Mr. Hamilton does not believe them and instead accuses the twins of lying and threatens them with rotten teeth for telling ›fibs‹ until the children flee from the apartment, ›tripping over themselves, running to get to a green space, to get to one of the lungs of the city, some place where they could breathe freely‹ (Smith 200: 174). In Mr. Hamilton's colonial memories, the image of Blackness is reduced to beautiful *white teeth*. It recalls the reduction of the Black body to the colonial *white gaze*. However, it is also symbolic of the racist and colonial vestiges of the question – the question of dominance – which determines whose lives are worth mourning and whose do not count, even when they are murdered. This is where humor reaches an end, as it cannot trespass as such, turning (back) to tragedy. It can only be trespassed by the other bodily threshold-expression (*Grenzerfahrung*) that Helmut Plessner mentions in addition to ›laughter‹ by crying. Crying and laughing are not opposites but reactions to an experience that is beyond comprehension. The body translates it into this almost painful shattering or overflowing response. Mr. Hamilton symbolizes colonialism and how the othered body has been either explored or eliminated (or both). But the scene still harbors a form of humor, one that comes with and lies in what Hannah Arendt famously has called *the banality of evil* (1963) – a phrase often misunderstood as trivializing the horrors of the Nazi genocide. Yet the opposite is the case: it marks the ease and thoughtlessness with which the most abhorrent atrocities and crimes are committed. This humor transcends the realm of humor and capacity. Mr Hamilton gives the children the creepy advice to brush their

18 Guilt not only as an ›affect‹, but also as a kind of rupture in consciousness that can be an essential interdependent ›political capacity‹ for singular and collective forms of (future) responsibility that Smith implicitly problematizes here is an approach developed by Theodor W. Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* ([1966] 1973, 2015). It is a conceptualization, which continues to be neglected in anti-racist theories and decolonial thinking. However, it should not only be of relevance within structures of coloniality, but also in relation to all possible supremacist atrocities, structures of domination and for transformative justice – globally. For a more recent and in-depth discussion of these Adornoian ideas, see Cucharó (2021).

teeth three times a day. The hushed ›laughter‹ of Mr Hamilton indicates a weird, pitiful, uncanny humor of ›superiority‹. The children get out with an unwell feeling without knowing what it means, but they feel, especially Irie, that something in this relation is wrong. The children are the third generation that endures the coloniality of racist thinking. The incident shows how racism not only effects discourse, language, ›institutions‹, ›structures‹, and the very subject of coloniality, but also those othered bodies on an everyday level. This ›little incidence‹ is so painful that humor, instead of its breaking, shattering work, comes here with a stop sign. The children, helpless and not knowing the range of this history and its meaning, can, nonetheless, feel a harmful, hazardous aura and flee from this place of evoked horror. Even the narrator gets silent and lets the performance speak for itself without further comment. The text seems to have written itself by itself in shock. To understand the episode as an appeal to mourn, and to feel through this uneasiness and what humor from this Other side can cause and mean, is what the text may want to say – and how pitiful this Other is as well. There is no power attached to this ›knowledge‹. It rather evokes the desire to escape, to find a sphere of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness, a green space, to breathe freely.

Another such borderline incidence that evokes Plessner's *Grenzerfahrung* in *Molars* is, secondly, the appearance of Mad Mary.

Even the children know that ›the city breeds the Mad‹. Mad Mary is one of them, ›a black, voodoo woman with a red face whose territory stretches from Kilburn to Oxford Street‹ (Smith 2000, 174). Yet, *White Teeth* looks at ›madness‹ from multiple angles; by focalizing the three young friends, the novel distinguishes ›madness‹ from ›madness‹, making it appear as a matter of fact. ›Real madness‹ is rehabilitated in *White Teeth* in fact as a form of life-style and thinking that even the children can distinguish. ›City-mads‹ ›were better, less scary than Mr J. P. Hamilton – they flaunted their insanity, they weren't half mad and half not [...]. They were properly mad in the Shakespearean sense, talking sense when you least expected it‹ (Smith 2000, 174). (Here, the narrator seems to unwittingly succumb to the colonial gesture that evokes the self-praise of ›Great Britain‹, to which poor Shakespeare has to remain loyal – though I think that this ›madness‹ that they so rightly diagnose may (at least: *may also*) come from other, much older literatures of the world, while Shakespeare is prided for it along a ›British‹ colonial fantasy style.) Anyway, the narrator also hastens to mention that people have learned to avoid eye-contact in the streets of the city, so no one gets annoyed, and everyone (›mad‹ and not, who can differentiate between the two), can indulge in their own sauce of (or saucy) thoughts. But it happens that Mad Mary, ›a beautiful, a striking woman‹ with her majestic appearance, ›ageless midnight skin and a long neck that Queens can only dream about‹ (Smith 2000, 177) catches Samad's gaze; although at first sight, there is a funny humor emerging from this scene, as Samad appears again caught unprepared, before an ›implied audience‹, it changes into another humorous tone: While their eyes are intertwined beyond darkness, beyond light, beyond reason and ›madness‹, Mad Mary asks Samad ›WHAT'S DE SOLUTION, BLACK MAN?‹, and, perhaps contrary to possible expectations, what comes about in this interlocked gaze between Samad and Mad Mary is a bond. Samad has an insight, the narrator muses, reading Samad's thoughts, Samad understands that he and Mad Mary both are standing in a close relationship to each other, that they are akin to each other:

»Mad Mary was looking at him with *recognition*. Mad Mary has spotted a *fellow traveler*. She had spotted the madman in him (which is to say, *the prophet*) [...] She recognized him. Simply because they were from the same place, he and Mad Mary, which is to say: *far away*.« (Smith 2000, 177–78)

Not only is there a chiasm of thought between Derrida's and Samad's outdoor activities and their encounters with the other, in the neglected corners of the polis, the self and discourse. The humorous tone of this exchange remains humorous because the merciless narrator reveals all of Samad's naked thoughts about himself, decentering and ironizing him, but it is also humorous because of the simple, beautiful, and rich rendering. It expresses the most elaborate understanding of ›diaspora‹ – *far away*, which may indeed describe the experience of life (and death) as such – life, death, ›diaspora‹ or just *far away*, the only real place there is, as it were, folded between the pages, in the book and untraceable. There is no stable homeland to turn to, or to return to, or at least it is not the same anymore, people move, the birds move, the earth moves, everything moves, endlessly, and nothing belongs to one, and no one belongs anywhere or everyone belongs everywhere – to *far away*. The experience of home is *far away*, and *belonging* exists in-between the gazes of the passing people, this is the *pass-port* to the O/other, *far away*, a humble, mutual recognition, the light touch, of an other *fellow traveler* in the infinite, not-knowing, and power-less darkness of something that may be called wor(l)d or ›soul‹.

Perhaps realizing a Derridean moment, Samad talks to Mad Mary. He responds to Mad Mary, taking her seriously. For me, this is one of the most significant and brilliant passages in the novel. It may be its heart, with its silent closeness and distant, mocking description, as well as what it purports to say beyond this smile. As a *prophet* that Samad feels he is, the narrator lets us know, not without an ironic tone, Samad quotes the one person, enlightened or not, he somehow knows he can trust. He cites *Ghandi ji*, saying one word to Mad Mary, a word that stands for (colonial) resistance against oppression, for decolonization – and for hope. And while this word is absolutely resolute, it is at the same time also absolutely anti-violence, this is what gives it power – its powerlessness:

»Satyagraha‹ said Samad, surprising himself with his own calmness. Mad Mary, unused to having her interrogation answered, looked at him in astonishment. ›WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?‹ Satyagraha. It is Sanskrit for ›truth and firmness‹. Ghandi-gee's word. You see, he did not like ›passive resistance‹ or ›civil disobedience‹.« (Smith 2000, 178)

And not only that,

»[...] Samad did what no one had done to Mad Mary for well over fifteen years: he touched her. Very lightly, on the shoulder.« (Smith 2000, 179)

This fraternal *understanding*, comforting touch, may be a sign of connectivity within non-knowledge and powerlessness. What connects the two characters is an understanding that deeply *seems to know something of value, another value*, beyond the moment and questions of ›value‹ as such, that can *existentially sense*, in many different ways, what it means to be from *far away*. It is a connection in difference, in which ›madness‹, ›reason‹, ›re-

sistance«, and ›truth« become one in figurative as well as allegorical ways, where the difference does not seem to matter (does it ever?) and is sublated. Humor, grief, melancholy, and affection join hands in this folded touch beyond time, space, ›identity«, and ›gender« in a not-knowing, power-less, threshold understanding in which both figures appear outside of themselves, outside their ordinary situatedness ›in life« and yet in the thick of it, and most intelligible in understanding something impossible, something beyond ›knowledge«, expressed only by a pure touch of connecting gazes, beyond the sight of the eyes.

Mad Mary as well as ›madness« in this way acquire *a place* in the novel and are not rejected as ›monstrous« or ›retarded«; rather, ›madness« appears as another form of reasoning and of ›knowledge« and is, at the same time, an untouchable sanctuary and territory of sovereignty; instead of being associated with ignorance, ›madness« appears as a form of craziness *because* it understands *so well* and is not afraid to tell the ›truth«.

Beyond Samad's *personal*, (Islamic induced) religious beliefs (›Personally, my hope lies in the last days«), Ghandi's (political) philosophy, which Samad proposes here and *which transcends his personal beliefs*, represents a beautiful gesture, a planetarian, cross-community teaching that conveys the idea of *far away* – but without absolutizing it:

»Truth and firmness is one suggestion, though there are many people you can ask if that answer does not satisfy.« (Smith 2000, 179)

This may indeed reveal the ›prophetic« capability of Samad. Although the scene appears comical, as he utters just this one word, ›satyagraha«, which seems ›mad« and powerless, and yet, in remembrance of the historical developments, and because Samad is shown as both frightened and heroic, speaking with fervor to a *fellow traveler* while Mad Mary exudes an aura of decisive authority, it is also tragic. This is not only because of Samad's oblivious role, speech, and crumbled dreams that are *barely* echoed in this exchange and yet grace the encounter, but also because of Mad Mary's so abandoned and immense vulnerability, her seeming unawareness of herself, her exposure to the narrator's facetious gaze, which evokes a scenery of voyeuristic quality before an ›implied audience«, and because of the sorrow she invokes, alongside her decisiveness. On the one hand, the scene is amusing because of the very performance of the two characters, and on the other hand, the performance of the quite desolate characters, is also disconcerting and heartbreaking. Very Shakesperean indeed.

Another scene evoked in this chapter, finally, occurs in a park, and again involves Samad and his mistress, his sons' young *white* teacher, Poppy. Samad apparently feels safe in the park, invisible to unwanted observers, but then all of a sudden he sees, not far from them, »quite clearly by the bandstand his two sons, their white teeth biting into two waxy apples, waving, smiling« at him (Smith 2000, 182).

White teeth here represent not only ›beauty« and ›delight« but also ›innocence«, all brought up by the white color of teeth that not only allegorizes protection and untouchability. It also entails a specific temporal threshold, a threshold that is about to be transgressed and that threatens to destroy this image of ›beauty« and ›innocence« that seem to emanate from *white teeth*, an image that is an affectionate part of one's very

heart, coming from untraceable paths. Here, another form of ›beauty‹ and ›innocence‹ is apprehended and *grasped*, one that quite clearly circumscribes non-knowledge and powerlessness – that of children, on the verge of destruction, against which an ›implied audience‹, as ideal observing subjects, may feel, not only unknowing and powerless but also guilty, because they seem to be or become witness to it.

Ironically it is the image of his children, his own two sons, who cannot know (and probably would not care) which ›laws‹ their father is breaking, that triggers something in Samad. The children become *wax puppets* at the mercy of their overwhelmed father, who cannot abide by the unwritten ›laws‹ that he has to obey qua birth, ›laws‹ that seem timeless, unaffected by the peculiarities of his life or that of his wife, that have acquired a life of their own, and seem ›right‹ and ›reasonable‹ – these are not only religious ›laws‹ in a narrow sense, but also historically driven, discursive ›laws‹ and those that frame the fringed con-texts of decoloniality. And if Samad does not protect them, nothing of him (or Alsana) may survive, as the beautiful and yet vanishing, vulnerable transience of his son's *white teeth* seems to remind him. Samad, living an inner crisis, overwhelmed by an overflow of paradoxical desires, religious duties, and images of postcolonial masculinity, postpones a decision and projects his dazed state, with all due religious obligations, onto his sons – a process of transference beyond ›good‹ and ›evil‹, which *white teeth* also render in the image of this moment in which Samad experiences the multiple dimensions of non-knowledge and powerlessness. On the surface it appears comical, on the inside it seems to resemble and reveal a carambole of tragic traits that have webbed his ›life‹. Full of remorse for his extramarital sins (but not willing enough to end them either, too sweet are the bargains, it seems), Samad decides, with some unintended help from his friend Archie and without Alsana's awareness, to send one of his sons to live with his grandparents in Bangladesh (he cannot afford to send both of them) so at least one of them can grow up with *roots*, having a traditional Islamic education. After this downright kidnapping and injurious act, in which Magid is put on a plane *home* (whose home whatsoever), Alsana refuses to talk to Samad for the next few years until their son returns. Female (and feminist) resistance against so much ›reason‹ is expressed in a state of muteness.¹⁹ This, too, is arranged in a funny hyperbole and tumbling and escalating series of thoughts and events, and one, moreover, can clearly imagine the funny side of a couple in a permanent state of calm-war, in which one side is, if at all, only indirectly speaking to the other. The grotesque condition also shows Samad's despair and the tragically confined possibilities

19 It is interesting that Alsana's downright rejection of sexuality stands against Samad's sexual appetite, sexuality standing in-between them, binding and unbinding them at the same time; what this un/says about the meaning of the institution of marriage and ›love‹ (and the affective economy of sexuality) in marginality and diaspora, and how it itself becomes a muted institution/discourse is another unfinished story, maybe for further scrutiny. In any case, it would be interesting to read Alsana's dismissal of sexuality as negligible and subsidiary against the importance that sexuality occupies, explicitly and implicitly, on a material and discursive scale. Alsana, at least, cannot find in Tagore's nationalized poetry or in critical political imagery a difference in how people ›are treated in life‹ and ›the sky they live under‹; whereas she sees that her possibilities in Bangladesh would not have been prosperous, in the UK, too, she can sense that she is deemed as incompetent, even in her role as a mother, and looked down upon even by ›feminists‹ (as represented by Neena and Joyce and what they claim to be (their) right). See Jiao (2019, 548 ff.).

with which Alsana reacts to this violence in order to carve out some space for herself and for her mourning (Smith 2000, 212). The silent *mouth* that speaks only indirectly stands metaphorically for protest and grief. On Samad's part, too, while the grotesquery of the situation may insinuate a zany humor, it shows the dramatic helplessness of Samad and his actions. One senses that there is more behind this humorized awkwardness that has driven Samad *crazy*: The fear of exposing his children to an order that is not only foreign to him but also unconvincing, as well as the fear to forget his own memories and connections, to forget his *roots, far away, not knowing who he is about to become* (or, much more importantly, *is assumed to be*) is so strong that it makes Samad part with the most precious he has. It also shows that ›the immigrant‹ never arrives and never finds themselves in the past and present records of (history and) discourse (at least not in a good way, and always uprooted – there is always something sudden about their existence, caught in a vacuum of presence, in mid-air). The idea of *roots*, moreover, relates to a country that has only recently and painfully acquired independence through partition. Its *roots* are awkwardly divided – not to say that there are no *roots* to which Samad's son could connect; *Hindustan* (in all its wounded divisions) is in a complex, motley state. This *turn*, as well as the acquisition of an (other[-ed], Islamic) ›knowledge‹ thus refers to a fantasized *future* rather than to the return to a past that has already passed but probably never existed in the first place. Magid, however, in the six years he is away, *home*, becomes what his brother and family could not (never?) achieve in Britain. He *belongs* to this other country he did not know before. Magid seems to be an accepted part of this other country, so much so, in fact, that he wants to reform it (against the backdrop of progressive, developmental policies and measures and although no one has probably asked him for the favor), but nevertheless ›*longing to improve the lot of my poor country*‹ (Smith 2000, 366). *Class* lurks in here as another (*the?*) dividing and defining issue of belonging. Magid has changed class in Bangladesh. Rather than naming failures and assigning blame, the narrative reveals a more interwoven, eclectic dynamic in this way that seems to sadly laugh about everything, everywhere. It may also suggest the possibility of another beginning, one that is built on the material and epistemological ruins of this tragic texture. In this sense, and the further development of friendships throughout the novel, it is reminiscent of Fanon's ›laughter‹ and its invitation to participate and begin *another* humanity, perhaps.

Canines – The Ripping Teeth, in Chapter III, seems to resonate such an image. *The ripping canines* may refer to the adolescents' attempt to find their own paths in this manifold fractured world and can be read as miniature-coming-of-age narratives – painful, unsettling procedures for the young as well as for the parents. The separation process and its pain are doubled by the material, social, and psychic uncertainty that the parents endure, and that they, to an extent, transfer to the children; the rest that their children must withstand comes from the sociopolitical pressures, from the outside world.

The third generation of ›immigrants‹ after independence still fights within pressures and processes of coloniality in its different forms, on smaller, much more invisible accounts within the everyday, struck between a rock and a hard place.

In this situation the home of the Chalfens becomes an anchor for Irie, Millat, and later for Magid. That Irie and Millat befriended Joshua, the oldest son of the Chalfens and Irie's and Millat's schoolmate, may be more than a coincidence. It seems to symbolize two

other things at once: On the one hand, Jewishness is integrated in this other worldliness of the ›immigrants‹, finding its age-old *ur*-space of otherness per se. On the other hand, the experience of antisemitism obtains a central place as the oldest form of (internally colonizing) racism *within* Europe, with *roots* that reach far into the past and still mark Jewish marginalization in Europe and beyond. Not only does the Chalfen Family become a quasi-foster home, where an ›implied author‹ places Millat and Irie and *decides* that they should thrive there. They become permanent guests of the Chalfen household, supported in every way possible, from listening to their concerns to providing money, food, shelter, and jobs. Not that this care is one-sided; the Chalfens, too, are in need of a minor/other-mirror, to *feel* again another non-knowledge they seem to have repressed, namely that Jewishness is connected, in every conceivable way, to experiences of marginalization, genocide, and genocidal dangers. Not only did the Chalfens, ›an aging hippy couple both dressed in pseudo-Indian garb‹, support Samad's suggestion in their children's school to remove the ›pagan‹ ›Harvest Festival‹ in favor of other religious festivals, and ›raised their hands defiantly‹ (Smith 2000, 131), it is also figured in Marcus Chalfen's profession and aspirations and the urge of his wife Joyce ›to help‹ and gain confidence from helping and caring for those who are socially marginalized. Especially Joyce's well-meant, although always derailing, *white* (she has a *Christian* background) racist comments are nevertheless a chief note in this direction: ››You'll stay for dinner, won't you?‹ pleaded Joyce, ›Oscar really wants you to stay. Oscar loves having strangers in the house, he finds it really stimulating. Especially brown strangers‹ (Smith 2000, 326).

Emblematic on Marcus' side are his ideals, through which the past shows its presence:

››And always with humanity in mind – a cure for cancer, cerebral palsy, Parkinson's – always with the firm belief in the *perfectibility* of life [...]. It was the Chalfen way handed down the family for generations; [...] If you were arguing with a Chalfen, trying to put a case for these strange French men who think truth is a function of language, or that history is interpretive or science metaphorical, the Chalfen in question would hear you out quietly, then wave his hand, dismissive, feeling no need to dignify such bunkum with a retort.›› (Smith 2000, 312)

Not only the strong emphasis on the idea to make the world more human (handed down for generations in the family), but also any touch on history (and its atrocities) is understandably rejected as it is read as antisemitic, perverse attempts to relativize the Shoah or at least as a possibility that it may be *used* in this way to foster antisemitism, concerns that are anything but unjustified. Instead of stating this obvious and painful argument and announce it, it is put aside with a dismissive gesture of the hand – an organ of touch that rejects touching upon an injurious issue, which goes deep into the body, soul and presumably the deeply affected family history. Nonetheless, the narrator's cheerful tone remains teasing and affectionate with regard to Marcus, as echoed in expressions like ›and always with humanity in mind‹. The allusion to a ›strange Frenchman‹, which of course depicts poststructuralist thought in an already devaluating gesture by focalizing Marcus, is also a playful tongue-in-cheek and an allusion to another ›strange Frenchman‹ in the novel, whom Marcus and the ›implied audience‹ *know* and yet *not know* at the same

time, and which entails another painful, disillusioning trait of horror. The humorous allusion thus is not only funny and playful but also loaded with grief, which sympathizes with Marcus' and the Chalfen's non-knowledge and powerlessness.

So, ›the care‹ (and the question who cares for whom) does have its own sand-traps in the ripping of the canines and is frequently mocked throughout the novel. Yet, out of this encounter, that, in its own ways, timidly touches upon different issues and effects of antisemitism and racism, different family bonds ensue, which are ›funny‹ and moving at the same time: The relationship of Marcus and Magid can be named as an especially noteworthy example. An accomplished Jewish scholar and a young Muslim lawyer-›poet‹-to-be become (close) soulmates (and how close!). They both believe in scientific ›truths‹ as problem-solvers of human development. A sweet ›irony‹ is set into work here as the two, Jewish and Muslim visionaries, feel akin and ›family‹ to each other, rescuing and protecting each other (something one can only hope for in the long run (of the ongoing history) – Jewishness as the experienced ›uncle‹ of little, but ambitious ›nephew‹ Islam (– or I would rather like to imagine Jewishness as a mother-religion to Islam). The allusion to their common religious *roots* comes with its own especially delicious and special delicate humor: ›[t]hey would *save* each other. This couldn't be faith could it, Marcus? [Marcus thinks to himself]. He questioned himself [...]. Not faith, no, Marcus, not the kind with no eyes. Something stronger, something firmer. *Intellectual* faith‹ (Smith 2000, 422). But they are both duped, *White Teeth* laughs with a resigned, painful ›irony‹, by the parameters of whiteness, and the belief in pure, positivist science and ›reason‹. It is invoked here by a slightly ironic tone with which the narrator accompanies Marcus' thoughts at the airport, where he wants to pick up Magid, who will be arriving. A ›Muslim‹ (not only?) (cis-) man in this way appears as the ›Jewish‹ (not-only?) cis-man's future lawyer and cousin in Europe, as it were (›Muslim‹ and ›Jewish‹ women* and LGBTQIA+ do not have a problem with each other, it may be safely assumed...– cheerfully? In solidarity? – always –?)–*yeah! Let's stick to that...*). In the end indeed, both of the two men seem to lack (another) ›knowledge‹, namely the ›knowledge‹ about the workings of power: The fact that Marcus' very mentor has been a Nazi scholar who was involved in eugenics. The evocation of ›real‹ historical ›knowledge‹, always right behind the back of the other, here of Jewishness, awaking horror in the poor ›implied audience‹, standing at the niche of the novel at the mercy of (and a merciless) well-knowing narrator, is a shrieking and ›maddening‹ humor that accompanies this development and yet is not so far away from the ways history is involved in the present. This may be the most striking element of non-knowledge and powerlessness that the novel may want to remind its dissimilar audience of.

All these instances of *White Teeth* and the allusions to the meanings of ›race‹ within the histories of external and internal colonialisms in the contemporary present, evoke different forms of touch amidst of miseries that are soothing and stroking, but also striking and shocking and that allude to the formative period of *new beginnings*, beginnings in the sense of a coming to ›knowledge‹, coming to understand (›coming home to oneself‹), and rejecting supremacist, logocentric ›truths‹ even when they appear as ›knowledge‹ or scientific ›truths‹ – and *beginnings* in the sense of *other* future possibilities.

With these images *White Teeth* generates not only a timeliness but also another imagery. This other imagery is part of its humorous as well as its rhetorically invoked poetic epistemological shifts that, despite all misery, smilingly turns to *friendships* as an ethical

emblem of another, possible, *humanity* that must learn to act *in earth-bound ways* within and yet against binarist and dominant imagery, one that »is resolutely turned towards the future« (Ledent 2016, 87).

Seen in this way, *White Teeth* can be conceived of as a metaphor for the concept of ›race‹, supremacy, and phallogocentrism, especially in the European context and its (global) historical implications. On the one hand, it shows how these structures have been materialized and have inscribed bodies, structured ›reality‹, our pasts, our presences, our gazes, even our most intimate relations. It simultaneously ridicules these structures by showing how hollow and untenable they are and that we are still not fully usurped by them. *White Teeth* thus shows the holes and gaps within the texture of our texts and corpuses as spaces of agency and rethinking. These are spaces of non-knowledge and powerlessness that become visible through the rhetoricality of *affective humor*.

White Teeth as an allusion to a body part located squarely in the face also undermines a separation between fiction and ›reality‹ in this way; it reinforces the realistic, almost documentary sense of the novel and signifies a threshold-place where it is not possible to distinguish between the two realms of reading that are considered as epistemically separate spheres of experience, as ›reality‹ and ›fiction‹. In this sense, the concept of ›race‹ is brought to the fore as a materialized bodily signification and experience that has been condensed in scientific and cultural discourse under the abstraction of violent philosophical and discursive approaches and their (material) effects that are dismantled here. These become palpable, visible, and, at the same time, remain invisible, in the mouth, in language, discourse and the folds of ›reality‹ *unfolded* in the novel. Every touch of the tongue, as an organ that sets language in motion, also touches the wounding inflections of ›race‹ and supremacist thinking as a fundamental concept of othering (and *selfing*). So this suggests, at least to a certain extent, that it matters *which subjectivity* speaks about *what* from what instance of ›knowledge‹ and power. Humor, for all the affectivity it can evoke in different ways, is the deconstructive, subtle, rhetoric that triggers this process of *unfolding* and, and makes it possible, on a psychic level, to speak about trauma by simultaneously also sheltering the self, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, by opening up a discursive space for contemplation.

White Teeth can thus also be understood as a disguise, as a mask that speaks about racism, antisemitism and, more generally, about structures of dominance, and their manifold materializing effects without speaking about them explicitly (Isaac 2005, 40). Understood in this way, it can also be regarded as a metaphor for the work of humor: It names indirectly, without naming, and intervenes by way of an in/congruency to make itself heard, without blaming, without opening wounds, and without hurting. The humor in *White Teeth* can thus symbolize (trickster, hidden) subversive forms of resistance that work from within language, altering narratives without much ado. ›Mouth‹ also resonates images of vulnerability and exposure, of penetration and silencing, all evocations that depict the hazards of marginal (sociopolitical) positions and ›the laws‹ that define the limits of what can be touched in discourse (and by whom) and what cannot (and by whom). *White Teeth* also includes (and conceals) the tongue. The tongue, in turn, marks a metaphor for language (and thus also discourse). Like the movements of a tongue, in which it touches itself within the mouth, *affective humor* appears as a

rhetorical and poetical as well as *bodily* movement that touches from within the mouth as the place of language and discourse, language and discourse by pointing upon their sociopolitically defining instances and sending them into other directions of thought and imagination. Although it is seldom considered, the *place* of touch is thus not only linked to a *bodily*, performing dimension attached to it, but also to an (*autobiographical*) subjectivity: It matters *which* mouth speaks of (and as) *W/white T/teeth* in which ways and for which (however unconsciously aroused) purposes. What invokes the zany ›laughter‹ is the enveloped play that is a corrective to discursive imagery, and the complex historical uprooting in the sense of violent displacements and mass-migrations that accompany internal and external colonialisms and their effects, which, consequently, mark bodies as injured entities and which are negotiated, as it were, as teeth-damage and teeth-fillings in *White Teeth*.

White Teeth – On the Level of the Story – Archie and Samad

Archie's and Samad's encounter is told through an analepsis in Chapter III, »The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal« (Smith 2000, 83). The chapter disrupts the chronological and teleological temporal order of the novel. It goes far back to the Second World War and His Majesty's Army, when India was still a *British* jewel and had not yet fallen apart.

The protagonists are in a ground war division, somewhere in Eastern Europe, and together with three other inmates, two other privates and a captain, they are assigned, to a tank with supportive functions. They are described as »a coalition of abject figures« as they apparently do not quite fit the prescribed format of regular soldiers. As Justin Omar Johnston perfectly puts it, »[t]his coalition of abject figures is abandoned or left to die because they are seen as not fully human. Even as they risk their own lives, their bodies make them risky, and so, like the enemy, they remain under suspicion. And yet neither can they escape the war. They must go on as ›the losers‹ within the victorious army, trapped inside the securitized space of an excluded interior« (Johnston 2021, 99).

Within this event that gives structure to the story in the proposed reading, fiction and ›reality‹ in the sense of historical events and their material and discursive effects touch upon each other through the references of the non-character narrator, triggering evaluations that in some way evoke a subjectivity, which comes close to the ›real author‹, implied by a specific disguising humor and a signifying trail. We hear the narrator speak:

»Their journey was a long tiresome one, rarely punctuated by any action. Archie's tank was a bridge-builder, one of the specialist divisions not tied to English county allegiances or to a type of weaponry, but providing service across the army and from country to country, recovering damaged equipment, laying bridges, creating passages for battle, creating routes where routes had been destroyed. Their job was not so much to fight the war as to make sure it ran smoothly. By the time Archie joined the conflict, it was clear that the cruel, bloody decisions would be made by air [...]. Meanwhile, on the ground, their heavy, armor-plated scout-tank had a simpler task: [...] to avoid the civil war in the mountains [...]; to pick their way through the glazed eyes of dead statis-

tics and the ›wasted youth‹; [...] ›Private Ick-Ball has passed to me at 16.47 hours a radio message that informs me that the area, as far as can be seen from the air, sir, is unoccupied, sir‹ said Archie. ›This is not war,‹ Samad had said quietly. [...] Two weeks later, as Archie checked their route to Sofia, to no one in particular Samad said, ›I should not be here.‹ As usual he was ignored; most fiercely and resolutely by Archie, who wanted somehow to listen. ›I mean, I am educated. I am trained. I should be soaring with the Royal Airborne Force, shelling from on high! I am an officer! Not some mullah, some sepyo, wearing out my chappals in hard service.‹ (Smith 2000, 86–7)

It is clear from the passage that Archie and Samad are unequal figures. We learn that Samad is ›mostly ignored‹ by the others and that Archie, too, tries to ignore him. We further learn that Samad does not feel good about his appointment in the tank. We further come to know that there is not much of a war going on as the tank rolls through the landscape, that it is quite calm, and that Archie nevertheless dutifully announces his protocol to a higher officer via radio, while Samad, apparently uneasy with the strangeness of the situation, puts his thoughts on record, in a wondering, questioning, and gloomy way. We can infer from all this a slight tone of humor in the passage, which is evoked by the mentioned strangeness of the incongruent circumstances that the scene displays: While they are in an armed military tank, there seems to be no war. Humor works in the passage mainly in two ways: It is firstly, based on the formation of what Judith Roof, drawing on Bergson's observations, calls an *aside*, an implicit address to a thus evoked ›implied audience‹ (Roof 2018, 49 f.). Secondly, it is established by evoking the characters as being unaware of being ›observed‹.

This unawareness is related to the figure of the ›fook‹, which has a history in the Western literary and philosophic understandings of humor. It is often seen as the representation of allegedly ›inferior people‹ (Colletta 2003, 18). However, it also signifies powerlessness, and although ›the fook appears as a figure who seems not to know, they apparently know something (other). ›The fook seems to be wise in a naïve, not-knowing way – which mediately also endows them with a kind of indirect authority and power.

Usually in dramatical plays an *aside* is a device in which the audience is enabled to hear a thought or an inner monolog of a character – the character speaks aloud as if speaking to itself – and in which the point may be ›aside the point‹ (Roof 2018, 49 f.), which is regularly the case with humor. Here, it is the silence in which Samad's thoughts are laid out for all to hear that evokes an *aside*. A humorous tone is emphasized by the suggestion that no one is really interested in hearing Samad speak, who speaks nevertheless, and that Archie, who actually is interested in what Samad has to say, tries to suppress his desire to listen to him. Archie *wants* to listen to Samad. Archie's wish softens the harsh humor, enhances suspense, and gives a warm trait to the passage. The narrator's *aside*, an implicit address, has a splitting effect, signifying the presence of diverse subjectivities in the text and beyond the text. In addition to the figures and the voice of the narrator, there seems to be an ›implied author‹ involved in the composition of the scenery, as well as an ›implied audience‹. The ›audience‹ is implicated in the descriptive address of the narrator and is ›created‹ in the form of a trace in the text. The describing *aside* of the narrator establishes a close relationship between the narrator and the ›implied audience‹. A secret is shared, in this way, between the narrator and an evoked

too, gets its humorous sting as their role appears flawed. Here, ›war‹ seems to be different from what it should be: a brutal and bloody exchange of fire and weaponry, of ›manhood‹, ›masculinity‹, and camaraderie. In such a sense ›proper‹, ›war‹ is associated with ideas of nationalism, patriotism, ›action‹, ›heroism‹, and ›guardianship‹. In the economy of ›war‹, power seems to transcend itself, exploiting its own discourses, by misusing images of masculinity and male bodies and minds. *Men* seem *obligated* to protect a family, a ›nation‹, ›history‹ (›culture‹, ›religion‹, and so forth) – a legitimation and in fact a machinery for all possible kinds of violence. In the passage this is discernible, critically, in the expression ›wasted youth‹. The ›war‹ in the *backstage* where Archie and Samad are placed does happen, but apparently without ›heroism‹. It is incongruent with idealized images. It appears in the guise of its almost buffoonish aftereffects: ›[T]o avoid civil war in the mountains‹, to pick their way through the glazed eyes of dead statistics‹, ›to make sure the roads of communication stretching from one end of hell to the other were fully communicable‹. This ›war‹ has more to do with forms of care and service – practices that are usually overlooked and made invisible. These are not just considered effeminate activities but activities largely associated with femininity, social class, the outcast. Somewhere in-between the lines of ›war‹ and the novel, the passage seems to imply that a swindle is taking place, and the ›implied audience‹ must decide for themselves, where this is the case, and must also negotiate what ›heroism‹ may mean. Although it presupposes sacrifice and a willingness to sacrifice, *service*, clearing the way so that ›war‹ can proceed smoothly, is certainly not understood as being ›heroic‹ but as a task that *must be done* so that the (classicized, gendered, and racialized) subtext of the phallogocentric theater of ›war‹ for the ›real‹ heros of the ›war‹ can go on. The humor of the passage mirrors a sentiment that Bakhtin would probably have called ›the falsity of conventional pathos‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 402). It results from the incongruity between the dominant discursive understanding of ›war‹ and the way it *appears* to Archie and Samad in its ›reality‹ and that, at the same time, through the aside, addresses an ›implied audience‹, signaling both, the gap between the pathos in discourse and the discourse of pathos as well as a meditative space to reflect on the logics that open up in this gap between the two possibilities of understanding. These meanings of the aside are underscored by Samad's almost desperate and also maybe ashamed, statement ›[t]his is not war‹ and the narrator's empathetic supportive observations of these emotive words, created by the word ›quietly‹: ›This is not war, Samad had said quietly‹. The passage is not only deconstructive regarding images of ›war‹, it also suggests a critique of phallogocentric values and effects. The overlapping of the semantic meanings can be seen, with Bakhtin, as a strategy of ›prose narration‹ to make conventionalized social meanings sound strange, in order to understand their ›false pathos‹. ›[T]he novel teaches prose intelligence, prose wisdom‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 404).

The tranquility of the situation in the *backstage* of ›war‹ seems like an ineffectual mechanical display, evoking Bergson's comical automatism, which is further emphasized by Archie's automated adherence to instructions that are incoherent, incongruous, with the dull situation in which the task seems obsolete. Bergson, speaking from within European modernism, links humor in the figuration of foolish behavior and its social functions to the ›automatism of acquired habits‹, an inability of individuals to adapt to changed circumstances (Bergson 1911, 8 b). For Bergson this ›mechanical inelasticity‹ is humor-

ated through the focus on Samad and the direct and indirect discourse that zoom in and out around the character, Samad can also be imagined in a state of mourning; instances of showing and telling thus go hand in hand. The passage conveys both meanings and both effects: It is ironically humorous with regard to the incongruent image of ›war‹ and its ›reality‹, and it is somber with regard to Samad's grief and his realization that he does not conform to the image of the hero. Between these divergent meanings of the produced *affective humor*, a void emerges as a space for meditations in which the (different) meanings can be further thought through.

There are three dimensions of humor that characterize the aside in this scene: the theatricality of the aside that establishes a secret audience, a secret that is lost (because it is spoken aloud) and yet archived in the sad utterance, and the characters who seem unaware of themselves. These three dimensions of the aside are affective in two senses: on a formal level, the aside evokes various affective traits, joy, pleasure, secrecy, sympathy; on a rhetorical and performative level – since the aside is spoken (told) and, in the instance of its telling, also performed, the aside is a *movere-docere*-dynamic, it moves affectively, instructing and orienting the text towards specific meanings. In this sense of untying fixed meanings, making them perceivable and unsettling their ground, the aside is also a setting to work of deconstruction in which the order of signification is altered. It cuts through perceived perceptions. This *parabasic* cut comes at the same time with a payoff. On the one hand, there is the playful pleasure resulting from describing the scene, and on the other hand, there is the setting to work of nonconformist meanings. These meanings open up presuppositions and destabilize their normalization by revealing embedded or tabooed implications in discourse. Humor appears as a form of pleasure that transcends the moment of its uttering in a suspenseful way. The aside enables something beyond itself. Moreover, another form of ›foolishness‹ is shown as well, which is not directly related to naivety as in the case of Archie, but to (mainstream understandings of) education. *Foolishness*, naivety, is also linked to (institutionalized) education. The passage places Samad between his portrayal of ›war‹ as an instance of class-specific masculinist heroic images of bravery and competence, and the ›reality‹ in which he appears to be neither. Bound up with this heroic-figuration of ›war‹ is also Samad's desire and expectations with reference to a specific class-oriented heroic subjectivity that is expressed in his claim to belong to another, higher army rank, which enhances empathically Samad's naivety to rely on ›authoritative‹, nationlistic discourses and shows tragically the failure of subjectivity regulated by mainstream discourse, and a singular ›mind‹ and ›life‹.

The above passage also allots instances of subjectivity within colonialism and questions, at the same time, the subject-positions engendered by colonial discourse. It is within this gap, between the performance of the subject-positions, the performative of subjectivity, the singularity of a ›mind‹ and *Leib* as well as the signifiers that determine them that *affective humor* ensues in the passage and its unfolding. Subjectivity within the context of the Second World War and in the passage is signaled through the characters' names ›Archie‹ (*white* British related to British nation) and ›Samad‹ (Person of Color related to British empire). The juxtaposition of the two English and Indian names touch upon colonial history and the different subject-positions it has enabled. What gives it a comic, humorous tone is the unusual *use* of the names that mark an aberration, an incongruency with regard to the representation of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹. *Archie* and *Samad*,

next to each other, like ›Tim and Anton‹, signal that the names are of equal importance and value (although locked up in the tank, in the middle of the road to nowhere – or because of that?). ›Samad‹ thus does not signify the other of the (European) self in the margins of ›Archie's‹ image as the superior, supposedly *knowing* and capable subject of empire. Rather, both characters are depicted as differently *foolish* in the way they *act* or are *fooled*, in the way they are acted upon, as representations of the discourses that have ›made‹ them. The names, in this order, thus convey a counter-order of dominant, authoritative discourses. Both names furthermore are shifted at the same time from the center of their contexts ›proper‹, as it were: The ›Indian‹ name ›Samad Iqbal‹ is not just (another) ›Indian‹, Hindi, and Hindu name along the usual ways in which ›the Jewel of empire‹ is homogenized and generalized. ›Samad Iqbal‹ signals a Muslim *Bengali* name. So while Samad regards himself as Bengali, a designation that no one can seemingly differentiate, the name also mocks, with a weeping eye, the cuts and scars of other kinds of *imagined geographies*, the painful separating ›geographs‹ of so-called decoloniality in the design of the earth (– and could these not be also read as a (depressing) success-process of colonialism?) Samad's ›origins‹, *routes*, and connection to ›India‹ is at least a theme that is played on throughout the novel.

›Archie's difference from ›the nation proper‹ is indicated by his different attitude towards ›Samad‹. Archie cannot really ignore Samad the way the others do and ›Archie‹ as a *white* British (superior) subject, is supposed to do; ›Archie‹ somehow, without knowing why, wants to listen to Samad. The humor here is engendered through Archie's sociopolitical standing within a discourse that allows him to act out the performance of a superior subject-position, and by a ›secret‹, ›unofficial‹, inner attitude that guides Archie to act differently and that is expressed in the narrator report, which informs us about Archie's wish *to listen*. But again, the humorous paradox of Archie's behavior that the narrator describes does not laugh at Archie. It rather underscores Archie's inner turmoil and his ›individuality‹, ›singularity‹, and resistance to discourse. Thus its funny underpinning is also accompanied by an aquiver, empathetic sense that heightens expectations of something different that seems to take place as well. Its humor then alludes to different things that are about to happen at once. The performativity of Archie's paradox affectivity opens up a gap and alludes to a rapture in colonial discourse's placements of Archie and Samad as well as in the humor towards them. Archie acts deliberately, distancing himself from the ›authoritative‹ discourse. As a result, Archie cannot only be seen as the ›fook‹ he initially appeared to be, but also as an agent who acts out of an inner impulse, in disagreement with his prepared and alleged discursive subject-position. *Listening* is a signifier in the metonymic chain of ›importance‹ and ›love‹. One listens to the news, and one listens to one's friend. The verb represents notions of concern and attachment. One listens to what *touches* one – *somehow*. The instance of touch signals the conjunction of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It is a moment by which one's actions are directed in specific ways beyond authoritative external control in the (discursive) work of humor. This internal turmoil, Archie's desire to listen to Samad, on the one hand, and the sociopolitical and discursive place in the ›British empire‹ reserved for Archie as a subject-position of superiority, on the other hand, is indicated by Archie's attempt to clinch to the role assigned to him in discourse ›fiercely and resolutely‹. But Archie resists playing the role assigned to him by the subject-position of colonial discourse. Rather he is

inclined to regard Samad as a singular ›speaking human being‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 332) and *wants* to listen to him despite and instead of the dominant discourse's offer of a superior position. Archie *acts* differently. He does not laugh at Samad and does not consider his comrade's interjections as odd. The desire to *listen* within the humorous display signals an affective, emotive attitude on Archie's side. The narrator's close distance in the free direct style, engendered through the deixis ›somehow‹ and the verbs ›wanted‹ and ›listen‹, on the one hand, captures this process of resisting mainstream discourse, and on the other hand, leaves enough space for Archie to act without an absolute ›knowledge‹ of the narrator and beyond their power that could verify and explain him (to an ›implied audience‹). Archie, in this way, is put in the forefront of the narration, which shelters him from being ridiculed. He can be seen as a deliberately acting ›person‹.

The difference between the two different subject-positions, beyond their names, is stressed, firstly, by Archie's cumbersome pronunciation of the name Iqball as ›Ick-Ball‹. The throatal sound of the Arabic letter *qāf* (ق) transcribed through *q* in ›Iqball‹, is foreign to Archie (although Samad is fluent in English . . .). Archie fails to pronounce it and is unaware of it. Instead Samad's name, in Archie's pronunciation, becomes an exclamation of disgust, *ick!*, and a *ball* – images that oscillate between a plaything and a party, something ›the British‹ can shoot or dance at. All three meanings show the dimensions of un/pleasure that are bound to the exoticized figure of the other, that the ›implied author‹, behind the narrator's shoulders, seems to be well informed about and slips in here to engender an almost impalpable sense of humor (*some people* in an ›implied audience‹, may note it though ;-)). Secondly, it is emphasized by the *fact* that the other men in the tank, a very small space, rigorously keep ignoring Samad.

Archie's and Samad's racialized difference is, moreover, alluded to through a sociopolitical hierarchy and its effects. Samad seems different (from . . .) because he uses another ›language‹, terms (›mullah‹, ›sepoy‹) that are, willingly or unwillingly, not recognized by the others (this is not the way ›one‹ speaks). From a *white* perspective Samad does not play by the rules. Samad touches and pulls at a set code of language use that is deemed as untouchable and superior. He does not seem to have authority over them either Samad does not recognize them or does not care about them (or both). They are not *his* ›rules‹ and ›laws‹ of touch. This un-*knowing* plays with the decoding signification-normalcy of a ›proper‹ *white* subject-position to whom these words sound unintelligible, making ›Samad‹ as a ›speaking subject‹ seem funny, odd, unserious, so that ignoring Samad *seems* justified. He does not belong. And again, this ›knowledge‹ alludes to the mark of an ›implied author‹ who is aware of the ways in which the other is homogenized and generated in colonial discourse, and who is also aware of the ignorance this produces in the *white* mainstream understanding of the self and its alleged other – the harmful side of depicting difference.

It is in the indication of racism in the humorous passage on Samad, however, where affectivity invades the humorous display. The racist attitude towards Samad is not presented as a taken-for-granted-normalized behavior, but shown in its ›weirdness‹, its oddity, which makes it also possible not to perceive Samad as the clown of the group and to sense some kind of soft empathy for him. What can be felt behind this invoked signification in the humorous display of the narrator regarding Samad's exposure to the others is the tragedy of racism that differentiates people, human beings, into differ-

ently evaluated (and hierarchized) ›groups‹ of people. Samad escapes such a flattened image, because he occupies not only a central role in the novel, but also because he can speak for himself, his ›voice‹ is heard, loud and clear, in direct speech. Moreover, an ›implied audience‹ is informed by the narrator about some kind of bond that is about to ensue between Archie and Samad, generated through a close distance to Archie. The narrator indicates that Archie is *somehow* interested in what Samad wants to say. This ›somehow‹ is a deixis that carries four functions: ›Somehow‹ constitutes a pause in the straightforward report of the narrator, it makes space for an affective trait that comes up in the middle of the unresolved different discursive meanings that are gathered together here (colonial discourse/mainstream, national language, Archie and the others as placeholders of this language, Samad as the speaking other, Samad as decolonial discourse/mainstream language, presumably by an ›implied author‹ who can distinguish all these meanings; this opens the possibility for other meanings at the limits of different discourses and beyond them. Furthermore, ›somehow‹ signals a ›varied *play with the boundaries of speech types*, languages and belief systems‹, which Bakhtin regards as »one most fundamental aspect of comic style« (Bakhtin 2014, 308; emphasis in the text). As a placeholder of a sentiment, ›somehow‹ marks, finally, the possibility of compassion. Despite colonial discourse and its restraints, Archie feels ›somehow‹ *called upon* to listen. Archie's desire is skewed by what he *is expected* to do, but he remains attracted to what Samad wants to say. This affective inclination also limits the portrayal of both figures as mere ›fools‹ in the sense of dumb, unintelligent, unknowing figures. It functions like a signpost that stages the characters as two ›speaking human beings‹ *through* and *beyond* mainstream discourse. ›Somehow‹ adds depth to the scene and introduces a touching, gripping tone of solemnity to the humorous performativity of the passage, which in turn *asks for* listening and attention, relegating Archie's desire ›somehow‹ *to listen* to a level of alertness in the text and the possible attentiveness of an ›implied audience‹. Embedded in this performance is the performative dialogue of Archie and Samad, in the directive of *an also somehow knowing* ›implied author‹, as it were, which places the narrator as the narrative instance, the camera lens, in close proximity to the character's intersubjective relationship, to what is going on beyond the spoken words of Archie, of Samad, and the narrator's humorous play. The narrator's humorous tone that depicts a common image of ›Samad‹ as the strange colonized other is thus enriched by an allusion to something beyond this weird image. Samad's direct speech disrupts the colonial discourse, as does Archie's desire *to listen*. Not only does Samad speak for himself, but he also does not seem in the least intimidated by being apparently ignored by his *white* comrades. As Samad can speak, he does not repeat biased discursive images of the other and does not represent the inferior other, but a reference to another ›reality‹ outside the rigidity of imperial discourse. It is a reference to decolonial discourse within the bigger picture to which the story alludes and in which this other is ›a self‹ with an *other* self-image and world image. Samad does not perceive himself as other or ›foreign‹, but rather regards himself in fact as superior, potentially even looks down at the others in the group (›I am an officer!‹). He sees himself as part of ›a world‹ that comprises both the ›East‹, as the use of the hybrid Hindi words indicate as well as the ›West‹ as he places himself not outside of empire or in the ›East‹ or ›West‹ but literally amid of empire's most powerful *forces*: the ›Royal Airborne Force, shelling from high!‹. Hybridity, invoked in the passage, does

not signify a ›third space‹ in Homi K. Bhabha's sense, but as an outcome of (historical) circumstances that comprises both, the ›East‹ as well as the ›West‹, in *one* ›speaking person‹. It thus is a form of Bakhtinian hybridity that does not mean a ›mixing up‹ in the configuration of empire but the unimpeded and interrelated dynamic co-existence of different languages and ›cultures‹ within *one* ›self‹. This insight into ›Samad's‹ subjectivity and the responses it gets within a *white* British context can be seen as the footprint, the trace and instance of the ›real author‹ somewhere behind the novel. It hints at an ›implied author‹ who at least must *know something* about the experientiality of such postcolonial textualities and their effects in the formation of subjectivity and thus about a cultural subtext, about the effects of decolonial discourse at the borders of mainstream discourses and images. The playful humorous sentiment of the passage also derives from such an instance of *knowing* that informs the not-knowing observing narrator and a possible ›implied audience‹. This ›knowledge‹ responds to a double movement: It is an analysis of the mainstream/colonial discourse while at the same time, deconstructing it. Its deconstructive trait is inherent in the play between the iteration of the image of ›Samad‹ within colonial discourse; ›Samad‹ is represented as if he was the (stereotyped) other. He acts differently by using another language and by speaking in a way that is perceived as unusual, ›un-British‹ ›un-proper‹. However, the stereotype is only partially repeated, as Samad can speak for himself and is not just talked about. The humor also emanates from the incongruity between the *white* British figures' understanding of Samad, Samad's self-understanding, and the invocation of an ›audience‹, whom the narrator, informed by an ›implied author‹, lets in on the secrecy of the scene. The humor of the scene therefore involves *telling* as well as *showing* instances in the performance of the *act of narration* and in the *performative acting* of the characters.

Yet the narrative text is not satisfied with the inversion of biases and strives to a completion of its deconstructive movement, if there can be any. Samad's words, too, are fractured in the passage and their centralizing effects infringed upon; consequently, Samad is neither heroized nor romanticized by the anti-stereotypical evocation of the other, but, again, appears as yet another singular ›speaking human being‹ full of complex forms of inconsistencies and shortcomings: Samad also distinguishes himself from others by class based-dominance and colonial hierarchies. These are signaled at by ›education‹ and by the effects of colonialism's discourse of divide-and-rule (›I mean, I am educated. I am trained‹; ›Not some mullah, some sepoy, wearing out my chappals in hard service‹). The humor that marks his ›individuality‹ and singularity as a ›speaking human being‹ at the same time also marks the sense of superiority that is part of mainstream/colonial discourse on education as well as being different societal evaluations marked (not only) by colonialism's effects. Samad's humorous tone, by invoking an other within a sense of superiority, is impregnated by an affective overtone that can evoke not only pleasure but also ›shame‹ as an other is laughed at. This spares ›Samad‹ from being captured within benevolent colonial images. The humor of superiority thus comes at the price of the possibility of an unpleasant sensibility at the ›end‹ of the humorous display and its ›laughter‹. It makes it more complex and something to be worked through beyond the immediacy of the humorous presentation. Samad's utterance is like a double bind. The tone of his dismissive remark is comedic as well as tragic, it is a play of superiority at the cost of ›injustice‹ towards an other. The affectivity of *humor*, thus, not only dialogizes, fractures,

mainstream discourses and images. It also dialogizes, fractures, and explodes itself: »The comic event is that which disrupts itself as the condition of its operation« (Roof 2018, 18). The meaning that is constructed through it is also obliterated within it, so that no utterance remains as a validated, confident ›truth‹.

The naming of Samad next to Archie, too, symbolizes an *aside* insofar as it evokes the (still effective) complex set of colonialism and its relationalities. It is an *aside from* out of mainstream, authoritative, and institutionalized colonial discourses. The character of Samad can be seen as a figure of an *aside from* as he symbolizes being (put) *aside from* the center that is Britishness as well as *aside from* the notion of a (qualified) main protagonist in a British novel. Yet it is these *asides from* through which ›Britishness‹ and the norms that give it credibility on a discursive as well as a materialized institutionalized level, and which are often concealed, are put in the foreground. Colonial discourse and its symbolic order appear disrupted, contrary to the norms that rule in the quiet. Both *asides* thereby have the function of a meticulous analysis of signifiers in a direct and immediate manner »without the imagined benefit of distance« (Roof 2018, 12). The performative humor that permeates their presentation is an analytical critique of supremacist and mainstream discourses in a present (and a presentable) form. In this sense, these narrative *asides* are also *performative besides* in Sedgwick's sense that play with the signifying practices in discourse, exploiting them and their validness.

These complex relations, at least in the moment of presentation, »are impossible to parse because their parsing produces more things to parse. The comic always explores infinitely and endlessly all directions« (Roof 2018, 12). What Judith Roof alludes to is the processual working of humor that indicates an opening beyond its allusions. Here, it is founded on the grotesque asymmetry that is brought about by colonialism and the concept of ›race‹: Archie and Samad may be soldiers of the same power and should be seen as equals yet it is quite clear that they are not. While Archie's *white* Britishness seems ›normal‹, unchallenged, it becomes fragile when it is paralleled with Samad's position to Britishness who is mentioned next to him as a soldier in and of the ›British empire‹, and further as a protagonist with the same relevance. The figure of Samad as an *aside (from)* restructures and resignifies images of ›the self‹ and the other. The other does not symbolize an array of inferiorized, romanticized, or exoticized otherness, but rather equity in terms of validity, representation, oddity, and fallibility. There is already this resignified incongruity that the novel creates through its two main entities from which its humor ensues. Furthermore, if we take Freud's insight into account and characterize the humorous instance as one that brings to light something that is hidden, repressed, and concealed, we can conclude that it is the repressed memory of colonialism and its effects that is condensed and concealed in the image of the British soldiers of World War II (who could be named ›Archie‹ and ›Samad‹), ostensibly English and ostensibly non-English names that are narrated (signaled by names) and that, in turn, signal specific characteristics, *white* figures and non-*white* figures – who are shown and can be seen side by side. The concealed hierarchy that ›race‹ signifies and its displacement in discourse, conspicuous by its absence and referenced and normalized by stereotypical images, is indicated in the novel by the two figures that are marked by it and who mark the discourse outside and inside the diegesis – but in unexpected ways. This mechanism of discursive coloniality is unconcealed in the reiterated *presence-absence* of stereotyped images and

discursive references. It is incongruous with regard to the organizing effect of ›race‹ in older, canonized texts. A symbolic order as an effect of colonialism, or as an order of its subsequent coloniality, is subtly revealed in its negativity, its fundamental *abnormality*. Freud's ›joke‹-work, its laborious effect, can be understood in a two-dimensional way. It encompasses not only the techniques on the part of ›the person‹ telling a ›joke‹, or if we take a novel, of a character, a narrator or an ›implied author‹ within the work of the rhetoric of humor, the linguistic and signifying techniques of humor. It must also comprise the part of humor that occurs at its end, and also comprise an addressee, an ›implied audience‹: The humorous performative must be recognized and *assigned* in a specific way in order to work. Humor in the invocation of Archie and Samad as British soldiers in World War II arises from instances of congruency as well as incongruency, which are not only inherent in the humorous paralleling of the figures per se, but in the address of and the relation to an ›implied audience‹ that is evoked in the narrative. While the humorous display may be felt as uncanny to one addressed ›implied reader‹, it may be felt as soothing to another ›implied reader‹ – depending on the dominant and marginalized discourses and subjectivities that the humor triggers and ›sends out‹ and which can or cannot be received. The ambiguity of humor also unleashes a mixed array of affectivity, encompassing ›shame‹ as well as joy, mourning as well as relief. All these ›affective traits‹ may exist next to each other and may be felt in different doses (by an unequal and diverse ›implied audience‹). This affective side of humor is not spelled out straightforwardly. It rather has the form of an ›affective labor‹ (Ngai 2012) that must be worked out within and beyond the presence of the humorous performative. It is part of the discourses that are triggered and exploded in the humorous display of signification. The humorous insight ›just‹ opens up and unpacks meanings, or, as we will see in the course of the reading, a complexity of meanings, but it ›just‹ lays there to be *grasped* (*with the hands, the heart, as an insight*) (or not *grasped*). The humorous performative, unlike its readings, also this one, entails a playful manner (a deconstruction) that does not enforce an other meaning but that, through its many-dimensional un-concealments, can be understood as a gesture of opening up meanings, and of suggestions that go beyond the immediate meaning of the humorous. It suggests the possibility of another, to come to a or forgotten understanding that is not *pregiven* but has to be worked out within and outside of the text. The humorous, then, opens up meaning in an untimely way, touching the past, the present as well as the future, without sticking to any of its time-bound understandings. The passer-by (the implied, non-implied in the text) can take it or leave it. The idea of address, whether we think it as an aside, an ›implied audience‹, an unintentional sender or receiver in a Deridian sense, or as the materiality of a book and its economy, implies at least *an other* as a potential receiver or as someone who feels they are receiving something, or who receives something anyway. This instance of sending out and addressing/receiving implicates a space of relationality. *Affective humor* works on different dimensions: It is performative, invokes the fabric of affectivity, is laborious, opens up meanings, and is relational. It is thus affective in two senses: It invokes different instances of affectivity and it is an affecting element of/in writing/performance, based on the meanings and effects of historically conditioned contexts. In *White Teeth* these trigger the story of an equalized-unequal friendship that explores and further develops the allusion of an amity between ›Archie‹ and ›Samad‹.

On the level of the story, thus *White Teeth* can be read as bringing these two subjectivities together in a frame that reflects historically acquired meanings and sociopolitical and symbolic orders, while at the same time fracturing and shifting them. The experientiality of the characters' encounter is not only grounded within the diegesis, the story-world, but also outside of it. *Outside* of it, insofar, as it indulges in the representational semiotics of discursive formations, and insofar as the two *forms* of textuality, the text of fiction, on the one hand, and the text of historical events, on the other hand, are linked.²⁰ This referentiality to historical events in the novel establishes a complex and affectively difficult, ambiguous humorous work. It pervades and drives the entire novel. At the beginning of this chapter, the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator again begins their report with an indirect address that implicates a division in their ›speech-/description; it refers to a speaking/showing narrator and a listening/observing ›audience‹. This division in the narrator's ›speech‹ accommodates an instance of mediation in the narrator's movement between telling and showing and an ›implied audience's‹ faculty to decode and to read what is told and shown by the narrator: On the one hand, the characters, and, on the other hand, also the insertion of an ›implied author‹ as a meta-discursive level of evaluation from a more ›real‹ world.

The chapter starts in the form of an address, presupposing and approaching an ›implied audience‹. It begins with the jocular expression »A propos«. The jocular trait arises from the playful inclination of the expression that addresses an other in the text, a ›you know what‹ and a ›besides, do you know‹ out of the text. ›A propos‹ indicates *someone else*, someone one is already talking to and who is again evoked as a receiver of the story told. ›A propos‹ also engenders a space, a stage, and a space behind or close to the stage, from which someone talks to someone else or to others about the stage on which the story takes place. This address-like performative utterance with which the chapter begins and which introduces the beginning of Archie's and Samad's encounter and *friendship*, on the one hand, reads like the musings of a stage director or an off-voice outside the scenery of the narrative discourse, alluding to an ›implied author‹ somewhere in the shadows of the narrative. On the other hand, as it, at the same time, depicts the characters and speaks within the text, it evokes the voice of the narrator. The address is thus divided, at once alluding to a meta-level of narration as well as to the narrative discourse. It is built on a former uttered direct speech of one of the characters, namely Samad's wife, Alsana:

»A propos: it's all very well, this instruction of Alsana's to look at the thing close up; to look at it dead-straight between the eyes; an unflinching and honest stare, a meticulous inspection that would go beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow, beyond the marrow to the root – but the question is how far back do you want? How far will *do*? The old American question: what do you want – *blood*? Most probably more than blood is required: whispered asides; lost conversations; medals and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates. Back, back, *back*. Well, all right, then. Back to Archie spit-clean, pink-faced and polished, looking

20 Regarding ›fact‹ and ›fiction‹ in narratives see Monika Fludernik (2015); Fludernik especially draws on the definition, parallels, and distinctions of factual and fictional writing.

just old enough at seventeen to fool the men from the medical board with their pencils and their measuring tape. Back to Samad, two years older and the warm colour of bread. Back to the day when they were first assigned to each other, Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over here now, soldier!) and Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move it), the day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners. He stared. They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper sailing-boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinched toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But Archie couldn't help but stare. And Samad put up with it, waited and waited for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank, hot and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to Archie's relentless gaze, he had putted-up-with as much as his hot-head ever could put up with anything.« (Smith 2000, 83)

With ›a propos‹, Alsana's utterance is split in such a way that it frames different interleaved spaces, which open unto a square, a stage, alluding, in an inner back part to an ›implied author‹, and in the next to an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator who looks at the figures in the middle of the square, and to an ›implied audience‹ that watches the acting figures from the other, the front side. This nesting space can also be imagined as circular and still interleaved, with an implicated audience around it. While the title as a paratext and the tendency of an ›implied author‹ can be seen as traces of a meta-discourse entering the novel, the unwritten space in which the narrative discourse takes place in its relation to the narrator, the characters, and an ›implied audience‹ can be regarded as the stage on which the story unfolds. The bifurcated address, then, is aimed at different narrative levels of the story. It ties together historical, mainstream discourse and the narrative discourse. It links fact and fiction and engenders a reality effect by interconnecting them within the narrative discourse. This ›third space‹, between fact and fiction, functions as the performative space in the making in which the figures can intervene. In this way, the novel problematizes, touches upon, historical omissions and other sites of history that could not find their way into mainstream historiographical discourse.²¹ The narrator's language is charged with humorous meanings that create a dynamic tension between what they allude to and what an ›implied audience‹ might understand, so that a *backdoor*, the infinity of dialogicity is opened up, from which also suspense arises.

The narrator also narrows the distance to Alsana, taking her voice seriously and giving more flesh to the illusion of her as a ›real‹ figure, a ›speaking human being‹. Within this nested performance the narrator muses along the meanings of ›origins‹, ›truth‹, and ›purity‹ by playing, on the one hand, with Alsana's ›instruction‹ to look ›close up‹ at something, to try to see something as it is, and by the chapter's title, on the other hand, that invokes the word ›teeth‹ and ›root canal‹ as quite short and short-lived enterprises, so that looking close up on a meta-discursive level is doubted as an endeavor to find some ›origins‹, implicitly suggesting that it might lead to a search in vain. Alsana looks close

21 This is, for example, the case with the British Army and its colonial subjects, which were part of it and fought for it. Cf. Foster (2005); Jeffreys/Rose (2012); Bourne (2012); Perfect (2016); Thompson (2024).

up at something to gain insight regarding its ›nature‹, ›essence‹, or ›being‹. The narrator's proclamation questions, at the same time, whether the full presence, some ›truth‹, can be detectable at all, no matter how close one looks at something. ›Beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow‹, ›beyond the narrow to the root‹ can be read as metaphorical expressions that allude to ›meaning-construction‹. ›Teeth‹ as a bodily part serves not only as a synecdoche for the body, taken up repeatedly throughout the novel, as discussed but can be regarded as a reference to the illusion of both fact and fiction, to history as well as to story and to the unreliability of a sign and an image per se that seem to be undone in infinite marks, without an essence or inner meaning. If the sentence is read as a metaphor for ›teeth‹ and for the construction of meaning, ›teeth‹ can be considered as alluding to a process of selection and meaning endowment. Here the term links narrativity (fictional and factual, story and history) and the inclination of ›truth‹ and ›untruth‹ to the materiality of the body. By invoking the materiality of the body, discourse is taken from a level of abstraction to the level of matter. Alsana's utterance forms a background to the reflections about any given ›truth‹ that would be verifiable. Its doubtful inclination is built on an idiom that bifurcates and ironizes an authoritative claim, and that concomitantly is echoed as an authoritative, other superior claim that inferiorizes the first one. While the idiom ›it's all very well‹ doubles and dialogizes Alsana's utterance, its mechanism here is not bottom up but rather seems to belong to a (patronizing) voice outside the narrative discourse and even outside the narrator's reach. It reads like a parody of a authoritative statement in court, whereby the voice uttering it, indicated through the idiom, is judging Alsana's statement. The ironizing and inferiorizing tone is evoked by the words ›Alsana's instruction‹ in juxtaposition with the idiom ›its all very well‹. This is done again in the form of an hyperbolic exaggeration of the verb *to look*, ›to look at it dead-straight between the eyes‹, giving it an overstated explanation that mocks its ›truth‹-content. The increasing hyperbole not only calls into question the ›presence‹, ›truth‹, and ›authenticity‹ of *things* and of *the other* as they apparently present themselves to us; the increasing hyperbolic rhetoric and humorous tone of the passage are used to link the question of the other and of ›being‹ to the question of ›essence‹, ›truth‹, and ›race‹ as hollow notions without any material essence. The judging voice, it can be inferred, does not inferiorize Alsana's ›instruction‹ to ›look at the thing close up‹ per se but rather transfers it to another thematical field. It scrutinizes its generality and validity with regard to the question of ›truth‹, ›origins‹, and ›essence‹. At the same time, linking the question of ›truth‹ and ›being‹ to ›race‹ also implicates how much ›race‹ *matters* in (postcolonial) contemporary perceptions. The passage's rhetoric in its addressing form directly confronts an ›implied audience‹, in whose perception ›race‹ and *things* that apparently show themselves ›to be‹ as they ›are‹, may matter and are put into question. By the implication of the hyperbolic humorous rhetoric, on the one hand, and the serious matter it raises, on the other hand, the passage also aims at affecting an ›implied audience‹. The passage's style of address and utterance is humorous as well as thought-provoking. The evaluative statement that plays at the border of the meanings of fiction/›reality‹ within a fictional text is a critique of unquestioning understandings as *mis(-sed)* understandings. It raises the very ›real‹, historically driven and sociopolitical important, and often concealed discourse of ›race‹ evoked through the metonymic descriptive verticality of a tooth as a bodily part. These metonymies can be seen as synecdoches for the racialized body, which in turn is

inscribed by the empty and yet, with regard to its ramifications, grave codes of racism as an everyday practice. This is also implied by its juxtaposition with ›blood‹. ›Blood‹ is another synecdoche for the materiality of the body within its discursive manifestation and a metonym for the colonial concept of ›race‹. It is done by a humorous rhetorical address, presuming an addressee in the ›implied audience‹ whom it seems to directly ask: ›What do *you* want?‹ – indicating that racialization is also a question of (political) attitude that one can choose to adhere to or disregard. The rhetorical question is humorous, first, through the form of the question. The question parodies a threat as an instance of power. Through the parody, power is, in this way, rendered as if it was performed by the inferiorized other, is questioned and mocked from a position of powerlessness, which in this way shows also its other power, the power of assumed ›weakness‹. The speaking voice that seems to overarch the observing narrator's voice, possibly that of an ›implied author‹, is close to the threatened other and well-informed of the image and discourse that engulfs it. The rendition of the threat by parody restores the other's subjectivity and sovereignty, whilst teasing and humbling the threatening one. Its parody contains a seductive and disarming undercurrent and comes with the payoff of ›entertainment‹ and pleasure. Its pleasure again ensures that the inherent critique of the parody is not taken as an offense. The ensuing humor rather plays with the efficacy of the menace and mimes the effects of its affectivity, of fury, as a zany and unjustified part of the utterance rather than of ›the person‹ or subject that threatens. The ›laughter‹, or at least pleasure, that it may engender is shifted to the unconscious and affective site of the thread and its ›general‹, ›common‹ feature. In this way, the derision comes as an insight about the unconscious affectivity of mechanisms of power as well as anger and has an emollient effect.

It implies an incongruous comparison that rests on an odd counterpart. ›More than blood‹ has the function of a humorous and multilayered, suspensive deictic unit. It contains the indication of the concept of ›race‹ as well as its meanings and effects. The expression gives meaning to the whole passage as well as to the unequal *friendship* that is explained and depicted later on in this chapter. With ›[m]ore than blood‹, the concept of ›race‹ is delinked from a naturalized, biologized understanding (›blood‹) and juxtaposed and transferred to its meanings in the production of discourse and ›culture‹ within a historical process. ›Blood‹, an essential bodily fluid that signifies ›nature‹, a ›natural‹ ›biological, ›self-evident‹ phenomenon that has also naturalized ›race‹ as ›natural‹ and ›given‹, is revealed within its metonymic signification and ridiculed in the passage. By the allusion to dominant and defunct discourses, ›blood‹ is linked to cultural productions (›medals and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates‹). The metaphor of ›blood‹ also signifies the way the event and process of (colonial) history have shaped discourse with all its material effects and have given meaning to subjectivity and (post-)modernity in the (national) understandings of self and other.

Implicitly the passage also questions whether there can exist any ›given‹, self-evident meaning, in the way history and historical artefacts are archived. This is indicated in the implication of any historicizing as an *active, interfering act* of archiving and selection that determines what is stored (›yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates‹), as well as in the construction of ›the nation‹ and its materialized and institutionalized signifiers (›medals and photographs; lists and certificates‹).

The payoff, therefore, not only lies in the humorous pleasure, but also in learning: we gain insight about the effects of power on the self, on the other, and historical ›reality‹, which are also part of an ›implied audience's‹ subjective and subject-related experiences within instances of non-knowledge and power-lessness. The ridiculing of power thus also shows another form of power from ›below‹ and produces a space of balance in which exchange and dialogicity seem attainable beyond discourse.

Furthermore, the passage gets its humorous underpinning by correlating a serious question (that of ›race‹) with a popular image (of the U.S.-American colonial history), whereby this U.S. popular image of brute and masculinist settler colonialism that signifies *white* US-American cis-masculinity is also mocked. Moreover, an addressed other is implicated in connection with the question of desire (what do you *want*?). Desire, the will to gain insight and the construction of subjects (the self and the other) are, in this way, inextricably knotted together as *one* activity within (colonial) encounter and ›knowledge‹ production. The passage's humorous rhetoric thus plays by implication on the edge of other significations that of violence, of an image of U.S.-American history as the ›Wild West‹, of racism, and at the same time shows how much racism, historical violence and dominant popular culture are interrelated.

In its manifold humorous allusions, the passage has an ›explosive‹ affectivity regarding the raised and exploited meanings that it inheres. Its manifold humorous play explodes »complexities« understood as »systems, regimes, discourses, intertwined conventions, occasions [...] joggling, clashing, resignifying and repeating« (Roof 2018, 36). The repetition of different discourses and images, though, is shifted, displaced, accomplished by a humorous rhetoric of performative *re*significations. It bears on past and contemporaneous meanings and opens them up without restoring another fixed meaning. The explosive element of resignification rather awaits to be thought through in unfinished ways within an alley of non-knowledge and power-lessness; it requires Freud's ›receiver‹ of the humorous message ›at the other end‹ and thus suggests an ›implied audience‹ by whom these repetitions are recognized and to which these repetitions are *retold*. Like Antonin Artaud's ›theater of cruelty‹, the humor's explosive »anarchic destruction« engenders a »fantastic flight of forms« (Chang 2003) that questions the idea of ›reality‹ as well as of ›representation‹ by *re*presenting conventionalized images in a deferred and estranged form (Artaud 1988, 245). The humor that is at work in the passage unfolds by »beginning with the simplest elements, or ›bits‹ [...] building bit by bit to increasing combination« (Roof 2018, 36) without having an end in itself. Rather each statement is followed by another one that questions, ›cuts‹, the former one and ends with an alluding suspensive utterance. The engendered humor is funny because of the many allusions and exploitative meanings. At the same time a touching, pensive affectivity is unleashed, which is part of the humorously contrived disposition *to look differently at things*. In playing with Alsana's utterance (to look ›close up‹ at something), the voice of an ›implied author‹ must be assumed in the passage, as the prompt ›to look close up‹ at things goes beyond the level of the narrative discourse. It alludes to the construction of meanings and invites a critical examination of what is depicted as ›truth‹ per se, and it may invite an ›implied audience‹ to scrutinize *the act of looking close up*, to see whether it *really* is a *precise* look, whereby in its call to do so, the assumed voice of the ›implied author‹ also performs this critical look without restoring its former meaning that was bound to the

narrative discourse and the context of Alsana's and Clara's exchange. An act of deconstruction is thus performed in the passage. ›Looking close up‹ is a deferral of the former meaning of looking close up and loses its former meaning, is not the same act again. It is a form of scrutinizing that questions patterns of acquiring ›knowledge‹ that have been taken for granted. It instead invites one to look close up at things by questioning their alleged verisimilitude. Bakhtin describes these ›endings as new beginnings‹ in the humorous display of novels, which do not close the text with any ›conclusive conclusions‹ (Bakhtin 1999, 165), but the signifying practices and the position and positionality of an ›implied author‹ within discourse, nevertheless, enter the novel in this way.

The humorous, mocking, tongue-in-cheek manner in the last transitional sentence of the passage, ›[m]ost probably more than blood is required‹, is invoked by an aporetic allusion, indicated by the deixis ›most probably‹. The expression implicates, on the one hand, uncertainty, not-knowing and the powerlessness that is part of it. On the other hand, the expression contains a certitude. It is quite sure that the matter indeed is different, which gives the statement a certain power. The utterance also engenders suspense and thereby transposes and prolongs the humorous effect.

The passage also emphasizes an ironic and multilayered meaning that knots together dominant and resistant language via a humorous and yet meditative caution to *look at* what comes, at the protagonists, in a different way, which does not reiterate stereotypes. In this way, a space is opened up in which the encounter of the two figures can be *looked at* within this conglomeration of different discourses and the deferring meanings, scrutinized by humor in the passage. Archie and Samad, while representing and repeating discursive images, are *shown* in a different and deferring space of representational *re-* and *de*imagining. Let's take another look at the passage:

»Back, back, *back*. Well, all right, then. Back to Archie spit-clean, pink-faced and polished, looking just old enough at seventeen to fool the men from the medical board with their pencils and their measuring tape. Back to Samad, two years older and the warm colour of bread. Back to the day when they were first assigned to each other, Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over here now, soldier!) and Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move it), the day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners. He stared. They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper sailing-boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinched toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But Archie couldn't help but stare. And Samad put up with it, waited and waited for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank, hot and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to Archie's relentless gaze, he had putted-up-with as much as his hot-head ever could put up with anything.« (Smith 2000, 83)

Firstly, an analepsis is construed by the deixis ›back‹. The repeating of the deixis ›back, back, *back*‹ and the italic typewriting of the deixis emphasize theatrical, performative stage direction or filmic camera shifts that indicate a-going-back-in-time. The deixis not only signals an analepsis. It also yields humor. Its humorous underpinning is induced by heightened expectations and suspense while an ›implied audience‹ is simultaneously evoked and addressed. ›Back‹ construes a constative as well as performative element that

is tonal and visual. In ›Back, back, *back*‹, melos, opsis, and lexis culminate. According to Northrop Frye literature as a »verbal structure« »presents a lexis which combines« the two other elements (Frye [1957] 2020, 244). Frye's more traditional account is sustained by Antonin Artaud's approach to art as an intervention that interconnects melos, opsis, and lexis. Artaud is not interested in the question of representation within art, but in the ways ›reality‹ and its meanings can be distorted in art in order to invoke other meanings in what could be called a dialogic encounter with an audience (Artaud 1988, 245). With regard to both Frye's as well as Artaud's approaches, it can be stated that the deixis functions as a merging of melos, opsis, and lexis in the passage, as an inter-art mimesis that induces a space of estrangement, pleasure, and attention within the text. It mimes a film as well as theater, whereby its mimetic repetition can be recognized. The repetition of the deixis functions like a camera perspective, a camera lens, a change of décor on stage or a voiceover in film (or stage) that guides an ›implied audience‹ to another scenery. It is a constative as well as a performative utterance. It has the function of a rotational axis between the narrator's comments and the framing of Archie and Samad (outside of stereotyped images) *before* the insertion of the deixis and the recounting of past events as well as the characters' first encounter *after* the insertion of the deixis. The deixis also functions like a narrative loop that prepares for resignifications in the semantic field of mainstream discourses. The humorous and multiply allusive intonation of ›back, back, *back*‹ does not mime ›reality‹ but gives narrative structure to the deferral and construction of new meanings in the process of its signifying practice of back and forth. Within this analeptic glimpse into the past, we can hear a third voice. It resembles a voiceover in a (war-)film as it is put in brackets (Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over here now, soldier!)) and (›Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move it.)) and displays the immediacy and commending tone of an army context, underlining the performativity of the narrated passage, as we at once can also *see*, imagine, the protagonists *run* to their assigned positions. The funny undertone is attached, on the one hand, to the performative aspect of the passage that again is a mélange of melos (the voice-over), opsis (the eidetic effect of the acting figures) and lexis (the narrator's framing descriptions), which are attuned to one another and which are not only part of drama but also of the reading process: While the narrator evokes a past time by the insertion of the deixis ›back‹, the insertion of the voice-over produces the setting of the scene within a past time and the performance of the characters gives evidence to the implementation of its presence. On the other hand, the humorous display is provoked by the mimicry of filmic techniques.

Secondly, the flashback is *shown* non-diegetically by a description (Fludernik 2008, 117). The description, too, functions here as a constative as well as a performative utterance in the narrative discourse. It entails the creation of the past by describing the young looks of the two figures; yet it is not their foreheads or the shape of their hands or their height that are described, but their skin color. The description thus also alludes to a sociopolitical discourse upon which the fiction touches, hinting at other meanings and thus to bodies (sociopolitical entities) and their figuration (narrative figures as well as representations of bodies) in the historically driven discursive configuration of ›race‹ and racism. Yet the appeal to ›race‹ is done in a subtle manner in connection with an account that is funny as it evokes not only racialized significations but also immaturity: ›back to Archie pink-faced and polished; ›back to Samad‹, ›the warm colour of baked

bread«. Here again, the fictional world touches upon discursive ›reality«, opening it up before the eyes of an ›implied audience«. The performance turns into the performative, and vice versa, as might become more prehensible in the following. The passage's funniness combines humor with an empathic affectivity that softens its racialized signification. Through the humorous depiction the racialized signification is put under erasure in a Derridean sense. On the one hand, it is necessary in order to clarify the figures' subject-positions within colonial discourse and its signifying order. On the other hand, it is only used in order to depict its sociopolitical effects and power asymmetries, but in a manner that empathically destabilizes biased assumptions. Both significations, ›backed bread« as well as ›pink-faced and polished«, give a note of aesthetics to their appearance and underline their vulnerability and young age. An empathic element thus emerges from the humorous description. The third voice and the description both also function in different ways as a catalyzer for this humor through which an affective *orientation* in favor of both characters is implemented in the narrative: The third voice's military drill tone is funny as it can engender an *eidetic effect*, so that the figures can almost be *seen* to obey the commands. But it also gives rise to sympathy for the bustling, agonized characters. *Affective humor* thus determines the distance in the relationship of the different narrative levels of the story.

Humor in the novel has been generally understood as a form of (rhetorical) mediation in a triangular form between at least three sides, the speaker/narrator, a character, and a ›listener« (Freud [1908] 2002; Lausberg 1990; Matzat 2014, 77). Depending on the utterance, one line of this relationship (between the narrator and the characters/between the narrator and an ›implied audience«/between the characters and an ›implied audience«; between the figures, the narrator and an ›implied audience«) might be emphasized in the narrative discourse. Here, the distance of the characters to ›implied audience« is reduced as the third voice puts the characters in the limelight, centering them. The third voice simultaneously makes the construing and addressing ›implied audience« see and sense the army atmosphere and also engenders sympathy for the two protagonists while they can be ›watched« performing what is required of them and can be pictured to move hastily and clumsily. The passage thus entails both meanings of performance, a performance that takes place (here, in the text and through the text) as well as in the sense of a *performative act* (Butler 1988), when the possibility of transformation appears in the arbitrary relation between the stylized repetition of acts through time, and ›the possibility of different sorts of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style« (Butler 1988, 520). In the novelistic text both constitutive forms converge through melos, opsis, and lexis in an Artaudian sense. An ›implied audience« is invited to *hear* the characters through two narrative techniques, the creation of a *third voice*, and the narrator's *description*²² of the acting figures within this scenery in relation to the voice. The passage portrays the two characters in a quasi non-biased form.

As discussed earlier, *affective humor*, more than being a form of ridiculing the other, is a form of narrowing the distance to an other. The novel especially can be regarded as a

22 Regarding the relevance of description as a diegetic tool in narrative discourse see Nünning (2007) and Fludernik (2014).

form of becoming familiar with someone else's perspective or situation because of narrative techniques like free indirect discourse, focalization and the establishment of perspective and distance (Matzat 2014, 77 ff.). Here, an ›implied audience‹ is induced that might sympathize with the two protagonists, because they are shown in a sympathetic way as young, ›innocent‹, still child-like, inexperienced and exposed to the rigorous authoritativeness of the military as well as to the atrocities of a ›war‹. This unfolds a space of responsibility, an immediate space of touch, between the characters and an ›implied audience‹ that is independent of the narrator. Yet there is also another thread in the signifying performance of the passage. It is a thread, that goes back to, speaks to, discourse. The affective, humorous portrayal of Archie and Samad sympathizes with them; the scene implicitly also opens up a meditative gap for understanding, that transcends the fictional world.

The implication that the military has the same physical consequences for both of them creates an analogous, eye-level ground for viewing them. Their sociopolitical inequality, marked by their skin color and Archie's gaze, and their equality as soldiers in the army are incongruous, and this incongruity unleashes an empathetic humorous tone. The description reveals a sympathetic narrative perspective, which expresses a sentiment for them rather than against them. It thus functions in a distinct way, beyond the narrator's voice, to ensure the transmission of the passage's humorous rhetoric. On the one hand, the narrator maintains a certain distance to the characters but, at the same time, they affectively narrows the distance by describing them. On a performative level, the description indicates with some affection that the characters are forgivable, that neither of them can really be taken seriously and should be treated with some generous mercy. This teasing narrative tone, produced by the narrator's description, continues, and it continues to take up the formative effect of the concept of ›race‹ and of racism. Its performative playfulness is produced not only by affectivity and humorous allusions, but also by the narrator's description of how the characters behave, *how they act*, by the *observation* of their more immediate, performing site:

»Back to the day when they were first assigned to each other [...], the day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners. They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper-sailing boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinched toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But Archie couldn't help but to stare.« (Smith 2000, 83)

Details in the description of the characters and how their bodies react (itchy uniform; ice-pinched toes; staring at another, despite all national-imperial ›civility‹, the creation of the ›national‹ self and the othered ›other‹), firstly, interrelate them to each other as subjects with a material body, enhancing an effect of reality in the illusion of the fiction, touching thereby the space between history and fiction; secondly they show bodies that are discursively marked; thirdly, an ›implied audience‹ is evoked as an accomplice of this ›knowledge‹. In this way, ideally, a (conflicting) space of identification is opened up: on the one hand, with the realistic clichés (of how a *white* man from an underprivileged class behaves, how a man of color *necessarily* looks like within colonial discourse, what soldiers

endure in the army). On the other hand, the liminal space between ›fact‹ and ›fiction‹ is softened in the images of the bodies and subjectivities, and with it the possibility of relating the figures to the material world, and thus the possibility of opening up imagination and unlearning. However, since the tone of the narrative voice contains humor and plays with a pleasurable affectivity, it avoids the stench of ironically blaming a side or siding with a figure. Instead it creates a playful proximity to the difference and peculiarity of the characters. A diverse ›implied audience‹ is thus constructed and addressed to simultaneously identify with and distance itself from them, so that a productive aporetic dialogicity is invoked in the text that can deconstructively allude to an ethical recognition of ›the other‹ as ›the self‹ despite all differences.

The passage further develops this trait of sympathizing with and mocking the figures, emphasizing that the two characters are equal on a practical, military level of army rank. Their equality is in stark contrast to their racialized difference underscored by the reference to the first time Archie saw Samad: ›the day when they were first assigned to each other‹; ›the day Archie . . . forgot‹; ›the day [. . .] Archie couldn't help but stare‹.

The induced humor in the description, parodies a prose narrative that is almost a fairy tale in the passage and indicates a random time, ›the day‹. The humorous tone is also stressed by the word ›involuntarily‹. On the one hand, these elements together indicate a future as well as a past time, a coming event in the story that has already happened, a perplexing display of time that increases suspense and is endowed with humor. On the other hand, they allude to an unconscious act that Archie has done, which, combined with the apparently ›knowing‹ narrator, creates a humorous, expectant tension. Furthermore, the phrase ›forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners‹ entails humor due to the comical narrative tone induced by ›most‹. While ›the fundamental principle of English manners‹ could be read in a de Manian ›grammatical‹ sense and could have been part of a manual on ›Life and Manners in Great Britain‹ or could have had a restrained, vaguely mocking undertone in the narrative, the deixis ›most‹ as a maximization and exaggeration produces a cheerful, joyful humorous tone and can, at the same time, be read as ironic as it alludes to forms of *learned*, societal constructed behaviors of social control that have a nation-building effect (›English manners‹). Its ironic humorous tone is once again enhanced by the word ›fundamental‹ that incongruously plays with the construed character of national ›manners‹ by evoking their baselessness and alluding to the emptiness and foundationlessness of purely imaginary constructions of (national) ›manners‹. Furthermore, as the allusion depicts Archie's stare, the foundation of ›English manners‹ is at the same time ironically linked to British imperialism and processes of colonization as will be discussed below.

Archie stares, but he cannot act *otherwise*. The gaze that is captured by the narrator's focalization of Archie and which seems to freeze the other (Samad) to a *thing*, is so strongly implemented in Archie's normalized self-identification that it even seems to supersede nationalized self-understandings and social values (›Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners‹), and the imperial British desire to establish egalitarian standards for all its racialized subjects in the army, so that they (naturally) feel obliged to serve empire at their best) (›dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper-sailing boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform‹, ›same black boots‹). All shall be equal for the purposes of the ›war‹, and yet

are not: The desire to stare, to capture, and fixate the other nullifies the (common) (bodily) experience of the circumstances (›itchy uniform; ice-pinched toes), another imperial geographical space that is alien to both of them (›on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground‹) and ›nature‹ (›same black boots scattered with *the same dust*‹). The other remains different, not so much by being another ›human being‹ but by skin color; ›the other‹ is different from ›the self‹. The depiction of the gaze in this passage fulfills various functions. It humorizes the stare as an errant, neurotic behavior, it exposes the colonial gaze, it offers a decolonizing reading of that gaze, and it lends itself, in effect, to envisioning another ›humanist‹ understanding of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ in relation to the coloniality of their images that are not absolutely dominated by the discourse of colonialism and that are suggested as the beginning of a *friendship*. Archie's staring also captures the ignorance and primitiveness of empire. Through a back door in colonial discourse itself, then, the narrative gazes back at the alleged power and ›knowledge‹ of the many faces of colonialism.

On the one hand, Archie's stare generates humor, because it is weird to imagine someone intensely glaring at someone else who is not very far away. It suggests a loss of control that lies outside of privileged social *tacts*, *touching too much*, and thus a violation of unwritten ›laws‹. Staring also implies a sense of embarrassment. It may not be staring as such that is regarded as *shameful*, but to *get caught* staring. The *act* of staring (and recognizing oneself in it) doubles the humorous effect as an act of having lost control or of being stared at and being on the verge of losing control. It is thus also a signifying play with a possible ›implied audience‹. Staring also implies ignorance and not knowing. It *shows* one's powerlessness – at the sight of an other (whom one desires?) and objectifies the other one stares at, which renders one powerless. The realization of the gaze is funny in relation to the concession that one has to make (to oneself) of being unknowing and powerless and of being caught doing something ›indecent‹. Staring thus symbolizes the visibility of incompetence but also of a form of ›eagerness‹ and a contradictory affectivity (lust, desire, joy, pensiveness, fascination, superiority and/or humiliation, self-awareness – or its opposite – reluctance, helplessness, lostness). As an (aggressive) attempt of curiosity ›to understand‹ the other, or/and to fix the other as an object of desire, it also emerges as part and parcel of the effects of coloniality – which is not so much connoted with power, but with a form of (›uncivilized‹) ignorance – traits that are regularly attached to the other. Staring, as mentioned in relation to the philosophy of decolonization and Fanon's deconstructive move, has the meaning of fixation within the coloniality of discourse and its materialized effects. The stare, the gaze, is the implication of placing the other (in a subjugated position), of othering. As a discursive effect upon the senses, it determines images of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ through biased forms of differentiation and by processes of negation and projection. In this way, ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ are created simultaneously. Based on a quasi *rereading* of Jacques Lacan's ideas about the formation of the self, in its recognition of the self through the Other, in the mirror stage and a Fanonian deconstruction of the racist gaze within a poetological account that undermines the gaze by ›laughter‹ and that restores an approach to the other as a form of tentative touch, which orients and opens up ›the self‹ towards ›the other‹, the gaze here seems *resignified* as a form of decolonial ›knowledge‹ and decolonizing power. The induced humor is thus a recognition of the

absurdity and tragedy of the gaze that presumes to have ›knowledge‹ and power. Humor becomes an affective expression of deconstruction in relation to a seemingly invincible sociopolitical ›reality‹: the manifestations of the absurdity of racism and othering. The novel alludes to these colonial/decolonial sites of the gaze: Archie's staring at Samad and Samad's response to it. The stare, as imperial gaze, is a sign of the concealment and displacement of coloniality that is worked out in the novel in a Freudian ›joking-it-out‹ sense. But in depicting Archie's gaze, the humorous tone also reveals it and turns it inside out as a form of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness in the experientiality of racialization as a decolonial strategy: The gaze is stared at, studied. The (normalized) subject of ›knowledge‹ (*white* subjectivity) is questioned and their act of ›knowledge‹ production, through which ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ are constructed, is itself objectified by being exposed and *shown*. The passage functions as a mirror vision of decolonial discourse. In this sense, too, Archie's stare has a humorous underpinning. It is a humor of relief and recognition on both ends, *of being stared at, and staring back*, as well as the humor of sharing ›the secret‹ of ›knowing it‹, and of recognizing its unmasking. It is thus also a humor of community building. Experiences of pain and defenselessness are transformed into empowerment. It is the ›knowledge‹ and power of decolonial (ancestral, transmitted, not-codified, counter-)discourse that enters the text through humor, laughing out discourses of coloniality. Like Freud's super-ego, (ancestral, transmitted, not-codified, counter-)discourse, through humor, functions as a corrective to the dominant discourse protecting the ego, the othered self *reinstating* the possibility of other relationalities, which are indicated in the novel by the ensuing *friendship*. However, the gaze of colonial power, as inscribed through the discourse by othering (it is Archie who stares at Samad), is also inscribed in the subjectivity and subject-formation of the characters, as can be inferred from how they *act*. The absurdity of the stare is emphasized in the passage by its repetition at the beginning and the end of the passage: ›He [Archie] stared‹ and ›Archie couldn't help but stare‹. In this way, staring at an other is made into something strange. It is portrayed as abnormal and absurd. Not only Archie's staring becomes abnormal, but also the tendency to stare, the idea of ›race‹. Archie's objectifying stare, thus, admits both, the absurdity and the effects of racialized discourse. This clash between the absurdity of staring and its manifestations is what makes the comical as well as tragical, thought-provoking. Moreover, in the humorous context of the passage, tragedy is not equated with something called ›fate‹, as might be inferred at first glance from ancient Greek plays, but rather as historically and discursively embedded – within structures of power-lessness and non-knowledge. *Affective humor* seems to signal a form of acknowledgment and acceptance – in affirmative ways. (Against the backdrop of the construction of ›narratives‹, perhaps Sophoclean tragedies mean to imply exactly the same – that things have a prehistory and are situated?) *Affective humor* dialogizes this experience without shying away from its tragic sides, but also without succumbing to them. It begins at its ruins – here, by opening up a space for reflecting on the effects of racism in ›real life.

The passage then also plays with the reality effect of the novel (it is all fiction – but it seems to reference and mimic ›reality‹), and with the expectations of an ›implied audience‹: Although the figures could be ›real‹ figures and are displayed in an empathetic way, the narrator still distances themselves from the sociopolitical discourse that make

the characters act the way they do, here especially from Archie, by implicitly mentioning that what Archie does, *staring*, is not ›normal‹. The narrator, on the one hand, seems to be critical of the gaze and does not identify with it (as do presumably parts of an ›implied audience‹), on the other hand, by alluding to the ›nation‹ (›English manners‹), they also take along an ›implied (white) audience‹ (and Archie), who might identify with ›Britishness‹ and somehow also with staring, and places them outside a *good, British* form of behavior as if Archie's staring were an isolated incident, like an ›understandable‹ slip.²³ This may be due to an effort not to offend anyone with the critique. It thus ensures that the critical touch is made in a *tactful* way, that it conforms to discursive regulations so that the narrative (and the narrator) is not rejected. As a result, the narrator produces a reliable narrative within their derailing criticism. This caution also creates suspense and enlivens the implication of an audience that, while diverse, is in no way blamed and can remain open(-minded) to the narrative. It is a narrative strategy that allows for the possibility of a space of touch that touches in different ways.

The humorous play with (sociopolitical) discourse also points to the fact that what the narration describes must (still) be a current issue as it is still recognized and understood. The flashback to the protagonists' young age is not to show how racism worked *then*. It highlights and explains *why* and *how* they could meet *at all* and become friends *despite* ›race‹ as a structuring matter of coloniality. Thus, *affective humor* reiterates and at the same time shifts sociopolitical meanings. Humor triggers a form of ›knowledge‹ about sociopolitical norms, subjectivities and their discursive evaluation and brings it into a dynamic dialogic process at the borders of constructive forms of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness. *Affective humor*, by establishing a multiplicity of narrated distance, affective positioning and humorous play, gives a normative framework to the narrative in accordance with the ›laws‹ of touch that determine what is taboo and what can be talked about in what ways (and by whom). It thus signals a play with such discursive norms, evaluations, and affectivity and can be regarded as a means of dialogicity that breaks through discursive barriers of touch as it entails the ludic form of role-playing, and only tacitly implies *resignification*. By influencing the affective mood of the story and thus the narrated distance between sociopolitical norms and their resignification, *affective humor* establishes a relationship between the narrator, the characters, and the ›implied audience‹ in the text. Sociopolitical norms and/or evaluations can be dialogically opened up or shifted. This setting of evaluative frames construes a meta-narrative level within the novel that echoes out of it into wider a discourse.

The deconstructive, performative aspect of the story becomes all the more evident as the text allows the other to speak »[...] qui invite à une carnavalisation de la narration de l'histoire« (Fendler 2007, 162). The French term for history means both *story* as well as *history*, and this is indeed what happens in and through *White Teeth*. The literary work supplements historiographic writing/›knowledge‹, another form of ›critical fabulation‹²⁴

23 Other members of the crew despise Samad as well and insult him verbally on a regular basis by calling him ›Indian Sultan bastard‹ or (because of his »Queen English«) a ›poof‹; see (Perfect 2016, 248).

24 The term ›critical fabulation‹ coined by Saidiya V. Hartman means a »critical reading of the archive that mimics the figurative dimensions of history, intended both to tell an impossible story and to

that is engendered in the infinite and unfinished economy of literature as a structure of non-knowledge and power-lessness, even in the dynamic of the market and of accumulation. The tone of the narration changes by direct discourse. Samad, of course, notices the gaze, and he reacts to it. The colonial discourse that is shown through Archie's stare is challenged by Samad's response and later on by their coming to terms with each other as the only survivors of their five-man tank. It is here, when we hear Samad respond to Archie's stare. What is questioned in *White Teeth* with its analeptic insertions into the past, in fact, is what Meyer calls the novel's »metahistorical« performances, which »[...] question determinist versions of history and develop an ironic comedy of history [...] as a farce« (Mayer 2017, 484). It begins »un voyage dans le temps, sous le ligne carnavalesque« (Fendler 2007, 162). The narrator indicates a date for the event of the encounter that will weld together the two characters' lives; it is April the 1st – Fool's Day:

»It was 1 April 1945. Archie Jones was the driver of the tank, Samad was the wireless operator. Roy Meckintoch was the co-driver, Will Jonson was crunched on a bin as gunner, and Thomas Dickinson-Smith was sitting on the slightly elevated chair, which, even though it squashed his head against the ceiling, his newly granted captaincy would not permit his pride to relinquish. None of them has seen anyone else but each other for three weeks.« (Smith 2000, 84)

The indication of the date as Fool's Day can be seen as a kernel node of the passage and for the ensuing *friendship*. The subtle, unobtrusive indication of an ironic humor in the date remains ambiguous and manifold. It refers to the characters as (possible) fool-figures, it refers to the situation and to being stuck together for quite a long time and therefore can refer to *being* fooled (by and in the »war«). The date also subtly mocks historiography in two senses: It makes fun of setting specific dates as relevant dates to be remembered, a characteristic of national, imperial, authoritative constructions and institutionalized forms of historiography that mocks their credibility, and it points to the absurdity that is inherent in the selection and archiving of events as »historical«, transmitted, and learned records. Moreover, on the one hand, it adds to the reality effect of the story by mentioning a date in the past to which we only have access through texts. On the other hand, it

amplify the impossibility of its telling.« Cf. Saidiya V. Hartman (2008, 11); while this approach is revolutionary and crucial for looking at archives differently and using their gaps to implement anti-dominant narratives and critiques, it may come with its own problems. Firstly, it can reestablish a dichotomous relation between »factual« and »fictional« text, and thus implicitly reinstate the position of historiography and official archives as superior to, say, literature or oral traditions, as well as a space and textuality of »truth« and »truth-seeking«. Secondly, it can be used counterproductively to normalize the act of »historical archiving«, which is itself steeped in the history of (probably not only) European imperialism and domination. Thirdly, it can evoke the impression that lost histories and genocidal atrocities can be recovered in retrospect, which can also serve to stabilize processes and methods of archiving. Literature, in its widest sense, on the other hand, as another archive, has a similar function of fabrication while questioning the »truth« of it and training the imagination; at the same time, it challenges official archiving as correct and truthful without replacing it. In this sense, literature destabilizes notions of power and »knowledge« (historiography and archiving) by implying the power(-lessness) of non-knowledge, which it evokes as an endless, itself anti-dominant archive.

deconstructs, at the same time, its reality effect in a subtle way by linking it to an official, authorized day of jest. Insofar as it implicitly signifies the factualization of the fiction, it implicitly signifies the fictionalization of historiography. Its humor thus parodies historic statements as well as laughs at the construction of fiction to counter these statements. It is thus a joyful, explosive humor that also undermines its own statement. The humorous play with the date makes the text charged with suspense, implying something important that is about to happen, something that must happen, that *has* happened, on *this* date, since only ›important‹ eventful dates are (historically) registered. By parodying historiography and implicitly pointing to its arbitrariness, the date paradoxically becomes central here in view of the folly that can be seen in the archiving of events, an important event in the narrative: the date of a *friendship* that ensues as a backbone of the novel. It is within this (fooled) frame that Samad speaks:

»And Samad put up with it, waited and waited for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank, hot and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to Archie's relentless gaze, he had putted-up with as much as his hot-head ever could put up with anything. ›My friend, what is it you find so darned mysterious about me that it has you in such constant revelries?‹ ›You what?‹ said Archie, flustered, for he was not one to have private conversations on army time. ›Nobody, I mean, nothing, I mean, well, what do you mean? [...] ›I mean merely that it is likely we have another two years stuck in this thing [...] ›And?‹ asked Archie [...] ›And there is only so much of that eyeballing that a man can countenance. Is it that you are doing some research into wireless operators or are you just in passion over my arse?‹ Their captain, Dickinson-Smith, who *was* in a passion over Samad's arse (but not only that; also his mind; also two slender muscular arms that could only make sense wrapped around a lover; also those luscious light green/brown eyes) silenced the conversation immediately. ›lck-ball! Jones! Get on with it [...].« (Smith 2000, 84)

Humor ensues here by Samad's angry waiting situation and growing impatience with Archie's stare. By calling Archie ›my friend‹ at the beginning, Samad's stifled anger as well as Archie's puzzlement can be ›felt‹, which makes the situation funny and easy to sympathize with them. Also, the oddity of the situation can be sensed, as well as the growing tension in the small space they have to share. The humorous display is, furthermore, accentuated by the dialogue, while both characters are not alone and have to stage their contention as silently as possible: »Both spoke under their breath, for the conversation was not private in the other sense, there being two other privates and a captain in their five-man Churchill rolling through Athens on its way to Thessaloniki« (Smith 2000, 84). The characters are also portrayed as conscientious. They act in accordance with the positions they are assigned to, as if they were in a role-playing game (which they somehow *are – and aren't we always?*): Archie ›was not one to have private conversations on army time‹ and Samad ›not wishing to be seen neglecting his duties, answered [the crackling voice in the wireless] speedily and efficiently« (Smith 2000, 84). Within the ›sensibility‹ evoked by the characters' direct speech and the focalization of the two characters, an immediate sensuous exchange can be detected between them. It is humorous as it has a performative note – the characters are shown in a narrow space and the atmosphere of this space is evoked by a stifled, strong but masked affectivity which makes it funny.

The narrator first sets an emotive orientation-frame for how to conceive of Samad's response and the ensuing dialogue between the characters. Although it is a rather sympathetic affective frame in which Samad's reaction is put, it does not glorify him either (as the ›good other‹) (also Sakiz 2023, 31). Samad is portrayed as a ›hot-head‹, but his impatience is not anchored in his character or ›race‹. Rather it is embedded in the endurance of the stare, as well as the suffocating ›airless machine‹, and is therefore construed as a comprehensible reaction. An evoked ›implied audience‹ thus is subjected to a scene that mirrors the double-knowledge of differentiation between the singularity of a voice and its generalized stereotyping. Samad's voice is placed in a gap that opens up between the intelligible singularity of experience and the generalized stereotypes of (colonial) discourse: The other may indeed be, is, a ›hot-head‹, but this is not necessarily related to ›their roots‹, rather it is (also) a (reasonable) sign of fatigue with the colonial gaze. The passage thus creates a narrative platform on which Samad can act without being denoted by his temperament in a naturalized, orientalized guise. Samad is also given a platform on which he can *begin* to speak ›freely‹ and outside the constraints of (colonial) discourse. His ›voice‹ and singularity is brought about through direct discourse. The framing of this voice, a possible intrusion of the ›implied author‹, displays what Bakhtin calls a ›hybrid construction‹²⁵ within his concept of dialogicity and what he regards as a significant trait of novelistic writing per se (Bakhtin 2014, 304 f.). Bakhtin defines a ›hybrid construction‹ as an utterance of a speaker that »contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ›languages‹, two semantic and axiological belief systems [. . .]. [T]he division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence.« (Bakhtin 2014, 305).

On a narratological level, the ›hybrid construction‹ may also be detected in the narrative design that can be attributed to an ›implied author‹. In what Bakhtin calls the ›stratification of common language‹, the different meanings that words carry and that are organized in a specific way within a dominant, unified discourse, the ›implied author‹ can still anchor their own ›sensibility‹ and ›moral intelligence‹ (Porter 2010, 235) and thus impart a slightly different meaning to the words. It is within this ›diversity of speech and not the unitary of normative shared language‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 308; emphasis in the text) that the humorous tone of the story is set in the narrative discourse. The passage focalizes the characters and lets them speak so that a level of more immediate mediation occurs without the narrator's interference. The passage's performative trait is induced by direct discourse and the content of a dialogic exchange. This makes it possible to *see* Samad as an acting and active ›human being‹ who reacts and responds to the gaze, thus delimiting its colonial meaning.

25 Bakhtin's concept of hybridization has influenced postcolonial theory and especially Homi K. Bhabha's understandings of ›third space‹, ambiguity, and hybridity (Bhabha 1994), which has been employed in postcolonial theory to unravel colonial cultural understandings of ›purity‹ and racist understandings of ›mixture‹ (Young 1995; Ha 2010), and has hence become an important concept of postcolonial readings and literary analysis. In narratology in particular, Monika Fludernik has discussed the concept in relation to postcolonial literature, and literary ›contact zones‹, as well as for a reexamination of narratological parameters. Cf. Fludernik (1998, 1999); for an overview on the ›third space‹ as a concept in literary theory, see also Frank (2009).

An ›implied author‹ does not only seem to give voice to the multiple meanings of how the other can be perceived (inside and outside the colonial discourse). This framing also prepares the ground for the ›hybrid construction‹ in Samad's utterance. ›My friend, what is it you find so darned mysterious about me that it has you in such constant revelries?‹, approaches Archie's stare by suggesting that Samad is no longer willing to accept it. The gaze must therefore come to a halt. Through Samad, the gaze of the colonial Other is critiqued. At the same time, Samad's subjectivity is emphasized. ›Samad‹ looks back at the gaze and destabilizes it.

The seriousness of his voice is further accentuated by the irritated tone of his utterance, indicated by the word ›my friend‹. This contrasts with his anger and produces a comical tone. His annoyance with Archie's piercing gaze entails a playful *affective humor* that, through the performative trait of direct speech, has an unmediated, immediate effect, indicating an implied authorial intervention: »[A]nother's speech [...] is at none of these points clearly separated from authorial speech: the boundaries are deliberately flexible and ambiguous, often passing through a single syntactic whole, often through a simple sentence, and sometimes even dividing up the main parts of a sentence« (Bakhtin 2014, 308). Bakhtin speaks of ›a varied play with the boundaries of speech types, languages and belief systems‹, considering them as a ›fundamental aspect of comic style‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 308). However, it is not only the boundaries of discourse that are tackled: ›Is it that you are doing some research into wireless operators‹ takes up another imagery and double gaze of the colonial Other. This utterance, too, contains a ›construct of hybridization‹. On the one hand, it reveals a trace of colonial practices regarding the other, on the other hand, it points to the ›knowledge‹ of the colonized other about these practices. Concomitantly, the utterance ridicules colonizing practices from a position of marginality. It is the gaze of the ›researcher‹, a quasi ›ethnological‹ gaze, that depicts the other as a *thing* to be studied. Through Samad's direct speech, an other signifying process is *told* and *shown* within a decolonial grammar. Samad is well aware of the function(s) that his body provides within colonial discourse. It is either an object to be studied or an object of (sexual, colonial) desire (›or are you just in passion over my arse?‹). The performative trait of Samad's performance thus lies in the exposure of colonial discourse with its stereotypes of the obedient, the unknowing, the silent other. By returning the gaze and addressing the colonial practices that accompany it, Samad's utterance holds up a mirror to colonial discourse and provincializes its unencumbered universalist claim as fraught with desire, as transgressive and contemptible. Both utterances can be regarded as involving different receivers. One, inside the diegesis, is Archie, another resides in the evocation of an ›implied audience‹, and yet another is outside of the diegesis, on a meta-level, which is (colonial) discourse itself. Samad's utterance thus shifts the perception of the other on a discursive level by a mere constative as well as performative utterance. This enacts a performative decolonizing speech and acts through a shift in language, discourse, and imagery.

This form of humor in relation to colonial discourse can be described as satirical and ironic. The absurdity of the colonial practices of the gaze is laughed at in the knowing voice of the other. Samad's well-informed words silence Archie. Archie, caught, is ›flustered‹ and speechless even though he tries to turn the table and mimes ›innocence‹ (›Nobody, I mean, nothing, I mean, well, what do *you* mean?‹; ›And?‹). However, Archie too

does not represent dominant discourse, as ›the British education system‹ had ›tripped him up with a snigger‹ (Smith 2000, 15). The portrayal of Archie as unlettered (Archie could not ›go to Grammar School because his mother could not afford to buy the uniform‹ (Smith 2000, 90) is a pivotal trait of his character that both gives background to his underprivileged social position and sets him at the margins of colonial discourse. He seems less corrupted by (colonial) ›knowledge‹ and more free in his perceptions (as we shall see further below). Thus, Archie is not just miming ›innocence‹ but, given the fact that he too is a victim of the same discourse that has given a specific subjectivity to him and has subjected him to itself, Archie is actually ›innocent‹ insofar as he is unaware of what he is doing and what it all consequently means.

The meaning of this insight and message, which presupposes an ›implied author‹, also implies an ›audience‹ in the text so it can be understood. The social ›types‹ and ›images‹ (Bakhtin 1984, 438) must be recognized, otherwise humor would not work.

The passage quoted above also raises another issue. It is anchored in the problematization of (colonial) sexual desire, on the one hand, and (queer) sexuality within cis-normativity, on the other. While Samad challenges colonial desire and the sexualization of the objectified body of the other as outlined above, the passage also sensitively deconstructs cis-normativity and the devaluation of othered sexualities within discourse in the voice of ›their captain‹, Dickenson-Smith, ›who was in a passion over Samad's arse (but not only that; also his mind; also two slender muscular arms that could only make sense wrapped around a lover; also those luscious light green/brown eyes)‹. Through free indirect discourse and in focalizing the figure, the narrator expresses Dickenson-Smith's thoughts and feelings. Free indirect discourse offers another possibility of proximity to the other that colonial discourse does not entail: Dickenson-Smith does not desire Samad out of a colonizing longing and lust (maybe, too, but not only). He is in love with Samad. Thus the character of Dickenson-Smith signals a differentiation between sexual desire (embedded in relations of power) (implying a hierarchical relationship) – and ›love‹ (implying – ideally – a non-hierarchical relationship) even in/beyond/along the images and effects of coloniality. To an extent this other layer of dialogicity in the passage also corrects Samad's utterance, ›[...] or are you just in passion over my arse?‹, which, at the same time that it criticizes the coloniality of discourse and its images, can be understood as a devaluation of queerness in a symbolic sense, repeating a stereotype and reaffirming cis-normativity. As we shall see below, Dickenson-Smith is, on the one hand, portrayed as representing British nationalism per se through his social affiliations. On the other hand, this portrayal is ironic, ridiculing nationalist attitudes, which are shown to be class-bound, authoritarian, traditionalist, subjugating, violent, and ultimately destructive. Through this empathetic, ironic humor, the text also shows that Captain Dickenson-Smith's adherence to these authoritative national-familial obligations is in fact against his will. He simply cannot free himself from them; this not only arouses empathy for Captain Dickenson-Smith, ›whose government file included the phrase ›Risk: Homosexual‹‹ (Johnston 2021, 99) but also shows how deeply induced, ›familial‹ orchestrations, sociopolitical settings as well as subject-positions in discourse go into the workings and becomings of the self:

»Against his will, he had been dragged out of his father's college, shaken free of his father's gown, made to fight a war, as his father had. And his father before him, and his father before him, ad infinitum; »traditionally the Dickenson-Smiths were insatiable in their desire to see Dickenson-Smith blood spilled on foreign soil. And on the occasion when there wasn't a war the Dickenson-Smiths busied themselves with the Irish Situation, a kind of Dickenson-Smith holiday resort for death.« (Smith 2000, 89–90)

Dickenson-Smith, however, is different and does not seem to fit in with Britishness, the army or his family tradition, though his difference is not entirely free of colonial desire:

»Poor Thomas had a different kind of lust for exotic ground. He wanted to know it, to nurture it, to learn from it, to love it.« (Smith 2000, 90)

So, not unlike Archie, Dickenson-Smith becomes a marginalized (and sexualized) other of cis-normative national pride. But Captain Dickenson-Smith is in fact the only figure loathed by all four other members of the tank's crew: »They were utterly filled with contempt for him and sickened by his poncey-commander-queer-boy-ways« (Smith 2000, 85). He is a target of various discourses and their effacing effects in the predominant rule of cis-normativity. When the tank is accidentally damaged two days before the official end of World War II (»a day that History has not remembered; »at about 18.00 hours on the 6th of May 1945« (Smith 2000, 91), and while Archie and Samad are allowed to wander around in the »tiny Bulgarian village« (Smith 2000, 91), finally the war enters its outskirts; there is no safe space in war, and the remaining three soldiers are attacked. While Mackintosh and Johnson are brutally murdered, Dickenson-Smith *chooses* his fate and commits suicide, a tragic incident that the narrator sarcastically comments on as »[t]he only Dickenson-Smith to die by English hands« (Smith 2000, 92), ridiculing patriarchal and nationalist, narcissistic attitudes as dumb. But Dickenson-Smith keeps his agency – and decides for himself in the liminal space that is left to him. The novelistic text differentiates between the subjectivity that the ›outside‹, general discourse professes and a performative execution of subjectivity that an agent handles singularly within it, thus shifting discourse and making it their own. Archie as well as Dickenson-Smith are both *white* figures who, although construed by national as well as colonial discourses, fall sociopolitically outside the benevolence of ›the nation‹ and occupy differently marginalized positions in the national and performative instances of discourse, where historical narrative and ›reality‹ collide, and are differently unfolded within the narrative discourse. On the level of the story thus the novel unravels mainstream discourses and creates a ›free space‹ in which ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ can be seen in a different light. A different access to the question of an ethical response is approached. The passage demonstrates through character function how discourse is ›lived out‹ in a bodily experience of ›life‹. An ›implied audience‹ is not only positioned as witness to the ›scene‹ but is given an involved position in the story through *affective humor*. It is asked to be an accomplice to the play that is unleashed and to position itself between the mainstream discourses and what is deconstructed in the novel. This is the case not only in the configuration of the three characters Archie, Samad, and Dickenson-Smith in the intersectional negotiation of class,

›race‹ and sexuality. It is also the case between historical (factual) and fictional discourse when historical writing is parodied or made part of the fiction to allude to ›reality‹.

The story of Archie's and Samad's *friendship*, this oscillating journey from one to the other and back, does not merely recount a colonial/colonized encounter. It resumes an aesthetic play that produces decisive moments, touching spaces, where different discourses are negotiated and result in ethical questions. The touching spaces it creates in the texture of the text give substance to the *friendship* and unfold a critical stance regarding (national(-ist)) historical discourses that evolve into the question of how these (or their absence) can influence ›experience‹.

The relation of Archie and Samad may also reflect an allusion regarding E. M. Foster and his friendship to and empathy for Sayed Ross Mahood whom Foster had dedicated his novel *A Passage to India* (1924). Here is thus another trait that shows the involvement of a ›real author‹ behind the scene of writing at the thin limit of history and fiction.

Cut off from the rest of the war and from communication, without a radio, Archie and Samad do not realize for two weeks that it has ended, and alone in the quiet of the village, despite the power of colonial discourse and its effects on subjecthood and hierarchized border-thinking, a ›life-forming‹ *friendship* begins to blossom between them, often presented in the form of dialogues²⁶:

›These were strange times, strange enough for an Iqbal and a Jones to strike up a friendship.« (Smith 2000, 92)

The narrator first sets Archie and Samad into a time-space that signifies a time-out. It is only in an isolation from dominant discourses and their time and space that this relation between the sociopolitically unequal characters can ensue:

›In short, it was precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and colour, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue.« (Smith 2000, 96)

The biting humor of the narrative alludes, of course, to what we have already learned. It pokes fun at Archie's ›British‹ attitude toward the other(-ed): contrary to what Archie thinks and what allows him to engage with Samad in the first place, a psychic proximity seems to exist between them – from one soul to another, as it were, and it will continue. The tone of the narrator is descriptive and yet alludes to the borders that racism and class have built, that give meaning to bodies, that construct and assign meaning to ›difference‹ and to *thought* in general. Here again, the humorous tone of the narrative becomes ironic, echoing a reality effect while maintaining a critical stance towards ›reality‹. This ironic tone unfolds an *affective humor* in relation to an ›implied audience‹ as it has to bear both utterances, one that has a rather somber meaning (Archie and Samad cannot simply be two friends because of class and especially ›race‹), and one that defiantly challenges an awkward social taboo, namely the effects of racism even on intimate spaces like

26 On role of dialogues and crossings in the work of Zadie Smith, see Guignery (2014, 11–12).

friendships. Furthermore, given that the narrator uses the analogy of the ›holidays‹ in the present, rather than situating the issue in the past, it can be argued that they are alluding to a phenomenon that is still quite taboo and reaches into the present.

While Archie is depicted as a *white* Briton from an underprivileged class with scarce access to education, who only vaguely relates to ›the British nation‹, the educated Samad (he studied biology) is construed as the descendent of a national Indian hero, Mangal Pande, a sepoy of the British East Indian Company, who fired the first shot in the Indian anti-colonial armed resistance of 1857 that led to the first Indian war of independence from British colonial rule. The illusion of reality and reference to history (writing) is accentuated through this figure, as a historical character, named Mangal Pande, did, in fact, exist. Mangal Pande is a contested figure in both the British and Indian historical narratives and archives.²⁷ In British accounts, especially those of the period in which Archie and Samad first meet, Mangal Pande is considered to be a ›traitor‹. In Indian historiography Mangal Pande is hailed as a hero and an important figure in the 1857 War of Independence. This almost mythical historical figure, ›the much neglected, 100-year-old, mildewed yarn of Mangal Pande‹ (Smith 2000, 99), is represented in the novel and even constitutes a kernel point of the story. In a humorous, mocking tone, it touches upon ›reality‹, the way the archiving and dismissing of (historical) images of ›identity‹ in the context of colonialism mark subject formations and the construction of images of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ (Isaac 2005, 41; Maticevic 2015). The humorous tone is induced by an allusion to the ways in which epistemes and discourses operate within the mechanisms of power: The history of Indian independence is metaphorically evoked as a ›100-year-old‹ ›yarn‹, a thread that still plays a vital role in the colonality of discourse and the subjectivities it invokes, which is humorously indicated by the word ›mildewed‹. ›Mildewed‹ has a double meaning and also indicates a double, tragic-comic effect. On the one hand, ›mildewed‹ refers to this forgotten figure and the neglect of colonial history in British historiography, which attaches connotations of sadness and mourning to the word. On the other hand, ›mildewed‹ indicates an ironic-cheerful tone with regard to the fetishization of the figure in Indian decolonial discourse in which the figure is almost ›dissolved‹ through overrepresentation and overuse. While the real figure (Mangal Pande) symbolizes (colonial/decolonized) remembrance and national ›identity‹ (on both sides), in the novel the figure occupies the question of how the narrativity of historiography, its ›yarn‹, signifies ›the self‹ and ›the other‹, how it shapes the materiality of ›life‹ and, in terms of ›lived experience‹, gives meaning to it, how it amounts to ›existence‹, ›the right to life‹, which shape such quandaries and the melancholies of loss (Kershaw 2021, 871 ff.). ›The shadow‹ of (narrated) history and its images in this texture of alterity and ›identity‹ also weaves the structure of the story. And here goes Archie first:

»Well, that is something. Do you know: I remember it from school – I do – History of the Colonies [...] To have a bit of history in your blood like that. Motivates you, I'd imagine. [...] We're nobody. [...] Not that I've ever been much bothered, mind. Proud all the

27 See on the totalizing rhetoric of World War II, imperial rhetoric, the heroic figuration of Pande and its reinscription in *White Teeth*, Thompson (2024). See also Sakiz (2023, 32 ff.), and Kershaw (2021, 870 ff.).

same, you know. Good honest English stock. But in your family, you had a hero! [...] ›Yes, Archibald, that is exactly the word. Naturally, you well get these petty English academics trying to discredit him, because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due. But he was a hero and every act I have undertaken in this war has been in the shadow of his example.‹

›That's true, you know‹, said Archie thoughtfully. ›They don't speak well about Indians back home; they certainly wouldn't like it if you said, an Indian was a hero ... everybody would look at you a bit funny.‹ (Smith 2000, 99–100; punctuation in the text.)

Archie's utterances signal his marginalized national ›identity‹ and its instability. He understands himself indeed as ›English‹. But then he also distinguishes between ›the others‹ and himself. Archie distances himself from the rest of ›the nation‹ in the way ›this nation‹ *speaks*. The distinction is emphasized deictically by the use of the pronoun ›they‹ and ›everybody‹. As the scene is set in direct discourse, its mimetic trait is further accentuated and contributes to Archie's singular agency within discourse that, if we follow Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, simultaneously grants him a place of speaking, a subject-position, and subjects him to it. But in the novel, Archie's subjection to the national discourse leaves space for change. The dialogue between the two figures opens up a space for encounters and for the self-reflective negotiation of (historical) discourses. The humorous and mocking display of ›history‹ that the narrator's voice introduces is enriched affectively by the pensive performative character of the exchange. It is this negotiation of historical discourse within the satirical tone of the narrator, on the one hand, and its naïve and yet thoughtful discussion by the characters, on the other hand, that opens the ground for an emerging *friendship*; a gap appears in discourse and imagery that allows for a shift in imagining the other as well as the self in a different way. It is naïve in that both Archie and Samad are, to a certain extent, subject to (national) mainstream discourses. But in the encounter with Samad, Archie has to negotiate what he has memorized and learned from history textbooks, to which art, and here the literary text, forms a challenging counter-discourse (Fendler/Wehrheim 2007, XI). In schoolbooks, the ›Colonies‹ are naturalized. They conceal the violence of colonialism and Britain's involvement in and imperial becoming through it. They also obscure forms of resistance. Both strategies of ›not-learning‹ feed racist and derogatory images of ›Indians‹, which Archie is already acquired at school. And Archie seems to slowly realize that there is a connection between ›the history of the Colonies‹, images of naturalized ›British heroism‹ and ›Indian inferiority‹. And he begins to act differently. The difference, a change in his mind, is indicated by focalization and Archie's description as ›thoughtful‹. Samad too acknowledges Archie's self-distinction and difference. Archie no longer seems to fit Samad's image of ›Englishness proper‹. As a sign of his acknowledgment and trust, indicated by ›Yes, Archibald, that is exactly the word‹, Samad fills Archie in on a decolonial counter-knowledge: ›Naturally, you well get these petty English academics trying to discredit him, because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due. But he was a hero.‹ Samad's language distinguishes between ›Archie's Britishness‹ and authoritative discourse that is evoked by the image of scholarly discourse. As Bakhtin observes in *Discourse in the Novel* (1981;2014), the figure of the simpleton and naïve fool is often used in novels to counter discursive, monologized power in order to show the narrow-

ness of authoritative discourse. ›The fool‹ thus becomes the wise person: ›The coupling of incomprehension with comprehension, of stupidity, simplicity and naiveté with intellect is a widespread and typical phenomenon in novelistic prose‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 403). Its function lies in ›robbing‹ authoritative language, ›the language of all who hold power who are well set up in life‹, the ›power to harm [...] by means of a smile or a deception‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 401), mocking its ›falsity‹ within ›novelistic-dialogic situations‹ or ›dialogic oppositions‹ as ›the fool and the poet, the fool and the scholar-pedant‹. Simplicity and incomprehension in the novel interact ›dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicalizes and whose mask it tears away‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 403).

The narrator's satirical depiction of the discourse of history elicits a distance from the characters and thus also engenders a space for the spectacle of the performance and performativity of their dialogue. The characters and their speech are centralized in this way. Within this spotlight an ›implied audience‹ is indicated and left alone with the characters as well as addressed through the characters' immediate speech, which effectuates a more nuanced intimate space of listening within the text. While the humorous tone of the narrator frames the exchange (colonial history) and structures it ideologically and evaluatively, thus setting the scene for suspense and attention, Archie and Samad's speech is noteworthy in that it *reshapes* and *renegotiates* the established (imperial) historical discourse.

The characters are furthermore *presented* as thoughtful, which thwarts the expectation of a ›fool‹ performance. Rather, they both appear as reflective ›speaking humans‹, who in their dialogue rectify and go beyond historically driven, dominant and prejudiced images of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹. Archie reports to Samad; he *informs* Samad about how ›they‹ are, thus reversing the role of a ›native informant‹ in colonial discourse and closing the epistemic gap between him and Samad. Their closeness is intensified by the joint repairing of the radio. On Archie's part this process does not happen without some reserve and shows his embeddedness in colonial discourse and the effort it costs him to escape it, while for Samad it apparently does not require much difficulty to approach Archie since on ›his side of the history‹, at least in this sense ›race‹, does not play an excessive identitary role. Out of his own self-understanding as another ›human being‹ (from a specific privileged class and family background), Samad does not mind to speak to a *white* Englishman, not least because Archie acknowledges his critical stance towards ›British‹ history and because he cannot *see* and has no regard for an alleged ›superiority‹ of whiteness/empire/Britishness. This context is set within a humorous narrative perspective that plays with the contradictions and incongruities of colonial signification. On the one hand, the humorous portrayal is based on the seemingly irreconcilable difference of their (singular) sociality, and at the same time, it reiterates popular stereotypical images of the *white* Englishman and the ›colonized‹ ›Indian‹ other, which are deferred. It also shows their different subject-positions within the coloniality of discourse and its effects. While Archie is quiet and interested but does not talk much, uncertain how to behave towards the (handsome) ›Indian‹ ›other‹, Samad appears sociable and chatty. Archie is shown to be ›very English‹, the antithesis to Samad's confident and open-minded, free-floating conviviality. The scenes are portrayed in a deadpan, cheerful-ironic humor within a distanced but sympathetic descriptive focalization that shows

both, the characters' incongruent behavior, as well as a space of affection between them. The narrator's stunning knowledge of their ›afflictions‹ is also a source of humor:

»No matter how much Archie shunned him, those four days of eyeballing had created a kind of silk-thread bond between the two men.« »It was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to do.« »[B]ecause you are a rare Englishman, Sapper Jones. I consider you my friend. Archie was not sure what he considered Samad, but he smiled gently in recognition of the sentiment.« (Smith 2000, 88, 93,103)

In this process of solidifying *friendship*, Archie, too, undergoes a process of hybridization. Samad seems to become a part of him:

»Archie had never had a hero [...]. But Samad, [...] had struck the seventeen-year-old Archie full square [...]: here was a friend, here was a hero, in a form Archie had never expected;.« (Smith 2000, 109)

And like old, intimate partners, Archie soon even begins to anticipate how Samad reacts: »[I]nstitutively, Archie turned to Samad, expecting one of his speeches« (Smith 2000, 110). And Archie begins to protect his despairing hero, who realizes painfully that the war will not bring him any valiant splendor: »[I]like a bus Jones. We have missed the bloody war.« (Smith 2000, 105). When a Russian officer finds the drugged Samad with his revolver in his mouth, and Samad, embarrassed, professes to clean it, Archie explains: »That's how they do it« »in Bengal« (Smith 2000, 115). Archie thus recognizes and consciously *uses* a form of othering; he now knows that Samad's racialized body regularly experiences different forms of othering, and he employs it here in order to protect Samad and their *friendship* – in a kind of secret code language of intimacy. This ›historical‹ *friendship*, so to speak, is what leads Archie, almost thirty years later, to call Samad »an unlikely comrade«, and yet »still the oldest friend he had – a Bengali Muslim he had fought alongside back when the fighting had to be done« (Smith 2000, 12).

In retrospect, Archie and Samad adjust their ›memories‹ to the expectations and connotations of the ›war proper‹ and its implications for and inscriptions on their masculinized bodies and biographies. After all, they both survived the dangerous backstage of war more or less by chance because they were together, strolling through the neighborhood. This (backstage of) war and this ›unlikely comradeship‹ within ›coloniality‹ and the structures that racism has built, brings Samad to England, 28 years later, and to the only friend he knows on the ›little island‹.

Unlike Archie, the educated Samad is much more influenced by (decolonial) authoritative discourse and the narrative of history and national pride. He sees himself as a descendent of a hero and tries to follow in the footsteps of this narrative and anti-colonial discourse. Samad regards the war as a chance to become (such) a Pande-hero like his ›great-grandfather‹, who influenced history. Unlike Archie who is shaped by discourse but not anchored in a national narrative (»[w]e're nobody. [...] Not that I've ever been much bothered, mind«), Samad embodies (anti-colonial) national discourses. Following their values and evaluations, he wants to achieve some form of (historical) glory that can

be transmitted – that can enter historical narratives and, at the same time, have an impact on ›reality‹. (National/anti-colonial) discourse is depicted here as a failure of another kind. While Archie and Dickenson-Smith fail to conform to colonial discourse and, to an extent, fall out of its embracing scope, Samad's voice, by adhering to a dominant narrative, develops hyperbolic-tragic features that signify the failure of both mainstream and subversive discourses. This tragic feature of the humorous tonality is subtly detectable in Samad's thwarted dreams. Samad's subjectivity is formed by the desire to achieve something of (historical) value that can be incorporated into the national narrative and passed on to the next generation: »You must live life with the full knowledge that your actions will *remain*»; ›Our children will be born of our actions« »He was expected to come home covered in glory, and then to return to Delhi triumphant. When would he have another chance?« (Smith 2000, 102, 105). But then Samad learns that the war is over. He realizes that he has failed his dream (shaped by discourse, not by his ›free will‹, if there can be such a thing; ›free will‹ the narrative seems to imply, lies more in the interstices of not-knowing and power-lessness than in any kind of ›education‹).

The tragedy of this dream is shown not only on the abstract level of Samad's subject formation and in its tragic-comic sides but, also on a material level and the effects it has on his body. Samad's right hand is badly injured in the war, yet not as expected within national imagery and discourses representing a ›glorious, brave military deed‹ but by an accident (»a bastard Sikh, Sapper Jones«, whose »gun went off and shot me through the wrist« (Smith 2000, 89). Chance, then, is presented not only as a, *the* model for the functionality of ›life‹ but also as the machinery of its dysfunction – with material effects. On an abstract level, it signals the absurdity of ›knowledge‹ in ›life‹, of fixed concepts and ideas, and of the belief of having power over the development of things (in war, for example). In another, material way, it signals the effects on the body and the formation of subjectivity, giving way to the assumption of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness as an insight of and into ›life‹. Samad is marked by the grotesqueness of both colonial and decolonial discourses. This is underlined by the fact that Samad works as a waiter in London to support his family, relying on his left hand. However, what has ›disabled‹ him, what has hampered him, are the discourses that have defined his (subject-)position as either an anti-colonial hero or an inferior other. The grotesqueness of such notions is inscribed in his body in three intersecting ways: Samad's body is violated and scarred, it is racialized (in London, he is henceforth ›the Indian‹), and he loses his privileged class affiliation due to colonial-independence-partition, migration, and working in an ›Indian‹ restaurant where he is looked down upon and exploited (also by other people of color, particularly the restaurant's owners). The only surface of identification that is left to Samad is ›Islam‹, which also echoes a tragic-comic humor as it is also bound to (colonial and decolonial) social constructions and their vague and ambivalent meanings, and (again) a failed dream – that ›education‹ will bring some form of fame and glory. But this depends on the overall social conditions, in particular for the pariah – and for ›the migrant‹, one of which is the effects of racism.

While Samad's grotesque figure thus initiates the site of a mirror and critique of colonial discourses and the intersectional effects of ›race‹, class, ableism, it also signifies a failure within anti-colonial nationalist and migratory-classist discourses. Its always failing, derailed acts explode the ›truth‹ of different authorized and mainstream discourses.

It is a frayed voicing that is part of the other's ›reality‹. In this way, the effects of the doctomic and binarist pairing of colonizer/colonized are shown but also suspended. However, ›Samad‹ is not just the depiction of a stereotype and a figuration for the display of a battle of all possible discourses, he also represents singularity performing ›his own experiences‹ in-between these discourses, which are neither romanticized nor victimized. Rather, Samad moves in between these discourses in making his decisions, weighing »all the physical and metaphysical consequences« (*à propos* ›Poppy‹ as the teacher-figuration of temptation for Samad) (Smith 2000, 133) (– and don't we all do that all the time? In good times and in bad?). In this way the ridiculing that is inscribed in his character can also be seen as the possible acts of an animated ›person‹; they do not single him out as ›the other‹. Rather, the humorous hyperbole that surrounds Samad is generated as a discursive by-product by which ›everyone‹ is in a (different) way inscribed. Instead of inferiorizing him, the shadowy gloom against which he struggles and that engulfs his figure, also entails and begs the question of the ethical by playing with ›shame‹ – can one really disregard someone whose dreams could not come true and who is, instead, in all possible senses injured, marked by ›life‹? At the same time, the figure of Samad *can* be seen as a *failed* figure, the way he perceives himself as he cannot abide by ›the laws‹ of the discourses around him, but he *can* also be seen as a figure with a successful, fulfilled ›life‹: he has found a friend for ›life‹, he has a more or less functioning foe-friends marriage (›Samad pressed Alsana's hand. She kicked him in the ankle. He stamped on her toe. She pinched his flank« (Smith 2000, 130), he has two sweet sons, and with his best friend Archie, some (other) unforgettable war memories, almost memories of felicity, almost holiday-like ones rather than ›normal‹ war memories of open wounds and dead bodies (– okay, at least not so many. . .). Maybe thus, in the end, Samad and Archie are the lucky ones who have acquired more valuable things than what commercials, ›education‹, or enlightened middle-class ›life‹ models promise. One possible message that the two characters might convey may be that the definition of *failure* in the ›experience of life‹ might be more linked to the narratives and discourses that surround and usurp us, rather than to ›life‹ and ›truth‹ as such – and that it may rather open up other chances, and, materially speaking, other doorways (to wherever. . .).

These incidents of acting and deciding that, according to Derrida, are decisive and yet maddening moments, seem to make all ›living beings‹ equal– a realization that is both liberating and comical as if the quintessence of life were laughing at protocols, laughing at ›laws‹, laughing at ›existence‹ per se. Thus it is Samad's funny, *all too human* choices, *all too human* decisions that are laughed at, not his difference or, in other words: everyone's insane, illogical negotiations of the various aspects of ›life‹, which are inscribed in significations and meanings in the structures of not-knowing and powerlessness, are funny in an insightful way. And that is what makes everyone equal and every form of participation ›in life‹ funny in a tragic sense. It is in this light that we can read Samad's catastrophic decisions: to marry by birth assignment (but don't they love each other – ?), to have a love affair with his son's teacher, to suffer for his sin by sending one of his twin sons to Bangladesh to become a ›good Muslim‹, a son who will return as a ›civilized‹, almost-European atheist (and probably socialist) intellectual. All of this is ridiculous because it shows that it is not really possible to control ›life‹, that things are not predictable, that it is not possible to gauge one's own reactions and agency. . .).

In short, *this* seems to be the ethical muddle that Zadie Smith, inspired by E. M. Forster, describes. And maybe it is not so bad, just ›life‹ – within structures of power and ›knowledge‹ and power-lessness and non-knowledge.

In this respect, Samad's grotesqueness corresponds with Archie's character. While Samad is initially privileged by ›class‹, Archie initially seems privileged by ›race‹. Both privileges, however, are of no use to the characters in the long run. What they develop might be a desirable ›life‹ – a ›life‹ in *friendship*. Perhaps this is the achievement of *White Teeth's* gentle humor. It moves between all sorts of dominant norms and values, keeping the really essential ones, those that touch us and by which we are touched, as well as those that shyly and intimidatingly touch normalized norms – and may break them free.

What Matters? – *White Teeth* On the Level of the Narrative Discourse

Underneath this bizarre and funny grotesquery that ›life‹ as the carnivalesque materialization of discourses seems to be, lies the tragic-comic question of *what matters* – in the sense of *what is important* and in the sense of *how something affects the materiality of and in ›life‹?* And – in light of such forlorn insanity and negativity, as it all often enough seems to be, the questions seem to come up, *how ›we‹ face each other and the ›othered‹ other when ›we‹ face each other and the othered other, and thus how this matters and materialize?* Questions that may be the underlying query of literature per se and that the two characters seem to run (in slow-motion) to meet.

Stuck with Archie in a ghostly war on the outskirts of a ›Bulgarian village‹, Samad, stoned, sees his chance to finally become a hero, when he learns about a French ›Doctor‹, a Dr. Marc Pierre-Perret, who has worked with the Nazis in an eugenics project, a ›sterilization program, and later the euthanasia policy. Internal German matters. He was one of the very loyal‹ (Smith 2000, 106).

It is interesting here that the Nazi ›Doctor‹ is not German, instead of making use of a German stereotype, racism and its quest to distinguish between livable and unlivable human beings is presented as a *pan-European* project in more recent modern history. ›The Doctor‹ is hiding in a nearby house, painting the ›Bulgarian countryside‹, seeking repose in art, which makes art, too, lose its innocent place in relation to power, (sociopolitical) terror, and the search for a subject-position. ›The Doctor‹ is nicknamed ›Dr. Sick‹ by the children of the vicinity. »Dr. Sick was as good as his name, sitting in an armchair in front of the wood-burning fire. Sick. Huddled in a rug. Pale. Very thin,« (Smith 2000, 115). The nickname is a double reference to both ›the Doctor's‹ condition and his actions. Suffering from ›diabetic retinopathy‹, he excretes blood through his eyes and has red, blood-tinged tears.

The figure of ›the Doctor‹ shakes the foundation of what is understood as (Western) ›civilization‹ and ›education‹, representing its hidden, violent, colonial, and colonizing sides – inside and out. However, ›the Doctor‹ is not represented as evil per se. In fact, his sickness humanizes him as a pitiful figure and is, simultaneously, a synonym for his deeds, which may indicate ›self-hatred‹; ›sickness‹ can be understood as the exclusion of what is regarded as undesirable, as an abjection in ›the self‹ and what is projected onto the other in order to efface the unruly, the undermining of (imagined) boundaries and

the sign of heterogeneity (Kristeva 1982 a; Pentony 1996; Covino 2004; Duschinsky 2013). The designation ›Dr. Sick‹ in the context of *White Teeth* is thus complicated by a double bind. It symbolizes the grotesque and the banality of horror. On the one hand, the figure of horror is linked to ›sickness‹ as an undesirable, abnormalized state. On the other hand, ›sickness‹ is resignified as the desire to *extinguish* what is rejected in favor of what is considered as ›pure‹ and normative, based on dichotomous and binary thinking, and on fantasies of superiority that always amount to nothing less than fascist political dynamics and ideologies. It circumscribes the arbitrariness of borders and is a form of *out-spacing* that draws the line to the other, who is conceived as despicable and in *this* sense untouchable. ›Dr. Sick‹ seems to represent the personification of this process. Both meanings of ›sickness‹ are provocatively linked to this figure, who in a dilemmatic way embodies a sense of pity as well as of horror. Read along those lines, ›sickness‹ evokes again Hannah Arendt's idea of the *banality, ordinariness, and thoughtlessness* that makes evil possible (1963), suggesting that there is no ›ingenuity‹ behind cruelty but only a meager conformity, which makes it so dangerous – a relation of the self to itself, at the other's expense, the prefix *ex-* again as in *exact*, that Derrida problematizes and critiques as that, which *per se* culls, weeds, rejects, eliminates. It also reveals the violent and disgusting site of the functionality and bureaucratization of fascist thought and of (*any* and *all*) such ideologies, the ›false pathos‹ of discourse in Bakhtin's sense through which a sense of responsibility for oneself and the other (*as* part of one's self) horrifyingly disappears, making room for blatant, legalized evil as (everyday) politics and normalized practices of (social and bodily) lethal senses of othering and exclusion. (But it is not *normal*. This is the residue that remains and speaks back to *us* out of the text, like an echo – one that will always haunt *us – all*). It is reminiscent of how Maya Angelou links the ›evil‹ done in the name of the ›good‹. In a lecture at the conference *Facing Evil*, Maya Angelou invokes the material outcome of epistemes and discourses with regard to the other in a planetarian manner in pasts and presents, as if asking for another future, by saying:

»Throughout our nervous history, we have constructed pyramidal towers of evil, of times in the name of good. Our greed, fear and lasciviousness have enabled us to murder our poets, who are ourselves, to castigate our priests, who are ourselves. The lists of our subversions of the good stretch from before recorded history to this moment. We drop our eyes at the mention of the bloody, torturous Inquisition. Our shoulders sag at the thoughts of African slaves lying spoon-fashion in the filthy hatches of slave ships, and the subsequent auction blocks upon which were built great fortunes in our country. We turn our head in bitter shame at the remembrance of Dachau and the other gas ovens, where millions of ourselves were murdered by millions of our-selves. As soon as we are reminded of our actions, more often than not we spend incredible energy trying to forget what we've just been reminded of.« (Angelou 1988)

In Maya Angelou's thoughtful and poetic analysis, any dichotomy between ›us‹ and ›them‹ seems to vanish, yielding in an arresting way to a ›we‹, to what *we* are capable of, implicitly asking what *we* can do, how *we* can face responsibility – for each other. In the pronoun *we*, the *other* and the *self*, *they* and *we*, *you* and *I*, become one – forever connected entities, beyond all borders, languages, and discourses. Maybe it is this *we* that clangs

through the words of Hannah Arendt and Maya Angelou, that somehow, frighteningly and ambiguously, also appears here in the shadowy figure of ›Dr. Sick‹. Through gallows humor, the narrative explores the liminal threshold between humor and the unbearable, a saddening, beyond crying form of humor – ›laughter‹ shot through with anguish.

In a poker game with the Russian officer who has been ordered to transfer ›Dr. Sick‹ ›to Poland‹, where he is to be handed over to ›the authorities‹ (Smith 2000, 107), Samad, slipping into role-playing, catching up on unfulfilled desires, declares himself an officer and Archie as his Lieutenant, and trades what they have won for ›the Doctor‹. An absurd comic impasse occurs when Samad *pays* for ›the Doctor‹, a Nazi criminal, determined to kill him in order to have done something (meaningful) in war. Archie, on the one hand, covers for Samad's deception and, on the other hand, tries to persuade him to let ›the Doctor‹ go. Archie's efforts backfire when Samad assertively declares that Archie is indeed right and that *he*, Archie, should kill ›the Doctor‹, as this has been a European *war* on values (Smith 2000, 119). But out of a marginalized position in the discourse of the nation, Archie is not used to identifying himself with anything as broad as ›a nation‹ or philosophical ›values‹; he cannot consider ›history‹ and ›historical narratives‹ or their transmission as important if it were for the sake of his potential children, as Samad does: »I can't see the difference« [between heroic deeds and profane ones] »When you're dead, you're dead«; »Our Children!« sniggered Archie, simply amused. The possibility of offspring seemed so distant« (Smith 2000, 102). Archie, however, eventually gives in to his friend's request. He is willing to kill the evil that ›his country‹ has fought to eliminate (with the help and lives of its colonized subjects). And off they go. While Samad stays in the safety of the car, Archie walks out of the car with ›the Doctor‹, but then, on the way, orders ›the Doctor‹ to stop, to have a thorough look at him. It is not history or some ideology or learned philosophical values that makes Archie do this, but simply the desire to face ›the Doctor‹, the personification of evil, who is at his mercy in that moment:

»[B]ecause he wanted to see evil, pure evil; the moment of the great recognition, he *needed* to see it – and then he could proceed as previously arranged. But the Doctor was stooping badly and he looked weak. [...] And Archie'd never seen a man so crumpled, so completely vanquished. It kind of took the wind out of his sails. He was tempted to say *You look like I feel*, for if there was an embodiment of his own pounding headache, of the alcoholic nausea rising from his belly, it was standing opposite him now.« (Smith 2000, 534)

In a space of confrontational encounter, the passage here introduces the question of ethics in a narrative fold within the diegesis, the storyworld, through direct discourse. Who is allowed to live and who or what can decide over ›existence‹? A subtle humorous tone accompanies the text, making the question of ethics a more profane and mundane one, a part of bodily processes, a question of the everyday. This deposes the question from its, ›lofty intellectual‹, theoretical heights, as Bakhtin would say. It makes the everyday into ethical decision-making, which is always relational and in ›the face‹ of the other within instantaneous and specific spaces and times. It is triggered through a focalization of Archie and the free indirect discourse that follows it. Humor is invoked as Archie compares his state of intoxication and hangover with ›the Doctor's‹ frightened concern

regarding his own fate. Through this impossible, naïve comparison, though, Archie understands not so much ›the Doctor‹, but another ›human being‹ in a predicament, someone else who is not only directly standing in front of him, facing him, but someone whom he has the power to kill. The scene that is created inbetween Archie and ›the Doctor‹ tacitly evokes a witnessing vantage point and bolsters the implication of an ›audience‹ and its involvement and complicity with the scene as well as with the question of ›crime and punishment‹ through the performance-character of the scene. From Archie's perspective, ›the Doctor‹ all of a sudden becomes the threatened one, whose ›life‹ hinges on Archie's decision, rather than the brutal, cold, abusive ›scientist-criminal. The confrontational trait of the space is constructed through the difference between the two characters, who seem to represent the two ends of the European discourse on ›race‹, class and the role and value of what ›education‹ should comprise of, as well as its effects in the material dynamics of the sociopolitical specter. ›The Doctor‹ represents science, and it is the narrative of scientific objectivity, hailing from the past, and ideas of the ›Enlightenment‹ (religious othering and the beginning of imperialism) that has allowed him, within a Nazi episteme, to control and annihilate life. Through Archie's character the highly discursivized question of ethics is brought down to an empty space where ›ignorance‹ and ›freedom‹ reside next to each other. Archie is not acting out of an ethical discourse though. He rather ›lives‹ its impulse in the performativity of its context. Archie can only see ›the Doctor‹ at *this moment* of their confrontation. To kill or not to kill, that is the question for him. It is a decisive moment of encounter for Archie, however, he seems only vaguely aware of the import of what is at stake. Archie can only see ›the Doctor‹ as an individual in a miserable situation. But by subtly identifying with him (›You look like I feel‹), Archie unleashes impulsively an ethical relation with ›the Doctor‹ that ›kind of took the wind out of his sails‹.

This moment in the novel comes close to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's suggestion of the ethical relation as a (virtually counter-intuitive) impulse that ensues reflexively out of an *aesthetic education*. In her rereading and restaging of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Spivak problematizes ethics by taking it out from the discourses of politics (Kant) and epistemology (Lévinas) and placing it in ›the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction‹ (Spivak 2012, 317). Thus read, ›Archie‹ can be seen to represent the struggle with an ethical reflex that disrupts colonial as well as anti-colonial discourses. This is all the more interesting as Archie is displayed as ›uneducated‹ in an official sense. Archie has rather acquired ›knowledge‹ from fictional narratives. A roguish humor erupts from the text that shows and delinks two forms of ›knowledge‹-formation: one form of ›knowledge‹-formation that comprises mainstream and colonial ›knowledge‹ constitutions, which more or less systematically inculcate people with specific sets of ›knowledge‹, inducing regimes of ›knowledge‹, and another form of ›knowledge‹-formation that consists of random forces of ›knowledge‹ production, emanating, more or less unwittingly, from the niches of ›the arts‹. The scene stresses on the one side, the complicity of power-alignments and dominant, authorized forms of ›knowledge‹ and education. On the other hand, it explores the boundaries and limits of not-knowing and power-lessness. Archie cannot deny ›the Doctor‹ a last cigarette and a last conversation, although he is well aware that this could be a strategy of ›the Doctor‹ to get away, which he *knows* from fictional narratives, because he has

»seen the movies« and »because this was a tactic of Movie Nazis«, and »Archie should have known; he spent the first four years of the war watching flickering Movie Nazis at [his hometown cinema] the Brighton Odeon.« (Smith 2000, 535)

The implication of (fictional) narrative as a form of ›knowledge‹ flickers between Archie's funny solemnity, reflected in the narrator's free indirect speech that is contrasted with the severity of the situation in the temporal space of World War II and the end of the Nazi regime. From this bifurcation of Archie's thoughts and the narrator's tongue-in-cheek factual report (indicating the time in-between, decades later, otherwise it would just cry numbly, I assume . . .) results a grim, incongruous humorous tone. The humorous tone keeps a close distance to Archie, which, with a wink, produces an affectionate sympathy for him. This creates the possibility of a space and a stage, and the potential complicity of an ›implied audience‹ that also has to decide is raised. Archie appears as a familiar ›face‹, a friend, almost family. ›The twinkle‹ also unleashes an affectionate teasing form of anticipation. It is as if the novel expects an ›implied audience‹ to abide by and observe Archie's performance, not knowing and power-less as to what will happen. The twinkle, thus, organizes a space between the narrator and an ›implied audience‹ as well as signifies a meta-discourse beyond the text on an extra-diegetic level, where ›Archie‹ as a ›character-type‹ can be further understood and shifted from someone uneducated to someone who may be ›knowing‹ and wise in his own way. Furthermore, narrativity, here in the sense of cinema, is, on the one hand, thematized as a pedagogical and formative discourse. On the other hand, its mimetic stance, its closeness to, even reflection of, ›reality‹ is strengthened as ›the Doctor‹ indeed acts like characters in ›films‹. However, since the tone of the narrative maintains an affectionate humorous display in a close focalization of Archie, it retains a (self-)deconstructive feature: While it thematizes the pedagogical place of fiction in ›life‹, it withdraws from an affirmative or declarative utterance regarding the validity of art. However, the humorous allusion is sufficient to confront and contest the ›truth‹ of philosophical and scientific ›knowledge‹ that has a privileged place in the formation of discourse but often presupposes dominant sociopolitical conditions and values that are not further questioned: Throughout the novel Archie is portrayed as uneducated, but not as unaware and unthinking. Samad's rigorous education in biology and ›the Doctor's‹ highly cultivated and malevolent ›knowledge‹ are confronted with another ›knowledge‹ that comes from the power-less narratives of fiction and the liberating space of non-knowledge, which provides a niche of ›freedom‹ in the subject where they can merge ›knowledge‹ gained from fiction and ›counter-intuitive, conflictual ›affective labor‹ in the ›nestle of rhetoric and logic‹ (Spivak 2012, 317) within the impulse of the moment when a decision has to be made. The reference to fictional narratives as enabling discourses seems naïve and in a humorous tone emphasizes Archie's apparent ignorance. At the same time, the allusion to the formative aspect of fiction opens up a thoughtful humorous play with the value of fiction versus objectifying scientific as well as philosophical discourses. The affective, humorous tone that enables a sympathetic proximity to Archie also valorizes Archie's ›simplicity‹ for its *otherwise* philosophical wisdom, gained from artistic, fictional narratives and conditions of powerlessness. It is affective in the sense that it arouses empathy for him and makes space for a contemplative attitude towards the question of ›knowledge‹, ›education‹, and structures of power as well as ›non-

knowledge, power-lessness, and the *productive unstructure* that emanates from these two elements in surprising ways. Once this ›stage of performance‹ is created, it unfolds into a performative, a ›witnessed‹ ›spectacle‹ that remains unprogrammed.

This problematization of an *ethical impulse* through Archie's power-lessness and unknowing ›knowledge‹ must be seen in context, however. It would be too simplistic to see it represented by a *white* male figure; Archie acts in a context where, as Samad puts it, ›your‹, European forms of annihilation are discussed and displayed. On an extra-fictional and meta-narrative level, it is not for nothing that Samad stays in the car, and is distanced from the scene and discussion since it is not ›his‹ discourse but rather one that threatens his ›right to live‹ and ›existence‹ as well. The novel leaves *white* Europeans of *Christian* descent to deal with the ghosts (in every possible sense) of ›their‹ discourses. (This is not meant to *excuse* anyone else: Other ›regions‹, systems, and other peoples certainly have other crimes and atrocities to deal with – in modernity often not unaffected by the structures and ideologies of colonialism, coloniality – decolonization, nation-building, and the general *will to power* – *that may also contain* structures of evil in the name of good).

Just when it appears that ›the Doctor‹ is getting away with his strategy and Archie is despairing, powerless, not knowing what to do, how to decide, *chance* comes to his rescue: »Please, just stop talking, *please*, so I can – ‹ he yells »I've got a coin!« (Smith 2000, 539). Again, through a humorous play with the naivety of an unlearned Archie, a question is raised about the undecidability that any (ethical) question poses. It is metaphorically allegorized by the ›flipping of a coin‹.²⁸ Archie wants the coin to decide. The idea of chance as a determining possibility, another structure that defines ›being‹ as well as the play of the plot, also critically foregrounds another question, namely that a decision, any affirmative act, is not an end in itself but enables other stories. In the last chapter, an *authorial* voice, it seems, refers to the ramifications of decisions and the ends of novels by declaring:

»*But first the endgames*. Because it seems no matter what you think of them, they must be played, even if, like the independence of India or Jamaica, like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story.« (Smith 2000, 540)

This voice is different from the humorous playful tone of the narrator. It is an ironic, more explicit reference to historical and political issues. The end of a decision that structures a story as well as history, narratives, it seems to say, is also the beginning of dialogicity and (just) another step within time and the unknown. Metanarratives are not a one-way street, and whether they are anchored in (a *Christian*) ›God‹, ›science‹ or ›history‹, they more often than not serve to legitimate decisions along embattled structures of power, which either way affect and change narratives and narrative discourses within the available time and space, but not forever and not in a totalizing way. Either way, decisions

28 Archie's flipping coin is often read as emblematic of the novel's postmodernist traits, and seen as a deployment of the notion of ›chance‹; while ›truths‹ are indeed questioned in the novel, especially with regard to discourse itself, the flipping coin may also indicate the arbitrariness of decisions as well as Archie's sociopolitical background. Cf. Hong (2007), Paproth (2008, 10); see also Sell (2006); Jang (2020, 629).

are not fully controllable and within a specific power, overriding ›knowledge‹. It is this slice of non-knowledge and power-lessness in the quest for ›knowledge‹ and power that cuts through their material and also decides how things can further evolve. Acknowledging this involvement of non-knowledge and power-lessness in all steps taken, in any encounter, is a sign of the openness of things, of *affirmative* openness, as an attitude of expectation towards the unknown in the ambiguous valley of hope, determination, and un/certainty.

As Archie reaches for the coin to see the result of what has been decided upon, ›the Doctor‹ shoots him in the leg: ›The bullet had passed straight through, just missing the bone, but leaving a shard of the cap embedded deep in the flesh‹ (Smith 2000, 540). With that the chapter ends, while the narrator's chatty voice reports of how the loud shot made Samad, still sitting in the jeep, ›jump‹:

»He slapped dead an insect that had been winding its way round his wrist, looking for enough flesh to bite. Lifting his head, he saw in front of him that Archie was returning: bleeding and limping badly, made visible, then invisible, illuminated, obscured, as he wound in and out of the headlights. He looked his tender age, the lamps making his blond hair translucent, his moon-shaped face lit up like a big baby, head first, entering life.« (Smith 2000, 121 f.)

This scene contains a subtle, imperceptible humor in the description of the killing of the insect, a ›soft representation‹ of the non-human in Smith's work (Bingham 2022, 455). It induces a halt – a pensive moment about how to respond to a face that has committed and helped to commit abuse and murder. The scene also asks where we need to rethink our relation to the other(s) of our self as part of our existence. The grimly humorous tone is made even more bizarre by the light and fluffy tone in which it is delivered, which, at the same time, captures the overload of the moment with mixed, affective, and unanswerable questions. It also mocks the young male characters who must play the male masculine hero. This question is contained in a sentence that evokes a very ordinary image of a very common, everyday human act – impulsively slapping and killing an insect just because you feel annoyed by it, while everywhere in the four niches of the book's pages, the invisibility of genocides (of enslavement, of colonialism, of decolonization, of world wars, of Nazi epistemology, of the Shoah) seems to silently wait for some kind of reference. This comic scenery with its serious theme and grim undertone arises specifically from the focalization of the insect ›that had been winding its way round his [Samad's] wrist, looking for enough flesh to bite‹. In view of the crimes committed, Archie's alleged murder, and the arising question of how to conceive of it all, the narrator is content with a detailed description of the smallest acting entity they can find, hiding away behind it and thereby bringing the tense atmosphere, as well as the serious question of ethics, imbued in-between the self and the other, once again, and in its manifold meanings, implicitly into the fore as if from another (humanimal) perspective.

It is only at the end and crux of the novel, and 47 years later, that Samad, proud of Archie and their little secret, has to learn how this *endgame* turned out. Archie did not kill ›the Doctor‹ after all; he could not do it:

»For fuckssake, why did you do that?« said Archie furious grubbing the gun off the Doctor, easily and forcefully. »It's tails. See? It's tails. Look. Tails. It was tails.« (Smith 2000, 540)

Despite having been shot in the leg, Archie is indignant, to be sure, but nevertheless, according to the dictates of the coin, lets »the Doctor« go, as we learn in the novel's final chapter.

Is this good or bad? Is it tragic or is it humorous? Or some combination of all of those?

Endgames and Beginnings

The many traits of the story come together in the last chapter of the novel and in the middle of »London«. The setting is a room, an exhibition hall, in the fictional *Perret*-(yes! *Perret*!) Institute in Trafalgar Square, where all the main characters, major and minor, are, for a variety of reasons, inside and outside the building. The Trafalgar Square as well as the main building are »occupied« by these figures from the periphery of the city. But the main event that has brought them together at this time and place is the »Millennial Science Commission«, which is about to present a mouse genetically programmed to die on New Year's Eve. Marcus Chalfen and Samad's twin son Majid are part of the scientific group and have invited Archie's and Samad's families to the event. There are also several groups in the room who want to sabotage the event. One of them is Millat, Samad's other twin son, who more out of TV-knowledge about »Muslims« than out of a sincere identification with »Islam« or fundamentalist Islamic aspirations, has brought with him a pistol to shoot the researcher who, instead of the Almighty, wants to decide upon the future of an »existent«, the mouse. »Non-knowledge«, in its narrower sense of *ignorance* (political malpractice) and powerlessness (or the abuse of religion and youth), is here taken to mean *absolute* »knowledge« and power in the name of God, which, especially from the perspective of Islamic law, at least, should amount to nothing less than blasphemy. It turns out that the main researcher behind the project is exactly the vicious »Doctor« whom Archie did not kill, a revelation that does not *not* come without its own deliciously comic »irony« in the narrator's endearing voice, linking the two characters and showing their multiple historical affiliations, on more affective related grounds: »[A]n old man weeping tiny tears of pride. Red tears. Tears Archie recognizes. But not before Samad recognizes them« (Smith 2000, 532), the very same »Doctor« who never got a trial because Samad so desperately wanted to become a hero according to the national, anti-colonial discourse that construed his desire to participate in »history«, which they both, in effect, did (good or not good?). *Recognition*, and not only the »Doctor«, is the trigger-word that construes and determines the humorous accord of the scene.

»Captain Samad Miah, who pauses for a moment on the threshold, peers through his reading glasses, and realizes that he has been lied to by his only friend in the world for fifty years. [...] And then, with a certain horrid glee, he gets to the fundamental truth of if, the anagnorisis: *This incident alone will keep us two old boys going for the next forty years.* It is the story to end all stories. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

›Archibald!‹ He turns from the doctor towards his Lieutenant and releases a short, loud, hysterical laugh; he feels like a new bride looking at her groom with perfect recognition just at the moment when everything between the two of them has changed. ›You two-faced bugging bastard trickster misamata, bhain-chute, shora-baicha, syut-morani, haraam jadda ...‹

Samad tumbles into the Bengali vernacular, so colorfully populated by liars, sister-fuckers, sons and daughters of pigs, people who give their own mothers oral pleasure ...‹ (Smith 2000, 532 f., all emphasis in the text)

The scene of Samad's sudden discovery is shown in a humorous way by the use of a close focalization of Samad's acts and thoughts, through indirect discourse as well as by direct speech, which express his shock; here, Samad's ›laughter‹ (in contrast to the potential ›laughter‹ of a – possibly empathetic – ›implied audience‹) does not signify humor, but the pain of betrayal and the ›irony‹ of disbelief that accompanies it. This multifarious sentiment and its bittersweet humor are indicated by the description of Samad's ›laughter‹ as ›short‹, ›loud‹, and ›hysterical‹, a ›laughter‹ that cannot decide from which senses and thoughts it emerges or should emerge and that encompasses all the antagonistic and undecidable sites of the moment. While the humor and the shock go hand in hand and invoke suspense through Samad's ›pause‹ on the ›threshold‹, the ›peer through his reading glasses‹ – the thorough look intensifies Samad's simultaneous disbelief and realization – the dramatic turn is halted by the humorous consolation of the narrator's two-voiced indirect speech: ›[H]e feels like a new bride looking at her groom with perfect recognition just at the moment when everything between the two of them has changed‹. Samad's thoughts are embedded in the narrator's description, and it is this ›third‹ voice of the narrator that may rise to a hysterical, humorous tone while, at the same time, maintaining Samad's state of shock. The construction can be regarded as an authorial allusion, as the comparison exhibits an allegorical, political meaning. The elicited images of a ›new bride‹ and ›her groom‹ evoke humor through allegory, playing with notions of cis-normativity and the marginalization of queerness. These images signify and travesty the intimate closeness of Samad's and Archie's friendship by comparing it to a romantic relationship, an allusion that equates relations of ›love‹ by transgressing normative ideas of cis-romanticism and queerphobic othering, as well as exclusive meanings of ›love‹ and ›friendship‹. The function of the description is not so much to ridicule the two characters or their friendship, but to affectionately emphasize their intimacy. At the same time, the queering of the characters shows the arbitrariness of normalized sexualized, gender norms. ›Looking at the groom in perfect recognition when everything between them has changed‹ not only evokes the harshness and brutality of the betrayal and its deep inter-subjective meaning with regard to what happens next, to a foreseeable, different future (in which Archie and Samad will no longer be friends), it also depicts Alsana's critical injunction and advice to Clara to look closely at her ›love‹ relation, to question it, to try to get to the bottom of all the supposed certainties. There seem to be none, or are there? At any rate, Samad is simply realizing what Alsana already knew and practiced: that she was not fooled by masculinist ideals. The close, empathetic portrayal of Samad is further intensified by the focus on his hurt thoughts. *Only* is the magic word, the deixis, that carries the weight of the disappointment as well as its humorous rendering since it emulates the

deeply felt sentiment of disappointment but also its infantilizing depiction, which softens the dramatic and humorous tone of the scene and heightens its dramatized humor. This affectively aroused humor is further evoked by the words ›the fundamental truth‹ and ›anagnorisis‹ as well as the description of Samad's shock as ›horrid glee‹. Samad's ›horrid glee‹ complements Alsana's insight to ›look-close-up at something‹ and Archie's ›stare‹ as well as Samad's belief in Archie's naivety. All of these forms of *staring*, and systems of *belief*, fragment and betray their ›truths‹. No ›truths‹ and no gaze appear to be sustainable, not even this one in the moment of its revelation. The signification of ›anagnorisis‹ is threefold, it plays on the threshold of the fictionality of fiction and the factuality of fact, and vice versa, it unleashes an *affective humor* at the threshold of tragedy and comedy, and it evokes and addresses an ›implied audience‹ that, together with Samad, can see *what really happened*: that the (*any*) fundamental truth is corrupted by the moment of its disclosure, as a ›pathos‹, in Bakhtin's words, as a lie, as a construct, »[t]hat the cornerstone of their friendship was made of nothing more firm than marshmallows and soap bubbles. That there is far more to Archibald Jones than he had ever imagined« (Smith 2000, 532). Affirmatively speaking, this also means that no one and nothing, no context, is reducible to how we might perceive it. While the anagnorisis unfolds the tragic element of this revelation in the face of Samad's grief, its humorous thread is unleashed by the narrator's indirect speech and the humorous, inapt description of their *friendship* with candy and potage as ›not more firm than marshmallows and soap bubbles‹. The metaphoricity of the comparison (the squishiness of marshmallows and the evanescence of soap bubbles with mock-amity) is incongruous with the pain of loss, yet congruous with regard to the sweetness of *friendships*, thus accommodating a bittersweet affectivity of loss, disillusionment, and longing. Humor is also induced by the antagonistic use of ›fundamental truth‹ and ›anagnorisis‹, which, moreover, construes and simultaneously addresses an ›implied audience‹, making the scene humorous from a position of observation that goes beyond its immediate ›presence‹ and invites a response, asking for a third party to decide whether this mess can (ever) be resolved. Humor works here as a rhetoric of dialogic deconstruction, a rhetoric that ultimately lies in the pleasure of the unfinished. This is not only the pleasure of the joy that follows the humorous description but also the pleasure of the sorrow that accompanies it, and of the infinity that is exposed in such undecidable moments, revealing the boundless abyss of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness at the heart of space, time, *you* and *I*, all ›events‹, and ›life‹ as such. In the end, death, appears as an inevitable and yet insoluble sign (although we cannot (yet) know what it may mean). Humor, then, plays at the liminal nature of not-knowing and the wisdom and relief that accompanies it, ›it is the gift that keeps on giving‹. As Mathew Bevis argues, humor, »as a P. S., as a desire to say ›And another thing . . .‹, is often an insistence that good things do *not* come to an end. Comic endings always seem to imply a future« (Bevis 2013, 109). The threshold-trait of the transition from tragedy to comedy also arises from the incongruity between Archie's *apparent* cunning and Samad's *perception* of Archie as incapable of hiding anything. Archie, as ›the fool character‹ and Archie as the naïve character in Samad's more literal perception, turns out to have been the figure who fooled Samad and his beliefs – his belief in Archie, as well as his belief in what formed their *friendship*, and their belief in what was important and mattered. Anagnorisis plays with the incongruity of expectations and the uncertainty of certain-

ties, and thus with the contingency of meanings. ›Knowledge‹, a firm, shared belief, as the force that gives birth to *friendship*, *seems* not only to have disappeared but actually never to have existed. Samad's shock erupts into a wave of dejected negativity. In the end, everything seems to be a lie, no matter where you look for some support (the ›nation‹, ancestral pride, ›education‹, anti-colonial heroism, ›war‹, ›religion‹, the belief that you can change fate and have a *friendship*), there seems to be nothing that you can hold on to – everything seems to ripple through your fingers like water (or sand). A humorous evocation arises precisely from the empathy that Samad's hyperbolic, somewhat narcissistic litany enforces in the narrator's indirect report. The term ›anagnorisis‹ refers not only to the tragic moment of the instance but also to an ironic and humorous display on two levels, on the level of the narrative discourse as well as on a self-reflexive meta-level. Firstly, the narrator's use of ›anagnorisis‹ alludes to the *moment* of Samad's discovery and shock. Secondly, it is a denotation that blurs the line to the ›fictional‹, as a constructed text without any claim to ›truth‹. This moment of revealed constructiveness, in turn, made into a ›fact‹, a ›factualization‹ that occurs because a secret has been unveiled in the narrative and has taken place. ›Anagnorisis‹ also refers to something ›factual‹ that is about to change the course of the narrative and its meanings, and the imagination of an ›implied audience‹ that had been invoked in the unfolding of the narrative as a witness to the characters' performances and ›lives‹.

The evocation of an ›anagnorisis‹ also implies reflection within and beyond the fictional text, again at the liminal seam of the narrative discourse and a meta-level. It signals that all narratives may be fundamentally untrue and entail moments of ›anagnorisis‹. Finally, ›anagnorisis‹ refers to the tragic moment of a deception but also to its ironic, humorous site. In this way, the ›anagnorisis‹ of tragedy is transformed into the disruptive parabasis of comedy, linking the semblance of tragedy and comedy even more. The humorous display of the ›anagnorisis‹ is achieved through the deployment of Samad's indignation, and his ›tumble‹ into ›the Bengali vernacular‹, and the use of (misogynistic) abusive language; a depiction that shows Samad is out of his mind and that stands for an unworldly, young age or a very intimate relationship that can no longer be disturbed by anger and insults. Nonetheless, Samad is not shown as a ridiculed figure but as a ›speaking human being‹, because the Bengali framed in Samad's expressive English announcement ›you two-faced buggering bastard trickster‹ is given space and is not just recounted by the narrator; the narrator translates and thus doubles Samad's outrage as well as its humorous display. The sincerity of the scene, despite or rather along with its drollness, and its touching moment is further enhanced in the text *by* Samad's Bengali outcry, showing both his dismay and his closeness to Archie as he addresses Archie in his mother tongue as if Archie would understand, (which Archie probably does as he ›knows‹ that Bengali is a part of his friend and nothing incomprehensible between them). Just »one page« before this ›anagnorisis‹, Archie is chatting with their mutual friend, Abdul-Mickey, the owner of the bar where they meet regularly. In this conversation Abdul-Mickey speaks of Muhammad Ali as ›*the greatest of all times*, past, present, future‹ (Smith 2000, 532) and describes him as *definitely his mentor*. Archie, worlds apart from the ›anagnorisis‹ (and not just one paragraph), concedes to himself that for him Samad was ›the mentor‹ as the narrator lets us know:

»For him, it's always been Samad. You can't tell Mickey that, obviously. Sounds daft. Sounds queer. But it's the truth. Always Sammy. Through thick and thin. Even if the world were ending. Never made a decision without him in forty years. Good old Sam. Sam the man.« (Smith 2000, 532)

Archie apparently speaks of the forty years of consolation *after* the fraud he has committed, without telling his friend, or at least *not mentioning it* (maybe having forgotten to mention it, so it was actually and strictly speaking not *real* fraud since he had let the coin decide, and since Samad wanted him to decide upon the fate of ›the Doctor‹). Archie's reflections, especially as they are presented in close indirect discourse and voiced without the interfering interference of the narrator, enable an intimate and unmediated approach to his touchy thoughts about Samad, and, at the same time, preserve and transpose his affectionate, almost romantic disposition toward Samad, whom he holds in high esteem as the passage shows. However, Archie's thoughts also represent a humorous side as they entail a cis-normative, male anxiety to be seen as ›queer‹ (a potential danger to images of cis-›masculinity‹ apparently). Yet, the narrator's relentless revelation of Archie's most secret thoughts also unleashes a space for reflection in which ›queerness‹, is thematized as a form of critique and as an abjected, excluded, and hidden form of ›love‹ that is positively affirmed as an expression of ›lived‹ masculinity and *friendship*. The humorous display of Samad's Bengali vernacular, at the same time, not only countersigns this image but also effects an affective specter of empathy and compassion for him. Thirdly, the unresolved and ambiguous allusion to a play on words with ›the end of all stories‹ and ›gift‹ creates another humorous evocation. While ›the end of all stories‹, alarmingly signals the end of Archie and Samad's *friendship*, it engenders an empathetic suspense. ›It is the story to end all stories‹ in conjunction with ›[i]t is the gift that keeps on giving‹ can be read as teasing allusions to whether Archie and Samad's *friendship* will withstand this revelation, suggesting that this may be the end of the story (as well as the end of their *friendship* and the novel). At the same time, the second sentence, concurrently, raises hopes that this might not be the case, as the end of stories unleashes other stories – and as *friendship* can also be understood as a ›gift‹ – that does not expect anything in return. It is just there, an in-betweenness, accumulated and accumulating by itself, an antithesis to the capitalist, market-based, understanding of the word ›gift‹ as a *thing*, a *present*, something *presentable*, something you *buy* to make someone happy. Rather, *friendship* – all deception aside – is ›the gift‹ that ›keeps on giving‹.

At the same time that Samad becomes aware of his friend's betrayal, Archibald senses movement in the hall and reacts to it instead of losing time explaining himself:

»But even before this, or at least simultaneous with this [Samad's realization and scene], while the audience looks on, bemused by this old brown man shouting at this old white man in a foreign tongue, Archie senses something else going on, some movement in this space, potential movement all over the room [...] and sees that Millat will get there first; and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means, so he stands. So he moves. So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there with no coin to help him, he is there before Samad can stop him, he is there with no alibi, he is there between

Millat Iqbal's decision and his target, like the moment between thought and speech, like the split-second intervention of memory or regret.« (Smith 2000, 533)

With the change of the scenery and the shift of focalization focused on Archie, the humorous rhetoric develops through the depiction of the character's *acts*, Archie's performance is scrutinized, *shown*, through the description of his actions (stunts, indeed!). At the same time that Archie's movements are recounted in the narrator's close, staccato rendition, the humorous angle is completed by the description of Archie's *senses*, which are rendered in the form of a void, like the calm before the storm, that makes room for them to take place, addressing an implicated audience (›he is there with no alibi‹, ›like the moment between thought and speech‹, ›like the split-second intervention of memory or regret‹) and which also results from his being aware of the moment with all his senses: his eyes, his ears, his ›life experience‹ as well as his experience of and ›knowledge‹ as an avid reader of cultural products such as films (›some movement in this space, potential movement all over the room [. . .] and sees that Millat will get there first; and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means‹). As Archie seems to act in a fraction of a second, the description is held in discontinuous, successive, short intervals that simulate the brevity of time, of the decision-making and of the swiftly executed series of actions that seem to be happening all at once, as in a film, mimicking and ironizing the ›mode of operation‹ of the visual media. The humorous tone is not only induced by the staccato of thought, senses and actions, indicated by the short sentences and the repetition of the deixis ›so‹ and ›there‹ (›So he moves. So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there‹) but also by the juxtaposition of Archie's action with the insinuation of his thoughts, which also encompass sorrow regarding the past and a concern with regard to what his past deed/decision might trigger ›today‹, which is evoked by the conjunction of the terms ›memory‹ and ›regret‹: ›like the split-second intervention of memory or regret‹. There is also a third, split, voice: that of the narrator, which accompanies the description as part of the indirect discourse: ›so he stands. So he moves. So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there with no coin to help him‹. The description again seems to mockingly mimic a camera lens. The humorous rendition is evoked in Archie's thoughts and actions, on the one hand, and the narrator's depiction of them, on the other hand, which ironize and disrupt the flow of Archie's performance, creating an implicit second opinion, in which it is not clearly discernible whose voice is speaking, the narrator's or Archie's: ›and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means‹, ›So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there with no coin to help him‹.

The description also functions as a multifaceted humor that targets different issues and explodes their straightforward meanings: it mimics Archie's cinematic mimicry as well as, more generally, the ways in which one might always already mimic something seen, experienced, read and thus implicitly declares ›life‹, ›reality‹ as a repetition, as a mimicry of images, of what one thinks, of what one has learned to regard, as ›right‹. It mimics and parodies action movies, and it renders a mimicry of Archie's actions, which induces a reality effect of the scene (and the novel), making the performance of the ›actually performing Archie‹ comical as Archie is visualized performing these actions in *reality*, and then again his performance is alienated as acts of mimicry of a visual medium, tele-

vision, which is itself ›unreal‹ and can be regarded as a medium of mimesis and mimicry of ›life‹. It sounds like a descriptive repetition of a repetition (›Archie‹ is cycling . . .) where ›reality‹ and mimesis dissolve into the reality effect of the novel and become ›real‹ through the narrator's visualizing report. It is as if the scene, Archie's performance – is described to an ›implied audience‹, equipped with ›knowledge‹ of the narrator that increases the humorous display as well as the realistic effect by doubling them. It is further informed by a meanwhile complacent ›implied audience's‹ acquaintance with Archie's unusual, jocular preference for using a coin to make decisions. Archie is guided by a conglomerate of his alert senses, informed by experience but also by (narrative) ›knowledge‹. While it is an ›anagnorisis‹ that brings Samad the ›fundamental truth‹, it is followed by a ›peripeteia‹ – as if the novel itself were suggesting that this is, at least and after all, what is expected of a ›good‹ narrative, by humorizing itself. The ›peripeteia‹ is initiated by the shift of focalization to Archie, which prepares and implies a further shift in the sequence of events taking place. This implementation of anagnorisis and peripeteia not only self-mockingly signifies the construction of fiction but also mocks the construction of literary writing according to specific, recognizable rules and the chopping-up of fiction into genres within literary studies. Both forms of normativized discursive (mainstream) dynamics (the use of strategic elements in literary writing, such as anagnorisis and peripeteia, which are usually classified as elements of ›tragedy‹), are defamiliarized through the self-reflexive, comedic and humorous framing of their use in the novel. As if in the void of a trance, induced by the concentration of all his senses and thoughts, ›like the split-second intervention of memory or regret‹, Archie realizes that something is about to go wrong again, and he begins to act. He impulsively throws himself between Millat and ›the Doctor‹. The anagnorisis that has prepared the change is followed by a peripeteia in which Archie is the (focalized) character of the action. This self-denoting characterization of the novel reads like a self-mocking, authorial level that infiltrates the novel and undermines the sincerity of the plot in a hyperbolically humorous way. However, through the hyperbole, it also carves out a space, a niche, for a zone of reflection:

»So Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do something unusual even for TV: save the same man twice and with no more reason or rhyme than the first time. [...]

But it would make an interesting survey (what kind would be your decision) to examine the present and the divide the onlookers into two groups: those whose eyes fell upon a bleeding man, slumped across a table, and those who watched the getaway of a small brown rebel mouse. Archie, for one, watched the mouse. He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. *Go on my son!* thought Archie.« (Smith 2000, 540–42)

While in the first part of the passage the narrator's voice can be detected, mocking Archie as well as visual media, the passage's central message is an ethical intervention, a call for responsibility, albeit in a humorous form, an attempt to avert a bad deed from happen-

ing, without much planning, philosophizing or reading, without much ›reason‹, ›logic – in ›rhyme‹ with the context.

Archie's impulsive act, this time, is not only informed by cultural ›knowledge‹ but also apparently by anxiety, triggered by remembering, a fear maybe of regretting *something*, perhaps that his *friendship* may be in danger. Archie's humorous action is thus paralleled by an indeterminate affectivity, the anxiety to lose something dear, a concern that this *something*, might affect the ›life‹ of his beloved friend in bad ways. This time he is not the young ›boy‹ anymore, the not so much older ›Doctor‹ called him back then to intimidate him. Archie has not only ›seen TV‹, meanwhile, but also ›real life‹, in good and bad ways, war, *friendship*, family. Archie has a *sense* of what seems right. And Archie is with the mouse he calls ›my son‹ in his thoughts. Archie acts out of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness, but his performance, affective equilibrium, and thoughts seem to be based on a kind of empathy. He can *identify with the other*, which is indicated by his intense observant focus on the mouse, in a more or less narrator-free indirect speech that entails understanding: ›He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. Go on my son!‹.

Though this *facing* of the mouse sounds naïve, and it sounds funny, it also unleashes a touching and knowing, almost mystical tone, as Archie *feels with the mouse*, and as the mouse is placed in the spotlight, facing an ›implied audience‹. The mouse seems to represent *the face of the other*, which seems sufficient to *understand* what may not be understandable as such, without much reasoning and without much ado. Facing the other is different from ›staring‹, and different from ›looking at someone close up‹. It seems to be an intense concentration in which all thoughts and affectivity are combined in a given moment, and in which the self and the other seem to dissolve, and for split-seconds become one, understanding something, before again resolving into two different entities. Facing the mouse can be seen as an affirmative mockery of a Levinasian reading of the face of the (wholly) other. But it can also be seen because of its mockery, which neither suggests nor imposes any ›truth‹, as an invitation to reflect on the face of the (wholly) Other at the other end of the hierarchy: an ›animal‹ as the other other of the ›human‹, which Archie's address transformes into a humanimal, questioning, from the ground up, the idea and separation of the self and the other. With ›Go on my son!‹, Archie visualizes and announces, parallel to the visualization of ›the face‹, the effects of an ethical relationship that denounces a vertical hierarchy. Archie faces the mouse, understands what this sudden change of circumstances means for the mouse (cut and run!), protects it by not giving it away or catching it, and releases it into freedom like a ›good‹ parent. Informed by a sense, unknowingly and without any power or ›authority‹, Archie nevertheless, *acts as a ›humanimal being‹*. He saves the life of ›the Doctor‹ (once again), but he also saves Millat from committing a crime, saves his *friendship* with Samad – it would have been one of the consequences of his former *historical* decision if Samad's son had ended up being the Pande in the end who killed ›the Doctor‹ – and frees the poor mouse from its glasshouse when he falls on it. But Archie does not do any of this with deliberation, intention, or much thought. He ›simply‹ acts out of *concern*, out of an awareness for his loved ones, and out of an impulse, a sense, imbued with *attunement to the moment*, to do

the ›right‹ thing at the ›right‹ place – to save people from harm or injury. The scene not only leaves the story open-ended (what happens to the mouse? Will it survive its calculated death? Speculations: Yes, it will because along the way it eats some cheese that fell from Hortense's buttered bread, which contains a substance that [. . .]. No, because its fate is already pre-programmed, but at least it dies in the dignity of freedom, or is eaten by a hungry cat that happens to be passing by, except that the cat looks into the mouse's eyes and recognizes the *traces* of medical treatment that it has also endured, and leads the mouse to where others have already gathered in a tavern to [. . .] – and maybe it's Derrida's unlucky cat, who, after he dies, whatever that means, wanders around in infinity in search of him, as it still has some questions, and there are some other aspects it wants to discuss with him, – where the mouse also finds itself. Or: Not that it died punctually on New Year's Eve well, it did die, but Marcus had played a little trick because he really did not want to kill the mouse but could not say so he aloud, and so had programmed the mouse to a fake death, but when the mouse woke up, it, well, I don't want to go into that, but in any case, it finally found itself in infinity, where it felt very, very lost and started to look for an abandoned side street, where, to its surprise, it also found a lot of artists and drug dealers, but then accidentally met Derrida's cat in a dog's bar, almost at the end of the street, from whom it learned all about deconstruction and got very excited, determined to return to the measurable time again, preferably to the earth, to find Marcus and tell him all about it [. . .].

The end also implies the possibilities of how things can end, which includes the ›exclusion of the unpredictable‹ and, perhaps, of (m)any possibilities of ›futuraity‹, which all seem possible, in terms of infinity (or literary writing – imagination). At the end, the story accentuates a bunch of undecidable endings. While Millat and Magid, because they are indistinguishable twins, are both sentenced to community service, which they will serve as »gardeners in Joyce's new project, a huge millennial park on the banks of the Thames«, seven years later, Irie lives in the Caribbean with her grandmother Hortense and Joshua, who becomes her lover, while their daughter writes »affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings?«.

Archie's and Samad's *friendship* not only survives the plot, with its anagnorisis and peripeteia, as it were, but seems to have deepened and now officially (they meet in their favorite bar) also includes Alsana and Clara. History is liberated and stands for counter-narratives, everyday narratives, the dates of events that structure ›lives‹, rather than for mainstream discourses that build nations. It is liberated through time and the music of joy in the anticipation of the grammar of language and imagination, and not only in a figurative sense as if humor were peacefully playing with a harp:

»And could it be that it is largely the criminal class and the elderly who find themselves wanting to make bets on the winner of a blackjack game, the one played by Alsana and Samad, Archie and Clara, in O'Connell's 31 December 1999, that historic night, when Abdul-Mickey finally opened his doors to women?

But surely to tell these tall tales, and others like them would be to spread the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as Archie knows, its not like that. It's never been like that.« (Smith 2000, 541)

It is always different – and maybe also beautiful – at least sometimes?

Structures of Knowledging and (the Matryoshka Dolls of) Othering

Of crucial importance to the dynamics of the novel and the lives of the characters, especially the younger, third generation, is the evocation of Jewishness in the novel (Lambert 2003; Furman 2005; Itakura 2009; Tolan 2013). Jewishness is invoked through the character of Marcus Chalfen and his family. As a Jewish Londoner, Marcus is also marked by migration, *diapora*, and othering. The Chalfens are the »third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovskyy« (Smith 2000, 328); their very name, *Chalfen(-ovskyy)*, signifies the traces of violence and violent uprooting. It is a name that signals the experience of otherness – »difference« – as othering – and thus may also signify an openness to the other. The figuration of the Chalfens entails a threefold structure in the novel, one that symbolizes an established middle class »Britishness«, yet symbolizing an *other* »Britishness« as well as one that *others* »Britishness« in an empowering sense. It is one embedded in and emerging from the past, but, nonetheless within the continuing structures of antisemitism, as one of the oldest if not *the* oldest form of racism and othering, long before and after 1492 in »Europe«. In the novel, Jewishness also means an archive of strategies of resistance and is an anchor and shelter for other othered people in the novel's contemporary present.

The Chalfens are portrayed as a middle-class family, which is part of their appeal and glamour in the novel; this is especially so for Irie. But they are shown as middle class with a casual difference: The Chalfens, in contrast to other (non-Jewish?) middle-class families »who shrugged their shoulders and coughed up the cash for a private education«, send their children to the nearby public school, even though they do not need to – but apparently consider themselves part of the outlawed community, »daring to take the ideological gamble« (Smith 2000, 313). As a consequence of the gamble, they not only have to deal with these two dysfunctional, imperfect families and their lost children, especially Irie and Millat, and later on, Millat's twin, Magid, and not only become their second home (Jang 2020, 623 ff.) but also, in quite charming ways, merge into a larger family landscape with a common grandchild (Irie's aforementioned doodling daughter).

The »Britishness« of the Chalfens, especially Marcus', appears as a disguised form of survival, a movement, however controlled and (un-)conscience, to achieve some kind of »normalcy« and to live on. Jewishness itself, in its assimilated form, is not exempt from antisemitism. Rather, as with the other forms of racism displayed in the novel, the effects of antisemitism on the life and history of the Chalfen Family are presented within a complex, affectively charged humorous rhetoric. This humor retains an affective angle towards the Chalfens, but also a mocking trait, which appears as an anti-essentialist rhetorical strategy deployed by the novel's overall narrative voice.

Jewishness, as a consequence of always being in the midst of virulent latent and manifest forms of antisemitism – is displayed within three distinct and yet interrelated frameworks: inner retreat, social withdrawal, and intellectualism. Chalfen-intellectualism subtly emerges as a resistant critique and counter-narrative on the shores of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness. These withdrawals and resistances are the preserve of the family's language, of (Freudian) psychoanalysis as well as of erudition and ›science‹. In addition to their countervailing and self-sustaining quality, these traits of resistance serve as and have the function of soft weapons and protective suits of Jewish narratives of survival. In this way, Jewishness within a European society is presented as still quite an isolated and solitary experience of othering. The text demonstrates how Jewishness is deeply intertwined with the family unit, serving as a sanctuary against antisemitic remarks and hate speech. In its linguistic manifestation, this resistance is symbolized in the meaning and function of the *family name*. The family name is transformed into a system of thought and a way of life. *Chalfenism* thus becomes a lifestyle, symbolizing a language that can only be spoken and denoted by its chosen members as if it contained a secret code that no one outside could ever understand:

»The Chalfens had no friends. They interacted mainly with the Chalfen extended family (the *good genes* which were so often referred to: two scientists, one mathematician, three psychiatrists and a young cousin working for the Labour Party). Under sufferance and on public holidays, they visited Joyce's long-rejected lineage, the Connor clan, *Daily Mail* letter writers who even now could not disguise their distaste for Joyce's Israelite love-match. Bottom-line: the Chalfens didn't need other people. They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives: *It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this.*« (Smith 2000, 314; all emphasis in the text.)

Antisemitism, with its *otherwise* orientalizing forms (Wille 2011) that places Jewish Europeans somewhere outside of ›Europe‹, is presented as a common and sociopolitically callable trait that is found, in the very close proximity of the Chalfen's immediate environment, in the midst of their neighboring *white Christian* family.

The humorous tonality of the passage entails a hidden tragic site against which the Chalfen language constitutes a safe space. The passage remains in a strained humorous mode that brings itself to a standstill, inducing the ugly face of antisemitism as a normalized sociopolitical vein that Jews must endure and live with. The humorous rhetoric thus also harbors sorrow, which emanates from its reflective zones that subtly hint at antisemitism as a prevailing sociopolitical stance and is a reminder of its violent history and its still palpable effects. Humor allows to address these issues without freezing Jewishness and the singularity of the Chalfen Family into an essentialized paradigm that would make any utterance outside stereotyped models impossible.

Although the passage is thus embedded in a humorous rhetoric, evoked by brute statements about the alleged self-sufficient seclusion of the Chalfen Family that may come across as narcissistic, and caricature them in a funny way, there are other unspoken meanings intermingled in-between the lines. The idea of ›*good genes*‹ is set against the implication of the concept of ›race‹ that is part of antisemitic thinking and its embed-

dedness and history in European depictions of ›science‹ and ›the nation‹, which began with the ›Reconquista‹ and the images of belonging through (non-Jewish, non-Muslim) ›blood‹, and which are also part of later racist implications in the histories of linguistic/philological studies and the natural sciences. These are mirrored in the continuation of such notions in the 18th century, which found their abhorrent modern guises in the atrocities of European (also German) colonialism and the fascist politics of the Nazis that are not so far removed in time and space (modern ›Europe‹) from the presence of the Chalfen Family. ›Good genes‹ as such a charged expression, is juxtaposed with the everyday antisemitism of the Conner-clan, while *their* ›Britishness‹ is evoked by the superficiality of *their* ›knowledge‹ and portrayal as ›Daily Mail‹ writers. With the invocation of *good genes*, the concept of ›race‹ through which Judaism as well as Jewish Europeans have been othered in different and also genocidal ways throughout European history, is used in an empowering and resilient self-pride imagery that counters antisemitism with its own weapons. Not only the ›Britishness‹ of the Conner-clan is made an ordinary and undistinguished lifestyle, but so is their antisemitic attitude. Secondly, as a consequence of the first family-shelter-retreat Jewishness is *attouched* to (Freudian) psychology as a kind of family sport and second religion; what the buzzword ›Enlightenment‹ is for European (post-)Christians, is ›psychoanalysis‹ for Jewish Europeans, the novel seems to suggest with a wink. Behind the humor, though, lies the very question of ›knowledge‹, the subject of knowing, power and powerlessness. Who, which subject knows (and has – or does not have – power)? The one who believes in the doxa of the Enlightenment and its assumed axioms? Or the one who believes that there is something else that this ›knowledge‹ ignores and by which it is controlled? This is not only another approach to ›knowledge‹ as a process of concealment and repression, but one that tentatively challenges the ›Enlightenment‹ itself, shedding light on its shady sides; the novel at least seems to celebrate this subversive level of psychoanalysis as empowerment as well as an *automatized* political guerilla war against sociopolitical oppression and (self-)denial. At the same time, the humorous tone of the passage empathetically mocks psychoanalysis. It is mocked by its own maxims, which are lovingly lampooned. They appear as tautological and standardized dogmatism, as orthodox beliefs and as a regime of self-fulfilling ›truths‹ that negate the diversity of possibilities. The novel *reopens* them through an affectionate, humorous ridicule:

»And not only were they bright children, they were happy, not hot-housed in any ways. Their only activity (they despised sport), was the individual therapy five times a week at the hands of an old fashioned Freudian called Marjorie who did Joyce and Marcus (separately) on weekends. It might appear extreme to non-Chalfens, but Marcus had been brought up with a strong respect for therapy (in his family therapy had long supplanted Judaism) and there was no arguing with the result. Every Chalfen proclaimed themselves mentally healthy and emotionally stable. The children had their oedipal complexes early and in the right order, they were all fiercely heterosexual, they adored their mother and admired their father, and, unusually, this feeling only increased as they reached adolescence.« (Smith 2000, 313)

The Chalfens' Jewish ›identity‹ is so obviously and prominently drawn back to ›Freud‹ that this already evokes a catchy humorous trait; but the name ›Freud‹ also stands for erudition, *cool* difference, as well as the entanglement of the contemporary, still vulnerable, Jewish diaspora throughout ›Europe‹ and the world; ›Freud‹ is also a name associated with the revolutionary notion of the illogical character of logic, a name that denies a privileged status to ›reason‹ (code word for ›Enlightenment‹) in an uncanny way, using the very science that has been heralded since the European Enlightenment. This makes ›Freud‹ a bull of acumen within European thought, countering and queering it, and at the same time and for the same reason, a hero within much of poststructuralist-influenced and postcolonial thought, to which this novel undoubtedly belongs.

Thus, the invocation of ›Freud‹ in these passages in the Chalfens' Family illustrates once again the ambiguity of Jewishness in contemporary ›Europe‹, and also shows its closeness to, or at least a transparent connection with, the other not-so-›British‹ subjects in the novel.

The humor with which psychoanalytic ›truths‹ are mocked here, nevertheless, follows an affectivity of care. It expresses concern for the Chalfen Family while at the same time ridiculing their attitude toward psychoanalysis. A threefold mockery is at work here: Not only does the narrative voice ridicule the ›law‹-like formulas of psychoanalysis and Marcus Chalfen's unquestioning belief in them as a kind of *ersatz religion*, but it also mocks its own narrative perspective since it can and does only laugh at stereotypical images and not at any essence behind these (Jewish) names and characters. The trait of care that accompanies the narrator's voice results, on the one hand, from the sympathetic, teasing tonality and, on the otherhand, from the proximity, the distance to the characters and their way of life that this voice entails.

These Freudian psychoanalytic approaches anchor the struggles of the psyche in the smaller unit of the family and, interestingly enough, avoid taking into account history or the larger sociopolitical influences and aspects that can also affect the psyche and the self. This limitation in theorizing the psyche within psychoanalysis may already indicate processes of antisemitic silencing that are reflected in these rather elusive Freudian analyses limited to the smaller unit of the family. On the other hand, this smaller scale of analysis allows Freud to make general assumptions about the human psyche that implicitly depathologize Jewishness (or prevent it from being pathologized); in this way, psychoanalysis appears as a feature of righting wrongs in an epistemological as well as scientific realm that runs counter to the violent concept of ›race‹ as a category of ›knowledge‹ production. Psychoanalysis also appears as a counter-writing, as a science of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness per se. Therein lies the compassion and ›knowledge‹ of the narrative voice, which also signals a *knowing*, understanding ›real/implied author‹ who can send the structuring narrative voice in that direction.

Behind this double structure of caring and mocking narrative voice, then, lies a subtly discernible ›knowledge‹ of Jewishness as a racialized and othered form of marginalization. It is presented here as if from its own site of experience: Jewishness appears as a form of marginalization in the struggle to forget and deny its own marginalization and, at the same time, to fight against both marginalization and its own forgetting; this is evident in the characters' references to high ambitions and aspirations or the neurotic pattern of doing everything right, but also in the ethical dimension that accompanies their

thinking and, in the case of the Chalfens, manifests itself in a politically liberal stance. Not only is the emphasis on ›learning‹ as an important trait of Judaism accentuated. Due to the harmful structures of antisemitism, Jewishness is presented as a retreat into the realm of intellectualism and the scientific search for ›truth‹: ›Rows were rare, playful and only ever over political or intellectual topics (the importance of anarchy, the need for higher taxes, the problem of South Africa, the soul/body dichotomy), upon which they all agreed anyway‹ (Smith 2000, 314).

It manifests itself in the way this unconsciously working desire is channeled into a determined pursuit of accomplishments and achievements for the sake of ›understanding‹, for the sake of ›the good‹. This is reflected in both Marcus Chalfen's character and Freud's aspirations. And yet, behind this ›knowledge‹, which seems to be the motor of the affectionately mocking, humorous narrative tonality, lies another ›knowledge‹ that reveals the tragic dimension of the humorous tone, which also gives rise to this *knowing* attitude, namely the long history of persecution of Jewishness that, in modernity, reached its genocidal culmination in the Shoah, and perhaps the question of how to live on with this knowledge – perhaps by surrendering ourselves to a realm of non-knowledge and powerlessness. The seclusion of the Chalfen Family and their attitude towards a family language, as well as their intellectually sophisticated attitude, even rigor, towards injustice, take on a different meaning from such a point of view, encompassing the irreparable site of the tragedy that hovers in the air and accompanies every utterance.

However, the Chalfens must also live through and with philosemitism in their midst. There is no post-antisemitism or post-racism; rather, living with and in the middle of antisemitism and racism is shown and emphasized in all its complexity.

Joyce Chalfen's *white* Catholic exoticized aesthetic imagery of Jewishness represents this dilemmatic place that Jewishness as a form of ›orientalist fascination‹ (Kirpikli 2017, 122 ff.) has to endure and is trapped in. It is peculiarly similar to Archie's naïve, affectionate fascination with Samad (and Clara), and is connoted as Jewish/›Oriental‹ masculine beauty and radiance (which Joyce later easily transfers to the ›Muslim‹ Millat):

»And that's Dr Solomon Chalfen, Marcus's grandfather. He was one of the few men who would listen to Freud when everybody in Vienna thought they had a sexual deviant on their hands. An incredible face he has, don't you think? There's so much wisdom in it. The first time Marcus showed me that picture, I knew I wanted to marry him. I thought: if my Marcus looks like that at eighty I'll be a very lucky girl!« (Smith 2000, 353)

Joyce is attracted not only to Marcus, but to what he represents as a Jewish man with (learned) descent: a different kind of ›wise‹ beauty, a quest for ›knowledge‹ and exoticism.

The humorous aspect of Joyce's words also evokes reflection, as an image of ›wisdom‹ is created in relation to a ›wise‹ Jewish ›face‹. A ›wise‹ Jewish ›face‹ may also suggest a form of not-knowing that comes from powerlessness and suffering; it is a ›face‹ that has seen, experienced painful events. ›Suffering‹ appears here as an other form of ›knowledge‹ and power, inscribed in ›the face‹, marking the body with a form of inaccessible illumination that may come from the always struggling, negotiating inner self. Thus, at the same time that the name ›Freud‹ generates a comic evocation, it subtly touches upon

another history, a history of exclusion that also marks the interior of ›Europe‹ and is intertwined with the experience of Jewishness. This secret touch that the dialogue evokes, then, is not only on the level of the text and its internal allusions but also on an ethical level, resulting from the description of ›the face‹ of ›Europe‹, in both senses of the word: the underrepresented Jewish ›face‹ of ›Europe‹ and ›the face‹ of ›Europe‹'s (internal) violent history, all of which are marked as traces of endured pain. Pain emits back as ›culture‹ and ›beauty‹ from ›the face‹ of the elderly man who has sought his way to find some kind of validating ›knowledge‹ in the widths and depths of the unknown and powerless (unconscious) psyche – perhaps because there were (and are?) not so many other ways to find some kind of self-sustenance. At least Marcus Chalfen's character has also embraced ›science‹ as a (survival) path through life.

What triggers Joyce's interest in Marcus is not only a fascination with Marcus's Jewish otherness and intellectualism, but also a state of social security, all of which cannot be separated from antisemitic images that are reflected in the ambiguous, slightly mocking voice of the narrator, who stands in close proximity to Joyce's thoughts:

»Her husband didn't just make money, he didn't just make things, or sell things that other people had made, he created beings. He went to the edges of his God's imagination and made mice Yahweh could not conceive of: mice with rabbit genes, mice with webbed feet (or so Joyce imagined, she didn't ask) [...].« (Smith 2000, 311)

The significance of Marcus Chalfen's occupation for Joyce is emphasized by the little word ›just‹; he not only makes money, which is relevant anyway, revealing a striking touch of antisemitism; Joyce's inclination toward the other, thus, more so than in Archie's case, also has an economic side. But this trait is further hyperbolized when Marcus is linked to an exotic intellectual masculinity: Marcus earns his money as a rival to *his* God, to ›Yahweh‹; he brings things into being, animating, creating existence. Othering occurs here through the non-*Christian* naming of God. This othering of Judaism seems to be the predecessor and model for the othering of the Muslim other in the name of God: The racialization of religion is indicated by the other(-ed) names for God, ›Yahweh‹ and ›Allah‹). Othering thus does not even stop before the Almighty. An unnamed, normalized status of (atheistic) *Christian* divinity is thus presented as ›God‹ pure and as a part of the cultural repertoire from which Joyce speaks. The narrator presents and repeats this normalized image and ironizes it through humor. The teasing tone of the narrative, while exposing the standardized assumption, also presents it as a singular act inherent in the affective economy of Joyce's desire; her relation and attraction to the other are not questioned as such, but the images they entail are unfolded in the narrative voice of a knowing ›implied author‹. Apparently, this philosemitic trait of Joyce's fascination with Jewishness is seen and rejected by Marcus's mother, who »[...] was not sure, was she?« (Smith 2000, 321) of Marcus's choice. Read in this way, Joyce's affection is based on a discursive economy that is a bizarre attraction based on the idea of otherness and exoticism. What also points in this direction is her treatment of Marcus. She accepts Marcus's display of affection for her, but in a manner that is more tolerant than passionate: »Joyce took the kisses like a girl indulging her best friend's younger brother« (Smith 2000, 321), and she also advises Irie to choose someone ›safer‹ (than Millat, for God's sake) (a well-earning, good-natured,

well-meaning, lost, brilliant thinker like Marcus): »[...] I used to like the troublemakers [Millat] when I was your age, but you learn later, you really do. Danger [young handsome Muslim men] isn't really sexy, take my word for it. You'd do a lot better with someone like Joshua« (Smith 2000, 321).

Joyce's son Joshua appears as a kind of distilled, assimilated, not to say ›civilized‹ version of ›Millat‹ who still harbors and radiates that other, more ›authentic‹ danger of the exotic to which Joyce is still attracted: »[...] the years seemed to fall like dead skin from Joyce and she bent across the table like a schoolgirl. ›God, he [Millat]'s gorgeous, isn't he? Like Omar Sharif thirty years ago. Funny Roman nose. Are you and he . . . ?« (Smith 2000, 320).

By hinting at a possible love affair between Joshua and Irie, Joyce bumps Joshua into this *dangerous dark* side of life, and she draws Irie into the ›normalcy‹ of middle-class whiteness (mixed with a fascination for Jewishness), trying to keep the shot of exoticism in the family. Millat remains an eye candy, and for Joyce's own aesthetic-erotic pleasure; he has a place at the threshold of her heart and home, always tolerated at the limits and liminal of some repressed affectivity. Despite this straightforward and obviously suspect reading (Black, beautiful and intelligent – each other has its own place while Irie and Millat must share theirs, which is only a gradual, gendered degree of difference), the scene, as well as Joyce's unyielding affection and ›love‹ for these lost others, has a touching site, because her attraction, despite the historically determined, corrupted discursive signifiers and material, bodily effects, has an innocent, naïve flavor and in this sense seems ›authentic‹, genuine, *truly felt*. This side of the passage attains its apogee in the figure of Omar Sharif, who joins this out-of-joint family and its adjunct members from the reality of the reel, showing the decisive role of cultural representations. Just as Joyce's naïve prattle perfectly parodies and mocks *white* middle-class femininity, which remains completely unaware of the damage of othering:

»The headmaster told me he was a Muslim boy. I suppose he should be thankful he's not a girl, though, hmm? Unbelievable what they do to the girls. Remember that *Time* article, Marcus?, ›But boys like that want the tall blondes, don't they? I mean, that's the bottom line, when they're that handsome.« (Smith 2000, 320)

The scene demands (and should get) a thrilled laugh because it presents such a familiar rhetoric. It generates a double humor. From the beginning, when Joyce sees Millat in her house, she is amazed and attracted, but also caring: »Joyce, partially recovered from the vision of Millat Iqbal, gathered herself together sufficiently to play her designated role as Mother Chalfen. [...] Joyce's big milky-blue eyes were all on him« (Smith 2000, 318). Albeit, her care also carries the burden of whiteness, which is woven into a specific form of ›knowledge‹ that she takes for ›truth‹ and which, in fact, prevents her from gaining access to Millat: This is not only the case when Joyce universalizes and normalizes assumptions about ›attractive women‹ that Millat must like, who are portrayed as *white* and ›blonde‹ (like Joyce), but also when she later tries to comfort Millat, who becomes a rather ruthless, always welcome guest in her house, using a language that is thoroughly permeated with the imagery of anti-Muslim/anti-Asian racism and that functions as ›knowledge‹ and reflects the function of ›knowledge‹ as a means of controlling and putting the other

in place; Irie actually intervenes in this process, telling Joyce that Millat (and Magid) are fine: »How about we all try a policy of non-involvement for once? A little laissez-faire?« (Smith 2000, 436). The other always seems to be either an object of erotic attraction or a fetish that requires some form of benevolence (or both), but sometimes, despite this language a truly loved one:

»For Joyce truly loved him and wanted to help him, but her advice was long and complex. She had read up on the subject. And it appeared Millat was filled with self-revulsion and hatred of his own kind; that he had possibly a slave mentality, or maybe a colour-complex centered around his mother (he was far darker than she), or a wish to his own annihilation by means of solution in a white gene poop, or an inability to reconcile two opposing cultures ... and it merged that 60 per cent of Asian men did *this* ... and 90 per cent of Muslims felt *that* ... it was a known fact that Asian families were often ... and hormonally boys were more likely to ...« (Smith 2000, 375)

Unlike Archie, whose ›knowledge‹ is based on cinematic representations and thus on a form of ›knowledge‹ that is more casual and unconstrained, Joyce builds her point of view on ›real‹ ›knowledge‹, on books and statistics and scientific treatises, on the one hand, and on the anthropological (colonial) gaze, on the other. The most dangerous thing about this ›knowledge‹ is that it is established within a realm, considered learned, studied, and therefore ›true‹. In this sense, Joyce appears as a victim of the very system of ›knowledge‹ that establishes her as a subject of ›knowledge‹ and power, both of which are rendered illusory.

The parody of a *white* speaking position, so familiar to Black experiences and experiences of color generally, is generated and testifies to a shrill hyperbolic zaniness. On the other hand, there is also a subtext beneath this image of a loving and well-meaning *white* middle-class woman who is simply unaware of the weaponry her language carries – but because her affection and ›love‹ is nonetheless acknowledged – she is not only tolerated in the other's household but has become an essential, defining part of it. Joyce's ›love‹ and affection for the (›Oriental‹) other, beginning with her Jewish husband and ending with her dark guest, the newcomer, the new stranger, Millat, misled and mispronounced as it may be, leaves enough space for enclosure within the other's enclave and for an encounter on more or less equal terms that is affectively generated. In this way, even Joyce's figure, in its displaced *white* representations and formulas, and its acceptance in this unruly circle, modified by the empathetic and slightly mocking narrative voice, is somehow touching and thoughtful. Joyce's sexual, maternal, and aesthetic ›love‹ can also be read as an atonement for all the historical and structural brutality of which she is, but refuses to be, a part. Her attraction to the ›good‹, ›interesting‹ parts of the exoticized images of the other is well-intentioned, and this is acknowledged as well. The novel makes space for her to enter and give shape to the story. She is made an important part of its world. Like Archie, Joyce's role and embeddedness in whiteness is complicated by such affectionate representations and mark the uniqueness of her character, although she is never separated from a *white* subjectivity and positioning, which is evident in her unawareness of certain discourses. This combination of affectivity and bemusement in the depictions of the Chalfen household also includes moments of silence and pause that provide an

opportunity to go beyond the scenes and look at something else in a double sense. On the one hand, the role and history of Jewishness in ›Europe‹ and its relevance for other people of color is emphasized, and an alternative possibility of encounter is hinted at. As the third-generation immigrant children meet and thrive in this Jewish-British house, Jewishness appears as a central and pivotal home (history) for ›Europe‹'s others, where they can seek their past and present, and from where they (can) launch a possible future ›Europe‹ (a possible different attitude toward the world?). And they seem to be welcomed by the Chalfens. Chiasmic points of contact, intellectual as well as affective and socio-familial, take place between the Chalfens and what will become their permanent ›guests‹.

On the other hand, this new form of being and bonding is not presented as a completed process, but as one that is still threatened by an unpredictable outcome. More than twenty years after the novel's publication, this strange threshold scenario remains a dominant site of current political developments. The wise and (knowing) narrator mentions this in an aside, depicting the possibilities, aporias, and limits of an amalgamated metropolitan neighborhood (see also Sakiz 2023, 29). It is as if a combination of Nietzschean, Fanonian, and Plessnerian attributions of ›laughter‹ would frame the narrator's lamenting observation in a slightly resigned tone. Their humor is imbued with pain and absurdity. Despite better ›knowledge‹, images of different racialized conceptions of ›authenticity‹ (including the *white* one) dominate the political sphere:

»This has been the century of the strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. [...] Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight walk), [...] there are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist.« (Smith 2000, 326–27)

The pleasure of the other, who is allowed to join the cultural forces of the nation, on the surface of the streets, still uncanny, unusual, and perhaps exciting to regressive forces (on all sides?), is circumscribed by double internal (there is no way back) and external (there is no way in) fears and threats.

Such fears and threats are well mirrored in the character of Marcus Chalfen, who is not only a scientist, and thus someone who, despite psychoanalysis, helps ›Europe‹ maintain its objective beliefs of becoming a better place, but who also falls victim to those same beliefs. Of all people, Marcus, without his ›knowledge‹, has become a follower of the Nazi eugenicist whom Archie, with his aesthetically engendered ›humanist‹ thinking, had spared from death. This is the ›laughter‹ of horror that resides in the tragic and is perhaps only depicted in the unfurled folds of the novel: »Ah, but I have a mentor, you see«, Marcus explains to Irie. He has a large photograph of his mentor on the wall of his office:

»And mentors are a whole other kettle of fish. [...] Grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar. Taught me practically everything I know. Seventy-odd and sharp as a whip. But you see, with a mentor you needn't credit them directly. That's the great thing about them.« (Smith 2000, 337)

This arrangement of horror and disgust has unbearable ramifications. In the literary text, it can only be translated through the interplay of the tragic and the sarcastic: ›Life‹ is formed by historically determined, sociopolitically intolerable structures. The sarcastic-tragic appears as a form of tragedy that goes beyond itself. It reaches a position of awkwardness in which ›knowledge‹ itself must be suspended. The sarcastic adheres to the tragic as a kind of sticky residue that makes every moment after the historical event (of trauma), at least in the instances that the literary text reflects, as such bleak and absurd. It is introduced into the passage by an indirect, not further commented upon allusion to ›the grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar‹. This innocent remark by Marcus evokes a sense of horror that lies in the supposition of who this Frenchman might be, and plays with Marcus' unawareness and the suspicious trace of an ›implied audience‹ that is about to witness the whole scene and from which the narrator spares nothing, laughing out loud, in pain, numbed from the drunken strangeness of life. The humor is charged with a different, contradictory affectivity, of fear, of empathy for Marcus, and of a zaniness resulting from felt powerlessness. And yet the sad smile that comes after the more or less digested news accompanies the text, points to this moment, reflects on it, and clings to its absurdity as a remnant. In this way, the novel at least remembers and reminds us of the extent to which, and the ways in which, repressive thinking and structures of thought that still unblinkingly embrace a homicidal mindset, are part of and can represent the most intimate, even scientific, and academic fields of the sociopolitical realm. Its humor is a ›knowing‹ humor, which is half helplessness and half a courageous wink that says things must go on anyway. In this way, humor creates a space of remembering and brings ready-made ›knowledges‹ to a halt. At the same time, Marcus' character takes on another empathetic color; he becomes someone who is shown in all his vulnerability. This vulnerability has both a singular and a collective side. On the one hand, the passage is a reminder of the political vulnerability that comes with being Jewish; on the other hand, Marcus, despite his ardent studies and highly qualified education and ›knowledge‹, remains a victim of the effects of the European ›Enlightenment‹ and the axiomatic belief in an understanding of ›science‹ that is no longer questioned. This is because, as the passage seems to imply, the horrors and history of antisemitism and racism are not critically processed. The passage also implies a self-critical endeavor that reveals the (tragic) entanglements of marginalized subjectivities within the ›master's‹ universe.

At the same time, as an unconscious form of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness, the novelistic text is interwoven with an image. It is a poster that Marcus has hung on his wall and that seems to look at Marcus, seems to caution him. And yet Marcus, who knows the poster and does not know the poster, looks at it and overlooks it at the same time; only unconsciously, perhaps, does he ›know‹ what it means:

»A big poster of Einstein in his American icon stage – Nutty Professor hair, »surprised« look and huge pipe – subtitled with the quote *God does not play dice with the world.*« (Smith 2000, 336)

There is a very charming allusion to two points in this passage, harboring a sweet, refreshing humor that seems to cover the tragic with a warm and affectionate smile in close proximity to the characters, especially Marcus, Irie, and Archie (is Archie a God then? Is it wrong to play God with a dice? Is it okay to play with a dice if you are not God (Archie might ask)?). It alludes to the diegetic world and the narrative plot, to a core point in the story as well as to a meta-level outside the text: The Einstein poster, on the one hand, shows how Marcus' view of science is to be understood and where he sees himself, namely in the long tradition of Jewish European thinkers. On the other hand, the passage is framed by a popular »knowledge« that seems wiser than Marcus' educated search for »truth«. It is no coincidence that the poster shows the words of Albert Einstein. The evocation of Einstein as a great thinker whose »face« has become a fetish for the emptiness of capitalist intellectualism, laughing knowingly at it, speaks to Marcus behind and beyond this market image, reminding him to think about the ethical meaning of science, more specifically genetics, and its »tradition«. In this way, the passage interweaves history and real figures with the fictional world through the description and design of Marcus's intimate office space. Marcus has to find his way through all these historically driven images, processes of signification and (false) »knowledge«. At the same time, the poster's inscription, in a sad playfulness and against the historical tragedy that frames modern European politics as well as Marcus' character on the brink of some kind of »madness«, brings together the well-intentioned humanism of Archie, Irie's father, and the well-intentioned, unsuspecting humanism of Marcus. Nazism, or more generally fascism, as a threat seems to form the backdrop of this scene as the characters exchange this information without being aware of it at the time. Yet it is the lives and vulnerability of these two characters, Black and Jewish, that are staged here on the dangerous display of these »humanisms«. The realm of the natural sciences appears as a free playground for two extreme versions of scientific humanism(s), one that wants to save lives and one that wants to save itself and eliminate others. But in *White Teeth*, both seem to be wrong; rather, within this form of rationalized and instrumental »humanism«, »knowledge«, and ignorance seem to shake hands. In both cases, the scientific machine turns against the lives of others, in the case of the Frenchman within fascist ideology, and in the case of the foregrounding humanistic science to which Marcus falls prey, this humanism finds its victim in mice as promising, objectified living material for laboratory experiments to overcome (human) misery (by producing it otherwise).²⁹

29 Ledent draws here a line between religious and scientific obsessions to find »truth« by »eliminating the random« in Marcus', Hortense's, and Millat's adventures with faith and »truth«. Ledent (2016, 86). See also in this regard McMann (2012, 619 ff). McMann stresses the line that is drawn between the atrocities of the Nazi regime and eugenics, and the progressive claims of Marcus Chalfen, which reside in a diametrically other, *humanist*, tradition but still remain unaffected by the harm it nevertheless causes.

The characters of Marcus and Magid, Millat's twin brother, complicate this trait in postcolonial terms and seem to open up a world beyond what we – unfortunately – are less accustomed to – a vision of the future for the (global?) masses. Marcus, a (convinced) scientist, and Magid, an aspiring lawyer and poet, fall in love intellectually. This *friendship* is formed while Aslana is already panicking that she might lose her son Millat to this accomplished family, exclaiming frantically, »I am not knowing them from Adam and Eve!« (Smith 2004, 344), which she in fact does – an ingenious humorous allusion to the similar, if not identical, Jewish-Islamic origins and thinking, despite very different histories that the narrator alludes to spicily and with loving ›irony‹ as if they were anticipating another European ›Toledo‹ era, hopefully one on equal grounds.

The two men become friends through an exchange of words, ›real‹ letters, love letters, Irie is disappointed to discover, »[w]ithin two months they had filled a volume at least as thick as Keats's« (Smith 2000, 365). The *friendship* between the two interposes itself between Irie and Marcus, but also opens up another path for Irie on her way to an inner self via her grandmother's kitchen.

The beautiful mysterious *friendship* between the two men, across age and space, is another encounter between Dhaka and London that defies the regimes of coloniality and bears a trace of hope for two so analogous and so supposedly hostile, but in any case, racialized ›religions‹ and ›ways of life‹. It bears the imprint of a ›Jewish-Muslim‹ *friendship* across and beyond all borders, touching all those ›laws‹ of alleged enmity and presumed irreconcilable differences. The functionality of *difference* itself seems to be questioned here. *Difference* here does not mean incompatibility, nor different histories and forms of othering, nor endless postponements, but *bonds*, essential bonds of kinship across all these divides and against all odds. *Differences* are there so that bonds can be made, it seems to suggest. In this sense, this bond opens the imagination to other possibilities within and beyond our time-bound conceptions. The initially literal encounter evolves into a heartfelt, close ›Jewish-Muslim‹ *friendship*, in the midst of which the narrator places the words of a male *Christian* poet – an order that resonates with a perfect, and so necessary, harmony between the three monotheistic, male masculinities; along with this chime, a feminist, teasing, celebratory humor is almost palpable:

»John Donne said«,

it goes on, and one senses the narrator's mischievous smile right under each word,

»more than kisses, letters mingle souls, so they do«;

and so Magid, the poet, writes:

»[...] When you delve into the mysteries of inherited characteristics, surely you go straight to the soul of the human condition as dramatically and fundamentally as any poet, except you are armed with something essential the poet does not have: the truth. I am in awe of visionary ideas and visionaries. I am in awe of such a man as Marcus Chalfen«

and so, Marcus, the scientist responds with no less vigor:

»You must get to England as soon as possible, early '93 at the very latest. I'll stump up some of the cash myself if I have to. Then we can enroll you in the local school, get the exams over and done with [...] and while you are at [the University] you can hurry up and get older, get to the bar and provide me with the kind of lawyer I need to fight in my corner.« (Smith 2000, 366–67)

This is another ›oriental‹ Europe that emerges from the spaces of the London marginalia. Marcus and Magid are two orientalized subjectivities, always already set in opposition to (*Christian*) white masculinity, who learn to support each other, in the middle of their *Christian* cousins, who almost enviously would not mind joining them. (And it is hoped that they will).

The Jewish-Muslim *friendship*, in the strict sense of the two religions, however, has an indeterminable duality. On the one hand, it seems to be superficial and not really important. It is never mentioned or discussed among the characters or otherwise in the novel. On the other hand, it comes across as an unwritten yet essential feature that foregrounds their identification with each other and allows for a subtle form of ›understanding‹ based on experiences of otherness. This subliminal meaning of the text is particularly evident in the humorous, teasing tonality of the narrator's voice, the reference to Alsana's and John Donne's words that frame the encounter and its thorough development into an ardent *friendship*. *Friendship* seems to indicate the value of a common ›good‹, which is an otherwise humanistic plan based on the faculty of sensing a kinship with another ›culture‹ or ›religion‹ beyond space. Here too, the violent and tragic, historical features behind this scene of unity make it possible to look at this alliance between Marcus and Magid in a humorous way that, at the same time, weeps in one of its corners. Its humor is based on the ›knowledge‹ of unbearable histories and their aftermath, which are mentioned through humorous allusions and again without being directly addressed. These are the experience of the colonization of vast areas of the world, here especially India, with all the misery, injury, and damage it has caused; the Shoah, as an atrocity and genocide after a long history of internal colonization; and the tragic political formations that are part of modern Jewish-Muslim history, as seen in (and reduced to) the interrelation of Israel-Palestine. The humorous aspects of this *friendship* touch on taboos and unspeakable and untouchable things, touches on them without further questioning, as if the grief were too heavy to bear. The affectionate, disguised humor surrounding these figures plays on the threshold of such miseries, which separate them because of their differences, yet also unite them because of their pain. Pain carries not only trauma, but also includes other forms of ›knowledge‹ that reside in and come from the experience of grief and sorrow.

While it is necessary to reflect with sorrow on the the reality of political events, the humorous tone opens up the possibility of other, joyful configurations of interactions (in another world – in the imagination – and from there, into the ›real‹ future) and thus has a moving side that lurks on the edges of its humorous tendencies.

This time, even more than in the case of Archie and Samad, two different colonized subject-positions and roles are imagined as ›kins‹ within a transcultural, transnational, and transhistorical specter.

The humor here also arises from the deluded, romantic character of the ›love‹ letters. At the same time, they operate on a meta-level of narrative since there is so much truthful affection and mutual respect in them, something that might give rise to the desire that it might be true, that something fresh and indeed ›deluded‹ might really exist as a ›real‹ and ›authentic‹ experience. It also reads like a hidden and (socially) forbidden trait of homoerotic ›love‹ that takes shape in intellectualism rather than sexuality, extending the meaning of eroticism and ›love‹ into a sphere of touch in which the cognitive and reflective realm is foregrounded as a form of sensuality (which is precisely not ›sexual‹ but still loving).

It is also intriguing, however, that the Muslim character is the younger newcomer to the European world, following in the footsteps of his Jewish mentor-friend. Both Marcus and Magid are driven by the desire for perfection, perhaps in a Freudian sense, to compensate for (historical) evil and to have control over a (better future) ›life‹ (symbolized by the fight against cancer and a ›life‹ without pain (Marcus) and an accomplished political order in which no one suffers anymore (Magid)). Both, however, take the path to achieve this ›truth‹ by following the logic of the ›sciences‹ and systems of ›knowledge‹, which came with the promise of an ›enlightened‹ ›Europe‹ – one that is allegedly purified of the barren weight of affectivity and the ethics that it, too, may indicate. They become in this sense of subversive mimikry, more ›English than the English‹ (Baglama 2019, 83; Wille 2011). Audre Lorde's warning voice that the *Master's tool* may not *dismantle the Master's house* (1979) seems to resonate in-between the lines here.

Both Marcus and Magid are the ones who are betrayed and who do not know whom they are following: Marcus knows nothing of his mentor's past, and Magid blindly follows the West's notions of linear ›development‹. The realm of science appears within the humorous portrayal of this friendship as an illusion of and about ›knowledge‹ but it also represents a mechanism within structures of power that defines what ›knowledge‹ is and that gives materiality to the sociopolitical. Something that is subtly questioned through the humorous tonality of the narrative. The ›knowledge‹ of a ›purified‹ ›science‹ appears as a dangerous, lethal lie, regardless of the motivation behind it. In contrast, Archie's working-class ›knowledge‹, as well as Samad's and Hortense's postcolonial ›knowledges‹, which emerge from critiques of Western ›knowledge‹ systems rather than elitist, (globalized, European) education, appear as fluid understandings of a ›knowledge‹ that is not ›purified‹. Such dynamic understandings of ›knowledge‹ in the making are ›life-giving, caring, political, and that view the present from the recognition of something else, the past, their pasts, and other ›wisdoms‹ – an understanding of ›knowledge‹ dangling between ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge, power and powerlessness – for shaping the future. The future is thus presented and negotiated in the interstices of the past-present of narrative dialogues and transnational, transcultural, and ›transethnic‹ encounters within humorously evoked textual openings. On a meta-level, these not-knowing ›knowledges‹ warn against an understanding of ›knowledge‹ that operates by ignoring the historical and political frames of the sociopolitical. These are the same frames that the othered have to deal with and take up in order to restore and seek healing possibilities of the injurious *his-torical* traces in their selves as well as in the sociopolitical. Here, in this negotiation of past atrocities and future paths, images of Jewishness can be

perceived and recognized as part of a postcolonial world in the making, and thus, as part of the power of powerlessness that comes from the possibilities of not knowing.

Unfolding Spaces 'n the Economy of ›Non-Knowledge‹ and Power-lessness

The characters in *White Teeth* – all three families – occupy a space in the novel, which is a cosmos for itself within the anonymous folds of the city. This fold-in urban space of London functions not only as a reality-invoking space of unimaginable encounters but also as a non-metaphor for the intense and fleeting encounter of different subjectivities in a ›lived reality‹. It is thus a space that is universalist and anti-universalist in its uncontrollable labyrinthine form. The city can also stand for the rapturous work of humor as well as a for a space of touch.

Humor, like the city, is also a place of decision-making; in its tendency to evoke specific tonalities, it can also be understood as an attitude that places an insight in a particular way. Its decision-making structure is dependent on the past and independent in its application, liberating meaning and releasing it into the wider space. Decisions, the trajectory of history and a story, also signal beginnings and endings, which are also at the center of humor (and the city): »[...] like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story« (Smith: 540 f.). The narrator's humorous allusion to factual independence and the intricate interdependencies that override both state and singular independence sheds light on unpredictable events and the intersection of conflicting and fleeting lines. ›Decision‹ can be understood as a concept that is inscribed in spaces of encounter, concurrence, and entangled, dilemmatic, aporetic instances that are also unwittingly instances of touch in their multiple meanings. At the intersection of different narratives, an ›implied audience‹ is constructed, informed by whatever narratives and epistemes the text displays, with the ability to perceive one image in relation to another, an endgame in relation to the future. By making its choices from the witnessing and complying standpoint of (a narrative) discourse, an ›implied audience‹ is called upon to weave meanings and, ideally, from this inherent position, to read and transpose the narrative into another – (wider) texture of ›reality‹. The invocation of an ›implied audience‹ symbolizes the proliferation, the weaving, of ongoing stories and textures. Different subjectivities are also inscribed within such (historically determined) contexts. This may be why *White Teeth* begins in a secluded space in the city and begins with Archie's attempted suicide. In any case, Archie understands himself as one of the city's inhabitants, and so he decides to end up in the city:

»But even as his breathing became spasmodic and his lights dimmed, Archie was aware that Cricklewood Broadway would seem a strange choice. Strange to the first person to notice his slumped figure through the windscreen, strange to the policeman who would file the report, to the local journalist called upon to write fifty words, to the next kin who would read them. Squeezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other, Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go other places

via the A41. [...] The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper. *In death as he was in life* and all that. [...] It made sense that Archibald should die on this nasty urban street. He wanted to do it before the shops opened.« (Smith 2000, 3–4)

The text's humorous display of Archie's suicide attempt is based on images of the city as well as on Archie's odd decision to commit suicide in a seemingly inappropriate place (is there an appropriate place for suicide?). The city in *White Teeth* seems to explore and unleash an imagery of interlocking aporetic illusions and disillusionments. The city conceptualized in the ›liberal, global age‹ as the smallest representational unit of a globalized world is shown, on the one hand, as a space of disillusionment in which the facts of racism wield authority behind a well-intentioned, self-sustaining imagery that places the other on the outskirts of thought and the city. The city allegorizes »[...] a space in racialized terms, which in turn allows for people to be literally put in place« (Amelvoort 2018, 424–25). On the other hand, the city is the place of touch, the place of possibilities to come, the place of (new) relations. It not only entails different sides of the *other* but also captures the transformative, and performative potential, and influence of the othered other in this space. The image of the city also harbors and negotiates the idea of hospitality and the roles of ›hosts‹ and ›guests‹. *White Teeth* tackles this aspect of the dichotomous idea of ›guest‹ and ›host‹, which remains absurdly entangled within historical experiences of colonialism and their aftermath. As Ryan Trimm argues, »[h]ospitality as trope foregrounds the problem of home and dwelling, thus figuring prominently in postimperial metropolitan texts« (Trimm 2015, 146). This is also the case with *White Teeth*. The novel shows a double ›knowledge‹ of the (colonial) symbolic order and its effects *within* and *on* subjectivity that are not only discussed but also destabilized in and through the text. In this sense, it may be related to other novels, which foreground this question of the materializations of racisms in the mesh of ›life‹ (Trimm 2015, 145 ff.). But this is not a ›new‹ phenomenon. It can also be read as a reference to the past and a problematic of long standing. In the case of *White Teeth*, for example, it can be read, as an intertextual (and transregional, diasporic) parallel to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) in which Baldwin problematizes the invisible structures of racism, and how to deal with them through the implication of address as a decolonial strategy and narrative tool so that anti-racist critique and the existential struggle against racisms cannot be devaluated by the transparent normalizations of whiteness. As Richard Sennett demonstrates, Baldwin's narrator does this by addressing explicit and implicit readers in his text. While the text addresses the narrator's 14-year-old nephew, it also places another reader within the realm of dominant discourses in the text by ironically advising his young nephew, the next generation, on how to read this text and informing him of the affectivity that accompanies these readings: »I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, ›No! This is not true! How bitter you are!‹ – but I am writing this letter to you to try to tell you how to handle *them*, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist« (Baldwin qtd in Sennett 1990, 193). Sennett refers to this implied second reader in the rhetoric of the text as ›the familiar device of the reader-over-the-shoulder‹ (Sennett 1990, 193), through which racist attitudes simultaneously are revealed as well as interrupted.

In this sense, *White Teeth* transcends the colonial trajectory of racism by satirizing the wor(l)d »in the teeth of the most terrifying odds« (Baldwin 1993, 10). The above passage in *White Teeth* thus *unfolds* incongruous threads and addresses a diverse audience: It subtly plays with images of the city and its meanings, touching on the secluded place of ›the migrant‹ and the other in the city, which is diametrically opposed to the celebrated, sound image of ›the (Western) metropolitan city‹ as the liberal-minded place of ›the (Western, white) intellectual‹ and the glamorous place of ›cosmopolitan diversity‹. In contrast to this image *White Teeth* hints at the secluded and rundown places where ›migrants‹ and ›other people‹ predominantly live, and which in effect mirror the intersecting categories of ›race‹ and ›class‹ in the niches of London. Notwithstanding this critical stance, these places are also used for empowering representations. They »[...] vividly articulate the small-scale cross-cultural encounters« that are »going on in these ordinary places, spaces and non-places« (Jain 2016, 16). These places are thus also empathically and teasingly captured as having their own merits, singularities as well as possibilities, and paths for the future.

The place that seems to metaphorically and materially correspond to this image of a ›no place‹ and ›no place a man came to die‹ is the place of the other, ›a nasty urban street‹, where the ›Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal butcher‹ is also located. As Nicole Waller, drawing on the work of Kathrine McKittrick and theories of maroon fugitivity and freedom, concludes, space in such a context »highlights the transitional and provisional« that embrace »a radical placelessness« (Waller 2022, 51, 66) as a form of space in the progress of becoming. The narrator's humorous undertone depicts different notions simultaneously, pointing to various issues at once: On the one hand, the passage refers to a remote part of ›the city‹ of London, characterizing it as a ›no kind of a place‹. On the other hand, it points to Archie's mistaken understanding of this place as ›in the city‹ and his sense of belonging to this place, which evokes humor as it is so incongruous with its neglected location. But it also hints at and staggers a humorous display, which implicitly characterizes it as *a cross-road to other places* that not only emphasizes the first description of a ›no place‹ but also gives it a different meaning, as it is humorously and discordantly portrayed as the place that opens up other routes. The humorous calculus is induced by the allusion to ›real‹ roads, which plays with the image of the road in its literal sense as well as with its associated senses within the evocation of ›other places‹. Yet, it is also Archie's ›place‹ as the place of despair, and a place of the city he lives in and he feels he belongs to, a strange place, ›[s]queezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other‹, where Archie »wanted to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an empty confessional box or the moment in the brain between thought and speech« (Smith 2000, 4). The humorous description of how Archie *feels* and *thinks* is metaphorized as moments in-between actions and movements that are full of meanings (›empty confessional box‹; ›the brain between thought and speech‹). These allusions to the ›perfectly quiet‹ and ›empty confessional box‹ also entail a poignant affective description, sad, affectionate, as well as mournful, which centralizes Archie's despair. At the same time urbanity, as well as solitude, and the desire to abandon life at the cross-roads to death, induced by a literal sense of death and the metropolitan place of death, show a humorous focalization of Archie's self-pitying sentiments and the ›reality‹ of the ›city‹ with its places marked by and echoing abandon-

ment. The humorous undertone of the narrator also adds depth to the humor evoked that presents these thoughts, but there is also an other voice lurking in the narrative report that seems to overshadow the narrator's, and that seems to be informed by different political senses of ›this place of nowhere‹, and that can be registered as the voice of an ›implied author‹. This voice lends a more serious tone to the narrator's tell-tale narrative through a dual implication of such a ›no kind of place‹ as the place of ›a celebrated halal butcher‹. Archie has parked his car at the ›delivery area‹ of *The Hussein-Ishmael* butchery owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, »a great bull of man with hair that rose and fell in a quaff, then a ducktail« (Smith 2000, 5). Mo tries to save the place by beating the pigeons with a meat cleaver »in an attempt to halt the flow of dribbling purple« (Smith 2000, 5). Again, the voice of an ›implied author‹ seems to link Mo's attitude to cricket, »the Englishman's game adapted by the immigrant«, to his presumed thoughts »and six was the most pigeons you could get at one swipe« (Smith 2000, 5). The mood of their narrative tone is ambiguous. On the one hand, it allegorizes the figure of the butcher with the act of killing, a doubling that might emphasize a reality effect regarding the authenticity of the figure, and that at the same time nullifies its authenticity by the hyperbolic exaggeration of the stereotype. This is achieved by presenting Mo as a simple man, the image of a butcher (who does not think much). In this way, though, the character escapes a ›well-intentioned portrayal‹ of a ›migrant‹. An ›implied audience‹ is construed and addressed through the report and is asked to deal with the ›impure‹ picture of the ›migrant‹, on the one hand (can it laugh? Should it laugh?), and the act of killing, on the other hand – unless the so construed ›audience‹ is vegetarian, it must also presuppose and negotiate its own ethics within this scenery. Thus, the Muslim butcher, in his staging of killing, comes close to what an abject image implicitly evokes (taking a standpoint towards the processing of ›meat‹ – and what it used to be – as well as ›filth‹ – and thus taking a stand towards not liking pigeon excrement and eating ›meat‹). So, a grotesque scenery is induced by negativity; and in this vein, no ›good-migrant‹ is evoked with whom it would seem easy to identify. The grotesque description of the scenery is also affective through the negative description since it evokes disgust in which, however, an ›implied audience‹ is involved and has (the task of) positioning itself. Unlike Archie, for whom the place is an empty no-place, the narrator's focus on Mo emphasizes that Mo actually understands himself as part of this place, that he regards the place as full of life, and that he cares for this place in his own way by trying to save it from the pigeons' excrement. Mo's care for the place is accompanied by an empathy that removes his grotesque representation as a disgusting, simple fool and allows him to be seen as an (other) ›human being‹ (in close proximity to the ›self):

»Mo wiped the sweat off his forehead, snorted, and looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons and the minicabs – all covered in shit. One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman or child in the Broadway would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four parts vinegar to clean up the crap falls on the world. [...] He was feeling really very Zen about this – very goodwill-to-all-men – until he spotted Archie's car.« (Smith 2000, 5–6)

The narrator, by focusing on Mo and through free direct discourse, fills out these grotesque and repulsive images, showing that Mo believes he in fact belongs to ›London‹ and to ›the world‹. *White Teeth* thus begins with a ›London‹ in which life and death, self and other, are juxtaposed in a setting that seems to analogize the dichotomies. It is not the glamour of London that is invoked, but another London in which ›the other‹ is located and lives, the other's world in all its meanings. The presentation of this juxtaposition is again presented in a multi-layered, affectionate, and humorous cast as the *Lebenswelt* of ›simple‹, ›ordinary‹ people, and the juxtaposition of dramatic, sad circumstances, and the comic accumulation of their interference (that ›life‹ and ›death‹ and self and other seem to be): Archie is in the very serious position of committing suicide, so an underlying, tense thrust of empathy is evoked with a ›dying man in a space of nowhere‹, a sociopolitically neglected migrant enclave: ›Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go other places via the A 41‹. This place of ›possibility‹, thus, of ›luck‹, in the niches of the other is underlined by a signification that evokes ›otherness‹ as well as by the indication that Archie was indeed lucky that the universe actually cared about him:

»These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky [the place of the butcher and Archie's suicidal car], and so they passed Archie by. For, though, he did not know, [...] luck was with him this morning [...] the positions of the planet, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live.« (Smith 2000, 4)

The other is invoked in an overarching but aporetic sense, encompassing both, that which is so much part of, next to, ›life‹, and that which is excluded, in a place of nowhere, as part of death, ›shit‹, ›nature‹, animals, ›God‹. This transcending of ›the other‹ finally stops within the novel's baroque urban *Lebenswelt*, as the figuration of the Muslim (*halal*) butcher ›Mo Hussein Ismail‹ and his son as references of othered others, as personified allegories, as it seems, of death and life, power and powerlessness, ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge, who find Archie's car on their property:

»Archad [Mo's son] shrugged. ›I shouted through the car window and told the guy to move on and he says, ›I am gassing myself, leave me alone‹ like that‹. ›No one gasses himself on my property‹, Mo snapped as he marched downstairs. ›We are not licensed.‹ Once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie's car, pulled out the towels that were sealing the gap in the driver's window, and pushed it down five inches with brute, bullsh force. ›Do you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die round here, my friend, I' am afraid you've to be thoroughly bled first.‹ (Smith 2000, 7)

The grotesque and comic humorous tone of the passage is almost entirely effective through direct discourse and thus its speech acts. *Affective humor* is expressed negatively, through absence, first, in the sober utterances of Mo, who, instead of showing mercy to someone on the verge of committing suicide, expresses concern about the legality of

the act on his property under (British) law (›we are not licensed‹) and the act of suicide under Islamic law as a legally forbidden act, an act that is the opposite of the *halal*, permitted act of *legally* killing, which is Mo's job. Mo's utterances show a factual, unaffected language that sustains different meanings and makes it uncertain whether Mo has a dry sense of humor or really means what he says, which would be funny in either case. A rhetorical meaning (in the more traditional sense of rhetoric) would render his remarks as a mockery of Archie's suicide attempt and would be a humor of superiority, the humor of power. A grammatical (literal) reading would make his utterance funny because it would be so absurd to remind someone who is committing suicide that their act is not legally supported, which would ridicule Mo's character. The humor is thus based on the grammatical syntax of the sentences and the illocutionary mode, but it generates two unfixable (literal and figurative) meanings and different allusions. This is what de Man called the convulsion of grammatical and rhetorical meanings within grammatically coherent, illocutionary utterances (de Man 1979, 8–10). It is the structure of linguistic meaning itself, which cannot be controlled, that comes to the fore and constructs a thoughtful humor that, in this third sense, does not have Archie or Mo as the target of ridicule, but the absurdity inherent in language and its locutionary as well as illocutionary performances; humor here becomes a meta-locutionary act. Mo's utterances thus employ a multi-layered ironic tone that can be read rhetorically, grammatically, or meta-critically. These different meanings within an illocutionary statement evoke an affectivity of puzzlement and signify, beyond their immediate meanings, a parody of legal, ›law‹-abiding language and an ironizing of language. They also enact Bakhtin's idea of a frayed dialogicity, not only on the level of individual words, but also on the level of speech acts. Second, the humorous tone of the passage derives from the incongruity of the character's attitude: Mo is portrayed as a ›migrant‹, a precarious position, but he is also prefigured as brutal (towards the poor pigeons). At the same time, he is portrayed as a ›law‹-abiding character, saying ›[w]e are not licensed‹ – at least when he has to address a *white* character: ›[d]o you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here‹. Mo's speech shows a ›migrant's‹ ›knowledge‹ of *white* people's adherence to ›the law‹, however absurd it may be at times, evoked and ironized in the idea of a place-license for suicide; and it shows that ›the migrant‹ also defines himself in the social configuration of ›the law‹ to make himself intelligible. It is also a performance of heteroglossia: Mo chooses a normed and conventionalized *white* British way of speaking while at the same time performing a hybrid understanding of ›the law‹ that also includes Islamic (and Jewish) rules. Third, the humor arises from a change of role in the representational repertoire. Here, it is not a *white* man who is ›law‹-abiding and tries to protect his ›property‹, but a man of color who defends his (however neglected) ›property‹ and has no mercy on the (imperial) Other. This also shows that the construction of whiteness as superior does not count for Mo. Rather, within his orbit, Mo adheres to his own definitions of ›law‹, ›suicide‹, killing, ›order‹, and ›humiliation‹, as well as of ›a good place in the city‹. Insofar as orderliness and the position of the keeper of order represent a role usually associated with whiteness, this role is also mirrored and parodied in a displaced form through Mo as the figuratin of the other, who has to endure (and live quite well with) this constructed order. The parodic humor construes, affectively and humorously addresses an ›implied audience‹ that may sympathize with Mo's obsessive tone because

of this recognition, this reading, and Mo's unaware ›simplicity‹. In the passage and the encounter between the *white* British Archie and the ›migrant‹ Mo, Archie becomes the other. This is also indicated by the fact that Mo explains the circumstances to Archie in bad grammar (›[t]his place halal‹), as if Archie cannot speak English properly, which in turn signals another parody of *white* postures of racialization and othering. To make sure that Archie understands him, Mo translates *halal* to Archie and (an ›implied (*white*) audience? Remember, we are still in the seventies. . .) as *kosher* ›[k]osher, understand?‹, which, on the one hand, highlights the mockery, but also shows, on the other hand, how Mo has learned what he considers to be ›correct‹, ›British‹ behavior; Mo acts out how ›they‹ speak, reiterating the words and tone without recognizing or acknowledging them as markers of racial superiority. It is thus his unaware and confident parody that unleashes the humor. On the one hand, it sheds light on the way ›migrants‹ are spoken to. On the other hand, it implicitly shows that Mo is not one bit impressed by it in the sense of a racist rebuke and placement. Rather, Mo ascribes this attitude to the way *white* ›Englishmen‹ speak, without being ›personally‹ affected by it. He simply applies it back as a heteroglot deployment, (this is the way ›they‹ speak) as a kind of translation to make himself understandable. The passage thus shows a ›simple‹ ›speaking human‹ act within different configurations of meaning, from which a dynamic image of an ›autonomous‹ and ambiguous ›migrant‹ emerges, shifting the racialized stereotype of inferiority and victimization without generating another, namely that of a ›good migrant‹.

The passage also plays with the racialized and marginalized position of two (other) social groups: ›the Jews‹ and ›the Muslims‹, situating ›the Jews‹ as a historical antecedent of this position of marginalization. »Hospitality as a claim to antecedence, an already-in-place positioning that denies attempts of the new to establish itself« is shown within the historical roots of antisemitism, racism, and othering. Although »[i]n this trope of antecedents, the new is permanently epiphenomena« and a »peripheral and harmful entity, one threatening the established and essential«, »White Teeth, most particularly through this stress and second generations, moves away from the new and its associations with guests through a revision of hospitality. This rewriting refuses the linear and simple temporality of precedence in favor of a complex understanding of time (and space) unraveling the claim of the prior and the host« (Trimm 2015, 147). It also centralizes antisemitism, making the entrenched patterns of this ›ancient-new‹ against which the novel writes, part of European history, everyday life, metropolitan niches, ›the present‹.

Mo may represent a kind of (un-mystified) future. He reverses the ›hospitality‹ of the colonizer and makes it his own. Mo is also aware of his ›predecessors‹, using the word *kosher* to explain *halal*— a word he expects *white* people to be more familiar with because of an ancient Jewish British presence. However, the utterance also indicates how obvious the words are to him and that he expects that both words might be completely unknown to Archie (and the ›implied audience‹), so he wants to reassure himself by asking again, ›. . . understand?‹ and, just in case Archie did not, explicitly explains the unappetizing meanings of *halal* and *kosher* in this context, in a way that should nullify any exoticization of the other: ›If you're going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've to be thoroughly bled first‹. As it is Mo himself who says these words, employing a disgusting image (at least if you are vegetarian/vegan or have never thought about the living origins of ›meat‹), they do not replicate a form of othering out of disgust for Judaism or Islam

(and their people. . .). The image of a bleeding animal in the hands of a butcher is horrifying, and it calls into question the acts of producing ›meat‹, but (ideally) on a more unifying, general level that does not exclusively fixate and point the finger at Mo or the ›Jews‹ or the ›Muslims‹ as the only butchers and immoralists. Rather, it is the animals that speak silently, and another form of othering is implicitly invoked. The grotesqueness of the passage is comic in the presentation and performance of Mo, and it is also tragic in the presentation of another, inferiorized, absolute othering, the (capitalist) ›human‹ counterpart called ›animak‹, and that functions like a slap in the face (in the face of incredible and unbearable violence and pain). The pigeons' ›shit‹ rain seems to stand here as an animalized response to this economy of reproductive mass killing. The passage thus plays with meanings and social heteroglossia, where it is Mo, a figuration of the other, complicated by his craft, which grants him a position of power (over the production of meat) and benevolence (as a butcher for the people, killing pigeons for the city – accidentally – saving Archie from suicide), who knows something Archie may not. In Mo's centrifugal utterances, which parody an authoritative tone, dominant social meanings are reflected. Moreover, because the utterances take the form of direct speech, they emphasize Mo's ›knowledge‹ of the various (marginalized) social groups, as well as Archie's possible ignorance of them, without the interference of an explanatory narrator. The direct discourse gives Mo's utterances a more nuanced immediacy and sovereignty. The humorous tone is underscored in the direct discourse by Mo's allusion to the meaning of legal and illegal killing, which locates and implicates BIPOC as ›implied readers‹ in evoking an ironic mockery of othering that also humorously makes room for difference and its ›normalcy‹ as well as a sense of solidarity and empowerment. The parody of role reversal becomes even more apparent when Mo more or less throws Archie off his ›property‹, using a form of speech that, if the context were unknown, could be depicted as the utterance and attitude of a *white* man speaking to an (effeminized) man of color:

»All right, all right‹ said the butcher, freeing himself from Archie's fingers and brushing himself clean, ›move along now. I've got meat coming. I'm in the business of bleeding. Not counselling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.« (Smith 2000, 7)

It is not only what the butcher says that plays with role reversal and evokes humor but also how he acts: Mo frees himself from Archie's fingers and brushes himself clean, as if Archie's fingers were dirty and as if his own ›business‹ were not a rather messy affair. It is an act from the colonial as well as classicized repertoire of images of supremacy, reminiscent of racialized forms of conceiving the other as abject, dirty, signifying (supremacist) ignorance, and the concealment of one's ›own despicable‹ desires and notions projected onto the image of the other.

Archie, who occupies the place of the other in the setting of the ›migrant‹ enclave, also functions as an inversion in the representational repertoire of the grateful, unaware, and pathetic, out-of-place, racialized ›migrant‹:

»Archie dragged his head off the steering wheel. And in the moment between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elvis and realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth, Life had said

Yes to Archie. [...] In between gulps he thanked Mo profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hand clinging on to Mo's apron.« (Smith 2000, 7)

Humor is evoked by the narrator's focalization of Archie through free indirect discourse that conveys Archie's impression of Mo as ›a brown-skinned Elvis‹, but also his joy of having survived. The humor is heightened by the play on the image of the instructor of death per se, the Muslim ›halal butcher‹ (the association with a suicide bomber may be allowed), who saves a (*white*) man from suicide – not out of a sense of duty or benevolence (as it might have been perceived had it been the other way around), but out of the pragmatics of a moment in his busy everyday life. Archie's suicide is just badly timed in Mo Hussein-Ishmael's butchering schedule, plus it is *haram*. What is doubted, then, is the idea of humanism that is presumably at stake in the (colonial) contact zone. Rather, it seems to be the narrative of power that rules the encounter between the self and the other – most probably on all sides of the divide. This may be what the humorous tone sadly wants to bring to the surface.

Yet, the encounter with the other that Archie has sought, these spaces of touch, touching the other, thematically, affectively, and epistemologically in terms of an opening up of meanings, implied in these juxtapositions at the beginning of the narrative, generates other meanings. This liminal space between life and death can also be conceived as a space between ›the (living) self‹ and ›the (unknown) other‹ represented by death.³⁰ The play with death includes Archie's suicide attempt but also the butcher's place, which is a legal place of killing. It alludes not only to the devalued lives of the pigeons but also to the abandoned and neglected place of the other in the city. However, Mo's performance and speech act reframes this image of death assigned to him and his place.

The *halal* butcher, who is loyal to and observant of (British as well as Islamic) law, is transformed into a savior, more or less against his will and without any good intentions or desire. The place of the other, where Archie has chosen to die, is full of vibrant ›life‹ and, inevitably, death, but it saves Archie's ›life‹. It also shows Mo's concern for his place and his rootedness in this place from which he attacks the pigeons: (home is the place where one attacks the other?).

The space of death becomes life. Life and death are depicted as intertwined, with no beginning or end. The other is turned into a (space of) the self. Entrusted with another ›life‹, Archie meets his second ›love‹, his future wife, the beautiful Clara Bowden.

Entangled Positions and The Still Language of Racism

Archie's best friend is a person of color. He is married to a Black woman and yet he still cannot strip off the meanings attached to racialized images and processes of othering

30 In *Aporias* Derrida ponders upon the border to the ›unknown‹ that death as the unknowable other per se signifies within different scholarly texts and (European) philosophy; he thereby takes the term ›Marrano‹ (as the other that falls out of discourse) at the end of the book as an entry point that links ›death‹ to a process of endlessness, *infinity*, rather than to an end; cf. Derrida (1993 a).

that also situate and normalize his own unmarked subjectivity within the economy of whiteness; at the same time, Archie seems not to be unaware of the constructed character of ›race‹ but cannot find a way to cope with it.

As a *white* figure connected to the other on various intimate levels, though, he is subject to a particular ›treatment‹ in the form of quiet and pitiful resentment within the broader *white* community that is on display through his workplace (Taheri 2018, 115). Archie, seemingly good-hearted, does not notice or pay much attention to it. This whimsical insensitivity seems to emphasize Archie's naivety. But it also leaves room for him to be seen as ›wise‹, as he does not even seem to think that there is something wrong with the way he lives (as he does not look at himself or the world around him, from an expected *white* perspective) or that ›race‹ might have something to do with the way he is treated or the way people (or he himself often) behave. *White Teeth* addresses racism and its effects in this context, also within an intersectional, gendered lens that does not excuse or exclude *white* women:

»Oh Archie, you are funny, said Maureen sadly, for she had always fancied Archie a bit but never more than a bit because of this strange way he had about him, always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice and now he'd gone and married one and hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was until the office dinner when she turned up black as anything and Maureen almost choked on her prawn cocktail.« (Smith 2000, 69)

Archie is befriended with people of color (›Pakistanis‹) (›For God's sake‹, all the same, what's the matter), and finally even marries a Black woman without warning ›his community‹: ›hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was‹. But it is not only skin color that causes suspicion. ›Race‹, the marker that sets the boundaries of sociability and access, is already read in the superficiality of ›food‹ and the making of the ›right‹ *friendships*, not only when the border is crossed ›legally‹ through marriage. Maureen has already shunned him because he ›behaved strange‹, ›always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice‹.

Archie does not behave (enough) like a *white* person, which means that he does not protect ›his community‹ by adhering to some implicit, fixed borders. He violates those lines, as if on purpose, by not noticing them, by touching them in conspicuous ways. To celebrate the news of his impending paternity Archie is excited (and learned from a *white* ›knowledge‹ system) about the possibility that, according to the physician, the baby might actually have ›blue eyes‹; an eye color that is associated exclusively with whiteness (empire should have known better – and immediately discarded the idea of ›race‹). ›Blue eyes‹ here ridicules biased, racialized assumptions, and unspoken anxieties: »He couldn't imagine any piece of him slugging it out in the gene pool with a piece of Clara and winning. But what a possibility!« (Smith 2000, 67).

So Archie dashes out for ›cigars‹ and comes back with ›some Indian sweets‹ and happily offers them around, but Maureen as well as another colleague, Noel, are picky about tasting the ›Indian‹ sweets Archie has bought:

»Going to have a kid, ain't I? Blue eyes, would you credit it? I'm celebrating! Thing is, you can get fourteen types of dal, but you couldn't get a bloody cigar in the Euston Road for love nor for money. Go on, Noel. How about this one? Archie held up a half-white, half-pink one with an unwelcoming odour.
 »Erm, Mr Jones, that's very ... But it's not really my cup of ... [...] Just them Pakistani foods aren't always ... I've got a bit of a funny ... « Noel pated his stomach and looked desperate. « (Smith 2000, 67)

The humorous portrayal of Archie's (not quite *white*) fatherhood-announcement is juxtaposed with his misreading of whiteness and his disregard for those invisible borders that racism has long since established (i. e. knowing where the ›correct‹ shopping areas are, and ›the sensitivities‹ of *white* colleagues). The co-workers are anxious both to distance themselves from ›this food‹ and to avoid offending Archie, thus playing out a literally and allegorically delicate situation at the material and symbolic boundaries of racism, which has also structured the idea of who belongs to humanity and who does not (and what food).

Moreover, while Archie is trying to celebrate the announcement of his forthcoming fatherhood with a ›cigar‹ following a cis-male, masculinist image of ›manhood‹, the London district is already occupied by the other and different kinds of *dal*, in which the masculinist ›cigar‹ no longer has a place. This may be an indication of a subversive authorial humor that only subtly appears between Archie's utterances through the evocation and juxtaposition of ›cigar‹ and *dal*. ›Cigars‹ symbolize not only *white* male masculinity, but also ›civilization‹ and ›culture‹ within brute structures of coloniality (– never mind, then, that ›cigars‹ are also firmly rooted outside of ›Europe‹, which may say something about modern European ›culture‹ and ›civilization‹; besides, *dal* is much healthier – any kind of *dal*, but whatever). Noel (and later Maureen) have no appreciation for the other sweets with the strange smell from next door. They are ›too foreign‹, ›Pakistani‹, and cause upset stomachs and other kinds of discomforts.

In a less funny and ›innocent‹ way, Archie is also excluded from official activities at his workplace. Archie's ›company director‹ with the odd name ›Kelvin Hero‹, a name that seems to ironize and laugh at the boss's authority and racist behavior, calls him into his office. Implicitly, he tells Archie not to attend an official work dinner because his wife is Black (and beautiful). Mr Hero's racist and sexist implications show the ambiguous image with which the (female) other is burdened. Racism is implied in the performance and direct speech of the characters; it speaks for itself, and in a way that blatantly reveals its horrific meanings. The (female) other seems to symbolize not only ›inferiority‹, powerlessness, but also, in a sexist way, ›superiority‹, and power, the Other's fear of their own desire:

»You puzzle me, Archie,‹ said Mr Hero. ›Mr Hero,‹ said Archie. ›Sit down there, Archie,‹
 ›Right you are, Mr Hero,‹ said Archie. « (Smith 2000, 70)

Archie's unknowing repetition, ›Mr Hero‹, ›Right [...] Mr Hero‹, endows the performance of his answers with a destabilizing undercurrent that threatens to explode the authority of ›Mr Hero‹ in Archie's favor – a point discussed in more detail below. It

almost does so, as the supremacist thrust of the conversation and the oblivious sexism and racism give it a tragic, sad twist. The subversive humor is hampered but nonetheless contains within itself a thought-provoking call to take a look at the unethical spaces that seem to knock at the reading process, and the ways it points to the instability of ›the self‹ and the desire for ›the other‹. The passage shows how the subconscious workings of racism are always saturated with ethical quests, which manifest themselves in the emptiness of the conversation and in an uncomfortable affectivity of unease and guilt that surfaces physically as ›sweating‹ in the one who exercises (commits?) them – here, all signs of some kind of unaware and instable ›knowledge‹ that this behavior and set of beliefs might be fundamentally wrong. Archie, in his almost absolute lack of bias, represents the other side, the bad conscience and the ethical ›face‹ that is hidden and concealed in racist discourse:

»Kelvin wiped out a streak of grimy sweat from around his shirt collar, turned his silver parker pen over a few times in his hand, took a series of deep breaths.›Now, this is quite delicate and I have never considered myself a racist, Archie ...‹

›Mr Hero?‹

Blimey, thought Kevin, what an eye-to-face ratio. When you want to say something delicate, you don't want this eye-to-face ratio staring up at you. Big eyes. Like a child's or a baby seal's; [...] Kelvin tried a softer track. [...]

›I respect you. You are not flashy, Archie, you've never been flashy, but you're

›Sturdy‹ finished Archie, because he knew this speech.

Kelvin smiled [...] ›Right, yeah, sturdy. People trust you, Archie. [...] And I'm trusting you, Arch, to take what I've got to say in the right way.‹

›Mr Hero?‹« (Smith 2000, 71)

Archie's ›Mr Hero?‹ come like an ironic punch that blatantly brings to light ›Mr Hero's‹ racist attitude and tone. Moreover, the word ›hero‹ appears in stark contrast to the utterly unheroic and craven performance of ›Mr Hero‹, further emphasizing the incongruous, ironic trait of the name's quasi-theoretical and practical meanings, and implications. The ›irony‹, however, is not bitter but quite joyful as Archie indeed has no idea what ›Mr Hero‹ is up to, and because his answer is given in the form of a casual question, which is the most minuscule and undermining form of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It could be understood in de Man's sense as an indication of pure pragmatics of form as well as an undermining rhetorical quest that questions the ›real‹ intentions and meanings behind what is said, and therefore is comical. But it also seems to evoke the question as Derrida's ›she*‹, in the form of *NichtWissen* und *OhnMacht*. The text thus plays with the meanings inherent in the word ›hero‹ and the performance of ›Mr Hero‹, on the one hand, and the grammar and form of the question, on the other hand, igniting an uncanniness that pervades the unbalanced and uncomfortable atmosphere of the ›conversation‹. It remains a monologue of racist assertions circumscribed by their own violence and presumptions. These repressed and hidden meanings of racism are projected onto Archie, making it difficult for ›Mr Hero‹ to look him in the face, especially since Archie's face is looking back at ›Mr Hero‹ as if reading his face as well and, incidentally, reflecting back to him the falsity of his unbearable assumptions; Archie's ›innocent eyes‹, which could

be understood as the un-knowing and power-less trait of his position before ›Mr Hero‹, nevertheless seem, at the same time, to force ›Mr Hero‹ to respect Archie. They seem to assuage his bad conscience, but also to show him the possibility of another, unbiased approach, which makes him feel uncomfortable. Although authority and power are on ›Mr Hero's‹ side, the ›eyes of the other‹ remind him of yet a different powerless power and authority beyond his faculty to imagine, suggesting the limits and fallacy of his ›knowledge‹ and power. Archie, however, is not only the figuration of a ›good‹ *white* consciousness. He also embodies a ›good‹, ›forgiving‹ consciousness of color that centers him in an ethical quest to accomplish three functions: Firstly, ›Archie‹ undoes the rhetoric of blame and the guilt of blaming; secondly, ›Archie‹ shows that it is possible to act differently from the set norm. Finally, ›Archie‹ represents the (lived, experienced, and desired) possibility of a promise, of another world in which neither ›race‹, nor gender, nor class exist – a world free from the mechanisms of power. Rather, the unknowing powerlessness of ›being in the world‹ prevails as ›real‹ wisdom, as desirable and *possible*.

»I could have lied to you Archie. [...] I could have fished around in my arse and pulled out a juicy one – but you're a big boy, Archie. [...] you'd put two and two together –
 ›And made four‹
 ›And made four, exactly, Archie. You would have made four. Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Archie?‹ said Mr Hero.
 ›No, Mr Hero,‹ said Archie.« (Smith 2000, 71)

›Mr Hero‹ alludes to Archie's other, *white* ›knowledge‹, he wants him desperately to understand ›himself‹, his debt to the unwritten and unmarked rules of whiteness that regulate the economy of racism from (almost) invisible shores. But Archie is beyond ›Mr Hero's‹ reach. He has already seen the depths of other choices. Archie cannot see the configurations and boundaries set by the rules of racism that he is supposed to understand.

The naïve, the fool, in their unconscious and inappropriate actions, as well as in their failure to understand, undermines and challenges ›reason‹, ›common sense‹, the logic of conventionalized, phallogocentric ›truths‹. And it is this elusiveness, this good-natured sturdiness of Archie and the evanescent simplicity of his monosyllabic question that evoke the wounding and dilemmatic humor of the situation and speak back to ›Mr Hero's‹ racist assumptions, which are quietly and inadvertently unmasked in the knowing, silent ›laughter‹ in-between the lines of the passage, a ›laughter‹ that remains in the background and captures the sad theater in the foreground:

»[A]s I say, it's not that I'm a racist, Archie ...
 ›A racist ...‹
 ›I'd spit on that Enoch Powell ... but then again he does have a point, doesn't he? There comes a point, a saturation point, and people going to feel a bit uncomfortable, ... you see, all he was saying –‹
 ›Who?‹
 ›Powell, Archie, Powell, [...] your attitude is a little strange‹
 ›Strange?‹
 ›You can see the wives don't like it because, let's face it, she's a sort, a real beauty – incredible legs, Archie, I'd like to congratulate you on them legs – and the men, well,

the men don't like it 'cos they don't like to think they're wanting a bit of the other when they're sitting down to a company dinner with their lady wives, especially when she's ... *you know* ... they don't know what to make of that at all.

›Who?‹

›What?‹

›Who are we talking about, Mr Hero?‹« (Smith 2000, 72)

›Who are we talking about, Mr Hero?‹ is the essential question, that generates the humor and shatters the meanings and imagery of the racist talk, asking whether it is *really* Clara who is being talked about, or rather *white* supremacy, scrutinizing the uneasiness of the dialogue. Is it Clara or is it ›Mr Hero‹ and what he represents that ›we‹ are talking about? Is ›Mr Hero‹ talking about his secret sexual desires? Is he talking about ›race‹ and its justification, because he is afraid of losing his ›self(-dentity)‹? Is this what he actually wants to say, as his sweating and discomfort seem to suggest? Does he know that there is something fundamentally wrong with what he is implying and that he, in fact, *respects* Archie for what he does, for his way he thinks and lives his ›life‹? The uncomprehending question of the unaware and unknowing workings of humor parses and presents phallogocentric, gendered, and racialized assumptions in the logics of racism. ›Mr Hero‹ tries to remind Archie of their shared ›good‹, the privilege of whiteness, which Archie cannot even grasp (can he?). ›Mr Hero‹, however, knows that there is a boundary that separates ›us‹ from ›them‹ and that this line must be maintained so that that ›position‹ and ›privilege‹ is not threatened.

To silence his conscious (it's good to have one! That means you can still distinguish between ›good‹ and ›not so good‹ senses), ›Mr Hero‹ first tries to bribe Archie:

››Look, Archie,‹ said Kelvin, the sweat now flowing freely; [...] ›Take them, Archie. There's fifty pounds' worth of vouchers in there, redeemable in over five thousand food outlets nationwide.‹ [...] Kevin thought for a moment he saw tears of happiness in his [Archie's] eyes. ›Well, I don't know what to say. There's a place I go to, pretty regular like. [...] Have a few meals on me.‹ [...] ›Ta very much.‹ ›Think nothing of it, Arch. Please.‹ [...] He [Archie] had just reached for the handle of the door when Kelvin snatched up his Parker pen once more and said, ›Oh, Archie, one more thing ... that dinner with the Sunderland team ... I talked to Maureen and I think we need to count down on the numbers ... we put the names in a hat and yours came out. Still, I don't suppose you'll be missing much, eh?‹ [...]

›Right you are, Mr Hero,‹ said Archie, mind elsewhere; praying to God that O'Connell's was a ›food outlet; smiling to himself [...].‹« (Smith 2000, 72–73)

Archie is happily touched by this offer from ›Mr Hero‹ because he reads it as a sign of generosity. This is both painful and hilarious. ›Mr Hero‹, in turn, is somehow awed, sweating profusely at Archie's incredible naivety, which indicates that it must have ignited in him some sort of ethical sense, some ethical sensibility – and that he might therefore also be grateful to have someone naïve around, someone you can look into the eyes and be reminded of the lines you are crossing, all of which is implicit in ›Mr Hero's‹ ashamed and tired ›Think nothing of it, Arch. Please.‹ ›Mr Hero's‹ sweating, and weary attitude thus also suggests the possibility of hope that an ethical impulse might exist that ›Mr Hero‹

simply cannot allow to surface at this moment; instead, he chooses to manage the discomfort of its concealment.

Archie, on the other hand, is simply enjoying his ›life‹ and his friendship, and has no problem admitting it (›Right you are Mr Hero‹, said Archie, mind elsewhere; praying to God that O'Connell's was a ›food outlet‹; smiling to himself). Archie is happy. His happiness evokes an ambiguous humor of joy, pity, sympathy, and disbelief, but it also opens up a space for further reflection on the tragedy of dominance and racism and their multiple, pernicious, manifest, and inherent effects in an everyday workplace. But this humor also extends to the liberating ›benefits‹ of not knowing and being powerless, rather than relying on false ›knowledge‹ and its harmful power. It allows you some space to build another world in order to live something *different*, unimaginable, beyond the economy of established, mainstream ›knowledge‹ and power. Archie's naivety not only opens up the imagination but also shows that living another world outside of the economy of ›knowledge/power is already taking place – a special niche – and there are inexorably many – within the realm of ›knowledge‹ and power.

The ›performative function‹ of the novel, then, is not only a ›machine of cultural representation and reproduction‹ (Stein 2004, 42). It also displays a performative critique of the macro and micro forms of the sociopolitical structure – and, what is more, exhibits other, unseen, possibilities of encounter and togetherness beyond the known.

Ironically, the status of marriage, which provides both female characters with a ›home‹ in a figurative and material sense, also alienates them from themselves, making them ›wives‹, people who belong to other people (›men‹) rather than to themselves, but conversely liberates the ›husbands‹ from ›their wives‹:

›Clara understood that Archibald Jones was no romantic hero. Three months spent in one stinking room in Cricklewood [from where they had just moved in to Willesden] had been sufficient revelation. [...] And if you are saddled with a man as average as this, Clara felt, he should at least be utterly devoted to *you* – to your beauty, to your youth, that's the *least* he could do to make up for things. But not Archie. One month into their marriage and he already had that funny glazed look men have when they are looking through you. He had reverted back into his bachelorhood: pints with Samad Iqbal, dinner with Samad Iqbal, Sunday breakfasts with Samad Iqbal, every spare moment with the man in that bloody place, O'Connell's, in that bloody dive. She tried to be reasonable. She asked him: *Why are you never here? Why do you spend so much time with that Indian?* [...] always the same answer: *Me and Sam? We go way back.* She couldn't argue with that. They went back to before she was born. No white knight, then, this Archibald Jones.« (Smith 2000, 48)

The account of Clara's thoughts is infused with a humor that ironizes her simplicity and simultaneously shows Clara as ingenuous. One senses a smiling narrator behind the sentences. Naivety appears as the *naivety of pathos* as a belief in dominant images. Here, in the characterization of female figures, it is not so much centripetal discourses that are thematized, but something that seems deeper and older, the images themselves, images of ›femininity‹, ›masculinity‹, ›wifehood‹ and ›husbandhood‹. The ›beauty‹ that ›women‹ are supposed to bring with them and the ›place, a house‹ that ›the men‹ are supposed to

give them do not seem to work – at least not for long. And Clara is just learning to decipher them as utterly false. ›She tried to be reasonable‹ ironically alludes to and reverses the supposed irrationality of ›women*‹ and the rationality of ›men*‹, as it seems rather ›irrational‹ for Archie to go out with Samad, and Clara tries to reason with Archie about it, but Archie does not understand such a logical point. In the same vein, ›[s]he couldn't argue with that‹ repeats and ridicules a phallogocentric, cis-masculinist disposition about ›reasonableness‹ while at the same time Archie's response, ›Me and Sam? We go way back‹ almost cynically distorts and satirizes the age difference between Clara and Archie, rather than being an appreciative tone regarding the *friendship* between Archie and Samad and mocks their quasi-ideal coupled demeanor. ›No white knight‹ is also a satirical humorous allusion to Archie's *white* subject-position in a number of ways. It not only alludes to his (›nice‹ but) apparently barely articulated romantic gestures towards Clara, for which she seems to yearn. (And should she yearn for them at all? *White Teeth* seems to ask, smiling amusedly and knowingly. Or is it all a myth? And if so, what desire drives them? (›Death‹, Freud might have said without knowing why. Or culture? But why? ›Shakespeare? Why so? A vocation to finally sense oneself? Maybe. Sounds pedestrian. Self-love – one that goes beyond oneself? Much better! A good fix. A lot of potential here . . . Let's go with that. . .). So he is ›no white knight, then, this Archibald Jones‹. The sentence sounds matter-of-fact and even a little mocking, but in a peculiar and affectionate way, which is indicated by the deixis ›this‹, ›this‹ Archibald Jones. Furthermore, ›no white knight‹ can be read in a forked, double-voiced understanding, in which *white* signifies, on the one hand, an unmarked position that perpetuates racism and its effects, and, on the other hand, ironically, a ›white knight‹ who does not save ›his own people‹ and thus does not adhere to the dictates and configurations of racism. ›Simplicity‹ is revalued through the humorous meanings that the figure of Archie signifies, as an openness to the realm of the infinite possibilities of non-knowledge and powerlessness, as an invitation for imagination. Moreover, the utterance seems once again to honor Archie's *white* difference and singularity from the dominant mainstream and to solidarily acknowledge his *attachement*. It can be read as an ethical tribute and bow to his unknowing naivety and refreshing difference. This trait seems to come from a ›third voice‹, another form of ›knowledge‹ and recognition that transcends the narrator's chatty voice.

››Clara, Clara, love, [...] We've got the Ick-Balls coming round tonight, and I want to get this house in some kind of order – so mind out the way.‹ [...]

›You said the Iqbals are comin' to dinner. I was just thinkin' ... if they're going to want me to cook dem some curry – I mean, I can cook curry – but it's *my* type of curry.‹ (Smith 2000, 52)

While Clara has her own images of ›Indianness‹ (and curry), which may also be informed by a *white* imagery, she can also relate to them from a different *history* and an other racialized, marked subjectivity, and ›difference‹ that is evinced by her polyphonic Caribbean English, which sets her apart as an *other othered* in the novel, and at the same time, charmingly normalizes her difference as another ›speaking subject‹. Clara's hybridized ›non-knowledge‹ of this blurred distinction is implicit in her conflation of ›Indian‹ and ›cook-

ing curry< with ›my type of curry<, as well as in the fact that in contrast to Archie's ›Ick-Balls<, she pronounces the name ›Iqbal< correctly as the spelling suggests:

»For God's sake, they're not *those* kind of Indians<, said Archie irritably, offended at the suggestion. ›Sam'll have a Sunday roast like the next man. He serves Indian food all the time, he doesn't want to eat it too<. [...] He gave her an affectionate kiss on the forehead, for which she bent downwards a little.

›I've known Sam for years, and his wife seems a quiet sort. They're not the royal family, you know. They're not those kind of Indians<, he repeated, and shook his head, troubled by some problem, some knotty feeling he could not entirely unravel.

Samad and Alsana Iqbal, who were not *those* kind of Indians (as in Archie's mind, Clara was not *that* kind of black), who were in fact, not Indian at all but Bangladeshi [...].«
(Smith 2000, 54–5)

Racism manifests itself in the ›knotty feeling< that Archie cannot really unravel. Archie thus physically *feels* the unresolved and paradoxical reactions he receives, especially so as he does not ›blend in< with the other in order to appear ›different<, and fancy, or to fall out of whiteness, in order to provoke and look ›interesting< or ›correct< and ›ethical< – as the unapproved but still tolerated good *white* consciousness on the fringes of colonial discourse. He does not *use* the other for his own agenda of political and/or social demarcation, he is shaped by them, woven with them, but so much outside any centripetal discourse that he has no idea, beyond ›the knotty feeling<, how much the concept of ›race< matters.

Archie tries to distinguish his beloved ›others< from the generality of ›their actual homogenized ›groups<, which is indicated by the deixis ›*those*< and ›*that*<. The italicized font accentuates in a telling way all those empty derogatory signifiers attached to particular racialized subjectivities and ›cultures<, and yet there is also the laugh of recognition and amusement at this behavior behind it and its tragic material outcomes.

Again, an implied authorial ›presence< seems to hasten to make clear that these categorizations are in fact Archie's and not Clara's or the narrator's. This can be seen in the parentheses that exempt Clara from ›*that* kind of Black< in Archie's imagination. This ›third voice< also points out, in a somewhat matter-of-fact way that ›Indians< (›who are, in fact, not Indian at all<, but never mind) was a generalization for people because of an assumed (racialized) appearance based on indifference and disinterest in any ›actual< (cultural) ›roots/routes< or *history* and Britain's role in such an interesting shared past. The humorized factuality of this false assumption and its merging with disinterested ignorance is induced by the deixis ›in fact< and ›at all<. The humorous tone becomes quite charming, empathetic, and funny as one ›sees< the characters nevertheless acting as lovers in this desolate world while their interchanged, unconventional bodily disparity is hinted at: Clara bending down a little for Archie to kiss her on the forehead (a sweet, *fatherly*, for God's sake!, kiss, but maybe one that is the epitome of ›love<, who knows).

On the one hand, Archie cannot move beyond his racialized images in which the other is somehow still trapped; on the other hand, Archie himself is shunned by his fellow *white* Londoners because of his suspicious contacts:

»Archie felt bad for Clara that it wasn't a bigger reception. But there was no one else to invite [besides Samad and Alsana]. All other relatives and friends had declined the wedding invitation; some tersely, some horrified; others, thinking silence the best option, had spent the past week studiously stepping over the mails and avoiding the phone.« (Smith 2000, 51)

The satirical, cynical underpinning of the passage is raised in the voice of an ›implied author‹ and overshadows the narrator's more factual account and Archie's oblivious observation. It emerges from the paradoxical attitude conveyed: the refusal of the ›wedding invitation‹. People were invited, but they did not come. A rather intimate and important celebration, a wedding, is not only not attended, it is deliberately not attended: ›tersely‹, ›horrified‹, and ›thinking silence the best option, had spent the past week studiously stepping over the mails and avoiding the phone‹. Archie is shown to *know* things and thus, to some extent, to perform naivety as a kind of shelter and shield against ignorance and racist violence and rejection. In this role, he, too, has become more or less a pariah. As a *white* person, he has become an outcast within *white* society. However, this contrasts sharply with the significance he occupies in the novel, which in turn values his role.

But Archie's interactions with BIPOC characters are thus shown and marked as an exception and a *self-positioning* rather than a direct result of ›multiculturalism‹. It is a dilemmatic and risky state of affairs that is represented in the novel by an almost cynical, satirical humor that critiques sociopolitical behaviorist structures marked by the historical configurations of coloniality (and gender bias). Thus the humorous tone is mixed with sadness and disillusionment. It evokes joy and serenity, as well as satirical allusions that can be understood as interventionist performances of *denormalization* and deferral of conventionalized meanings, displacing and *resignifying* them. Thus, there is a performative quality in their prompting us to consider and envision the possibility of another world in which these meanings do not matter (and will not have materialized themselves).

The Laugh of the Medusa

While Archie and Samad's *friendship* begins outside of the UK and London, Clara and Alsana's *friendship* takes place in London and is initially more or less ›forced‹ upon them because of their husbands' *friendship*. Thus, the structure of the narrative already succumbs to a gendered pre-structure into which ›woman*‹ is woven. This is already evident in the very organization of the novel itself, where *Archie* and *Samad*, as well as their children, *Irie*, *Magid*, and *Millat*, are chapter names, while Clara and Alsana are somewhere between the pages. Nevertheless, this *prestructure* may be employed in *White Teeth* to dismantle, mirror, and *resignify* such sociopolitical patterns from within.

One could say, with H el ene Cixous, that feminist* ›laughter‹, if there is such a thing, structures the novel ›from above‹, from a feminist implicit authorial instance and thread that seems to dissect signification itself through the braiding of a humorous rhetoric and its explosive, affective, and epistemological work within the narrative. On the one hand,

a feminist authorial subjectivity critical of masculinist, *white* norms and assumptions and sensitive to queer, feminist, Black, Jewish, anti-racist, postcolonial, and decolonial epistemologies, weaves the story together and scrutinizes intersectionally different signifying practices. On the other hand, the two main female protagonists within the narrative discourse, Clara, Alsana, and also Alsana's niece Neena, work out the rest within the novel.³¹

In her famous, aforementioned text, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), Hélène Cixous describes a ›feminine text‹ as subversive quasi ›by nature‹, essentializing an attitude that speaks out of necessity in relation to *pregiven* dynamics of signification in which male, *white*, middle-class subjectivities are privileged. According to Cixous, »[a] feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written, it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he« (Cixous 1976, 888).

The crust is the normalcy of a symbolic order enmeshed in structures of coloniality under which *White Teeth* also begins to emerge; but the novel makes the crust crumble by breaking new ground, using humor as an instrument for rewriting normalized images and formulas,

»[...] in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ›truth‹ with laughter. For once she blazes her trail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the cosmos of the ›personal‹ – in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents. And for good reason. There will have been the long history of gynocide. This is known by the colonized peoples yesterday, the workers, the nations, the species of whose backs the history of men has made its gold; those who have known the ignominy persecution derive from it an obstinate future desire for grandeur; those who are locked up know better than their jailers the taste of free air. Thanks to their history, women today know (how to do and want) what men will be able to conceive of only much later.« (Cixous 1976, 888)

In *The Laugh of The Medusa*, Cixous sees, against the backdrop of her own Jewish Algerian background, the thread of a feminist resignification in line with postcolonial and decolonial strategies of writing that invade, invent, and restructure the language and rhetoric that are part of the political-›personal‹:

›I say woman overturns the ›personal,‹ for if, by means of laws, lies, blackmail, and marriage, her right to herself has been extorted, at the same time, as her name, she has been able, through the very movement of mortal alienation, to see more closely the inanity of ›propriety,‹ the reductive stinginess of the masculine-conjugal subjective economy, which she doubly resists. On the one hand, she has constituted herself

31 The arrangement of stereotypes that Smith deploys is sometimes read in a straightforward rather than symbolic manner, which flattens the complexity of her critical effort; this is also the case with the female figures of her novels. As Nicklas points out, though, »Smith's ›veil‹ often is a caricature which entices the reader to look behind the act of estrangement inherent in the distorting mirror used by the author. At the same time, Smith is quite averse to the idea that belonging to a certain social group involves being closer to the truth.« Nicklas (2013, 130).

necessarily as that »person« capable of losing a part of herself without losing her integrity. But secretly, silently, deep down inside, she grows and multiplies, for, on the other hand, she knows far more about living and about the relation between the economy of the drives and the management of the ego than any man. Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title and his titles, his pouches of value, his cap, crown, and everything connected with his head, woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself: because she's a giver.« (Cixous 1976, 888)

While in *White Teeth* Archie's and Samad's figurations are used to expose and resituate gendered, cis-masculinist frames through an intersectional advance, and while *White Teeth* follows a deconstructivist mood, it equally does not essentialize a feminist or cis-feminine agenda or imagery. In line with Cixous' invitation to shift the (linguistic) ground for the possibility of another language and thinking, *White Teeth* laughs at authority, even its own, so that what may come into view is the *possibility of giving*, of facing the other as other without assimilating it into ›the self‹ or constructing it in any other way, to acquire a ›self‹. This, at least, seems to be the common ground on which Clara and Alsana connect. Clara and Alsana bond out of a felt necessity as their husbands are so close, but then they develop their own form of *friendship* within this trajectory:

»Partly because Mrs Jones becomes pregnant so soon after Mrs Iqbal and partly because of a daily proximity [...] the two women begin to see each other. Hesitant in the beginning – a few lunch dates here and there, the occasional coffee – what begins as a rearguard action against their husband's friendship soon develops. They have resigned themselves to their husbands' mutual appreciation society and the free time this leaves is not altogether unpleasant; there is time for picnics and outings, for discussion and personal study; for old French movies where Alsana screams and covers her eyes at the suggestion of nudity (›Put it away! We are not wanting to see the dangly bits!‹) and Clara gets a glimpse of how the other half live [...]: The other half who have *sex*. The life that might have been hers had she not been at the top of some stairs one fine day as Archibald Jones waited at the bottom.« (Smith 2000, 73–74)

Alsana's and Clara's *friendship* thus arises out of an arbitrary ›life-situation‹. Their different racialized backgrounds are there and not there either; ›identity‹ does not play a decisive role in the development of their *friendship*, yet it does structure who they ›are‹ in a sociopolitical sense.

Both women marry out of socially structured conditions, not out of a sentiment of ›love‹, though Clara wishes it were so and clings to the idea, and perhaps it is ›love‹ then.

Clara and Alsana meet for the first time after Archie and Clara's wedding ceremony, where Samad Miah Iqbal and ›his submissive wife‹ were witnesses to the marriage ceremony and Clara's ›only wedding guests‹:

»[T]wo Indians, both dressed in purple silk. Samad Iqbal, a tall, handsome man with the whitest teeth and a dead hand, who kept patting her on the back with the one that worked.« (Smith 2000, 50)

Clara's thoughts, expressed in indirect discourse and hybridized by the narrator's mocking voice, evoke a humorous scene through the casual description of ›two Indians‹, both (and not just the woman) dressed in ›purple silk‹, a color and fabric associated (in ›the West‹, no doubt) with femininity* (– whatever that might be anyway). Playing on dry humor, this image triggers a mixed affectivity and reflects prejudices and resentments that have inadvertently traveled to (racialized) ›camps‹ as well. It also reflects the distance Clara has felt toward the Iqbals, despite the *white teeth* she recognizes as an attribution of Samad's handsomeness. Clara complacently lets the ›Indians‹, as the Bengali Iqbals are teasingly and hopelessly also called by Clara, know and lovingly shares with them what they already know, namely: How (Britishch) ›Jamaicans‹ ›think‹ about them. It is a nontoxic way to encounter someone when you share the same grounds of power (=non-power). With an ›implied white audience‹ Clara's remark laughingly and deconstructively shares and reflects racist prejudices and thought patterns, implicitly asking why clothing colors are (an envied?) problem (just do it!). What kind of (gendered and racialized) color line is indicated in standardized white European/Western thought? This touches on and opens up the unwritten ›laws‹ of understanding ›sobriety‹ and ›solemnity‹ and what they may signify (– gentility? And is this the only way to show it? Does it not sound wrong?) It also points, with a sad smile, to the loneliness of marginalized people and the difficulty of creating another patchwork family and ›community‹ in the *nowhere land*, where you suddenly, somehow, end up – (with people in purple silk, or mostly very plain (– very, very plain indeed!)), and how random that ›family‹ is, just like the ›real‹ one you are born into.

Humor as feminist ›laughter‹, a ›laughter‹ reminiscent of Cixous' Medusa, occurs in a more direct way in an encounter between the three female characters, Clara, Alsana and Neena. The scene is set in a fictional location in London and thus evokes a disorienting degree of verisimilitude in the novel. It is a lunch and picnic scene that takes place in London's Kilburn Park (an actual Tube station) and depicts a meeting between Alsana, Clara and Alsana's niece, Neena. The chapter consists of a dialogue between the three picnicking women. Both Clara and Alsana are very pregnant. While the characters are portrayed as having a good time chatting, eating, enjoying themselves, and having secret intellectual exchanges (Clara »is the recipient of a secret (kept secret from Alsana and Archie) lending library of Neena's through which she reads in a few short months, Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Jong's *Fear of Flying* and *The Second Sex*, all in a clandestine attempt, on Neena's part, to rid Clara of her ›false consciousness‹), their conversation thread twice veers into unsettling territory.

It is as if Medusa is revealing her secret liaison with them, as if she is unobtrusively touching them on the shoulder, cautioning them to be aware and to do their best. Alsana is about to talk about her marriage to Neena and how hard it is for her to get close to her husband. But she is also very happy that way: »Now, every time I learn something more about him, I like him less«. Alsana even defends the arranged marriage, dismissing her niece's modern thoughts and question of how she could marry without knowing her husband: »Because, *Miss Smarty pants*, it is by far the easier option. It was exactly because Eve did not know Adam from Adam that they got on so A-OK« (Smith 2000, 78). What is one to say? (*There may be some ›truth‹ in that lottery-marriage. . . ? That it incidentally also deconstructs some rigid religious images of female* sexuality (names it at all). . . that it wisely emphasizes the role of not-knowing for real marriage kicks?*) The dry but playful sense of humor that

accompanies Alsana's remarks, which turn marriage into an endless adventure, a leap into the unknown (assuming one remains unknowing about the other), and the realms of powerlessness, speaks for itself despite its decisiveness. In its sorrowful and cheerful meanings, it also opens up a thoughtful side that raises the question of whether ›knowing the other‹ and ›knowing things about the other‹ – even in an intimate relationship – is possible at all, and whether it actually brings closeness or rather imperceptibly increases disinterest and distance (does one even *know* oneself, whatever that entity may mean? And does one have the power to look thoroughly through oneself in a radiographic mode? Freud may have been the one who did just that, and what *he found*, well, is a lot to digest . . . we are still chewing on it . . .). Alsana continues in this vein, lamenting in a rather resigned manner, and ends her speech with a chaste remark: ›Getting anything out of my husband is like trying to squeeze water out when you're stoned‹, Neena laughs ›despite herself‹, correcting the phrase: ›Water out of a *stone*.‹« (Smith 2000, 78; Ledent 2016, 85). Alsana's comment is also funny because it conjures up a very different image, incongruous with her serious and sad remark, that echoes the description of a ›real‹ image of young Samad, stoned to the ears, in the ›war‹ (– a secret that the narrator will soon share with their ›implied audience‹). Humor seems to function here as an affective shield. It shields from the sorrow that Alsana's words actually entail by evoking joy as a kind of distraction. Moreover, it not only shields Alsana from pity. It also shields ›life‹ as such as if to suggest the ambiguous, uncertain, and pitiful sides that are inevitably part of it and will remain part of it, no matter how hard one tries, with whatever models – some ends will never quite fit. And that is why Alsana talks about it without being completely overwhelmed by her insight. She just *knows without* knowing. Alsana's lament has the effect of a talking cure, cleaning out the wastebasket of her psyche, and it shows the power (and luxury) of her companionship, *friendship*, and bond, in all powerlessness, and the power to find a way through ›life‹ in its unknowing and powerless moments, within and without.

Alsana goes on, and her flood of words seems to mimic some (hopefully outdated) masculinist speech acts regarding the mystification of the female* gender. It is not so much a reversal of such attitudes as a proof that they do not concern her in the same way, that femininity* was (is?) a never-ending mystified subject in dominant mainstream discourses – and from time to time, astonishingly, perhaps also in not-so-mainstream ones – (if it is talked about at all). It touches on the secret ›laws‹ of discourse that Clara is just about to open up to herself, supported by Neena, the secret princess of feminist* resistance in the novel. But Alsana seems to *know* of all this anyway, without being particularly, literally, *affected by it*:

»Yes, yes. You think I'm so stupid. But I am wise about things like men. I tell you – Alsana prepares to deliver her summation as she has seen it done many years previously by the young Delhi lawyers with their slick side partings – ›men are the last mystery. God is easy compared with men. Now. Enough of the philosophy, samosa?‹ She peels the lid off the plastic tub and sits fat, pretty and satisfied on her conclusion.« (Smith 2000, 78)

Alsana nonchalantly brushes off the mystery of masculine* pride with a samosa, too busy enjoying herself and too content to be puzzled by it for longer than seems necessary

(three minutes?). To her, male masculinity seems a given. *Nature* is used here in a more metaphorical, aesthetic sense as its own metaphor, as something to enjoy (or not) and not to worry about too much. Unlike Archie, who has learned things from the cinema, Alsana has learned her part from the theater of ›reality‹, she has observed how educated ›men‹ with slick haircuts, lawyers who obey (their) ›laws‹, behave, and she mimics their rhetoric in a sphere of unknowing and without obvious power (unless you are a goddess*, power always has a purview, it will always remain limited); for Alsana, this is her free and liberated world where discourse (with its predetermined ›knowledge‹) has no power over her (mind). Thus, while using the same rhetoric, Alsana says something different, something that is inconsistent with the ›law‹-abiding speeches of cis-masculinist or dominant thought. She uses the same rhetoric and gestures to *expose* dominant discourses and their *unwritten* ›laws‹, not intimidated or impressed in the least. But Neena cannot let it go, pre-occupied with intellectual and erudite care and heroism. Unsatisfied, she pushes the discussion to the extreme, and to the question of male ›masculinity‹ from its assumed very beginning, construing it as and tying it to the sexes in a more biological sense, missing the metaphor of ›nature‹ by a hair and triggering a humorous and affective abundance at a limit that finds expression in laughter as well as crying:

»Shame that you're having them‹, says Neena to her aunt, lighting a fag. ›Boys, I mean. Shame that you're going to have boys. [Clara:] ›What do you mean? [. . .] ›I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos this century. There's enough fucking men in the world. If I knew I was going to have a boy‹ – she pauses to prepare her two falsely conscious friends for this new concept – ›I'd have to seriously consider abortion.‹ Alsana screams, claps her hands over one of her own ears and one of Clara's, and then almost chokes on a piece of aubergine. For some reason the remark simultaneously strikes Clara as funny; hysterically, desperately funny; miserably funny; and the Niece-of-Shame sits between the two, nonplussed, while the two egg-shaped women bend over themselves, one in laughter, the other in horror and asphyxiation. [. . .] Clara cannot stop the tears from squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. She cannot work out, at this moment, whether it is crying or laughing.« (Smith 2000, 78–79)

As if a ›real author‹ does not want to spare a certain academic feminist* smugness from its mockery, sympathize with working-class women*, and mock hegemonic feminist* discourse, they let the other, supposedly unknowing and unlearned women* speak and act. While Alsana and Clara seem to echo two opposing reactions, they both reflect instances of shock, but they are shocked by different aspects and consequences of Neena's question. Alsana may be shocked for religious reasons because the idea of abortion itself, and ›the murder of innocents‹, as she later remarks, is so far from her approach to ›life‹. This idea seems so insane to her that she would not want to be exposed to it and, theatrically, even tries in vain to prevent Clara from hearing it, which also shows that she does not take the question too seriously and is not really upset. At the same time, the gravity and weight of Neena's question is further tempered by Alsana's humorous portrayal as her gesture has a dramatic effect that is heightened by the comical description of her choking on a – delicious – ›piece of aubergine‹.

Clara's ›laughter‹, however, mirrors Cixous' ›laughter‹ of Medusa. It is an ambiguously sad, joyless, and hysterical ›laughter‹ of misery and despair, but it may also reflect the pleasure she actually has with her two friends. Clara seems to welcome Neena's objection about what to do with ›men‹, and, at the same time, seems to laugh it off as Neena is talking about unborn, barely imaginable babies, so the question seems quite absurd to her. Both Clara as well as Alsana also seem to sympathize with Neena's disregard for ›men‹ but simultaneously reflect the tragedy of a feminist* desire that literally drives them to the point of developing ›mad‹, self-destructive thoughts, but that, in doing so, also goes beyond sex, questioning social norms and the theater of gender roles (in war and peace). Clara's ›laughter‹ also corrects Cixous's ›laughter‹ of the Medusa in the sense that Medusa may not have been as self-confident as she comes across in Cixous's text. She may have rather laughed out of the experience of a limit that is indistinguishable from grief, and out of a faint hope that it might still be possible to change things.

Plessner's understanding of ›laughter‹ as an experience of the limit seems to be lurking around the corner here, reminding us of a threshold space that the mind can no longer process and that interrupts not only the flow of meanings but also that of the body, touching body and mind in a striking way and pointing to the brokenness that accompanies existence – as well as experience. But Clara's reaction may also point to a sign of ›understanding‹. Clara understands without knowing and without knowing whether she is crying or laughing. The passage thus also goes beyond Plessner's reading and links both crying and laughing to striking or stroking forms of touch as experiences of a limit; it shows the space of not-knowing and powerlessness that is *attouched* to the life-worlds, to the experiences of femininity* and, in the novel as a whole, to the experiences of vulnerability and otherness.

The second turn in their social gathering and conversation is again triggered by a question from Neena about Archie and Samad and how they met and became friends. Alsana and Clara mention their participation as British soldiers in the Second World War. While Clara believes she married Archie out of ›love‹ and considers him a hero, Alsana married Samad in an arranged marriage and is more ›rational‹, and suspicious of his heroism. Frowning, she urges Clara to face ›the truth‹ and see her husband for what he ›is‹.

The passage allows for a subtle reference to different spaces of touch, and how they are produced in the narrative, and how humor as an economy of affectivity is created and operates in the passage. Spaces of touch appear as affectively charged packages of meaning that are exchanged between the characters, intoxicated by friendship and conviviality (and also more unmetaphorically, by delicious ›Indian‹ food). On the one hand, these are created by the dialogues of the characters, by what is said in a direct style and by the character-bound, internal focalization. On the other hand, they appear in the narrator's reported speech and a succession of external/internal focalizations. The dialogic form between the characters on the level of narrative discourse reflects the affective ambience between the three and gives meaning to their performance. The reported speech fills the humorous ›affective gap‹ between the dialogic sentences, marking them. And it also carries an affectionate, humorous narrative mood, conveyed by the narrator's voice, invoking and addressing an ›implied audience‹:

»Alsana throws her head back, a dismissive gesture. »Oh, in the war. Off killing some poor bastards who didn't deserve it, no doubt. And what did they get for their trouble? A broken hand for Samad Miah and for the other one a funny leg. Some use, some use all this. »Archie's right leg« says Clara quietly, pointing to a place in her own thigh. »A piece of metal, I tink. But he don really tell me nuttin«. »Oh, who cares!« Alsana bursts out. »I'd trust Vishnu the many-handed pick-pocket before I believed a word those men say.« But Clara holds dear the image of the young soldier Archie, particularly when the old, flabby Direct Mail Archie is on top of her. »Oh, come now . . . we don know what —« Alsana spits quite frankly on the grass. »Shitty lies! If they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where are the hero bits and bobs? Heroes — they have things. They have hero stuff. You can spot them ten miles away. I've never seen a medal and not so much as a photograph.« Alsana makes an unpleasant noise at the back of her throat, her signal for disbelief.

»So look at it — no, dearie, it must be done — look at it *close up*. Look at what is left. Samad has one hand; says he wants to find God but the fact is God's given him the slip; and he has been in that curry house for two years already, serving up stringy goat to the whiteys who don't know any better, and Archibald — well, look at the thing close up . . .« Alsana stops to check with Clara if she could speak her mind further without causing offense or unnecessary pain, but Clara's eyes are closed and she is already looking at the thing close up; a young girl looking at an old man close up; finishing Alsana's sentence with the beginning of a smile spreading across her face, » . . . folds paper for a living, dear *Jesus*«.« (Smith 2000, 81; emphasis in the text)

The humorous tone of the passage is touching in ambiguous affective ways, pointing to several things at once, at the level of the narrative discourse between the characters as well as at the level of the narration and its implications with which it organizes an »implied audience«. The dialogue is held in a humorous tone, realized through a tagged direct style that marks both characters in a funny way. On the one hand, this maintains the (humorous) narrative mood and, on the other hand, it plays with stereotypes. The humorous implications are embedded in Clara's accent, which gives the text a warm, giggly tone, and in Alsana's insistence with which she addresses her friend. Alsana's disapproving attitude toward Hinduism that is expressed in a frank manner, is another sore of humor. While, on the one hand, it violates a sense of tact and shows her naïve speech act, it also excuses her by revealing her (other) position in discourse. But it also playfully alludes to the traumatic history of the Indian decolonization process, which tore the country into fragments, so that Alsana's disparaging remark appears as a reminder of these anti-colonial wars and the pain, which has manifested itself in language in this hurtful way. It may also have the function to disapprove of any kind of glorification of this other place called *home* that comes with its own nightmares and structures of neglect, violence, and othering. Clara's Caribbean accent allows for a humorous portrayal that elicits sympathy for her. It creates a link to the stereotypical image of how »Jamaicans« speak, and at the same time, gives space to this accent and what she has to say. Here, it is *attached* to a female protagonist of the novel. In this way, Clara can also be shown in her uniqueness and singularity beyond any stereotypes. Again this humorous, affectively ambiguous process reveals the entangled (colonial) histories that are mirrored in language and discourse on a day-to-day basis; it also dignifies the characters and their (*her**-) stories even if they do

not appear as educated and do not speak the way ›one‹ should speak, opening up discourse to include their experiences and, on a meta-level, the possibility of grasping the pain and trauma other people have to live with, besides the stereotypical, racist and classist prejudices that configure other(-ed) experiences. The humorous portrayal of the characters indicates that it is not an analogous representation of ›Jamaicans‹ and ›Bengalis‹, but a teasing, affectionate one that fondly considers and exposes perfect(-ly) (fine) imperfections without fear of doing harm. The logic of the stereotype is thus deconstructed by the affective-humorous effect of the text, which touches on various images, stroking some and striking others, shifting them on the chessboard of discourse. A deconstructive procedure emerges between the narrative discourse and the instance of an ›implied audience‹ through Clara's external focalization, which suddenly shifts from the character's direct speech to a character-bound focalization in an intensifying, internal form (Bal 2009, 148): »Archie's right leg,‹ says Clara quietly, pointing to a place in her own thigh. ›A piece of metal, I tink. But he don really tell me nuttin«.

It is in this shift of perspective that the humorous rhetoric on the different textual levels of the narrative can exude a specter of paradoxical affectivity, which expresses the complex vulnerability of the characters and their affective world, their thoughts and utterances.

This is suggested here by the word ›quietly‹ and Clara's pointing to a spot in her own thigh. This nimble and fine textual choreography may also wish for an ›implied audience‹ to pause and contemplate.

Humor once again undoes the closure of the idealized portrayal of the characters as the *perfect other* or the simulated *good other*. The narrator's voice, on the one hand, hints at Clara's ›love‹ for her husband (›But Clara holds dear the image of the young soldier Archie . . . ‹) and, on the other hand, quite frankly reveals what Clara might be thinking while having sex with her much older husband (›particularly when the old, flabby Direct Mail Archie is on top of her. ›Oh, come now . . . we don know what -‹)

The paradoxes presented herein also touch on psychologically reassuring traits, suggesting that it is still okay to think that way, and that the ›love‹ she feels is not diminished by it, on the contrary, ›love‹, that funny thing, can be imagined as a ›state‹ that is all-encompassing and sometimes perhaps lenient as well.

The humorous play on stereotypes and humorous sensibility thus works against stereotypes through the voices and the behavior of the characters, through what they perform in these ›touching spaces‹ created in the narrative between the narrator's voice, the characters' direct speech, and the witnessing of a possible ›implied audience‹ that it inevitably evokes.

The humorous narrative tone also shows Alsana and Clara's *friendship* as a space of touch, as a space of trust. It is realized through a rhetoric that maintains an external focalization in relation to direct speech. The focalization explicitly refers to the characters' actions, to their performative attitude, which presents humorous instances within a dry narrative presentation that is incongruent with how they act. This incongruity genderizes humor as reflected in Alsana's astute perspective on her husband: ›Alsana throws her head back, a dismissive gesture. ›Oh, in the war. Off killing some poor bastards who didn't deserve it, no doubt. And what did they get for their trouble? A broken hand for Samad Miah and for the other one a funny leg. Some use, some use all this‹; ›Alsana spits quite frankly on the grass. ›Shitty lies! If they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where

are the hero bits and bobs? Heroes – they have things. They have hero stuff. You can spot them ten miles away. I've never seen a medal and not so much as a photograph. < Alsana makes an unpleasant noise at the back of her throat, her signal for disbelief.>

It is as if they were talking about and problematizing discursive issues, but these are shown to be rather intimate everyday problems, which also indicates their closeness. Because both characters have a voice, they can speak back and challenge mainstream *white* British or Western norms (as well as their husbands', another kind of mainstream within). Here it is expressed in Alsana's straightforward exclamation that marks her character: >to the whiteys who don't know any better<. On the one hand, Alsana is speaking back to an >implied (*white*) audience<, suggesting that there are things beyond >their< >knowledge<, and that she perceives it as incomplete. However, implicit in the words >don't know any better< is not so much an accusation as a forgiving tone that excuses this behavior, suggesting that Alsana does not expect more of them and believes they might have acted differently if they had known better.

In this quite confident tone, the stereotype of the >submissive< and >backward Muslim wife*< is undone in a disarmingly humorous way that may make future restaurant patrons laugh and keep it in mind for the next time they encounter a >subjugated< Muslim woman*. The other, in their >otherness< and difference, can be perceived, at least by an ideal >implied audience< who can hear this as an equal, in that, to quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, through the narration and the fact that Alsana has been given a voice, *the conversation flows from both sides*. The humorous narrative angle allows the characters to speak back to the mainstream discourse alongside and beyond any stereotypes. The characters' voices diminish the stereotypical representation as well as any stereotypical images that the >audience< might bring with them. Rather than marking the characters, the stereotypes are modified and sent back to discourse from which they originate (via colonial history).

On a meta-level, humor offers a field of touch that renders difference unimportant to understanding and may even subtly ask an >implied audience< to alter its images of the other. At this level, an incongruity of humor is performed. Additionally, there is also an >implied audience of color< that shares the >knowledge< of the narrator and the characters and can laugh and enjoy the congruency of the humor performed.

Despite the fact that Alsana and Clara belong to different religions (both, at least historically, quite imperial) that are often seen as warring, they discuss an intimate subject, which shows their closeness. This is also evident in the way how Alsana *acts*. She *looks* at Clara before deciding to utter her words. She does not want to offend Clara, which indicates her affection for her. Her concern is thus transferred to an >implied audience<. After looking at her Alsana decides not to say what she wanted to say in order not to disturb her friend, which is signaled by the word >but<: >but Clara's eyes are closed<. The passage also shows that Alsana is a respected friend. Alsana's words have influenced Clara's thinking, touched her. In the midst of a funny story, there is this subtle performance of *friendship* and warmth that has developed from a chance encounter between two people with very different backgrounds in a new environment, who become a new >family<: Clara has closed her eyes in a meditative way. She has taken up the words of Alsana >to look at it close up<. And it is in this moment of absorbing her friend's words that Clara seems to realize something else.

In a withdrawn way, she looks at Archie ›close up‹ and recognizes another instance of an encounter that has touched her deeply in a reorienting way. In a transposed speech that changes the focalization to a tagged direct style, the ›implied audience‹ is placed in a close narrative distance and can feel Clara's realization of an im/possible ›love‹ at the same time as she does. The moment of realization is expressed in a humorous way, intensifying the narrative distance in direct style, as Clara, smiling, exclaims: ›folds paper for a living, dear *Jesus*.‹ There seems to be a crudeness in this realization that amuses Clara. Clara, a young, beautiful Black woman, has fallen in love with an old, poor *white* man. The socio-historical boundaries and *normalizations* around ›race‹ class, age, and the meaning of ›love‹ – are subtly deferred by the indication, firstly, of Clara's happy smile and secondly, by her utterance: ›folds paper for a living‹ and an emphasis on the word ›Jesus‹ as if to say *I cannot believe I am in love with someone like that* and at the same time that such is ›life‹. It is an affectionate, humorous, liberating invitation to all possible impossibilities beyond the limits of our first-hand imagination, encouraging us to think that it is possible to have another world through slightly different shifts in our ways of imagining things (around us). Clara's smile, in this sense, also indicates the process of *unfolding* in the endless matter of non-knowledge and power-lessness that ›life‹ seems to involve in order to arrive at some form of understanding – somehow.

Reading *Je suis un écrivain japonais*

Je suis un écrivain japonais – A Contextualization

Dany Laferrière is one of the most celebrated contemporary Francophone authors in North America. Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and raised by his maternal grandmother in Petit-Goâve, Laferrière worked as a journalist before being forced to move to Canada in 1976 by the regime of Jean-Claude Duvalier and the murder of a journalist friend. Laferrière began his literary career in Montreal, where all of his novels were published. His first novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985), was an immediate success and was made into a movie of the same name, released in 1990. While the novel is a meta-critical approach to racist discourse and imagery that plays with the limits of stereotypes, it has also been viewed with concern by critics because of its ambivalent tone, which can simultaneously be used to stabilize racist images (Daniel Coleman 1998, 52 ff.). The rather one-sided reception of the novel did indeed have an impact on his career as a writer, since Laferrière's fame at the beginning of his writing career, and despite many other subsequent publications, was almost exclusively linked to this book (Skallerup 2013, 9 ff.). In fact, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* was his first book after a long break from writing due to racist and ethicizing attributions and categorizations. In 2001, Laferrière published *Je suis fatigué* ([2001] 2005), a title alluding to the reception of his first novel and its enormous, lopsided popularity. In this publication, Laferrière declared that he would quit writing altogether because he felt tired of such simplistic readings (Skallerup 2013, 10). *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is therefore an important milestone in his career, almost seven years after this critical reflection, as it not only poignantly symbolizes a return to writing but also makes space for writing beyond (dominant and colonial) unintelligible gestures. In this sense, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is also a debut novel of a different kind.

Since his first work, Laferrière has published more than 25 novels. Laferrière's oeuvre is considered «une véritable fête de l'esprit et de la langue», «pour tous les lecteurs francophones». ¹ This celebration of Laferrière's work has so far found expression in major literary prizes and acknowledgments, like the French literary *Prix Médicis* and the *Grand Prix du livre de Montréal* for his book *L'Énigme du retour* (2009); he has also been awarded the *Grand Prix littéraire international Metropolis Bleu* as well as *le Prix des libraires* among others. Since 2015 Dany Laferrière has been a member of the *Académie française* and thus

1 Cf. Les Éditions du Boréal (17.10.2022).

admitted to the French ((ex-?) imperial, self-celebrating) literary establishment (as the second Black writer after the internationally acclaimed Senegalese poet, writer and political thinker Léopold Sédar Senghor). In 2015, Laferrière was also awarded the prestigious Canadian *Prix littéraire Ludger-Duvernay* after the publication of his inaugural lecture at the *Académie française* (*Dany Laferrière à l'Académie française – Discours de réception*, 2015), which includes a response by the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, a fellow member of the *Académie*. In February 2022 a wax figure of Dany Laferrière was unveiled at the Musée Grévin in Paris, sitting in an armchair and holding a book of one of his favorite authors, Jorge Louis Borges.

Although Dany Laferrière considers himself to be an *American* writer, an understanding of *America* that, firstly, shifts the meaning of the term to encompass all parts of the continent and that, secondly, makes French an American language, decentralizing English, and, thirdly, to some extent, displaces and *denormalizes* France's (historically driven, colonial) grip on parts of the Caribbean, he is often stubbornly considered and discussed exclusively as a ›Haitian‹ writer.² Laferrière's novel *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, published in 2008, can thus be regarded as a work that problematizes this idea of the ethnicization of writers and the emptiness that such categorizations imply. Far from denying his Haitian origins but rather taking them for what they are, an unexciting, and unexotic, and yet an *intimate* and *dear* trait of (his) autobiography, Dany Laferrière's *claim to America* should be understood as a discursive intervention that, rather than essentializing presumptions, problematizes the idea of ethnicity and the vacuity that such categories imply. Instead of accepting the presumptions and monolithic assumptions of normalized academic, stereotypical, nationalist, discursive protocols, it discusses the value of writing and thinking beyond such narrow discursive, often supremacist categorizations and placements of the other. Laferrière's interest in the theme of ›Japan‹ reaches far beyond a proxy to discuss and question sanctioned forms of othering. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is not the only work by Laferrière that deals with and depicts ›Japan‹ in its title. In two other novels, he also makes explicit references to Japan. This is the case with his second book, *Eroshima* (1987). The book meanders around the question of ›love‹, and in meditative ways negotiates questions of ›identity‹ and belonging against the backdrop of racist and stereotypical images, but it is also a book about trauma (Skallerup 2013a: 51). Furthermore, another of Laferrière's recent books, *Sur la route avec Bashô* (2021), also implicitly evokes and centralizes ›Japan‹ by using the name of the Japanese writer Matsuo Basho (1644–1694). In this book, wandering and wondering seem to be intertwined and used as forms of poetic and figurative contemplation. Laferrière here emphasizes and attempts to preserve the value of aesthetics and of wonder (Laferrière 2021, 4:48 ff.) by employing a poetic form as a tool for looking at things for their own sake and as a pleasurable as well as political and aesthetic form of the poetics of contemplation per se that transcends ›philosophy‹, reaching far beyond it and opening up another

2 Kirsten Dickhaut (2014), for example, is, on the one hand, well aware that Laferrière tries to complicate the meaning of identarian assignments but links this approach rather to a cosmopolitan Haitian trait in his attitude (Dickhaut 2014, 391; 392, 392, 399) and puts the word American in quotation marks (Dickhaut 2014, 393).

understanding of it outside of disciplinary and disciplined narrowness – maybe in the realm of theory.

So far, different aspects of his work have received scholarly attention. These include the various aspects of migration and diasporic life in Canada, the lyrical character of his prose, and the highly political and class-related forms of the different exploitative sociopolitical frames that Laferrière problematizes. However, the issue of humor, which also characterizes his work extensively and to which many critics allude in passing, has not yet been systematically discussed. In an interview, Laferrière claims that the use of humor in his work is underestimated. He reveals how important humor is in his oeuvre, that he uses it in an aware, intricate, affective way in his writing and that behind his »constant humor« there is »a kind of extreme despair. A few critics noticed, but many others failed to see that fundamental trait« (Laferrière 1999, 911). While Laferrière describes humor as »at the heart of the subversive intention« (Laferrière 1999, 912), his humorous style is often portrayed as an »ironique postmoderne à l'américaine«, and, moreover, accurately described as »[u]n style débridé et allusive« that »exploite les codes de la fiction sans qu'il soit possible d'assurer une base d'interprétation stable« (Alexandre/Schoentjes 2013, 13).

Je suis un écrivain japonais (2008) could not be more different from *White Teeth* in terms of its novelistic form and its narrative style. But in its complete difference, the novel shows other aspects of humor in its rhetorically, affectively, and discursively touching movements.

As with many of his works, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, too, does not follow a linear line of narrative (Mathis-Moser 2003, 2007) but indulges in reflections on the meanings of the sentence that is its title – a humorous genie in a bottle that he tosses into the sea of meaning. Laferrière's suggestive humor is thus already present in the novel's title. The plot(s), if there are any, are taken from the title, as it were, and fissured out and unfolded throughout the book to reveal their (many) possible meanings. In this way, the novel develops several overlapping stories, which are linked by the narrative voice in close proximity to an »implied author«/»real author« and thus always remains on the verge of metalepsis, which itself can be seen as a narrative tool that emphasizes a humorous tonality.

In principle, two main narrative strands and two organizing stories can be distinguished in the novel. On the one hand, there is the narrator, who thinks about how to write the novel. Their narrating voice can be heard throughout the everyday reflections while walking through Montréal. On the other hand, there is an underlying story and narrative thread of a super-star girl band around which they intermittently try to write the novel and which the homodiegetic narrator accompanies to an extent through Montréal.

Laferrière's work is often characterized by a complex, performative, scene-oriented quality in which an »audience« is invoked. This is also the case in this novel. Often this trait in his work is associated with *la lodyans*,³ a nineteenth-century term and literary genre in Haitian literature that, while initially and often humorously referring to traditional oral narratives, also encompasses written literature. It is often suggested that Laferrière evokes and uses such an »audience« while giving the concept a modernist trait. »C'est cette présence ponctuelle qui a pour fonction même de produire la vraisemblance, de

3 See for example Anglade (2006) and Dardompré (2013).

déguiser en témoignage ce qui n'est qu'imaginaire. Ce narrateur/témoin agit comme un journaliste qui apparaît brièvement devant la caméra pour présenter ou commenter son reportage« (De Luca 2018, 199).

Although *la lodyans* seems very close to the much later discussed European notion of an ›implied audience‹ in literary writing as a feature of the telling and showing aspects of narrativity per se, *la lodyans* is specifically characterized through ›l'humour, la critique et l'actualité‹ that are employed ›[d]ans une économie de mots et d'espace textuel‹ in which ›tout est dit, tout est ex-primé en ›miniature‹« (Dardompré 2013). These are also aspects characteristic of Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which are already implied and evoked in ›miniature‹ in the title.

The narrative is held in the form of monologic threads of thought, sometimes in a reporting tone that addresses such an ›implied audience‹. This emphasizes not only a performative but also a metaleptic trait of the novel. Instead of a stringent or coherent plot or story, the narrative evolves into a collection of scattered short chapters, ranging from half a page to five pages, resembling short prosaic poems and vignettes. They often contain speculations and bits and pieces of stories, narrative beginnings, and philosophical impressions as well as thoughts on what it might mean to be a *Japanese writer* in particular. Within these scattered speculations, however, a narrative discourse with a possible plot takes on a sketchy form. It consists of the wanderings of a homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ through Montréal and their wondering over the title of the very book they are writing/that is written. Here, too, Laferrière mixes the notions of reflection and travel.

The reportage, realist mood is emphasized by a narrator who seems to be the ›implied/real author‹ and protagonist. This overlapping of different narrative instances is a feature that Laferrière often uses in his work (Mathis-Moser 2003, 53). However, the novel is more than just ›referential‹; it rather amounts to reflections on different possibilities of writing this novel, whereby a diegetic level is nevertheless created. Through this structure, the text remains puzzling and amusing, and also evokes a state of thoughtfulness. The diegetic and extradiegetic worlds seem to intersect and give meaning to each other.

All the above elements can be summarized as characteristics of a *picaresque novel*. From the start, the narrator/›implied author‹ adopts a congenial outsider status with a twinkle in their eye: They are a Black émigré author as well as an author with a peculiar book title; the somewhat humorous-roguish trait at the beginning is also taken up throughout the novel, but in quite unexpected forms and without being bound to a specific linear plot. There is a homodiegetic narrator/protagonist and a genre mix that includes elements of crime fiction/mystery romance, and evocations of travel writing; it is partly social satire, interspersed with haiku and haibonic prose with intertextual elements. The narrative can also be read as a *haibunic novel* as the text shifts to impressionistic prose on almost every page and often concludes with a haiku poem. This prose corresponds to an allusive, allegorical, picturesque scenery and a contemplative, reflective rhetoric. It is as if the text were embarking on a journey, not only in the ›real‹ sense of being on the road, but also in the figurative sense of the process of thinking itself.

There is, on the one hand, the story of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ who tries to find an entry point to the chosen title of the novel, a search in which the

›real author‹, the ›implied author‹, the narrator as well as the protagonist coincide. What emerges is an »univers de frontières poreuses« (Mathis-Moser 2011, 72).

This search evolves into a reading of the work of Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), the Japanese writer and poet of the Edo period, especially of his work *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (*La Route étroite vers les districts du Nord* (published posthumously in 1702) and is programmatic for how the novel can be conceived. The narrator/›implied author‹, themselves wandering through Montréal, follows Basho's text and becomes a homodiegetic narrator within an evolving narrative discourse.

This path along Basho's script is set off visually from the rest of the text, written in italics, and marks the trail of inner, contemplative insights in close proximity to Basho: »Je suis dans le métro de Montréal en train de suivre les traces d'un certain Matsuo Munefusa, dit Basho. [...] Basho et Sora viennent d'arriver à la prestigieuse barrière de Shirakawa que tous les vieux pêtes évoquent avec émotion« (Laferrière 2008, 28).

Basho and his work seem to represent this Shirakawa barrier for the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, who tries to capture it in the novel with increasing affection.

It would still be difficult to speak of a frame narrative here and to decide which narrative threads can be seen as frames for which ones; rather, the title seems to be the main theme around which all others revolve; however, Basho's book has an important place in the novel, his writing being indirectly portrayed as what *really* matters and what is *really* relevant in the wor(l)d (poetic language/poetic (in-)sights). These reflections that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ undertakes along with Basho seem to be an implicit answer to what it means to be a *Japanese writer*. Perhaps the most accurate and meaningful depiction of this novel is, in fact, the cover of its Japanese translation: It shows an empty (men's) kimono (McQuade 2023, 204). As Shereen Kakish aptly observes »[d]ans ce cas, le seul référent qui reste est le texte. Dans cette perspective, on peut concevoir les frontières entre le réel et la littérature sont affranchies dans ce roman à l'étude. Tout se mêle; tout s'imagine et tout se passe« (Kakish 2019, 667). ›Reality‹ is thus revealed as a liminal space of contemplation in which the experiences of everyday life intermingle with the workings of poetry. That it is an empty *men's* kimono, however, underscores by absence the importance and role of subjectivity, even within critical thinking, *authorship*, and in(ter)ventions.

Within the diegetic level, the plot of the novel develops from the story of a writer who has the idea for a book entitled *Je suis un écrivain japonais* but has to figure out how to write it. The novel captures this distance between the title at the beginning of the book and its end, in which the homodiegetic narrator, in dangerous proximity to the ›implied‹ and ›real author‹, has to unravel a story. In order to do this, the narrator/›implied author‹ disassembles the title throughout the book, opening it up to look at its language- and discourse-related peculiarities.

While for *White Teeth* the rhetoric of humor and its affective economy is a way of dealing with and unfolding the evocation and deconstruction of meanings within an ethical quest, what guides the humorous and affective drive in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* may be a notion of *meaningfulness* understood in a political, aesthetic, and thus poetological sense – and as a form that must also be captured in a specific meaningful *style* as the outward

appearance, *the sound*, as it were, of this interwoven signifiability.⁴ *Style* in this sense is indeed one of the major themes the novel deals with and the theme that is discussed on a reflexive, almost-meta-level of the story, as well as within the narrative discourse. At the level of the story, it can be seen as *the* guiding question of the novel. It is evoked at the beginning, in the paratexts of the novel, and it is part of its complicated and delicate zones of reflection, and only there, almost imperceptibly, is it really addressed. These zones of reflection are written in a humorous tongue-in-cheek tone. They are part of the novel's rhetorical thread and are taken up in the midst of the development of the plot that evokes a complex aura of affectivity. The narrative voice seems to slide from the wonderings of the narrator to the solitary voice of the ›implied author‹, and in some instances, to that of the ›real author‹. This voice is imbued with a withdrawn inward gaze as if in dialogue with some ghosts of other times and places, or with the transparent presence of an ›implied audience‹ that may identify with its stance. And this absence-distance of address is what is actually discussed *as style*, as an inwardness that turns to the other; it is a form of address that signifies proximity within a vast infinity. This self-rapturous, multilinear and questioning movement of the novel can thus be seen as a trait of the novel's *style*. Humor, as an affective rhetoric, not only deconstructs meanings here but also ensures this specific contemplative aesthetic form. While the contemplative thread ponders the imageries and possibilities of ›knowing‹ and skill, the humorous note, more generally, fractures this tone into pleasurable other insights that also deal with the contemporary (and its linkages to the past).

Dany Laferrière indeed raises the question of style in a more recent text, where he, without directly mentioning this novel, relates it to issues that he also takes up here, emphasizing their importance for his work in general as well as for the act of writing:

›C'est Borges qui m'a signalé, à sa manière, la source populaire de toute culture. Un ami lui a envoyé un conte qu'il venait d'écrire. Borges, l'ayant particulièrement aimé, lui répond que sa fable est ›si merveilleuse qu'elle mérite d'être anonyme‹. C'est l'une des premières réflexions de Borges qui me soit tombée sous les yeux, et c'est celle qui m'a poussé à plonger dans son œuvre afin de découvrir la source de ce paradoxe. Borges croit que la littérature est faite par des gens qui ont une existence particulière, alors qu'il n'hésite pas à affirmer que ce qui est bien appartient ›au langage et à la tradition‹, c'est-à-dire à tout le monde. Cet individualiste forcené était donc pour le bien public. Je me suis longtemps demandé si Borges incluait le style dans sa réflexion. Le style m'a toujours semblé une affaire personnelle, jusqu'à ce que je tombe sur ce poème de Basho, peut-être le plus grand styliste japonais. Basho écrit:

›Les chants de repiquage
Des paysans du Nord
Première leçon de style‹

4 *Style* is, of course, itself a hotly debated topic and a central theme in literary theory as well as philosophy; however, Laferrière does not problematize *style* as a purely European and Western theme but attaches (touches on) other(-ed) sides of *style* that are not European or Western yet and part of the French language in its globalized echoes. For an overview about depictions and understandings of *style*, and the challenge to their Eurocentric understandings, see Robinson/Sheils (2022, 476 ff.).

Basho et Borges s'entendent sur ce point: il s'agit d'un fond porté par une forme. Il reste le travail du temps. Mais il y a des images si fulgurantes qu'on reste saisi par la vitesse avec laquelle elles nous ont traversés.» (Laferrière 2020)

By referring to Matsuo Basho and Jorge Luis Borges, Laferrière links the problem of writing as a singular act and yet collective resonance to an ›international‹ league of writers, making it a more global affair. *Style* appears as a question of *repiquage*, the way in which the unsaid is (*re*)used and enacted by an author for anyone interested in hearing it or listening to it. At the same time, in quoting Borges, Laferrière also invokes the meaning of *style* in these various political and ethical senses: in the sense of responsiveness, in the sense of social conventions of addressing a friend (and colleague), in the sense of a sociopolitical form of literary address, as a pivotal form of writing per se and of poetic form in particular. Laferrière also quotes the same poem in fact at the beginning of *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, raising the question of the limitedness of something called ›culture‹ and the vastness of the (global) ›culture of writing‹ as a self-sufficient mode of sensibleness that does not need interpretation or translation – but *poetical reading* in order to *understand*, which means to *remain in dialogue*. Thus *style*, as a poetological plane of con-tact may mean to keep *in touch*, to keep the other's touch.

The foundation of writing, according to Basho's poem, it may be concluded, is the *style* in the above sense with which an author chooses to raise the question of the said/saying within and without a (historically determined) sociopolitical context, a question that always seems to come from the other. The other who is far away, ›in the North‹, a position that Laferrière himself occupies, doubly so, seen from France, since he is related to both Haiti as well as Canada, so that a small and quiet smile seems to lurk in the corners of this ›North‹.

Against the backdrop of the geology of northern Japan and Canada *paysans du Nord* also refers to the coldness and harshness that come with the cold, with being an outcast, as well as with (the loneliness of) throwing oneself powerlessly into the abysmal not-knowing of writing. It also refers to the other, who is far away in the temporal sense of the past, but whose ›culture‹ in the Borgesian sense of what one ought to say may be very close and may *close* all the temporal and spatial gaps at the foundation that this question of *style* raises, in order to open it anew as the quandary of perhaps the quintessence of writing/meaning as such.

This sense and sensibility of *style* then, amounts to the subtle multifariousness of meanings that are enfolded in one another and that a writer enables without naming them. In this sense, *style* appears as the inversion of an infinite trace insofar as it marks a faculty to indicate different possibilities of exposure without disclosing anything in a straightforward manner, and without any intentionality in doing so. Such *style* lays out something from which something else is gained, like a *repiquage* of the chants of the *paysans* of the North, a chorus of voices of life-giving, creating people, from whose hands emerges something very small and yet essential and meaningful, like a grain of rice or the poetics of words within a poem in the vast palette of language.

Here, the humorous rhetoric also includes allegorical allusions that complicate the affective and temporal side of the text's tonality, giving it a more thoughtful weight, along with the rapturous pleasure of a smile. *Style* is not only defined in this scenography and

intertextuality that Laferrière brings into play. With its full and ample indications, it thus seems to line up a trace of what the task of the poet and the poetics of writing is or should be.

With the invocation of *style*, Laferrière taps into a poetology of poetics itself, indicating and adhering to an essential part of the occurrence of a poem, and more generally of (literary?) writing without stipulating what it should be. What comes into view, however, is something like a path, indicating meanings that emerge from it, like the trace of songs sung by unknown and untrained people in a place full of hardship – from the heart of a place driven by devastating (living) conditions, as Basho's poem could be read in the above lines.

Such an essential element of a poetology of poetics, if there can be one, recalls the question of liminality as part of Plessner's, Nietzsche's, and Fanon's thinking along humor/laughter as an insight into limits within not-knowing and powerlessness that allows for a space in the self as well as between that otherness out there (in time or space) and the self's living conditions. In all of these cases, *affective humor* can be understood as a form of touch that is produced by the illegibility of signs within a context experienced as pleasurable instructive. Although the affectivity that is evoked may be composed of various paradoxical traits, its pleasurable and insightful sites predominate.

With the title and within the novel, Laferrière also depicts a decolonizing, postcolonial *style* of critique that is formulated beyond postcolonialism and decoloniality and that in some ways echoes an approach of Edward W. Said in considering other forms of encounter beyond the known. In his essay *Politics of Knowledge* ([1991] 2012), in which Edward W. Said scrutinizes postcolonial criticism and the way it is sometimes uncritically understood as a ghettoized and narrow form of ›identity politics‹, he pairs postcolonial criticism with the meaning of ›knowledge‹ and values that can still claim to be universal and meaningful. In this sense, Said redefines *style* as an author's signature:

»The paradox is that something as impersonal as a text, or a record, can nevertheless deliver an imprint of a trace of something as lively, immediate, and transitory as a ›voice‹ [...]. [S]tyle neutralizes the worldlessness, the silent, seemingly uncircumstanced existence of a solitary text. It is not only that any text, if it is not immediately destroyed, is a network of often colliding forces, but also that a text in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world, it therefore addresses anyone who reads.« (Said 1983, 33)

Style, then, is not only a property of writing, but also a quality of singularity, which, though not exhausted by it, also has a context.

While Laferrière says something very similar as Said in his allusion to Basho and Borges, and acts in these terms in his writing, he goes beyond Said. With Basho, Laferrière emphasizes that literature also beholds something *to itself*, not in order to confuse or sound mysterious but as a form of not-knowing as part of its reflections, beyond any power, which is poetically set in motion (also inherent in Basho's poem) and which, instead of claiming a specific ›knowledge‹, makes ›knowledge‹ *clang* like a lyrical piece of music sung in the languages of the most ordinary and everyday enduring, *living* people that the poet must become in order to put their grain into the poetics of language. This, in fact, seems to indicate the power and the powerlessness of (poetic) writing. How this

grain develops, what poetic language *does*, always remains to be seen and experienced. This is the work of (good) literature, and this is what Laferrière's novel, with its allusive, amused and amusing and yet serious, rapturous title, seems to be trying to say – and perhaps to disentangle – *meaning-fullness* as the most elaborate form of *style*, in which humor leaves a sometimes sunny, sometimes rainy, glittering trace.

Humor in Laferrière's text is an elegant rhetoric of interruption, of relief and pause, but also of innovation, all at once and in a thoughtful way; it thus becomes itself what it wants to show and for which a *Japanese* form of writing stands symbolically: a ›wise‹ (unknowing?) *style*, in touching literary spaces, which joyfully and gently points to the bizarreness and complexity of things, in and of ›our‹ wo(r)lds, and in this way gives our material and discursive bruises and heartbreaks an aesthetically embellishing, soothing and healing flavor. This may be why Laferrière was affectionately nicknamed *the Basho of Montreal* after the publication of this novel (Marchand 2010).

This style of writing is also what frames the novel's paratexts, and it is possible to see and unfold their workings as a poetological framing of the story. The allusive title, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, becomes particularly vivid in conjunction with a work of art with a similar gesture: René Magritte's *La Trahison des Images* that depicts the painting of a pipe and beneath it the phrase *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Marchand 2010; Dickhaut 2014). In both cases, the arts, which are regularly condemned as *mimetic* and of *secondary* quality to the spoken word, to ›nature‹, ›reality‹, ›creation‹ (and thought?), question their own work as well as its categorization in discourse as if to infer ›knowledge‹ from querying it or to doubt others, who think they know what they mean or who see ›more‹ in them than they supposedly show; in any case, they enter a dialogue with those who pass by and take the time to sneak a peek. This might stand for the power-less work of art. While Magritte's painting claims *not to be* what it *appears* to be, Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* claims *to be* what it seems *not to be*. Derrida's favorite questioned question, the question of *being* (of certainties?), is thus again questioned and put into a state of (constant) flux. And *this*, art and Derrida, seem to echo – is it *really* ›reality‹ (or is it not?). Both ›texts‹ the painting and the novel, invoke what Derrida has in fact *humorously* (perhaps *ironically*) called *mimetologism* (Derrida [1972] 1981), the ancient (Western European) philosophical attempt to distinguish (and construe) itself by naming what it considers to be its other, poetic thought, *poetics* encompassing both the art (poetry, certainly) and the limitless ›knowledge‹ (and power) of art (poetry) – ›knowledge‹ about poetry as well as ›knowledge‹ that poetry comprises generally.⁵ Both ›texts‹, the painting and the novel, are forms of ›fiction‹ outside of any mimetologism and the place of this outside of mimetologism is precisely within the realm of the poetics of art/poetry, ›fiction affirms itself as a simulacrum and, through the work of this textual feint disorganizes all the oppositions to which the teleology of the book ought violently to have subordinated it‹ (Derrida [1972] 1981, 36). The poetology of the *textual feint*, is, at the same time, perhaps the unconscious, unknowing power-lessness of poetics that lies in this double structure.

5 Geisenhanslüke opens up the validity of this tradition by critically tracing its historical-discursive assumptions as well as its more contemporary receptions. His work may be considered as the critical continuation of a thread that was sparked by poststructuralist thinkers. Cf. Geisenhanslüke (2018).

Laferrière's rhetoric of humor not only unleashes affectivity but is also used as a technique of rapture that performs an *unterdes*, an unfolding of meanings within one and the same time as it interrupts, fragments, and opens up discourse, thus giving it a spatial timeliness through which attention is shifted to other insights and allusions that he gently and questioningly wants to (or not *explicitly* wants to) make known or just lay open before one's eyes, like a view or like an allegorical allusion, a »phrase qui s'énonce ne sait rien de son point final, la phrase suspend notre lecture dans le vide, collant au plus près de la vérité de l'existence – car l'existence ne sait rien et surtout pas ses avenir« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 64).

In this way the invoked *style* is uttered as a *performative act*, firstly, as already mentioned, with the humorous title *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which creates an ›implied audience‹ and transfers it to a state of cluelessness and vigilance, where the narrator picks it up to further open up the sentence. Secondly, this question of *style* is invoked by Basho's discussed haiku in the form of an epigraph: »Première leçon de style les chants de repiquage des paysans du nord« (Laferrière 2008).

Thirdly, it is invoked by addressing an ›implied audience‹ at the beginning of the text in the form of a dedication with the following sentence: »À tous ceux qui voudraient être quelqu'un d'autre« (Laferrière 2008).

In this way, two O/others are addressed simultaneously, and at the same time, an ›implied audience‹ is invoked through the dedication. All three addresses are intertwined, and many references in the course of the development of the novel refer to them by invoking them together or one of them.

The two O/others are, on the one hand, the dominant, ordering language within the historically conditioned sociopolitical discourse *from* which, *against* which, and *in* which Laferrière's narrator speaks: the language of the Other as empire, therefore, here with a capital O. On the other hand, the title takes up the question of the other, with a small o, which is the other that is othered within the symbolic regimes of the dominant language, that resonates in the picturesque discourses of *japonismes*, and that is invoked here in the designation *japonais*. In evoking the *japonais*, Laferrière's question of *style* touches upon the way the other of Western discourse and the other of its arts has been construed throughout European colonialism, in an economy of pleasure and unpleasure, and has served to create and engender an (enlightened and modern) European self. This other was (is?) always used as a mirror for structuring the ›homemade‹ European self.

The third tendency, indicated by the dedication, gives another impetus to the title; it poses the question of singularity and ponders the im/possibility of the freedom to *choose* one's ›identity‹.

On a fourth level, still, the title and the novel *are* indeed reminiscent of Japanese authors, such as Matsu Basho or Mishima Yukio. The different possibilities of meaning, as well as the question of *style* that the ›implied author‹ invokes at the beginning of the novel, already touch upon different allusions, making *style* per se a question of touch – the question of how one approaches an issue, and from a marginalized position, in order to be able to touch upon it and upon ›marginality‹. The *style, touch*, requires the adherence to certain (sociopolitical) ›laws‹ and in specific ways of tact and contact, in order to be heard, and in order to be able to say anything at all. Humor, with all its arousing affectivity and rhetoric is of such a *style* that enables and circumscribes the touch of contact.

Humor appears as the tone and rhetoric of touch per se, is »[u]n style rapide, intense, qui va à l'essentiel – dans les mots comme dans l'émotion« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 61). The question of *style* also becomes a question how to touch things, how to name them, how to indulge in discourse, how to say something – before whom and in what language. In this sense, Joqueviel-Bourjea describes Laferrière's *style* as a *poetic meditation* rather than a *philosophical* one, in which the use of Japanese poetry plays a decisive role: »Laferrière privilégie *de facto* la poésie japonaise au détriment de la philosophie grecque« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 70). That is to say, to contrast and to defer European/Western philosophy as a decolonial strategy of and through poetical writing, not so much to privilege it, indeed, such a conclusion would be too hasty (Laferrière's admiration for European writers, at least, remains irrefutable). But perhaps because its philosophical assumptions are too rooted in colonial images, imagery, and traditions and cannot be used steadfastly to say the most essential, and would not leave us »seul face à notre propre existence, auprès de notre propre parole« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 75).

Style, in effect, is also what distinguishes philosophy from literature and is therefore at the forefront of radical philosophy, both in Derridean thought and in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. »Philosophy, Nancy contends, desires to be ›discourse, by definition, *without style*« (Long 2014, 1), which is not possible. The question of *style* rather exposes philosophy as a way of writing (*le mode*) with a mode (*la mode*) (Long 2014, 1). Like Borges, who critically distanced himself from Western distinctions between philosophy and literature, ›after Plato« (Long 2014, 2), Laferrière seems to follow and appreciate a Bashoean *style* because it does not distinguish between thought, reflection, pleasure, dreaming, sensuality, reason, ›knowledge« and ›non-knowledge« but instead speaks along their welded, overlapping borders.

At the same time, the ›implied author« also sets a specific *style* at work, which is precisely this many-formative, performative, subtle *speech act* (Felman 2003) that tackles different themes and levels of and in discourse and lets them vibrate in humorous evocations. All of this amounts to sociopolitical questions. On another plane, however, they also address the question of voice at the borders of the narratological and diegetic levels. The question of voice is the question of singularity but also the question of subjectivity, an author's *style*, *le mode* as well as *la mode* of their writing. On a meta-level of narration, the question of the author and the ›implied author« is raised. Who is speaking here? Who is touching upon these questions? This line of questioning, too, becomes part of the question of *style*, engendering an interruption and heightening the humorous bent that accompanies the theme of the title.

The humorous tonality within the novelistic text, thus, also evokes an affectivity, which can be related to touch as a form of *movere* that the literary work evokes as an *aura* (not in a religious sense though) and that revolves around reading as the inhaling experience of literature.

Furthermore, Laferrière's evocation of *Japan* is an indication of intertextuality within a broader world literature⁶ and of an intertextual globalization of literary texts as well as their shifted meaning production.

The amalgamation of different rhetorical devices raised by the text in a multi-dimensional way is loaded with humorous affectivity and emits different meanings, different nuances of the question of touch – in the proximity of the *O/other* as well as of othering. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* takes up the question of the *O/other* in French and Western literature and culture, questioning it, while employing it in another sense. Laferrière's novel, thus, speaks from a twisted, decolonizing postcolonial, discursive and geographical in-between space – but also beyond it.

To Be or Not to Be a Japanese Writer – On the Level of the Story

Je suis un écrivain japonais thus refers subtly, ironically, and critically to discursively produced processes of othering, to Africanisms, Orientalisms, and, here, to the orientalization of everything ›Japanese‹, and also to *japonisme*: After a period of blossoming Orientalism, Egyptology, and Chinoiserie, as well as *Indianism*, the ways ›India‹ was utilized for European thinking, ›Japan‹, was ›discovered‹ in the late 19th century in European art and academia as an exotic (and ›traditional‹ = inferior) counterpart to Europeanness. ›Japan‹ became ›Europe's other par excellence, the place to which Europe henceforth looked to find its *self* as well as another field of reference beyond itself. In philosophical contexts, too, this almost naïve, desperate search for otherness, for a *self*-affirming difference that, read against the grain, reveals the fragility of empire,⁷ was extended to ›Japan‹ and later influenced even postmodernist philosophies (Hottner/Trueper 2021). This Other as empire, was not extraneous, but rather necessary for forming regimes of ›identity‹ formation and a particular European ›identity‹ – that is, in overt and more

6 By referring to a manifesto signed by 44 writers in favor of considering francophone literatures instead of limiting French to France and a national understanding, which was also signed by Laferrière, Mathis-Moser places the novel in the context of a French debate on world literature (in French) (2011, 77 ff.). But Laferrière does not only want to expand the canon of (French) literature to include other literatures (and not only literatures in French). As Mathis-Moser also observes (78), he criticizes racialized and ethnicized stereotypes as well as structures of othering.

7 In its colonial strategies, ›Europe‹ sought to create a mirror image of itself by disparaging the unknown in order to define *itself*. The meaning of the productivity of these discursive and philosophical forms of othering, I think, beyond their military and strategic components, still needs to be further elaborated and remains a future task; the ambiguity that ensues from them rather exemplifies several things at once: – that the search for the other's inferiority is an ongoing process that is doomed to fail – that the world we live in is a product of such conglomerations and a web of cultural influences; – that it is possible to alter and change these images, and – that it may be possible to discern the worthwhile sites of such interferences, despite themselves, for the construction and enjoyment of a future world and history, as within this exoticization, there is also a lot of proximity. I wonder what would happen if we more or less intentionally began to read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or the imagery that is bound to ›the Orient‹ or to ›Africa‹, despite and beyond all the violence, in a reparative, affirmative sense, as forms of admiration and (affectionate) desire, dismissing everything else (– an experiment...).

covert ways, grounded in mechanisms of exclusion and images of superiority. *Japonisme* is in fact one of the main Western, *French*-style discourses, especially after colonialism in vast parts of Africa seemed to have lost its chic and no longer seemed appropriate as a mirror and source of inspiration for this very close Other. The *japonais* seemed untouchable, far away, exotic enough, endowed with a specific ›culture‹ and not really involved in the sordid parts of colonialism and its wars.

The ›implied author‹ in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* seems to be aware of this phenomenon and to allude to it. We can infer from the ›real author‹ that the novel is indicating here to an incongruous tendency. In its ironic allusion, the title of the novel, and with it the ›implied author‹, seems to say: »These days I am your Japanese« and »The days of *japonisme* are (unfortunately) not over, just have a look at the imagery that is part of language (yours *and mine*)«. This incongruity, and allusion humorously invites for thoughtful readings. Its playful rhetoric already creates a tension and suspense through the humorous tonality, through what the novel says by not saying, and unsays by saying.

The unsaid creates a space, an un-knowing field of appeal. It is marked by an expective affectivity mixing joy, anxiety, and a state of alarm that the critical side of the title silently also produces within the humorous rupture. The humorous tonality thus contains a power-less tension of non-knowledge, and poetically generates a liminal position from which it is possible to consider the development of the text's meanings beyond what it obviously seems to say. In addition to the pain and painful effects of the mechanisms of othering around which this humor revolves and which one must endure while reading, the novel promises linguistic, thought-provoking, and affective pleasure. Here, too, as in *White Teeth*, it depends on the subjectivity of the ›implied audiences‹ what is perceived as pain and where pleasure lies or could begin.

As Béatrice Rafoni argues, there is a more recent form of *japonisme* within ›French‹ culture, *néo-japonisme*, which may also be part and object of Laferrière's novel. *Néo-japonisme* coincides with anti-American sentiments in France, where, according to Rafoni, ›le Japon‹ is seen as an alternative to ›Americanization‹ and ›American‹ globalization. Against the backdrop of such anti-›American‹ attitudes and rivalries between (neo- and ex-?) empires, *le Japon* represents images that are »[...] capable[s] de supporter des projections pré- et post-modernes séduisantes que l'Amérique ne peut égaler« (Rafoni 2008, 271). ›Japan‹ signals antagonistic exoticized images of space *and* time, it can be conceived of as traditional, as well as modernist *and* futuristic within a space that is seen as both spiritual and highly technologized. Laferrière writes against both of these dichotomous images. He regards himself as *American* and criticizes the stereotypical images of Japan in French culture that are also part of (French) literature. The novel is thus also a critique of French stereotypical culturalisms as part of the French language, which he must also write against in order to make himself heard. In some ways, the novel's allusion to *japonisme* in this bifurcated form is reminiscent of the invocation of *japonisme* in the work of Marcel Proust.

As Jan Hotkonson notes, Proust uses the evoking *japonisme* of the time, of the late 19th century, the lust and ›love‹ for the *extrême-orient*, which to some extent displaces images of the *proche-orient*, not as a form of othering; Proust rather laughs at it as simplistic and naïve (Hokenson 1999, 24 f.). Because of his Jewish heritage, however unknowingly ex-

perienced,⁸ (and perhaps also because of his illness), Proust appears to be receptive and sensitive to the other as an other self and as an other that he seeks within himself. Proust uses *japonisme* in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* to induce in his work a style that is aware of and attentive to details, to (the evanescence) of time, and to the otherness of others (and thus the fragility of the self), no matter whether these details are drawn from the image repositories of ›nature‹ or of ›culture‹.

Proust's *japoniste* attention differs from Laferrière's, however, in that Proust evokes its subtlety while only superficially criticizing it as a form of Orientalism – or at least not consciously, and maybe there is also an *other* form of ›identity‹ search in *japonisme* for Proust, one that is precisely based on the othering and the orientalizing of the Jews, which Proust refutes, resignifies and *seeks* at the same time; however, for both Proust and Laferrière, *japonisme* is a question of the (proper) style, the style that is considered as most ›artistic‹ and the most accomplished, the most learned. And that is why both try to evoke it in their writing as well: Proust's *japonisme* ›is rather an affiliation with an entire aesthetic, and it is rendered as such in the novel [*À la Recherche du temps perdu*], in cumulative allusions and reflexive imports. Proust embraces particularly the evocative power of suggestion, the rendering of fugitive impressions, the crucial blanks or incompleteness – indeterminacies, opening imaginative possibilities (for narrator and reader), and the sensory appeal in swift delicate strokes of line and color. [...] Marcel is something like a pilgrim through his European heritage [...]. Proust positions the *Recherche* as the acme of European arts and Marcel as the literary innovator. The Japanese aesthetic appears intermittently, working like a counter-system to clarify the limitations of Marcel's inherited Occidental aesthetics. Proust's *japonisme* operates at two levels in the *Recherche*, in discourse and in the story [*histoire*]⁹, to use Emile Benveniste's terms. [...] Also, when the characters comically repeat the worst abuses of the Japanese aesthetic, as in the Verdurin's mawkish jokes about ›la salade japonaise‹, the narrator mocks mercilessly, as he

8 While Marcel Proust's Jewish background has often been overlooked and deemphasized or, on the contrary, taken to characterize his texts as ›unFrench‹ and as ›Jewish‹ because of the ›animated ›humor of the social scenes‹ (Edmond Wilson qtd. by Maurice Samuels (2015, 223)), more engaged discussion of Proust's ›Jewishness‹, or rather forms of othering that he experienced, and the various ways it may have influenced him, as well as the ways in which he gave shape to them in his work, still awaits its disclosure. See for example Julia Kristeva (2018). See also John K. Hyde (1966); Isabelle M. Ebert (1993).

9 Seymour Chatman (1978, 1990) uses the terms somewhat differently, even vice versa, which can be confusing. For Chatman *story* is the *what* that the narrative is about, and *discourse* is *how* it is rendered. But, of course, we have to think of both instances as not only intertwined but also as a plurality: Story and discourse may contain different framings or may entail more than one story/discourse, depending on what one reads in what relations. This may in fact be an essential characteristic of texts/literature/signs – they cannot be reduced to or frozen forever within one reading. However, for the narratological, formal, as well as poetic composition-analysis of the narrative (any narrative), as well as for the transparency of the reading, it seems worthwhile to me to use the words in these technical terms. In terms of *poetics*, the *story* would be *what* the text is about, *what it wants to say*, its poetological dimension, while the *discourse* would be the way in which it is narratologically and rhetorically rendered; the narratological and rhetorical levels of narrative supplement each other, rather than be mutually exclusive, and seem to build their poetic thickness in an intertwined way.

always derides the mere social uses of art. Like a code within a code, the comic targets are indexes of value and form a counter-discourse to the narrator's own aesthetic judgement and practice« (Hokenson 1999, 25).

Laferrière, too, works with a double gesture. He invokes *japonisme* to refute Orientalism and simultaneously, through Japanese literature and the evocation of Basho as an accomplished author, to create a space for an other image outside of it. The narrator in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* ponders and discusses Japanese literature and art as a (humanistic) epistemological proposition by and for a writer. Thus, Laferrière, too, tries not to repeat Orientalisms while emphasizing the dexterity of another literary aesthetics beyond dominant French. Within the discourse of the novel, he writes against Orientalist stereotypes by both invoking them and deconstructing them. What Jan Hokenson writes about Proust's use of *japonisme* in his oeuvre can also be applied to Laferrière's work, albeit in a way that emphasizes its colonialist and racist underpinnings much more strongly, while seeking to deconstruct its linguistic implications within rapturous, amusing, humorous, and, at the same time, thoughtful implications.

Hokenson writes: »At least, however, it is certain that in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* Proust uses the formal properties of the Japanese aesthetic contrastively to challenge outworn mimetic assumptions, and to point the way for new ambitions in French literature« (Hokenson 1999, 36).

Proust thus seeks to escape specific filters of mimetology and to remain open to an other imagery. The narrator in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* explicitly refers to Proust, and this should not be a coincidence since Proust, as mentioned above, not only appreciates what he considers and regards as *japonais(e)*, but, not unlike Laferrière, strives to make it part of his own literary reflections as a form of accomplished literary achievement. Laferrière may also see another proximity between his writing and that of Proust in that both, in a sense, belong to French language and literature, and yet as racialized (Jewish and Black) writers (though appropriated and valued) do not *properly* belong to it. The interdependence parallelism of antisemitism and various forms of racism has always been a matter of postcolonial thought and literature, where Jewishness, as in *White Teeth*, is often taken as an *urgestalt*, an archetype of racialized othering in European thought and history. »For Fanon«, too, »despite the difference in racial stereotypes and the distinctiveness caused by the inescapable visibility of the black man's blackness, as opposed to the Jew, who can pass for Gentile, the mechanism of racism are identical in both cases; [...] the French Caribbean *imaginaire* turns to the situation of another diasporic people in order to construct a representation of its own situation [...] these intertexts illustrate the interconnectedness of different diasporic cultures, and show how these connections are actively put to use in the structuring of individual and collective experience« (Britton 2014, 62). It is in this context that Proust's as well as Laferrière's problematization and use of *japonisme* needs to be seen and reflected upon; it can be understood as a form of bonding that constructs connections with the other othered and implicitly speaks of sympathy and solidarity. What matters may not be so much the ›diasporic‹ experience, but different forms of racism and othering as part of the different (internal and external) colonial histories.

Laferrière tackles *japonisme* from three sides; on the one hand, he distinguishes Japanese poetic achievements from *japonisme*, on the other hand, he criticizes different

forms of othering that he, at least as the ›real author‹ of this book, must experience and endure. Finally, he uses an allusive, allegorical poetic form to evoke an aura of immediacy, of contemporaneity, and infinity, in which time and space merge and seem to halt within one another, which seems characteristic of haiku poetry – a place where we can dive into the novel:

»C'est une guerre tenace entre le temps et l'espace. L'espace policier permet de t'identifier (Tu viens d'où, toi?). Le temps cannibale te dévore cru. Né dans la Caraïbe, je deviens automatiquement un écrivain caribéen. La librairie, la bibliothèque et l'université se sont dépêchées de m'épingler ainsi. Être un écrivain et un Caribéen ne fait pas de moi forcément un écrivain caribéen. Pourquoi veut-on toujours mélanger les choses? En fait, je ne me sens pas plus caribéen qu'un Proust qui a passé sa vie couché. J'ai passé mon enfance à courir. Ce temps fluide m'habite. Chaque nuit je rêve encore de ces orages tropicaux qui font tomber les mangues lourdes et sucrées dans la cour de mon enfance. [...] Et moi, fiévreux tous les soirs, en train de lire Mishima sous les draps. Et personne autour de moi pour me dire qui c'était Mishima. Je ne me souviens pas à qui appartenaient ces livres qui me semblaient encore en bon état. Que faisaient-ils dans cette petite ville endormie? Laquelle de mes cinq tantes s'était entichée, à un moment donné, de Yukio? [...] On ne sait pas toujours par quel chemin un écrivain arrive dans une famille. Et je le lisais pour quitter cette prison du réel. Mais je ne me réfugiais pas pourtant chez Mishima – la littérature n'a jamais été un refuge pour moi. Mishima, je suppose, n'écrivait pas non plus pour rester chez lui. On se rencontrait ailleurs, dans un endroit qui n'était ni tout à fait chez l'un, ni tout à fait chez l'autre. Dans cet espace qui est celui de l'imaginaire et du désir.« (Laferrière 2008, 23–24)

Humor here comes from the transformation and turn of a traumatic colonial and racist image, that of cannibalism, into something else. The narrator situates cannibalism within a process of the present, but not without historicizing it with the depiction of the *espace policier*. The *guerre entre le temps et l'espace* of which the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator speaks here is, of course, (colonial) history, and the way in which its images have materialized in racialized assignments. Time is in space, in the space of the Other, in the space of empire, where it eats you up; *le temps cannibale* is empire's time-signification in which the other with the small o, seems forever frozen, lost in its otherness. It is almost impossible to imagine a wor(l)d in which nationality and ›race‹ do not matter. The *cannibalistic time* always devours you already before any sign. And this is where the text with its painful humor, much in accordance with a Nietzschean *nevertheless*, tries, beyond the sorrow, from a more or less desperate state, to open up a space beyond this terrible history, to turn it upside down, as it were. On the one hand, the narrator/›implied author‹ wittingly reveals how the formation of ›identity‹ depends on the placement and racialization of bodies, which allows the question *tu viens d'où, toi?* to emerge and which would make no sense outside of this *historically driven logic* that *geo-graphizes* bodies and the earth. On the other hand, the humorous allusion plays with the formation of ›identity‹ and the institutionalized structures that regulate and sustain structures of othering, before one can think of placing and naming oneself in a self-determined way. This humorous aspect is intensified by the naively posed question *pourquoi veut-on toujours mélanger les choses?* as it, firstly, indicates a *mélange* where there seems to

be none, and, secondly, masks critical thinking as a playful, harmless pursuit. In this way, hope is also smuggled into the humorous inclination of the question that asks to be considered and pondered because there is something violent and hurtful in this form of cannibalistic identifying that the Other pursues through language and its regimes of seeing, its imagery. The humorous rhetoric thus differentiates between (self-)identity and being identified by the capital Other/and (structures of) power, touching upon ›the laws‹ of (imperial) fixed, seemingly immutable patterns of assignment. The passage also affectionately mocks Proust's bedridden confinement caused by his long illness and incongruously juxtaposes it with the childhood of the narrator/›implied author‹, depicting it as being in a state of ›running‹. The comparison *between* and image of two (very much successful), but, in any case, both *French speaking writers*, one lying in bed and the other running, is empathetic and amusing; it also makes one *think* what the comparison wants to evoke, maybe that it is not the condition of writing that is relevant, but the way one *looks at* things. Both activities, lying in bed as well as running, obstruct the view but perhaps open up something else, the absorption of impressions and images (and the tendency to *japonize* the wor(l)d around you, in order to be able to bear it). And in this sense, Proust and Laferrière's narrator are not so different from each other and thus can just be identified as *writers* (and, perhaps, as *Japanese writers?*). Humor is also aroused by the indirect implication of Proust as a Caribbean writer (*je ne me sens pas plus caribéen qu'un Proust*), since it is an unusual evocation and seems absurd. But it may point to the cumulative conglomeration of francophone literature (including works written in France) and French (colonial) history and thought, and resistances to it that can be found in different ways in the Caribbean as well as in France; it also reverses the common appropriation of the Caribbean as *French* territory and allows for the reverse conclusion – if the Caribbean is French, then France must also be Caribbean (yes, indeed!). And so, the text seems to ask, is it not time to equalize ›France‹ (and the French) in this sense as well, to *become* its other parts that it has wanted to be? (. . . for such a long time . . .), albeit through these others themselves?) The humor that makes no sense at first glance suddenly does not seem so senseless at second glance. Its affectionate trait also parallels ›Proust‹ and ›Laferrière‹ as two writers who had to endure different forms of othering, and thus also ›evokes a shared grief between the two, but also another form of understanding, historically differently produced but transcending time and space and an actual encounter.

The passage begins with Yukio Mishima (1925–1970) as a starting point to create a space of encounter and dialogicity within the signs of language (as Proust does by deploying *japonist* elements in his writing) to challenge and overcome mainstream imagery. This process of reading, of encountering beyond and against space and time, creates a timelessness through reading that is more immediate, more sensual and more contemporaneous, regardless where the author is from – a neighborhood reading. Time and space are deferred and sublated in the process of reading (and in a hidden way, behind the reading, in writing). What counts is only the space of encounter that is evoked within the reading process. Rather than establishing a past within history, it takes the experience of reading, the literary text, as a past, and *auto-bio-graphy* as the first touch of historicity – which is also very political. It is not so much where you come *from*, and *how* you are named by *whom*, but who you have *read* – and one could add, *whom* you were *deprived* of reading,

that gives impetus to your becoming and that forms your always incomplete ›identity‹. This humor, despite the tragedy that lies buried in history, takes a further step to open up another space within the cannibalistic historiography, through the immediate marking of normalized processes of signification and the fixation of bodies in the circles of discourse. It is a space for an other dialogue in the economy of power-lessness despite and beyond what is known and remembered. This space touches the unknown and touches a sentimental thread within the folds of the very space that it opens. The literary space, the text, here, with its humorous tonality in which signifying processes are tossed overboard, thus introduces an other rhetoric, which can give way to the possibility of other narratives without depoliticizing them – on the contrary. This space is also the space of and for a (long-term) resistance as it indulges in language and its imagery with the potential to transform it. It thereby also frees geography, the writing of the earth and the earth of writing, from immediate (colonial) gestures.

Space as such is not responsible for the formation of subjectivity and cannot give meaning to it, nor can historiography be an explanation for the singular subjectivity that is part of a subject's being (in the world); rather the spaces of attachment as spaces of *attachment*, reveal the composition of subjectivity and give ›identity‹ to the self through memory and memorization of which the experience of reading is a part. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator‹ strips the process of signification from historiography and geographized,¹⁰ racialized thinking and offers to think about ›identity‹ through what can be called *reading auto-graphy*: The way literature as a meaningful way of understanding, and as understanding meaning, inscribes itself in the manifestation of the self and shapes ›identity‹ against the backdrop of a sensual, living experience of life in which the body and the mind are twisted and entangled. At the same time, the allusion to a time-space of war and cannibalism appears within this ›new‹ context as refurbished, differed. It enables the possibility of speaking (up) without being immersed in a colonizing narrative or ignoring colonial atrocities and their historical procedures. Thus, the humorous tone, evoked by the name of Proust and the confusion of things that must be imagined as not belonging together, such as the place of one's supposed ›origins‹ and the fact that one writes, are accompanied by an imagery that allows us to touch upon and shift the ground of speaking. This movement that amounts to an epistemological shift, at least for the moment of reading, shifts ›the laws‹ of a symbolic order that is arranged by history (and subsequent historiography). In this way, meaning can be configured differently, although nothing really changes as such; it is still the same ›implied author‹/narrator from the same Caribbean writing in French prose. *Or maybe not*. Now, indeed the question lurks as to why there should be a coherence between one's place of birth and one's profession? The politics of placing is deferred to a politics of displacing. It is a liberating question that elicits an affirmative: *Yes indeed, why?*

It also leads to other questions, such as what such a logic continues to indicate? And what it reveals? This humorous rhetoric forms part of a linguistic, affective, and rhetor-

10 At the same time, though, it is important to consider the spatial-historical geo-politics that are also inscribed in bodies and give them meaning. For a discussion of geopolitics as a category of analysis that sheds light on the ›fields of power‹ and ›patterns of exclusion‹ that are attached to them and give from to subjectivities, see Pabst (2006, 39; 42).

ical performance that harbors the ability to *move*. It is accompanied by a pensive quality, followed by those Basho-like still lifes that seem to hold a scenario in motion within a picturesque scene like a living photograph.

These instances are not only captured in adjectives that give meaning to the repetition and excitement of the amalgamation of time, memory, and the image of a little boy running – *fiévreux tous les soir* as well as the use of the present progressive (*en train de lire Mishima*). They are also caused by the description of the literary scenes. The description, thus, is not just a mere embellishment or a means of promoting realist scenes. It serves as a literary canvas on which a thoughtful image is painted, signaling the infinity of time and space or making them disappear. The humorous rhetoric, with all its stimulating affectivity, is part of the colors that frame this image and also move it smoothly to the next insight, the next image.

Much of this picturesque, allegorical, literary still life is, moreover, conjured by the evocation of a state of not-knowing, and not only that; not-knowing is even retained as an important component of this form of wandering, powerless, *knowing* that ›knowledge‹ is transferred to a sphere of non-knowledge, and is given over to a (smiling?) ›implied audience‹. It is construed through the rhetorical deployment of questions such as ›Que faisaient-ils dans cette petite ville endormie?‹ This form of ›not-knowledge‹ that seems to know that there is ›knowledge‹ in the powerlessness of ›non-knowledge‹, is expressed most poignantly in the final, emblematic sentence of the passage: ›On ne sait pas toujours par quell chemin un écrivain arrive dans une famille‹. The humorous depiction of an author's path into a family alludes to the coincidence of reading and literature as a third voice and a third, in/visible kin or *parent*, which can send one in different directions and show one different angles of the wor(l)d, of tongues, of tastes, and this parent can be an ›international‹ parent, and sometimes, as in the case of the narrator, this parent is Japanese, which makes the adolescent reading narrator ›Japanese‹ as well; but this is a ›knowledge‹ that is formed much later when the adolescent is compelled to learn to distinguish human beings along different, intersecting categories and national(-istic) lines; there is so much comfort in the idea of reading as a process of becoming, of acquiring ›identity‹, through our ›international‹ parents and kinship across the world, time and space. And it is a process that is perhaps not all that utopian but rather a ›common‹ process of which one is only unaware, one that is relegated to the background of what is considered as ›knowledge‹ and ›identity‹. ›Nationality‹ and belonging become conceivable as cosmopolitan forms of a global *author-ized*, as it were, parenthood. It allows us to imagine the planet in a totally other configuration and structure of meaning. Its humor is liberating and pleasurable because of the new insights and images one gets. It unleashes a thoughtful, reflective scenario that *denormalizes* the way we perceive the world and ourselves and enables us to position ourselves differently. The phrase not only expresses a charming, powerless form of ›non-knowledge‹ that triggers the imagination in a different empowering way. It also contains a humorous tonality that is affective by touching some strings in the inner self, in long ago, almost forgotten, locked up memories (of adolescence). And it makes you *think* that there might be some kind of ›truth‹ in this *image*. ›Truth‹, then, is not presented as such, but is opened up as a possibility that can be further thought through. Here, the affectivity of humor is allegorical rather than ironic, and, here, too, it does not disrupt, does not enrapture but rather encourages thinking about

the possibility of some ›truth‹ that might be fleetingly present in what the sentence expresses, on an explicit but also implicit level.

Within this affective, humorous rhetoric that disrupts and deconstructs an image in order to shift meaning to other possibilities of understanding, the ›implied author‹, in close proximity to the narrator's voice, in fact speaks of a *space of encounter* in which both an ›implied author‹ and an ›implied audience‹ meet, a space without a place and without time; rather its temporality and spatiality are hidden in the pages, in the alphabet, and in what they invoke in-between the lines where one can unexpectedly be touched by the other in ways as delicate as harsh: *On se rencontrait ailleurs, dans un endroit qui n'était ni tout à fait chez l'un, ni tout à fait chez l'autre. Dans cet espace qui est celui de l'imaginaire et du désir.* And it seems to indicate a reciprocal form of touch, as the text speaks of an encounter that presupposes at least two entities. Since this encounter is one beyond time and space, within desire and imagination, its unfolding and reciprocity also unfurl in different ways within a temporality and spatiality that is immersed in the performatives of reading that go beyond the text, in ways that can give orientation to the acts and performative orientations of a possible ›implied audience‹.

This space that touches in different ways and that opens up between writing and reading, is a space that precedes and goes beyond any identitarian configuration. It is a space in which a relationship emerges and it is a space of relatedness within the textuality of the text, it is a space of touch that seems to be spread out like a terrace in a blooming garden, adjacent to a house that the literary work becomes, where a potential reader and a potential author seem to come together, out of the different configurations and affiliations to which they belong, to meet each other and others. Thus, Laferrière himself, with this book (and perhaps many others), unfolds this way of being touched, touching upon different dimensions and aspects that the experience of reading (with the other) produces in the context of one's own *auto-bio-graphy*, authorship and writing. This touch, although it is an experience within desire and imagination in the folds of a book, develops its further effects within different, existing temporal and spatial contexts via the possibilities and abilities of ›implied readers‹ who reside somewhere at the borders of this magic jewelry box called a book, which someone must have packed and left behind somewhere, like a bottle thrown into the sea of not-knowing. An *envoi* without a direct addressee. (I am not speaking of the market but of books that one encounters on one's paths, more or less by chance, which is another phenomenon besides the market. One must also think of a silent sea of books that could not be written or produced because of market values and structures of exclusion and inaccessibility, and then there are the unwritten books that can only be heard and listened to, which also silently shape us by their absence . . .).

Such a space encompasses different forms. It is a space in which different times and different ideas from distinct spatial configurations can come together to form possibilities, little insights, like first steps, dance steps, fighting steps, and give way to new ones. It is a performance between different subjectivities as well as different subjects who (perhaps) have experienced life differently and still have something to say to each other, endowed in a space of touch that builds and shifts perceptivity and epistemological scope and purview. The text, as it unfolds here, implicitly also captures the work of translation, and is also translation, independent of the languages, times, and spaces it crosses; but

it also forms translation in the more classical sense of *translatio* as an *allegorical transference* (Geisenhanslüke 2003, 10 ff.) that touches meaning faintly far away in the vastness of time, space, not-knowing, and a terrain beyond power. And even this allegorical sense of touch is opened up here by something in the poetics of language that lies in the humorous inclination, which configures the text.¹¹

Novels, and perhaps this can be extended to any text, can be seen, this seems to suggest, as such houses with terraces and different views and landscapes. They build a ground for the possibility of encounter, and also for the effect of the narratives themselves, where the people involved in them can meet in a space of imagination and desire. In this sense, this space seems to transcend time as well as language or any other possible obstacle. This encounter promises nothing, and there is no address where the house is located and where the dispatch should arrive, and no instructions as to what it should do there. Rather, the literary encounter itself seems to be a haiku-picturesque.

But the ›implied author‹ here could only arrive at saying this by circumventing all the possible stereotypical significations that are part of the *geo-graphies* and bodily inscriptions that form the imagery and imagination of the language and the space-time from which they speak; they could only speak by pointing to the space-police and the policing of space (when it comes to racialized subjectivities) that want to place them in certain rubrics, endow them with a specific, restricted travel document. So they first have to find the right password, a shibboleth, in order to move freely through the space. And *japonais* is the code name they give themselves within a humorous tonality that functions as such a *pass-port*, a fool's license, to enter the scene of higher literature and literary erudition.

While Basho could (supposedly) simply proclaim his haiku, the ›implied author‹ of this novel must first create space for this to happen. And they use humor as a tool, with all its affectivity, while the humorous rhetoric is the instrument of their disruption and the vehicle of transport, of the procession that takes place in the performativity of language and the performance it stages. From here, this terraced stage, a dialogue begins in which the ›implied author‹/narrator addresses their audience as if driven by the desire to make space once and for all for another process of signification, which shows that reading and writing have something in common that exceeds any classification of sense-making, that the signifier needs its freedom to unfold, that any notion of origins misses this point, that something more relevant emerges, something like an *elective affinity* that could also serve to consider being in the world and being part of the world differently, as other forms of what *humanism* might actually mean, beyond ideas of ›blood‹ or of ›race‹ or nation. The ›implied author‹/narrator of this book, however, once again begins with a plea not to be placed in another register of classification: They want to emphasize that this book, their novel, should not be read as another example of exoticizing, and certainly not as a mockery but as one that invites one to look, in a very literal, spatial way, *behind* meaning, as if *behind* a stage, *behind* the stage of language and signification, in order to arrive at different conclusions; they invite to a playful journey that promises to be pleasurable but does not guarantee that the ›audience‹ will return home in the same way that it left:

11 Irony, as a figure of speech in a wider sense is, according to Geisenhanslüke, itself seen as a form of allegory due to the incongruity that is seen as part of it; see Geisenhanslüke (2003, 12).

»Mettons-nous d'accord, je n'ai jamais été obsédé par Mishima. Adolescent, j'étais tombé sur un de ses romans au fond de la vieille armoire en même temps qu'une bouteille de rhum. D'abord une longue coulée de feu. J'ouvre ensuite le livre (*Le Marin rejeté par la mer*) et un essaim de voyelles et de consonnes survoltées me sautent au visage. [...] Et dans ce cas-là, on ne fait pas le tri. On ne regarde pas à la couleur. Le livre de Mishima ne s'est pas dit ›tiens, voilà un bon vieux lecteur japonais‹. Et moi, je n'ai pas cherché un regard complice, des couleurs reconnaissables, une sensibilité commune. J'ai plongé dans l'univers proposé, comme je le faisais si souvent dans la petite rivière pas loin de chez moi. J'ai à peine fait attention à son nom, et ce n'est que bien longtemps après que j'ai su que c'était un Japonais. Je croyais fermement, à l'époque, que les écrivains formaient une race bannie qui passaient leur temps à errer à travers le monde en racontant des histoires dans toutes les langues. C'était leur peine pour un crime innommable, Hugo et Tolstoï étaient des forçats. Car je ne voyais aucune autre explication pour écrire des romans aussi volumineux que je dévorais la nuit en cachette. Je les imaginais avec des chaînes aux pieds, assis à côté d'un énorme encier taillé dans le roc. D'où ma réticence à écrire plus tard des bouquins épais. Je ne voudrais pas effrayer les enfants. Je suis étonné de constater l'attention qu'on accorde à l'origine de l'écrivain. Car, pour moi, Mishima, était mon voisin. Je rapatriais, sans y prendre garde, tous les écrivains que je lisais à l'époque. Tous. Flaubert, Goethe, Whitman, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Cervantès, Kipling, Senghor, Césaire, Roumain, Amado, Diderot, tous vivaient dans le même village que moi. [...] Quand, des années plus tard, je suis devenu moi-même écrivain et qu'on me fit la question: ›Etes-vous un écrivain haïtien, caribéen ou francophone?‹ je répondis que je prenais la nationalité de mon lecteur. Ce qui veut dire que quand un Japonais, me lit, je deviens immédiatement un écrivain japonais.« (Laferrière 2008, 24–25)

There is a sense of delicacy in this passage, in the way it humorously touches and touches upon; the passage evokes a pleasure that resides in the opening of a book that one does not know. An image evolves as if it were picking up a known, fragrant memory, or so it seems, that gives way to a quiet, smiling, humorous tonality. The humorous tone is further intensified in three ways: On the one hand, through the representation of Mishima, whose well-disposed phrase is heard, a speaking ghost emanating from the book; on the other hand, through the evocation of the image of the adolescent as an old Japanese soul, sitting there with some rum, immersed in reading (without understanding much; apparently, the adolescent seems to enjoy the abundance of vowels and words that are thrown at their face) as well as, on the other hand, through the suggestion that follows from this image: That a literary work may be addressed to a specific readership, but that the book, the text, is *free* and can address anyone it wishes and the reader can be anyone who wishes to open it. The author, however real, or implied, or narrated, cannot control the text (nor can any authority . . .) and what it has to say, across and in spite of all wor(l)ds and continents (and political systems), as different eyes and ears may read it differently or precisely because of that. It is a liberating humor that can elicit a winsome chuckle (. . . provided the ›implied reader‹ is in a good mood ;-) . . .). Also tugging at the sense of humor that a seduced, ›implied audience‹ may be willing to reveal is the next sentence, which compares two seemingly incomparable sights and experiences as one and the same insight: the delightful pleasure one gets from reading the sea of words in a book and from swimming

in a nearby river on a hot day. In both cases, *swimming in the book* and *reading in the river* evoke the notion of sensitive and sensual impressions and come into existence in a close, physical sense, eliciting a humorous, jocular tone (as well as *atonement* for stressful situations one may have hoarded throughout the day . . .). Equally incongruous is the naivety and the maturity of the evoked image of writers as a group of banned people, a cult of wise, who go around the world telling stories (although no one seems to listen to them – no disrespect intended . . .), but without the humdrum and marketing politics of publishing and its pressures, which have no place in the fresh imagination of adolescence, where everything is still possible (or not yet forgotten?). The lost orchestration of exiled and banished writers emphasizes the humorous tonality, especially through the names of *real* writers or writers from something called *reality* who can be imagined in such roles as well as through the idea that they must have committed a crime – which illustrates the painful, hard work and perhaps also the compulsion that the *impetus to write* can have on such a ›sect‹. This is reinforced by the evocation of the image (or, indeed, an entire movie) of ›Hugo‹ and ›Tolstoy‹ as chained prisoners sitting at a seemingly never-ending, rocky inkwell. It also pleasurably plays with the different experiences of the different sides of the text: On the one, invisible, distant end of the text, still in the making, the author is imprisoned, condemned to write for their crimes (of enjoying writing? seeing? questioning? asking (for)? doubting? desiring? denying? discovering? touching?) – of disobeying the written and unwritten ›laws‹, – all of which is not so far removed from the precarious positions that writers around the globe still experience and can find themselves in, in many ways; and at the other end, the ›implied audience‹, who – untouched, exploiting and savoring – enjoys (and even mocks) the plight of the banished, homeless ›sect‹ condemned to non-belonging. Authors, in this sense, are given a (very benevolent, indeed!) marginalized position (hopefully they are not all male – and cis-normative . . .), but also appear as related to each other, as a family or ›tribe‹, which offers a meaningful image of what a family or ›tribe‹ could be, beyond (de-)colonial, nationalist(-ic) or geneological boundaries.

This is where this literary litany for change and transformation in a way seems to begin. The ›implied author‹/narrator speaks out against the formalization and categorization of writers (of color) along national(-istic *and* de-colonial) politics.

Instead of taking up this line and splitting it in two, they invoke the reciprocity of the encounter between the writer and a possible ›implied reader‹ by speaking of the visit sought by the *voyelles* and the *consonnes* waiting there, like jinns, to be seen, which seem to have no meaning as such but which an ›implied audience‹ is expected to find in the corners of the book and in the sights they evoke, conflating and merging them from beginning to end. The humor of the scene is invoked by the image of all those flying words fluttering into the surprised face of the teenager at a threshold age, an age when one begins to look at the world (and oneself) in a different way as if one had never seen either before. Again, a magical moment is invoked as if the book were recounting an experience of reading *Harry Potter* (volume I, where we have quite dangerous flying keys) or some other magical fairy tale instead of Basho or Mishima. The affectivity of this portrayal is heightened by the depiction of a realistic teenage memory with all the innocence and adventurous, secret and sacred feelings that each new ›discovery‹, each newly found crack in the walls and in the eagerness of one's lonely but full chest, entails. It is pleasurable

to think of and about such moments, and it heightens the attention to the reading process, as an ›aesthetic experience of the moment‹ (Ertler 2008, 72) in which the ›implied author/narrator not only evokes such memories but also offers other, similar ones that may be relived. The humor of the description is thus embedded in joyful sensations and an affectivity that lies in-between fulfillment, contentment, abandonment, ›watching‹ the teenager, and thus, in the *other* imagery that the book invokes, close to one's inner layers.

Mishima, Hugo, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Senghor, and Césaire (no female writers apparently, whatever that may say about our world, a lot, no doubt): The world seems to meet in the small worldliness of a formerly colonized, free space that is its richness; it does not suffer *from* the and *in* the poverty of a nationalist or continentalist subsidiary understanding of *who* matters and *what* one has to read. There are just books that one can grab and read. Real freedom. Those who tell the adolescent all these wonderful stories are thereby their ›neighbors‹, the ›implied author‹ seems to indicate.

Reading the other as one's neighbor creates a form of touch, imbued with a smile and a humorous quiet tone that induces silence – the aura that arises when something of (lasting) value appears. This neighborhood is more than a good turn. And it is not altruism either. Rather, what the ›implied author/narrator may invoke is the neighborhood of a ›village‹. A ›village‹ functions as a placeholder for an entire community, signifying a random group of (diverse) people, a cohabitation of the many that can be extended to include a city, a metropolitan area, or even a continent, or the world . . .). Village-neighborhood in this sense is more than what one knows and has power over. It also includes the other, whom one does not know so well, whom one cannot control but who can be considered part of one's living environment. The other, in this sense of the *village neighborhood*, is not so far away from the self and also does not need to be understood and studied first, checked out or presupposed as someone completely different, something to be classified and categorized first. Instead of becoming a fetish or an object, the other is just a (sometimes a little crazy or obscene) fellow from one's own village. Not unlike *White Teeth*, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* thus suggests here an other way of *looking* – one that frees the gaze from an inspecting, mechanized, radiographic appeal that wants to see through ›to the mallow‹ as the narrator in *White Teeth* called it (as if), thereby, shaking their head; it proposes to sublimate this gaze in the image of a convivial and, to some extent, mentoring encounter (implied by the book's author/narrator) that is part of living together (and learning from each other). The ›implied author/narrator here reveals the ways in which they use the name Mishima and the senses in which they call themselves a *japonais* writer. For them, ›Mishima‹ encompasses two names: On the one hand, Mishima stands for a long series of writers whom they consider important for their own becoming as well as for intellectual pleasure (here, too, it seems that no Black woman* writer or woman* writer of color could apparently make it into the avenues of fame and acclaim); *Mishima* is thus a name alongside Shakespeare and Victor Hugo, but also Césaire. The ›implied author‹ does not differentiate the authors according to their nationality or decolonial stance; they withdraw them from history and discourse in a direct sense, and at the same time implement the coloniality of our worldliness, of the contemporaneity, into (another, more global) history, by enqueuing Shakespeare, and Hugo in a list of important writers next to Césaire and Senghor. Instead of politicizing their names in a quite

familiar dichotomous way, they present them as writers of the same world, of a ›village‹ with different languages. This unusual enumeration, by its very unfamiliarity, evokes a humorous tonality of incongruity. The image evokes a pleasant alignment of people that touches, moves, because it groups supposedly antagonistic groups of authors, who are usually placed in a hierarchical (racialized) ranking, in a circle, in a family, and places them all in a setting – a place ›in Haiti‹, the place of possible, random, memorable memories. The usual hierarchical image is thus shifted and transformed into a vertical setting. Temporal time and history are not seen in a linear, successive way but as shared ›knowledge‹ in different shades and outcomes; one reads (and inhales) them while running (like a teenager) or while lying in bed (like Proust).

What emerges from the processes of reading, however, and this is the implicit allusion to the liberating workings of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness, depends on the possibility and affiliation of the ›implied audience‹: *je prenais la nationalité de mon lecteur. Ce qui veut dire que quand un Japonais me lit, je deviens immédiatement un écrivain japonais.* By invoking the name *japonais*, the ›implied author‹/narrator, does indeed include the ›Japanese‹, as the one (reader) one does not know, *the* name for the ›implied reader‹ within the thought and within the world they invoke. ›The Japanese‹ is not only part of their past learning and *auto-bio-graphy* but also of their future encounter and becoming (a writer). It stands for and shows the infinite incompleteness of something called ›identity‹, of who we are (becoming) as human beings, as writers, as people who meet and get to know each other, who change and become the other of ourselves, an ongoing process with and without the makings and processes of ›history‹ and historiography.

Here then, there is both an immediate and a lingering, potential instance contained in the relation that indicates writing and reading as processes of encounter. And this image of encounter in writing/reading evokes another form of coming together, which is based on an almost mythical-ethical reflection of what could be called *erudite non-knowledge and non-power*, beyond any configurations of capitalist manipulation or a however pre-defined and pre-structured *education system*. The *japonais(e)* writer becomes a *japonais(e)* reader – a form of address that signals the self as the other, the unknown, – as the one through whom the self is read and defined in the reading. This expresses a surrender of the writing self to a reading other. In this sense, it is an address that signals a chiasm, a touching space, within structures of unknowing and powerlessness. So here, too, within the antagonistic frames of decolonizing discourses and language, and from out of literary reflections, within these reflections, an epistemology for global contiguity is established or at least seems to be called for.

There is, of course, first and foremost, and in a humorous way, a critique that is embedded in the title *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. At a more explicit level of the novel, the text gives the impression of being about questions of ›identity‹, which it inevitably is. It seems to say, and here again the ›implied author‹ would coincide with the ›real author‹, *I am what I am, and I am not reducible to the country of my origin or to a specific language. Rather, I determine what I am, and I am a Japanese writer.* Along *autobiographical* lines that reaffirm the singularity and thus the ›originality‹ of all experience despite history and the sociopolitical, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* proffers the imagination and the possibility of the imagination as a humorous, liberating counterweight to the imagery of representational and fixat-

ing forms of othering, in which the tragic, painful as well as determined and resolute conviction to create space for subjectivity beyond fetishism is affirmed.

From this point of view, the title sounds like a slogan for freedom, one that claims such a freedom, and one that the book seems to promise to unfold like a manifesto. It echoes and claims the right of a writer to be free and to belong everywhere and at all times, past, present, and future. It claims a position that, despite and because of its singularity, is ephemeral in terms of time and space. At the same time, it defines a (good) writer as someone who stands beyond time and space, or rather *place*, and as someone, and this is the political side of an artist's claim, who stands beyond *being placed* and objectified. The narrator seems to refuse to be placed in a discourse, as an artifact, symbol, or fetish of a specific history, culture, or language, although the question of ›origins‹, culture, and language remains, and it also remains as a complex and aporetic question of ›love‹ and affection, of one's past, of memories that are dear to one, which altogether belong to or are attached to a place and convey something about a writer. But it is a place that belongs to the writer and travels with them.

With this disposition, the ›implied author‹ enters the novel by approaching the narrator with the same inclination and desire. The overall question of a style *japonais*, while adhering to the picturesque denotations that it sets at work in the poetic instances of its prosaic oeuvre, is haunted by a form of writing that deconstructs the Japanese (writer) as a stereotype and yet *reconstructs* a style, *as* Japanese writing, as a contemplative question, on every page of the novel, in the sense of a sophisticated, thoughtful form of writing without reconstructing racist imagery but playing with its limits.

In this sense, Laferrière, while deploying his own *style*, circumvents platitudes and (identitarian) assignments, writes against them, and *reinscribes* other texts into what could be understood as a (world) literary canon – *on the move*. While exploring the meanings of a Japanese writer (and becoming one . . .), his narrator and ›implied author‹ lets themselves be guided by Matsuo Basho's journey, in the worldliness of Montréal, a space, which against the backdrop of the narrator's haunted musings, becomes ›Japanized‹ – just one of a billion ways of ›seeing‹ (the world) – which is to say, to wander around in wonder, wondering:

»Je ne sais même plus si l'angoisse vient du fait que j'envisage d'écrire un nouveau livre ou de devenir un écrivain japonais. D'où l'interrogation fondamentale: C'est quoi un écrivain japonais? Est-ce quelqu'un qui vit et écrit malgré tout (il y a des peuples qui sont heureux sans connaître l'écriture)? Ou quelqu'un qui n'est pas né au Japon, ni ne connaît la langue, mais décide de but en blanc de devenir un écrivain japonais? C'est mon cas. Je dois me le rentrer dans la tête: *je suis un écrivain japonais*. Du moment que je ne sois pas cet écrivain nu qui pénètre dans la forêt des phrases avec un simple couteau de cuisine.« (Laferrière 2008, 19; emphasis mine)

The humorous tonality comes from what seems absurd and therefore amusing; it is not only imbued in the meaning of the sentences, but is also made part of their rhetoric, through a contrapuntal use of conjugations, like ›*malgré tout*‹, or the invocation of a writer as a naked (male!) writer (*écrivain*) with a knife as a weapon, and of sentences as a forest in which they get lost. Its amusing senselessness also exploits incongruity: The very goal

of wanting to be a Japanese writer for a book or because of a book, seems so nonsensical, because it appears to be so clear what a Japanese writer is. But the ›implied author's‹/homodiegetic narrator's unlikely chitchat unleashes a thread of wise-cracking: Not only is it so clear what a nationality would have to do with writing (on the level of an essence of writing, maybe, if there is any), but they point out as well that there are also peoples that do not write. What does that mean for nationalities as well as for writing? (And it has meant something historically and has been part of colonial gestures towards the other). But the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator distinguishes colonial fantasies of supremacy from the image they invoke here by sending the writer naked into the forest of sentences; not only is this image funny and pleasurable, because of its unusual, surreal, almost cinematic imagery. There also seems to be some wisdom lurking in it, provoking possibly thoughtfulness and attentiveness: At least, we know now, that a Japanese writer is not a naked man entering a forest of sentences with a kitchen knife, which makes them a quite ›ordinary‹ writer; against the backdrop of this image, everyone else must be an ›ordinary‹ writer, and it also makes it clear how ridiculous it would be to consider a Japanese writer as different from any other writer. On the other hand, any kind of writing may begin exactly there, in the forest of written and unwritten sentences, before which one feels naked and equipped with nothing more than a kitchen knife – which makes all writers, in their desperation of not knowing where to begin, finding a way (in as well as out), alike. This, in turn, amounts to the fundamental question of what distinguishes a Japanese writer from any other writer. It is a question on the borderline of ›identity‹ politics, subject formation, and the willingness or resistance to deal with them – a sphere of interaction at the threshold of language, discourse, desire, and power, a state of unknowing and powerlessness – and how to navigate it that all and find one's way nevertheless.

What the novel is attempting, then, can perhaps be compared to the narrator's observation of a cloud-laden sky they wonder about and want to dissect while sitting on a park bench:

»On examine ce ciel au ventre bas et lourd d'orages noirs. On se prend à vouloir ouvrir son ventre pour voir si ça se nourrit d'angoisses ou d'images« (Laferrière 2008, 15).

The title of the book can thus be seen as such concealed *orages noirs et lourds*, packed with meanings. And the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ sets out to unpack them slowly, without making it rain. A humorous rhetoric that underlies the narrative translates these images into a subtle meditation that is itself questioning and allusive rather than determining and defining, or outright funny.

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ rather seems to stick to and be stuck by the self-posed question that comes with the title, namely: What is *un écrivain japonais*? What does that actually mean, and to what does it amount to? What is it (*un*)saying?

From here, the beginning before the beginning, the narrative is spilt into different problematizations, which develop their own paths, and yet, somehow, they all belong together, not so much as part of the story but as part of the contemplation of the narrating instance(s) that the title evokes. The story is thus part of the reflections that the title sets in work, not the other way around. These reflections also trigger the blossoming of an

inner diegetic world, always on a metaleptic level, which questions any diegetic separation between the real, actual world and the diegetic world. Rather, all these levels are represented as liminal and intertwined. This becomes apparent from the proximity of the protagonist, the narrator, the ›implied author‹, and the ›real author‹, but it can also be seen in the depiction of the realistic scenery and the allusions to other writers, such as Basho, Proust, Mishima, Kerouac, and Diderot, so that the text, at least at times, resembles a literary analysis framed as a poetic text. The conflation of these different zones that are ›usually‹ obeyed in the stringent world-making of the novel, arouses humor because the text appears restless and challenging, enhancing its performative and aesthetic qualities while simultaneously demanding the ability to think along the meanings of the text and beyond them.

This reflective mark of its humorous trait also becomes evident in another passage in a chapter quite at the end of the novel, which takes up the aforementioned scene of the narrator sitting on a bench in the park, contemplating the dark clouds. The chapter is called *Désir d'or*. *Désir d'or* seems to stand for the writer's desire and the art of literary writing:

«Quand j'ai trop lu à la bibliothèque, je vais me reposer dans le petit parc, juste en haut de la côte. [...] La littérature non plus n'aime pas ceux qui l'attendent assis comme un con en face d'une machine à écrire. Je sors prendre l'air. Deux hommes en train de décharger des caisses de bière. Un Noir et un Blanc. [...] Ils travaillent vite sans cesser de se raconter des histoires. Des pros. J'écris vite aussi. Peut-être mal, mais toujours vite. J'affirme être le meilleur sprinter de ma génération. On devrait me croire sur parole, car tout le monde ne cultive pas pareille audace. Dire qu'il est le meilleur. Dans les autres métiers, oui, mais pas en littérature. Les sportifs annoncent, sans trembler, leur désir de l'or. Les écrivains pratiquent le flou artistique quand on leur parle de palmarès. On devrait prendre exemple sur les enfants qui n'hésitent jamais à montrer leurs biceps. Le problème c'est qu'on se méfie de ceux qui s'avancent dans la vie à visage découvert. Et on croit naïvement que l'art ne se pratique pas dans un centre sportif. Faut s'entraîner. Me voilà déjà en sueur. Je me revois dans l'univers de Midori. [...] Je me revois en train de marcher dans les pas de Basho. La fête violette chez Midori. La dérive dans la ville. Le paysage bariolé de l'automne. Il fait déjà moins frais avec ce soleil si éclatant. Sa douce chaleur sur mon visage. Je pourrais rester des jours sur ce banc à regarder des jeunes écureuils grimper aux arbres. Je sens l'engourdissement du sommeil. Je frissonne. Un nuage, peut-être. Tout disparaîtra (ce qu'on a vécu comme ce qu'on a rêvé). Un avenir radioactif nous attend.» (Laferrière 2008, 203–205)

The passage subtly, playfully reveals the arbitrary order of the novel as willful and deliberate; this disorderly form is seen as constructed and as a scheme guided by the desire to form a narrative as valuable as gold, not necessarily in the sense of literary awards, but in a metaphorical sense of literary originality and expressiveness that requires a lot of hard work, training, and care, like the mining of gold. This effort, this *désir d'or*, is at the same time put into practice and shown as hard mental work, indicated by the break and sitting in the park, the sweating, the stress, the diverse thoughts and doubts that the writer has to go through. It is also shown as a sensual and physical undertaking and as part of everyday life and its experiences. Humor serves as the tool with which this form of writing

in the footsteps of Basho is put to work. The humorous tone humbles the text in a self-reflexive way, as in the image of children showing proudly their ›biceps‹, and prepares the ground for the final touch, the contemplative ending of the scenery. The humorous tonality is part of the reflection of the protagonist/narrator/›real/implied author‹. It is rhetorically evoked by the incongruity between the ponderousness of their thoughts, on the one hand, and the lightness of the scene they describe on the other, like the vision of contemplative, intellectual work that the protagonist/homodiegetic narrator/›real/implied author‹ seems to escape by sitting on a bench in the park, and the description of the scampering squirrels. The squirrels not only stand in liberating contrast to the heaviness and self-imprisonment of reflection but also seem to mock the seriousness with which reflection is self-congratulatorily endured by intellectuals (writers, philosophers, philosophical writers?). The fact that the writer finds solace and meaning in the description of the squirrels also shows how the squirrels ultimately ›win‹ as if the description were saying, yes, indeed, what is the act of writing and thinking compared to the beauty of ›life‹ as such, metaphorized in the image of these beautiful tree-climbing creatures? The description itself is thus transformed into a poetic inflection at the edge of a powerless unknowability. In addition to the humor inherent in the uneven comparison, there is another, pleasant, thoughtful humor in the liberating realization that one is merely part of the scenery one wishes to reflect upon, and in the realization that one does not really know anything, and that it may not be all that important to try so hard *to know*, against the backdrop of the infinity of things that the squirrels seem to symbolize. And yet, the scene evokes a silent humor because its questioning form, at the same time as it doubts itself, also evokes thoughtfulness and poetic writing. On the other hand, humor is evoked in the passage by images and metaphors that seem oddly apt, such as the comparison of gold mining with the work of a writer trying to fish for gold in the sea of language, or the comparison of physical work and training with the non-sweaty (but still physical!) mental work of writing, which corrects the idea of writing as not arduous (and not physical) but in fact as a stinking, unfunny proposition. The humorous tone of the passage, which derives from the descriptive character of the text, is elegantly unobtrusive, thus reinforcing humor as a seductive invitation to be enchanted and to smile along with these reflections. In this way, the passage reclaims its self-imposed goal of molding ›gold‹: mission accomplished, »Great writing!«, »Bravo!« as an addressed and invoked implied and abducted ›audience‹ may have to admit (with a satisfied smile).

To follow in the footsteps of Basho seems to mean working hard, despite the sober ›knowledge‹ that everything will disappear, the present and ›life‹ itself, with all its joys and sorrows. What remains is writing as a capsule in which the present and existence are encapsulated and archived, perhaps becoming a little nugget of ›gold‹, something of value for and in the future, which is why it may be relevant how a text is put into composition.

Basho's text in this sense appears to be such a valuable piece of gold. To be a Japanese writer thus indicates this metaphoric quest and self-expectation – here it takes the form of a soliloquy with a presumed ›audience‹.

In emphasizing this, the narrator/›implied author‹ almost becomes part of the scenery in the park they describe, part of the squirrel family – a passing summer day with a writer in the park. The haiku at the end of the passage though, unlike Basho's

poems, does not end in thoughtful harmony, but, rather, in a more political sense, summoning a dystopian aura, which is (still) not very far from the political reality.

Humor is here not only part of the rhetoric in order to evoke a pleasant mood, and thus part of the text's particular, targeted rhetorical and affective economy. It also produces a momentum as well as a spacing in which a disposition to be touched can set in. It is within this momentum, prepared by the humorous rhetoric, that the haikuian observation with its contemplative copious allusions can produce its affect-driven, thought-provoking impact.

To Be or Not to Be a Japanese Writer – Otherwise

The narrator/⟨implied author's⟩ quixotic musings about the production of this novel and productivity of the writing remain throughout the main narrative thread. While they ponder about *how* and *what* to write, and wander through the city of Montréal, always accompanied by this text of Matsuo Basho, they develop a narrative plot in which they also become a character in the novel. The narrative discourse that develops is about a Japanese girl band led by the singer Midori, whom they meet through a Korean-Canadian acquaintance. This female group of friends seem to be, at the same time, part of the homodiegetic narrator's/⟨implied author's⟩ (cis-male) fantasies, which the title may (have) spawned, pushing the boundaries of gender and gender relations in a quite sexualized way; (they are lesbian by the way (so no hopes or no worries), although almost at the limit of not withstanding the homodiegetic narrator/⟨implied author⟩ – yeah, well (cis-male) fantasies (McQuade 2023, 203), and some form of *contact*, indeed, *happens* with(-in) this group, but it turns out to be part of another story almost unrelated to the narrator/⟨implied author⟩, therefore . . . depending on what one wishes for, it might come out as frustrating or not). The novel, exploiting a realistic tone, does indeed refer to Midori and the other female figures around them as ›fake‹ characters that the novel could have developed while it evolves a story around them (Laferrière 2008, 199 ff.). Then there is a nearby Greek fishmonger's shop, the narrator's Greek landlord, their daughter (the impassive *Helena*) to whom they are attracted (to the point of ›madness‹), the Greek restaurant to which they are drawn (because of the souvlaki *and* *Helena*), and the Japanese embassy. While the attempt to build a story around the girl band is regularly questioned as a construct and dwindles, the Japanese Embassy, especially one of its employees, gets involved by taking an interest in the book project, and the Japanese intellectual media follows. A Japanization of North American culture seems to be taking place in French Canada within the context of quite questioning postcolonial gestures that try to free ›Japan‹ from frozen, colonizing Western prejudices and Japanist (*white* American) gazes, while touching upon other such stereotypes of Western culture, that of African Americans in particular. As in other of their works, ›the North‹ acquires thereby a notable aesthetic value, what Ertler calls a ›euphorization of space-patterns‹ (Ertler 2008, 84). In contrast to images of ›the North‹ that are often associated with ›the West‹ and the axiomatic latitude and longitude of empire, Laferrière's work evokes a different meaning of ›the North‹; it stands for the silence that comes with the snow, as well as for the solitude, and austerity that accompany its chill, and which also entails an ascetic flair. In this novel in particular, ›the North‹

is a connecting metaphorical element of proximity between Matsuo Basho's book and a journey to ›the North‹, and the homodiegetic narrator's/›implied author's‹ wanderings in the novel's cold, northern setting of Montréal.

Moreover, there are scattered memories in which the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ immerses themselves, memorabilia, as it were, of Haiti, of their family, of their home, of (Japanese) literature and a taste for reading, of a particular friendship that finds its way to Montréal, and of the homodiegetic narrator's ›real‹ ›life‹ within the diegetic world. The role of memory as a melancholic as well as epistemological enterprise that can also affectively illuminate understanding is a characteristic feature of Laferrière's writing (Imbert 2006; Ertler 2008, 72, 2013, 125).

Finally, there are ›chapters‹, half-page pieces of writing, lyrical-prosaic, vignette-fragments that are somehow related to the rest of the text, with titles such as *Le temps des mimosas*, *Des objets*, *Une mort Manga* or *Miss Météo* but without a clear or coherent connection, as is often the case in Laferrière's other novels (Mathis-Moser 2003, 2007).

Within this zigzagging journey, however, the titles of the disparate ›chapters‹ of varying length form a kind of connecting chain that holds the book together. As paratexts to the overall development of the story, they form a *chronology* as well as a *chronography*, linking the story and its narrative discourse, also linking the seemingly disjointed parts of the narrative, which meanders around and about a plot, sketching a possible plot, while the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ seems to be mostly on the move. The novel ends with a brief, contemplative rumination on a snowy Montreal night along the lines of Basho's insight. In all this, there is a quiet, almost imperceptible, humorous rhetoric that touches these themes and unleashes – with no less virtue – an affective touch:

»C'est pas facile de changer une idée en émotion. On est impatient, alors que ces transformations s'opèrent lentement. Le temps ignore notre impatience.« (Laferrière 2008, 15)

Writing is depicted as the transformation of an abstract notion into *émotion*. It appears as a form of internal translation between *idea* and *word* and thus in a deferred rather than straightforward meaning of *understanding* as a pivotal sense of touch that the novel attempts to show, that it perhaps wants to sensitize for; writing in this mode processes thought into affective, sensual units that have the capacity to move and, in doing so, to prompt reflection. The task of the writer is to translate words into layers of meaning that arouse affectivity, and only then, it must be concluded, does the text acquire meaning. For the writer, too, this is a consuming and seemingly frustrating process. And it is a process to which they are subjected and to which they must surrender, while *time*, like a (good?) parent or mentor, remains unyielding. The writer has to play along, is disciplined by *time*. The humor here comes from several sides. On the one hand, it is difficult not to forget the distinction between the narrator of the novel and the ›implied/real author‹ and not to take them for the ›real author‹. So, ultimately, one sees Dany Laferrière sitting on a bench in the park (where the homodiegetic narrator says they are sitting right now, on the bench above), almost motionless and seemingly languid and absorbed in a cloud of not knowing, powerless, waiting for some answer, some clue, as to what to write and how. *Time* itself is evoked as timeless and untouched, as a powerful wasteland in which an

overwhelming infinity of ›knowledge‹ resides and from which some form of ›knowledge‹ emerges once the writer resorts to it, unknowing and powerless as to what awaits them there. The figuration of time as a powerful, knowing agent on which the author depends and against which they are powerless, helpless, is, in a frustrating sense, amusing but also meditative, like the act of waiting itself that the narrator/›implied author‹ performs in order to be able to write. Waiting, as a powerless and not-knowing precondition of writing, is thus transformed into a performative act. It is a volitional act performed not so much by the writer as by the seed that *time* waters. The writer seems to be dispossessed in the process of writing, torn between the desire to write and the time that *time* needs to fill this desire in its own way. The short passage evokes humor by touching on depictions and reminiscences of eagerness and impatience that ultimately remain abortive; this, too, is an image that in its realization inevitably implies a discerning approval and a surrender to the evoked image, which elicits a state of amusement as an experience of the limits of one's will, willfulness and, finally, one's surrender to the other that *time* is.

In the developing narrative discourse, the homodiegetic narrator attempts to encounter a ›real‹ Japanese lifestyle. They meet the Japanese singer and pop star Midori, who is on tour with her band. They become friends, and the homodiegetic narrator occasionally accompanies her; at times it seems as if they are lovers (which is never fully resolved). There is also a photographer named Takashi, who accompanies the band, filming and photographing the group. The other women in the band are also named (Eiko, Fumi, Tomo, Noriko, Haruki, Heideko), and smaller episodes are rendered about the dynamics of their relationships. Later in the novel, for example, Noriko commits suicide out of jealousy in the apartment of the homodiegetic narrator (Laferrière 2008, 78), a crime in which they become involved. But then, in a later chapter, as mentioned, there is the subtle hint that Midori and her band could have been an example of how this book might have been written, a story sketched in the ›imagination‹ of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator:

»Je crée quelque chose, et j'y crois après. Je ne peux plus me passer de ces filles. Elles sont plus vivantes que celles que je croise. Elles bouffent tout mon temps. Je ne pense qu'à elles. Je me noie dans leur monde. Je les vois au réveil, je les sens, comme si elles m'avaient happé. [...] Jusqu'à présent, j'ai pu les garder dans l'espace de la nuit. Si jamais elles se font voir le jour, je suis perdu. Je dois défendre le peu de lumière qui me reste. Alors adieu au monde de la nuit et de la solitude.« (Laferrière 2008, 109)

Here, the narrative levels in the passage evoke *affective humor*. They play on the edge of each other, never quite giving way to one another. This is suggested by the way the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author/real author‹ metamorphoses in and out of the textual and meta-textual instances. It is done in a humorous hub that is self-ironic but also includes and mocks the process of reading: The belief, the folly of believing, in fictional writing, taking it for ›real‹, and being seduced by its imaginative power. At the same time, the polyphonic narrative tone confides that it, too, is imbued with this folly imagining, which has taken hold of them and controls them, even consumes them completely. The ›implied/real author‹-instance thus admits that they, too, are seduced and overwhelmed by their own autonomous characters and undecidable plot.

It is pleasurable and amusing to see the author-instance as a vulnerable product of their own work, because it implies how ›real‹, affectively palpable, a narrative can become and how much fiction, as an instance of imagination and thought, affects not only the writing processes and reading possibilities, but also how much it leaves its mark on other processes of the body (insomnia, perhaps even self-neglect). At the same time, the passage seems to ask what ›reality‹ *really* is, whether it can be more than that? In other words, is ›reality‹ so different, and does it not also play in one's imagination, making the acting people around us figures of and in our imagination, in one's thoughts? (Although they might be completely different, even in the way they perceive themselves . . .). The narrative tone leaves a smiling, thoughtful trace in the text, a golden thread of the novel (on a meta-level) and in the novel (as a fleeting narrative trace). It also forms a fragile, unstable link between the ›real author-‹instance and an ›implied audience‹. This narrative voice is thus a hybrid voice composed of different authorial instances. On the one hand, there is a trace of a ›real author‹ in the process of generating an idea and plot for this book. On the other hand, there are the voices of the homodiegetic narrator of this fictional text, which also indicate an ›implied author‹ who is in a struggle with the very same characters as well as with the plot that the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ wants to talk about and portray. This second level can be called *the infra-narrative level*. It stands in contrast to the meta-narrative level, a hybrid voice of the several liminal and intra-diegetic narrative instances that mirror the voice of the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ and the ›implied author‹.

The humorous rhetoric allows to reflect on writing as well as on the grip of the imagination on ›reality‹ and vice versa, and to problematize the power of what is perceived as ›reality‹ on the imagination. But it also invites to reflect on the ›maddening‹ character of writing in which an author is left alone with imaginative labor, which must not be amusing at all and can amount to painful hard work. The passage thus can evoke different forms of ›laughter‹, or at least ›smiles‹, despite or because of its humorlessness as it touches on and problematizes different issues within a defenseless, surrendered form of implied address, through which a humorous rhetoric emerges between the lines: A desperate ›laughter‹, an amused ›laughter‹ of the author-instances, an empathetic ›laughter‹ for them, and perhaps also a ›laughter‹ of recognition. The humorous tonality evokes and facilitates the utterance as well as the willingness to reflect on it. In this way, the hardship of writing and the self-reflection with its thought-provoking allusions become more easily digestible. In addition, the humor comes from the tension created by the fact that the passage does not reveal whether ›Midori‹ and their friends are a construction or ›real‹. This adds to the wit, playfulness, and humorous enjoyment of the novel and heightens the suspense almost to the end of the novel.

In another chapter, ›Midori‹ is presented as a Japanese-Canadian female figure, a diaporic Japanese-Canadian woman who (must) imitate the stereotype of a Japanese woman, an exoticized role discursively imposed on her:

»En flânant ici et là sur le câble, je tombe sur Midori en Miss Météo. C'est un canal local où je ne m'arrête jamais. Je n'y connais personne. On regarde la télé pour revoir des gens qu'on a croisés sur d'autres canaux. Mondanité virtuelle. [...] Midori passe bien l'écran avec son kimono coloré et ses bâtons dans les cheveux. C'est un déguisement,

sinon elle est toujours en jean et T-shirt. En se déguisant ainsi en japonaise, elle devient moins Midori. [...] Midori ne les intéresse pas, ce qu'ils veulent c'est une geisha.» (Laferrière 2008, 124–126)

Even within this critical assessment of everyday culture, which depicts the niches offered to the other, mediative, reflective contemplation is aroused within a humorous inclination that simultaneously evokes a specter of affectivity: wonder, insight, contentment, thoughtfulness, and joy, but also sadness. Here, too, the narrative levels oscillate between the narrative discourse, its diverse narrative traits, and a metaleptic level, since it is the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ who penetrates the discourse both on the diegetic and the extradiegetic level and suggests references to the ›real‹ world and its discourses. The humorous tone itself seems to be a byproduct of the narrator's reflections rather than a skillfully crafted, intended rhetorical piece of writing. The reflective thoughts evoke humor by questioning the normalcy and naturalness of watching television, on the one hand, and by revealing a quite psychic trait of why we watch television the way we do, on the other. The tone of wonder is affective because it recalls the pleasure of being ›at home‹ (in a narrow sense, of sitting in one's dwelling), watching TV without a specific purpose. On the other hand, a contrasting sentiment is evoked because of the analyzing, observing tone of the narrator, which objectifies ›us‹. The narrative tone is thus alarmingly ambiguous. It evokes pensive pleasure but then becomes uncanny. The passage asks whether we do not often enough want to meet the same people on television (or now: digitally? Through social media or netflixing, for example?), and whether this virtual world has not already become a kind of substitute for the (affective) evocation of a ›family‹-relation (a pleasant one that we can safely end without much fear of hurting anyone). And it seems to ask whether it does not reflect the alienation of the self from itself, which does not even notice its normalized, exploited, burned-out loneliness? This is not a pleasant thought but one that nevertheless evokes a humorous trait of self-questioning and even consent. On the other hand, the sentences seem to ask whether the virtual world is really a form of alienation or another form of togetherness, one that imitates itself, that imitates sophistication, *mondanité*? A thought that is not so far away from ›reality‹ as it can be applied to the internet and remains meaningful when it is related to the digital world. Nevertheless, the other is also sought in these encounters, the other that, even in the virtual world, represents desire, erotic display and exoticism. The other is represented by the fetishization of a traditional Japanese piece of cloth and style as well as figurations of femininity*. And this silently emanating thought between the images of the sentence evokes a quiet humor in the process of contemplation, one that smiles at the trajectory of the thought and what it makes us see, and that changes into pensiveness by the last sentence, which reveals that it is not ›Midori‹ that people are interested in; ›Midori‹ as the other and as femininity* must always appear masked in order to be ›seen‹, ›recognized‹ and ›acknowledged‹, which means that ›Midori‹ can never be fully present, not even to herself*, but always in a disguised form. The tragic smile that sticks to the utterance, extinguishing itself, has an intensifying melancholy in the corners of its mouth, because the disguised ›Midori‹ also shows and mirrors the half-presence of the spectator, who must then ask themselves who *they* are if ›Midori‹ is not ›Midori‹ looking at them.

These narrative currents meet in the question and meta-question of narrative itself as a constructed, rhetorical device that depends on (historically influenced) language and discourse. ›Language‹ no longer seems to be so free and floating but very much bound to the meanings that its words, expressions and significations have acquired over time, and which do not solely lie in the faculty of ›language‹ alone; rather, these meanings have taken material form and have shaped ›reality‹ from where they also resonate in a self-affirming way. But this is not the ›message‹ of the novel, which is categorized as a *roman* on the cover; it is only the assessment that comes with the chosen title in the narrative discourse that is also the title of the actual book.

In another short ›chapter‹, which is half a page long, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ again muses about *time*. The chapter is called ›*le temps des mimosas*‹: Time is pre-figured here as an enclosure that tries to avoid being touched (lived?); it evokes the often-used English name for the mimosa flower, ›touch-me-not‹, so that the novel alludes to this translated and transposed English meaning of the mimosa, behind the image, as some form of aesthetic timelessness:

«Certains possèdent leur temps: ›J'ai tout mon temps.‹ D'autres se font posséder par lui: ›Je n'ai pas le temps.‹ Il y a aussi ›le temps manquant‹ du suicidé [...] À Tokyo, où je n'ai jamais mis les pieds, on converse, paraît-il, le temps, dans de jolies petites boîtes laquées. Si tu veux trois jours, on peut te les vendre. Contre de l'argent? Non, on n'achète du temps qu'avec du temps. [...] Je voudrais acheter du temps japonais avec des mimosas ruisselants de pluie. Basho donne l'impression de cheminer à côté du temps.» (Lafférière 2008, 123)

The humor here comes from playing with the meanings inherent in the poetological instances of language itself. These are shown in the multiple *senses* depicted by the use of *time*. As Vasile points out

«[L]e temps semble occuper une place particulière dans les ouvrages laferriens. En apparence, menacé d'inexistence [...], il s'avère, néanmoins, que le temps s'immisce dans l'univers laferrien sous des formes particulières et en rapport permanent avec le ›je‹ (narrateur et protagoniste) ou avec les divers personnages.» (Vasile 2008, 63)

In this passage, and in the novel in general, the meanings of *time* are opened up beyond their common denotations in the everyday: Possessing *time* and being possessed by *time*, as well as the thought-provoking notion of suicide as a *lack of time*, of being in a hurry and getting away, of saying goodbye to the scenery of life as soon as possible as if one were simply heading somewhere else, or ›home‹ – these instances are not only pleasant but also ambiguously humorous in that they hint at the senses and possibilities of meaning that one might not think of at first, and thus experience as insightful forms of surprise; they also have a decelerating effect because of their thought-provoking potential, inviting one to linger a bit longer, to savor the moment, and to reflect on the meanings evoked. Such haibunic-haiku insights are both amusing and contemplative, evoking a state of wonder. The joking reference to Tokyo, where the narrator claims to have never been,

plays, on the one hand, with the diegetic level of the novel and its claim (to be *japonais*) but also echoes colonial, orientalist schemata that report on the other and other places in order to inform empire about ›them‹ and thus create a dichotomous and binary relation between ›us‹ and ›them‹. There is also the incongruity of claiming to ›know‹ something one cannot ›know‹ even when one has been ›there‹. This ›knowledge‹ about Japan/Tokyo, while mimicking an Orientalist, exoticizing gaze, is also a self-ironic comparison of this text with the constructedness of Orientalist implications and academic ›knowledge‹. The self-irony allows the narrator/›implied author‹ to continue the little game. It constructs ›Japan‹ on a construction and surreptitiously exposes it as a construct; the passage appears like a bottle message and an exoticizing and sensualizing, mysterious flower. And yet the image of a mimosa drained in rain drops, which seems to lie behind this allusion, has a beautiful, sensual aesthetic. And this is the aesthetic that the narrator/›implied author‹ seems to see and seek in Basho's poetry – but they want to look at it carefully, beyond any exoticizing meanings, and they do so by first reflecting the very political meanings that the words carry, to carve out some space and time for them to be seen differently.

The poetic, often conclusive remarks that come in the form of haikus at the end of the haibunic prose are not only ornamental observations but function as a twofold critical reassessment and contemplation. On the one hand, an Orientalist image is ironized so that its meaning is deconstructed. On the other hand, once this image has been deconstructed by an almost imperceptible ironic tendency, it is *deexoticized* and taken to another place where it can be contemplated in a different, thoughtful, sensual way.

Often, the allusive allegorical reference seems to await an answer, hovering in the air that the text conjures up, attempting to repeat Basho in a different way, as in the phrase *l'impression de cheminer à côté du temps*. Here, then, is the other ›real‹ literary contemplation, beyond the naturalized meanings that have been established over time and that things, contemplation itself, have acquired. The poetic tone takes the form of a touching *insight*, evoked by the described image of the flower covered with raindrops, a concentrated close look that resembles a still life of *time*, and of *time* as wandering untouched outside itself, without being out of joint. This image not only remains in the inner eye, it also remains open what it could mean, what it conveys. This space is as much a space of affectivity and thought as it is a space of joyful contentment and wonder, touched by the other (the flower, the rain, being, sight, another power/creator). In this space of touch and close encounter with the other, both the self and the other become one, on one page; any distinction between observer and observed, subject and object, would destroy the evoked allegorical allusion that the poetic rhetoric entails and offers. Rather, what is emphasized is the relationality, the angle and orientation that this touch of the other induces and that lies in the observation, both within the self and between the self and the other.

The narrator's voice thus establishes a double role of narration and a double level of reflection that characterizes the novel. The doubleness of the voice is manifested by the reflections of the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ and, by the reflective zone that is more immediately adjacent to the voice of an ›implied author‹ and, it must be assumed, the ›real author‹ – a pleasantly confusing indistinguishability between the meta- and infra-narrative levels.

Both levels of reflection are constantly doubling back on each other, complicating the narrative as well as the decision as to whether something is happening in this book, or whether it is just a possibility of a possible plot-to-be that has not yet been worked out.

The resemblance of the homodiegetic narrator to the ›real author‹ of this book inevitably invites an implied image of the author, imbued with authorial intentions inferred from information about the ›real author‹, Dany Laferrière. The ›homodiegetic narrator‹, like the ›real author‹, is Haitian-Canadian. They are also (apparently male, cis-normative, and) a writer; this already generates a humorous tonality at the level of narrative rhetoric. In this way, a liminal space is created within the text, where the borders between fact and fiction seem to be erased and the narrative discourse and ›the real world‹ seem to touch each other but do not claim to do so, and instead claim to be completely different, namely *Japanese*, and yet ›real‹; the assertion of incongruity where there seems to be none is thus what evokes humor as well as suspenseful thought about what the homodiegetic narrator (or Dany Laferrière?) is up to. This liminal space that exists between the ›real‹ world and the narrative discourse not only blurs the distinction between the ›texture‹ of ›reality‹ and the novelistic text but also creates another space between the two that complicates the distinction we usually assume between literary writing and ›reality‹. The novel begins to write about itself while it is being written. This style provokes both amusement and attention:

»Quand on a le titre, le plus gros de l'ouvrage est fait. [...] Je nage encore entre le titre et le livre. Moment de flottement. Le temps de bien mesurer le chemin à parcourir. Pas pressé d'entrer dans le vif du sujet. On retourne dans sa tête les images qu'on voudrait voir dans le livre. On aimerait surtout qu'elles s'infiltrent dans notre chair, se mélangent à notre sang, pour qu'on puisse écrire avec notre pied, c'est-à-dire sans y penser. [...] Il en résulte une sorte d'angoisse diffuse qui nous accompagne partout, même à la poissonnerie. Le problème c'est qu'on ne sait pas de quoi se nourrit un tel monstre. On flâne. On s'assoit sur un banc de parc pour regarder passer les nuages. On s'amuse à voir une petite fille jouer avec son chien. On examine ce ciel au ventre bas et lourd d'orages noirs. On se prend à vouloir ouvrir son ventre pour voir si ça se nourrit d'angoisses ou d'images. On reste là, hébété. Ouvert. Tout peut entrer. Un moment d'accalmie. On hume l'air. On s'émerveille devant une simple feuille sèche qui vient de tomber de l'arbre. Le temps d'avant nous semble gorgé d'insouciance. Sale temps ce matin.« (Laferrière 2008, 15–16)

The supposed ease and wonder inherent in the art of literary writing evoke a pleasant humor, showing through the joking of the hybrid narrative voice the rather helpless, the unknowing power-lessness of the art form. Writing appears to be an initially haphazard endeavor, guided more by spontaneously picked up words that can form a title and allow the writer to imagine and construct a whole (other) wor(l)d. But then it shows how difficult the act of coming to terms with the dictate of words of a title is, and how it takes possession of the writer and dominates all their acts. It is presented as a thoroughly physical endeavor, from flesh to blood, to thinking, encompassing perception and movement; the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is completely enmeshed by what the title demands and by the restless, trembling images it provokes.

Three different narrative levels representing the author figure seem to meet at the limit of a metalepsis. These are invoked by allusions to some of the chapter titles: While in the first pages the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ alludes to the literal title of the actual book *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, here the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ uses the chapter title »*Chez le poissonnier*« to indicate both their destination and their location. The words »*même à la poissonnerie*« seem to indicate the thoughts of an ›implied author‹ and seem to correspond to those of the ›real author‹, reflected in the performative act of a homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ (going to the fishmonger).

By indicating the titles, the ›actual‹ performance and the location of the homodiegetic narrator, the text comes very close to the voice of an ›implied author‹ so that we have to expect an ›implied author‹ in close proximity to the ›real author‹. In fact, the homodiegetic narrator seems to be a mirror image of the ›implied author‹, who is a mirror image of the ›real author‹, a *mise en abyme* of voices and possible ›lives‹, all of which are not only part of the diegetic world but also of ›reality‹, which is thus itself questioned as ›real‹, understood in a straightforward sense.

A humorous tone is also mirrored in the image of an author trapped by the self-chosen title of their book, a book not yet written; in addition, amidst the reflections, the passage unleashes amusing images, such as ›monsters‹ that might emerge from the unwritten novel or the image of the flow of writing that is incongruously metaphorized in the image of writing with one's feet. This image captures the flow of writing as something that writes itself, regardless of which part of the body does the writing; in fact, it suggests that it is unclear where the impulse and ideas to write come from. The humorous tone thus facilitates a sincere reflection on the writing process. At the same time, both writing and thinking about writing appear as everyday activities, evoking a specific lifestyle as an everyday scenery. This scenery, however, becomes flesh and blood through the descriptions given by the contemplating homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ who, just by uttering the words, creates an almost temporal standstill, a performative act that the narrator/›implied author‹ brings about, and which produces a kind of tranquillity. So it comes as a surprise when, after this still picture, a description of an everyday event, a haiku-like sentence suddenly appears, visualized here in a leaf falling from a tree. The description ends with the rapturous phrase: *sale temps ce matin*. Not only is the evoked aura captivating and contemplative, combining a vision with beauty, mystery, and paradox, induced by the sudden change of mood and the allusion to *sale temps*; the image elicited within this calm also entails a form of wisdom as inherent in our most immediate surroundings. It is found in the attention paid to the decay of a single leaf; the gaze, a synecdoche of body and soul, seems to be on a journey, wandering, finding a halt in the evanescence of life and its resemblance to mystery and aporia. This movement of the gaze, captured by the words, implies a form of touch, a resonance resulting from the attentiveness required by the description in its slow unfolding, which, at the same time, generates a subtle humorous tonality based on the contentment and the satisfaction implied in the place of the delicately described images.

At first glance, the title of the novel seems to reflect on authorship, but also on ›identity‹ (politics), which seems to be the major theme of the narrative. In fact, the novel explores the question of ›identity‹, the concept and the *limits* of ›identity‹. In this sense, it is a quite critical, philosophizing narrative, as much as it theorizes the instances of literary

narrative (implicitly, any kind of narrative, to which we would also have to include philosophical ones). In an interview, Laferrière explains this form of writing as a complex act touched by history, politics and thus by *auto-bio-graphy*, which also gives texture to texts:

»Il ne faut pas oublier qu'il y a toujours deux narrateurs dans mes romans. Il y a un narrateur singulier, qui pourrait être moi, qui utilise des éléments autobiographiques liés à ma perception du monde. Et ce narrateur est en lutte contre un dictateur qui veut lui imposer un mode de vie. L'exil est une conséquence de la dictature. On ne s'exile pas, on vous met en exil. Mais ce narrateur a toujours refusé de se considérer en exil, préférant plutôt se définir comme un voyageur.« (Laferrière 2011, 18)

Right at the beginning of the novel, on the first page, while we are being introduced to the somewhat narcissistic, very sympathetic reflections of a narrator and protagonist, who also happens to be a writer and who takes us to a meeting with their publisher, a sentence, a thought appears in the middle of a passage. This sentence seems to be out of place in the cheerful comedy that the ›implied author‹ (we are more or less forced to invoke them as we read, because of the aforementioned similarities with the ›real author‹) triggers in the immediate vicinity of the narrator's voice: *On devrait savoir, avec le temps qu'il ne se fait plus rien de nouveau. Mais on s'y accroche*. This thought-deposit, which in itself sounds humorous because it comes suddenly and in a rather seductive way, has the power to take one by surprise and to shift the humorous rhetoric of the narrator to a much more somber, other, affective instance – that of (a still smiling) meditation:

»Mon éditeur a téléphoné pendant que j'étais parti acheter du saumon frais. [...] Autrefois, je ne supportais pas le saumon. Quand j'en mangeais, je le vomissais dix minutes plus tard. La dernière fois, c'était chez une amie. J'avais mal visé le bol des toilettes. J'ai nettoyé sa salle de bains, me suis lavé le visage avant de retourner au salon. Je m'étais juré que c'était la dernière fois que j'en mangeais. Bon, ce n'était pas la première promesse non tenue. Je n'ai aucune obligation de tenir des promesses que je fais à moi-même – sauf peut-être celle d'écrire ce livre. La voix de mon éditeur me semblait bien aigre, malgré toute la chaleur qu'il a cru y mettre. Je le comprends un peu. Il ne m'avait pas vraiment tordu le bras pour écrire ce livre. J'étais le premier à hocher vigoureusement la tête quand il m'a dit qu'il fallait absolument que j'écrive un nouveau livre. Le mot ›nouveau‹ m'effraie toujours un peu. Pourquoi un nouveau livre? On devrait savoir, avec le temps, qu'il ne se fait plus rien de nouveau. Mais on s'y accroche. Le client veut toujours du nouveau. Je ne vais pas reprendre ce débat qu'il connaît maintenant par cœur.« (Laferrière 2008, 11)

The novel begins by evoking a realist and picturesque imagery, which prompts one to think of the everyday life report of its author: So it is not only the paradoxes of events (not being able to stand salmon and yet eating it (over and over again, by the way), being in conflict with one's desires and one's ability to fulfill them, being unfaithful to one's self and enjoying it, and thereby overcoming one's bad consciousness and the loud workings of the super-ego voice within one's own torn and broken self), which not only make one feel sympathy for the narrator (and most likely the ›implied author‹); the pleasant humor they unleash is thrilling. Their humorous tendencies are relieving and pleasant, and they

also increase the willingness to continue listening to the musings of this speaking homodiegetic narrator/ implied author. The humorous tone thus prepares and facilitates the ground for identification with the narrator. Moreover, it comes across as playful and therapeutic, and in its vulnerability and down-to-earthness, as a limit of touchability, as untouchable, as almost sacred, (innocent) anti-power rhetoric. Touching on such issues themselves, evoked in the passage, makes the text in a way almost untouchable, giving impetus to an understanding of its affective economy that is not logocentric but remains in the poetological specter of touch, knitting together reading, sensuality, and cognition. In the midst of the humorous tendency, there is suddenly a much quieter, indeterminate voice that seems to skim over another narrative level, and another narrative voice, presenting time as eternity, represented in the phrase mentioned above: *On devrait savoir, avec le temps qu'il ne se fait plus rien de nouveau. Mais on s'y accroche*. The text thus touches on an insight that goes beyond the narrator's supposedly naïve portrayal and their everyday humor; a thoughtful trait invokes time as infinite in contrast to one's own finiteness, and the evanescence of all existence. The unknown that combines life and death refers to more than the writing of a book. It refers to the experience of life as such as an interval, as simultaneously always old and new, with its share of good and bad times, its pain and losses, subtly set to work by the expression ›rien de nouveau‹ (on this earth). The narrator's former joking and disobedient tone takes on a different flavor; its taste is more bizarre, more strained. And the humor that accompanies it changes into a different attentiveness on the edge of sorrow as if a line had been drawn in the distance, between a crazy, loud ›laughter‹ and a silent, crying grief. It is a small, unobtrusive and yet strong interlude in the text that changes the tonality of the whole passage, unleashing an affectivity of vulnerability, of anguish. At the same time, it gives a foretaste of the entire narrative, evoking suspense and a state of alarm. The experience of the everyday and ordinary is given a deep structure, like a cellar full of unspoken things. It is as if it were reaching out to touch the secrets and discrete spaces of an ›implied audience‹, or to imply and mirror them, rather than to reveal any mysteries that no one would know. However, the novel's narrative style also has a realistic, almost chatty, reportage undertone. In the following pages, the homodiegetic narrator/ implied author readily and without mystification explains how the title of the book came about and what it supposedly means. But before this explanation, as if mocking an academic language of ›truth-‹ seeking (and philosophy?), the narrator points out the importance of titles in general as well as the importance of the title of this book in particular. At first glance, the passage reads like a truism:

»On ne peut pas imaginer le nombre de bons livres qui circulent clandestinement à cause de mauvais titres. Dans les librairies, les rares commentaires que j'entends d'un livre, c'est à 90 % à propos du titre. Les lecteurs me demandent souvent comment tel titre m'est venu à l'esprit. Je ne sais pas, moi. Je reste assis un long moment, et subitement le titre vient. Pas même le temps d'y penser dix secondes, le titre était déjà là. Comme s'il m'attendait au tournant. Tu cherches un titre, toi? On ne peut rien vous cacher. Alors il me saute à la gorge et se retrouve étalé sur la feuille blanche. Je dois le contempler longtemps, le tourner dans tous les sens. Chaque mot, que dis-je, chaque syllabe, chaque lettre doit être à sa place. Quel que soit le livre, ce sont ces mots qui le

représenteront. Ce sont ses mots que l'on verra le plus souvent. Pour les autres, il faudra ouvrir le livre. Alors que ces mots seront toujours là sous nos yeux. Ils contiendront tous les autres mots du livre. Pas besoin de relire le livre de Garcia Márquez, il suffirait de dire *Cent ans de solitude* ou *À la recherche du temps perdu* s'il s'agit de Proust (on dit encore Proust? Ce titre n'est-il pas connu de tout le monde?) et toutes les images du livre défilent alors devant nos yeux éblouis comme un rideau enluminé qui nous sépare de la déplaisante réalité. Et le temps de la lecture (les jours dans les cafés, les nuits près de la lampe), caché dans les replis de notre mémoire, remonte instantanément à la surface avec son cortège riche de sensations inédites. Un bon titre: quel fabuleux mot de passe!« (Laferrière 2008, 12–13)

At second glance, there may be more to this passage than the humorous small talk of an unnerving narrator. The platitude is transformed into an assessment of the excitement of reading, which is not only a form of immersion in the world of the other but also an enriching, intimate, affective, and sensual experience within the self, in a quite solitary way; this solitude and devotion to the (other's) text is reinforced by spatial and temporal invocations: Even in a probably very loud and/or crowded café, one remains absorbed in the other's text, and not even the darkness and seclusion of a late hour can disrupt the connection, which is even reinforced by the soothing complicity of a lamp. Here, too, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator seems to speak and reach out to the possible ›audience‹; they may thereby trigger, touch faintly, somewhere, intimate memories. Again, this skill, coming from a humor of approval, has a disarming effect that leads almost imperceptibly to a state of affective and sensual attentiveness, not only to the text but also to this experience of reading that is being described. It thus amuses with an insight that seems to come from within, within the dialogicity that the text offers, by inducing a memory of an internal state in the self as the sensuality of a reading experience. Moreover, the truism of the book's title appears as a teasing rhetorical technique, a detour to the entrance of the spirals of affectivity of amusement. With this humorous excitement the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator indicates how important titles are to them, at least, and that they therefore do not choose them at random although they cannot say and do not know how they come about. This state of power-less unknowing, behind the words, however, seems to open them up to what might come. Agency is left to the other, to the text that may find answers. But this happens in a kind of state of tacit mutual colloquy: They weigh ›chaque mot‹, ›chaque syllabe‹, and ›chaque lettre‹ ›doit être‹ ›à sa place‹.

What this enumeration suggests is that the title has a meaning, a meaning, though, that remains to some extent unknown even to the (›implied‹) author. What this passage also suggests is that, while it is not possible to remember all the details of a text, what remains lodged in the folds of memory are the affective and sensual effects of a textual reading sensation as a reminiscence and perhaps even its essence. The title functions here as a password, a *mot de passe*. It is a shibboleth,¹² a test word, to access not only the un-

12 Redfield speaks of the shibboleth-effect and defines it as an »[...] insistent foregrounding of words that grant, forbid, delay or simulate access to other scenes, voices, and signifiers: words misspoken, forgotten and returning, errant, promiscuous, at work in the arrière-scène, punning across languages, having letters purloined, coming unglued« (Redfield 2021, 11). Derrida's famous examination of the term is based on and inspired by Peter Szondi's reading of a poem by Paul Celan.

known contents of the book but also the known and unknown pages of one's self. *Mot de pass*, however, signals more here; it can be read as a password, a shibboleth that allows an authorship to take shape within a specific authorized canon, it allows entry and recognition into such a canon, it signals affiliation to a specific (literary) space with its ›laws‹; it is a shibboleth that makes an author part of an archive, the sphere of socio-cultural power. The password is a sign of crossing borders. It is a passport that, to a certain extent, also decides on survival and death, also in a sociopolitical sense. The title is thus a shibboleth for the (net-)workings of power and the flaw of un/touchability: It defines whether one is livable as a writer or is an outlaw. It marks the border between center and periphery. A shibboleth title allows you to survive as an author (who never stands alone but represents certain other affiliations, (elective) affinities and political sentiments), and it allows you to think about other titles to be vocal and *heard*. In this way, the title is the entrance into a world system and an order of signifying senses (in both senses). A politics of reading is thus entangled in the title, marking what is allowed and what must remain secret (and read in clandestinity). It involves a strategy of subversion and resistance. Titles, as passwords of passages and borders, are also demarcations of identitarian politics in different senses and of different forms of identification. As a test word, finally they are thus, an »Erkennungszeichen [an identifier], a sign that polices an order« (Redfield 2021, 10) of non-belonging.

The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator seems to complicate such an invisible, unwritten thread by exploring the emergence of their own title and what it sets in motion within themselves and and perhaps also others:

»Quand on avance un titre qu'on aime bien, il faut y aller prudemment. Généralement, l'éditeur veut vous entendre sur le contenu. De quoi s'agit-il? On pose encore de pareilles questions idiotes. Pas le genre de mon éditeur qui se détache un peu de sa table sans cesser de sourire. J'en profite pour regarder quelques titres autour de moi. Rien de bon. J'ai donc lancé négligemment le mien par-dessus la pile de manuscrits. Quoi? *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. Bref silence. Large sourire. Vendu! On signe le contrat: 10 000 euros pour cinq petits mots. Dans l'euphorie, je raconte à l'éditeur l'anecdote de Vonnegut Jr. On parle déjà d'un bandeau: ›Le plus rapide titreur d'Amérique‹. Mais on a vite laissé tomber, par pudeur. Voilà le problème de l'Europe: une trop grande conscience du ridicule. Ce n'est pas le ridicule qui nous tuera, mais sa peur. Si on a laissé tomber ce bandeau, c'est aussi à cause de l'ambiguïté du mot ›titreur‹. La grande majorité des lecteurs auraient lu sûrement ›tireur‹ au pire, ›tueur‹. En fait, on a été lâches. Revenons au titre. Il l'a pris dans ses mains comme un briquet dans un espace interdit aux fumeurs. Il l'a retourné dans tous les sens. Mon titre a gardé sa force à chaque fois. Subitement, il se met à l'écrire sur la nappe. C'est assez banal, tout compte fait – sauf le mot japonais. Dans mon cas, ce n'est pas une plaisanterie, car je me considère vraiment comme un écrivain japonais.« (Laferrrière 2008, 13–14)

Derrida's undertaking, therefore, itself appears to me as a poetological discussion and entry into a theory of historiography and of shibboleths that separate what is allowed and what is foreclosed from thinking and thinking *about*. It thus becomes a password to the politics of (experienced and enacted) violence that also determines language and thinking.

The humorous tonality of the text takes up another facet of the dilemma of the title and of writing. It first shows the resurfacing of a title as the ultimate idea for a new book; its quasi initial point of departure is a whim even though it remains a secret, it fore-closes even the author from knowing how it comes about and finds its way out. The one who authorizes it has no authority over it. This mysterious weight borne by the humorous tone, adds a thoughtful nuance to the text, increasing suspense and proximity to the speaking voice of the ›implied author‹/narrator. The closeness is built on the experience of not-knowing as an effect of the everyday as one's own actions, in which one feels to be caught, which triggers humor. Even what we say the text, seems to suggest, often happens without our ›knowledge‹ and power, and supposedly without any specific meaning. (As we shall see, it is this sapping nonsense that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* wishes to reflect upon . . .). The passage, then, in its fluffy and charmingly winning chatter, refers to two momentous processes that give meaning to writing and its interrelations and contexts. The tone of the humorous slant is incongruous with the serenity it evokes. The book is then presented as a product of and for a market. As such, it depends on the needs of the market and is regulated, at least to some extent, by the workings of capital, which always works in tandem with the values and meanings of a (historically given) culture and its politics of meaning production as well as structures of power. This cultural location of the book's title, indeed its market value, is implied in the broad smile of the publisher, who does not even know what the book is about, and the meaning it may harbor, but he knows: It is going to be a probable bestseller, which is indicated by the look that supposedly accompanies the publisher's smile, and to which the text gives contour with the exclamation ›Vendu!‹, and an accompanying exclamation mark, to make sure that the weight of the title is understood.

The title suffices to tell the publisher what a good deal it seems to be. The passage even suggests a sum for these *cinq petits mots*. In this descriptive scene about the title, therefore, there is also an implied criticism. Beneath the humorous tendency, it describes a serious defining condition of a network of historically determined sociopolitical workings in which an author is embedded as well as the emergence of a cultural narrative, a seemingly harmless one, a novel.

This realistic tone, moreover, not only blurs the distinction between the novel and ›the real‹. It also functions as a self-humorous portrayal that, in the moment of describing a great success and approval, laughs at it by implying its absurdity and also its tragedy. Its tragedy depends, on the one hand, on the description of the publisher, which is humorized above all by evoking a small and dirty scene of (everyday) not very heroic subversion of regulations, *Il l'a pris dans ses mains comme un briquet dans un espace interdit aux fumeurs*. On the other hand, a contemplative tragic side is evoked as part of the little adjective *japonais* as the ›implied author‹/narrator indicates with an almost resigned gesture that the title is all very banal, except for the little word that indicates otherness: *tout compte fait – sauf le mot japonais*.

This is followed by the most important shift in the novel, which determines the further orientation and double angle of the narrative. It happens on two levels, on the level of the story and on the level of narrative discourse. The ›implied author‹/narrator adds to this tragic-humorous scenery a decisive reflective side, which they bring into play

throughout the text by stating unambiguously that they really consider themselves to be a Japanese writer and that this is not a ›joke‹.

Thus, the dumb humor that might arise, an imagery that hangs on the corners of racist implications and visions and that feeds on the notion of the ›implied author‹ of the novel as a Black writer, and the title *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which can be considered as a paradox, is unhinged. And this, perhaps, is what the ›implied author‹/narrator wants to reveal, the stupidity of a ›knowledge‹ that does not know, and an ›implied author‹/narrator, who is trying to find out what such a claim might mean. They follow the possibilities of the question on a double level, they track its meaning at the level of the story with implications for meta-understandings. And they pursue its possible meanings and outcomes at a discursive level within the narrative form of the novel.

At both levels, an *affective humor* is at work that touches and is touched by different matters, with the potential to touch and move and orient an implicated ›audience‹ with all its ethical repercussions.

L'anecdote de Vonnegut Jr. is also such a double signification inside and outside the text. It reinforces the quasi realistic-journalistic narrative of the ›implied author‹/narrator. A page earlier, ›the implied author‹/narrator quips that Vonnegut Jr., a reference to the real U.S. writer Kurt Vonnegut, has labeled them the *plus rapide ›titreur‹ d'Amerique*:

›Kurt Vonnegut Jr aurait dit à sa femme qui m'a rapporté le propos (je parle comme un journaliste maintenant [...])‹ (Laferrrière 2008, 12).

Kurt Vonnegut had just died in 2007, the year before the publication of *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, so it can be assumed that his name as an acclaimed author, which he is considered to be, carries some weight here in two ways: On the one hand, the ›implied author‹/narrator humorously presents themselves as an important author mentioned by Vonnegut, making themselves, with a wink, part of the American canon – and extends that canon to include not only North America but *l'Amerique* as a whole, including Canada and the Caribbean (later they mention the importance of García Márquez and thus Latin America). The ›implied author‹/narrator reminds us that ›America‹, encompasses more than the U.S. (Mathis-Moser 2003; Ertler 2008; De Luca 2018), and ipso facto introduces what a powerful and defining power the book market in the U.S. is. With this humorous tone, they also perform a critique of such a system of sanctioned neglect.

On the other hand, the ›implied author‹/narrator not only ironizes this status of an author and the importance they attach to their name by humbling themselves as a journalist. And this humorous humbling, in turn, comes across as sympathetic, because it is not meant in a derogatory sense since the ›real author‹, Laferrrière, was a journalist before their migration and diasporic life in Montréal. The humorous tonality is therefore not ironic and not incongruous with what they are saying but may rather resemble a melancholic memory of a different life *back then*, in time and space, which must carry some grief (Ertler 2013, 125). Again, I am reminded of a space somewhere in the remoteness of the text, where a string is stretched between joy, sorrow, and misery. The affectivity of their humor, as well as the humor itself, remains undecidable, ambiguous, oscillating, and must remain so as it carries the burden and meaning of different things at different times and places at once, all of which are backpacked and laid out in this short passage.

This style of thoughtfulness that somehow remains in the air, amidst the humorous allusions, evoking affectivity in relation to infinity and presence, thus is *doing time*: It pro-

duces and presents presence in the midst of the transience of time in all possible directions (past, future, not-knowing), like a narrated still life. The literary text appears like a painting, and not-knowing becomes not only a wide space and distance but also a form of unpredictable and extended (ocean of) *time*, laying there bare (power-less).

The humorous tonality changes its shade again into a more bitter humor, which cynically leaves a presumed ›implied audience‹ out there, in the niches of the narrative, confused by the neologism *titreur* with *tireur* and *tueur*.

Not only does this shift painfully associate murder and violence with the image of the racialized other, putting a finger on the wound that racism inflicts on living bodies even when they are recognized writers (which means that class does not necessarily protect against racist hate speech and images), it also ironically and with a disguised critical humor points to a false political correctness that is hypocritical in that, instead of discussing racism, sweeps it under the rug by claiming that it is not funny.

The ›implied author‹/narrator, here, explicitly addresses it as ›*le problème de l'Europe*‹ which is ›*une trop grande conscience du ridicule. Ce n'est pas le ridicule qui nous tuera, mais sa peur*‹. It depicts humor as a platform of anxiety as humor can prompt us to think about taboo sociopolitical issues that we do not want to touch; not laughing and not using humor thus becomes, in this sense, a way of avoiding being touched by an issue as well as by (the issues of) the other. It indicates a form of power that is also disguised as a fear of error. This form of closure guarantees the preservation of the existing ›laws‹ of touch, of sociopolitical and discursive impenetrability, and of the (historically determined) axis of power (also of writing and speaking). By using the pronoun ›nous‹, the ›implied author‹/narrator, on the one hand, protects themselves from resentment, while at the same time they announce their criticism and repair the borders of touch that they have just dared to transgress. On the other hand, they point out that they, too, are nolens volens part of this ›Europe‹ and therefore (should) have the right to bring up and discuss the things that literally *kill* ›them‹ on a daily basis.

In this way, and probably without knowing it, the ›implied author‹ asserts their literary skill, their tact and ability to touch and to touch upon different issues, which is manifested in the invocation of different matters and sentiments in the nutshell of some tangible humorous allusions that transcend nationalisms, ›reality‹, ›the non-real‹ (what ever that might be), the world on a broader, global level and its entanglement, in thought, in sensuality, and in the imagination.

Je suis un écrivain japonais – On the Level of the Narrative Discourse

Point of Entry – In the Metro with Basho

The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator begins their quite solitary journey into the forest of writing by taking Basho with them (Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1702)), and they enter the diegetic level of the story understandably with the subway (it is a fairly big city):

»Je suis dans le métro de Montréal en train de suivre les traces d'un certain Mastuso Munefusa, dit Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 28)

Here, on a narrative level that remains in close contact with the assumed voice of the ›implied author‹, a plateau of reflection is opened up, and the question of (literary) writing as reflection, as philosophizing. This state of more or less endless contemplation also goes beyond a trait of world-making while it is worldly in Said's sense and a written metamorphosis of what it means *to be in the world*, a property that both shows and sutures its *brokenness*; this reflective specter seems to transcend continents, history, and national borders or colonial concepts like ›race‹, to open up a plateau for the possibility of touch and being in touch that may be fertile for thinking humanity and being human differently. Touch appears, not only as ›the laws‹ of the unsayable but also as the threshold where sensuality and imagination meet and from where it may become possible to think the world otherwise.

»Un Basho dont j'avais lu quelques bribes, mais jamais un texte complet. Le poète raconte son voyage à pied dans le Nord du Japon. Je le lis dans le métro. Je suis en train de suivre les péripéties de Basho à la recherche de la barrière de Shirakawa dans un métro en mouvement à Montréal. Tout bouge. Sauf le temps qui reste immobile. Trop absorbé par tous ces télescopages de temps et ces croisements d'espaces pour m'intéresser à mon entourage immédiat. Sauf cette fille en face de moi qui me regarde sans sourire. Longue et mince. Des yeux noirs – un trait de pinceau. Elle doit s'appeler Isa. Dès que quelqu'un traverse mon champ de vision, il devient un personnage de fiction. Aucune frontière entre la littérature et la vie. Je replonge dans le livre. Basho prépare son dernier voyage avec minutie. Il n'en peut plus de son quotidien étouffant. Le temps file aussi. ›*Les jours et les mois s'égrènent passants fugaces*: murmure sans amertume le poète vagabond. Il lui faut de nouveau se mettre en route, retrouver les zigzags du hasard.« (Laferrière 2008, 26–27)

With Basho, *thinking* is presented here as reflective moments of undoing, through a conjunction of contemplation at the level of discursivity and discursive critique; this reflective style shows thinking as writing, and writing almost *filmographically* (since the picturesque scenery is always in motion) as both, being in the world and as going beyond it. This contemplative thinking, which remains in dialogue with a prosaic poem, across time and space, can be regarded either as an alternative to philosophic thinking or as philosophic thinking per se (which would amount to considering philosophy as a specific (haibunic?) literary branch), depending on where one wants to or dares to draw the line between the two forms of thinking, one made into a discipline (power) of knowledge-seeking, the other more free (but virtually placed in a madhouse of power-less unknowing? Where it is happy anyway, spreading its critical emblem?). (Fictional) writing, moreover, is shown to be embedded and implicated in the everyday, a limitless and fluid flow of thought that touches the limits of sensual experience and becomes an abstract concept-metaphor in touch with reality, as in the emblematic names (of Basho as well as Isa). The naming of names in this simple way brushes aside an alleged paradox of fiction and shows its entanglement and complexity within ›lived experience‹. The humorous tone is further emphasized by this playful play on names, which, however, hides the thought-

provoking claim of the ›implied author‹/narrator, tilting the boundaries between ›real life‹ experience and fiction. Thought itself, reflection, is real and yet not, it is untouchable, but it is there – touchable, maybe, in the way we act and in the way how we perform, a double mark of how we are touched and how we touch. The text itself appears as an intertextual but also as a sensual trace of the reading experience in the external and internal world, full of concentrated affectivity that is part of the contemplation and of the experience of time as arrested and infinite, whereby the external world is also imbued with the textuality in the strict sense of other texts that is signaled by reading Basho. A light humor carries the tonality of the contemplation. It arises from the evocation of a typical *métro*-encounter, when the eyes of people facing each other suddenly meet for a moment and give rise to fugitive thoughts around the person, possibilities, narratives, questions who they might be, why they seem tired, and how random and accidental life seems to be and so on. The scene generates a moment of recognition and not only blurs any borders between a fictional and a realistic incident but challenges them.

Yet Basho is more than a companion. The narrator seems to embrace Basho as a mouthpiece. Instead of enumerating thoughts in a trail of internal monologue, they speak with and through Basho, making him their master poet. In this way, the two different languages, spaces, tongues, and affective and intellectual insights intermingle and become one. In quoting Basho, the narrator becomes Basho and vice versa. Basho appears as the *ur*-voice of poets in general. And poets, regardless of time, space or nationality, become a family of wisdom-seekers, who seem to know and to report on the delicate experience and the liminality of the aesthetics of beauty, which seems to linger on the threshold of being alive and being dead, of living and dying. They are captured through intense close and contemplative gazes that are translated into a poetic language within instances of infinite forward-moving repetitions. Time appears as a space in motion; it is allegorized twice here, it is allegorized as a journey *à pied*, as it used to be in Basho's *time*, and it is allegorized as the trip with the *métro* in the contemporaneous *time* of the narrator. In both cases, it is a journey to the *North*, which not only generates space *beyond* (linear) time and is not only the *north* of a place (Japan/Canada), it can also be understood as symbolizing the living path to death, and in effect, to heaven – a space without time and sensuality, at least, in the living form we (do not) know, but a form of unknowledge and powerlessness, which we can picture as something worthwhile, at least in the abstract of the text and imagination. These are also the characteristic features of the rhetoric through which the narrator portrays their search as a ›Japanese writer‹, trying to find the ›essence‹ of writing itself:

»Je lève la tête. Isa, toujours là. Rien n'a bougé, sauf le train. Je retourne donc à Basho. Matsushima! Cela fait un moment que nos voyageurs en rêvent. Enfin, ils y sont. [...] La mort le frôle près du fleuve Kitagami où se jette la rivière Koromo. [...] Et Basho toujours soucieux de bien situer le lieu où il se trouve afin que d'autres poètes puissent refaire le même chemin. C'est cela le grand jeu auquel on joue depuis des siècles. Basho tente de nous faire comprendre que les poètes ne font qu'un et qu'un seul souffle les anime. Et ce chemin, qui est le même pour tous, mais que chaque poète emprunte à sa manière. Et en son temps. Le train s'est arrêté sans que je m'en aperçoive. À peine le

temps de voir Isa de dos dans la foule pressée. Long cou fragile. Nuque triste (je projette ma tristesse sur sa nuque). Le train recommence à bouger.» (Laferrière 2008, 28)

The claim of the ›implied author/narrator to be a Japanese writer slowly gets contours and appears more transparent. Its contemplative ›murmuring‹ is eliciting a spectrum of affectivity from sighing melancholy to sorrow and then back to joyful reflective recognitions of possible similarities with the realistic imagery that the narrative inconspicuously employs and that plays pleasurably between realist and contemplative fictional strolls. It also shows the ways the ›implied author/narrator themselves are touched by Basho's writings. The narrative reveals the instances of influence and erudition via the implicit and yet essential working of reading itself – across time, space and different languages. In an interview with Adam Leith Gollner, Laferrière evokes the image of border crossing as a movement inherent in writing:

»A writer is someone who crosses frontiers without being stopped, and without getting caught, both in the imaginary sense and in reality. To read is to be able to change centuries. That's the power of literature. It erases borders. They say you can't be a Japanese writer if you don't know Japan. So I chose a country that I didn't know that is far away and I said, there: I am a Japanese writer.« (Laferrière qtd. in Gollner 2020, 39)

Translation, in turn, functions as the bearer and the archive of wisdom within the nutshell of poetic language, as the ulterior *touch* of the other across the limits and limitations that are set by time and space, life and death, and the different *tongues* that can still touch and teach each other, which is reflected in the poetic reverberations of the ›implied author/narrator, who evokes those ancient traces and teachings in their prose. Touch, in this sense, appears as a form of bonding and inner affiliation that can surmount all boundaries and obstacles, and that looms within the poetics of literary dexterity, which itself one must be able to *read*. In this sense, touch also appears as a language between writers, between poets, in translation, and thus seems to be a shibboleth to enter this inner circle of punditry and wisdom. The passage explains and performs this touch and conveys it with a humorous tongue that plays and keeps the balance between the tragic and the joyful borderlines of life. It is depicted here within a cis-normative gaze as the fragility of a female *nuque triste*, the nape of the neck, which can be *the* epitome of ›love‹, but also of vulnerability, loss and death, of power-lessness. This ›observed‹ instance that evokes a delicate glimpse and perhaps a cautious smile at the silkiness and value of life, not only constitutes a touch in itself, but also emphasizes the effectiveness of the narrator's earlier moving comments within a relieving, sensual, and bodily everyday episode. Translation, too, becomes a mechanical part of this everyday life and is shown as a passion, as ›love‹ and as an unappreciated but relevant occupation of being alive. The ›implied author/narrator refers explicitly to translation. In one scene, in the narrative discourse, on the threshold of a metalepsis, they depict a personal meeting with an English translator of Basho, Nicolas Bouvier (1929–1998). Bouvier is portrayed as someone who is literally on the verge of different journeys within seemingly, infinite border crossings, not only in his writing but also in ›real life‹. Indeed, Bouvier was famous as a traveler-writer per se (Détrie 2020). Here, however, he is also portrayed as a beleaguered person,

out of time, not only due to his importance as a translator and writer, but because this timelessness and overwork also corresponded to a ›market value‹ that was *attached* to him, that he seemed to be exposed to and that stole his time until he found his way back to Basho, as the passage seems to indicate:

»J'ai rencontré Bouvier à Toronto, il y a quelques années. On a pris un café ensemble. Si plein de vie et épuisé à la fois. Sa valise au pied de la table. Dialogue rapide entre deux aéroports – il filait à New York. [...] Son taxi est arrivé. Je regarde ce profil presque basané et en sueur. Déjà absorbé par ses notes. La voiture filant sous une pluie fine. Les années sont passé. Sa légende a déraisonnablement grossi. Une petite coterie en a fait une sorte de saint. Le voici de retour en traducteur de Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 26)

Thus, for the narrator, the name of Basho seems to embody not only a specific form of poetry, but also a specific form of ›being alive‹. His poetic style corresponded to his lifestyle. Poetry, the ›implied author‹/narrator seems to say, also means a specific form of seeing, of sensuality and sense-giving, of leisure.

This metalepsis threshold is also deployed in relation to the novel itself that has not yet been written. It emerges in the process of reading, dissolving any boundaries between narrative time and real time, narrative space, the ›world out there‹ and the diegetic world. And it seldom appears as a play with instances of reality and world-making. Rather, an ethical trait is evoked around the task of the writer and the economy of writing that seem to be at odds in the absurdity of capitalist modernity. This is for example the case when the ›implied author‹ is called by their publisher from a Swedish hotel, where they notice by chance, while watching a documentary, that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is about to be translated into Japanese (although, the book has not yet been written):

»Je sens surtout la présence de mon éditeur quand il ne se manifeste pas.
 – Allô!
 – C'est votre éditeur.
 – Justement, je pensais à vous.
 – Je suis à Stockholm pour un colloque sur Andersen.
 – Mais il est danois.
 – Les Danois détestent Andersen qui les a fait passer pour des monstres capables de laisser mourir une petite fille dans le froid! [...]
 – La télé était allumée, et subitement votre visage en gros plan en face de moi ...
 – Mais qu'est-ce que je foutais à la télé à Stockholm? [...]
 – C'était un reportage de la télé japonaise. Vous marchiez dans un parc à Montréal. J'avais vraiment l'impression d'halluciner quand j'ai entendu parler de votre roman Je suis un écrivain japonais. [...] Je vous le dis tout de suite, mon problème n'est pas l'alcool, mais le manque d'alcool. [...]
 – Mais qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire! Je n'ai même pas encore reçu le livre qu'il est déjà traduit, et en japonais. Je suis l'éditeur ou quoi?« (Laferrière 2008, 152–154)

A sensual, tangible, confusing effect of reality, is thus created in the rhetoric of the text; interwoven within its layers is a pleasurable, roguish humor generated through the repeated naïve form of its humorous tone. This playful humour also paves the way for an

openness to think about the evoked scene and the rather helpless humorous dialogue, in which the ›implied author/narrator as well as their publisher become figments of their semi-diegetic world. This quasi-metaleptic insertion also evokes the incongruity of time, space, and of desire (however mediocre), all of which further evoke the persuasiveness of the situation and of everyday reflective ruminations. Moreover, through the rhetorical form the passage develops a *performative trait* in which an ›implied audience‹ is invoked to witness the scene as a paradox of fiction, which may also enhance an effect of touch from within the text, playing with the limits of a non-fictional text. In this way, the text makes the touch of the imprint and impression of a described situation even more ›real: The text appears almost as an unmediated immediacy, as presence. Moreover, the scene seems ›real‹ precisely because of its paratext, its title, blurring any distinction between the literary and the non-literary. In doing so, the text invites reflection on the validity of this distinction as well as on the notion of a paradox inherent in, or arising from, fiction. Every literary text appears as an imprint of experienced life. It also echoes a form of globalized mediatization of ›culture‹ and ›literature‹ that squeezes time and space into another realm of experience, one that is ›real‹ but takes place in the synecdochic ›unreal‹ of medial representations.

This is a trait that, since its postmodernist ›discovery‹ has grown into the immediacy of the internet, the digital translation of algorithms, and translation as algorithm, and is therefore, in its appalling and fascinating, seemingly all-encompassing velocity still significant and important to touch and reflect upon – and its (im/possible) controlling effects.

It is a form of humorous globalization that is distinguished in the novel from another form of planetarity and ›humanity‹, which is invoked with the name of Basho and imploringly echoed in the title and text of the novel, where the ›implied author‹ not only poetically follows in the footsteps of Basho but also reinscribes their footsteps in their text, incorporating Basho into their oeuvre:

»Je jette un bref coup d'œil sur Basho penché, lui aussi, sur un petit cerisier.

Basho examinant ce petit cerisier qui commence déjà à fleurir. On est toujours étonné de tomber sur la vie à certains endroits. Giflé par le vent glacial de l'hiver, il n'a pas oublié de fleurir au printemps. Quel courage! Il semble là tout seul, ignoré de tous, sauf de Gyoson qui a écrit une strophe à la gloire des cerisiers solitaires.

[]e reprends ma lecture. Je picore ça et là. J'ouvre le livre, je lis une strophe ou j'accompagne Basho un bref moment, puis je le referme doucement. Regard rêveur. Cette capacité qu'a Basho d'être immédiatement vivant, à chaque fois. Il n'y a que Whitman ici pour avoir une pareille énergie. Me voilà de nouveau en phase avec Basho. Au moment où je sens revenir mes douleurs de dos, je tombe sur ce passage où Basho se plaint du même mal. C'est souvent dans les douleurs qu'on se reconnaît dans l'autre. [...] Basho envisage la marche comme une façon des se laver de toute la crasse de cette réalité. Le haïku n'est qu'un petit savon bon marché.« (Laferrière 2008, 61–62; emphasis in the original)

Reading Basho seems to give way to a value, an ›essence‹. Whether this is the ›essence‹ of poetry or the ›essence‹ of wonder remains unclear. But there is a similarity even in the bodily movements that accompany this reading process, which appears like a chore-

ographed dance, touching the reading process and visualized in the same bodily movements around the streets of a metropolitan city. This poetic re-rendering of the words of an ancient poet mirrors understanding as movement that goes deep into the body-mind apparatus. It is expressed in the form of psycho-physical gestures. The words *doucement*, *regard rêveur*, and *un bref moment* evoke a paused, slow contemplation. Basho's book seems to represent *la gloire des cerisiers solitaires* that is cherished here by the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator just as the cherry tree as a sight of wonder and beauty is cherished by Basho, and before him by Gyoson.

What is evoked here is not only a sequence of wonder and wandering inherent in the words, the sights, and in poetry, but also a form of devotional meditation in which poetry becomes part of the nature described, and part of the devotion and wonder at beauty, and the beauty of wonder as a form of reflection. Poetry signals not only withdrawal and surrender to and wonder at beauty, but also the beauty of wonder as a form of reflection. These cross-references evoke a form of humor that is conveyed by a wit bound not only to the faculty of ›reason‹ and wittiness (as parts of reflection) but also to the affectivity and expressiveness of contentment, satisfaction, and fulfillment. In its unfolding, it educes a touching energy that, like the description of Basho's poetry itself, simultaneously opens and fills desirous spaces in the text and within the reading self. This touching energy can be observed in the satisfaction that the reading of the ›(implied) author‹/narrator echoes within the (implied and ›real‹) reading process and seems to mirror the experience and impression of reading that the ›implied author‹/narrator takes with them on their journey, along with an ›implied audience‹, just as Basho is accompanied, in his book, by his friend Sora. Humor is also evoked in a sensual as well as a material form, in the references to the body, to the *skin*, and in the meaning of poetry as a *bar of soap* with which one washes the soul¹³, and frees it from the *crasse de cette réalité*.

The cheap price of the soap does not indicate that it has no value, but that it is quite easy, simple to obtain. In a world where commodities seem to reign, poetry appears as a secret and luxurious, undervalued artefact that only a few fortunate people seem to know about. Basho also stands here for slowness, the slowness of the dreamy and visionary gaze that contrasts with the acceleration of a pragmatized time in a capitalist society. In this way, the novel seems to take up an anti-capitalist, critical tone here, that, in its desolation, almost resembles a naturalistic, realist novel, as if it wanted to distance itself from a purely idealistic or mystified understanding to avoid being misunderstood, categorized and read as such a form of representation. It shows that it is well aware of the other ›reality‹ of systematic and systemic sociopolitical neglect, but that it, precisely for this very reason, is not interested in concentrating on portraying its glumness. Again the hand of a ›real author‹ seems to intervene to ensure that the novel is steered in the right direction. Poetry, then, is evoked here in a touching way as a pain that unites (human) experience – a form of ›humanity‹ that, in its simple, naïve, and yet existential understanding, generates a contentment-related affectivity that borders on humor, which is also aroused by the reference of the ›implied author‹/narrator to this ancient poet and his writings and sufferings as if they were following a parental figure like a chick. However, the novel here also takes up the sociopolitically ›dirty‹ side of this haiku-world, of

13 On the role and meaning of lyric as (world) theory see Popal (2024a).

›the North‹, of Montréal, showing that poverty, in all possible senses, is also a characteristic of the (post-)industrialized, (still) imperial northern hemisphere. The almost ritual purgative power of Basho and poetry is further underscored by the evocation and reference to the everyday of such squalid places and harsh encounters as a repertoire that people must endure on a daily basis, throughout their lives. ›Soap‹ and ›skin‹, as the largest bodily organ, and ›veins‹, which *geograph* the body and its struggles, are the synecdochic terms that symbolize such lived experiences in contrast to the healing process of Bashoan poetry. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator enters a restaurant on rue Saint-Laurent. The waitress whom the ›implied author‹/narrator calls ›Suzie‹, the name embroidered on her apron, arrives promptly. ›Suzie‹ is introduced as the prototype of a kind of lost and desperate *white* working-class female migrant from the country to the city, struck by poverty, disillusionment, and social decline, with all its material and physical effects that have transformed her into a restless, alienated *machine humaine* as the short chapter is also called (Laferrière 2008, 60):

» J'étais encore avec Basho quand elle s'est assise en face de moi.
 – Qu'est-ce que tu fais là? – [...]

– Je termine mes frites.

– Tu lis quoi?

– Basho.

Regards suspicieux.

– C'est qui lui?

– Un poète japonais.

– Tu te moques de moi ?

– Non.

– T'es japonais?

– Non.

– Tu n'es pas de la police par hasard?

– Même pas. – [...] – Pourquoi je serais de la police?

– Les gens viennent ici pour manger ... En dix ans, je n'ai jamais vu quelqu'un avec un livre ici, et toi tu lis un livre en japonais.

– C'est une traduction. [...]

– Tu peux finir des frites, mais après du pars.

– Je ne savais pas que c'était un club privé.

– J'acceptes qui je veux ... Tu perturbes la clientèle ... Rejean est parti ... Les gens que tu vois là viennent ici depuis au moins vingt ans. C'est leur dernière station avant la rue. Je dois les protéger ... T'as compris là?

Elle retourne à la caisse où un vieil homme est en train de compter sa monnaie depuis un quart d'heure.« (Laferrière 2008, 62–64)

The passage reads like an Edward Hopper painting brought to life from an intersectional and socially disadvantaged perspective to shed a different light on North America at night. While the scene may play with images of Blackness and Japaneseness and the marginalized experience of reading as such that seems to come across as ›exotic‹, on the one hand, and ›Suzie's‹ misinterpretation that shows her as illiterate on the other, which has its own tragic traits, the underlying incident within this dialogue is

sociopolitical marginalization and downward social mobility on an intersectional level, and the grief that must accompany this form of historically conditioned and politically sustained deprivation. The situation is comedic while it hinges on grief as there is no comprehensible reason why reading must come with external categorizations. It shows how the margins of the literary possibilities of reading, as well as the margins of the sociopolitical, are invoked differently in the figure and embodiment of the othered. The supposed strangeness, furthermore, seems to stem from what is perceived and connoted as an incongruity: Reading literature is controlled by historically conditioned and transparent, unwritten sociopolitical ›laws‹ of ›nationality‹ and ›belonging‹ – which are queered by literature as well as by the literary imagination, for which this novel stands as well. Literature, especially in its unexpected form of ›world literature‹ (all literatures in the world always appertain to the whole world, does it not?), is regarded as a threat and with suspicion.

The evoked ›translation‹ from the Japanese seems to be an explanation as well as a bridge that interlinks paths in time and space, in thought and language, but also in realism, ›reality‹ and a future im/possibility that the literary text opens up, touching on the accessibility of and *belonging to* and *for* the other.

The waitress is suspicious of the protagonist/homodiegetic narrator's reading of a book, and all the more so of reading, non-English, ›Japanese‹ poetry; she feels deceived. ›Suzie‹ suspects them of belonging to her ›enemies‹, either an elite social class that has the privilege of reading, or to ›the police‹, who, in fact, because of the uncertainty of power abuse, are also often seen as the ›enemies‹ of racialized, and more often than not, criminalized Black people and people of color. But the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ not only shows sympathy for her, as *c'est souvent dans les douleurs qu'on se reconnaît dans l'autre*, be this other Basho or ›Suzie‹; they also let ›Suzie‹ speak back. At the end of the dialogue ›Suzie‹ emerges as a tragic heroine, who despite all her misery tries to protect those she knows and who, as she knows, remain defenseless. The passage also shows that reading (literature – all the more so poetry) has become a luxury and a sign of social class, pointing to the exploitation of others. The comic of the scene on the edge of the tragic, thus, unfolds and plays with various asymmetries of power in which gender, ›race‹, and class are intertwined and overlapped in their layers of meaning; it all appears as a ›reak‹, ›authentic‹ scene in a Canadian metropolis near a subway that does not take one away very far from underprivileged conditions; a scene, which enhances its tragedy at the same moment in which its comical side is grasped. However, the scenery may also ask if reading may be an answer to this desolate state, at least to a different kind of poverty and deprivation? Would the world be different if much more books from the shelves of world literature, even if in translation, were read (and remembered, taken to heart)? Would ›Suzie‹ be different, if she had (had) the chance to read Basho and find some form of comfort and shelter in his literature? Perhaps she would.

What distinguishes this humor from ›mere‹ satire, though, and gives it a more empathetic, thoughtful quality is the way the ›implied author‹/narrator approaches both ›Suzie‹ and Basho. While they consider ›Suzie's‹ ›life‹ circumstances and empathically note her lost dreams as well as her self-determined heroic acts, despite being victimized by discursive and material structures, Basho is not just any treatise for them. For them Basho's text is full of (existential) wisdom and, in this sense, a text with which they can

identify, another more fulfilling discourse. Identification, too, is thus transferred to another understanding. This understanding of ›identity‹ is not based on a capitalist, racialized, and national understanding, but on the idea of suffering that seems to have become an internal, *deep understanding of relatedness*, which, rather than having to be explained or rather than to being alienating, is echoed through the appreciation of the other in all their supposedly bizarre acts, and the allegories of the poetic allusions to ›beauty‹ and a ›beyondness‹, in which the ›implied author‹/narrator can find themselves and *chooses* to place themselves through literary imagination rather than the ›real‹ world but *as the ›real‹ world*. And it is from there, the literary world, that they can perceive the external and internal world differently, with *that other kind* of understanding beyond the *skin* while looking at the other's salient *veins*.

On a sociopolitical level, the passage indicates barriers. The vivid realistic scenery depicts ›laws‹ that the passage and the novel as a whole touch on and open up; the only contrast to this experienced everyday life is Basho's poetic writing as well as thinking/writing in this poetic form; the realistic scene as well as the educative role of the ›implied author‹/narrator emphasize the text's references to different ›truths‹ and possibilities that the passage conveys and performs. At the same time that the ›implied author‹/narrator is aware of the problem and analyzes it (by portraying ›Suzie‹ and giving her a name), and also by their delicate reading of Basho, the novel shifts this ›reality‹ into the possibility of another reading of ›reality‹, which is also a ›real‹ understanding of Basho as well as the refusal to place, to be placed, and to accept the workings of (discursive and ideological) naturalized and racialized, fixed role-playing and silencing, and thus to open up the texture of the wor(l)d to the other and let them speak.

The materialized workings of ›race‹ and class, as well as the danger and threat that emanates from ›the police‹, are explicitly invoked in another chapter, where the ›implied author‹/narrator must endure police harassment in their very *home*, their apartment; Even the most private place cannot serve as a shelter.

After Noriko, one of Midori's close friends, who always accompanied her, commits suicide from the narrator's appartement, driven by ›love‹, jealousy, and mental struggles (Laferrière 2008, 80 f.), the narrator receives visits from two police officers, the second time just for harassment.

A humorous tone, nevertheless, frames this scene at the beginning of the chapter, which is conveyed in a lighthearted manner:

»Bof, avec la police, il faut simplement attendre. C'est ce que je fais. Je m'assois. Le concierge en bas doit être dans tous ses états. Non seulement il déteste la police comme tous les immigrés, mais il se demande s'il va être payé avec toutes ces histoires. Eux continuent à circuler sans ménagement chez le contribuable. Ils vont ici et là. [...] Je les attends tranquillement. Il faudra bien qu'ils me parlent à un moment donné. Les voilà qui viennent se planter devant moi. Deux policiers et un Noir dans la chambre crasseuse d'un quartier mal famé de Montréal, ça craint.« (Laferrière 2008, 117)

The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator speaks in an ironic, *knowing* way that may be a kind of self-reassurance. The humorous rhetoric provides relief from the tension, which they must experience in the presence of the two police officers. It also unleashes a

specific, elaborate, and sophisticated assessment in the midst of an unbearable situation. Even here, or maybe especially here, despite the horrors that the scene inevitably evokes, humor adds a subtle tone to the passage, an (*in*)direct inclination towards the illegitimate and racialized condition that *tous les immigrés* have to suffer and have learned to fear; and amid the brutality that is part of this almost always presumed clash, resides a ›laughter‹ on the verge of ›madness‹ about how ridiculous this is, a game of and with ›identity‹ and belonging within fantasies of superiority.

The inverted critical pose not only increases the observing and witnessing stance, it also prevents the victimization of the speaking voice as it is this voice that delineates the event, and it does so in an unperturbed tone:

»Ils sont simplement venus voir s'il n'y a pas de coke qui traîne ici. La seule chose que j'ai à faire c'est ne pas bouger. Ne rien dire. Ne rien faire. D'un autre côté, j'ai de sérieux doutes que cette histoire s'est passée dans la réalité. Paul Veyne rappelle que: ›les vérités étaient elles-mêmes des imaginations.‹ (Laferrière 2008, 118)

Different affective evocations haunt each other in this very short passage. On the one hand, the voice of the ›implied author‹/narrator is sensible; however, it is the scenery as such that shows the exposure of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, especially of Black men in this case, to police brutality and the rule of racist arbitrariness; here, another ›law‹ seems to reign: Right in the center of state authority, there resides the potentiality of lawlessness and the emergence of *bare life*. The scene generates an aura of menace and captivating anxiety. Yet the passage interposes a humorous tendency, both on the diegetic level and on a meta-level, when it touches on the question of ›reality‹ and ›fiction‹ in a fictional writing in the form of an almost *auto-bio-graphical* report (Mathis-Moser 2003; Ertler 2008; Lessard 2014).

It is not, however, this space of touch between ›reality‹ and ›fiction‹ that the ›implied author‹/narrator might want to point to, nor an urgency to critique the determinism of subjugating subject formations within language and discourse, these might just be side effects of the narrative structure that is employed. Rather, the focus is on the ›irony‹ itself, an ›irony‹ that arises not from an incongruity but from a congruity: that police brutality is indeed a threatening problem, especially for BIPOC. This at least does not seem so alien to the homodiegetic narrator, who has learned to play along, to deal with it, and to remain calm, since there is no other shelter to lean on, to complain to, or to find protection in, as they soberly point out in another passage:

»Je viens de comprendre que sa descente est une initiative personnelle. Il a vu mon dossier avec mon adresse. Il est venu m'intimider, sachant que je ne suis pas assez stupide pour porter plainte. (Laferrière 2008, 122)

Pas assez stupide pour porter plainte is the expression that prosaically signifies this normalized intractability of the traumatic everyday threat. State brutality functions as a reference to ›reality‹, implicitly pointing to the other tragedy that indeed *invokes a reality effect*, and the ›knowledge‹, and to an extent maybe resigned, sad humor that must accompany it: The *risus purus* that interlinks Nietzsche, Fanon and Beckett:

»The bitter, the hollow [...]. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh [...] the laugh of laughs, the risus purus [...] the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy« (Beckett 2009, 40).

The scene addresses two other important points. On the one hand, it shows how police harassment often comes with sexualized threat, ensconced in the performance of a combat of male masculinity. On the other hand, it displays the performative resistance that such harassment and brutality will always have to figure and face:

»– Essaies-tu d'insinuer que des policiers de la Gendarmerie royale du Canada ont volé des bijoux d'une prostituée? lance-t-il à la ronde tout en pressant son bâton, cette fois, sur mon pénis. Le bâton est le prolongement de sa main. [...] Et moi, toujours quelque part dans le vieux Japon. J'ai arrêté de faire partie du cirque qui se déroule sous mes yeux. [...]

Un temps. C'est ce temps qui doit être bien rythmé. Un interrogatoire, c'est un tempo spécial. Trop vite, on est en mode confrontation. Trop lent c'est de l'impertinence. Je bats la mesure discrètement avec mon pied droit. Cela fait un léger mais insistant frottement contre la cuisse du policier.

– Merde!« (Laferrière 2008, 120–121)

As Coleman points out, »[p]erhaps Laferrière wants to expose the smug Canadian hypocrisy that dismisses racism as a phenomenon unique to populations south of the forty-ninth parallel« (Coleman 1998, 79). From a threatening position the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator still finds a way to defend themselves in a covert form. They speak of the right time and the *rhythm* that accompanies the thread; resistance may often resemble a micro-warfare (civilized and civilian, that may be its clue, its power and ›knowledge‹ within an economy of power-lessness and non-knowledge) – in a well-plotted and careful way in which the asymmetry of power is unmentioned and the asymmetrical power relation, is not touched on the surface. *Le vieux Japon*, perhaps a code word for an accomplished, poetic form of thought-place, beyond such unbearable situations, does not denote a ›foreign culture‹ or a space *far away* or a literary work for entertainment. Rather, it appears as a psychic support, a heterotopic island, that offers an (other) view, another possible possibility of looking at ›life‹. What provides hold, then, is not only the ›knowledge‹ that emerges from the poetic text, but its aesthetic form through which not-knowing and power-lessness are evoked as safe spaces and as states of wonder, pause, and thinking. Poetry thus seem to awaken a form of vigor. The narrator speaks from an almost distant, contemplative space within their self as if they were in the company of Basho. The poetic text reads almost like a *comforting balm* and at the same time like a *plan of action*. Basho's text echoes here as an inner shield and protection from the brutality of the structures of historically driven ›reality‹.

While the older police officer is in the bathroom, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator is able to strike up a brief conversation with the younger policeman, whom they believe to be more open and less corrupt, in the hope that it will maybe become part of an alternate, transforming, memorized memory of them:

»— Vous venez d'où? Un moment d'hésitation. — De Gaspésie. — Je connais Trois-Pistoles. Son visage s'éclaire. — Ma mère est de Trois-Pistoles . . . Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé? Pourquoi vous a-t-il frappé? — Je ne sais pas.« (Laferrière 2008, 122).

So, as it turns out, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator knows a town in the region to which the officer has a personal connection. This creates a space in which a virtual touch, an encounter can take place. With this more personal questioning that the narrator initiates, they seem to remind the policeman of their common ›good‹, of an ethical responsiveness. A space is thus created between the two in which a dialogue ensues that has the potential to engender the possibility of a ›real‹ encounter: the perception of each other as equal partners in a dialogue, in the presence of the wondrous strangeness that ›life‹ seems to be. In this dialogue, a common link, a common ›knowledge‹, emerges and creates a bridge for responsiveness. The passage closes with an open thread that gently points to the familiarity that lies in ›the humanness‹ of people, even in asymmetrical power situations, as a potential for other possibilities of imagining, of becoming, of togetherness (. . . of another world . . .).

It is the sociopolitically ›weaker‹ position that initiates this path to what could become a healing process, and in this way also maintains the sovereignty of African American subjectivity in the midst of racist structures (within and without discourse). The passage transcends the mere representation of racist police crimes, offering a self-determined route to *transformative justice*, a path to an ethically informed possibility of change. As if to say, »May I remind you . . . of your own touch/ability . . .?«.

Moreover, this space is where humor emerges as a reflection of inner powerlessness and not-knowing, a quiet smile that transcends time and space.

As discussed earlier, power structures narrative in subtle as well as blatant ways (Abbot 2021, 61). The whole idea of the novel, already evoked in the title, reflects how power structures the discourse against which this narrative is written: What ›identity‹ is and how it works is deeply embedded in language and ›culture‹. To denormalize such conventionalized structures, humor is invoked as another way of thinking. Humor, in this sense, is not only part of the narrative rhetoric of the text but appears as a ›natural‹ byproduct of any deliberation that seems different from the way language and discourse are defined by historically driven imagery and presuppositions, as ancillary parts of thinking and discourse that evoke different sensualities, preferences, and affectations. *Affective humor* as the deconstructive, notknowing and powerless power and ›knowledge‹ of rhetoric, can reveal such historically based deep structures, the rhetoric of power, with its dispositives and microstructures; it is thereby part of the question of who is speaking and whose voice is structuring rhetoric at any given moment, and thus the question of subjectivity. The ›author‹ may be dead with regard to Roland Barthes' very political declaration out of the authoritarian political circumstances from which he spoke, but ›authors‹ are still needed for texts to be generated within discourse and language, and it depends on the corner, space, distance, entangled positions of *subjectivity* from which language and discourse are taken up, arranged, and form a text, and whether and how this position is renegotiated in the process – or not. Does it conform to how it is placed, or does it transcend its usurping determinations? Basho stands out as an alternative way of encountering and identifying with another. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is therefore not about ›identity‹ but about the acts

and performatives that result from its understanding, it is about *identification*. But not only that. The novel is also about the epistemological and poetic possibilities of writing and reading, of wondering and wandering in the search for an (inner) home:

»Parfois, je lis, toujours le même livre. Je l'ouvre pour me retrouver dans un haïku de Basho. C'est là que j'aimerais vivre, dans un vers de Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 129)

To become part of a poem, to live in it, captures well the notion of the text as a space in which the self and the other meet and develop relational ties. These ties arise from the text's manifold faculties to touch and touch upon, which are invoked by the text's rhetoric that relies on the affectivity of the humorous tonality from which different meanings are addressed. Within these instances of touch, the poem seems to morph into a place, a lieu, that can be filled, a place that is absorbing, accepting, and welcoming. The other's poem can thus have the connotation of ›warmth‹, of becoming a ›home‹.

This wondrousness of the ancient literary text seems to establish a kind of untouchable place for the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator‹, an absolute limit within the self to which no one from outside has access, but which is itself structured and nourished by an other from the very outside space, a spacing that a non-apprehension has left in the self. It is a spacing, a heart feeling, according to Husserl, *ein Herzgefühl*, that comes from memory, the memory of a touch, a familiar and yet forever lost ›home‹ and childhood, a *time perdu* that is somehow traced and retrieved in the process of reading Basho, poetry, and writing along their evocations, as the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator recalls:

»Je me vois remonter la rue ensoleillée de mon enfance en tenant la main de ma grand-mère. Un dimanche en province. Un homme tranquillement assis sur sa galerie devant une large table couverte de livres, tous ouverts. Il était penché vers eux, comme devant un buffet riche et varié. Ce gourmand passait d'un livre à un autre avec la même excitation. Rien ne semblait exister autour de lui, à part ces mets appétissants [...] Ma grand-mère m'a alors glissé à l'oreille: ›C'est un lecteur!‹ Et j'ai tout de suite pensé: c'est ce que je ferai plus tard. Je serai un lecteur. [...] Sur mes rares photos d'adolescence, j'ai toujours un livre en main. [...] Ni le soleil, ni la lune, ni les filles, ne m'intéressaient alors. Seul le voyage que permet la lecture. Je n'étais jamais rassasié. Je rêvais qu'un jour, j'entrerais dans un livre pour ne plus jamais revenir. C'est ce qui m'est enfin arrivée avec Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 68)

Memory, a figure that signifies this *ur-touch*, this space of spacing in the self, can be understood, on the one hand, as the ultimate space of touch and, on the other hand, as the absolute, sacred space of untouchability, perhaps as the vulnerable space of dignity that remains unreachable however atrociously outward corporeality and corpus may be violated. This is evident not only in the way the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator seeks refuge in the power-less non-knowledge of Basho and the reading to which they can devote themselves once the terror is over and even as it is happening. This is also expressed in their memories of the absent-minded *lecteur* and their apparent devotion to books. The sight of the *lecteur*, reading, has become not only a piece of memory, a valuable sight to be memorized, but also represents the relevance of the act of reading and

the value of reading as an instruction, as a model for *devotion*, for living ›life‹. The *lecteur* is absorbed by the wor(l)ds and possibilities that the books apparently open up before their eyes. It gives them sheer joy, and they remain undecided where to begin, in which pool to dive first.

The passage captures this sensual and affective arousal of an all-encompassing procedure, of *begreifen*, of *touch*, that is part of the reading process, with the metaphor of *mets appétissants* and the image of *un buffet riche et varié*. This sensual and affective meaning of the philosophic-theoretical, performative, transformative, and cognitive features of *the act of reading* is rhetorically deployed by the humorous symphony of the passage that itself carries an empathic, affective angle towards the description of the *lecteur*. And it may also be a ›love‹ song to, an appreciation of, an almost imagined ›implied audience‹, in the act of writing, as a figuration on which the book, the author depends in some way, to whom they write in a first, perhaps unaware instance, to countersign and receive their statements. Not only a nuance of affection is aroused here but also an ethical touch at the sight of someone so distant and withdrawn – in other wor(l)ds. It is also a gaze that shows and tests the limits of the permission to look at the other, to touch them while they seem to be withdrawn, which is evident in the way the protagonist's grandmother behaves: She *whispers* to her grandchild so as not to disturb the scene and the *lecteur*, out of respect, and as if she were sharing a secret or as if she were in a sacred ambience where the other is and is not.

The scenery also shows the other in a touched, moved, transported state, an intimate instant in which one is particularly vulnerable. It is a sight that can evoke different kinds of humor and a specter of affectivity (depending on *who* is looking), and it itself leaves a form of touch within the self, evidenced by the detailed remembering of the day and the scenery. Such touching/reading comes with a form of humor that is also withdrawn and imperceptible, the way Derrida describes it, and the way Schlegel describes it as the long repercussion of humor that unfolds in the future in unforeseen ways.

Reading appears as a form of being deeply moved, (taken away), cognitively occupied, *working, somewhere else*, with all the senses, though the body remains in place, a state that might well be captured in the German word *Ergiffenheit*. Moreover, this image-memory of the *lecteur* is a picturesque imprint of the division, in Helmuth Plessner's sense, between the fissured form of being in the world, the staying body, and the wa/ondering mind. Engaged reading thus appears as an example of different self-parts. It may represent the dissipation in Plessner's vivid notion of brokenness (*Gebrochenheit*). But this kind of division is not only shown as a self-refuge, it just seems to be most evident in such cases. At the beginning of this chapter, brokenness is indeed felt and described in a joyful, humorous tone, in a moment of solitude and intensity; it is experienced while the protagonist/homodiegetic narrator is taking a bath, and as if the text knows and follows Plessner's ideas, brokenness appears as the status quo of the human (?) *experience of being per se*:

»Mon corps au fond de la baignoire. Mon esprit au plafond. De temps en temps, ils se rejoignent. Et je remonte à la surface, au bord de la noyade. Un spasme de vie.« (Laferrère 2008, 67)

Brokenness surfaces in this description and appears as an experienced part of the self-sense and of being in the wor(l)d; it almost seems to be a *reflex of staying sane* despite all the destructive ways in which the surrounding ›reality‹ is composed. It gives way to inner spacings and heterotopic withdrawals as a response to the sensual, cognitive, affective desire to be (and to be in an other's wor(l)ds). But it can also be employed as a movement, as an inner way to flee from the terror of destruction that can result from (the invented, constructed, and materialized) ›reality‹, and that can become an egress (or a withdrawal to one's inner ›home‹) from those experienced forms of physical, mental, or epistemological violence. Brokenness as such an understanding includes reading and its reciprocal act of writing as an orientation to the other, as the opening of a space in the self for an encounter with an other, and as a readiness for dialogicity. Brokenness in this sense would not only be a condition of being in the world, but would also include a (willed, intended, produced) desire and capacity to be with the other and to cherish and anchor the reciprocity of the touch. Brokenness, thus, can be regarded as the synecdoche of a bigger coherence of cohesiveness and relationality that is imbued with and is part and parcel of a touching space.

This internal spacing within the self is invoked by intimate moments of memory which are also mirrored in intense instances of reading and writing as a kind of depository and sublation of the self. It signals both postponement (dealing with the matter in another time, and already being shifted to another time-space) and shelter (a shift to a safe other-inner-space).¹⁴ Plessner's understanding of brokenness can thus be seen as reversing the relation of imagination and ›reality‹. The safe and ›truer‹ space in this

14 There is an affinity between Helmut Plessner's idea of brokenness and the concept of dissociation in psychoanalysis, a concept that is linked with trauma. While dissociation, though, means the division of the mind in unbearable situations as a pathologized technique, that, in effect, establishes ›mad‹ minds and ›normal‹ minds, and that, in this way, is part of the hitherto scarcely critiqued, institutionalized and institutionalizing power of psychoanalytic hermeneutics and treatments (also of literary texts), which often hold a decisive, but by far not always positive, and still stigmatizing power on lives, (which should be challenged, especially in light of intersectional, informed, socio-historical, also literary, analysis), Plessner's concept shows the composition of the human being as utterly fractured, and as a part of an outer (historically driven) environment. This approach, it seems to me, to be much more effective in understanding the workings of the psyche and the relations of the body and mind, material and immaterial, animated and unanimated, formulated and unformulated. See for a discussion of ›dissociation‹ and the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis see Donnel B. Stern (2003); in another work literature (and *Japanese* literature!) is taken as a resource to show the workings of dissociation and its handling in literary works; from a more critical approach, I find it problematic though, to impose psychoanalytic findings on literary works, instead to regard these themselves as other forms of narrative analysis, which are informed by philosophic as well as psychoanalytic traits and ›knowledges‹ that in fact may exceed the realm of these sciences, and also formulate, and open up, psychic processed experiences of temporal and spatial relational fragmentation of *being*; nevertheless, I find it stimulating to problematize ›dissociation‹ (or rather brokenness) by reading literature, not to gain insight about a ›nation‹ (the question again: what is ›Japanese‹ or ›French‹ literature), but to *rethink* singular experiences of the mind, to gain access to an *other* approach of conceiving the human being – maybe as a fractured element of a (historically driven) ›environment‹ and how this is mirrored or established in (the) writing (pad); see David C. Stahl (2018).

distinction between ›madness‹ and ›sanity‹ is not ›reality‹. ›Reality‹ with its brutal structures appears (and is experienced) as unmitigated lunacy; rather, *imagination*, as that which occurs in the mind (but can be materialized, for example, in the form of a ›book‹ or in the act of reading and writing), seems to form the space in which ›truth‹ can be protected. The experience of brokenness can become a space of shelter without forcing one to get ›out of touch with reality‹, and can still take place when one does not have the possibility to get out of it. The touch, as the trace of the inner encounter with the other in the self, is a heterotopic place that, although abstract, remains most palpably felt and organic (within the body).

Reading/writing, in this sense, thus appear as the figuration of the freest form of freedom that, in Hannah Arendt's sense, captures both a freedom *from* as well as a freedom *to* (Arendt 2017). And freedom can also be seen as a form of affectivity that can be most elaborately perceived in humor, with all its delicate rhetorical and performative possibilities and workings of rupture, displacement, and escape from social or epistemological, inner or outer or both, confinements.

Reading and writing, moreover, become indistinguishable, merging into one another, in a way that effectuates closeness rather than detachment. The gaze that emanates from the text is not objectifying but comes in the form of a presupposed understanding, of proximity, which, however, must also be sensed:

»Je termine le voyage de Basho dans le Nord du Japon pour découvrir que ce moine rusé voyageait plutôt en moi. Mon paysage intérieur inventorié par un poète vagabond. Mes veines lui servent de sentiers qu'il emprunte seul (›*Chemin solitaire, nul pas que le mien dans la nuit d'automne*‹.)« (Laferrière 2008, 74)

At the end, though, there seems to lurk something like an alternative view of things, or at least an ending that the work offers as a *dernier voyage*:

»Je traverse la rue. Neige lourde et molle. Le soir tombe doucement. [...] Une jeune femme [...] sourit en me croisant. [...] Un homme m'accroche en passant. Je titube. Il se retourne pour s'excuser mais je n'entends déjà plus rien. Je continue mon chemin sans jamais reprendre tout à fait mon équilibre. On me klaxonne de partout. Musique urbaine. Je perçois à travers un brouillard cette dame qui me hurle quelque chose, avec les yeux et la bouche grands ouverts. Entre les voitures, je cherche la fameuse barrière que Basho fut si heureux de franchir pour prendre la route ›étroite et difficile‹ qui mène vers les districts du nord.« (Laferrière 2008, 212)

It is difficult not to be drawn into the melodic aura of the text, which seems to signal an end but also a beginning, indicated by the tranquility of the scene as if waiting patiently for the next turn once the road has been crossed. The scenery, evoked as a final journey, is already touching by its allusive title. It seems to imply not only a road at the end of the last scenery of the diegetic world, and thus a farewell. Its moving moment also derives from the apparent lostness of the ›implied author‹/narrator generated by focalization. They are shown in a vulnerable, dispersed state, out of touch with themselves, in a state of division and brokenness. The *final journey* also evokes Basho's text and implies an affini-

ity to his text, the *father text*, as it were, which also has a touching quality as the ›implied author‹/narrator cannot let go of the figure of Basho as a guiding figure holding his hand, and let themselves be pulled and drawn by this hand – drawn by someone of whom we do not know if he would have returned the ›love‹ – or perhaps he has already returned it as part of his text and in-between its sentences, holding the ›implied author‹/narrator in an embrace like *the avenir* Derrida suggested, an already realized future coming from the past; in this sense, the scene may also be touching because it evokes that inward humor, deep in the heart, which may not even elicit a smile, maybe a sigh, and which would allegorize that *neverthelessness*, that kind of desire, ›love‹, and admiration that is not tied to settlements and payoffs. Instead, it loves incurably, entrusting itself to this other, powerless and notwithstanding not knowing. Maybe it would not be so far-fetched to assume that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is also about the idea of choosing one's ›origins‹, beyond nations and nationalities, that it is about an *other*, ancestral form of *elective affinities*. Such a perspective would question ›identity‹ altogether, as it is hitherto conceived, and would invite to restructuring, to imagining, and to naming oneself differently and freely. It would give another liberating impulse to subjectivity and subjecthood (and give rise to new professions, such as *kinologists*, who would advise people on which ancestral, familial, and identitarian paths to take, based on how they experience *attachment* and indebtedness to others). This would also challenge psychology and allow it to be defined and understood otherwise. It would also allow us to reread Freud in this other sense, and to relate his approaches and his return to those ancient Greek texts as a way of fleeing the latent racism and antisemitism that determined his life. *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, then, is indeed a rapturous statement that can evoke another world in which different people form loose yet deep connections and *attachments*, affinities, and gatherings across the planet, across time and space.

The title, *Le dernier voyage*, finally alludes to an end on the road of life, an end as death, as coldness and darkness, as another name for not knowing and powerlessness and what is ahead of us (and maybe also behind us . . .). Not finding one's balance again, in this silence dictated by the snow and the cold, may transcend the moment of narrative time and narrative discourse. It may also encompass the ways in which the rapturous events *in* life, which can be translated as such jostlings, inscribe themselves as perceived, permanent bodily and psychic imbalances.

While the text invokes this picturesque landscape, it also reflects upon it, giving it meaning beyond the text. As Joqueviel-Bourjea writes of Laferrière's work in general, »Laferrière est un peintre en écriture comme certains peintres sont poètes de/dans la couleur« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 14)¹⁵ and not without a tacit humor that may evoke a smile. It emerges here amid the melancholic reflections and wanderings, emphasizing them, even deepening them, like an exclamation mark, through the verb *klaxonner*, described somewhat ironically but also empathetically, almost tenderly, as *musique urbaine*, which not only signals a vivid incident but also makes it audible, inevitably bringing one back to life again; it can be grasped as an interruption, a *différance*, a *clang*, reminiscent of Der-

15 See also Romuald Fonkoua (2016) on the role of painting in Dany Laferrière's work, which also recurs in this book.

rida's *Glas* (1974),¹⁶ which harbors so many instances and lifestyles of a big city, probably most familiar to an ›implied audience‹, a familiarity that also in its chaotic and colorful liveliness evokes a humorous scene out of memorized instances, a bag full of affectivity: joy, anger, stress, strain. The humorous tone also implies a kaleidoscope of other sensations. It is quiet, thoughtful and at the same time funny as it alludes, in the midst of thoughtful wanderings, to the merciless and anonymous atmosphere of a city that lives difference and where everyone seems to be in tune, to understand each other and to belong together – a small village full of anonymous neighbors from all over the world (or so it could be).

and Off. Stereotypes – *Abbrüche* and Deconstructions

While both *White Teeth* and *Je suis un écrivain japonais* depict stereotypical images not in order to repeat them but to dismantle them and rewrite them within other meanings, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* deals more explicitly with stereotyping. Stereotypes are kindly taken for a ride. This is especially the case with the allusions that the title already evokes. The novel comes across as an outburst and an imprint of a wedge in which writers are discursively implicated according to the logic of the book market. As we have seen, this is one of the main characteristics of the novel and its title. Instead of clichéd images of writers, it offers a placelessness and yet a universal belonging of authors. The novel challenges racist stereotypes about ›the Japanese‹ while also addressing those about ›the Black‹; here, too, the ›implied author‹ links a position they inhabit with the ancient figure and the *true* protagonist of the novel, Matsuo Basho, freeing them both from such constraints and biased thinking.

Peter H. Abbott defines the stereotype from a narratological point of view in relation to character types in narratives as »[a] kind of character that recurs across a range of narrative texts«; he speaks of a ›stereotype‹ »[w]hen a character is composed without invention, that is by adhering too closely to type [. . .]. Stereotype can also be used more broadly« he continues, »to refer to any literary cliché« (Abbott 2021, 263). In Abbott's definition there is thus a narrower meaning of stereotype that he associates with ›character types‹ and to fiction, and a broader understanding of stereotype as quasi the stereotype of the stereotype. What this convoluted relation ultimately suggests is that there are neither ›real‹ and uninvented types ›out there‹, nor that it is possible to distinguish between stereotypes and clichés. What he may be suggesting with this distinction and the adjunct description ›without invention‹, however, may be the notion of singularity – the *new* that emerges through the repetition, whether explicit or implicit. But there is more to the ›stereotype‹. Stereotypes are not only part of narrative strategies; they are also sociopolitically relevant and evaluative forms to designating different ›people‹ according

16 In the new English translation of Derrida's *Glas*, David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington in fact translate the French *glas* as *clang*. Bennington and Wills describe *clang* as the enactment and signature of a reading, typical of Derrida, that pays attention to the *différance* within the text, resonating from it; see Derrida (2021, xii). *Clang* as a form of reading interrupts any sublation in a dialectical Hegelian sense and rather affirms an *other*. These traces also endow *clang* and its quasi-material sound, *klaxonner*, also with dis/continued and de/composed pasts, reminding the self consistently of the other.

to a historically driven ›typology‹ of sense-making within structures of dominance and meaning production. It depends, thus, on whose narrative is told (by whom), and which narrative is *retold* or *destabilized* in a text. Hence, the question of authorship and subjectivity needs to be revisited again and again. In Laferrière's text, clichéd versions of sociopolitical stereotypes are invoked to be destabilized. While Abbot depicts the stereotype within a quite *deideological* layer of narrativity, Homi K. Bhabha, drawing on Said's theorization of *Orientalism* (1978), discusses the stereotype within the circulation of colonial discourse and the *manifold effects* that its repetition regulates and evokes when he writes:

»My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped images on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectivity.« (Bhabha 1994, 95)

The effectivity of the stereotype is what is raised as well as displaced in Laferrière's novel through a tonality of humor, which comprises affectivity and unfolds its rhetorical resonances within the poesies of the novel's performative conjunctions. Laferrière's approach to the stereotype, however, also laughs at itself. It pays attention to the writer as a stereotype and to the stereotyping of the figure of the writer. As Spivak points out in relation to Derrida's understanding of deconstruction, a deconstruction of othering cannot halt at the images of oneself as well as the images of coloniality that the (speaking) subject thereby offers:

»In answer to the question ›Could you expand upon that statement concerning your primary interest in literature‹, Derrida asks the interviewer to situate his own ›stereotype‹ of himself; and engages in a textual weaving of the production of his preferences in adolescence and early career, that would be as decisive as any tracing [...]. This is where Cultural Studies must forever rehearse the cultural subject's politics of exodus: middle passage, exile, indenture, migration? From where do you stereotype yourself? How is this different from historicizing in that there is never a closure here. The trace is also an effort to indicate intentionality (*tenter d'indiquer la visée*), not a cause or effect.« (Spivak 2000, 24)

The ›stereotype‹ is seen here as a trace rather than a consumable *cause* or *effect* in the production of meaning. Such an approach allows us to see its inscription in history and at the same time to free ourselves from its grip. This is what Laferrière does through a rhetoric of humor. The affectivity that is part of this humorous rhetoric prevents it from becoming mere abstraction, or from ignoring the materialized reality that stereotyping inscribes in the body (and the mind). By evoking a humorous, at times ironic attitude toward his own authorship, he also attempts to shift and displace any evocation of an ›essence‹, using instead, on the one hand, Basho as a writer and, on the other, *auto-bio-graphical* instances in which ›implied readers‹ may find themselves implicitly evoked. In this sense, the self is always related to a *vanishing otherness* from which it must understand and form itself

within a performative specter of affectivity and its linguistic, discursive, and imaginative poetics.

There are two levels of stereotypical representation and deconstructive moves in the novel: The text operates on a discursive meta-level to dismantle stereotypes, and the novel depicts stereotypical images in order to deconstruct them within the narrative discourse. At this level, the dismantling of stereotypes seems to be more difficult than at the meta-level. The novel practices this deconstruction of stereotypes, yet not by replacing them with a ›correct version‹ or by pitting some stereotypes against others, but by taking the stereotype as a signifying entity, opening it up and putting it into play like hand puppets. The text thus never loses its performative trait – unless Basho is taken up. The figure of Basho, and the reflections that the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator makes along Basho, stand like a mountain or a ramified cherry tree against these historically driven representations of representations, which are complex and revealing in their signifying practices, but simplifying in their epistemological quality. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator simultaneously ridicules the possibility of a ›correct version‹ or ›essence‹ of the other. Signification, deconstructed through a rhetoric of *affective humor*, appears as a vexing and and disordered institution. The novel is therefore illuminating – on cultural-critical, meditative, poetological, and epistemological levels by reconsidering ›truth‹ and ›falsehood‹. As the text meanders about meaning and the production of meaning, rather than weaving together a consensual narrative discourse and characters in more or less harmony, it also operates on this level of the text, on the edge of a meta-level, always mocking and unfastening a naturalized and fixed imagery – again, except when it indulges in thoughts about Basho and, apparently, the essence and meaning of poetry, signaling that these may lie beyond such signification regimes.

The humorous tone of the text is varied, and its affective economy corresponds accordingly to a multitude of different sentiments and sensations.

It is as if the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator wanted to free Basho, as well as themselves, from the imprisonment of any pre-conceived notions; but what would be at stake? Is there an ›authentic‹ ›author‹ and authority behind the writer, once stripped of the stereotype? In *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, at least, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator is not convinced of the notion of ›authenticity‹:

»Pour moi, c'est simple: tout est sérieux, et rien ne l'est vraiment. C'est ainsi que j'avance dans la vie. Même moi, je n'arrive pas à démêler chez moi le vrai du faux. C'est que je ne fais aucune différence entre ces deux choses. Pour dire vrai, ces histoires d'authenticité m'ennuient à mourir. Je parle du fait concret de mourir. Quand on évoque les origines en ma présence, je perds littéralement le souffle. On naît d'un endroit, après on choisit son lieu original.« (Laferrière 2008, 21)

Different layers of the meaning of ›authenticity‹ are evoked in this passage; on the one hand, there is the differentiation between ›reality‹ and fiction, which is not deferred but sublated in the expression *tout est sérieux*. Both approaches to ›life‹ (and thus meaning?), whether it be how one indulges in ›reality‹ or how one writes about it, appear to be equally important; the two spheres are not separated but presented as interwoven by the next sentence, which describes this approach as an attitude *within ›life‹* as well as *towards*

›life‹, *c'est ainsi que j'avance dans la vie*. The next statement ridicules the often naturalized duality, and in this way evokes humor based on expected incongruity (one differentiates very much between ›truth‹ and ›falsehood‹); the statement also evokes attention to the text, an implicit issue that the narrator centralizes. Then the angle of the difference between ›true‹ and ›false‹ is changed. The passage digs a little deeper and reveals other presuppositions that are not necessarily related to factuality but are regularly invoked as such, namely the notion of ›authenticity‹ with regard to the ›realness‹ of human beings. This notion of ›authenticity‹ involves hidden assumptions about human ›types‹ as part of a structurally embedded, often racist, culturalist, ethnicized imagery. In this way, the humorous tendency points to the cause-effect of ›authenticity‹ narratives. Not only does ›authenticity‹ produce and refer to ostensible *origins* of an idea, a thing, a culture, a subject by simplifying a bunch of different influences and narrative threads, it also gives these narratives a causality-effect. ›Authenticity‹ becomes a sequential, successively structured master plot (Abbott 2021, 53) that is naturalized as a kind of culturally embedded and self-evident historiography. It is also linked to categorization. Categorization, while seemingly innocent and a harmless site of scientific classification, is in fact the placement of human beings within the imagery of the colonial concept of ›race‹ and its evaluative and geographized mappings (or, in other places, along other degrading and ordering categorizations according to structures of dominance that stabilize specific ›truths‹ and generalize them, which is harmful and problematic as it leaves others vulnerable); rather than an innocuous way of grasping things at an elementary level, categorization combines a list of presuppositions with power relations and solidifies them in a retrievable virtual drawer from which the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator attempts to fish them out, dismantle them, and place them in the out-of-use drawer.

They thus touch on ›the law‹ of ›authenticity‹, questioning its availability and givenness in discourse and language. The text points out that even the evocation of ›names‹ comes with a repertoire of presupposed attributes. ›Authenticity‹ appears as a myth within the economy of representation and as a fundamental discursive basis for placing and structuring the economy of ›truth‹. This is indeed an arduous and daring undertaking, since there is not much space for critiquing and questioning ›authenticity‹ without evoking an abject trait of affectivity such as rejection, fear, discomfort, and the risk of losing an ›audience‹. It touches a limit not only within discourse but also within the affective household it calls upon. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator of the novel uses humor as a rhetorical vehicle to lodge their critique. Within this disjunctive poetics, the rhetoric of humor functions as a pleasurable, soothing, and healing olive branch that opens discourse as well as narrative discourse to the sphere of non-knowledge, relying on the power of powerlessness. In contrast to *White Teeth*, where a more Bakhtinian, carnivalesque performing narrative discourse takes the lead, in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* this ›resolving power‹ plays on the level of discourse itself. The entities remain sketchy and mostly at the mercy of the voice of an ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator while there are also some minor instances of repulsion on the part of the characters. In the following, I will look at some terms that play a relevant role in the novel and are repeated in order to further examine this point, which forms a constitutive element of the novel.

›Japan‹ – L'Asie

Je suis un écrivain japonais thus also begins from the repertoire of colonial stereotypes. The novel untangles it from the texture of the cultural text, from the literary text, and resignifies it as a cultural product, however intended, of colonial discourse within the racializing geopolitics in which ›whiteness‹ as a social construct of domination (and a form of disjunctive power) is written in the tinted transparent color that unmarks specific subjectivities.

The novel thus orbits a space that not only encompasses Montréal, but is also organized by the idea of the importance of art in a global encounter in different contexts of coloniality. The search for what it means to be a (›Japanese‹) writer becomes an excursion into the violence of language as a minefield of stereotypes, and a search for how to circumvent them while using the same language and inevitably evoking the same images. But language is not only a matter of stabilizing power, not only a repository of colonial views but also a resource for change. It matters who writes, what subjectivity speaks from what angle. »From Yeats to Achebe [...] it is the deterritorializing and creative potential of language that signals the ability of postcolonial literature to disrupt the dominant forms of colonial discourse« (Bruns 2012, 11).

In this way, different images are presented and challenged. One of these stereotypical images is ›the Japanese‹ as well as ›Japan‹ and also ›Asia‹ and the orientalizations that are part of their evocations.

The title of the chapter *Une Asie de poche* already alludes to this as if to say that all that is ›known‹ about *Asie* is no more than what one finds in a ready-made handbook, it is meager, reduced to a few ›facts‹. And that *Asie* is seen as a distant place of tourist attraction, that it is in fact an island in the ocean of non-knowledge. This alludes to ›knowledge‹ itself as a constraining entity, captured in small paperback books, collected in libraries that have grown over the centuries, which can only touch on *the possibility of ›knowledge‹*, and which stand in contrast to the infinity of non-knowledge. The title, therefore, already contains a humor that questions ›knowledge‹ and the ›knowledge‹ that images of ›Asia‹ arouse.

In the chapter titled *Une Aise de poche*, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator tries to seek out and find an ›authentic Japanese‹ writer in the ›real‹ world. They do so by trying to have a ›real‹ ›Japanese experience‹. This desire has a cis-normative face and means, at first glance, meeting a ›Japanese woman*‹. Femininity* serves as an allegory of capture and conquest but also of lust and adventure within cis-normative, male masculinist thought – just as ›the world‹ was perceived in European conquest and empire; but the homodiegetic narrator/protagonist does this through another related image, that of ›Korea‹ – they ask a Korean-Canadian acquaintance for help. In this way, they locate ›Japan‹ within the larger space of ›Asia‹ (and also Canada) and relate it to another country that has a difficult history with Japan; the text thus shows that ›Asia‹ is not a homogeneous entity but a continent with an ongoing, complex history:

»Je ne connais personne qui vient d'Asie. Je suivrai n'importe quelle fille qui se prénomme Asie – on dirait de la soie. Asie me fait penser aussi à une arme blanche. Un cou tranché si vite. Un collier de gouttelettes de sang. Une rapidité dans la mort qui

rassure. Je pense à ce continent comme un explorateur du XIX^e siècle. Je m'en fais une idée à partir ma chambre. Je connais pourtant ce type qui traîne souvent près du square Saint-Louis. Je ne sais pas trop d'où il vient. L'Asie est si vaste. Lui, le sait-il aujourd'hui? Quand quelqu'un n'est pas retourné chez lui depuis si longtemps, son origine perd de la pertinence. À quoi sert d'être d'un pays dont vous ne parlez même plus la langue?

– T'es pas japonais par hasard

– Corée. Je suis coréen.

– Japon, Corée, c'est pas pareil, ça?

Il me jette un coup d'œil furieux.

– Pourtant, dis-je, j'avais l'impression que vous aviez quelque chose en commun.

– Quoi?

– L'Asie.

Décidément, j'aime ce mot. C'est le continent le plus proche d'Amérique. L'un est trop vieux; l'autre, trop neuf. Et les deux commencent par la lettre A. J'ai devant moi un être de chair et de sang, et je me confîne dans la sémiologie. C'est mon côté européen.

– Que veux-tu au juste ?

– J'aime eras vivre une expérience japonaise...

Le Coréen n'est pas trop sûr que je sois sérieux. Je garde mon sérieux. [...]

Soudain le type semble comprendre ce que je cherche.

– Kama-sutra.

– C'est l'Inde, ça.

– Je sais, mais tout le monde croit que c'est japonais.

– Je ne suis pas tout le monde.

– Que veux-tu au juste?

– Être dans les parages ... Les odeurs, les couleurs, les frôlements ...

– Je connais un jeune travesti ...

– C'est mieux que ce soit une fille.

– Et deux jumelles chinoises?

– Je n'ai pas dit la Chine.

– Tout ça c'est l'Asie, vous venez de le dire.

[...]

– Je peux te poser une question? Ça fait combien de temps que tu n'es pas retourné en Corée? C'est la question qui combine l'espace et le temps.

– Je ne sais pas ... J'ai perdu mon passeport.

– Et où tu le gardes ton pays?

– Là, dans ma poche.

Ses yeux brillaient étrangement. Je me dirige vers la petite librairie du Square où j'avais fait commander un livre (La route étroite vers les districts du nord de Basho).«

(Laferrrière 2008, 20–22)

In this extended passage, several images related to ›Asia‹ are both evoked and de/constructed. First, the passage deals with the Orientalist image of Asia in a homogenized and generalized way as an ›outdated‹ space. ›Asia‹ seems to be a steppe-like area beyond history and time. In this outstretched, seemingly passive mode, ›Asia‹ functions like a colonial archive of hidden desires and illicit dreams. In its functionality, it resembles the unknowable and uncanny space of the psyche, reflecting a site of the (colonial) self. *Asie* stands for eroticism and violence, and these terms also evoke cinematic images of ›Asia‹: ›Asia‹ is what we see and grasp as ›Asia‹ through the performative imagery of (Kong Fu)

films, the clean cuts at the throat and the silence of fighting sport on the edge of art, where it meets the silence of erotic ›love‹ as art. It does not matter whether this art is called ›kama-sutra‹ or some other name and which niche of ›Asia‹ it represents. These quasi-filmic, doubly culturalized images of ›Asia‹/›Europe‹ (or ›the West‹ and ›the Rest‹) derive from such generalizing colonial fantasies and not only that, but also from the accumulation of ›knowledge‹ as a *cultural capital* that has grown out of colonial encounters and scholarly learning, of *un explorateur du XIXe siècle*, which is itself imbued with desire and violence towards the other(-ed) space – a desire and lust that differentiates and separates because it wants to understand it([s]-self). The notion of ›knowledge‹ that these absurd images imply for ›Asia‹ is sexuality and corporeality; the space of the other is the space of passion, irrationality, and sensuality, and it is here that ›Asia‹ is allowed to be an expert, in a way – of things that ›Europe‹ has left behind but which it randomly seeks for pleasure, like the legendary erotic plays of the ›Kama-Sutra‹, and strictly speaking it does not matter from which corner of ›Asia‹ these come. *Asie* thus represents the place of (a self-injured) ›Europe‹, a mirror image of what ›Europe‹ has stripped from itself in order to look at it from a yearning distance while it has imprisoned *Asie* in the grotto, behind the mirror with the Rest (of the world). (What ›Europe‹ cannot know is that *Asie* and the Rest of the crew talk in their own languages, sometimes (well often unfortunately) at war with each other, sometimes (seldom unfortunately) having a good time (but maybe things will change eventually and move in the opposite direction . . .). The grotto is, in fact, another universal dimension of which this book is a random sign . . .).

Secondly, the function of difference in discourse is brought up and demonstrated in this way. Difference within the phallogocentric grammar of coloniality and its discursive aftermath functions as a legitimation for alleged ›knowing‹, revelation, and discovery fantasies within colonial regimes. At the same time that empire claims this self-image, it conceals and obscures its other motives and drives, making them unknowable to itself and projecting them onto the other. This is how the (colonial) self and the (colonized) other are born. Empire seeks ›truth‹ through violence and silencing. The other no longer has to speak; it is already evoked and represented by the colonial image, which, through its scholarly rendition, knows it much better than it knows itself. But even in this state of assumed passivity, *Asie*, thirdly, as a signifier of geographized otherness per se, like Derrida's *Psyche*, is not inert. It touches the imperial other and leaves its mark through this imagery, which reveals much more about empire than it does about *Asie*.

This becomes palpable in the encounter between the homodiegetic narrator and their Korean Canadian acquaintance. Both characters know that ›Kama-Sutra‹ stands for ›India‹. Although the narrator initially speaks in the language of the colonizer, who is, at the same time, a (male) scholar, *un explorateur*, they do not take this language for granted either but rather look behind it, and this is a ›knowledge‹ that both characters also share. It is evoked in the angry, reproachful look of their acquaintance, which tells the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹: »*Pardon me?* You come with the same images? You know better, I know (and I also know that you know) that you are part of a very similar and related imagery. So, what is your problem, man?«. And the homodiegetic narrator answers quickly: »*Pourtant*, yes, of course, I know, it's all prejudice and colonial language and so on, but there is, *pourtant*, still something that ›Korea‹ and ›Japan‹ share as signifiers of colonial imagery, you know? And that is the evocation of the

images that the word *Asie* brings into being, right?« The Korean Canadian acquaintance understands, of course, and comes up with, »Ah, Kama-Sutra«, that is what you mean – that all of *Asie*, and in fact the whole world, is reduced to how empire wants to see it, mirror image, eh? To make it pleasant for itself, to have some pleasure, the poor guy, hey, and you are, in a different way, on the same journey, eh? I understand. You want to have ›another experience‹, an ›adventure‹ with *Asie* out of friendship, so to speak, eh?«
 Since he cannot know the ›real‹ motives of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, their acquaintance suspects a sexual experience (which may also lurk somewhere in the ›implied author's‹/narrator's inclinations toward charming and arcane *Asie* (– what kind of a mirror image may this be?).

Nevertheless, the exchange takes place on an equal ground, they both *know* that ›Kama-Sutra is Indian‹, but that when it comes to *Asie*, it is all the same anyway, and ›Kama-Sutra‹ becomes Japanese (don't *they* have something similar?). Some other form of frivolous (and perhaps more fulfilling (*damn!*) sexual techniques one should learn?)

Fourthly, buried in the folds of colonial language, another ›knowledge‹ and *language* becomes visible and audible in the encounter between the ostensible subjects of empire, a ›Korean‹ random guy from the street and a Black writer-character-narrator who has something to say by claiming to be *Japanese*: This is the knowing language of the other(-ed), the nightmare of the colonizer, who already suspects with an uncanny feeling that they might be thoroughly mistaken. The humorous rhetoric of the passage is not evoked by incongruity. It is an orchestrated and allusive dialogue with an ecliptic rhetoric that has a *lexic*¹⁷ signifying effect and that has inspired the above hidden exchange between the characters. The humorous tonality, moreover, is carried out through interrelated, equally ecliptic, silent gestures of mutual understanding, *un coup d'œil furieux*, and the understanding of this gaze by the prompt reply of the narrator, which signals both concession and belated explanation. The humorous rhetoric is thus produced by what is not said rather than by what is said, by the deliberate *gaps* in their dialogue as signs of rapprochement. At the same time, the humorous tonality, on the quiet, mirrors and ridicules racist signification and produces an incongruity with regard to the normalized appeals of the images associated with it. In this way, it also produces a pleasurable affectivity. It derives from the recognition of the clichés, on the one hand, and from being caught *in flagrante delicto* on the other: An ›implied white (?) audience‹ may find itself caught, nolens

17 *Lexic* is a slightly different suggestion of Roland Barthes' understanding of the term ›lexia‹, which he uses in an earlier work within a structuralist analysis of texts. In *S/Z* (1970, 13), Barthes speaks of *lexia* as units of reading and signification through which he proposes to encode a work according to the *five codes* he makes out in the novel. Barthes's *five codes* refer to five positions that a reader can take in order to read, in a more or less exhaustive way, different sediments of a text, which include a hermeneutic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural code. But it is difficult to differentiate between these codes as they are intermingled and interconnected and, moreover, reduce the work of reading to a rather mechanical understanding, from which Barthes later distanced himself. Nevertheless, *lexia* still can be understood as *chunks* of words that contain meaning and thus can engender a specific reading. Such an understanding of ›lexia‹ confirms Barthes' more deconstructive understanding of texts according to which ›everything‹ is already in the text, and it may help to shed further light on the poetological understanding and analysis of literary texts through a close reading *for* and *of* such *word chunks*. See also Abbott (2021, 32 ff.).

volens, in these images but may also feel a sense of ease and relief (from the guilt of participation) that these images are being taken apart, and the other has finally found a way to speak back. It is a joyful humor that laughs along with the text. Humor is also generated in the performative instances of the passage, for the text shows that those spoken about have not only already figured out how they are represented in the imperial imagery of language and discourse, but that they have also made up their own minds about it (enviably understanding each other on a completely different level) and about empire, which also creates a thoughtful site of humorous affectivity. In this way, humor shifts and moves sense and sensuality, while, at the same time, it contains a space for thought, a dwelling place for longer reflection on what has been said, and where humor unfolds its after-effects, its *Nachwirkung*. The rhetoric of humor creates and displays the confrontation of a decolonial praxis of signification that comes with a deconstructive move. In this rattling and shifting of meanings, another possibility of togetherness is also evoked. It is generated by the affective deconstructive movement inherent in the humorous rhetoric that puts everyone on the same level, touching and healing colonial scars and wounds on all possible sides.

The colonized subject shows and shares with empire a ›love‹ for *Asie*, but one that goes in a detrimental other direction, albeit it is still a ›love‹ for *Asie* and the desire to find oneself. Although at first glance the passage mimics colonial fantasies by evoking a sensual desire, which is deictically indicated by the desire of *être dans les parages – Les odeurs, les couleurs, les frôlements*. But then, the conversation returns to *Asie* as an idea for ›home‹ and the notion of ›authenticity‹, not in the senses of a passport, or national belonging; rather it is indicated by a tapping of the chest, the place of the heart, an inward bodily place, the place that symbolizes ›love‹ as well as memory. Suddenly, the chapter's title *Une Asie de poche* obtains another meaning and flavor: It is an *Asie* that is in the heart and the path that leads directly to it. *Asie* is not seen in a geographical sense or in the sensation of exoticism but within and through poetic writing, here through the writing of Basho, also *un livre de poche*, as it were – a book that comes from the heart, touches the heart, and is a touch of the heart that is also preserved there. The passage thus proposes, as an alternative to previous (colonial) understandings, to try to *understand*, to *know*, the other through the allusive images that poetry evokes within the self. The passage purports a form of ›knowledge‹-production out of this vast array of non-knowledge and powerlessness in which literature resides and from which it speaks, and begins to reflect with ›the heart‹ as the spacing and the alphabet of the early encounter with the O/other of oneself rather than with the logic of the passport. The way and philosophy of understanding that the passage offers is thus a deconstructive understanding of discourse and language (if that is possible) and the poetics and poetology of the lyrical work.

The implicit other imagery that emerges in the dialogue between the characters in the narrative discourse as well as on the meta-level between an ›implied author‹ and the discursive fringes of colonial meanings show that the other does of course *know* and can read how colonial language operates, but that this ›knowledge‹ does not necessarily free them from the coloniality in which the wor(l)d (in Canadian French) operates. Only within their ›own‹ signifying practices, like the production of this novel as well as the performance of the encounter and exchange that the narrative discourse makes possible, can they detach themselves from this imagery and make room for their own language(s) and

knowing ›knowledge‹ that nevertheless, too, remains within the vast sphere of not-knowing, where they unpack and release imperial meanings, like caged birds. The power that comes with it thus remains within the constraints of power-lessness. Its touch in this sense is manifold and empire in fact anticipates it; this is where imperial discourse falls within an affectivity of discomfort, sulking and vulnerability – against which it guards itself by the untouchability of its ›laws‹ and positions of speaking. This colonial relation is shown here within a more modern(-ist) thread, by conjuring up ›America‹ and ›Asia‹. A twofold meaning is unfolded here. On the one hand, the text uses colonial imagery that is best captured in Hegel's philosophic classification of the continents in a linearity of time, by speaking of ›Asia‹ as the old continent and of ›America‹ as the new one, referring to the narrative of America's ›discovery‹ as well as to ›Asia's bygone, past glory‹. On the other hand, there is a quite affectionate juxtaposition of the two continents. This is another ›America‹ that encompasses all parts of the continent and not only North America. This other image depicts the two continents as somehow related to each other, as germane, as neighbors. Again, the image of the world as a village is thereby invoked (– hey, and let's not forget, by the way, that *Asie*, although unmentioned here, on its other end, is close to *Afrique*, so – this makes Asia very interesting indeed – what a continent! Blossoming, beautiful. . . which makes the world quite round, wherever you go, you come out at the same place somehow. . .).

The passage is furthermore humorous not only because of the rhetorical technique of personifying the continents, but also because of the allusion to their first letters, (which they share with other continents (›Africa‹, ›Anarctica‹, and ›Australia‹ – but anyway) and by a manifold ironic allusion: *J'ai devant moi un être de chair et de sang, et je me confîne dans la sémiologie. C'est mon côté européen* (Laferrière 2008, 21).

Not only is the boundary between the novel and ›the real‹ world undone by the invocation of a blood-and-flesh encounter, which may make one pause for a moment. There is also a quick reference to ›semiology‹ as a method of reading, but perhaps also as a limited venture of understanding, one that overlooks the immanent and lively, sensual, touching elements, which, too, reside in meaning and give meaning to the becoming and being of the self and its relation to all things. Lastly, it refers to this quite abstract *understanding of understanding*, not only as European but also as their own European side. They, thereby, not only mock ›Europe's engineered approach to ›knowledge‹, but empathically admit to be influenced by it as well – a major influence within power-lessness that is the organizing, central, critical trait of the novel: The mockery, is self-mockery but also a critical stand to its own validity. By deconstructing their own standpoint while practicing it, they take a slight shift outside the box – akin to Basho's style – by organizing meaning through the allegories of *différance* offered in poetry, poetics, and the work of literariness. And again, it is the comic, the humorous rhetoric, what people in ›high theory‹ (Schlegel, de Man, Derrida, Spivak) sometimes call ›irony‹, that is deployed here to make this sound, in close proximity to Basho (and without employing philosophy ›proper‹).

Against an understanding of difference that legitimizes colonial violence with its supremacist discourse and language, the novel proposes to bring in a poetological approach that begins a journey from the heart by adhering to the allegorical understanding of the poetic work. In this, it resembles Derrida's decolonizing notion of and adherence to *différance*, the observation that *différance* is too manifold and too dynamic to be taken

for any sense or essence, that there is no essence/sense that could be captured once and for all, and that the desire to do so in fact reveals the deeply buried unknowing, unconscious, powerless space of the self. In a way *différance* also calls attention to psychic mechanisms of not-knowing and powerlessness as well as to the intrinsic, immanent, silent, yet dynamic, unruly, and un-knowable space of non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*), which, in its inaccessibility and vastness, also remains the repository of all powerlessness (*OhnMacht*). Coloniality and imperial imagery, thus, manifest nothing less than a (caught) space in the powerless unknowable, within a historically and ideologically formed basin, from out of which and from out of where the self acts. And this self, too, is a double self. It encompasses both the colonial self as well as the colonized self, both of which are placed in the theater of a permanent struggle. The novel, with its deconstructive moves and evocations, touches this performance and shifts it to another setting. The rhetoric of humor sets the structure of this other stage. On this stage, suddenly, the sobriety of the learned philosophy of coloniality appears as absurd. It is a willful staging that the rhetoric of humor not only shifts, but with which it disassembles the stage into its components. The Other and the othered are forced to face each other in an open space, from which it seems possible to go off in other directions, alone or in each other's company. The ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator in fact does both. They embark powerless on an unknown journey, unknown even to themselves, and they take with them an ›implied audience as well as Basho. Within the narrative discourse, this encounter, rather than representing a journey, becomes a space of dwelling; it dwells on the threshold of language and discourse, untying and fraying their historically loaded meanings. The historically driven basin of meaning and meaning production is thus challenged, even performatively transformed within the rhetoric of language and its discursivity. The novel as a product as well as what it unfurls in its narrative discursive in the rhetorically induced affectivity of a humorous tonality poses such a challenging, *trans-per-formative* rereading of what is regarded as ›knowledge‹ and power. It holds up a mirror to the mechanisms of empire and the effects of its language and discourse. It is done with empathy rather than ridicule, almost dying of, or at least shaking with, ›laughter‹, laughing about the configurations of our understanding, going beyond their tragic components of silencing by looking out for Basho for help, and a place to let go. As if saying to discourse and how it occupies language: *U know what u doin, man?* (Yes, ›man! Mostly ›man! There is a specter of (at least: cis-)masculinity inherent in it that cannot be denied), while at the same time acknowledging the contamination and complicity of any decolonial project with the ongoing reconfigurations of various systems of coloniality.

The Japanese Writer and ›the Camera‹ (obscura)

The novel thus writes in a modality of deconstruction, deconstructing itself, deconstructing the title, the plot, the genre, and it also comes close to a deconstruction of deconstruction indeed, insofar as it touches upon the limits of the historically, spatially, and sociopolitically caught meanings in language and discourse. In doing so, it shows that deconstruction, as crucial as it is as a power-critical and ethically sensitive lens of reading, remains in the custody of language and discourse rather than being a liberator of other(-ed) meanings and possibilities – as opposed to this, literary writing itself seems to be

offered as an alternative vehicle of deconstructive critique in transit within open-ended possibilities.¹⁸ The novel also exploits stereotypes of ›the Japanese‹ to demonstrate the

18 Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* can be read as a response to a quite well-known text of Jacques Derrida. It can be read not only like an application of deconstruction within a literary setting but, to an extent at least, also as a deconstruction of one of Derrida's approaches. In one of his texts, in which Derrida alludes to deconstruction, he does so in the form of an address, of a letter. The letter is written to another scholar specialized in Iranian and Islamic Studies, a Japanese scholar, in fact, Toshihiko Izutzu. In this text that was first published in Japanese, Derrida explains deconstruction in an instructive form in preparation of its Japanese translation. Although it is not a fictional letter and Derrida explicitly addresses it to Toshihiko Izutzu, in its published form it comes with a title, and the title is called *Letter to a Japanese Friend (Lettre à un ami japonais* ([1985] 2008). But why not just *Letter to a Friend*? Derrida may have wanted to emphasize the tone of an address and thus the invocation of a *friendship*. However, in the French and English versions of the text, at least, the questions that Toshihiko Izutzu may have posed and the possible exchange between the two are not mentioned, nor anything about the occasion of their encounter or why Toshihiko Izutzu took interest in the approach of deconstruction, why he wanted to translate deconstruction into Japanese or what possibilities, pitfalls, and problems a Japanese translation of the term would involve. It would also have been interesting to know, why Toshihiko Izutzu came into contact with Jacques Derrida, and in what way he saw connections between his field of study and deconstruction and in which ways. It is striking that this letter is the opening text of the second volume of Derrida's *Psyche – Inventions of the Other* ([1987] 2003) – as if it were asking about the limits of philosophy and the sphere of psychology with regard to the very concept of deconstruction. How is deconstruction to be situated within philosophy, especially as it seems to open up psychology for thinking (otherwise)? Perhaps deconstruction can only be demanded, *ordered* within philosophical thought, perhaps it cannot work independently here as in philosophy there seems to reside an assessing, centralizing desire (to find something?), no matter how elegantly it is formulated or set into work. This might be philosophy's core element, if it should have any, that separates it from ›literature‹ in the sense of literariness, or writing *ohne Zweck*. Although deconstruction is not a formula, as Derrida always emphasized, as part of a philosophical undertaking, there is still a gesture discernible in its design that requires something to be *undone*, something to be *achieved*. This may be why Derrida, too, seems not interested in what his friend found so interesting about deconstruction and why he may have wanted it to be transposed into Japanese? The gesture of philosophy/academic work seems always accompanied by the desire towards power, of finding and saying words that can ascertain themselves by (philosophic discursive?) enactments. Perhaps this is why philosophy remains so important to Derrida as a field, *the* field of signification, the field of power, and why it seems so necessary to begin here to change things for good. In this text, Derrida, in one passage, describes deconstruction as follows:

»All the same, and in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*, and its translation would have to take that into consideration. It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *undecomposable origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense or in a Kantian sense. The instance of *krinein* or *krisis* (decision, choice, judgement, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential ›themes‹ or ›objects‹ of deconstruction« (Derrida 2008, 4). Through this non-definition Derrida already sets defaults and a guideline. He thus structures his understanding of deconstruction in specific ways, *within* and *without* philosophical presumptions, authorizing something without authorizing it. Literature, or literariness, as perhaps the *actual* field of deconstruction, cannot, even if an author wanted it, claim any authority (although a literary text may have/gain authority); philosophers can allude to an external position, and must even do so, if they want to speak from a philosopher's position. The only way how such a position of speaking could be

racist and arbitrary nature of the images that surround the word: Somewhere very early in the novel, while the ›homodiegetic narrator‹/›implied author‹ are strolling through Montréal on their journey to find themselves as a Japanese writer, they stumble upon an often depicted and ridiculed image, that of the Japanese tourist with a camera, or at least that is how the emblematic title of the one-and-a-half-page chapter *Le Japonais de la tour Eiffel* could be read; the meanings that are evoked play dangerously on the borderlines of the racist, stereotypical image:

»Je n'ai jamais eu d'appareil photo. C'est que je ne comprends pas tout à fait son usage. [...] J'en ai déjà un qui fonctionne très bien. Cette boîte crânienne où j'ai classé cinquante ans d'images dont la plupart se répètent jusqu'à former le tissu de ma vie ordinaire. Cette vie quotidienne faite de minuscules explosions successives. Une vie électrique. []Je peux les décrire avec une précision telle qu'elles finissent par défiler devant leurs yeux. Mieux, je parviens à transformer ces images en sentiments. Je sais raconter un instant sans décrire les personnages présents, en évoquant simplement l'énergie qui donne vie au moment. Sur une photo, on voit rarement cette émotion qui constitue la trame de l'histoire qui se déroule devant nous. [...] Je garde toutes ces photos dans ma tête où elles s'enracinent. Et où les images se piétinent, voulant passer toutes au premier plan. Quant au Japonais qui ne cesse de photographier le monde: le voit-il? [...] La tour Eiffel est là pour témoigner que cet homme est passé un jour à Paris. Mais en faisant le même sourire large et impersonnel devant tous les monuments de la Terre, celui-ci annule le caractère intime du moment. Le Japonais devient lors aussi intemporel que la tour Eiffel. On pourrait croire que c'est la tour Eiffel qui se fait photographier derrière un Japonais souriant.« (Laferrière 2008, 35–36)

At first glance, the humor invoked here is a (racist) grin that relies on the self-perpetuating stereotypical image of ›the (male) Japanese tourist‹. Moreover, it seems to ridicule a clichéd lifestyle as ›Japanese‹ that is actually quite Western and (European) (tourism) and could be understood as a performative mimicry of it. As the text unfolds, however, its meanings and humorous bent become more complicated. The passage suggests that the stereotypical nature of the image of the ›Japanese tourist‹ has itself become a decolonizing tourist attraction in its own right, and the Eiffel Tower is content to be photographed alongside it. The ›Japanese camera‹ appears as an invincible weapon of resistance that seems to mock the phallic imprint of imperial architecture. The grand architecture of the *Tour Eiffel* suddenly appears preposterous against the backdrop of people utilizing it to take selfies. Thus, the big Other appears as if it were *used by* the other(-ed)

deconstructed, may be the rapturous rhetoric of humor (that Derrida like Nietzsche often enough uses); would that not mean that deconstruction, if one feels obliged to take it seriously – and one should, can only lead to an opening up of philosophy to join (*to mean*) the unlimited field of ›literature‹ (and its affective smile) as the vast field to philosophize? Does deconstruction mark the limits of philosophy, the limits *in* philosophy, and must philosophy be transferred (back?) to literature, where it remains infinitely entangled in meaning? (This would be anything but chaos, or arbitrariness within a political system or on a political agenda – far from it. It would just open up the field of thought). Literature can only speak by exposing the limits of its own speaking. And this is what *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, more than anything else, appears to stand for. And does that not also pertain to Derrida's thinking?

to give impetus and importance to the stations of their own lives rather than to honor or accept the monuments' significance as a sign of (political) power and influence. Furthermore, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ compares their humorous writing to the image of the smiling ›Japanese tourist‹ in a contest of sorts for ›authenticity‹. In taking and making their own pictures, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ disassembles and smiles at both, at the emblematic meanings and constructions of the *Japonais souriant* and the *tour Eiffel*. They confidently and self-ironically regard themselves as the more ›authentic‹ Japanese *photographer/writer*, in the sense of remaining more ›truthful‹ to the details and affective expenditure they observe and depict in their writing while trying to look deeper at things and the ways in which a wor(l)d is made up. For the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, writing and photography are the same, »[...] *au fond, c'est la même chose*« (Laferrière 2008, 145). Since, according to the stereotype, the Japanese are »[u]n peuple de photographes souriants« (Laferrière 2008, 144), the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ becomes a *Japanese writer-photographer* by employing humor in their writing sketches — in a witty, tacit joust. Underneath the humorous allusions that playfully tug at the limits of meaning lies a serious admonition not to take images and meanings for granted as self-sufficient entities. The passage also centralizes relationality and alterity rather than *autonomy*; neither the monument nor the tourist would have a significant and actual meaning without the relation that is part of their functionality. This recalls Derrida's notion of *auto-bio-graphy* as the chiasm of a historically driven touch and as the relation of a self to an other but goes beyond that by taking into account the affective and sensual momentum of singularity. Singularity understood thus pays attention, not only to the self-other relation, nor only to the repeatability and mimicry of the singular and the generalizability of its meanings, but also to the affective and sensual economy of a (foregone) moment and its future afterlife. The comparison between writing and photography problematizes the dynamic that lies between the singularity of a sensually experienced instance repeated in writing and of *photography as a still life*, as a promise of such an act. Although the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator generates a kind of competitive comparison between photography and writing, both photography as well as writing appear as archival depositories of affective and sensual ›knowledges‹ and powers. Both not only encompass untouched ›knowledges‹ and powers in the layers of their texture while operating at the borders of non-knowledge and powerlessness, which are implicitly depicted here by *the act of comparison*. Photography and writing as well as the relation between the *tour Eiffel* and the *Japonais* are compared. Comparison appears as a threshold, hinging-movement, the back-and-forth movement of contemplation between knowing and not-knowing, power and powerlessness. At the same time, comparison appears as a movement in touch and of touch: In addition to contemplating and touching upon the qualities of the two faculties and art forms, comparison embraces the senses and affectivity, as well as time and space. This movement of touch and of touching contained in the moment of comparison is also framed by an instance of singularity and a historical context, its *trame de l'histoire*.

Trame de l'histoire refers to both history and the writing of history, as well as to stories and their writing; in both cases, narratives and narrativities are involved. *Trame* specifically echoes the historically driven presumptions of discourse and meaning production, but it also signals the framing of a story, of the novel, and the *auto-bio-graphical*, as well

as the singularity of subjectivity – memory, remembering and recalling. These constitute the threads of various levels of texturing, which are enmeshed within writing/photography, within the materiality of the arts (and historiography), and within language and discourse, where they construct and interweave loosely connected spaces of touch and thus touching spaces. By comparing the act of photography, the graphology of the camera lens to writing and alluding to tourism within a postcolonial setting and colonial discourse, it becomes blurry who ›the Japanese‹ is: The ›homodiegetic writer/implicit author‹ of this narrative discourse or the stereotype of a colonial discourse. It also becomes ambiguous whether it is colonial discourse that sets meaning, or rather the decolonizing act of ›the Japanese tourist‹, who keeps smiling at the alleged accomplishments of the (imperial) world's monuments.

In another chapter titled *Un œil froid*, this image is amplified within a subversive rhetoric that again remains close to the stereotype and cliché. This rhetoric opens up the image's meanings and further interlinks photography and writing as similar art forms. (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 83). The text begins with the sentence »Bon, l'appareil photo a connu un vif succès chez les Japonais surtout« (Laferrrière 2008, 144), a declarative sentence that introduces a normalized and familiar stereotype. The fact that it is a known stereotype is indicated deictically at the beginning of the sentence by *bon*, all right, this expression also entails a conditioned assent, as if it also said, ›ok, let's assume‹, ›let's start from the assumption‹ or ›fine and good, we all know that‹; it thus does not repeat the stereotype as such and takes it for granted as a fact but invokes it already as an assumptive *belief*. This is not only a racist stereotype; besides its derogatory meaning, it serves a purpose. Hidden behind the stereotype is an objectification of ›the Japanese tourist‹ as a kind of ridiculing souvenir, which has an inferiorizing effect on a discursive and visual level. As noted above, it distracts from and normalizes *white* European tourism by rendering it transparent. The stereotype declares ›the Japanese tourist‹ implicitly to be ›strange‹, ›different‹, and ›artificial‹, all of which are evoked with the words ›camera‹ and ›smile‹; by implication, European tourism appears to be the ›right‹, ›legitimate‹, ›original‹ one (with and without the camera – jolly for sure, but not smiling – all very serious business – gazing at. . .). The second sentence of the passage, however, moves beyond the stereotype. It gives agency back to ›the Japanese‹ by shifting the stereotype into a witty other meaning that makes the presumed inventors and users of the stereotype look bad, under target, challenging the power asymmetry in saying: »Pourtant, je les ai longtemps soupçonnés de ne pas mettre de film dans leur appareil« (Laferrrière 2008, 144). *Pourtant* introduces this other understanding that the homodiegetic narrator/implicit author implements. In both cases, the first and the second sentence, the direct evocation of the stereotypes already hints at the humorous play they evoke; ›the Japanese tourist‹, it says, only pretends to take photos. They make fun of you. It is a decolonial disguise. What is ridiculed and focused on in this way is the stereotype itself as the racist pillar and effect of colonial language and discourse, which is revealed as void. It is on this discursively signifying meta-level that the novel depicts the stereotype rather than attempting to establish a counter-image that would ultimately fall prey to the dominant structures of meaning production within the conventionalized language and discourse. That critical approach frames the further meaning of the pas-

sage and gives impetus to understanding the rest of the short chapter, where the shift is further expanded:

»Si on tombe, un jour, sur ces montagnes de photos, on risque d'avoir l'impression que la Terre n'était peuplée, à l'époque, que de Japonais. Il n'y a pas un seul monument digne de mention, sur cette planète, qui n'ait pas été colonisé par eux. C'est une conquête mondiale. Le regard universel. Alors pour devenir un écrivain japonais, je dois vite me procurer un appareil photo. Je préfère encore ma machine à écrire. Au fond, c'est la même chose. On décrit tout ce qu'on voit. Je voudrais être non pas un photographe, mais simplement un appareil photo froid et objectif. Juste regarder l'autre. Est-ce possible?« (Laferrière 2008, 144)

Le œil froid as the title announces, depicts ›the paradigm and value attributed to something called *objectivity*, an attitude that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ doubts, by questioning it. Implicitly, this rhetorical question also indicates that the camera/writing never comes by itself, but that it is given ›life‹, that it is *moved* by someone behind the camera, someone who operates it, much like the epistemological presumptions that work behind the stereotype, as well as writing. *Juste regarder l'autre* as the emblem of modern European science and epistemology, appears to be mere nonsense, a fantasy. And it cannot be done without the other gazing back. What one sees, it is suggested, is never some naked ›truth‹ or things as they *are* but rather, things as they are *made to be seen*, as desire, frozen in the economy of power; this is evident in the use of *décrire* – writing/photography as an act of describing rather than of writing, which, especially in its more poststructuralist understandings, is often defined as an authorless, subjectless, *writing out*, (which, by the way, is not so far from the Cartesian ideal, since in both cases, the subject is made transparent, albeit in different ways). There are no objective gazes but only gazes, *le regard universel* – that is, the gaze of someone starring, which always remains epistemically colored. (This does not mean, of course, that there are no ›truths‹ and no ›facts‹; it just invites us to be cautious of our most normalized beliefs and what they may serve.) The text thus performatively displays a displacement of writing and photography, of ›being‹ and ›not-being‹, and the workings of a defining gaze. Humor provides the frame within which the deconstructive shift takes place.

Not only does it implicitly create space for the reconsideration of this and other stereotypes in an implicit way; the humorous unfolding also has a pedagogical effect: Next time, it may not be that easy to look at such images without the shift that was also triggered by their deconstruction and thus, to ›see‹ them in this double meaning of colonial rhetoric and political functionality. Humor also unleashes a seductive charm, inviting the disposition to be attentive to what the text alludes to. The thought-provoking aftereffect of the hidden meaning creates a spacing through which it becomes possible to regard the other as (one's) self. In its repercussions, the humorous deconstruction contains a potentially touching, moving effect. Inherent in the re/production of the (racist) stereotype is also the consumptive desire to *know* the other *entirely*, in order to be able to *place them* in the world and in discourse, and thus to mark the boundaries of what and how meaning is touchable or untouchable and to infinitely draw boundaries between oneself and the otherness of the other that marks this self. Not only that,

but this *epistemeophilic drive*, the will to know the other entirely by fixating it in an aura of ›authenticity‹ and ›identity‹ may be what the stereotype perpetuates and what the novel revises.

The novel approaches this embankment, takes up the stereotypical words and attributions as artifacts of the historical context that produced them, looks at them out loud and puts them back in the masonry but their contemplation has already changed the way they are put back into the wall. This, at least, seems to be the point of the passage and the novel as a whole. In this way, the novel shows and emphasizes that it *does not* use and *does* use the ›Japanese writer‹ as a label or allegory but that it actually means what it says (in all possible senses). A playful, ridiculous, humorous drama is born from this conviction, which does not stop at national borders, even in the virtual-cultural sense. It emerges from the firm stance of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator on the one side, and the convincing display of diplomatic vigilance that tries to steer things in a different, (national), politically more desirable direction, on the other side. While the Japanese embassy tries to talk to the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator, they repeat that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is merely the title of a book to be written. »Je ne suis pas un écrivain japonais . . . J'écris un livre dont le titre est ›Je suis un écrivain japonais, ça ne fait pas de moi un écrivain japonais‹ (Laferrière 2008, 95). The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ thus slips into the role of the ›real author‹ who just wants to pursue their next project. At the same time, on another meta-level, the novel shows the entanglement of literature with constructions of nationality as an ongoing process in which art becomes a tool, and which the novel and its title write against as well. The novel attempts to disentangle literature from notions of ›identity‹ and ›national belonging‹; literature should not be essentialized and imprisoned within any political superstructure, the tenor seems to resume, and that while literature remains political, and must remain so, it should float freely, like a written verse on a page. A few pages later, however, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ specifies this *affirmative negation* in a chapter called *Métamorphoses* (and Kafka's famous little story is ultimately evoked), in a dialogue with Midori, who tries in vain to make them see how Japanese nationalism (like all nationalisms) confiscates everything considered ›Japanese‹. To this the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ replies: »Je n'ai pas dit: ›Je suis l'écrivain japonais, J'ai écrit: ›Je suis un écrivain japonais.‹ Ça peut être un mauvais, ça peut être un bon« (Laferrière 2008, 164). But that is not the point, Midori tells them. It is not a question of quality or method. The question of nationality concerns dis/possession.

The novel thus seeks to free the word ›Japanese‹ from any conformist, narrow nationalist understanding. This movement that is a quasi-extended touch towards the word ›Japanese‹ as a national signification, also embarks on national self-stereotyping and queries any kind of self-sufficient ›authenticity‹ and ›identity‹ on this shelf as well. Within the narrative discourse this national image and desire that the word ›Japanese writer‹ may invoke is disassembled by the depiction of Japanese diplomacy (and, as will be seen, ›Greek culture‹): The planned book has aroused the interest of the Japanese embassy and the Japanese media. Although it has not been written yet, and the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator is still roaming the streets of Montréal in search of answers to this other space within themselves, they are haunted by what the title seems to declare. The Japanese embassy, alarmed, gets involved.

The embassy invites the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator to lunch and a dialogue evolves around the expectations of what it means to be a ›Japanese writer‹.

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is indignant:

»Je n'ai pas fait tout ce déplacement identitaire pour me retrouver avec des Japonais dans un restaurant japonais. En tout cas, cela en dit beaucoup sur la capacité à imaginer le monde de personnes pourtant payées pour être plus curieuses que les autres. Pour elles, l'univers se réduit à leur espace mental et à leurs petites combines diplomatiques. Elles comptent mourir là où elles ont chié pour la première fois. Cela se sent que je suis de mauvaise foi ce matin. Dieu! Tout un plat pour presque rien. Je chiale mais ce n'est pas fini« (Laferrière 2008, 87).

So, ›reality‹ is not only exploited here but is literally churned and taken apart until it finally wakes up and makes room for its good side, imagination: »Voilà une autre chose que je déteste: l'authenticité. Le vrai restaurant. Les vrais gens. Les vraies choses. La vraie vie. Rien de plus faux. La vie est un concept d'ailleurs« (Laferrière 2008, 89).

›Reality‹ is thus nothing but invented, and ›the diplomats‹ are just paid guards in service of this (long forgotten) mission. Their work resembles a call to duty, the opposite of freedom and free choice, and maybe the opposite of what art, literature is supposed to achieve. »Tokyo ne s'intéresse qu' à l'économie – dix-sept personnes dans ce secteur. Vous voyez, on ne fait pas le poids« the vice-ambassador says. The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ remains unblinking, they know only too well:

»Je savais que la littérature comptait pour du beurre dans le nouvel ordre mondial. Il n'y a que les dictateurs du Tiers-Monde qui prennent les écrivains au sérieux en les faisant régulièrement emprisonner, ou fusiller même.« (Laferrière 2008, 92)

The biting joyous ›irony‹ is grievous for the grain of ›truth‹ that is invoked and held up here on the surface of the text. (A kind of ›truth‹ always remains as an excess of literary writing, perhaps, rather than as a reduction). Does literature not count in ostensibly democratic states, but only its market value? What is good literature? The passage seems to ask. Humor, in this sense, is also a pained rhetoric to account for this despair, a cry at the limit of political silencing, which occurs more or less by consent. This makes democracies worse for writers than dictatorships, as they are abolished in another sense, doomed in the speechless and meaningless valley of lost souls. For the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ it is not only about literature, and literature does not come of its own accord. It is also about the writer: »Des qualités que j'aimerais avoir en écrivant: un style classique nourri par un feu dévastateur« (Laferrière 2008, 173) – a passionate writer free from the constraints of any nationalism that the novel attempts to invoke, but in whose traps it becomes entangled, for there is no nationalism that is free of nationalist thinking. And this is where the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ despairs and why they become so defiant, not against ›Japanese diplomacy‹ but against the barriers and imprisonment that the notion of ›national belonging‹, ›identity‹, and ›authenticity‹ pose and of which here ›Japanese diplomacy‹ is the emblematic representative. Their defiance takes on a pouting, naïve charm that is funny in its obviously contrived performance yet thought-

provoking and touching in terms of the questions it raises. Where indeed is the place of literature, and even more so of ›world literature‹, in the capital- and data-accumulating globalization? An implicit, suggestive question at the fore of academic knowledging that can only leave one in ill-humor, this is what the novel stages here – the *mood* that is part of a kind of tragic drama whose effects are unknown to us and against which we may be powerless yet whose affectivity is already at work, unknowingly, somehow, which may also be its power:

»J'ai décidé de garder ma mauvaise humeur encore un moment. Ils ont l'air perdus. C'est vrai que cela peut causer un certain problème dans un resto japonais si on n'aime pas le sushi.

– C'est que je n'aime pas le poisson (ce qui est faux).

[...] – Heureusement qu'il n'y a pas que le poisson dans la cuisine japonaise, murmure M. Mishima. « (Laferrière 2008, 89)

Their own mistrust thus becomes biased, prejudiced, and injurious (with regard to the food), and it is the (power-less) calm of Mr. Mishima's voice that points this out to them (even though it is gentle – whether this comes from a pained and yet solidary understanding between men of color or from the power of Mr Mishima's *diplomatic* function remains unresolved), a calm, a whisper, which they repeat, as it were, and which remains speaking for itself, beyond the portrayed scenery.

Again, the humor rests on the threshold of the tragic-comic, between ›laughter‹ and crying, invoking Plessner's evocation of a liminal experience yet both effects in one humorous rhetorical stroke and performative staging. But the two diplomats, Mr. Mishima and Mr. Tanizaki, continue to question them about their book in a kind of inquisitive quest for ›knowledge‹ to find the kernel of ›truth‹ in this enterprise and to alter it according to what might be *representable* in a national sense while the ›homodiegetic narrator/implicit author‹ continues to insist that it is not a book but a title and that it is an invented *Japon*; but this in fact poses the problem as well as what the book seeks to problematize: Every bit of meaning, especially national(-istic) meanings, is nothing but invented, every *Japon* (and every nation) is in this sense an invention, only imagined, ›un-real‹, an un-factual fact that has given structure to our (invented) ›realities‹ :

»– C'est mon assistant qui a entendu parler de vous.

– Ah oui ...

– Vous êtes écrivain?

– Pas en ce moment.

Ils rient.

– Vous êtes en train d'écrire un livre?

– Oui et non.

– Nous sommes très intéressés par votre livre. «

[...]

»Je n'écris jamais sur autre chose que sur moi-même. « [...]

– N'y a-t-il pas un rapport quelconque avec le Japon dans votre nouveau livre? [...]

– C'est un Japon inventé qui ne regarde personne d'autre que moi. [...]

On sait que vous ne l'avez pas encore transcrit sur papier, mais il est dans votre tête, dit M. Mishima avec un air entendu.

– Tokyo est, pour une fois, intéressé par un de nos projets, ajoute vivement M. Tanizaki. Si vous voulez visiter le Japon ... D'ailleurs on a un bon guide pour la piste de Basho. [...]

– Mais je ne veux pas visiter le Japon ... Quelle idée!« (Laferrière 2008, 91, 93–94)

The scene is comical both for its presumed reference to the ways we perceive ›reality‹ and for its evocation of a cinematic imagery. It is reminiscent of how, indeed, *diplomats*, at least in a movie, would take over from some stage, and it is possible to picture them in a ›Japanese‹ restaurant all in an uncomfortable gathering. But even this diplomatic trait has its exclusions. Here, it is culture and literature that seem to be marginalized within the structures of diplomatic mission itself – what a waste, the passage seems to say. In the dialogue the ›homodiegetic narrator/IMPLIED author‹ appears as somehow misplaced, out of joint, *mad*. Their supposedly irrational attitude of not knowing Japan and apparently *not wanting* to know it, and yet writing about it, evokes zany fun, it goes against any rational thinking, mimicking colonial discourse (and ›area studies‹) in being ignorant about a place and owning power over it through some form of constructed ›knowledge‹ while the two *diplomats* appear as the desperate, not-knowing, powerless guardians of order, (universal, decolonial) rationality, and diplomatic, loyal responsibility. Through this humorous invocation, the novel reflects back to ›the West‹ (and ›the Rest‹) – its rationalist stance and that it does not make sense against the background of literary ›knowledge‹ and the freedom of thought, the power of imagination, that resides in literary writing.

But there is more to the scene. In a sense, the novel takes place on two stages: It is performed on an *open stage*, more or less directly in front of an ›implied audience‹ and it is also performed on a secret, *hidden stage*, which the ›audience‹ can discover for itself if it cares enough. In fact, the novel problematizes the *secret* in a chapter that hangs loosely and without any reference or coherence to the rest, right at the end (Laferrière 2008, 201 f.), and even emphasizes its secrecy by calling it *un secret oublié*, a secret that is unknown even to oneself, and against which one is powerless, powerless against its possible workings. I would like to ponder about this secret a bit before we return to the analysis of the above passage. *Un secret oublié* makes one wonder whether and where the ›implied author‹ has hidden the guiding secret in the text (where one's own may lie), and where its threat is, it heightens suspicion and alerts the senses but also summons a pensive awareness.

The secret is thus defined as an ambiguous something that is read against itself. It is not taken for itself or in an allegorical sense, as a deconstructive, Benjaminian, or Derridian approach would suggest. Rather, the secret is introduced within a rhetoric that is reminiscent of Bakhtinian grotesquery and that, instead of implying the unknowable possibilities of futurity, hints at the corporeal, relational, and political effects that instances of unknowability, and thus powerlessness, are also made of, their historical, material, and political sides. While the evocation of the secret is understood as allegorical per se, here the ephemeral constancy of the body and its politics are emphasized and made part of the literary text:

»À quoi sert un secret s'il reste caché au plus profond de quelqu'un? Peut-on l'oublier? Est-ce un secret si on l'a oublié? Où vont les secrets oubliés? Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un secret? Une chose qu'on brûle d'envie de hurler sans pouvoir le faire. Un virus mis en quarantaine. Il n'appartient pas uniquement à celui qui le détient. Où le cacher? Quelque part dans le corps. Surtout pas dans le cœur, déjà bien occupé avec les passions. L'enfourer dans la chair. Le fameux pacte de ne jamais le révéler. [...] En confiant son secret à l'autre, on lui donne un pouvoir absolu sur soi. Mais on se lie à lui aussi. D'où l'aspect sexuel du secret. Quelqu'un se livre à un autre. Se dénude. Le fait entrer dans son intimité par la porte de derrière. L'étroite porte du cul. On ne cache pas un secret dans son cœur mais dans son cul. D'où le cri, juste avant de parler: »Je suis dans la merde.« On veut surtout attirer l'autre dans sa merde. Nous sommes de l'autre côté de la scène – obscène. Là où tout semble plus vrai. En fait, on est dans le cérémoniel le plus codifié. Rien de plus réglé que l'atmosphère du secret. [...] Un secret en cache toujours un autre qu'on veut vraiment cacher. Il y a des couches de secrets. Quand tout est secret, on se demande bien ce qui reste de vraiment secret. Un geste spontané, peut-être.« (Laferrière 2008, 201–202)

The passage not only conveys the secret but also invokes it. And it does so in a gripping, provocative, and suspenseful way, through a witty and tragic-humorous rhetoric, which plays on the boundaries of obscenity and sexuality by evoking ›shit‹ and ›ass‹, by having a secret and being deep ›in shit‹. Defecation, ›love‹, violence, danger, and objectification, as it were, form part of *long-forgotten secrets* that dwell deep within the flesh and form part of the bodily-mental experience of pleasure, pain, and abjection, although as such they cannot be touched. Such secrets, much more than the allegorical allusion to which Derrida may be pointing, are here transformed into historically and materially effective entities within the flesh, in the *chair*. In contrast to the heart, the ›ass‹ indicates the ›screwed‹, painful, vulnerable aspect that the secret can also entail even when it is understood in a more allegorical, epistemological sense of unknowing, powerlessness, and longing, for it means to be potentially subjected to hopelessness and a disenchanting experience of unattainability, or of not knowing, not knowing about any origins or causes, in a spiral of thoughts, and powerless against it while any attempt at understanding remains a construct. But this unreachability also manifests itself in its affective and corporeal household as an agonizing prick within the flesh. In this sense, the secret is not only evoked in this encompassing, abstract as well as material way but is *revealed* as the most *intimate* element of the touch of the other per se and the aporetic touch that resembles it in ›real life‹.

But the point I am making is that the passage seems not only to be a meditation on the secret it invokes and sets into work; there seems to reside a subtext beneath a straightforward understanding in the novel. Here, the text invites an ›implied audience‹ to participate in a contemplative dialogue in a self-reflexive way but *secretly*, by implication. It displays its own poetics of secrecy and is itself a poetological ramification of its poetic endeavor. It enacts what it theorizes: The meaning and operation of the secret, the novel as a secretive display, the performance of a novel as the performance of an other – in many different senses – unwritten story.

In the above passage, too, a secret is at work. It is displayed on the other, hidden stage of the narrative performance. It can be seen in the dialogue between the homodiegetic

narrator/›implied author‹ and the two ›diplomats‹, which can also be understood as a dialogue of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ with *Japanese* literature and the *Japanese* literary canon. Would this ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator with such a title have a chance of being accepted by the (national, ›real‹) *Japanese* literary canon?, the passage seems to ask. M. Mishima (1925–1970) as well as M. Tanizaki (1886–1965) are at least the names of the two most elaborate authors of modern Japanese literature.¹⁹ Both authors depict notions of nationalism, ›identity‹, and coloniality in their writing. The ›diplomats‹ thus symbolize the guardians of not only *Japanese* but in a more general sense even *national* literatures and *national* understandings, which remain faithful to the ghost of *national belonging* but also decolonial resistance for which literature is often enough a tool and playground.

This secret is hidden here, behind the discussion of the secret as such and behind the names of the two diplomats. Like the secret that the text defines in *un secret oublié*, this secret, too, is set at the very end (*cul*) of the text, rather than in its middle (*cœur*), and it is placed deep down in the flesh of the novel and is therefore meaningful for the whole novel. If it had been revealed from the beginning, it would have given away power (and play) and placed it in the reasoning hands of the Other (an ›implied audience‹, perhaps), and would have been a direct violation of the relation within the assessing dynamics of a novel between the author and the reader on the two far ends of the opened field who rather always miss each other. Inherent in this novelistic self-reflection is also the function of a literary work and its difference from a non-literary one (but can there be texts that come with no secrets and do not hide them as well?). In a more specific sense, the secrecy of the novel can be itself taken as a shibboleth function to decipher the above diplomatic performance. Here, the novel depicts a quite carnivalesque, satiric as well as grotesque form that critiques the politics of national literature by parodying it as the politics of the border and the guarding of ›the law‹ of the archive in a Derridean sense (Derrida 1995, 1–6) (or, at least, this is how I would read it), which the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ touches on by putting *the secret*, the never fully revealable sting of otherness, into its flesh. It also wonders about the place of literature in diplomacy, which amounts to zero (and might have been so fruitful for ›real‹ exchanges), and the place that literature is given to the structuring of ›national identity‹, which utterly exploits literature and narrows it down to a politics of functionality.

Within this ›diplomatic endeavor‹, other aspects of a Haitian, Canadian, Japanese, American-Asian postcolonial as well as decolonial encounter are also depicted. They give way to other geographical, ethnicized, and ethical traits of touch by humorizing the colonizing stereotypical imagery and plucking at its racist ingredients.

Of course, within the economy of racism and postcoloniality the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator also discusses racist implications entangled with a book called *Je suis un écrivain japonais* written by a Black writer and ›*Japanese* responses‹ to it. They conclude that it would have been different, of course, if the structures of exchange, dependency, and history had been different but that on the surface of it, at least, imported racist implications flicker around the idea. As Mr. Tanizaki sadly explains, not all people but some

19 For a more detailed discussion of these two authors and their work in Laferrière's oeuvre, see Desorby (2020, 333).

would think »que le pays est tombé bien bas si l'on doit payer un Noir pour qu'il accepte de prendre l'identité d'un écrivain japonais« (Laferrière 2008, 133). This would go so far that ›people in Japan‹ would suspect the Japanese embassy had invented this story in order to arouse interest in Japanese literature. The reflection of racist presumptions and representations are tacitly mentioned on all sides regarding Japanese and Black people, but they are placed in a humorous frame that may make them sound less aggressive, and yet they remain untouched, in the air, like a heavy, hanging cloud of tension that the passage seems to produce despite itself. The humor of the passage thus also evokes pain on both sides of the postcolonial world.

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ does not hold back their partly humorous prejudices with regard to ›Japan‹, either; they all lead back to the racist imagery they find already prepared and consumable in language: »En fait, je répète ce qu'on dit généralement à propos du Japon, je ne fais aucun effort de recherche. Je suis un parfait écho. Mon oreille ramasse tout. Mon œil capte tout. Et ma bouche avale tout« (Laferrière 2008, 130).

This painful dialogue is also accompanied by a postcolonial exchange, followed by a closing of ranks. Mr Tanizaki bitterly problematizes ›Japanese identity‹, which was almost lost in the coloniality of the wars with the U.S., and why questions of ›identity‹ are so important in ›Japan‹, and why this novel is therefore so important *for* ›Japan‹:

»Tout le monde s'excite. Un étranger qui n'est pas spécialement emballé par tous ces objets qu'on fabrique, ni ce poisson qu'on pêche en quantité, je leur ai dit que vous n'aimez pas le sushi, et tout ça les a intrigués. Vous ne voulez pas non plus de notre yen, ne de nos geishas, etc.

– Oh là! Ne parlez pas trop à ma place. Pour le yen, je n'ai rien contre. Pour les geishas, on verra.

Il rit de bon cœur.

– Vous vous intéressez à ce que nous avons de plus fragile et de plus intime, à notre poésie, et j'ai raconté aussi pour Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 132)

There is much naivety as well as romanticism in this humorous and ironic display of stereotypes. These are performatively changed into other meanings and thereby also touch a meta-level of writing beyond the narrative discourse. All the things Mr. Tanizaki mentions are, of course, images that stand *for* ›Japan‹ in a representative way and are not only reductive object-images but also objectifying. ›Japan‹ itself becomes in this way a thing for consumption. Mr. Tanizaki actually points this out in another passage, gagging our homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ for the first (and only) time (in the whole book): He urges not to take Basho as the only valuable equivalence for Japan and (please) not to reduce and essentialize Japan, this time in a melancholic way in the past tense (in the Orientalist mode of being outside of time and space): »Je voulais diriger votre curiosité sur autre chose que les clichés sur le Japon« (Laferrière 2008, 134).

Notwithstanding this understandable, very much postcolonial desire, the passage also reveals something else here, beyond the text: As Coleman based on Freud's ›joke theory‹ that presupposes three addressees, a teller, a listener, and one ›the joke‹ is about, and Sedgwick's analysis of cis-normative signification processes in male settings points out

how the figure of ›woman*‹ becomes a sign of solidarity between cis-men. This is also the case in this context with regard to Laferrière's male figures. The exchange between the two racialized cis-normative men, the homodiegetic narrator and Mr. Tanizaki, not only fulfills a male racialized solidarity, but also a phallogocentric, cis-normative desire for ›ascendency over women‹ (Coleman 2013, 74 f.). At the very least, it can be argued that in this passage, ›the geisha‹ represents a code word for cis-normative male sexuality while at the same time it is itself muted and fetishized. Freud's analysis of ›the joke‹ as a triangular form of exchange seems not only met in the literary text but also extended to build a square as it also anticipates an ›implied audience‹ beyond the diegetic level and Mr. Tanizaki. But the text also inevitably construes a critical space beyond the square from where it can be catcalled. In this way, the square also becomes a cage for the display of such sexualized references in cis-male masculinist representations, which can be pointed out and interrupted, but only on a meta-level of the text. On the level of the diegesis, the figure of woman* remains, in relation to two cis-normative male voices, a muted and sexualized object of male desire, signifying a fetish for pleasure (but also ›capital‹, wealth) – (however, I think, whether in the novel or beyond, ›she*‹ does not really care about that and just keeps on doing her* thing, much work to do, goals to achieve, plans to realize . . . so, there has to be a wor(l)d beyond discourse and (male masculinist) representations . . .).

Thus, while ›the geisha‹ creates a bond between the two, Mr. Tanizaki's speech is quite touching in two ways. Despite its obvious playfulness and entirely contrived comedic character, to which the profane and perhaps all-too-human (?) mention of ›money‹ and the objectification of an iconoclastic ›Japanese‹ depiction of femininity* contribute significantly, there is a tone of mutual appreciation in the passage. It emphasizes a ›real‹ Japanese evaluation of the ›implied author's//homodiegetic narrator's‹ motives for writing this book. In this sense, the chiasmic handshake and the touch of the (writing) hands represent more than mutual understanding; they represent indebtedness as such, a reciprocal thank you (*bro*). A moving thread is further established in the text as it returns to poetry. Poetry is portrayed as the most fragile of all cultural/national artifacts. Fragility also implies grace and value. In this sense, poetry is held up as a contrast to consumer culture and as an immediate and precious object to be marveled at, protected, and cherished, something to be carried in one's pocket, in the heart, the place of memory, as the narrator's Korean acquaintance had pointed out. One's ›home‹ is thus in one's heart, it is one's memories, perhaps most clearly discernible in the fragility of verses, the branches of a poem. Poetry, the passage seems to indicate, is the *real*, the actual, representative of ›identity‹ and *belonging* (of being and longing).

The ›implied author‹//homodiegetic narrator, out of the instantiated performative moment, also echoes a more technical problem of ›representation‹ by saying that they do not want Mr. Tanizaki to put words in their mouth. Who puts words in whose mouth (and who does not?). This is what the ›implied author‹//homodiegetic narrator also does with their Japanized character and author. But can we be so sure? Maybe the words just came out of the character once it emerged and took shape and began to speak on their own? So whose voices are they? And perhaps it is also a gentle warning to the future literary scholar or other figure outside the novel not to think *they know* what the ›(implied) author‹ or homodiegetic narrator may or may not *know*, have power over, or not have power

over? In this way, the passage also elegantly plays with the sphere of non-knowledge and powerlessness that is part of any form of reading (and writing), celebrating and amplifying it rather than eradicating it.

Asian-African-American Touches

As mentioned above, other such Asian-American touches are evoked through more realistic (historical) encounters that also revolve and take shape around affect-laden, ›life-defining and ›life-changing (con-)textual effects. All three cases, which I will briefly discuss here, are embedded in a rhetoric that navigates with the humorous-tragic limits of experience in specific (historical/historicized) contexts, which are also living *environments* in Plessner's sense.

The novel hints at Asian/Black entanglements by evoking a Japanese African American character who appears rather shadowy yet given a vivid voice and story. They have, of course, heard about the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator through the media and apparently seem to be searching for their father (figure). Since they ›do not know their father‹ (in a symbolic way?) they, too, have to deal with the repertoire of stereotypes they find inscribed in the meanings of (racist) images and words. Nevertheless, they have to forge their path through these injurious forms of ›knowledge‹ through which discourse and language are formed historically. The chapter benignly (and quite innocuously) titled *Peau douce* alludes to the search for and desire to find one's ›identity‹ in the absurd mix of racist and culturalist images and meanings already inscribed on the body. In contrast to these manifestations of racism, the title evokes the image of *soft skin* as a symbol of gentleness, care, and ›love‹ – and the vulnerability of the skin as an outward, exposed organ.

As is to be expected at this point, the character is called Haruki Murakami – a name that references the famous and much celebrated contemporary Japanese writer. The encounter thus begins with an allusive, humorous eye twinkle (Laferrière 2008, 146). With this humorous display, the (reading and) ›implied audience‹ should be all theirs. All ears agog, big smiles. A stage has been inaugurated, which indeed also suggests that Haruki Murakami, because of their popularity in North America, could in fact be perceived as a Japanese American author. But the short chapter takes up another Japanese American biography, that of a Black Japanese American character, and while it evokes them with a humorous allusion to the name of the famous writer, it gives them a mournful and momentous relevance, taking them off the shelf of exoticism or melting-pot celebration and placing them in the context of an autobiography, of singularity – that also becomes an *otobiography* in Derrida's sense (Derrida 1985), an admonition to *listen* to the story of the other. The scene depicts a phone call by this character from New York. The young caller talks about their father, who was stationed as a soldier in Tokyo, (where he met their mother), but who apparently later left them and Japan, not least ostensibly because of their mother's ›loving‹ and yet racist and exoticizing approaches:

»Elle le suivait partout dans le magasin à cause de son odeur [...] Elle pouvait passer des heures, la tête sous ses aisselles. Mais, lui, ça l'énervait. Ce n'était pas un homme violent, mais il pouvait être irritable. [...] Et pourtant, ce qui me touche c'est la peau ...

Il y a des peaux qui sont d'une telle douceur ... On dirait une peau de souris. Quand je rencontre un homme comme ça, je fonds littéralement.

– Un homme ou un Noir?

– Je ne regarde pas d'autres hommes.

– Vous cherchez votre père.

– C'est ce que dit ma mère, et elle croit que c'est ça qui m'a rendu homosexuel ... Mais moi, je sais ce qui m'a rendu homosexuel: c'est un type de Harlem, un tueur psychopathe, qui avait une peau de bébé. J'étais seul à le savoir. Je pouvais passer des heures à le caresser dans la pénombre de cette maison abandonnée où on se cachait. [...] Il avait toujours son revolver à la main, et me menaçait de me faire sauter la cervelle. Je m'en foutais du moment qu'il me baisait. C'est simple, j'étais amoureux de lui.

– Il aurait pu vous tuer.

– C'est lui qui a été tué ... Et quand on l'a tué j'étais à Harlem, chez un ami. Cela faisait une semaine que je ne l'avais pas vu. [...]

On ne peut pas avoir une peau si douce sans être doux ailleurs. [...]

J'ai entendu un coup de feu, ce soir-là. C'est la musique de Harlem. [...] J'ai dit à mon ami: cette balle est pour Malcolm. [...] Je savais où il se tenait, j'y suis allé, et je l'ai trouvé dans son sang. Malcolm est mort comme un chien. Je l'ai nettoyé, et j'ai appelé son père. [...] J'ai erré pendant des jours et des nuits dans Harlem. Je voulais me faire tuer aussi. J'ai tout fait mais la mort n'a pas voulu de moi... Mais pourquoi je vous raconte tous ça ?

– Parce que vous ne me voyez pas.

– Je n'arrive pas à aller voir un psychologue.

– Et pourquoi ?

– Je suis un fan de Woody Allen, d'ailleurs mes amis m'appellent ainsi en japonais. On a le même physique. [...]

– Mais vous n'avez jamais pensé que vous étiez un Noir.

– Jamais.

– Après tout votre père est noir.

– Ou mais je suis un homme, pas mon père, je veux dire je suis une femme, pas un homme.

Il a dit ça en un seul mot, sans prendre le temps de respirer. J'ai entendu un bref sanglot. Et il a raccroché doucement. (Laferrière 2008, 146–149)

This Haruki Murakami portrays the dystopia of the everyday from the other side of ›reality‹, from the middle of a hell, built of constructed bricks of historical injustices, an embodiment of ›lostness‹ – often mistranslated in depictions of ›violence‹ – and violated. The accusation of ›violence‹ is contrasted with apprehension and sympathy within a bodily metaphor that of the *softest skin* – an oxymoron. *Soft skin* depicts the inscription of *bare life* as a body part and as the body's – and perhaps the soul's most delicate, exposed, most vulnerable yet most tangible part: a transparent, overlooked envelope. The skin tells stories when caressed, it can speak (up) to an O/other, in the most tactile, melodious tacit tunes. The skin functions as a multiply coded symbol, of subjugation and subversion, of racist violence as well as counter-power that becomes a piece of art, of music and poetry. The organ of touch per se touched upon in striking and stroking ways in every possible extreme sense, is turned into a speaking tongue. Though Laferrière repeats such extremes, he shows their absurdity and pain, in a humor that can be described as an affectively

loaded, meditative, poetic »expérience de pensée« qui produit des correspondances entre le passé et le présent« (Farah 2011, 42).

This other poet named Haruki Murakami has the rare ability to listen to the poetry that *the skin* tells and to see through to the deep grief in the heart of the one they are touched by, the one they ›love‹; they feel connected to them, because they can read the pain that comes from *the softness* of their injured, not-*knowing* inner skin; the echo of this pain is inscribed in power-lessness, metaphorized as skin, and a silently speaking body. *Listening* as a deep form of being in touch, and touch as a listening form of *con-tact* as the most immediate and ensconced affectivity of touch is deployed here in the vanishing monument of care/ing. ›Malcolm‹ also represents the name of Malcolm X, both as the historical figure of Malcolm X and as the symbolic figure of the brutality, violence, and atrocities of The Middle Passage and its catastrophic aftermath, with millions of deaths. But ›Malcolm‹ also stands for the other side of this brutality, for the un/told and barely audible songs, the other placid music of Harlem, its recurrent renaissance of musings and rhythms of marginality. That may be something this Haruki Murakami, shares with the Rest of the wretched in all corners of the earth. To be *wretched* is not a natural phenomenon but is a state that is brought about. How can we account, the passage seems to ask, for these forms of brokenness that are unseen but archived in the vulnerable softness of *the skin*?

On ne peut pas avoir une peau si douce sans être doux ailleurs. The whole chapter, seems to circle around this sentence. The roguish humor with which the chapter begins, opens up into the ocean of a silent and deep question that life and *history* seem to be, with all the tantalizing unuttered and unacknowledged replies and resonances lying buried underneath its surface. The passage illuminates African American history, for which the evocation of Harlem, the name ›Malcolm X‹, experienced violence and state neglect are the signifiers. The passage looks at it from a global perspective, the implicit evocations of The Middle Passage and the Japanese African American character, giving more resonance to the idea of the *écrivain japonais*, emphasizing that this is not fantasy. The chapter shows the interconnectedness of African American history with the wor(l)d, as world history, bringing it home in two senses: Firstly, it shows where the roots/routs of this brutality lie – in the interwoven U.S.-American colonial history, and, secondly, it places ›home‹ right there, but as a space attacked, under fire, in war. »And yet, his text is an assertion of freedom, a creative insubordination, that takes the form of impiety, a refusal to enact what some might consider to be categorical imperatives, a refusal to enact the role of an ›appropriate black subject‹. Moreover, the humor suggests a pattern of laughing to keep from crying, as it were, for the perpetual laughter in the face of adversity does not entirely mask a weariness and despair. Laferrière's is an ambivalent, impious, yet politically charged representation [...] in American and African American social contexts [...]« (Pabst 2006, 38).

The skin, as the most tangible and most exposed organ of touch, bears witness to and speaks back to this violence. Racism can be grasped in this way as the most systematic form of denying the other the right to speak. In its soundless and insidious traces, racism inscribes the other's *skin*, declaring it a zone of war and destruction. The other comes from this zone of destruction and begins to tidy up the rubbish, deconstructing the system's systematic tidiness. This is as true of Derrida's que(e)rying, deconstructive texts

as it is of the intersecting queerness of this passage. It emphasizes, on the one hand, the ineffable *softness of the skin*, which cannot be felt or grasped without affectivity and without affecting as well as with and without touching matters of history, *auto-bio-graphy*, and biopolitics – the general as well as the singular. *The skin* appears as a synecdoche for what is at stake: the limits of tangibility that lie between two ends, two possibilities, two entities, a material spacing, inside and outside. It can become a place of coming together as well as of falling apart within the self as well as between the self and the other, as two figurative formations of subjectivity as well as of something that can be called the most essential of ›humanity‹, of *touch* in its most elaborate, incomplete, Sisyphus-like, nevertheless sense.

The humorous inclination of the passage develops into a stage on which the effects of colonialism (American militarism from where the *touch of love* in the figure of the Japanese African American character speaks for itself, speaking *to* and *of* the possibility of another future), and the writing of decolonization are performed in intersectional ways, touching on the tragedy of this form of neglect and opening up a discourse, or at least asking the ideal ›implied audience‹ to listen carefully to what is happening behind the things right in front of them. The chapter does not close with representations of masculinity, however, but alludes to queerness and thus to multiple forms of violence and ascriptions that interrupt any straightforward modules of signification, so that at the end the section has to be reread in order to be understood, as it is also a search for ›gender identity‹, which would not make any sense *without* the violent, determining, and confining definitions of ›gender‹ and ›gender politics‹ that remain vexed within exclusionary, binary oppositions. These are undone by a sentence in which ›gender binaries‹ are coalesced into a non-binary, infinite utterance that resembles an infinite journey:

»– Ouimaisjesuismamèrepasmonpèrejeveuxdirejesuisunefemmepasunhomme.
Il a dit ça en un seul mot, sans prendre le temps de respirer. J'ai entendu un bref sanglot.
Et il a raccroché doucement.« (Laferrière 2008, 149)

The ›homodiegetic narrator‹/›implied author‹ seems to understand and expresses their empathy by holding on to the silence of the phone call, standing by until their caller hangs up. It gives an almost instructive response to this call by being there and by echoing it back to discourse. The vignette-like episode explores the intersections of ›race‹, class, gender, and sexuality, emphasizing singular histories and thus accentuating the ethical impulse within an individual encounter with the other's *voice* as a placeholder for a Levinasian ›face‹. This voice that Laferrière invokes appears as an anonymous name, a historical name, and a contemporary, singular name. Its ethics illustrates the idea of general and collective responsibility and its singular apparition. For the literary text, this is not just an example of abstraction, but an individual, ›human face‹, a *voice* that should have *the right to vote, to choose, to be* for themselves.

In the folds of the novel there is also another form of touch, gently, almost indiscernibly, laid out, to which I will refer only briefly here; it may be a secret, one that the novel both entailed and produced; and so perhaps it should be left as such, untouched.

But it may also be possible to read it along the only form in which it is presented in the novel, in a seemingly disguised way. Here, too, the incident performs the secret it entails.

The implemented humor, while incongruously accompanying the sobriety with which the narrative rhetoric is told (as if it were all ›true‹), comes into full play after the encounter and the memories it contains are digested. Maybe it is a humor at the rims of wittiness but without the coldness that resides in the wit's play with reasonability. It opens up only slowly, like a slow-motion picture in the rhetoric arrangement of the narrative discourse and displays a specter of affectivity by engendering a complex space of touch, but only *after* everything is (allegedly) laid out and said. It may be a humor of afterwardsness in Freud's sense that comes in conjunction with a pensive contentment: a suspended humor.

Towards the end of the novel, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, irritated by all the fuss about their unwritten book, decides to leave their home and to live the life of a modern nomad, of a vagabond in the streets of Montréal, still following and imitating the footsteps of Basho whom they cannot help but be influenced by and to admire, looking for and slowly miming a humble ›life‹ on the surface, and a rich ›life‹ within, full of wanderings and wondering about all the small and detailed little marvels they seem to stumble upon.

One day, while the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is quite exhausted and drenched in the ›perfume of poverty‹ (*le parfum du pauvre*) as they call it (Laferrière 2008, 170), they meet a friend they know from a long time ago, from *that other* country they have memorized in their heart; maybe they both symbolize alternative threads, alternative selves, other paths that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ could have taken but maybe the possibility has left behind at least the desire to become a *Japanese writer*. The humorous tone that ostensibly lends the book its (spontaneous) title (which may not have been spontaneous at all), may not have been the ›real‹ reason for the novel, but a secret that may lie behind it, all hidden even from the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ themselves.

The novel shows these two possibilities as two lives, the life of a forlorn, romantic poet, lost in poverty, and the life of their counterpart, the ›friend‹ they meet, who is a successful and wealthy stockbroker, but who may be impoverished within. Although there is much ›love‹ between the two (›friends‹), the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ also remembers that their ›friend‹ *loved* them so much, he wanted to become them, to *be* them: »Il veut tout me donner: sa maison, sa femme, sa voiture. Là aussi, il n'a pas changé. Il a toujours voulu être moi« (Laferrière 2008, 173). (We note and record that ›voiture‹ and ›femme‹ are apparently two entities that can be given away and used almost interchangeably in a sentence). The ›friend‹ is happy to see them, overwhelmed even, and takes them out for an evening walk, introducing them to his circle of new friends, taking them to his apartment, and presenting them to his wife. »J'avais l'impression de lui appartenir. Avec sa mémoire prodigieuse et si généreuse, il s'était accaparé ma vie. J'étais dépossédé de moi-même. Méfiez-vous de ceux qui vous aiment« (Laferrière 2008, 274). This ›friend‹ is married to a Japanese woman, their apartment is filled with Japanese art and artefacts. The name of the ›friend's‹ wife is Shonagon, a name she shares with the famous Japanese female writer from the 11th century, Sei Shonagon.

They remember their youth in Haiti. The chapter's title, *le moment magique*, may be a telling allusion to the *secret oublié* – a touch that remains encapsulated in the heart and orient ›life‹ (and writing), a touch that may be so serious and deep that it can only be discerned and evoked within a humorous play, so it can remain a secret. The humorous rhetoric thus is also a technique of dis/closure, a performatively dis/closing within the narrative rhetoric, Derrida's secret/touch.

It turns out that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ and their ›friend‹ had a common acquaintance back then, a Japanese woman, Miss Shikibu Murasaki, who became the interpreter for a group of Japanese journalists while they were under cover during the Duvalier regime. Both were in love with her but while the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ was busy with *their* first ›love‹: literature, ›Diderot‹ at the time, to be precise, their ›friend‹ and Miss Murasaki began a love affair, ›[d]ans la vie, on prend toujours le mauvais chemin au bon moment‹, our homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ contemplates, creating a paradox that challenges our understanding of language and ›life‹ (Laferrière 2008, 179), a melancholic reflection that sets in, after their drunken ›friend‹ tell them during this reunion that they started the affair just to outdo them:

»François marmonne des mots que je parviens difficilement à capter. Comme quoi il n'a jamais aimé Mlle Murasaki, mais que voyant mon intérêt pour elle, il s'est précipité sur elle. Il n'allait pas me laisser aussi le terrain des femmes. Moi, c'était les livres. Après, tout s'est enchaîné, ajoute-t-il, et je me retrouve dans une banlieue montréalaise avec une nouvelle Japonaise.« (Laferrière 2008, 179)

Different layers of meaning can be discerned here; the humor resides in the layering but also the meanings that ensue form the immediate narrating tone. On the one hand, a pensive humor ensues from the idea of the two paths taken by their ›friend‹ and themselves, and the hidden allusion to an alternative self that is placed right in front of the, at least first, unsuspecting ›implied audience‹. On the other hand, there is the implicit comparison between being in love with someone and being in love with literature. This comparison displays the affective attraction the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator feels for literature, personifying it, and giving flesh, material to its flavors, showing its ›realness‹, from which an empathic humor may also derive.

Then there is the evocation of *une banlieue montréalaise* and the implicit critique and comparison with *Paris*: Those (willed?) neglected suburbs and spaces, the city as a locus of biopolitics, in which the other, marginalized, is made to reside in specific, preprogrammed ways – a phenomenon not only of *Paris*, as the novel critically suggests, but also of *Montréal*. This allusion, moreover, symbolically reveals the bruised affective state of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator, which leads them directly into such a neighborhood. Implicitly in fact this queer conjunction also asserts a connection between the experiencing of violence and finding oneself living in a *banlieue* between Montréal and Paris.

Furthermore, Shikibu Murasaki is also the name of a Japanese woman poet and novelist from the 11th century, so that the novel here, too, silently and winkingly, plays with the interrelation of ›authenticity‹ and literature as a matter of ›reality‹ in this double

sense of a literary writer and their phantom in a literary work. The passage plays, moreover, with the meanings of memory and remembering as poetic events. In both instances it is this relational touch, the encounter with an other that gives impetus and orientation and that later unfolds as memorized precursors and principles for how one acts ›in life‹ and what steps one takes, it seems to say. It also surfaces in the pages of a book and the spaces in a narrative or novel, the passage implies. The *moment magique* is a moment in which one dwells in or can move in time, time after time, but which can also become a prison: »Tout reste circonscrit dans cet espace émotionnel. Il n'a jamais voulu quitter le moment magique« (Laferrière 2008, 179).

The memory/remembering of this first ›love‹ apparently led their ›friend‹ to his second ›love‹, his wife Shonagon with whom the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ identifies, playing again on the falseness of ›authenticity‹ and the deceptive meaning of ›origins‹ that they try to shift:

»C'est à présent qu'il me parle de sa femme. D'abord les origines. Elle est espagnole par son père et japonaise par sa mère. Elle tient des deux, le feu des Espagnols et la sobriété dans le goût des Japonais. [...] Des qualités que j'aimerais avoir en écrivain: un style classique nourri par un feu dévastateur.« (Laferrière 2008, 173)

Again, the text shows how specific qualities are ascribed to nationalities that they attribute to themselves and to the instance of writing, as an amalgamation of a perhaps planetarian intertextuality that resides not only in the citation and ›knowledge‹ of texts, but in the unfolding of writing as a space of and for affectivity, ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness as well as an effort that is set into being by an other's touch: Shonagon later calls them, not because she is attracted to them, but because she wants to *know* something about her husband that would be a mirror of them, rather than the all-encompassing image of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator. Our ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator comes up with the image of their ›friend‹ sleeping on a bench in the park, with some birds sitting on his chest, and how they hesitate to go closer so as not to disturb him and wake him up (Laferrière 2008, 188); the scene they describe evokes an earlier scene in the novel, a bench in the park where the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ begins to think about what it means to be a *Japanese writer*, some birds around them. The scene is touching in terms of both ›friendship‹ and ›love‹ as a search for intimacy (Ertler 2008, 82), and how both terms are interchangeable in this sense. Here, too, a humorous tonality may silently be evoked at the end of a cognitive realization that the text sets in play.

However, although the names of both Sei Shonagon and Shikibu Murasaki are mentioned, they appear as nothing more than tamed *femmes fatales* who live for ›love‹ (their male spouses or some other socially predetermined ›life‹); the figure of ›woman*‹, along with all its affectionately mentioned images of ›the geisha‹, ›manga character‹, ›pop star‹, ›obedient wife‹, ›whore‹, ›weirdo‹, ›nice grandma‹ remain all oddly empty and, even in the novel, apparently only there to please and arouse some male, cis-normative erotic or other sensation of ›love‹ – and lastly left blank. Alas, it »remains relegated to the phallic sign of male identity« (McQuade 2023, 203). The humorous tone and touch/ing allusions

thus become therefore quite prescriptive, but they may also echo the stereotypes of female* stereotypes back into discourse *as* stereotypes.

With this unhinging movement, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ returns the clichés to male cis-normativity and may reflect the consistency of its desire:

»Je ne vais pas commencer à lui mettre des barrières. Surtout que je réfléchis sur des miettes qui tombent de la table de Pascale. Le cliché sse situe bien au-dessus de la morale. Il est là, rond, mystérieux, éternel. Il nous regarde en souriant. Aucune utilisation personnelle d'un cliché n'est possible, sauf le renvoyer à l'expéditeur.« (Laferrière 2008, 83)

The ›laughter‹ that these and other female* stereotypes evoke is Medusa's. It is beyond *risus purus*. This ›laughter‹ does not touch, it lets everything crumble (... *beware* ...). Here, one should read the novel against itself, using its boomerang effect from and within a postcolonial feminist reading.

(An inaudible, congratulatory ›*Touché!*‹ must be written here somewhere in the pages of the novel. *Cheers!*)

Greek Culture with Capital Letters

There is one other important ›nation‹ that is evoked in the novel and that repeatedly fills a role at the threshold of a parodic and ironic play, and that is ›the Greeks‹. ›The Greeks‹ stand here, on the one hand, for the figuration of the ›Greek Culture‹ and the importance it still plays for what is conceived as ›Western Culture/Philosophy/Civilization (per se)‹, and, on the other hand, ›the Greeks‹ are evoked as a miserable diasporic people, not much different from any other marginalized diasporic people (›reality!‹ *in real*), and thus as ›folks‹ with whom one identifies and lives in good and fighting neighborhood.

Interestingly, the stereotypes presented as *clichés* are thereby linked as such with ›Greek Culture‹ as a code name for Western philosophy/epistemology as a whole, its cradle, it seems to suggest (oh wait, wasn't that *the Orient*? I am getting confused myself ...), mirroring an image that ›the West‹ as the Western Civilization (civilization par excellence?) regularly reproduces itself. The stereotype works here as a kind of boomerang, coming back to where it all began, but the boomerang is *Made in Japan*. The novel at least seems to suggest that there is a consumerist culture of objects and images, impelled by Japanese cultural and industrial productivity that plays with (Western) ›Greek clichés‹, turning them into purchasable items, and sending them back ›home‹ again:

»Je me suis demandé devant mon souvlaki, la seule trouvaille grecque depuis la démocratie (je dis ça pour énerver mon concierge [qui est grec]), ce qui peut bien faire la modernité japonaise tellement à la mode depuis la mort de Mao. À part la capacité du Japon à changer tout ce qu'il touche en cliché. Ce cliché dont on sait si peu de chose, et dont on se demande parfois si ce n'est pas une variété contemporaine du mythe grec. Est-ce d'ailleurs les Grecs qui ont appelé leur cliché ancien un mythe grec? Le french kiss existe partout sauf en France.« (Laferrière 2008, 82)

The interjection of high theory as raised by the codeword (and identarian (self-)assignment) ›Greek‹ is wittingly juxtaposed with things *japonais* and the image of Japan as *the* consumerist counter-export-nation of objectified ideas and desires. In the middle of the disintegration that the two ›civilizations‹ of high prestige must endure here, ›democracy‹, at least, roguishly survives, which also makes it possible to take the critique seriously and to allow for what it might want to suggest and open up: that we are apparently living in a world ruled by clichés in which everyone is involved on all ends of the world, from North America to Haiti, from Greece to Japan (not to mention China, which, being aware of the misery, could not stop it?).

The affective economy of the passage is a thoughtful one, which can stroke some rays of honest despair and dismay, at least a little, as if to ask anxiously: Quo vadis world? An allegorical, haibunic opening that carves out space for further dialogue, giving the Bashoean prose style a modern touch.

Funnily enough, the homodiegetic narrator's/implicit author's Greek *poissonnier* is the first to learn that their next book will be called *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, and, as if their ›Greek friend‹ were a lawgiver or overman*, points out to them that with this book title they may indeed offend juridical boundaries at the national frontiers:

»Le poissonnier, un Grec, me touche l'avant-bras en me remettant le saumon bien ficelé dans un papier brun.

– Êtes-vous en train d'écrire un second livre?

J'ai écrit quatorze livres, mais lui, il en est resté au premier. Cela fait vingt ans qu'il me pose la même question. Ma réponse ne l'intéresse pas. Déjà passé à un autre client. Je lui lance, au moment de partir, pour voir sa réaction:

– Je suis un écrivain japonais.

Son regard revient vers moi.

– Comment ça! Avez-vous changé de nationalité?

– Non, c'est le titre de mon nouveau livre.

Un coup d'œil légèrement inquiet vers son assistant, ce jeune homme occupé à emballer les achats. Mon poissonnier ne regarde jamais directement la personne à qui il s'adresse.

– En avez-vous le droit?

– D'écrire le livre?

– Non, de dire que vous êtes japonais.

– Je ne sais pas.

– Avez-vous quand même l'intention de changer de nationalité?

– Ah non ... Je l'ai déjà fait une fois, ça suffit ...

– Vous devriez vous renseigner là-dessus.

– Où?

– Je ne sais pas, à l'ambassade du Japon ... Vous ne voyez pas me lever une nation et lancer à mes clients, que durant la nuit je suis devenu un boucher polonais?

– Je penserais plutôt à un poissonnier polonais, vu que vous êtes dans le poisson.

– Surtout pas un poissonnier polonais, fait-il en se tournant déjà vers le prochain client. Un type qui donne son avis sur tout finit toujours par vous planter une aiguille d'inquiétude dans le crâne. Je vais quand même appeler mon éditeur là-dessus. Cela ne devrait pas poser de problème.« (Laferrière 2008, 16)

At first glance, the scenery seems comical in a subtle way. It portrays an asymmetrical mockery of someone who appears inferior in terms of social class and education, and comes off as patronizing: a fishmonger against a writer (although the fishmonger may be (much) richer than the writer in every possible sense but within the narrative of social and class interpretations of deprivation, let us stick with this image for the time being). On second thought, however, the dialogue at the *poissonier* can be read allegorically. It can be understood as a mockery of the *white* Western European supremacy imposed on everyone else by seduction and consent (eating a delicacy one cannot stand) through the channels of ›knowledge‹ and ›learning‹ (Gramsci, Foucault, and Said seem to be the successive background chorus here): The self-identificatory and invented glory of a crushing ancient (European) ›Greek‹ culture (*for* and *on* others, to be sure) appears metaphorized in the ›Greek‹ fishmonger (in diaspora, though, – this is what diaspora does to people – a loss of power, a muddling of all norms and symbolic sign systems, but for the evocation of a (melancholic) past allure the reference to ›glory‹ and ›good old times‹ seems to suffice).

The symbolic ›Greek Culture‹ as ›Western‹ ›culture‹ per se, at any rate (how dare I, I thought it all came from ›the Orient‹ ? I mean it, this time for *real* . . .) wants to keep the nations apart within its catalog of classifications, and thus refers to ›the law of the judges‹ for permission to touch on these matters. As a diasporic Greek neighbor though, it is touching that the fishmonger seems to be doing this out of concern (*un coup d'œil légèrement inquiet vers son assistant*), which may be partly because he sees his customer as another diasporic ›fellow traveler who will never arrive‹ – just like ›himself‹. In diaspora, one's village is the world. Is the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator‹ telling us that they prefer the concept of ›diaspora‹ over that of ›the nation‹ and recommend it for further reflection?

Maybe. (Doesn't seem so bad, after all, aren't most, if not all, places in the world, ›diasporic‹ anyway? The problem is still how to create equity, how to shed light on power structures – and here we go again – . . . but still, would make a difference from ›the beginning‹ . . . I think. But let's read/listen and see . . .).

The Greek fishmonger thus plants his philosopher's doubt in the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator's‹ thoughts, who prefers to follow in Basho's footprints. Where does ›true‹ ›knowledge‹ come from (and where does it go?), the novel seems to ask, from the fierce, ever-ready doubt of the philosopher who seeks power over it, or from the tranquil powerless ›non-knowledge‹ of poetry? From ›the West‹ or ›the East‹ or any other point of the compass? From philosophy or from literature? From ›the self‹ or from ›the other‹?

The novel seems indeed to elusively allude to the village of the homeless and the wanderer as a possible answer – the entangled space of all those who are always in search, always on the run, always an alleged threat, always threatened, always suspicious, always suspecting, always looking for some space for rest and serenity: Diaspora thus appears as an alternative to the stickiness of ›nations‹ that, in a figurative sense, remain wor(l)ds apart. In contrast to this, the world as such, beyond national borders, appears as a (diasporic) (village) space to approach (con-)›texts‹ and to gain ›knowledge‹ from this querying, wondering, nomadic non-knowledge, trenched in other forms of powerless-ness yet to be spelled out.

However, read that way the dialogue reveals this amusing alley of thought around ›ancient Greek culture‹, just like the magic wall in the backyard of the *Leaky Cauldron* pub reveals *Diagon Alley* to the astonished and delighted Harry who can hardly believe his eyes in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997).

The allusive, magical postcolonial alley that may be revealed and revealing here is, on the one hand, the proclamation of the *poissonnier's* ›Greek origins‹ and, on the other hand, the other, an incongruity of the mind, as the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is allergic to salmon but buys and eats it anyway. ›Greece‹, then, stands for more than (an economically exploited, impoverished, and perpetuated) European country: it also comes with the flavor of ›Athens‹, alluding to the indebtedness of French language to ›Greek‹ philosophy, which does not seize to influence the French-speaking ›implied author‹/›homodiegetic narrator‹ even in diaspora – they still have to buy their salmons there. ›Salmon‹ becomes the inner-psychic shibboleth for entry into the literary canon and its high institutions of learning, representation, and marketing. This is the spacing that the Other other has left behind in this other self and that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ cannot quite digest and has to throw up again. The ›Greek fishmonger‹, however, is so absorbed in his own wor(l)d (making), he does not even look at the ›homodiegetic narrator‹/›implied author‹ and has not taken note of their achievements and success as a writer, but feels obliged to tell them where to look for any disregard of ›the law‹ (of meaning (production) – a politically invested, silent, ›civil war‹ over the ›knowledge‹ of non-knowledge and the power of power-lessness to define (and as to who defines) may be staged here.

In its humorous tendency, a relational space of affectivity is invoked, a querying one that, along with its critique and amusement, also opens up space for contemplation.

It is not only the meaning of nationality, ›identity‹, and belonging that is critically examined. In the midst of this performative scene lies the question of the meaning of art. For the ›Greek fishmonger‹, embracing another nationality also means changing one's work/profession/art into something else, as depicted here in the allusive transformation of the ›Greek fishmonger‹ into a ›Polish butcher‹ that he would become, if they decided (overnight, which means, arbitrarily (*and maybe freely?*)) to be ›Polish‹. Often enough it can also signal the diasporic, refugee experience par excellence: If one is lucky enough to find one's way to the shores of the other wor(l)d, one is forced to take on any possible (nationality. . .), profession, any possible ›identity‹ (and still remain the same person, shifted inside). But back to the fishmonger. What else can the transformation of a fishmonger into a butcher refer to? These may be small differences, but with very different results and different investments of violence against very different entities (or so it seems). What does this mean? Does it mean, in a more literal sense, that there is a difference between killing/selling/eating fish or cattle (beef)? Or in a more derived sense that each language/nation has its own horrors? That every language/nation (therefore) creates a different form of art? That a language/nation is untranslatable in the way it is understood? While the humorous rhetoric plays with the incongruity, distress, and nonsense invoked here – it does not seem to make sense why a fishmonger would become a butcher by changing their passport/›identity‹, especially in the privileged sense that the ›implied author‹/›homodiegetic narrator seeks to do. The text is playing with the incongruous amalgamation of the tragedy of being-on-the-run, homelessness (and

killing/getting killed), which means pleasure for the Other ((great dishes)), inherent in the two professions and one's own non-vegetarian contamination with them; it also allegorically conjures up essential questions of belonging, ›authenticity‹, art, translation, and the translation of signifying processes, alongside the straightforward, surface meaning of an utterance and the inevitable misunderstanding of ›the refugee‹ (not on the ›the refugee's‹ side of course – *they* understand very well).

Looking at the novel itself, which reflects upon itself, the ›Greek fishmonger‹ seems to be right. Although the book is based on a Bashoan poem, the text has not become the same; it has emerged with its own traces – but this is where its kinship with Basho and every other author/novel lies – which would, perhaps, mean that in the end it makes sense why a ›Greek fishmonger‹ should become a ›Polish butcher‹, it is because he would have to change his focus and ultimately his destination.

What comes across is a decolonial understanding of a ›Japanese writer‹. On the one hand, it is free of any constraints of meaning; on the other hand, it can be seen as part of the coloniality inscribed in our current understandings and language(s), especially maybe in the West and in French as one of its alleged representatives.

These two epistemological movements are carried out by a humorous rhetoric, accompanied by a deep, almost hidden, and inflected affectivity – an affectivity that, instead of being straightforward, becomes billowy and melodious. It changes from harsh tones to softer ones and vice versa, making one think of a heartfelt quilt, stitched by all kinds of people.

Not unlike the *poissonnier*, other terms referring to ›Greekness‹, too, appear as heavy with meaning. This is also the case with the homodiegetic narrator's/›implied author's‹ Greek landlord (*concierge*). The ›landlord‹, someone who owns the house they live in and who governs over all its rules, is the one to whom the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ owes rent. This can be read as an ironic, humorous bent on the coloniality of the present; the world, and more specifically North America (the house) is in the hands of European philosophy and an epistemology (at the moment, if at any at all) that privileges a supposedly European heritage. It is so much part of the everyday praxis that few people are aware of it. While their landlord is always worried about not getting the rent, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ further irks him by always giving him the rent at the very last minute of the deadline, »Je passe la nuit dans un bar miteux à régler l'heure tout en imaginant mon concierge en train de tourner en rond comme un animal en cage« (Laferrière 2008, 99).

Not only is this play with roles and words striking, there is also another phantom friend, invented by the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ with the all too familiar name ›Plato‹ – a name, however, that in its philosophical meaning and decisive role is completely unknown to their Greek landlord:

»Je suis sorti par l'escalier de secours pour éviter le concierge à qui je dois deux semaines de loyer. Il est grec, d'où mes petites blagues sur les liens nécessaires (même un philosophe doit manger) entre Platon et le souvlaki. Il ne sait pas qui est Platon. C'est un homme de la mer, son intérêt aurait été pour Ulysse. Je m'en fous qu'il sache ou non qui est Platon. C'est pour équilibrer le pouvoir dans nos rapports.« (Laferrière 2008, 98)

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ not only makes it clear that they are not interested in ridiculing the *concierge* for his lack of education (okay, maybe just a little bit, yet not out of harassment – does not some form and residue of affection, solidarity also reside at the corners of it, from this other side of experience that equalizes them?) They also mock the nationalized form of education indicated here by the portrayal of the landlord as *un homme de la mer*, which would make him a more accurate reader of *Ulysses*. Maybe one's inclination and interests should determine what one learns rather than the desire to sustain national belonging through education? (Which would speak for diaspora . . .). This acknowledgment of the *concierge*'s interest also shows their respect for him (as a diasporic fellow) despite the unpleasant elements that adorn their relationship. Furthermore, there is a double allusion to power-lessness at play here, one that points to the structure of power in the narrative discourse between the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ as a not-quite-wealthy tenant and their landlord as a wealthy but dependent tenant; and another one that points to the power relations on a meta-level, indicating the colonial asymmetry between ›the West‹/European Culture represented by the ›Greek landlord‹ and ›the Rest/all other cultures‹ depicted in the diasporic figure of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ as well as to the fact (!) that the wealth of the ›landlord ‹/the West depends on the payment and exploitation of the other(ed). But this exploitation is accompanied by resistance, which however futile it may appear, at least satisfies the power-less double ›knowledge‹ of the (privileged and complicit) colonized subject.

With these allusions, the passage touches on the unwritten political ›laws‹ that give way to different relations of power-lessness, which structure not only what is considered as ›knowledge‹ but also what is unknowable, and against which one is powerless. ›Non-knowledge‹ thus appears not only as the ultimate and vast sphere in which everything is already immersed but also as a constructed part of ›knowledge‹ itself that is made up out of political reasons (even if its ultimate cause and origins may have been lost) – a resigned form of ›knowledge‹ and powerlessness that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ knows all too well: »Je peux bien me moquer, c'est lui qui finit toujours par avoir le dernier mot. C'est qu'à un moment donné, il faut cracher le fric. Et là Platon ne fait pas le poids« (Laferrière 2008, 101).

Again, a double allusion seems to be at work here, one that depicts the everyday of a (white) landlord and a (Black) tenant, and one that points to the meta-level, and the text, and meaning production of a Black/postcolonial writer, and how their text is perceived and placed within the literary canon and its discourse(s). The only thing that this writer can do is to chip away a little at the discourse itself even if they may end up losing out to it.

On the diegetic level, this relationship shows the asymmetrical encounter between the narrator and the landlord; but the narrator/tenant generate their own methods in order not to succumb to the default power-relation.

»Il résiste toujours un bon moment avant de venir rapper à ma porte. J'ouvre, et je lui sors du même coup une citation de Platon, l'intello-star de la Grèce antique. Il ne sait même pas qui c'est, croyant qu'il a affaire à un des clochards qui traînent dans le petit parc en face. C'est quand même un Grec, ce concierge, il devrait avoir entendu au moins une fois dans sa vie le nom de Platon. Je suis presque fier de connaître un Grec qui ne

sait pas qui est Platon. Je déteste, bien sûr, toute cette propagande faite autour des philosophes grecs, leur préférant les poètes japonais plus énigmatiques.

– Je ne pourrais vous payer que plus tard, je lui fais sans ciller, car Platon doit passer me rembourser une dette, d'une minute à l'autre.

[...]

Il part sans un mot puisqu'il ne pense qu'à l'argent. Je suis riche de mots, moi. Je peux lui payer en mots tout de suite son loyer jusqu'à la fin de l'année. Dix minutes plus tard, je l'entends remonter précipitamment l'escalier, sûrement pris d'un soudain malaise – ma cassette, ma cassette.

– Ton type, là, il a intérêt à te payer, dit-il à bout de souffle.

– Quel type?

– Ton Platon.

– Bravo, ça marche dans les deux sens ...

– Quoi?

– Regardez: Ton Platon, ça marche à l'envers comme à l'endroit ... Vous devriez vous lancer dans le rap ou dans le slam.

– Qu'est que tu veux me dire?

– Écoutez ... tonplaton ... Maintenant, je le dis à l'envers: tonplaton ... Vous voyez là? Je l'écris pour lui sur un morceau de carton: tonplaton.

– Es-tu devenu fou?

– Mais je ne vous l'aurais jamais dit si c'était vrai ... C'est à vous de juger si je suis devenu fou. Peut-être que oui ... Peut-être que non ... Peut-être que oui ... Peut-être que non

...

Je danse autour de lui. Il s'en va encore plus furieux qu'à son arrivée. « (Laferrière 2008, 99–100)

Both traits of the passage are humorous: that the ›landlord‹, contrary to our expectations, does not know Plato, and that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ invents this spectral ›Greek friend‹, doubling the first incongruity. Furthermore, while ›Greek Culture‹ is often presented as the epitome of ›knowledge‹ per se, its importance in the self-constructions of the ›West‹ is here marked as ›propaganda‹ (Greek culture, nickname: Plato); by calling it ›propaganda‹, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator points to the constructedness of the self-image of ›Western culture‹ and its discourses, and moreover criticizes the way ›the West‹ regularly treats all other (not *that* harmless) ›nations‹ and especially those who are critical of ›Western culture‹ (but there are also those ›powers‹ – or rather *power-seekers* – who instrumentalize such critique, which is another form of ›propaganda‹ in a fabricated postcolonial decoloniality we should not forget that either – and where a lot of vicious seductive ›energies‹ are at play – and at a loss ...). The humorous insertion heightens the attention to the text but also creates a space of touch since its laughing side is at once disarming and contemplative. The humorous insertion is also accompanied by an epistemological allusion. With Plato, the passage seems to say, ghosts are everywhere, without our awareness even if we ›own‹ the house. The ›origins‹ of colonial mapping and the mapping of discourse are not remembered and long gone, and yet they have not ceased to dominate the wor(l)d. This is emphasized at the end of the passage, where the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, in a rather quixotic, maddening allusion, plays with the ›landlord's‹ words by echoing them back: tonplaton, ton-

platon; whether one reads it as ton-platon, from left to right, or as tonpla-ton, from right to left, it makes little difference, the *rhyme* remains the same; as if the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, in a state of ›madness‹, were, on the one hand, giving, assigning, Plato back to him, and, on the other hand, asserting that, whether one reads words from their end or from their beginning, or in whatever script, one cannot escape Platonic thinking, which is in fact quite ›maddening‹. ›Madness‹ seems here to be more reasonable than the unconscious acceptance of meanings with which, for example, ›the landlord‹ marches through ›life‹, busy counting his money. And it is interesting that ›the landlord‹, although unaware of his unawareness, accuses his tenant of being ›mad‹ – which is very applicable to relations of domination and exploitation, and what is normalized by it and what is marginalized as *unnatural*, but also how it is misused and abused in other political regiments – a *risus purus*. Again, the humorous tonality, however hidden, links an instance of narrative discourse with an epistemological analysis on a meta-level. It is also the textual space in which the poetic and poetological validity of the passage resides. A sphere of non-knowledge is triggered here and laid out through an affective, humorous rhetoric in which a Nietzschean state of Dionysian intoxication as well as a Freudian emphasis on the unconscious come into view, contributing to the ›maddening‹ meaning of the passage, where meaning is constructed in the same instance in which it is deconstructed.

Humorous rhetoric appears as a technique for bringing something into view – a process by which something significant in the production of meaning comes to the fore, something one need not necessarily have experienced but learned unconsciously. *Learning* and *reading* seem to have the same result (to make one unconscious or ›insane‹), which is why what is learned and constituted as part of ›knowledge‹ seems so meaningful. But this is not meant in the sense of the effects of ›knowledge‹/power. The homodiegetic narrator's/›implied author's‹ ›knowledge‹ does not actually increase their *power* over the landlord. The text does not change the social hierarchy, nor is the goal to be superior. Indeed, in an early interview, Laferrière claims that he regards Plato as a writer who is important to him (Laferrière 1999, 915). But the display of a specific ›knowledge‹ (of ›Platon‹/›Greek‹ philosophy) and the deconstruction of this ›knowledge‹ (there are other ›knowledges‹ and these may also be meaningful: Basho) makes visible the strength of another power-lessness – the double non-knowledge within the (othered) self in a situation of power-lessness: In this way the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ *knows*, or rather experiences themselves as informed and educated, on the one hand. On the other hand, they do not give much weight to this ›knowledge‹, they use it, but they also seek other paths, other ›knowledges‹ to which they are attracted, other voices that seem to resemble those of a super-ego (those of the ›enigmatic Japanese poets‹). This inner power-less non-knowledge, which unfolds here in humorous allusions, is both empowering (speaking back) and liberating. Its liberating side is evoked in the reference to other realms of ›knowledge‹, the non-knowledge and power-lessness of (evocative?) poems around the world. There are, it seems to say, other open and questioning approaches to language that search the vast ocean of non-knowledge that Plato tries to codify and claims to *know*, which do not claim *to know* and instead accumulate what they gain from their observations and insights in the verses of poetry. Poetry, the allusive, non-binding poetry of haiku, appears as another form of philosophy, or even as its most

accomplished form. Bashoan poetry also stands against a philosophy that is compatible with ›power‹ and capitalist thinking. It is the philosophy of the wondering wanderer, the poor ascetic. Against this poverty, the passage invokes the richness that resides in words, the richness of poetry and poetry as wealth, which unleashes an empathetic side within the humorous tonality of the passage. The humorous effect of the passage is further heightened again by the swaggering, self-assertive claims of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, who themselves are apparently intoxicated by their own humorous play, and who perhaps ask for some respect maybe (in general for the poet/writer?), when they say that they are rich in words. That this touching side of the passage may come over as ›empathic‹ shows the need, the spontaneous openness and susceptibility to the possibility of notions that differ from the normalized workings of consumer society. It also may reveal where a reorientation towards alternatives can ensue.

Furthermore, it is possible to interpret this text in two ways: on the level of narrative discourse and on a meta-level. It is unclear whether this duality was intentionally inscribed into the text by an ›implied author‹ via the ›real author‹ or if it should be understood as a kind of unconscious guerrilla war against the imagery and historically conditioned hierarchies that regulate language and discourse. But this doubling of layers also shows how the epistemology of the world, the way it is structured and represented, also works within everyday ›life‹. In the narrative discourse, the passage alludes to the Greek landlord, who is mocked by another diasporic figure, not for the purpose of ridicule, but perhaps in retaliation for their dependence; however, it also reflects a struggle within the self. The violent, striking touch of a (dominant) Other, in the sense of established structures of power, shows itself here against which a willful combat is waged that does not aim at offending the ›landlord‹ but at working against internalized impositions. The ›landlord‹ only marks its symbolic epitome. It seems to be against this inner Plato that *les poètes japonais* work, in order to make space for other possibilities of acquiring ›knowledge‹ beyond the routes of the ›known‹ and the austere regulations, which platonian philosophy seems to offer. In the narrative discourse, the ›landlord‹ is also depicted as a ›victim‹, as there is nothing he can gain from ›Platonic thinking‹, not even (national) glory. The power asymmetry, however, exceeds the possibilities of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹; what rules is money. It might therefore be appropriate to see the ›landlord‹, too, as a figuration of someone who has lost everything – not only the illusion of a great past (of which he does not even know anything about), but also a more recent history that must have something to do with the diasporic situation, which might be the reason why he clings to money, the only thing that seems to matter when everything else has disappeared; ›knowledge‹ does not make much sense, and the void that non-knowledge and powerlessness may signal is rather dreaded?

To see Plato as a vagabond sleeping in the park is only derogatory within the parameters of the narrative discourse, according to the social standards and the eyes of the ›landlord‹; within another layer invoked in the novel, situated on the border between the meta-level and the narrative discourse, a *vagabond Plato* does not have a pejorative sense; although it may be amusing to imagine Plato as a vagabond because of the high level Plato occupies in the history of European thought, here, on the contrary, the ›vagabond life‹ is cherished. Basho, whom the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ holds in high esteem, and the ›vagabond life‹ they themselves embark upon in Basho's temporally and

spatially displaced footsteps, appear as an ascetic as well as aesthetic search in this precious void of power-less not-knowing. It thus contains an epistemological dimension for the acquisition of what could be counted as ›knowledge‹. This appreciation of ›the vagabond‹ – is it also an appropriation of the ›vagabond?‹ – and the shift in meaning that results from it, would unleash an openness if it carried a space of empathic, caring affectivity (for the other(-ed) ›real‹vagabond). This would come with a willingness to dwell a little further on the meanings that unfold and to listen to what is said and unsaid in its implications.

In this way, the passage encompasses and offers a banquet of elements that work together to produce mesmerizing and pleasurable effects. Within its affective economy, however, pain is also evoked in two ways, both of which are linked to questions of subjectivity and (political) positioning. From a critical position and postcolonial subjectivity, pain becomes palpable in the ›mad‹ humor, where forms of discursive silencing and the desire to restructure discourse appear. In terms of *white* subjectivity (or dominant subjectivity more generally), the pain might be in acknowledging that there may be something wrong with one's perspectivism and self-definition. But the joy in both cases lies in the possibility that things can be changed, as well as in the humorous rhetoric that, through its affective work, space of and for togetherness and conviviality may be created, a naivety perhaps, that would have the possibility of seeking together other shores.

In this thought-provoking and amusing confrontation with ›Greek culture‹, a female figure is also invoked. Her name is, as mentioned earlier, ›Helena‹. Given the ambiguous role that ›Greek philosophy‹ plays in the novel, and the fact that ›Greece‹ is *almost* equated with ›the Middle East‹ in contemporary European and political contexts, – *almost* an other within – and given the distinct standing of ›ancient Greece‹ in its global dimensions – a field that still requires further exploration in critical approaches – it remains uncertain whether ›Helena‹ can be considered a *white* subjectivity or rather a subjectivity of color here. In any case, her attitude is portrayed as a kind of psychic withdrawal, enchanting, and intoxicating rather than supremacist, though this is not further touched upon.²⁰ She is the daughter of the narrator's ›landlord‹ and works in the ›Greek restau-

20 This portrayal is not in line with what is usually said about Laferrière and the transgression of colonialist boundaries through intimate representations between *white* subjectivities and subjectivities of color, especially regarding cis-normative relationships: »Montréal devient pour lui lieu de carnaval, où la truculence permet de faire apparaître la critique d'une société qui se croit libérée de toute affectation colonialiste ou raciste tout en fonctionnant selon les mêmes vieux mythes. Dany Laferrière les dénonce en mettant en scène l'espace des relations sexuelles [...] perçu traditionnellement comme lieu de transgressions [...]« (De Luca 2018, 197). In this novel, Laferrière mostly ignores this issue, concentrating instead on different relations between subjectivities of color; what I find problematic, however, is when *white* feminist critics more or less accuse Laferrière of sexist images (of *white* female figures) and thereby draw on and use the work of Black feminist thinkers, emphasizing the interconnectedness of sexism and racism, without acknowledging and critiquing the problematic position of often enough supremacist *white* feminist discourses. Such a move, moreover, may lend itself to an appropriation of intersectional studies and may emphasize an essentialist (?) ›feminist struggle‹ and an uncritical universalization of *white* feminist stances, rather than to illuminating, problematizing, and acknowledging racism. This is, for example, a critique that can be seen in the work of Lori Saint-Martin (2011, 55 ff.). What may become obscured and silenced in this way are articulations of anti-racist critique by Black male* writers, as well as

rant. In keeping with Greek myth, ›Helena‹ is portrayed as very ›beautiful‹ – and very silent and unresponsive. Whether it is this aloof attitude or her silence, she is portrayed as a true heartbreaker who (how could it be otherwise?) seduces the poor male customers by making them addicted to her ›beauty‹ and absent-mindedness (so much for (cis-normative) male rationality) (maybe ›Helena‹ just does not want to be stared at or talked to? Maybe she is already in love with someone (– possibly a woman*? or someone dead?), maybe she specifically dislikes flirting? Maybe she is a philosopher or a writer and concentrating on her texts while helping out in the restaurant, as her family is already complaining about her actual job (writing) that does not earn her much money, none at all in fact, so she is trying to make up for it, this way? Whatever). But no. What is rather presumed – as is usually the case throughout history and textuality, and no less so here – is, at best, only available as a mythologized silence that leads us directly to a nearby park. It is in this park that a number of the restaurant's customers, who have gone ›mad‹ and call themselves by the names of Greek mythological figures – Ajax, Achilles, and Agamemnon . . . – gather, where they throw away their second and third souvlakis (Laferrière 2008, 110 ff.), to the delight of the park's other inhabitants (who are not in love with ›Helena‹ but apparently cannot afford a meal, the ›reak, not chosen, ›vagabonds‹).

›Helena‹, as another female figure, is again invoked to represent male, cis-normative desire, and perhaps to illustrate ›Western‹ disinterest in the (male*) other. But nowhere is there any indication of why ›Helena‹ appears to be so abstracted or whether there is more to her disinterest. ›Helena‹ is perhaps both a mockery and a sign of the (long gone?) sexy sides of ›the West‹ and its seductive powers, from which it still seems impossible to protect oneself?

However, we will never know what ›Helena‹ may be thinking, or how she defines herself. Here, the novel pushes us into the realm of myth, mocking European self-constructions and -representations. ›Helena's‹ inner withdrawal may also represent the unavailable²¹ sight of myth – as the allegory of non-knowledge and power-lessness, a sphere that lies in the untouchable layers of the poetic. Within the scope of this study, the figure of ›Helena‹ may also foreshadow the limits of humorous rhetoric and its touching affective economy, that is, when the tragic side that underlies *affective humor* remains unspoken and unreceived in which case no humor and no touch may emerge. In such moments, humor seems to dissipate, leaving behind unpalpable, somber traces.

Black feminism and feminisms of color; this is particularly important because especially Black, but also other people of color, have been overrepresented in sexualized, often violent, racist narratives in which *white* women have been seen as victims of, particularly, Black male sexuality and male sexualities of color – a colonial image and legacy. To ignore this colonialist, racist trait by suggesting a general ›feminist struggle‹ – does that not amount to a categorical repetition of discursive violence and colonialist imagery? Laferrière has responded to representations of Black masculinity, and Black writers, and the expectations of mainstream society. I think, for example, of his book *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993), a title that is perhaps more accurate in its English translation *Why must a Black Man Write about Sex?* (1994); see also Goller/Laferrière (2020). For a critical analysis of sexism, racism, and class, see, for instance, Angela Davis's still relevant, seminal text *Women Race & Class* (1983, 172 ff.).

21 Cf. annotation 19, p. 45.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to specify how *affective humor* works by unleashing touching spaces in (literary) texts, how it thereby touches us by addressing various issues, and what its affective economy explicitly and implicitly evokes in such spaces and (con-)texts. I have conceived touching spaces as poetologically invoked lines of allusions and insights that (literary) texts within their dynamics and economies of meaning-production evoke in different ways through the rhetoric of affectively charged humor. Touching spaces are thus composed of *affective humor* that is based on dialogic elements.

In order to enable an understanding of this poetologically generated momentum, I looked at three different entangled facets that such humorously induced spaces encompass. These are the work of humor that is rhetorically unleashed in ›texts‹, the affectivity that is thereby set into being and the question of how we have to perceive ›touch‹. Two other central points that accompanied these questions have been, on the one hand, the entanglement of texts and contexts, of language and discourse within different historically driven material effects that interlace fiction and ›reality‹ and give meaning to language as well as the materiality of the things around us. Following from this, on the other hand, bodies are also seen as inscribed with and marked by historically conditioned chains of signification that determine to an extent how humor, affectivity, and touch can be perceived and who is ›allowed‹ to touch upon them, which amounts to the question of the politics of signification and thus of subjectivity in the (re)production of meaning. To trace this dynamic between the performance of humor in the context of the sayable, and the performative, aberrant, and often subversive side of the ›un-sayable‹ in the meanings produced in such instances, I also looked at the idea of performativity that (literary) texts rhetorically produce in their humorous performance. Following the discussion of this first theoretical and conceptual section, the second part of this study proceeded to a thematic and imagological close reading of the representational schema in the two exemplary novels, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001) and Dany Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008). Within the scope of a narratological analysis that illuminates layers of subjectivity invoked at the meta- and infra-narrative levels of the literary texts, I focused on the instances that generate these layers, the rhetorical and affective dynamics, and the processing of spaces of touch in the two novels. This allowed me to see *how* mainstream

normative meanings were negotiated in the literary spaces and *what* (other) meanings emerged from these reinscribed instances.

Humor, affectivity as well as the question of touch encompass a complex and wide range of debates in literary theory, as the manifold understandings, definitions, and uses of *humor* in the different theoretical and philosophical approaches show. But the main claim with regard to the work of *humor* is its at times consciously and sometimes implicit function as a critique and a praxis of resistance, especially so in feminist, queer, Jewish, Black, and postcolonial theory. *Humor* can also be seen as a challenge to philosophy per se and even discussed as philosophy, understood within a complex economy of the tragic sites of ›life‹, and of insights and experiences of survival and marginalization that may even exceed the tragic.

Humor thus is conceived as a *tonality* with different nuances and specters that can be explored in the work of language and how it is engendered through different forms of performativity, ›irony‹, and rhetoricality, often as an allegorical, poetic surplus or as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick may call it, as *weak theory*, in *periperformative* spaces and *besides*, which shed light on instances of witnessing at the margins of actual performatives that are challenged.

My exploration of humor as ›irony‹ as a figure of speech and a frequently discussed term in literary theory revealed ›irony‹ as a parabasis and a phenomenon of incongruency; ›irony‹ turned out to be an incongruous humorous tonality and an intervening, performative invention in thought and language with a pensive and epistemological amplitude. A rhetorical consideration of humor shows how humor works in the text. Rhetoric is thereby understood as a deconstructivist phenomenon, also evoked in the term ›rhetoricality‹ that emphasizes the different, often paradoxical, undecidable meanings that are invoked in (con-)texts. The function of rhetoric within poetological sentiments, senses, and affective meanings, and its trait as a thread of the aesthetic and epistemological components of a text through which meanings are generated, determine humor as a poetological and affective endeavor. Humor can thus be understood as an affective rhetoric and poetological tool performed within the text. This property of *affective humor* gives way to *the poetics of non-knowledge and power-lessness* as a pivotal, ambiguous ingredient in the texture of humorous texts and utterances.

Following a Spinozian approach to affectivity, feminist, postcolonial, and constructivist understandings, as well as a psychoanalytic understanding of affectivity as *a mechanism of regulation* in the self, the functionality of affectivity is understood as a nodal point of psychic discursive and sensual negotiations in the self, which are related to the sociopolitical texture and interrelational, processual questions of subjectivity and materiality that are also part of and manifest themselves in literary texts in the economy of discursive signifying processes and power dynamics. Thus, *humor* can be further regarded as a poetological tool that regulates discursively and sensually evoked *affectivity* and also encompasses epistemological threads. *Affective humor* can then be seen as a rhetoric of deconstruction that is engendered within the poetology of the text, in dialogue with historically determined discursively set, and materialized parameters, giving way to liberating, thought-provoking, and transformative processes in the realm of non-knowledge and power-lessness. Its epistemology is that of an allusive, allegorical poetics that questions ›knowledge‹ and ›power‹ rather than to affirm specific meanings by carving out space for

other possibilities in thinking as forms of empowerment and (self-)critical epistemologies in the making. *Affective humor* is thus a rhetoric that is dialogic as it induces an open space in the texture of meaning production and field of signification, inviting other responses and possibilities to understand/ing and intervening in any established form of alleged ›knowledge‹ and ›power‹.

Affective humor thus *touches* upon signification and thought, opening up a field to the *weak*, allusive, and unenforcing epistemology of non-knowledge and power-lessness.

In determining the idea of touch, my main focus remained on the work of Jacques Derrida. *Touch* according to this reading not only encompasses explicit and implicit forms but also compliance with unwritten ›laws‹ that regulate the discursive un/touchability of conceived and conventionalized norms, regimes, and boundaries of ›knowledge‹ and ›power‹, and of what can or cannot be touched, the question *who* can touch on what and in which ways, and the limits of touch, of what is seen as sociopolitically sacred and what as outlawed, and in both senses thus untouchable. Derrida's address of touch also exposes the limits and limitations of philosophical thinking, and where the literary space of touch begins, which in his reading entails the everyday encounter as well as (critical) thinking that the one in fact can give rise to the other. Derrida's display of this discussion also reveals the performance and performative work of touch. For Derrida, *humor* is a site of touch, understood as an abstract sense of discursively tackled issues, but also, and, at the same time, as imbued within the body. Following these approaches, I understand the work of touch in *affective humor* as discursive and bodily processes of disassembling and deconstruction that can be expressed in ›laughter‹ or crying and as *brokenness*. The faculty of touch is an *ur*-mark, an imprint within the body-soul and the responding and responsive ability in the relation of a self to an other, which forbids and allows to touch. *Affective humor* opens such a space for an other in the heart and the mind through signification in language and discourse by dealing with the economy of this un/touch/ability.

The touch of *affective humor* is a dispersal that shows itself in the bodily effect of shock and commotion, seen in the complex affectivity of pleasure and pain; not only can this process evoke ›laughter‹ as a tonality of humor, a physical response, and *Grenzerfahrung*; but it is also a bodily evoked parabasis that rattles any fixating, authority-related meaning and thought. This touch of *affective humor* shows a space of encounter on unequal grounds in which a discursively inferiorized subjectivity undermines the discursive and sociopolitical lines of power. In this sense, the touch of *affective humor* can be conceived as the effect of a humorous tonality from a position of marginality that outdoes conventionalized and inferiorizing meanings, which configure and place subjectivities within discourse by evaluating those places of subject-formation; in the touch of *affective humor* and its excessive tonality, discourse, and self-understandings, as well as the economy of ›self and other‹ are shifted to another field where meaning must be sought anew. Touching spaces in *affective humor* thus describe a poetological machinery that gives structure to meaning by opening it in deconstructive forms. Along these lines, literature's ability to touch (upon) meanings in implicit and explicit, tender and violent senses can be shown, as well as its manifold possibilities to *resignify* and *renegotiate* conventionalized, epistemological, and sociopolitical meanings in different ways. The empowering, playful, pleasurable, and tragic sides of *affective humor* in the work of literature, its signification pro-

cesses, and intervention in discourse can thus be seen. These touching spaces unleashed by *affective humor* are subject-related and interventionist, speaking back with ›soft‹ epistemological *rearticulations* that show *who* speaks and *how* humor is thereby used in *which* ways. Subjectivity can be considered and evinced by the indication of the narratological instances of authorial, narrating, and addressing voices, as well as the sociopolitical figuration of the characters within the metaleptical and infra-structural spaces of texts in-between the diegetic and extra-diegetic tracks of their poetological meaning production. It is these traces of touch that are of significance for the humorously invoked angle of the evoked meanings, and revealing as they advert to conventionalized formations of subjectivity, as well as to counter-formations of subjectivity that displace signification-configurations in discourse and are therefore relevant for the processing of the parabasic trait of *affective humor*.

The different deployment of humorous poetics in novels touch on painful as well as pleasurable, joyful as well as tragic moments by the invocation of incongruent images and meanings, which deconstruct familiar, unquestioned, and normalized notions. The affective economy and humorous rhetoric of *White Teeth* indeed reveal what Zadie Smith has described as the *ethical space* in the novel as such spaces of touch, in the muddle of non-knowledge and power-lessness. In this way, an ethically informed negotiation for values in the not-knowing and power-less psychic errantry of memories, and experiences, and decisions show themselves in the agency and performance of the characters, however riddled these may be, which heighten the humorous aptitudes of the novel. This *clueless muddle* of non-knowledge and power-lessness that emerges as the text touches upon and traces these threads of historically driven, textured texts also reveals the *affective and ethical traits* and aspects of meaning and sense-making as unresolved, *open ends* offered as dialogic sites within and beyond its diegetic *life-worlds*.

In this way, the touching spaces of the always ambiguous affective humorous tone invites for further pondering on the meanings of the text.

These subconscious voices, and the preferences and experiences of a ›real author‹, as well as the evocation of an ›implied author‹ can be further traced in the acts and utterances of the characters, as well as the narrator. These voices and tonalities represent and give impetus and orientation to the epistemological directions, the humorous tonalities the novels are running to. This does not mean that *affective humor* or the epistemic *unfolding* that a novel offers is monolithic or one-voiced but that the *subjectivity* of the writing subject pervades the signification economy that the novel attempts to set into work. *White Teeth* sets out to unfold meanings within processes of signification from marginalized positions: The novel shows how meanings are *attouched* to each other and are aesthetically packaged. The *life-worlds* that the novel invokes through *humor* can be further read as an ongoing process *in touch*. *Life-worlds* depict the world as a historically conditioned, spatially situated, and fundamentally *experienced life-context*, which is constitutive for the formation of subjectivity and bodily inscriptions, and the way we learn to ›know‹. *Life-worlds* signify processes of ›selfing‹ and othering in the formation of subjectivities in interrelated ways. It therefore is central to my understanding of how novels work and how spaces of touch are created in the rhetoric of *affective humor*.

The deconstructive rhetoric of *affective humor* and its ability to *touch* and generate dialogic instances and touching spaces show *processes of becoming* rather than of fixed mean-

ings. They deal with the material and sociopolitical chasms of different and differently referenced communities. In this way an »intensely, stifling human quality of the novel« (Forster [1927] 2005, 39), as a form of ethical touch, ensues. The novel's authorial subjectivity creates a frame *to look at* the wor(l)d pleasurably (painlessness not guaranteed) in a different way. While representing and repeating discursive images with the deconstructive rhetoric of *affective humor*, the novel opens up a different space for imagining self and other. The exploration of the fixated gaze against an understanding of its Fanonian problematization can be seen and understood as a liberating, deconstructive emblem of these effects. Fixed »national identities« as well as mainstream historiography can be negotiated: »La discursivité de l'histoire coloniale« that contributes to such dominant »myths« »ce qui est mis en relief« (Fendler 2007, 170).

It is affirmed in this questioning humorous way that no context is reducible to how it is represented in mainstream discourse. The touch of *affective humor* is also induced from »a position of witnessing« that goes beyond its immediate »presence« and invites a response, asking for a third party to decide. The affectivity of the humorous rhetoric plays thus with the pleasure of the unfinished. It plays at the liminal of not-knowing and powerlessness as »the gift that keeps on giving«, always implying a future. History is in this way touched upon, is liberated, symbolizing and evoking the possibilities of other narratives.

Touching spaces decompose normalized images and formulas. Non-knowledge and powerlessness emerge as incomplete, but forgiving and empowering, rather than as blaming instances, which may unleash something like *hope* beyond the immediacy of novels.

It is consigned to the subjectivity of the »implied audience« (how) to deal with it. The novel generates a reflective economy of signification that triggers imagination. Wondering through time and its inner and outer textuality, the humorous tonality touches on possible memories within an affectivity that is allegorical, »ironic«, and that disrupts discourse and common images.

Connections between language, discourse, and the fictional texts, as well as the material effects of meanings, are thus discussed.

With this study I hope to have pursued three lines of thought. On the one hand, the study deployed a literary poetological insight for theorizing rather than for taking »theory« or »philosophical acumen« as a starting point to think and read »literature«. On the other hand, it questioned conventionalized ideas about humor, reinstating humor instead as a complex rhetoric of *contemplation* that must also be seen as an affective and sensuous act. Furthermore, it questioned boundaries between »philosophy«/»theory« and literature. In the same vein, it brought to the fore, I hope, the notion of *subjectivity* as a more nuanced category of basic reading that has to be further explored. This seems important and meaningful with respect to intersectionally informed readings and writings, and with reference to the notion of *autobiography*, which would also pay attention to the mark of singularity within understandings of subjectivity – and not only when it comes to the works we analyze, but also the analysis of works.

The novels of course come with their own limits as they operate within what Derrida calls »institutionalized literature« and structures of power and inscription. And it remains

an open question how other forms of literature, perhaps less well known or in other languages, are to be understood as spaces of touch and *affective humor*, and how they may inscribe *humor*, or how any other form of affectivity constructs spaces of touch to elicit insight.

Touching spaces in text/ure/s can be envisioned as spaces of contemplation in manifold senses, immanent to thought, images, and imagination, but coming from the place of an other, and relating the self in affective and sensual ways to such an other. They are aesthetic as well as ethical traces, which can hold a grip on passers by and (re)orient their wandering and errantry. This other can be an encounter with momentum, with a memory, with someone else, with a sight, with a piece of literature, with a text, or, as is the case with Derrida in *On Touching* (1993, 2000), and bell hooks in *all about love* (2000) with a sentence on a wall in a metropolitan space.

The other is the one who angles and orients the self to itself and its traces.

This is in fact what happens in the process of reading and especially so in literary texts, as these texts do not come with the eagerness to persuade nor to seek ›truth‹.

I hope to have shown that (literary) texts unlock a wide field of not-knowing and power-lessness. What may appear as *weak* opens up other avenues of thought. This is the ethical quest of the literary, poetic work. It is a poetological quest that is accompanied by the unfinished work of non-knowledge and power-lessness. In this way, (literary) texts also open up a relation to the subjectivity that resides in their authorial rims, which can be deduced from the work.

What writes itself in the text out of the texture of a past-present as *affective humor* in (con-)texts can be conceived of as ›preaffectivity‹. We perceive sens(e)uality not only as an ›actively‹ (after-) *affect and sensing* but also as ›passively‹ *being touched* (by the other) in different ways. This shuttle between actively acquiring sense-making and passively being impacted, inscribed by a dynamic of a relation between inner and outer forms of affectivity is important to consider, I think, as affectivity is not a (more or less) conscious process, but also something that *happens* to one, it is an impression-expression within various threads that conveys a bodily dialogue within the self as well as between the self and the ›world‹. Senses are understood hereby as a more undefinable form of *tangency* that preempts the actual sensations of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, as well as sense-making. *Affective humor* as such a sensation of *tangency*, maybe a conglomeration, part cognitive, of *being touched* somewhere within the (unconscious) ›self‹, gives way to the ›rise‹ or shift of the senses, in both meanings. It is in the moment of *being touched* that a process of affectivity may change and challenge our perceptions, redirecting them towards other forms of ›understanding‹.

Affective humor, taken not only as a rhetoric and (deconstructive) writing style, but also as performativity, opens different shades and specters of sense-making and reflects the many layers of texts. It entails the potential to show the limitations and exclusions in and of thought within time/history, and the way our ›reality‹ and its conceptions are weaved within an outer material space as well as within language.

Affective humor thus also involves various forms of intelligibility, the transfer of ›knowledge‹ beyond the structures and signifiers of the ›reality‹ in which we live, and in this way can engender spaces of touch, instant instances that map out equality and the ethics of the clandestine, the secret, and the vulnerable.

Since *humor* is often understood as an ›easily digestible‹ mode of affectivity and a form of expression of joyous play, the barrier between approximate solitude and surrender that makes any touch possible is regarded as low-threshold and not read as a thread. *Humor* thus allows spaces of touch to emerge and to unfold rather easily. This can happen in an explicitly sensual way (through a brief contact, a smile, a glance, skin contact), but also by an indirect touch through words (e.g. a verse, a sentence, quotation, a description, a view) that can also have a sensual effect. Yet it is only in the written text, especially in literary texts, where both instances of touch culminate. This happens when we ›see‹ a stirring scene as it ›takes place‹, and is performed while we read a text (and still reflect upon it already in the process of reading). In its post-reflected, suspended form, *humor* operates in a text as that, which is in fact not written, as a trace of lack in writing that retains the suspense of ›truth‹-striving/driving through which contradictions and aporias may be revealed and thereby deconstruct meaning, wor(l)ds, futures.

As an overarching rhetorical and performative tonality *affective humor* encompasses various forms. This is especially the case with novels, which often entail diverse statements, and utterances, and viewpoints within the story-level, as well as within the narrative discourse, and on a meta-narrative level. The rhetoric of the humorous, then, can encompass different levels of the text. It can include the narrative instance that structures the rhetoric of the humorous tonality of the text. It can encompass a relational structure that links the characters to each other as well as to the narrator within the diegetic level. In this function of the internal structure, it also involves and generates the place of an ›implied audience‹. It can also prefigure and involve a meta-level of the text (that speaks to the outside of the text).

Affective humor in this way is a praxis of *designification* within language. *Designification* does not mean that no meaning is ensued but rather that the thread of meanings that an utterance, sentence, word, idiom might entail are opened up in order to give way to *the possibility* of other insights.

Inherent in the self as a potential (*pre*)affectivity, *affective humor* intrudes and touches language/performance and enters the performative space of emergence, which produces another view, the impossibility of a possibility.

Affective humor is affective in two senses: It affects the meaning of things, it does something with them, and it is endowed with an affectivity that opens up a machinery of scrutiny. It comes with a pay-off that can both encompass pleasure and pain. Pleasure it is as it frees the self from meaning, and its severity. It is painful as it hurts to be freed from the illusion of stability. *Affective humor* is violent as it works like a bomb in sentences, destroying metaphors and metonomies, signifiers and discourses. It is a rhetoric that denies its own possibility and undermines its own validity. Although it may have different ›degrees‹ and ›depths‹, these cannot be categorized according to different genres or forms. It is thus not possible to give a hierarchical account of how (*affective*) *humor* works along its various tones. Rather, *affective humor* works within the content and the context, and is part of a performative writing-reading/rhetoric that operates in the place of deconstruction. It thereby rips apart the knot of signification, leaving behind a gap in which the specter of the other *reemerges*. Although *affective humor* is violent in the above sense, it does not force itself as it is masqueraded as a ›joke‹, as fun, as pleasure, as melancholy from where it also gets its seductive attraction and allure. It is bound to

the effects of ›power‹, to the trace of effacement, and dismantles them. Although it has therefore an empowering quality, it also undermines it as it does not erect any ›truth‹ and does not substantiate any other ›power‹ while touching upon the signifiers of ›truth‹ and ›power‹, incorporating and ›rebranding‹ them.

The poetics of *affective humor* must also be conceived in a non-verbal form of (or basis for) dialogue, as it begins when the things we believe we know, presuppositions and ›truths‹, are disassembled and break up. This lays the ground for another beginning, a turning point where an other thinking can set in, and the materiality of our perceptions can change according to a new view. Although non-programmatic, *affective humor* makes time for space and space for time so that further thinking can be enabled. The limits of *affective humor* begin when it comes as a one-dimensional site. Touch must be presupposed as the underpinning of any *affective humor* – otherwise it becomes *false humor* with all its limitations. *Affective humor* can only materialize if a form of touch is somehow indicated on the sur/face of its (unintended) efficacy.

›Word and thing and thought, in fact, never become one« (Spivak [1967] 1976, xvi); this is the movement of *affective humor* as a rhetoric of deconstruction, it signals *Abbrüche* and ruptures, it signals *Ausbrüche*, and *Aufbrüche*: its deferred movements are not linear but kaleidoscopic, spatial as well as temporal and loaded with a paradoxical, aporetic affectivity. It affirms escapes, eruptions, and outbreaks, departures, awakenings, crackings, and cracks, break-ups, starts and raisings while in its other, free hand, it still holds the prior, the previous, the *beforehand*, the antecedent, both o/Others, working itself along texturing. *Affective humor* co-operates with the trace, tracking and following behind the words and allusions. But *affective humor* comprises more than language and rhetoric as such eruptions and departures, it also encompasses sensuality, sensitivity, and the senses, and while it touches upon all those, it sets meanings into being. *Affective humor* shows how thought, life, and death are all parts of this process of the trace and the traces we leave behind and form anew in many different directions. *Affective humor*, in such a sense, shows that deconstruction is only possible if it comes from the other. It always leaves space for an other to destroy what one has just said, not as such, but from the outskirts of disempowered and thus power-less positions. It shows that deconstruction is embedded in an economy of endless ›democratization‹, in the infinite space of non-knowledge, and that ›power‹, too, must always be figured as a bare, void place of power-lessness that can never be captured. Whatever and whoever occupies such a place called ›power‹ can only show its limitations and the limitations of its powers. A *humor* that comes from positions of ›power‹, remains a ›power‹-form, and therefore cannot be a site of deconstruction but for deconstruction. It thus signals *false humor*, a mask of alleged supremacy.

Affective humor, as an other touch, is a sublation that does not come from any dialectics but follows the doom of its own claims in a spherical, anti-dialectical form. In *affective humor*, however, as a resonance of deconstruction from the site of the other, all meanings seem sublated (*aufgehoben*) simultaneously, to be unpacked and reworked later. *Affective humor* departs from any form of linearity to reform itself anew, in next, unforeseeable steps. The poetics of *affective humor* is, above all, a structure. It is built and perceived in different shades of suffering, put into procedures of healing. While it listens to the tragic, it shows it a starry night, reflecting a forlorn wild flower drenched in rain. Its *erupting* and *awakening* movements express the ›face‹ and meanings of *infinite* affirmations from

within crumbled and corroded textures. Its affirmation and disposition are that of non-knowledge and power-lessness that keep their secrets and sighs.

In all these senses, then, *affective humor* opens up a space of touch and may be especially at work within literature, and instances of literariness and their performative sites. *Affective humor* signals an (impregnable) quality of otherness in relation to ›philosophy‹ as the ›power‹ and determining authority of reasoning. It stands in relation to ›knowledge‹ and the control of philosophy as well as to the free and open, flowery and wide field of non-knowledge and powerlessness that is imbued in language and *life-worlds*. In this sense, *affective humor* as a sign of literariness at the rims and margins of ›philosophy‹ and ›literature‹ could be seen in a relation not dissimilar to that of Narcissus (philosophy) and Echo (literature):

»Two lectures here seem to echo one another. They perhaps answer one another, just as Echo might have feigned to repeat the last syllable of Narcissus in order to say something else or, really, in order to sign at that very instant in her own name, and so take back the initiative of answering or responding in a responsible way, thus disobeying a sovereign injunction and outsmarting the tyranny of a jealous goddess. Echo thus lets be heard by whoever wants to hear it, by whoever might love hearing it, something other than what she seems to be saying. Although she repeats, without simulacrum, what she has just heard, another simulacrum slips in to make her response something more than a mere reiteration. She says in an inaugural fashion, she declares her love, and calls for the first time, all the while repeating the ›Come!‹ of Narcissus, all the while echoing narcissistic words. She overflows with love; her love overflows the calls of Narcissus, whose fall or whose sending she seems simply to reproduce. [...] If I seem to be insisting a bit too much on these *Metamorphoses*, it is because everything in this famous scene turns around a call to come (à venir). And because, at the intersection of repetition and the unforeseeable, in this place where, each time anew, by turns (*tour à tour*) and each time once and for all, one does not see coming what remains to come, the to come turns out to be the most insistent theme of this book. ›Veni!‹ says Narcissus; ›Come!‹ ›Come!‹ answers Echo. Of herself and on her own.« (Derrida 2005 a, xi–xii)

It is unsettling that Derrida begins *Rogues – Two Essays on Reason* (2005 a) with the narrative of Narcissus and Echo – a drama of ›love‹ – a drama *for* ›love? A drama of failing to hear, of ignoring (not ignorance), of not-knowing and power-lessness, a failure to see oneself, a failure to see the other, a failure to sense oneself and the other, a failure of touch within the outward and inward procedures, yet the space where the myth chooses to remain in the end, is not failure, but the multilayered and infinite – unfinished – economy of non-knowledge and power-lessness.

And Derrida actually begins this writing with Echo. Echoing Echo, Derrida speaks of something to come, of the act, the (a)waiting of the event that may bring ›democracy‹. ›Democracy‹ appears here not as a given nor as a (European) historical achievement. It appears rather as structured by the call of the one who seems not to be able to speak, it is Echo's call and she* calls with all her* ›love‹ in the hope that it might echo back; in contrast to Narcissus, who wants to hear himself* (according to common belief at least), Echo is waiting for a resonance, she* is waiting for an *echo*. It is not she* herself* that she* awaits. She* is already, through her* voice, a parted and sliced other. What she* is waiting

for is *an other echo*, an *echo* of her* de(-parted) *echo* that is not the same as her* utterance. She* is always already a reverberation, a doubling or multiplicity that does not seem to have an ›origin‹. She* is waiting for a response, for the dialogization of the dialogues she* permanently is lovingly echoing. Although Echo just seems to repeat, she* is waiting for the Other to respond to her* (›love‹?); she* hears and listens and tries to understand, but she* is always heard as the Other's echo. Her* words seem not to resonate anything beyond the ›known‹, and they are returned back to her* instead of being held, instead of being believed. Echo is the *echo* of the wor(l)d that cannot believe itself, a wor(l)d that wants to be different from itself and wants to be seen in its differences. Narcissus allegorizes that hope as much as Echo does. They are both two sides of the same wor(l)d, who try to understand the wor(l)d, their own hurt textures, looking for themselves in it, trying to find themselves in the o/Other, in order to find the right wor(l)d. Haunting each other forever, their story seems to prevail. And forever is a long time, and there is a chance, in this long time, that things change, make a detour in which Narcissus and Echo may face each other. There may be thus some hope in such a search within repetitions that tries to go beyond itself, as both do.

So far, though, Echo waits for the Other to respond to the other bent in her* unheard, repeated utterances. But as her* call finds no resonance, bouncing back to her*, she* turns around to see herself*, to see where the calls come from, to point a finger at her* inner self, to touch it, and finally, to sense something other and *hear* her* own echo, which it is no longer as it escapes her* mouth toward the woods, the hills, where it is set free in the resonating freedom that the mountains will always reverberate back to her*.

It is in this book that Derrida speaks of the *khora*, renaming it as a spacing, an interval (Derrida 2005 a, xiv) that takes place in between the two lectures, the interval between the utterances, which takes the shape, in hindsight, of a neverending, eternal haunt for dialogue between Narcissus and Echo. *Khora*, this ›taking-place‹, is »[n]o politics, no ethics«, and no ›law‹ can be »deduced from this thought. To be sure, nothing can be done (*faire*) with it. And so, one would have nothing to do with it. But should we then conclude that this thought leaves no trace on what is to be done – for example in the politics, the ethics, or the law to come?« (Derrida 2005 a, xv).

Khora may not be a single large space, but a space for im/possible forms of contact that may forever invite to dialogicity, between ›you‹ and ›I‹, between ›us‹. Its interval-character may suggest that we think of it as *khoras* within *khoras*, like flower bulbs or little sand waves that all are different and yet belong together, like an infinite story. *Affective humor*, with all its dispersing affectivity, can be depicted as such a touching space within the *khora* of language that itself generates other little *khoras* in which, not imperatively but possibly, things can change; its dispersing expressions create utterances that disrupt and, at the same time, begin dialogues, touch each other without necessarily becoming one, and yet something may echo out of their emergence, the Echo of narcissistic vowels, which may be what Echo wants to finally resonate and also return to the wor(l)d, a transformed Echo, an Echo of Echo that Narcissus wants to hear, the Echo of the other in his heart that he cannot *recognize* though.

Maybe, then, literature, within the evaluated economy of language, is such a self-produced *khora*, a place and a taking place that gives rather than it takes, it rather *de-* and *re*constructs itself permanently, like Echo's repetitions. Within this bigger *khora*

that literature forms, *affective humor* emerges as a rhythmic interval that moulds its own rhetorically engineered, poetological *khora*. It is a *khora* in which the dialogic character of language shows itself, unfolding slowly the incessant arrays of non-knowledge and powerlessness. Echo appears as a lost voice, audible but unheard, often ignored in discourse and language. Literature, often through the affectivity of humor, touches upon and echoes the various meanings that such missed utterances carry. Echo longs for something, for ›love‹, perhaps for admission, but it is a call for admission that also promises change.

This echoing is what happens within the structure of the meta-critical novels as an effect of *affective humor* within the *khora* of literature, which brings about inviting touching spaces within the seams and margins of the text. These seams and margins are all spaces for the possibility of touch, for a chiasm-*croisé* in which embodied-subjectivity is enclosed in the (abstraction, worldliness, and flesh) of language and discourse like the endless fold Merleau-Ponty describes. While the margins of the text are those passages in-between the seams of the instances of the ›implied author‹, the ›implied audience‹, and the possibility of a ›real audience‹, the fringes of the text are held together not only by the narration and its techniques of showing and telling, and the touching lines between the narrator and the ›implied author‹, but also in-between the diegetic lines that bind the characters and position them to each other.

It is a double echo that both produces and reiterates in its murmur the power of Echo. On the one hand, this echoing of Echo replicates Narcissus in terms of the symbolic order of a time-space and its related discourses of power. On the other hand, in its echo, it also inevitably *produces* an other discourse, an other language, that of powerlessness, which is Echo's power. It is a duplicity, a reiteration and, at the same time, another reverberation. In-between this reiterating doubleness of Echo's voice, there may be the possibility of the impossible experience of *affective humor* as an ethics, an (*uncompulsive*) openness to otherness. Its ethical dimension also lies in its dialogical trait. It is always in a process, at work, in the relatedness of the self to the other, to discourse, to a wor(l)d outside of her* self. This relatedness is reproduced and opened up in another guise within the performative space in the texture of the novelistic text but may echo beyond it. Its ethical endeavor, moreover, lies in the destabilizing proportions of dominant significations – which are not always linked to pleasure but also to pain. As an ethical, *dialogical*, instance, *affective humor* offers a double possibility – of another encounter of the self and the other, and the possibility of an another reading. In this sense, *affective humor* cannot be assigned and predicted formalistically. It is rather a singular act of and within the text and the texture of experience that means different things in different contexts and to different subjectivities. This singularity not only comprises uniqueness but also echoes the singularity of the experience of the other, as well as the experience of the self as singular. It is the touch of difference that induces sameness. Equality in difference. It may be worthwhile, then, to consider the spaces where *affective humor* touches as a poetics of non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) and powerlessness (*OhnMacht*), as an infinite rainbow loop of a future ethics that may one day appear and remain in the wor(l)d, affecting other potentialities and possibilities of togetherness . . .

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