

# Towards an Intersectional Autosociobiography

## Diversifying Perspectives on the Works of Annie Ernaux and Mely Kiyak

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### Conceptual Limits of a “*genre in the making*”

Since the translation of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009), Édouard Louis's *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014) and Annie Ernaux's autobiographical works into German, there has been considerable discussion in Germany regarding a new “*genre in the making*” (Blome et al. 2022: 12, original emphasis) which blends autobiographical and sociological writing. In academic discourse, autobiographical texts have been increasingly regarded as falling under the umbrella of autosociobiography, either because they explicitly refer to the French trio, or because they resemble these ‘founding texts’ in their form and content. As outlined in the present volume's introduction, the categorisation of these autosociobiographies typically revolves around four criteria: the autobiographical portrayal of a *transclasse* character who recounts their origin from a working-class background (see Jaquet 2014; Blome 2020), an examination of social borders in neoliberal meritocracies (see Blome 2020; Spoerhase 2022; Steinmayr 2022), a sociological approach underpinned by intertextual references especially to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (see Farzin 2019; Reuter 2020) and the representation of an individual life path as emblematic of a collective destiny (see Reuter 2020; Lammers/Twellmann 2021; Amlinger 2022).

It has not gone unnoticed that the genre debate has its pitfalls; for instance, Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, and Sarah Seidel have warned that it is prone to “the dangers of discourse constitution and premature canonisation of literary

processes" (Blome et al. 2022: 2).<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned list of criteria raises the question as to whether autosociobiography is an independent genre at all, or merely a specific "mode" of life writing.<sup>2</sup> One particularly critical aspect of the scholarly discussion so far is the tendency for these texts to be exclusively interpreted in the context of class dynamics, whereas the fact that the narrator's origin can also entail other social inequalities is often overlooked. Modalities of gender, in particular, are frequently downplayed to the extent that the literary phenomenon has been referred to as being "suspect of a male plot" (Blome et al. 2022: 10).<sup>3</sup> In her autobiographical study *Se ressaisir: Enquête autobiographique d'une transfuge de classe féministe* [Regaining control: an autobiographical investigation of a feminist class defector] (2021), Rose-Marie Lagrave, a renowned sociologist at the EHESS in Paris, has criticised this one-sided view of upward mobility. She expands Bourdieu's concept of a 'cleft habitus' (see Bourdieu 2002: 116–26), which Bourdieu uses to describe the inner conflict of not fully belonging to either the milieu of origin nor the milieu of arrival. According to Lagrave, many women in academia suffer from a double 'cleft habitus', as they are compelled to fight for their place in society twice – both as a *transclasse* and as a woman (see Lagrave 2021: 16–7). Philipp Lammers concludes that the contemplation about social structures within these texts is nuanced even more under gender aspects (Lammers 2022: 137). In addition to its perceived failure to address gendered modalities, the debate has also been accused of Eurocentric tendencies: Vanessa Thompson, for example, has drawn attention to gaps in relation to postcolonial configurations in Eribon's *Retour à Reims* and its reception (see Thompson 2020).

In light of these critiques, it seems obvious that what is called for is a more inclusive perspective on the object of study. Accordingly, I argue that 'origin' cannot be limited to 'class' in the sense of socio-economic conditions, but must also be examined with regard to other aspects such as migration, nation, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and gender. Attending carefully to autosociobiography's engagement with social distinctions and power structures, the

1 "Es lauern offensichtlich Gefahren der Diskursbegründung und vorschnellen Kanonisierung literarischer Formprozesse." Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 This distinction comes from the anglophone discussion on autofictions and has been raised by Karen Ferreira-Myers and Myra Bloom, who consider autofiction a "mode of writing" rather than a distinct genre" (Bloom 2019: 2).

3 "Darüber hinaus eröffnet diese *écriture féminine* der Autosociobiographie auch Perspektiven auf ein Genre, das eines male plot verdächtig ist."

present paper seeks to broaden the scholarly discourse by foregrounding questions of intersectionality in a very concrete sense: what intersectional entanglements characterise the various autobiographical stories, and how are they addressed in the respective texts? How does the narrative about class distinctions connect with reflections on other forms of discrimination such as racism and gender injustice? And can the genre discussion be expanded to include autobiographical texts in which power structures other than class dynamics assume a central role? In what follows, I will elaborate first on the conceptual need for an intersectional approach to autosociobiography before proceeding to a close reading of two especially pertinent works: *Les Années* (2008; *The Years*, 2017) by the above-mentioned French Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux and *Frausein* [Being woman] (2020) by the German-Turkish author Mely Kiyak.

## Beyond Class: Thinking Autosociobiographies Intersectionally

“If you’re born poor you’re fucked. But if you’re born poor and a woman then you’re genuinely and utterly fucked.”

— Kerry Hudson (2019: 22)

With these cutting words, Kerry Hudson’s *Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away, and Returning to Britain’s Poorest Towns* (2019) vividly portrays how poverty, when coupled with a female identity, gives rise to intersecting forms of discrimination. In the same vein, Marlen Hobrack shows in her text *Klassenbeste* [Top of class] (2022) that social origin cannot be viewed in isolation from other subject positions. Hobrack understands the individual as a subject characterised by its multidimensionality and writes: “The dimensions of class and identity cannot be separated in the sense of an isolated consideration of class position, gender, or origin; they overcode each other.” (Hobrack 2022: 21)<sup>4</sup> Daniela Dröscher takes a similar position in her autobiographical work *Zeige deine Klasse* [Show your class] (2018):

I am not only socialised as an ‘upwardly mobile child’ [Aufsteigerkind], but also as a woman and as the daughter of my ‘foreign’ mother. I therefore

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4 “Die Dimensionen Klasse und Identität lassen sich nicht im Sinne einer gesonderten Betrachtung von Klassenlage, Geschlecht oder Herkunft trennen; sie übercodieren einander.”

cannot help but to consider this knot of domination (Frigga Haug) of class, culture, and gender in its overlaps, given how tightly and seamlessly its strands seem to be sewn together. (Dröscher 2021: 28)<sup>5</sup>

Such reflections are not limited to these women writers – in *Retour à Reims*, for instance, the male ‘founding figure’ of autosociobiography, Didier Eribon, articulates the multidimensionality of the self by framing his social and educational ascent against the backdrop of his own homosexuality. Eribon’s desire for upward mobility is significantly influenced by his experiences of homophobia in his adolescence. Bettina Kleiner argues therefore that *Retour à Reims* constitutes an attempt at an intersectional examination of masculinity, sexuality, and class relations (see Kleiner 2020: 49–50). Unsurprisingly, many authors depict their rise from humble origins against the backdrop of a multidimensional understanding of the self: Édouard Louis likewise foregrounds his homosexuality, Saša Stanišić negotiates his Bosnian origins, and Annie Ernaux and Rose Marie-Lagrange focus on gender aspects, as do Marlen Hobrack and Daniela Dröscher, whereas Hobrack deals with an East German perspective. Although the negotiation of class is a characteristic feature of almost all the texts currently assigned to the category of ‘autosociobiography’, their autobiographical self-reflection is never limited to this one aspect. Hence, the respective protagonists cannot be reduced to their social status, but are positioned within highly complex identities.

Furthermore, the chances for an individual’s advancement by means of education is not solely governed by class-related experiences and socio-economic preconditions, but also by a myriad of other factors including gender, language, cultural origin, nationality, and health. According to Bettina Kleiner, autosociobiographies therefore point to the intersectional nature of western education systems: “Gender, social background, and natio-ethno-cultural affiliation influence such attributions of achievement and performances of achievement.” (Kleiner 2020: 60)<sup>6</sup>

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5 “Ich bin nicht nur als ‘Aufsteigerkind’ sozialisiert, sondern auch als Frau sowie als Tochter meiner ‘fremden’ Mutter. Ich kann deshalb nicht umhin, diesen Herrschaftsknoten (Frigga Haug) von Klasse, Kultur und Geschlecht in seinen Überlagerungen zu betrachten, so eng und nahtlos vernäht erscheinen mir die Stränge.”

6 “Geschlecht, soziale Herkunft und natio-ethno-kulturelle Zugehörigkeit beeinflussen solche Leistungszuschreibungen und Performances von Leistung.”

Nevertheless, autosociobiographies are often primarily understood as ‘class literature’, which is in part due to a Marxist reading of the texts. The works of Ernaux, Eribon, and Louis, in particular, are interpreted as contributions to leftist class politics and attempts to give a voice to the exploited working class (see Steinmayr 2022; Kargl/Terrisse 2020). In this Marxist discourse, the so-called ‘social question’ takes precedence over other concerns. While Marxist perspectives concentrate on macro-political mechanisms of oppression in the economic system, proponents of identity politics regard class more as one empirical form of structural discrimination among many. This view is frequently criticised by Marxists, who argue that such an approach obscures a comprehensive critique of capitalism. Conversely, Marxists’ approaches are often accused of failing to adequately address the diverse power structures within society (see Mendívil/Sarbo 2023: 109; Smith 2017).

Marlen Hobrack attempts to defuse this conflict, when she notes: “Neither a class perspective nor identity politics should be understood or instrumentalised as dogmas” (Hobrack 2022: 15).<sup>7</sup> In *Retour à Reims*, Didier Eribon also reflects on the tension between class and identity politics and questions their incompatibility:

But why should we be obliged to choose between different struggles being fought against different kinds of domination? If it is the nature of our being that we are situated at the intersection of several collective determinations, and therefore of several ‘identities’, of several forms of subjection, why should it be necessary to set up one of them rather than another as the central focus of political preoccupation [...]? (Eribon 2013: 242)<sup>8</sup>

In her much-cited essay *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* (2014), Chantal Jaquet embraces the same notion when she argues that the hierarchisation of anticapitalist, (queer)feminist, or antiracist movements leads to blindness towards complex power systems (see Jaquet 2014: 228). Considering that such reflections are in fact an integral component of many autosociobiographical

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7 “Weder eine Klassenperspektive noch eine Identitätspolitik sollten als Dogmen verstanden oder instrumentalisiert werden.”

8 “Mais pourquoi nous faudrait-il choisir entre différents combats menés contre différentes modalités de la domination? Si ce que nous sommes se situe à l’intersection de plusieurs déterminations collectives, et donc de plusieurs ‘identités’, de plusieurs modalités de l’assujettissement, pourquoi faudrait-il instituer l’une plutôt que l’autre comme foyer central de la préoccupation politique [...]?” (Eribon 2009: 245)

texts, it is really quite striking that autosociobiographies have barely been examined from an intersectional angle: most studies that analyse autosociobiographical works under inclusion of identity dimensions other than class usually take Didier Eribon as their starting point and address aspects of sexual orientation or masculinity, whereas other key aspects of individual and collective identity formation tend to be underrepresented in the academic reception.<sup>9</sup>

A particularly promising way to grasp the plural structure of autosociobiographies is to deploy the concept of intersectionality. Since the US-American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term in 1989, numerous approaches from various academic disciplines have been summarised under this keyword. Intersectional research assumes that every individual is positioned at the ‘in-intersection’ of different categories of social inequality, which mutually reinforce one another.<sup>10</sup> The original triad of class, gender, and *race* has since been supplemented by numerous other parameters. According to Helma Lutz, these ‘categories of difference’ can be summarised along the lines of the basic dualism of ‘dominated’ and ‘dominating’, and describe power relations that reveal not only discrimination and disadvantages, but also privileges (Lutz/Leiprecht 2006: 219–21; see also Schnicke 2014).

As has frequently been pointed out, this comprehensive approach is difficult to apply in practice, as not all categories can be considered at the same time and the analysis necessarily remains fragmentary and incomplete. Furthermore, it carries the risk of fitting people into rigid schemata and playing the resulting classifications off against each other. Rather than simply establishing multiple discrete categories that compete for ‘primacy’ in a given context, it is therefore crucial to investigate their *combination* (see Schnicke 2014: 9; 17). An intersectional perspective does not, then, diminish class considerations, but allows us to see how this specific factor is inextricably entangled with other modes of social categorisation.

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9 A number of recent studies have addressed individual intersections such as those of class and gender (e.g., Rieske 2020; Lammers 2022; Ernst 2022), class and sexuality (Kalmbach/Kleinau/Völker 2020), and class and *race* (Thompson 2020), but to my knowledge, no comprehensive intersectional approach to autosociobiographical texts has yet been proposed.

10 These categories are socially constructed and (re-)produce power relations. Especially the category of *race* is subject to controversy, which is why I put the term in italics (see Ruth Mayer 2013: 632).

In the field of literary studies, such entanglements can be identified, for example, through approaches of intersectional narratology,<sup>11</sup> in which narratological categories are examined for intersections. Using this approach, not only motifs, characters, and plot patterns (*story*) can be viewed intersectionally, but also the narrative mood, focalisation, and perspectivisation (*discourse*). Thinking the question “Who speaks?” or “Who represents whom?” intersectionally thus makes it possible to draw general conclusions regarding textual spaces of representation. It is from this vantage point that I will now examine Annie Ernaux’s *Les Années* and Mely Kiyak’s *Frausein*, both of which, I contend, incorporate a broad variety of social, cultural, and gender-specific perspectives that go beyond the consideration of class issues and represent complex social realities.

### **“A woman’s destiny”: Annie Ernaux’s *Les Années* as a Female Generational Portrait**

Annie Ernaux occupies a special position in the debate on autosociobiographies, as the Nobel Prize winner is often considered the founder of the literary phenomenon. Ernaux’s own poetological reflections play an important role in the interpretation of her writing: she repeatedly refers to herself as an “ethnologue de soi-même” (Ernaux 1997: 38), and in *Vers un je transpersonnel* (1993), *L’écriture comme un couteau* (2003), and *Raisons d’écrire* (2009) she clarifies her sociological ambitions. With her idea of a ‘transpersonal I’, she attempts to situate singular, individual experiences within a larger, socio-historically relevant context, lending them a collective dimension (Ernaux 2003: 80-1). Furthermore, Ernaux’s working-class background runs like a common thread through her entire *œuvre*, as do the painful recollections of class difference and the social shame she feels as a self-identified “transfuge de classe” (see Ernaux 2003: 77; Charpentier 1999; Hechler 2022).

However, the academic focus on class neglects essential aspects of the author’s work. Ernaux also writes about numerous other topics that can be summarised as experiences of female subjectivity. Heike Ina Kuhl asserts that this

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11 Intersectional narratology can be considered a development of feminist narratology and gender-oriented narratology. For an overview, see the anthology *Intersectionality and Narratology. Methods – Concepts – Analyses* (Klein/Schnicke 2014; see also Nünning 2004).

sets Ernaux's writings apart from other 'class literature': "The female context makes Annie Ernaux' work exceptional, since the remainder of the related fiction focuses on male life stories" (Kuhl 2001: 5).<sup>12</sup> Kuhl further argues that Ernaux's gender-specific life experience inevitably shapes the worldview of her characters, who have to cope with specifically 'female' issues, such as pregnancy and abortion (Kuhl 2001: 5). Siobhán McIlvanney also points out that Ernaux primarily conceives characters "which [...] center on both working-class and gynocentric concerns" (McIlvanney 2001: 2). Lyn Thomas confirms this view when she writes: "In Ernaux' work, sexuality, gender and class are inextricably linked" (Thomas 2006: 163). In light of these observations, an intersectional interpretation of Ernaux's *œuvre* is highly compelling.

Ernaux's *Les Années*, first published in 2009 and translated into German in 2017 – right after Eribon's literary success – is considered her most successful title and significantly shaped the academic discussion around autosociobiography in Germany. In *Les Années*, Ernaux recounts her life along certain biographical milestones, describing her childhood in the post-war period, adolescence in the small Norman town of Yvetot, and years of self-doubt in university before proceeding to her everyday life as a Parisian teacher, wife, mother, grandmother, and ageing woman. *Les Années* not only archives the stages of Ernaux's personal life, but also depicts French society from the 1940s to the year 2006: by weaving political events, popular expressions, and pop-cultural phenomena of each decade into her narrative, the author consistently embeds her perspective as an individual within a wider historical and political context.

In addition to Ernaux's portrayal of upward social mobility, it is above all this social impetus that has repeatedly prompted the classification of *Les Années* as an autosociobiography (see Reuter 2020: 106-7). This perception is supported by an unusual and complex narrative situation: despite its unmistakable autobiographical character, *Les Années* is not a classic autobiographical first-person narrative; instead, the protagonist is described in the third person singular with the pronoun *elle* ('she'). Furthermore, this biographical *elle* dissolves into the use of the impersonal French pronoun *on* ('one') or a collective *nous* ('we'). Not only are these pronouns used to capture time-specific moods, trends, and conventions, but they also serve to generalise singular experiences. Ernaux thus raises her individual recollections to a collective

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12 "Der weibliche Kontext der Thematik macht Annie Ernaux' Werk zu einer Besonderheit, da sich die übrige diesbezügliche Belletristik auf männliche Lebensläufe bezieht [...]"

level, as explained in a metatextual reflection towards the end of the book: “By retrieving the memory of collective memory in an individual memory, she will capture the lived dimension of History.” (Ernaux 2023: 222)<sup>13</sup>

However, a closer intersectional analysis of the impersonal pronouns *on* and *nous* makes it clear that this collective memory can by no means be understood as generic and universal, but is in fact highly specific and addresses a specific reference group. This group is primarily defined by its belonging to a certain generation, those born in the 1940s, by distinguishing it from other generations:

The media divided time into the jé-jé years, the hippie and the AIDS years. It divided people into generations. De Gaulle, Mitterrand, ‘68, the baby boomers, the digital generation. We belonged to all and none. Our years were nowhere among them. (Ernaux 2023: 209)<sup>14</sup>

Belonging to this generation goes hand in hand with an ageing process that includes reflections on remembering, as well as an engagement with one’s own mortality. While the very first sentence of *Les années* addresses the transience of individual memories with the words “All the images will disappear” (Ernaux 2023: 11),<sup>15</sup> the final sentence expresses a sentiment that is diametrically opposed to this sense of vanishing: “To save something from the time where we will never be again.” (225)<sup>16</sup> *Les années* can therefore be understood as an attempt to capture a shared cultural memory for a specific generation through a process of collectivisation.

That said, the collective reference group is also differentiated by other parameters. First, the generalising *on* provides a perspective on the social milieu in which the protagonist moves. At the beginning of the book, Ernaux explores the “simple conditions” from which she originates. The post-war years in which

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13 “Ce que ce monde a imprimé en elle et ses contemporains, elle s’en servira pour reconstituer un temps commun, [...] pour, en retrouvant la mémoire de la mémoire collective dans une mémoire individuelle, rendre la dimension vécue de l’Histoire.” (Ernaux 2008: 239)

14 “Ils découpaient le temps en années yéyé, baba cool, sida, divisaient les gens en générations de Gaulle, Mitterrand, 68, baby-boom, numérique. On était de toutes et d’aucune. Nos années à nous n’étaient pas là.” (Ernaux 2008: 225)

15 “Toutes les images disparaîtront.” (Ernaux 2008: 11)

16 “Sauver quelque chose du temps où l’on ne sera plus jamais” (Ernaux 2008: 242).

the protagonist grows up are described as poor and deprived. In several passages, the social status of her parents is primarily characterised by a lack of possessions:

Nothing was thrown away. The contents of chamber pots were used for garden fertilizer, the dung of passing horses collected for potted plants. Newspaper was used for wrapping vegetables, drying shoes, wiping one's bottom on the lavatory. (Ernaux 2023: 37)<sup>17</sup>

In her youth, the protagonist experiences a change of class. Thanks to her good grades and a scholarship programme, she gains the desired access to university. This marks the beginning of a process of “intellectual gentrification” which involves “breaking with her origins” (Ernaux 2023: 113):<sup>18</sup> after a visit to her parents, she realises that she has “gone over to the other side” (82)<sup>19</sup>.

In addition to this educational development associated with a detachment from her parental home, the protagonist undergoes a fundamental politicisation during her studies, embracing socialist perspectives and left-wing academic conventions:

We who had remained with the Parti Socialiste Unifié to change society now discovered the Maoists and Trotskyists, a vast quantity of ideas and concepts surfacing all at once. Movements, books and magazines popped up everywhere, along with philosophers, critics, and sociologists: Bourdieu, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Chomsky, Baudrillard, Wilhelm Reich, Ivan Illich, *Tel Quel*, structural analysis, narratology, ecology. (Ernaux 2023: 100)<sup>20</sup>

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- 17 “Rien ne se jetait. Les seaux de nuit servaient d'engrais au jardin, le crottin ramassé dans la rue après le passage d'un cheval à l'entretien des pots de fleurs, le journal à envelopper les légumes, sécher l'intérieur des chaussures mouillées, s'essuyer aux cabinets.” (Ernaux 2008: 39)
- 18 “embourgeoisement intellectuel” and “rupture avec son monde d'origine” (Ernaux 2008: 117).
- 19 “Elle est passée de l'autre côté [...].” (Ernaux 2008: 87)
- 20 “Nous qui en étions restés au PSU pour changer la société, on découvrait les maos, les trotskistes, une énorme quantité d'idées et de concepts d'un seul coup au grand jour. Sortaient de partout des mouvements, des livres et des revues, des philosophes, critiques, sociologues: Bourdieu, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Chomsky, Baudrillard, Wilhelm Reich, Ivan Illich, *Tel Quel*, l'analyse structurale, la narratologie, l'écologie.” (Ernaux 2008: 106)

The fact that the protagonist positions herself to the left of the political spectrum is also evident from her attitude towards the numerous historical events referred to in the text: she experiences the election of the socialist presidential candidate François Mitterrand in 1981 as a liberation and sympathises with various communist movements. On the narrative level, too, the use of the personal pronouns *on* and *nous* establishes an affiliation with this reference group of politically like-minded individuals, positioning the collective 'we' within a distinct political horizon. This self-placement is complemented by a bourgeois-intellectual lifestyle, characterised by various status symbols that indicate cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1983: 231-7): the single-family house in the wealthy outskirts of Paris, contemporary furnishings, a 'tasteful' clothing style, bookshelves loaded with representative significance. The collective 'we' thus refers not only to a specific generation, but also, as a result of the protagonist's social ascent, to the bourgeois habitus of a left-leaning intellectual elite.

Although the narrative doesn't explicitly address the fact that it also involves a *White* social class, the socio-cultural context allows clear conclusions to be drawn. Political events such as the Algerian War and debates on migration are repeatedly framed from a non-migrant perspective. In numerous passages, the narrator looks 'from the outside' at migrant individuals, as in this passage about the residents of Parisian working-class suburbs, situated in the mid-1980s:

The 'intercultural dialogue' boiled down to an appropriation of their way of speaking, an aping of their accent, reversing letters and syllables as they did, saying *meuf* for *femme* and *tarpé* for *pétard* (joint). They had been given a collective name, *les Beurs*, which referred all at once to their origins, skin colour and way of speaking [...]. There were a lot of them; we didn't know them. (Ernaux 2023: 139)<sup>21</sup>

In this quote, the generalising 'we' is constructed in opposition to "*les Beurs*", a colloquial and derogatory term for French citizens whose parents or grand-

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21 "Le 'dialogue des cultures' se résumait à s'approprier leur parler et à singer leur accent, à inverser les lettres et les syllabes comme eux, dire une meuf et un tarpé. Ils avaient reçu un nom collectif qui signifiait tout à la fois leur origine, leur couleur de peau et leur façon de parler: les Beurs. [...] Ils étaient nombreux, on ne les connaissait pas." (Ernaux 2008: 155)

parents originated from North Africa.<sup>22</sup> This juxtaposition of ‘us’ and ‘them’ establishes a dichotomy between two ethnic groups, effectively conceptualising the text’s ‘we’ as a *White* collective. At the same time, the narrator’s use of the collective pronoun suggests that what is being described is the dominant narrative in the overarching historical context. By evaluating narratives of this type as dangerous or by employing distancing elements such as the subjunctive, the narrator subsequently problematises them; and although the protagonist’s own privileges based on ethnicity and skin colour are not explicitly acknowledged, the subtext is clear.

Annie Ernaux’s specific conception of the generic *on* becomes most apparent through the category of gender. The narrator consistently addresses questions of gender and sexuality. The protagonist’s childhood and adolescence is determined by traditional role models and rigid Catholic morals, which are imposed with particular severity on girls and women. In the context of autosociobiographies, it seems remarkable that the traditional role models and gender-specific expectations of the 1940s and 1950s are portrayed as the major driving force behind the protagonist’s social advancement. Similar to Didier Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* and Édouard Louis’ *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, where homophobic experiences are described as a key impetus for fleeing one’s hometown, the protagonist in *Les années* hopes to emancipate herself from dictated norms of femininity by moving away. She not only associates her studies with the opportunity to be better off financially, but also as a chance to escape traditional gender roles:

It seems to her that education is more than just a way to escape poverty. It is a weapon of choice against stagnation in a kind of feminine condition that arouses her pity, the tendency to lose oneself in a man, which she has experienced (cf. the school photo from five years before) and of which she is ashamed. She feels no desire to marry or have children. Mothering and the life of the mind seem incompatible. (Ernaux 2023: 83)<sup>23</sup>

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22 The term *Beur* comes from the youth language Verlan and is formed by reversing the syllables of the word *arabe*. It has since been partly superseded by the double inversion *rebeu*, which is still criticised as stigmatising.

23 “Plus encore qu’un moyen d’échapper à la pauvreté, les études lui paraissent l’instrument privilégié de lutte contre l’enlèvement de ce féminin qui lui inspire de la pitié, cette tentation qu’elle a connue de se perdre dans un homme (see photo de lycée, cinq ans avant), dont elle a honte. Aucune envie de se marier ni d’avoir des enfants, le maternage et la vie de l’esprit lui semblent incompatibles.” (Ernaux 2008: 88)

The gender roles of Annie Ernaux's home environment thus play a crucial role in the pursuit of social ascent, proving to be just as significant as her protagonist's will to escape from material deprivation. This link between class and gender is reinforced by the recurring motif of shame, a shame that not only concerns class, as is often assumed, but also sexuality and womanhood: "She is unwilling to say her parents run a café-épicerie, ashamed that she is haunted by food, that her period has stopped, that she doesn't know the meaning of *hypokhâgne*, that she wears an imitation suede jacket." (Ernaux 2023: 73)<sup>24</sup> Specifically female issues are mentioned here in the same breath as the protagonist's economic circumstances and her lack of connections to the French higher education system. Feelings of shame also accompany her sexual development, which takes place in secret. The young woman is constantly worried about pregnancy; contraception and abortion are omnipresent subjects. Recalling these memories, the narrator combines individual and collective experiences by using the generic *on*, which, in a passage referring to the *Manifeste des 343*, is revealed as a stand-in for 'women':

We would not remember the day or the month, only that it was spring and that we had read in *Le Nouvel Observateur* the names of 343 women who stated they'd had illegal abortions – so many, yet we'd been so alone with the probe and the spurting blood. (Ernaux 2023: 105)<sup>25</sup>

A remark in which the narrator differentiates between poor and rich women, the latter of whom could obtain an abortion in Switzerland, further highlights the distinct interdependencies of gender and class in this context, framing illegal abortion as a class-specific traumatic experience (Ernaux 2023: 82).

Gender-related issues continue to play a significant role in the final quarter of *Les Années*, in which the protagonist reflects on the compatibility of work and family life as a mother and wife. The ageing female body is another prominent subject: for example, Annie Ernaux thematises menopause and breast cancer,

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24 "Elle a honte d'être hantée par la nourriture, de ne plus avoir ses règles, de ne pas savoir ce qu'est une hypokhâgne, de porter une veste en suédine et non en vrai daim." (Ernaux 2008: 77)

25 "On ne se souviendrait ni du jour ni du mois – mais c'était le printemps –, seulement qu'on avait lu tous les noms, du premier au dernier, des 343 femmes – elles étaient si nombreuses et on avait été si seule avec la sonde et le sang en jet sur les draps – qui déclaraient avoir avorté illégalement, dans *Le Nouvel Observateur*." (Ernaux 2008: 111)

an affliction “that seems to burgeon in the breasts of all women her age” (Ernaux 2023: 218).<sup>26</sup> Crucially, these topics are not negotiated in the form of individual experiences, but described as emblematic of the ageing of an entire generation of women.

In summary, we can conclude that *Les Années* explicitly foregrounds the aspect of gender through the format of collective biography. Annie Ernaux’s concern is to depict a specific generation of women, sharing their memories of past gender dynamics, misogynistic restrictions, and feminist emancipation, and thereby writing what the text itself refers to as “a kind of woman’s destiny” (Ernaux 2023: 148).<sup>27</sup> As far as the *story* is concerned, Annie Ernaux deploys numerous motifs that are explicitly linked to the female body, such as gender roles, sexual desire, menstruation, abortion, motherhood, care work, and breast cancer. On the level of *discourse*, meanwhile, the focalised *elle* repeatedly expands into a collective *on* or *nous* that denotes a female collective. As Sarah Carlotta Hechler has astutely pointed out, the impersonal *elle* of the narrative thus entails a “quality of her existence interchangeable with that of other women of her generation” (Hechler 2020).<sup>28</sup>

The collective potential of the text is primarily enabled by a specific combination of experiences shaped by class, *race*, gender, and generation. Isabelle Charpentier even sees in *Les Années* a form of a “social destiny of a social class, a generation and a generation of women” (Charpentier 2014: 90).<sup>29</sup> All told, *Les Années* does not merely present a generic panorama of society as a whole, as has often been claimed, but weaves diverse subject dispositions into a specific and multi-layered collective portrait.

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26 “cancer qui semblait s’éveiller dans le sein de toutes les femmes de son âge” (Ernaux 2008: 235).

27 “Parce que dans sa solitude retrouvée elle découvre des pensées et des sensations que la vie en couple obnubile, l’idée lui est venue d’écrire ‘une sorte de destin de femme’ entre 1940 et 1985, quelque chose comme *Une vie de Maupassant*, qui ferait ressentir le passage du temps en elle et hors d’elle, dans l’Histoire [...]” (Ernaux 2008: 158)

28 “une qualité interchangeable de son existence avec celle d’autres femmes issues de sa génération.”

29 “une forme de destin social épistémique à la fois d’une classe sociale, d’une génération et d’une génération de femmes”

### **“I’m one of those Ali daughters”: Frausein as a Migrant Transclasse Story**

In contrast to the frequently discussed *Les Années*, Mely Kiyak’s *Frausein* [Being woman]<sup>30</sup>, published by Hanser Verlag in 2020, has not yet been examined in the context of autosociobiography. Kiyak chronicles her childhood in Germany as the daughter of Turkish-Kurdish migrant workers, her adolescence between two countries, and the arduous path towards establishing herself as a writer. As the book’s title suggests, Kiyak primarily addresses questions pertaining to womanhood. However, her social and educational background likewise play an important role in her autobiographical writing.

*Frausein* is designed as an autodiegetic first-person narrative. The frame story is formed by the author’s eye disease, which results in an almost complete loss of sight. Based on the traumatic experience of nearly going blind, the first-person narrator describes memories from her childhood and youth in retrospective analepses. The opening sections of the book delve into the narrator’s origins in the northern German city of Sulingen: her mother is a cleaner in the local courthouse, while her father works shifts in a factory. The labour not only allows the narrator’s parents to provide financially for their family, but it is also closely linked to their residence status: they are *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) who came to West Germany in the 1970s in the wake of the country’s recruitment agreement with their native Turkey. The parents’ social position has a major impact on their views regarding the education of their daughter: “In the family, the instruction was to leave the world of the parents. You were supposed to move up and be better off” (Kiyak 2021: 29).<sup>31</sup> Encouraged by her loving parents, the protagonist starts university after graduating from secondary school. She is the first in the family to study. As in the autosociobiographies of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, and Édouard Louis, Mely Kiyak’s ‘educational success’ is described as a process that goes hand in hand with a certain alienation from the family environment. Access to university occasions momentous shifts in the relationships between family members:

My entry into the university means admiration, prestige, pride, and exclusion. A very distant relative announces: You are no longer one of us. She

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30 The book has not yet been translated into English.

31 “In der Familie galt die Anweisung, die Lebenswelt der Eltern zu verlassen. Man soll aufsteigen und es besser haben.”

means it as a compliment. Of course I'm one of you, I try to negotiate my way back into the bosom of the family in horror. You ought to be glad, she said, you're something better now, I wish I was in your place. (Kiyak 2021: 82)<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the path of education itself turns out to be rocky: the young woman feels out of place at university, drops out, and finally applies to study creative writing in Leipzig. She experiences many barriers in accessing the cultural sphere: "The term *literary industry* [Literaturbetrieb]<sup>33</sup> put me back into my place. A place with the people for whom industry [Betrieb] is synonymous with noisy, smelly machinery spaces and working in shifts." (Kiyak 2021: 95)<sup>34</sup> These obstacles notwithstanding, Kiyak eventually undergoes a change of milieu with her studies and subsequent success as an author and journalist.

But it is not only this upward social mobility that allows for clear parallels to be drawn with the abovementioned autosociobiographies. The collective and socially critical dimension of *Frausein*, which Kiyak explains in a metatextual passage about her writing, also speaks to the spirit of the *transclasse* genre:

My experiences accidentally turned my writing into political writing. It wasn't something I set out to do. Writing happens in the hope of realising something. Writing is sorting and making visible, an attempt to establish a relationship between oneself and the world. (Kiyak 2021: 103)<sup>35</sup>

It is precisely this "relationship between oneself and the world" that runs like a common thread through Kiyak's literary self-exploration. Based on her own

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32 "Mein Eintritt in die Universität bedeutet Bewunderung, Ansehen, Stolz und Ausgrenzung. Eine sehr entfernte Verwandte verkündet: Du bist keine mehr von uns. Sie meint das als Kompliment. Natürlich bin ich eine von euch, versuche ich mich entsetzt in den Familienschloß zurück zu verhandeln. Sei doch froh, sagte sie, du bist jetzt etwas Besseres, ich wäre gerne an deiner Stelle."

33 "Literaturbetrieb" refers to the literary and cultural sector, while the term "Betrieb" invokes a factory or company setting.

34 "Das Wort *Literaturbetrieb* verwies mich zurück auf meinen Platz. Ein Platz bei jenen Leuten, wo Betrieb das Synonym für einen Maschinenraum mit Lärm, Gestank und Schichtsystem ist."

35 "Meine Erfahrungen machten aus Versehen aus meinem Schreiben ein politisches Schreiben. Das war nichts, das ich mir vornahm. Schreiben geschieht in der Hoffnung, dass man etwas erkennt. Schreiben ist Sortieren und Sichtbarmachen und der Versuch, sich in ein Verhältnis zur Welt zu setzen."

experiences, the narrator compares herself with (supposedly) normative values and social stereotypes. In this process, she also situates herself in a collective frame of reference: the daughters of German-Turkish *Gastarbeiter*.

Kiyak's *transclasse* story cannot be imagined without her parents' migration from Turkey. In this case, 'origin' not only has a class-political dimension, but is also closely linked to ethnic, cultural, and religious factors. Accordingly, the text foregrounds the economic status of the protagonist and her family, but also their experiences of discrimination and the lack of permeability of German social hierarchies. In no uncertain terms, the narrator criticises how *Gastarbeiter* and subsequent generations of migrants are persistently sequestered to their 'social place': "From the perspective of German society, one is expected to remain who and, above all, where one is." (Kiyak 2021: 29)<sup>36</sup> To further illustrate this social hierarchisation, Kiyak draws on the example of Günter Wallraff, a German journalist who, over the course of two years, posed as a Turkish casual labourer by the name of Ali Levent Sinirlioğlu in order to document the abject living conditions of migrant workers in his book *Ganz unten* (1983, *Lowest of the Low* 1988). Here, too, the narrator's commentary is sharp-tongued:

Although Wallraff himself came from a working-class background, he was so shocked by the humiliations he experienced that he did not call his book *low*, *half-low*, or *middle-low*, but: *lowest of the low*. We were assigned to the very bottom. Someone had dressed up as 'us', simulated our lives, and reported about it. (Kiyak 2021: 17)<sup>37</sup>

Even as a young girl, the protagonist realises that Wallraff has described her own situation: "One read, marvelled, and had to digest: I am one of those Ali daughters. The insignificant child of insignificant parents." (Kiyak 2021: 17)<sup>38</sup> By using the impersonal pronoun *man* ('one') – again, much like Ernaux – Kiyak indicates that this is a shared experience. At the same time, her protagonist resents the fact that the living conditions of her community are narrated by a

36 "Aus Sicht der deutschen Gesellschaft soll man bleiben, wer und vor allem wo man ist."

37 "Obwohl Wallraff selbst aus kleinen Verhältnissen kam, entsetzten ihn die erlebten Erniedrigungen derart, dass er sein Buch nicht *unten*, *halbunten* oder *mittelunten* nannte, sondern: *Ganz unten*. Wir wurden am niedrigsten Punkt verortet. Jemand hatte sich als 'wir' verkleidet, unser Leben simuliert und mitgeteilt."

38 "Man las, staunte und hatte zu verdauen: Ich bin eine dieser Ali-Töchter. Das unbedeutende Kind unbedeutender Eltern."

non-member. Through the juxtaposition of 'we' and 'someone', she differentiates between social groups and positions herself within the reference group of migrant workers, with the reflexive pronoun 'us' in the second sentence further emphasising this sense of communal consciousness. Later, the collective 'we' is specified by distinguishing between the generation of the parents and that of their descendants born in Germany:

Suddenly, all the toil of the guest worker generation made sense. At one stroke, the entire pain and humiliation were paid off, because we, the daughters, turned the hardships of our ancestors into gold. [...] The rise of their daughters compensated them for everything. (Kiyak 2021: 32)<sup>39</sup>

This 'we' not only encompasses the social status of a second-generation migrant, but also the aspect of gender. At many points, there is explicit mention of *Gastarbeitertöchter* (daughters of guest workers), and social mobility is considered chiefly from a female perspective. Issues of gender, class, and *race* also intersect in the narrator's statement that "[b]eing a cleaner is the reference point for everything" (Kiyak 2021: 41).<sup>40</sup> Poorly esteemed and poorly paid, this occupation is presented as a powerful impetus for striving 'upwards' and hence as a motor for educational success. A similar intersectional entanglement becomes manifest in the feelings of shame experienced by the young female protagonist: "I am embarrassed. I am embarrassed of my origins, my family, my body, my inaptitude, my fears, the lack of words, the emptiness, my desire, of absolutely everything." (Kiyak 2021: 75–6)<sup>41</sup> As in *Les Années*, social, cultural, and sexual shame merge in a general lack of self-esteem.

The discrimination experienced by the protagonist's community only adds to her feeling of unease. Like many daughters of guest workers, she develops a sense of belonging neither in Germany nor in Turkey: "We were outsiders in every way. In the new homeland and in the old homeland. By origin, lan-

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39 "Auf einmal ergaben sämtliche Mühen der Gastarbeitergeneration Sinn. Alle Schmerzen und Demütigungen waren auf einen Schlag abgegolten, weil wir, die Töchter, die Strapazen unserer Vorfahren in Gold verwandelten. [...] Der Aufstieg ihrer Töchter entschädigte sie für alles."

40 "Das Putzfrausein ist der Referenzpunkt für alles."

41 "Ich geniere mich. Geniere mich für meine Herkunft, für meine Familie, für meinen Körper, für mein Unvermögen, meine Ängste, für die fehlenden Worte, die Leere, meine Biege, für einfach alles."

guage, and also religion.” (Kiyak 2021: 89)<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu's notion of a ‘cleft habitus’ could be expanded here to include cultural, national, religious, and ethnic affiliations. Analogous to the figure of the *transclasse*, those affected find themselves in a painful in-between: the social system makes it difficult for them to fully integrate into their new environment. At the same time, they do not feel like a complete part of their society of origin.

As the narrative progresses, however, a process of emancipation is outlined by which the protagonist increasingly frees herself from social constraints. The question of what kind of woman's life she wants to live becomes increasingly urgent. Unlike those around her, the protagonist decides against pursuing the kind of family life in which her job would play a subordinate role. In writing, she finds the independence for which she has long yearned. Detaching herself from external attributions empowers her to say ‘I’ and to tell her story. *Frausein* therefore does not simply narrate a *transclasse* story, but above all describes a process of emancipation from multiple, intersecting social constraints.

No surprise, then, that the narrative of ‘educational success’ is questioned towards the end of the book:

Making it. I can't hear it anymore. You're always supposed to achieve something. And when you are where you're supposed to be, what happens next? What about dignity? Why doesn't female dignity play a role? Why did no daughter of a foreign cleaning lady dare to show the dignity of her path, to talk about it? The dignity of failure, of insecurity, of endless fear. The dignity of not being seen. The dignity of shame. This isn't a glamorous story, not a story of ascent, but one of descent into hidden corners. (Kiyak 2021: 117)<sup>43</sup>

In *Frausein*, Mely Kiyak thus demonstrates that the autosociobiographical narrative of ascent can follow a trajectory that is anything but straightforward.

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42 “Wir waren in jeder Hinsicht Draußenstehende. In der neuen Heimat und in der alten Heimat. Durch Herkunft, Sprache und auch Religion.”

43 “Es schaffen. Ich kann das nicht mehr hören. Immer soll man etwas schaffen. Und wenn man da ist, wo man hinsollte, was kommt dann? Was ist mit der Würde? Warum spielt die weibliche Würde keine Rolle? Warum traute sich keine Tochter einer ausländischen Putzfrau, die Würde ihres Weges zu zeigen, darüber zu sprechen? Die Würde des Scheiterns, der Unsicherheit, der unendlichen Angst. Die Würde des Nichtgesehenwerdens. Die Würde der Scham. Das ist keine Glanzgeschichte, keine Geschichte von Aufstieg, sondern eine vom Abstieg in verborgene Winkel.”

Although Kiyak's milieu of origin is thematised as the starting point, the narrated life path cannot be thought of as one-dimensional – rather, factors such as ethnic origin, womanhood, illness, and authorship are just as significant as class considerations. From this perspective, *Frausein* is first and foremost a story of emancipation. Yet it is precisely the “hidden corners”, the personal anecdotes and complex entanglements, that lend this autobiographical self-exploration its specific shape. I therefore concur with Alexandra Senfft when she argues that *Frausein* shows “that identity is not a fixed, immutable entity, but the result of emancipatory processes that operate between the poles of contradictions in the face of which clichés and prejudices collapse.” (Senfft 2020)<sup>44</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Over the course of my examination of Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* and Mely Kiyak's *Frausein*, it has become evident that an intersectional reading is fundamental to understanding these texts: *Les Années* must be read as a *White* female generational portrait, and *Frausein* can only be understood in the context of German-Turkish *Gastarbeitertöchter*. In both narratives, it is precisely the intersections of gender, *race*, and class that not only structure the experience of social mobility, but crucially *shape* the desire for ‘social ascent’. As I hope to have shown, these interdependencies are integral to the personal and social emancipation of the protagonists; they influence their opportunities, ambitions and life paths.

The application of an intersectional methodology undoubtedly presents problems – be it with regard to the mapping of analytical categories onto literary texts, the definition of the categories themselves, or the impossibility of considering all such categories simultaneously. Nevertheless, the underlying concept of differentiated subjects not only helps to grasp the complexity of texts summarised under the label of autosociobiography, but it also calls into question their simplistic labelling as ‘class literature’. The one-sided celebration of these texts in existing scholarship and the German cultural *feuilleton*

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44 “Anhand ihrer eigenen Biografie zeigt Kiyak, dass Identität keine feststehende, unveränderbare Entität ist, sondern das Ergebnis emanzipatorischer Prozesse, die sich im Spannungsfeld von Widersprüchen bewegen, denen gegenüber Klischees und Vorurteile in sich zusammenbrechen.”

as important contributions to class politics should therefore be viewed with caution and replaced with a more nuanced assessment.

Just how productive a broadening of the critical horizon can be, has already been demonstrated in Kalmbach et al.'s *Eribon revisited* (2020), a volume that engages thoroughly with aspects of gender and sexuality and places a special focus on the role of affects like shame. Another intriguing exploration was undertaken by Christina Ernst in her article "*Transclasse und transgenre: Autosociobiographische Schreibweisen bei Paul B. Preciado und Jayrôme C. Robinet*" (2022), in which she applies the aspect of the *transclasse* experience to two texts that describe a gender transition and criticise social constructions of gender within Western societies. While both these publications constitute a significant move away from a one-dimensional understanding of the genre, an intersectional perspective goes even further by opening up the genre discussion to queerfeminist and post-migrant perspectives. As I have shown with my reading of Mely Kiyak's *Frausein*, such an approach makes it possible to discuss texts under the label of autosociobiography that have not previously been considered within this theoretical framework. Such an intersectional approach brings us closer to appreciating the full complexity of narratives about origin and 'social ascent' and to questioning these concepts at the same time.

Hence, in keeping with the express intention of this volume, we should be mindful of the criteria according to which some texts are perceived as autosociobiographical whereas others are not. This necessarily involves a critical reflection of the researcher's own role in the 'doing' of genre. Assigning the term autosociobiography – in the sense of a synthesis of autobiographical and social-analytical writing – only to those texts that address class can lead to problematic exclusions and entails a questionable hierarchisation of socio-political concerns. In this context, it is also important to examine how this literary phenomenon can be meaningfully differentiated from other autobiographical forms of life writing (especially those established by women) such as autofiction or autotheory. Against this backdrop, an expanded intersectional research perspective can help to counteract the premature canonisation of autosociobiography and to question its definitional framework.

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