Alienation in Christian Schmacht's *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* (2017)

Ivo Zender

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I revisit Marx's concept of alienation within the context of contemporary trans literature, specifically focusing on Christian Schmacht's *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* (2017). Schmacht portrays the experiences of his protagonist and narrator Chrissy, who earns his living as a sex worker, while also grappling with his trans identity. Through this literary work, I explore how alienation intersects with the unique struggles of trans sex workers in a capitalist society.

Fleisch mit weißer Soße conveys Chrissy's experiences over the course of one year in the form of a fragmentary diary. Chrissy is a white trans man, working in a Berlin brothel under his female persona, Leonie. The difficulties of living in a capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal, racist, ableist and femme-phobic society, leave him feeling deeply isolated, depressed and alienated from everything and everyone. His improving mental state towards the narrative's end, however, raises questions about the potential for regaining agency.

Rooted in the affective, literature serves as an ideal tool for deepening our understanding of alienation. Through the act of reading, it allows us to emotionally explore how capitalism intersects with oppressive structures such as race, gender, sexuality or disability. As a form of art, literature sensually captures the embodied experiences of individuals, revealing the affective currents that impact workers' bodies and reflecting the realities of contemporary capitalism through language and narrative.

While the term 'alienation' can be traced back to thinkers like Rousseau and Hegel (Jaeggi 2014: 6), it is most prominently linked to Marx's theory of capitalist society (ibid: 11). Marx explored how workers become disconnected from the

products of their labour, which then exert control over their lives "as something hostile and alien" (Marx 2005 [1844]: 295). As a social relation, the capitalist mode of production, however, not only impacts the connection between workers and their products but also their relationships with themselves and others. While capitalism has evolved since the industrial era, the concept of alienation still remains pertinent today due to the enduring divide between those who control the means of production and those who have only their labour power to sell.

Yet, as many scholars have pointed out, Marx does not offer us a theory of how alienation structurally interlinks with experiences of oppression (Fanon 1952; Said 1978; hooks 1984; Hall 1986; Spivak 1988; Crenshaw 1989; Federici 2004; Fraser 2014; Faye 2021; Gleeson/O'Rourke 2021; among others). To make Marx applicable for my reading of *Fleisch mit weißer Soße*, I will first provide an overview of his conceptualisation of alienation. I then incorporate Rahel Jaeggi's contemporary reinterpretation, which sheds light on alienation as an inherent part of human existence, with individuals continuously shifting between losing and (re)gaining control over their lives.

Through an analysis of Schmacht's text, my aim is to reframe alienation as a lived experience shaped by oppression. I argue that there is a sort of alienation which uniquely impacts trans individuals due to the oppressive constraints of a cisheteronormative framework of gender. I assert that the lens of alienation provides an effective approach to reading trans literature and also a powerful method for literary analysis from a trans-Marxist[1] perspective.

2. Alienation from Marx (1844) to Jaeggi (2014)

The term alienation has a long philosophical history both within Marxist and non-Marxist literature. Offering a genealogy and comprehensive analysis is not the purpose of my analysis.[2] Instead, I will reflect on whether we can make

1 I build here on more recent attempts to articulate a trans-Marxist theory. See, for example, Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke's *Transgender Marxism* (2021) and Lia Becker's article "Schnitte durch die zweite Haut" (2022).

2 I would refer interested readers to Jaeggi's chapter titled "A Short History of the Theory of Alienation", where she traces the origins of the term back to Rousseau (Jaeggi 2014: 6–10).

Marx's concept of alienation fruitful for a reading of the experiences of trans (sex) workers under capitalism.

Marx introduces the term alienation in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* written in 1844, published in 1932, taking it up from his bourgeois predecessors, but expanding it to include the aspect of estranged labour. By highlighting class as the central social relationship, Marx underscores the historically specific exchange-mediated structure of capitalist society which consists in the generalisation of the commodity form. Understanding alienation as a social phenomenon that stems from this specific organisation of society, Marx distinguishes between: 1. alienation from the product of labour – workers no longer have any relation to the product of their work; 2. alienation from the process of production – work no longer represents the satisfaction of a need, but instead turns into 'estranged labour'; 3. alienation of people from their 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*)[3] which lies in the self-determined processing of the material world; 4. alienation from one another – each person evaluates and perceives others based on commodified terms (cf. Marx 2005: 297–300). Marx's theory of alienation, however, should not be misread as a moralistic critique of capitalist society. He does not suggest that we should return to some former, unalienated state of being, an anthropological constant of sorts. Rather, his account of alienation is to be understood dialectically in that it suggests that alienation can also hold an emancipatory potential if workers become collectively organised as a political subject to reappropriate the products of their labour.

While Marx does not systematically explore the affective dimension of capitalism, his thoughts on alienation do touch upon aspects of the worker's affective experience. For instance, he describes how in the context of estranged labour the worker "does not affirm himself but denies himself, *does not feel content but unhappy*, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (ibid: 297; my emphasis). This affective dimension makes alienation an apt subject for literary analysis as, in literature, the affective undercurrents of alienation can both be depicted in a nuanced way

3 Marx's species-being is characterised by the performance of non-alienated labour as a self-determined, conscious activity, "free from physical need" and "in accordance with the laws of beauty" (Marx 2005: 299–300). In this understanding, the process of actively interacting with and shaping inorganic matter to create objects is central to defining the essence of human beings, but estranged labour reduces "man's species-life" to a mere "means to his physical existence" (ibid. 300).

and brought to resonate with the reader. As literary characters contend with feelings of alienation, they become relatable as embodied, socially interconnected and acting entities. Literature enables us to perceive socially mediated alienation from an individual's perspective and thus sheds light on the interconnection of the individual and the social.

Accordingly, Jaeggi understands alienation as a ruptured relation of the self to the world, a disruption of our capacity to appropriate and act in the world (cf. Jaeggi 2014: 1–2). While drawing on Marx's understanding that "alienation from the world implies alienation from oneself" (ibid: xxi), Jaeggi defines alienation as "a relation of relationlessness" (ibid: 1) which does not consist in "the absence of a relation but is itself a relation, if a deficient one" (ibid.). When feeling alienated, relations with oneself and others still exist, but they lack or significantly diminish the sense of relatedness and connection, identification, belonging or agency.

Rejecting both the widespread idea that alienation entails a lost essence of being human that needs to be regained[4] and the equally common notion that the opposite of alienation is reconciliation or a "unity free of tension" (ibid: 2), Jaeggi suggests that alienation can best be understood in relation to the term "appropriation". Appropriation refers to an ongoing process in which the subject is able to actively and productively engage with its existence, interpersonal connections and the world by integrating and transforming that which is given (ibid: 1). The opposite of alienation would then be the capacity to "*establish[…] relations* to oneself and to the relationships in which one lives" (ibid: 33; emphasis in original). It is, Jaeggi stresses, "a certain way of *carrying out* one's own life and a certain way of *appropriating oneself*" (ibid.).

However, for those facing oppression that goes beyond their status as workers, the act of (self-)appropriation may prove even more difficult. Although Jaeggi does conceptualise alienation as a "relation of domination" (ibid: 22) and problematises the constraining effects of social "conventions"

4 Marx's critique that capitalism inhibits the realisation of a certain species-being has given rise to conservative, humanist, anthropological and/or ahistorical interpretations which "emphasize the loss of connection to a given meaningful order" (Jaeggi 2014: 23). Bourgeois philosophy therefore tends to draw on the young Marx to criticise 'immoral' social conditions while at the same time disconnecting him from the idea of class struggle and the necessity of revolution against bourgeois class society.

(ibid: 67),[5] her analysis, like Marx's, does not explicitly address the intersecting experiences of oppressive structures. Yet, I argue that trans individuals face a distinct rupture in their relationship with themselves and the world within a capitalist society which is not only based on the commodity form but simultaneously deeply entrenched in a cisheteronormative matrix of gender. The demand to conform to a binary gender presentation according to one's gender assigned at birth often leads trans individuals to feelings of heightened self-consciousness, worries about external perception and rejection, insecurity, isolation, anxiety, bodily hyper-awareness, and exhaustion from the constant need to explain and justify oneself.

As "distress […] stemming from the incongruence between experienced gender identity and the sex assigned at birth" (Coleman et al. 2022: 59), these affective phenomena are often referred to as *Gender Dysphoria*. While replacing the term *Gender Identity Disorder* (DSM-5), *Gender Dysphoria* still retains a diagnostic framework that pathologises transness as a psychopathological disorder needing cure. Moreover, these terms primarily attribute the origin of the experienced distress and the responsibility to solve this distress to the individual. In reframing these experiences as manifestations of a ruptured relation to the self and the world, my intention is to understand transness from a structural, contextualised perspective as "a lived engagement with relations of violence and power" (Becker 2022).[6] In my analysis of *Fleisch mit weißer Soße*, I reconsider these lived experiences as negotiations of alienation, focusing on forces that amplify or alleviate it and exploring strategies for addressing it.

3. Alienation in *Fleisch mit weißer Soße*

The narrative opens by depicting a lack of agency in the face of something relatively ordinary. Chrissy wakes up from a nightmare and becomes aware of a rustling sound in his room. Not being able to find the source of the rustling, he retreats into the guest room for the rest of the night. When coming back the next morning, he feels totally overwhelmed and conflicted by the thought that a moth could have died in his room: "I lie on the bed and contemplate – a moth

5 While rightly considering conventions as "(normalizing) influence" (Jaeggi 2014: 67), Jaeggi, peculiarly, only mentions childcare and marriage as examples without addressing broader societal conventions like heterosexuality or cisgenderedness.

6 All translations of Becker 2022 are made by the author.

has died in my room. I was lying there. I did not want it to die. But i didn't want it to rustle in my room either" (Schmacht 2017: 4; my translation[7]). The rustling sound serves as a reminder of the persistent presence of external factors that affect Chrissy's life, reinforcing his feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to act. The conflicting emotions Chrissy experiences – not wanting the moth to die but also not wanting it to disturb his personal space – underscore his internal struggle to reconcile his desires with the realities of the situation. The situation described conveys a sense of powerlessness and the feeling that life is happening to him beyond his control.

In the subsequent chapters, it becomes clear that Chrissy feels alienated from everything and from almost everyone. He feels alienated from his work, his family of origin, his friends, his flatmate, his partner and he also feels alienated from the gender assigned to him at birth and his body. The title of the book speaks for itself by pointing towards an objectification of and an alienation from the sex working body, which appears as mere meat, garnished with white sauce as a metaphor for sperm. Although seemingly being able to employ a healthy sense of detachment from his wage labour, Chrissy experiences alienation both from the product and from the process of his work. While working, Chrissy's mind drifts away, rendering him mentally absent: "I go to work, lie under a guy, but think of a colleague who has just told me about the violence she has experienced. She is tender, smart and loving" (ibid: 54). Chrissy also feels alienated from his coworkers and customers, mostly because of their political mindsets ("They are pleased with the afd's result" (ibid: 15)) or intrusive cisheteronormative questions ("Are you into men or women?" (ibid: 4)). But he also feels alienated from those coworkers with whom he could possibly have a better connection, since one is trans and the other one a leftist, but instead "I talk and talk, but skyler doesn't understand me. Nor does franka" (ibid: 69).

When Chrissy goes to work, he continually has to (re-)transform his testosterone induced body "from a hairy queer something into the soft curves of a money maker" (ibid: 9). He faces the pressure and discomfort of having to remove ever more hair from his body (ibid: 49): "I have to shave all over my body.

7 *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* was published in 2017 in German, with no English translation available yet. The title could be translated to English as *Meat with White Sauce*. All subsequent quotations of the text are translated to English by the author. In my translations, I aimed to retain the consistent use of lowercase letters as found in the original German, including words like 'i' and people's names.

I hate it" (ibid: 9). In the context of his work, he is annoyed by the cisheteronormative expectations directed towards his body and the cisheterosexual white gaze by which his body is interpreted and assessed, and which does not correspond to his self-image:

> How I see my body is different from how others see it. My body remains invisible when they talk about the body i present to them. They talk about pure, white skin, snow white, the witch or the seductress; they love natural beauty and very specific parts of the body. I look at the ceiling and count the money. (ibid: 19–20)

Chrissy describes a gap between 'my body' and the 'presented body'. The 'presented body' is there for others to project their fantasies on within a racist and cisheterosexist meat market. It is "a satisfaction machine for friends and strangers" (ibid: 18). 'My body', in turn, refers to Chrissy's queer body, which remains invisible. But as a politically educated subject, who knows about the alienating effects of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc., Chrissy takes a pragmatic approach towards bodily commodification. He owes to 'his body' that it is able to present itself as 'a body', as material on a meat market, and understands his body as a means "to make money" (ibid: 5) in a society where "our bodies do not belong to us" (ibid: 10). Therefore, Chrissy does not expect life as a trans sex worker under capitalism to be anything other than alienating: "I do not feel indignation, because I am a materialist" (ibid: 45). His work, instead, provides him with time and money to spend on other projects: "Only thanks to the brothel I have the time to write. The time to think. The time and the energy to organise" (ibid: 72). After all, he does not see a more efficient way to earn money: "I don't want to do a job that is more strenuous than this one and pays less" (ibid: 21). Chrissy even tries to form a union once, but the project is quickly dropped because his coworker fears being fired.

Neither romanticising nor demonising sex work, Chrissy highlights the economic reasons behind his engagement. He embraces a feminist-Marxist perspective that regards sex work as work and acknowledges it as an "actively chosen preference to other forms of employment" (O'Connell Davidson 2014: 519). Likewise, Molly Smith and Juno Mac point out that "people sell sex to get money. This simple fact is often missed, forgotten, or overlooked" (Smith/Mac 2020: 46).

While acknowledging sex work as a profession in need of reasonable working conditions, it's still distinctively stigmatised and highly gendered work,

making sex workers especially vulnerable to capitalist exploitation. Chrissy's experiences reflect these intersections of capitalism and gender, particularly through the process of feminisation:

> In the brothel, i introduce myself. Again and again, a hundred times, like growing up as a girl in fast forward, day, night, day, night, door opens, hi, a smile, leonie, hello, a flutter of the eyes, my hand, coquetry, shyness. (Schmacht 2017: 15)

It becomes evident that Chrissy sells femininity, yet this paragraph also underscores the temporal, highly repetitive nature of his work. On the one hand, time and temporality are crucial for Chrissy's narrative as he is trying to reconcile gender transition with the capitalist temporality of embodied commodities. Transitioning towards a more masculine body while presenting himself as feminine at the same time, forces Chrissy to negotiate a fundamental contradiction.[8] Right at the beginning, Chrissy states that he "*still* has a body with which to make money" (ibid: 5; my emphasis). At another moment, Chrissy is wondering: "Who knows how much longer i can play this double game here. Passing – i refuse to think about that" (ibid: 21). Chrissy and Skyler, torn between the pressure to market their physical appearance and their desires to transition, assume that they "only carry around passably marketable bodies with the help of [their] underwear" (ibid: 77).

On the other hand, Chrissy emphasises the uniformity of capitalist labour: "The temperature is always the same. The light is always the same. The music is always the same. Everything is always the same. Time stands still […] because every day is the same. All days are the same. The farm of the days, some are more equal" (ibid: 61). In *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx emphasizes that a significant factor contributing to alienation is that "constant labour of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flow of a man's animal spirits, which find recreation and delight in mere change of activity" (Marx 1996 [1867]: 346). By creating an environment devoid of meaning, capitalist labour appears intricately linked to depression. Remarkably, however, the text's twelve chapters follow a chronological

8 The feeling of contradictoriness is continuously expressed throughout the text, for example, when Chrissy says "I am tired and awake at the same time" (ibid: 95) or when there is "dirt, even if freshly cleaned" (ibid: 8). This means that here, an understanding of capitalism is embraced, which interprets it as an experience of tension, ambiguity, and contradiction.

structure based on months, countering capitalist timelessness with chronology. Chrissy claims that "through writing, i have the illusion of being able to bring the flow of time under my control" (Schmacht 2017: 60). He imposes a structure of time onto his writing to safeguard his sense of time from slipping away, ultimately facilitating self-preservation by reconnecting him with social life.

Although *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* does not appear as a typical trans narrative, the motif of the wrong body is certainly present: "My body: In the bathtub i think, please cut off my breasts, i think, don't listen to my voice, it's a joke. I want to be different, i was born in the wrong body, etc." (ibid: 55). Chrissy finds it challenging to see himself in photos or in the mirror (ibid: 50) and feels sad when thinking about his body (ibid: 62). At one moment, he even wishes to get back to "when it didn't matter – who i am, how others see me" (ibid: 48). The topos of the mirror addresses the optical dimension and the gaze, following Jean-Paul Sartre's conceptualisations of 'the look' (Sartre 2018 [1943]: 347–408). The gazes both of others and himself significantly hinder Chrissy from feeling comfortable, as these gazes make him aware of his body and his being, exerting an objectifying and expropriating influence. Being seen, Sartre explains, is "the alienation of myself" and "implies the alienation of the world I am organizing" (ibid: 360–361). But equally, Chrissy grapples with a feeling of not being seen and recognized. This is evident when his coworker Selina assumes people are attracted to either men or women, or at most both, without considering other spectra of desire. Similarly, when the brothel owner opens the door to a masculine presenting Chrissy, while rationalising him back into womanhood (ibid: 74). Or when the customer Jürgen offers Leonie/Chrissy a career in film and they decline because "the real reason, not working as an actress, however, is that i am not a woman, but a man, but would probably not be cast for a male role" (ibid: 32).

Chrissy is literally illegible to others because they cannot recognise and therefore cannot acknowledge him. But rather than "gaining a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms" (Butler 2004: 3), Chrissy seems to prefer a strategy of estrangement and social withdrawal. Through the continuous experience of misrecognition, however, Chrissy distances himself from the world which impairs his sense of belonging (cf. ibid.). No wonder, Chrissy feels sick and depressed (ibid: 5), empty (ibid: 6), in pain (ibid: 7), suffers from migraine (ibid: 9), does not sleep or eat (ibid: 18), or, at least, is "thankful and sad at the same time" (ibid: 22).

4. The Text's Body – Schmacht's Autofiction

Alienation is not only a popular topic of modern philosophy, but also a common aesthetic theme in literature. Most prominently, we can think of Dada and the Surrealists, Beckett's, Kafka's and Brecht's aesthetics, Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942), or Ramón del Valle-Inclan's concept of *Esperpento* as an aesthetics of distortion, first developed in his play *Luces de Bohemia* (1924). The Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky considers alienation, or estrangement, "the most vital capacity of art" (quoted from Dickson 2021: 206). Art is able to change the reader's perception of the everyday, estrange it and let the observer/reader see reality differently. Therefore, Dickson conceives estrangement – both in the context of art and gender transition – as a potential to form new relations with the world and thus for social change (ibid: 207).

Fleisch mit weißer Soße intertextually refers to other works of literature. For Chrissy, a source of connection lies in the solace found through reading literature: "Christa wolf carries me a little way through the fear. You hold my hand, most of the time" (Schmacht 2017: 14). Another time, literature becomes a medium of mutual recognition:

> For the first time i read schernikau[9] and am electrified – is he like me? Does he understand me? Am i like him? Are there more of our kind? But he is dead and even his writing has not stopped the malignant course of the steamroller of capitalism. He says: What does the revolutionary artist do without the revolution? Well, art. […] I had to become 28 to know that this author existed, who died of aids at 31, who is a look into the mirror and into the future and into the past. I exist! Proof: he existed. (ibid: 41–42)

Chrissy reflects on his own process of writing as allowing him to take a necessary distance, while at the same time intensifying his presence in the world: "I observe and that feels like more than life when you are in the middle of it" (ibid: 60). Ultimately, writing serves him as a counteragent against being silenced:

> Lies that portray our lives differently than they really are are, after all, the instruments of patriarchy; I must somehow confront them SOMEWHERE BUT

9 Schmacht's use of lowercase letters might be influenced by the gay communist writer Ronald M. Schernikau who became famous with his book *Kleinstadtnovelle* (1980).

> HOW can i counter them? Tell my story, because whose else, relate it to the story of others. (ibid: 24)

The paratext labels *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* as an 'autobiographically inspired novella'. Due to its lack of clear fictional markers and its appearance as 'authentic', it initially prompts readers to establish an autobiographical pact of truthfulness (cf. Lejeune 1975). However, the main fictionalisation resides in the author's name itself, unveiled as a pseudonym by the German magazine *Der Spiegel* (2019).[10] By employing rhyming invocation and estrangement, the pseudonym takes on added significance as it establishes a parodic reference to the name of the well-known cis-male German contemporary author, Christian Kracht. Similar to a drag name, Schmacht constructs an authorial persona that simultaneously alludes to and questions the relationship between originality and imitation for the context of authorship and authorial enunciation. By invoking Kracht, Schmacht acquires authorial voice and inscribes himself into a German literary discourse.[11]

Using a pseudonym, however, is also a common practice in sex work to ensure privacy. Moreover, in light of the "excessive industry obsession with 'authentic' trans stories and figures" (Mozer 2020: 18), writing 'authentically' as a trans sex worker would require disclosing private information and fostering immediacy and intimacy with one's readers. Schmacht, however, rejects the readers' desire for a 'true story' of a trans sex worker and instead highlights the challenges faced by marginalised individuals when sharing personal experiences in public. The challenge of speaking publicly as a trans sex worker and embodying authorship becomes especially evident when Chrissy compares himself to Jacqueline Frances, a cis, white stripper, which, according to Chrissy, puts her in "the more respectable corner of the industry" (Schmacht 2017: 64). The observation that Frances can promote her books with her face and her body (ibid.) and "can tell a story that is tangible and comprehensible

10 This article, published on August 5th, 2019, in *Der Spiegel* was authored by Schmacht himself. Previously, Schmacht had also already been known as the author of a perennial column about sex work in the German pop feminist magazine *Missy Magazine*.

11 It could be argued that by depicting the experiences of a trans man, Schmacht introduces another marginalized form of masculinity to the non-hegemonic masculinities present throughout Kracht's body of work (cf. Dinger 2021: 291). Akin to Dinger's characterisation of Kracht, Schmacht's enactment of authorship is likewise marked by a mode of reserve, distance, and absence (ibid.: 220). Lastly, the theme of alienation is undoubtedly relevant for much of Kracht's work as well.

for others" (ibid.) makes Chrissy feel "small and invisible" (ibid.). He suspects readers are drawn to his text for "all the dirty details" (ibid: 65) whereas he aims to shield himself from voyeurism. Being a trans sex worker, he refrains from promoting his book with his body, knowing that others perceive it differently than he does (ibid: 19). In opting for Christian Schmacht as the name of an authorial persona without public appearance, Schmacht chooses to deprive his readers of an author's body altogether. Instead of a physical presence revealing gender cues, there is only the text, but no body to be read for gender.[12] The withdrawal of the author's body can thus be seen as an opposing response to the expectation to embody authorship in a binarily gendered manner as well as to the particular experience of consistently being embodied as both a transgender and sex working subject.

In this manner, *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* highlights the factual while rejecting authenticity and intimacy. The use of a pseudonym functions as a strategic form of estrangement and self-multiplication, allowing the writer to retain control over the text, avoid exposure and resist the commodification of a marginalised experience for the pleasure of voyeuristic readers. Feeling too vulnerable to engage in an autobiographical discourse of truthfulness, the autofictional, in turn, becomes a textual shelter to explore (in)visibility by offering a protective barrier against exposure, objectification and exoticisation.

5. Existence

By consistently emphasising the term 'existence', Chrissy expresses his determination to resist societal erasure and affirm himself in the text: "I feel like telling stories because I feel like existing" (ibid: 65). The practice of writing and the practice of existing become fundamentally intertwined, making writing a form of existing: "As long as i write, i prove to myself that i exist, that i am complete, not a satisfaction machine for friends and strangers" (ibid: 18).

A central tension in Chrissy's narrative is his desire for relatability, especially when he compares himself to Frances. He laments not feeling as relat-

12 Yet, there is a body, or rather two, to be seen on the cover of the book. It is the duplication of the same human being who is wearing a wig, long nails, lipstick and 'feminine' underwear one time, a binder, shaved hair, a 'masculine' necklace, 'masculine' underwear and money the other. It might be tempting to assume that this individual is the author, but without confirmatory paratextual information it remains unclear.

able as Frances but simultaneously claims to write solely for self-preservation: "I write for myself because i want to and sometimes because i have to; to uphold myself. Or to hold" (ibid: 16). The verb 'to relate', however, encompasses both establishing a connection and providing an account. While his main intention for writing is supposedly self-directed, Chrissy, by giving an account of his existence, may still hope that his readers can relate to him, much as he did with Schernikau. This hope suggests that writing and publishing inherently carry an element of relatability, which, in turn, bears the potential to acknowledge and affirm one another's existence through reading.

However, Chrissy's narrative clearly demonstrates the challenges of existing and relating as a trans person within a cisheteropatriarchal capitalist society. Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2016), Lia Becker speaks of transphobia acting "like a permanent hammering that makes the self fragile" (Becker 2022) and considers that "'[n]ot to be housed by gender, to be homeless through gender' (Ahmed 2021, 158) makes it necessary to fight, to insist on one's existence, to be persistent" (Becker 2022). Chrissy persists in his being by writing and insisting on his existence on the page. His act of writing becomes a form of resistance against the alienating forces of cisheteropatriarchal capitalism, involving shared emotional processing and mutual affirmation of existence as essential for connecting with others. After nearly a year, he feels less fatigued and experiences moments of happiness (Schmacht 2017: 76). In the final chapter, he even starts a promising friendship with Melli (ibid: 90). But while ending on a positive note, *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* does not conform to a neoliberal narrative of overcoming depression (cf. Davis 2013: 66) or triumphing over alienation. Instead, it provides a nuanced exploration of a trans sex worker's experiences in capitalism which encourages readers to reflect on the significance of mutual affirmation, care and collective resistance against structural oppression.

6. Conclusions – Owning Gender

In a capitalist society, establishing connections and owning one's life can prove to be challenging and, may at times seem outright impossible. Nevertheless, these connections are vital for political organisation. *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* reflects a yearning for both interpersonal connections and broader social and economic transformations. By acknowledging and articulating the experience of alienation in the act of reading and writing, Chrissy reclaims a sense of existence and belonging.

In terms of gender, Chrissy experiences dysphoria when he is addressed as female while working as Leonie. Turning to Jaeggi, however, makes it possible to read Chrissy's alienation as the result of living within various systems of oppression – economic, social and epistemological – that hinder the unfolding, livability and flourishing of transness, femininity and gender nonconformity. Chrissy's choice to embody Leonie during work hours is a pragmatic strategy to navigate the need to make a living. Similarly, the choice to embody the authorial persona Christian Schmacht is a strategic choice to navigate the expectations of a capitalist book market directed towards trans sex workers to speak intimately about themselves. The embodiment of multiple names and personas thus mirrors the complexity of gender, which does not fit into a binary heteronormative capitalist framework of unambiguity.

With Jaeggi, the process of gender transition itself can be understood as a negotiation of alienation by departing from the gender assigned at birth and appropriating another. "The concept of alienation," Jaeggi says, "concerns itself with the complex conditions of 'linking' one's actions and desires (or, more generally, one's life) with oneself, 'counting them as due to' oneself, or making them '*one's own*'" (Jaeggi 2014: 35; my emphasis). Applying Jaeggi's perspective on transness, the process of transitioning is not seen as the discovery and pursuit of an inner truth; instead, it can be viewed as a response to a profound sense of alienation combined with a desire to transform that which is given to make one's gender one's own.

At the same time, Butler reminds us that "what I call my 'own' gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author" (Butler 2004: 1). Consequently, as "one does not 'do' one's gender alone" (ibid.), gender cannot be a fixed or given identity, but is an ongoing process and a shared exploration of self-presentation and realisation with others. Reading trans narratives through the lens of alienation reveals gender transitions as "an embodied, pleasurable and painful, contradictory *work* of *unlearning hegemonic and appropriating* new ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (Becker 2022; emphasis of 'work' in original, rest mine).

In the past, trans people predominantly shared their stories through autobiographical accounts, often referred to as 'body narratives', as Jay Prosser described these accounts due to their focus on "stories of bodies in sex transition" (Prosser 1998: 4). Prosser argued that narrative is essential for healing "the rupture in gendered plots" (ibid: 9). In a deliberate departure from the

conventional transition narrative, *Fleisch mit weißer Soße* blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction while inhabiting differently gendered personas. Nonetheless, it remains a body narrative by resolutely addressing the challenges of trans embodiment. Similar to autofiction's blend of autobiography and fiction, Chrissy skilfully navigates different embodiments, purposefully inviting differently gendered pacts of reading. By taking authorship of both his narrative and his body, Chrissy embraces and claims the multiplicity of gendered embodiment. When he goes out with friends in wigs and "slutty schoolgirl costumes" (Schmacht 2017: 104), he taps into "the power that drag can bestow" (ibid.) and feels "alive, unpredictable, strong" (ibid: 105). Chrissy not only embraces the embodiment of multiple genders, but also explores femininity as a trans man, reflecting a desire to exist in complexity.

Consequently, Schmacht does not portray transness as a rupture in gendered plots in need of healing. Instead, the text succeeds in depicting Chrissy's complex relationship with his body within a capitalist cisheteropatriarchal society. The split that Chrissy encounters is not between different genders nor embodiments but rather between normative and nonnormative ways of living gender and desire, between the marginalised and the norm, between visibility and invisibility, between workers and capitalists. Through autofiction, Schmacht's body narrative does not heal a rupture in gendered plots but embraces this rupture in order to challenge forms of domination in contemporary capitalism.

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