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Competitive Words: Identity Counts in Large Amounts

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This essay argues that central assumptions underlying identity politics in literary writing—inclusion, visibility, diversity—are progressive in character. Yet in conditions of social precarity, literary writing and especially literary discussions that derive progressive potential from identity claims involuntarily and inevitably act under the aegis of neoliberal progressivism (as critiqued by Nancy Fraser and many others). Caution about identity politics (rather than its outright rejection) is a necessary minimum in response to the corruption inherent in the systemic placement of literature. When literary discussions, and this does not just mean scholarly research but also literary critique, book presentations and discussions in different reading groups and book clubs, fall short of this critical minimum, they risk missing that common and universal feature of the general intellect upon which revolutionary ideas of emancipation and solidarity once rested. Following Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen's study of the *imperial mode of living*, this essay examines the phenomenon of what I call 'literary identity politics'—namely the implementation of identity politics *in* and *through* literary writing—in terms of the interval between literature's efforts to right the wrongs of exclusion and its simultaneous entanglement in the system of global injustice.

What has been termed the "identity politics" of oppressed social categories should be treated as an integral element within a broad emancipatory politics rather than a matter of secondary concern. The task for progressive anticapitalists attempting to build a politics intended to erode the dominance of capitalism is to include explicit reform programs that recognize these identity-interests and connect them to the agenda of eroding capitalism, especially through actively valuing equal access to the social and material conditions necessary to live a flourishing life.

Erik Olin Wright,
How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century (2019, 116)

1. Introduction

A number of texts are recognized by our contemporary literary system as important agents in societal learning processes because they have an explicit, or perhaps at times implicit, identity agenda. Consider Maja Haderlap's *Engel des Vergessens* (2011), Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Synchronicity* (2015), Fatma Aydemir's *Ellbogen* (2017), Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019), Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021), Tomasz Jędrowski's *Swimming in the Dark* (2020), or polemical interventions by Reni Eddo-Lodge (*Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, 2017) and Angélique Beldner (*Der Sommer, in dem ich Schwarz wurde*, 2021). With the requisite pinch of benevolence, it can be said that the assumption underlying identity politics in literary writing is a progressive one. Its progressiveness rests on explicit or assumed support for broader social efforts to move society toward greater inclusion, and thus greater equality, than the inherited models handed down to us by, in Corinne Kaszner's words, "historically engrained systems of oppression" (Kaszner 2022, 5). At the same time, when speaking of the politics of literary writing, one cannot ignore the fact that literature constitutes a sphere of production that has its specific place, responsibility and agency in the complex fabric called 'society.' Since literary texts contain, both as social products and as artistic artifacts, superficial layers and their hidden, less accessible implications, readers are obliged to a multifocal engagement with the written word. This engagement not only reveals what is said, but also confronts what is hidden. Thus, if literature is a place where "subjectivity and conditions meet and produce each other" (Steffens 2022, 353), then the task of understanding the specificity of literary identity politics (in contrast, for example, to identity politics in social movements, in government policies or in employment strategies) is to read the interstices between the progressive agency of individual literary texts (self-declared or ascribed) and the uncomfortable compromises that literature must make in order to become visible in the literary system and in the general public sphere. Having this in mind,

my essay first explores the progressiveness of identity politics in and through literary writing (sections 2 and 3), and then turns to its uncomfortable limits (sections 4 and 5). These limits arise, I claim, from the material conditions of literature, i.e. its position and function in the system of cultural production that both sustains and is sustained by what Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen call the *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2017).

In political theory, 'identity politics' is a term used to describe non-governmental strategies and governmental policies aimed at redressing the plight of excluded and marginalized social groups who owe their disadvantaged position primarily to their ethnic and racial backgrounds and gender orientation. While identity politics understood in this way has been accepted and even appropriated by broader social structures (management structures of universities, publishing houses, corporations), its image in the field of literary studies and philosophy, however diverse and complex, is different. Although the advocates of the "radical diversity"[1] do not cease to emphasize that identity politics is much more than bureaucratic measures aimed at counting, managing and controlling social subjects, the critics continue to understand identity politics, and the underlying idea of identity, as diametrically opposed to the philosophical presuppositions of equality and the concept of existence. Peter Fenves, for instance, contrasts identity with existence: If identity requires or institutes "a self-subsistent subject who, having secured its own unity, constitutes a unified world, which can then assure it of its identity and location in space," (Fenves 1993, xvii) existence means "being unable to give oneself a ground and thereupon to secure the unity, identity, and constancy that every question of essence—'What is that?'—presupposes." (Fenves 1993, xxiii) Similarly, Todd May argues that equality, as opposed to identity, "does not assert another identity against the identity given to it by the police order." (May 2012, 166)[2] Finally, Anis Shivani's critical account of multiculturalism exposes the myopic belief that rethinking cultural identities leads directly to the dismantling of class discrepancies. He argues against the truism that "once you cease to stereotype a marginalized group as inferior, then economic doors will open up for that group." (Shivani 2017) Aside from the fact that inclusion so understood is highly selective and also reserved for the best (and privileged) among the new or different, this assumption also leads to a distorted view of literature and art as "the prime vehicles through which to accomplish this goal." (Shivani 2017)

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[1] Kaszner defines the concept of radical diversity as "point[ing] to the necessity of questioning the very mechanisms of how otherness is conceptualized in relation to a norm." (Kaszner 2022, 15)

[2] It "expresses no identity whatsoever, but only its own equality." (May 2012, 166)

In contrast, the advocates of identity politics understand identity not in opposition to but precisely as a precondition for diversity and plurality. For them, a politics based on this idea of identity—namely *identity politics*—is not a "simple affirmation of group identities." Rather, it is "the basis for political agency." (Kaszner 2022, 5) Understood in this way, the 'identity' in 'identity politics' is not identical with the identitarian "relapse into mythology" that Theodor W. Adorno warned against (Adorno 1966, 263).[3] Undoubtedly, the thesis that the assertion of an identity coincides with its absolutization comes true whenever an individual or collective subject simply asserts itself without complicating its own position, or when there are no other field agents to do this complicating in place of the supposedly unencumbered subject—by means of disagreement and challenge, dispute and confrontation. Whether we sympathize with it or not, the contemporary epistemological environment in which "everything counts" (and I return below to Depeche Mode's 1983 critique of the 'inclusivity' as designed by corporate culture) sustains a multiverse that allows for different positions ranging from strategic identity politics to identitarian and fascist projects. Despite the fact that some of the identities in this multiverse tend to deny even the right of existence of all the various others,[4] there might still be hope that the legal and systemic framework of liberal democracy can preserve its own fundamental openness to multiplicity. In this framework, a diversity of positions and identities is expected to not only effectively destabilize the totalizing narratives of masculinity, majesty, and majority (by confronting them with genders, multitudes, and minorities of all kinds), but also enable a multiplication of viewpoints that would change the picture of the whole. However, when this facilitation is limited to a formal procedure and guarantee by laws, but denigrated in social praxis, identity politics not only arouses skepticism but, moreover, appears as a mask that helps to disguise the system of social privilege and exploitation.[5] In his recent study of "improper politics" (which refers to politics that succumbs to what is proper, both in the sense of what is one's own and

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[3] "What remains the same as itself, pure identity, is bad; timeless, the mythical doom." ("Was sich selbst gleichbleibt, die reine Identität, ist das Schlechte; zeitlos das mythische Verhängnis." Adorno 1966, 126).

[4] The 'identity politics' of far-right movements remains beyond the scope of this essay—not for reasons of its irrelevance (a growing trend in this sort of writing most certainly needs circumspect analysis, see for instance Boucher), but based on the focus of this special collection on "thematis[ing] the lives and experiences of marginalised groups." (Call) It is implied in the Call for this special collection that identity politics does not include identitarian phenomena and focuses on those literary texts which are recognized as acting in support of plurality, diversity and, finally, liberal democracy.

[5] One of the most impressive, classic examples in this respect is Amazon's *Inclusion Playbook*. It leads to the setting of quotas for the production and casting of all films produced by Amazon, which ultimately leads to actors being forced to explicitly define their identity according to the criteria of "race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability (including mental health), body size, gender, gender identity, and gender expression." (Amazon Studios 2021) At the same time, this standard completely disregards the social dimensions of inclusion. The author thanks the editors for this reference.

what one owns), Mark Devenney exposes this uncanny dispositif of (neo-)liberal identity politics: Neoliberal identity politics casts itself as the extension of civil rights to all, while in fact it is only "the other face of economic inequalities sustained and deepened with the outsourcing of government, and the withdrawal of welfare support. Neoliberalism thus articulates the left's insistence on civil equality and freedom with a market logic that recognises no prejudices other than one's fitness to prevail in a competitive market." (Devenney 2020, 139–40)

To sum up, both proponents and critics agree that identity politics is fraught with a fair amount of hypocrisy, which is in fact a hypocrisy of the entire regulative framework through which it is constituted. This regulative framework welcomes and institutionalizes identity politics as a form of liberal emancipation compliant with the rule of law, democratic procedures and liberties; however, because individual identities are expected to prevail in a market of ideas while competing with other identities, practically they are prevented from achieving full and unconditional recognition. That is why the hypocrisy of identity politics is basically its systemically conditioned incapability to deliver what it promises. It is as if any demand for equality and freedom is inevitably overtaken by the economic inequality, which it seeks only to conceal. Thus, a discussion of literary identity politics—which is the implementation of identity politics *in* and *through* literary writing—cannot do without a deeper interrogation of literature's economic and political enablers.

Far from rejecting the principle of identification altogether (for how else could politics speak to and mobilize its subjects?), this essay acknowledges the arguments of both sides. It attempts to move the discussion out of the dilemma between the politics of the real (identity politics as possible under neoliberalism) and the radical imagination which dares to operate on a universal level: It recognizes that a literary text, regardless of its original commercial or non-commercial destination, can only circulate within the prevailing social order as defined by the logic of capital (material or symbolic). This is the starting point from which in the final section I sketch the contours of the actual power of fiction beyond its social blindness on the one hand and its supposed radicality on the other.

In the given context, literary writing and especially literary discussions that derive progressive potential from it are involuntarily and inevitably part of neoliberal progressivism as critiqued by Nancy Fraser and many others.[6] Thus, caution about literary

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[6] With the adjective 'progressive,' I refer to Fraser's critique of "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser 2017a): The term designates "an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end 'symbolic' and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other." For a controversy around Fraser's intervention, see Brenner 2017; also Fraser 2017b.

identity politics (rather than its outright rejection) is a necessary minimum in response to the potential corruption inherent in the systemic placement of literature. When literary discussions—and I argue below that these do not just mean expert debates—fall short of this critical minimum, they risk missing that common and universal feature of the general intellect upon which revolutionary ideas of emancipation and solidarity once rested.[7]

2. *The handshake seals the contract*: An Old-New Constellation of Production Forces

The modern notion of literature emerged in Europe around 1800, when the development of the free market coincided with the creation of a literary public sphere in the contemporary sense of the word.[8] Ever since, those parts of literary production that could rely on the support of private capital (the bourgeoisie provided for the livelihood of writers from or aligned with their own class, Mattick 1993, 177) or on public funding in the second half of the 20th century developed into an autonomous or semi-autonomous social subsystem.[9] Literary sociologists commonly agree on the illusory character of this autonomy i.e. on its ongoing dependence on the markets, which remained determining for literary production even in the perhaps golden welfare-state era after the Second World War (Amlinger 2021, 136–268). Today, this intimate connection between the social life of literary writing and the market as the hand that feeds it seems to be entering a new—"post-autonomous"—state (Eiden-Offe 2023). The precarious social life of literary writing today recalls the by large forgotten "commercial" (originally a thoroughly pejorative attribute, see Mattick 1993, 152, 171) literary work of writers who came primarily, but not exclusively, from the lower and middle classes and

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[7] In "Identity Politics and the Left," an essay which today presents a classic leftist summary of identity politics since the 1960s, Eric Hobsbawm reminds us that "the mass social and political movements of the Left, that is, those inspired by the American and French revolutions and socialism, were indeed coalitions or group alliances, but held together not by aims that were specific to the group, but by great, universal causes through which each group believed its particular aims could be realized: democracy, the Republic, socialism, communism or whatever." (Hobsbawm 1996, 42)

[8] Caroline Amlinger, who focuses on German conditions in her study of literary labor, dates the emergence and development of the modern literary market in Germany to the period between 1871 and 1918 (Amlinger 2021, 56–135). In contrast, the literary market in England and France was already established around the middle of the 18th century. Other European literary markets remain unmentioned in her book.

[9] The workings of this autonomization of literature also had far-reaching consequences for literary theory, or "Theory." See Schüttpelz 2023, esp. 142–65. For a reordering of priorities of Theory after the decline of the welfare-state era, see North 2017, 204.

were dependent on periodic income. Delivering an enormous amount of unpaid and unsubsidized labor, they inevitably had to orient themselves to popular taste and sales figures and in this sense were far less autonomous than the canonized image of modern literature would have us believe. Inevitably belonging and constituting the life-world of commodities, literature today is similarly bound to explicitly or perhaps only tacitly approve of the economic system from which it is unable to detach itself. In this old-new constellation, the literary subsystem ceases to be, and consequently ceases to understand itself as an intact sphere of creativity. With the ongoing destabilization of the liberal-democratic equilibrium, which has been fostered by overarching social crises related to the Covid-19 pandemic, climate catastrophes, wars, and migrations, this is even more the case.

Literary identity politics reacts to and reflects upon these social crises insofar as it actively participates in civil society, political movements and public arenas that enable the cultural recognition of marginalized groups and even, however prospectively, advocate for alterations in the overall (political, legal, economic) system that impact them. Judged by the standards of modern literature, the politics of contemporary literature is, therefore, inevitably an impure politics: When it raises claims in the name of margins, it simultaneously compromises itself. Any more radical questioning of the hands that feed it would bring its own existence into question, and thus also disconnect it from audiences that are increasingly seized by the market logic. This may be the reason why it is not welcomed by the adherents of literary world-making and social criticism based on the modern idea of aesthetic autonomy of art and literature—a residual idea still prevailing in the academic world. But this elitist repulsion is not my point here; rather, I am arguing that there is a gap between the self-declared or ascribed progressiveness of literary identity politics and the dire conditions related to the material existence of literary writing. This gap produces noise that is, however, often deliberately silenced so that writing can be heard at all.

Before returning to these dire conditions in the final section of my essay, I want to point out another noisy phenomenon buzzing in the title and the subheadings of this text—Depeche Mode's song "Everything Counts" (1983). Inspired by the more radical sound of German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten, from whom it takes its "cruel tension between man and machine," (Heller 2011) "Everything Counts" articulates something that sounds like a parody of corporate culture and, paradoxically, like its eulogy. In a retrospective account of this song, Jason Heller addresses the ambivalence of Martin Gore's capitalism bashing, claiming

> Depeche Mode still wanted to succeed on capitalist terms. And the group wasn't try-
> ing to hide it. Absolving himself of responsibility even while playing both sides, Gore
> used "Everything Counts" to cast Depeche Mode as a self-aware automaton slaving
> away within the omnipotent mechanism of industry—and himself as a cog within
> that automaton. (Heller 2011)

It remains unclear whether Gore's "sociopolitical conscience" is a construct added in retrospect; however, Heller adds that "at the time, it seemed sincere" and refers to an interview in which Dave Gahan makes a distinction between singing about "something of substance" and singing "about nonsense." Most bands who are successful choose the latter, while it is also possible—given their comparatively strong position—to "write" and "sing about something of substance." Gahan formulates this as a question of responsibility, which in fact fits in well with Heller's framing of Depeche Mode as a somewhat lighter synth-pop version of Einstürzende Neubauten, even as "a Trojan horse" that does not "destroy the system from within," but rather "infect[s] it with a viral strand of pale, squishy humanity." (Heller 2011)

Coming back to specific literary infections, the hypocrisy mentioned above con-sists in literature's silence about the compromises it makes—compromises with the publishing industry as well as with the chains of critics, promotors and readers that help the books achieve greater visibility of the issues they raise and perspectives they take. In the final section of this essay, I reformulate the above-mentioned interstice between the progressive agency of individual literary texts (self-declared or attrib-uted) and the uncomfortable compromises literature makes. I also come back to the question how the troubling 'progressiveness' of the global North/West might be exposed.

3. *The graph on the wall / Tells the story of it all*: Reduction Fallacy

Despite dissatisfaction with identity politics in literary writing, which is admittedly more common among literary scholars than among producers of literature, let alone stakeholders in the publishing industry (publishers, marketers, legal experts), it can-not be said that literary texts with identity agenda simply fashion a particular identity in terms of an unencumbered, unproblematic self. Rather, the identity in question is often filtered out for 'good' marketing reasons on the covers and in other kinds of paratext. To illustrate, critical appraisals of Fatma Aydemir's *Ellbogen* rarely recognize the novel as "a provocation of the liberal majority" (Bovermann 2017). They prefer to follow the blurb, which emphasizes the author's and main character's Turkish background, her search for origins ("Suche nach Heimat") and the blunt violence depicted in the novel

("stumpfe Gewalt").[10] *Ellbogen* exemplifies at least two important moments related to literary identity politics: first, a reduction of the text's features to the question of ethnicity; second, a spillover of political and activist discourse about post-migrant communities into a critical discourse about fiction. At the same time, the working-class position of the main protagonist—a dimension of her identity shared by all ethnic groups in Germany, including the so-called 'Biodeutsche' (people with German origins)—is ignored.

"[T]he problem of contemporary literature is not literature at all," argues Florian Kessler in the German newspaper *taz.* Instead, he concludes: "The problem lies rather in the state of its criticism" (Kessler 2021). While the work of editors has been transformed in recent decades in the sense that they approach literary texts "without normative violence" (Kessler 2021) and with due respect for different reading audiences, a critique that still condemns identity politics clings to inherited aesthetic categories created by social classes that had sufficient resources to operate according to the standards of Kantian 'purposiveness without purpose.' Today, things are different in that a significant percentage of readers and critics readily accepts the perspectives and ethical demands of social struggles that are developing 'out there,' often without caring about received notions of aesthetic value. One might even say that the discourse of social media and street activism is literally spilling over into literary tastes, taking on the role of arbiter and even exercising a kind of normative violence that until recently, albeit under different auspices, determined publishing policies.

This new kind of normative violence is inflicted on texts and writers even when they do not seem to care about identity issues at all. To say that that the recognition of a particular literary agenda as 'identity politics' depends on the viewpoint and interest of the observer, and sometimes has surprisingly little to do with the text itself, is to say that texts and writers are quickly defined by critics and promoters, university teachers and researchers on the basis of their social background and place of origin, which then determine how their works are read. In this context, a phenomenon occurs that I understand as the *reduction fallacy*: The complexity of a work of fiction is emphatically reduced to a single dimension by attributing all aesthetic characteristics to the ethnicity, race, or gender. Accordingly, authors are asked by the media and critics to formulate their first-person singular in terms of a 'we.' This is inevitably a 'we' whose original polynomic capacity is both expanded and minimized to the voice of a collective that already sits in the minds of the audience as a firm assumption of a transparent and

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[10] See the blurb on the homepage of Hanser Verlage: https://www.hanser-literaturverlage.de/buch/ellbogen/978-3-446-25441-1/.

uncomplicated identity (see Dwivedi 2020, 12). In doing so, actors in the literary field act as mere performers of an "identity check" based on a person's assumed characteristics (ancestry, race etc.) (Kaszner 2022, 10). Thus, they become guilty of bureaucratizing literary discourse and, simultaneously, of failing to do what literature does best: represent and create plurality.[11]

Illustrative is the case of Saša Stanišić's autobiographical novel *Herkunft* (2019; trans. *Where You Come From*, 2021), which playfully, self-deprecatingly and open-endedly depicts the layers of identity as constructed by the narrator's significant others (grandmother, parents, distant relatives and friends) (see Balint and Popović 2023). At a public reading at Heidelberg University, moderated by Jagoda Marinić (director of the Heidelberg Intercultural Centre), the complexity of the German word 'Herkunft' as "origin, ancestry or provenance" (Evers 2021) was however downplayed to an entertaining transposition of the notorious everyday question, 'Where do you come from?' (Stanišić 2020). The author was hailed not only as a fresh winner of the German Book Prize (2019), but also as someone who has mastered the arduous path to success in his 'new' homeland. Stanišić, however, did not show any ambition at this public event to challenge the meritocratic phantasy according to which those who are industrious become worthy enough to develop into full-fledged German citizens. Instead, he stepped up to prove that immigration can be a success story and that foreigners can even be included in the literary canon of the native culture. Simultaneously, he concealed the fact that the canon unfolds according to socially highly selective standards and is downright hostile to the idea of radical diversity.[12]

The risks of the reduction fallacy grow as the activist articulation of voices from the social margins gains prominence. Here, the fallacy is not only in the assumed identity with predefined collectives, but rather in reducing fiction to a textbook from which readers might distil yes/no answers to the questions raised by human rights and diversity activists. Similar as when a literary text is reduced to the author's origin or identity, the literary critique here reads fiction as an illustration of the experience of margins and revolt—and thus enforces another one-dimensional malapropism of the written word. Sometimes, criticism even demands that fiction act in concert with

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[11] This problem has been pointed out by different authors and in various contexts: In the U.S. context, Anis Shivani (2017) singles out the moral standards of identity politics as a hypocritical entry point into higher social ranks. In the German context, Baßler (2022) similarly slams literary moralism tailored for middle-class, wannabe educated social strata adhering to the heritage of German 'Kulturbürgertum.' Finally, Otegha Uwagba argues that in the UK, the recent phenomenon of a so-called "anti-racism reading list," (Uwagba 2020, 22) which is purported to support "consciousness-raising," in fact, comes down to "mere filibustering—white people learning about their privilege and power without ever having to sacrifice either." (22)

[12] Kaszner also reminds us that the literary canon celebrates "'Vielfalt' [...] as long as this does not conflict with socially accepted conventions of being 'a good Other'." (Kaszner 2022, 15)

social outcries and demands.[13] If the kind of reduction fallacy described in the above paragraph has a tacit and sometimes even (albeit often unintentional) racist content, thanks to its fixation on the authors' geographical, language and cultural backgrounds, the reduction fallacy evident in the activist penetration of literary discourse produces a distortion of a similar, if deliberately progressive, nature.

Both fallacies—the identity much as the activism fallacy—have to do with the belief that visibility in the realm of culture enables recognition in other social realms, such as politics and economics. In this regard, critics often emphasize that as long as the visibility agenda of literature is indebted to the "existing principles of recognition" (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 125), it remains committed to an "internal" struggle (105), meaning that it does not disrupt the system but only seeks to amend it. In effect, it virtually renounces the desire for an "interruption of the whole normative order" (105) at which the abovementioned philosophical understandings of existence and equality aim. The error of reduction is greatly abetted by what seems to be a basic instruction for writers, namely to "stay[] close to the raw story that only a single person can know and contain[] all the power of that lived reality." (Nayeri 2019, 226) It is not surprising that Saša Stanišić and Dina Nayeri, whose *The Ungrateful Refugee* is one of the most acclaimed contemporary fusions of identity politics and auto-fiction, are making themselves responsible for enticing the reader to reduction fallacy—but László Krasznahorkai's *War and War* (1999) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) are not. Because of an almost dogmatically enforced "identification potential" (Baßler 2022, 129) that is expected of contemporary fiction, the reader becomes an accomplice to the text, a seduced follower—a consumer, not a critical observer. This argument, mentioned in the Call for this special collection, suggests that a text that "promotes purely affirmative attitudes" (Call) may not have the liberating, let alone emancipatory, potential that has been invested in literary and especially critical reading over the past two centuries. The argument is not new: Adorno was not the only one to find this compulsion to identity ("Identitätszwang," Adorno 1966, 22 and passim) unaesthetic and dangerous; Clement Greenberg, in his analysis of both capitalist and Soviet society, also recognized similar forms of "ersatz culture" (Greenberg 1989, 10) that compel their recipients to identify and conform.

Yet when it comes to the analysis of mass media and, in particular, literary works embedded in the global fabric of the publishing industry, these arguments of cultural critics are as general as they are unproductive. At a somewhat lower level—and it is at that level that most actors in the literary world operate (speakers and other participants

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[13] For a good illustration of such a requirement, see Shivani's account of the confrontation between Yassmin Abdel-Magied and Lionel Shriver after the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival. See also Abdel-Magied (2016); Shriver (2016).

in literary evenings and public readings, book clubs, university seminars, literature classes in compulsory education)—the medium of literature, precisely by being part of a social nexus, nevertheless enables a problematization of its own place in the "normative universe" (Cover 1983–1984, 4): Whenever thrown out into this universe, saturated with different voices and experiences, both individual and collective, and exposed to different ways of reading and interpreting, the literary text becomes a material for discussion and sometimes a stumbling stone of debate. It is at this point, in crossing the threshold between its praised autonomy and the risks related to the particular social contexts, that literature becomes pertinent for the societal learning processes: It is here that the aforementioned challenge, dispute and confrontation occur.

Whenever a text is released into the world (by publishers, through free online libraries or illegal seeders), it opens itself up to exchange and insight. The critique thus enabled is not doubling the viewpoint of the text anymore; it outgrows its "artistically organized" world (Bachtin 1979, 157) and opens an adjacent sphere of dialogism: Bakhtinian heteroglossia now extends beyond the margins of the text and seizes also the readers and their lifeworlds. This happens only when the act of reading ceases to be the one-dimensional object of commerce and consumption, when it breaks away from the imaginary of 'a room of one's own,' and becomes the object of an exchange of opinions in social contexts that allow for experiences gradually moving away from the understanding of 'society' as synonymous with commerce and profit. I am not speaking here of utopian islands purified of commodity logic, but of singular but viable instantiations of reading collectives, such as are possible in the here and now, and which can generate experiences and knowledge that potentially overcome the identity politics malformed by neoliberalism. It is in scenes of collective reading and discussions that, thanks to subtle differences that are characteristic of any group dynamic, opinions are formulated and positions generated that run counter to straightforward and affirmative readings. Layers are discovered which make the text more complex than its cover and promotional text suggest. Situations arise in which the impression that the text under discussion is profound and perceptive is countered by arguments that its profundity and perceptiveness counteract the interventionist potential. And vice versa, the translatability of a piece of fiction into the identity struggles characteristic of global capitalism is criticized as weak in regard to its perhaps radical imaginary and the desired world-making. Similar arguments can be continued endlessly, and indeed they are continued in peer-to-peer discussions of the written word. What all texts have in common is their (at least) bi-directionality: On the one hand, every text is, inevitably, partly affirmative toward the normative universe in which it is embedded; on the other hand, as a medium of exchange, it holds the potential of critique and thus of emancipation. Accordingly,

even a discussion about the perhaps simplest piece of identity-based storytelling—something of the kind Fenves, May, Shivani and others are warning against—opens the gate toward an insight into the normative universe it is concerned with. I repeat, this occurs in various formats of shared reading (book clubs, debating societies, writing workshops) as well as in most unexpected places and occasions (on public transport, at a sports club, at work, in the stairwell of a flat building). Where there is conversation, and especially confrontation, it is impossible to settle on a clear value. Two is always more than one and, as we know from basic logic, it possibly leads to a three.

Furthermore, the aforementioned "identification potential" can do good. To recognize oneself in what is written, therein lies the seductive appeal of fiction. Fiction has the power to draw the reader in, which is sometimes made possible by its narrative tension and plot structure (thrillers and crime novels, e.g. Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*, 2005, 2006, 2007), and sometimes by its uncovering of unbelievable and shocking human natures and behaviors (Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, 1955). Nowhere does it prove its seductive power more than when it grabs the reader by virtue of his or her self-recognition in the personal traits and individual deeds of the characters. Sylvia Plath's *Under the Bell Jar* (1963) is a vivid example of a narrative that has been formative for generations of female readers, much like Adelheid Popp's *Autobiography of a Working Woman* (1909), which was published anonymously with a foreword by August Bebel and achieved such popularity among proletarian readers that it went through three editions in its first year of publication. The same is true of the power of identification or self-recognition that drives the unbridled popularity of both personal and collective narratives, such as Chinua Acheebe's novel *Worlds Fall Apart* (1958) and F. Sionil José's *Mass: A Novel* (1973).

Viewed from this longer-term historical perspective, the sometimes ill-maligned identity politics in contemporary literary production employs identification strategies that were significant for the emergence of proletarian and anti-colonial reading publics and proved quintessential to emancipatory projects throughout the 20th century. At the same time, those texts that expose, question and even ridicule the pillars of contemporary society (e.g. political correctness, gender-neutral language, zero tolerance for anti-Semitism, green transition) also achieve acknowledgement by readers who feel discontent with the 'progressiveness' of neoliberalism. Literary writing of this kind, even if not necessarily based on a personal narrative, also allows for identification on the part of the readers. The popularity of authors such as Michel Houellebecq (*Submission,* 2015), Christian Kracht (*Empire*, 2012), and Lisa Eckhart (*Omama*, 2020) is clearly due to the fact that they not only skillfully ridicule established and entrenched attitudes, but also speak to audiences that identify with their laughter.

4. *It's a competitive world*: Acknowledging the Actual Power of Fiction

The discontent with literary identity politics, then, must lie deeper than in the two ephemeral sets of problems highlighted above (the identity and the activism fallacy) or in the identification power of contemporary writing. Its potential lies somewhere between the abovementioned poles of the politics of the real, on the one hand, and the radical politics that operates on a universal level, independent of identity markers and the system of needs cultivated by capitalism, on the other. So the question is: What is the actual power of fiction? If we consider the burning issues of the present, we cannot but admit fiction's inadequacies: Neither can CO_2 emissions be reduced, nor climate change slowed, nor the life chances of millions of war, economic, and climate refugees bettered, nor the standard of living of any marginalized social group increased by means of awareness raising through fiction. For all intents and purposes, the eradication of systemic poverty, as well as structural discrimination and economic racism, can only occur and succeed in the sphere of politics itself and through the interplay between the state and the local, both official and activist, action. What individual agents of the literary system—writers, readers, facilitators etc.—can do is to ask about their own role and responsibility as cultural producers in this overall system of production. They can rethink the power of literary writing in terms of political self-education, which not only produces a different ethics of everyday living, but also establishes a more direct connection with social movements and political actions and organizations that work to solve the problems mentioned above.

The most troubling truth about literary writing is the most well-known and the most abhorred social fact, namely, that it thrives on the exploitative system it abhors. Whether writing is made possible by the "curated history" of "family genealogy" (Brown 2021, 77), by private or corporate foundations or even by public funds (is the state anything other than an extended hand of the market that it props up and promotes?),[14] the writer is "necessarily rooted in the bourgeoisie and therefore unable to find the language to express the needs of the proletariat" (André Breton, qtd. in Enzensberger 1968, 192, my translation): If this disillusioning sentence once referred to authors who were of bourgeois origin but sought to place themselves in the meaningful service of the proletariat, today large sections of the writing guild are directly immersed in the commercial mode of living. This makes them inherently corrupt, a case study in cognitive capitalism, which exploits the general intellect for creative industries. Is identity politics in literature an agenda of 'the precariat' endowed with

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[14] Brand and Wissen (2021) remind us that "the supposedly governing body of the 'state' is in no way a potential challenger to the imperial mode of living, but, rather, an essential aspect of safeguarding it institutionally." (44)

self-assertion but without class consciousness? If so, then we can again conclude that literary identity politics has so far, to paraphrase Hans Magnus Enzensberger, only 'continued and radicalized liberal politics.'[15] Although literary publics, unlike those in Europe in the 1950s for example, have multiplied and subsequently became more independent of the state, their increasing subordination to competition regulated by markets and social media reinforces the function of literature as a ventriloquist for the economic principles to which it is forced to submit. This is similar to Depeche Mode's song "Everything Counts," hinted at in the title of this essay, which simultaneously provides a critique *and* a playback of what it exposes: *the grabbing hands grab all they can / all for themselves, after all / it's a competitive world.*

Only a few decades ago, an important element of social analysis was the systemic inadequacy and devaluation of political action: Critics belabored the exuberant disenchantment with politics in the age of "post-democracy" (Crouch 2004) and "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009). As early as 1993, Jay M. Bernstein identified "the liberal state" as the main culprit for this stalemate. In Bernstein's view, the liberal state effects a "suppression of the political" (Bernstein 1993, 268) because it is "grounded on the precept of equal respect whereby each individual is free to pursue his or her own conception of the good life[.] [Thus, it] operates a […] neutralization or evacuation of the political realm." (Bernstein 1993, 269) Fiction follows the same tracks. Today, when 'politics' and 'the political' are not only a major focus of scholarly debate, but appear to animate the literary field as a whole with an acceleration not seen in decades, the question arises as to the critical power of literature to 'truly speak' out about the problems of the present and thus to become the aforementioned "vehicle" (Shivani 2017) through which these problems might be solved.

It is therefore worth critically placing literary production within the context of the overall social production. Similar to Nancy Fraser, who rejects the half-solutions of the "progressive neoliberalism" for the sake of saving emancipatory politics, in their study *The Imperial Mode of Living* (2017/2021) Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen problematize the seductive lies of our current way of coping with ongoing catastrophes. Their argument is concerned with the interval between authoritarian efforts to defend the Northern or Western, in many aspects privileged mode of living and the neoliberal solutions that optimize this mode of living through further globalization of markets and methods. Against this backdrop, Brand and Wissen redefine the scopes of a left global politics that consist of creating "a third movement of global solidarity that

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[15] Enzensberger's original claim about the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s was that it in fact "continued and radicalized bourgeois [i.e. capitalist] poetics." (Enzensberger 1968, 193, my translation)

copes with multiple crises by overcoming *the imperial mode of living*." (2021, 25–26, my emphasis) This imperial mode of living is defined by three aspects: First, the term implies the general mode of living in the global North (or North/West), regardless of class and lifestyle. This Northern mode of living thrives on the global constellation that preserves and perfects its imperial character. This is also true for those lifestyles that reform and remedy the imperial constellation by, for example, shifting food consumption to organic products produced in the global South, inventing sophisticated forms of charity and philanthropy, and developing social activism not against but with the help of corporate models of the so-called 'social responsibility of capital' etc. With regard to this, I contend, literary identity politics should be critically examined in terms of the interval between the ambition to right the wrongs of exclusion and the simultaneous entanglement in the perfidious mechanisms by means of which global exploitation is maintained and perfected. Second, Brand and Wissen are concerned with the pace of intensification of the imperial mode of living precisely in times of crisis. The related dynamics, they say, capture and affect the broadest domains of everyday life, including "social reproduction, ecology, the economy, finance, geopolitics, European integration, democracy, etc." (Brand and Wissen 2021, 41) Instead of eliminating them, the individual attempts to ameliorate the damage actually exacerbate global inequality. A vivid example of this is the shift in food production, which increased its global profile after the GFC: "Thus it would have been vastly more difficult after the deep economic crisis of 2007 to ensure the reproduction of the lower social classes of the global North without the cheap food produced *elsewhere* at such high cost to humans and nature." (Brand and Wissen 2021, 41, italics in original) The term *elsewhere* used in this last quotation is already the third axis of their argument: In the global North/West, not only the 'classical' exploiters and beneficiaries (the 1% of the world's population), but also the exploited, deprived and declassed benefit from the reproduction and acceleration of global inequality. Their minimal share in global privileges is already the basis for their consent to the prevailing mode of living (Chibber 2022, 93). However, consent is always only preliminary lip service to the system, which may—hopefully—change in times of crisis (although, as Vivek Chibber rightly notes, this is rarely the case). What is important to the constellation of global discrepancies is that the system is fissured by contradictions that, despite the seemingly firm consensus in all parts of the social structure, are also present "at the heart of the imperial mode of living" (Brand and Wissen 2021, 42). As this mode of living moves toward an unprecedented accumulation of contradictions, the current state of affairs is challenged not only by those in the global South/East, but also by those disadvantaged and marginalized groups living in the North/West that form its local peripheries or inner fringes (*les gilets jaunes* in France, Eastern

European *Euro-orphans*, the *indignados* in Spain, etc.). Considering the all-pervasiveness of exploitation, it would be naïve to think that the margins and peripheries, once represented and retrieved in the selected literary texts, would be acknowledged and their wrongs remedied by the reading public in the global North/West (which is again extending its global exploitation as it is increasingly becoming politically correct and hospitable as well as purportedly climate and environmentally friendly). Even if that would be the case, it is highly unlikely that the economic system of the North/West would renounce the privileges which produce global margins in the first place.

Given the intertwining of literary writing and reading as a specific line of cultural production with the intricate mechanisms of overall, global social production, one cannot discuss literature without asking uncomfortable questions about the sites of production which enable its deliberate progressivism. One cannot but ask: "What does it mean to act and live responsibly in a society that is characterized by systematic production of irresponsibility?" And "how do we safeguard nonconformism and individuality without living at the cost of others?" (Brand and Wissen 2021, 35)

Because of their radicality, answering such questions often takes the form of an either/or trope. In a recent essay in *New Left Review*, whose title symbolically ends with a question mark—"Ukrainian Voices?"—Volodymyr Ishchenko asserts,

> *Either* we allow ourselves to become incorporated as just another "voice" in a very specific field of institutionalized identity politics in the West, where Ukrainians would be just the latest addition to a long queue of a myriad of other minority voices. *Or* instead, starting from the tragedy of Ukraine, we set out to articulate the questions of global relevance, search for their solutions, and contribute to universal human knowledge. (Ishchenko 2022, my emphasis)

In the currently changing literary public sphere, which is still a highly selective component of the general public, the question arises as to the compromises required for voices to speak their "parrhesiastic" (Blanco 2021, 131) truth and for that truth to be heard.[16] Writing about the present moment, Ishchenko illustrates this with the ideological contract writers consents to, if they want to be heard in the ongoing discourse on Ukraine and the West. In the philosophy of science, this praxeological compromise is also referred to as "Overton's window," meaning, in a somewhat less emphatic way, "the range of ideas, and [...] methods that mainstream practitioners consider sensible." (Montévil 2021)

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16 Drawing on Michel Foucault, Azucena G. Blanco (2021) speaks of literature's "parrhesiastic capacity," (132) which is enabled through both its immanent potentialities (dialogism and polyphonia) and "the lives of its authors"—their "style of life." (131)

So, if the progressive discourse in the North/West can only be heard on the condition that it conforms to the "structures of knowledge aligned with Western elite interests," (Ishchenko 2022) does it seem that the only available action is to add the representatives of another group of the dispossessed to the above-mentioned "myriad of [...] minority voices"? Anything more radical might turn out to be too unsettling to the centers, which find themselves amidst a new loop of massive exploitation on a scale that is both global and local, and which, thanks also to the rising social and ecological awareness (with 'awareness raising' as an important policy of contemporary governmentality), face an increasing need to exculpate their culpability. If this is so, if literary discourse, with its potential for 'awareness raising,' is assigned an important role in contemporary governmentality, then only insofar as it does not disrupt the material condition of possibility of the North/West. Literature is supposed to maintain the fiction of progress, and in its neoliberal manifestation it is indeed successful in doing so.

5. *Picture it now, see just how*: In Lieu of a Conclusion

Questioning this sophisticated ban on radical criticism in the 'enlightened' circles of the literary public of the North is necessarily an open-ended endeavor, and I can only conclude this essay with a series of questions rather than conclusions. The first set of questions concerns the fictional text itself: To what extent does it, deliberately or not, demonstrate the systemic compulsion to encode aesthetic competition in the consensual discourse of social inclusion? Where does progressive fiction, or fiction recognized as such, fall short of critique, i.e. where are the limits of its agency? The other set of questions is about the critical discussion of fiction: How does a phenomenon within the literary field that is repeatedly both welcomed and shunned as 'identity politics' operate on a scale between what is given (the normative universe of liberal recognition via competition) and what could or should be? If there is no hint of an Adornian "otherwise"[17] in Depeche Mode's 1983 song, and if Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism still resonates in contemporary writing, can this 'otherwise' be found in literary discussions organized at various levels of professional and non-professional debate?[18] Can the literary system create spaces that prefiguratively delineate the "contours of a solidary mode of living" (Brand and Wissen 2021)? Here an age-old problem resur-

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[17] Even Adorno, the author of the canonical attack on commitment, asserts: "Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden 'it should be otherwise'." (Adorno 1980, 194)

[18] To illustrate, in his critique of Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Serpentinen Angst* (2020) Felix Stephan disapprovingly states: "Actually, Wenzel's narrator does not want a different world, for she never undertakes to question the system. In fact, all she wants is to find a place in the world that she finds hostile, racist and spoiled—a place where she is no longer bothered by any of this." (Stephan 2020)

faces, one that is, in Georg Lukács' words, "no longer that of the technique of writing, of the form in a formalist sense, but that of the poetic 'worldview', that of the worldview to be formed in the work, that of a writer taking a stand to his vision of reality, of the evaluation of the worldview thus grasped." (Lukács 1971, 469) While it is clear that answering this question with a ready-made prescription for an engaged writer would not only run counter to Lukács' original intention, but would indeed be silly in all sorts of scenarios, it should be posed with regard to the readers, their understanding of the social issues raised (or concealed) by the piece of fiction and, ultimately, their evaluation of the worldview that underlies it. These are, evidently, sociological concerns—but how could one ever consider a fiction obsessed with social issues from strictly literary standpoints of 'form vs. content' anyway?

When discussing literary identity politics, one should strive to situate fiction between what it tells and what it, perhaps involuntary, shows. If this sounds like a reinforcement of the critical reading of the "political unconscious" (Jameson 2002) or the "false consciousness" (Chibber 2022, 73, 112, 114), which can be uncovered by reading literature, the impression might not be wrong. While this essay grants validity to the post-critical claims that literary scholars should abandon their inherited privileged position as experts who are supposed to know what lies behind the surfaces (Felski 2015, 172–75), it simultaneously urges them to engage with the reading communities anew. The different reading audiences not only enable and help shape publishing policies through feedback loops but also, and especially, raise questions about identity and belonging, and sometimes also the prevailing mode of living, both material and symbolic. This turning to readers has not happened since the 1970s, when various theoretical streams of reader-response criticism examined the processes of the reader's understanding and affective experience of fiction. Today, this critical approach concerns both authors and reviewers, both texts and their otherwise anonymous readers. Rather than focusing on the psychological, cognitive and emotional reading strategies of the universal reader, we should examine the political investments in literature made by diverse audiences, cutting across age, race, and ethnic differences, educational and social backgrounds, not to mention gender differences.

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