

Claudia Gremler (Aston University): Visions of Scandinavia as an ‘alternative Heimat’ [alternative home] in 21st-Century German-Language Women’s Writing

Towards the end of Sibylle Berg’s 2007 novel “The Journey” (*Die Fahrt*) Frank, one of the book’s many characters, arrives in Iceland, one of the novel’s many locations, where he is surprised to feel an almost immediate sense of belonging. This is a new experience for him because although he spent all of his life in Berlin, “he had never had a home” (Berg 2007, 17).

The term which Berg uses in relation to Frank’s lack of emotional connection to his place of origin and residence is *Heimat*, a highly fraught concept at the centre of German debates about national identity that has “accumulated multiple connotations” (Eigler/Kugele 2012, 1) over the last few centuries. Loosely translatable as “homeland”, the definition of *Heimat* seems obvious to “[German speakers] as long as no one asks [...]. But as soon as someone asks, the difficulties begin” (Blickle 2002, 1). Traditionally associated with a pastoral ideal of living in harmony with nature on a homestead, *Heimat* has undergone many transmutations since the 1800s, in particular since the transformative events of German unification, and has in addition been challenged by the recent developments of globalisation and post-nationalism. As Anke Biendarra has argued, “literature dealing with ideas of Heimat and provincial life signifies a[n] [...] important strand in the German-language reaction to globalization” (Biendarra 2012, 181). Berg’s characters are prime examples of these “Germans going global” (Biendarra 2012) who feel estranged from their origins and are drifting aimlessly from one random international destination to the next. Most of these locations seem to be mere transit points, displaying the characteristics of Marc Augé’s non-places, anonymous “spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense” (Augé 1992, 87).

Berg’s disillusioned characters on their unfulfilling trips around the world have frequently been compared to Judith Hermann’s protagonists who go on similarly random travels “in search of something that they themselves cannot clearly articulate” (Biendarra 2012, 172).

Given this context, it is highly remarkable that some destinations in Berg’s and Hermann’s books do not fall into this pattern of arbitrary locations and instead create or facilitate the aforementioned surprising sense of belonging that Frank experiences in Iceland. This feeling of an instant connection with a place prompts a hitherto unfamiliar desire in the characters to remain in this location instead of returning to Berlin: “I wanted to stay in Tromsø. To never leave [...] Norway” (Hermann 2004, 229). In both Berg’s novel and Hermann’s collection of short stories as well as in the writings of Antje Rávik Strubel, whose novels will be the main focus of this paper, the Nordic countries occupy a special place. This is already obvious from the alignment of locations: Berg’s novel is set in a confusing myriad of global destinations but the setting of both the first and the last of the book’s over 70 short chapters is Iceland. Stopping short of creating a similar structural bracket,

Hermann chose to include two Nordic locations in her much more reduced ensemble of only six international settings and deliberately ends her book in Norway.

Similar to Frank in *The Journey*, Hermann's characters feel a strong affinity to Scandinavia. The emotional attachment to this region outside of their home country forms part of a long tradition of representation which emphasises the close cultural, political and linguistic links between Germany and the Nordic countries. As Strubel explains in her 2008 travel guide "A User's Guide to Sweden" (*Gebrauchsanweisung für Schweden*), Germans enjoy travelling to Scandinavia because they appreciate the comforting feeling of familiarity as they enter "a foreign country and yet continue to move in well-known territory" (Strubel 2008, 24).

This German love of the Nordic countries goes beyond a fond appreciation of the neighbouring regions or even a presumptuous classification of Sweden as an "idealised version of their own [home country]" (Strubel 2008, 24). As earlier texts like Thomas Mann's 1903 novella *Tonio Kröger* demonstrate, which frames the protagonist's journey to Denmark as a "return home" even though he has never visited that country before, Germans are used to treating Scandinavia as a natural extension of their home country. Intellectually, going back to eighteenth century authors like Johann Gottfried Herder, they laid claim to the Nordic, or 'Germanic' cultural tradition, which served as a vehicle for the formation of German national identity (von See 1994). Politically, this was backed up by geographical acts of aggression which culminated in the occupation of large parts of Scandinavia during WW II. At the end of the war, as the Wehrmacht retreated from the territories near the Arctic Circle, they left scorched earth behind and appeared to have caused lasting damage to the previously harmonious German-Scandinavian relations.

However, after the war, normalisation did set in more rapidly than initially expected and the Nordic countries soon welcomed back tourists from West Germany while Sweden gained a new status as an unattainable dream destination, a *Sehnsuchtsland* (Gauck 2012) for East Germans, who were painfully limited by Cold War travel restrictions and longingly traced the course of the Sassnitz ferry on the horizon of the Baltic sea. Despite the reconciliation and the resumption of diplomatic relations, Germany's belligerent attempts at cultural and territorial appropriation of the Nordic countries can never be fully forgotten or atoned for. The unjustifiable urge to consider the Nordic countries a "foreign Heimat" (Thomas Mann 1924, 132) that Germans should naturally have access to is heavily if sometimes obliquely criticised by Berg, Herman, Strubel and other authors of their generation. Consequently, characters' attempts to conquer and lay claim to Nordic territories are firmly rebuffed and sarcastically denied.

In Hermann's story *Love for Ari Oskarsson*, the protagonist shares her intention to stay in Tromsø with her Norwegian host and asks him to "take a drive sometime, into the woods, to the rivers, the waterfalls and the fjords [...] to a spot he thought was beautiful and would like to show

me” (Hermann 2004, 255). Not realising that his interest in her is purely sexual, she is shocked when his answer to her suggestion is a blunt “no” (Hermann 2004, 255).

In Berg’s novel, Frank initially surveys his new Icelandic *Heimat* in a dominant, almost regal pose: “It lay below him like something he had been gifted as a Christmas present” (Berg 2007, 270). But this control over his Nordic environment is soon exposed as an illusion when his desire to “stay [on this island]. For ever” (Berg 2007, 312) is unexpectedly and cruelly realised as he receives a diagnosis of terminal cancer and dies within weeks of his arrival.

Whilst Scandinavia can be said to occupy a privileged but ultimately not unique position amongst the many locations in Berg’s and Hermann’s fiction, Nordic destinations, in particular, the “utopian country” of Sweden (Strubel 2008, 15) are very much at the centre of Strubel’s writings. Three of the novels in this writer’s prolific works are set in Scandinavia. As Emily Jeremiah argues, Sweden represents for Strubel an “alternative *Heimat*” that is considered to be superior to both the disappointing political reality of “today’s Berlin Republic” and the stifling “German construction of gender and the family” (Jeremiah 2009, 230).

In Strubel’s 2008 novel “Colder Layers of Air” (*Kältere Schichten der Luft*) a group of post-unification social misfits have temporarily escaped to a holiday camp Sweden. Here “they lived rootless” with “time suspended” (Strubel 2007, 8) in a liminal space. This location, which is situated outside of Germany and is simultaneously positioned away from Swedish everyday life, seems to offer a respite from the problems and homophobic attacks that Anja, the protagonist, tried to leave behind in her East German provincial hometown and creates a space for the exploration of her gender identity.

Strubel’s later novels „Plunge of the Days into Night“ (*Sturz der Tage in die Nacht*, 2011) and „In the Woods of the Human Heart” (*In den Wäldern des menschlichen Herzens*, 2016) both show a similar vision of Scandinavia as a region that offers an escape from German socio-historical reality and as an area that holds the promise of an acceptance of a variety of gender identities and sexual relationships.

While Strubel’s charmingly amusing Swedish travel guide, written for a different audience than her highly artistic fiction, presents an appreciative, in parts almost naïvely admiring stereotypical view of Scandinavian society, in particular of *folkhemmet*, the Swedish model of the welfare state reminiscent of the lost East German ideal of Socialism, and of the frequently cited, almost proverbial Nordic sexual tolerance, including acceptance of members of the LGBT+ community, her novels grapple with the much more complex reality of German-Scandinavian relations, of the difficulties of negotiating gender expectations in both German and Nordic societies and of the persistent but non-viable concept of Germans finding a new *Heimat* up north.

The temporality of the set-up of *Colder Layers of Air* already makes it quite clear that Anja will need to return to Germany and cannot make Sweden her permanent home. In addition, the narrative shows the local house where Anja is hoping to settle down with her mysterious lover Siri as still filled with the previous owners' possessions and Siri as incapable of facing up to and accepting responsibility for the historical reality of German activities in Sweden during WW II. They cannot build a future here.

Similarly, *Plunge of the Days into Night* portrays a cross-generational East German couple who meet and fall in love at a bird sanctuary on the small Swedish island of Stora Karlsön. When young student Erik realises that ornithologist Inez is his biological mother, they soon need to leave to avoid the scandal in part engineered by Inez' gay, misogynistic and xenophobic Swedish colleague. His behaviour calls the stereotypical image of tolerant, welcoming Sweden into serious doubt and rejects the idealised image of Sweden presented in *User's Guide*. Nonetheless, as *In the Woods of the Human Heart* reveals, the couple who are barred from returning to Germany where they have attracted the hostile attention of the gutter press, do eventually find a new home on Sweden's east coast. Their relationship has survived adversity but they are not safe from xenophobic abuse and discrimination in response to the incestuous nature of their bond.

Despite the couple's precarious position, their unusual relationship serves as inspiration for one of the other German characters in the book. Helen, who has come to Sweden with her two girlfriends Faye and Sara, is hoping to successfully negotiate rules for a functioning polyamorous household. She cites Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf and her relationship with her lovers Sophie Elkan and Valborg Olander as a role model but this is rejected by both Sara and Faye's unwillingness to move beyond monogamy and to embrace other lifestyle options.

In addition to Helen's failed attempts at finding acceptable and viable Swedish models for her complex romantic life, *In the Woods of the Human Heart* once again raises the issue of German entitlement and appropriative tendencies towards Scandinavia. At the beginning of this "novel in episodes", young couple René and Katja are disappointed to realise that they have spent their holiday in Sweden exclusively in a German bubble without access to a genuine Swedish experience. This realisation of being unable to overcome the fake, touristy nature of the trip is mirrored in Katja's growing certainty that she is caught in a false gender identity and will need to transition to become authentic. René is shocked by this development and finds herself unable to continue the relationship.

Throughout the novel, René keeps returning to Scandinavia in repeated attempts to connect with the country, the scenery and the people but this is rejected time and again as she struggles to overcome her status as the eternal tourist. During a trip to Lapland she is involuntarily cast in the role of a perpetrator of colonialist aggression who becomes the target of a covert attack by an indigenous Saami guide.

As the textual evidence shows, the deep-seated German longing to find a home in Scandinavia which allows for a fairer and more tolerant existence than Germany can provide, is rejected as an illegitimate act of colonialist appropriation. But a second concept that is traditionally associated with the North, and also goes back to Mann's *Tonio Kröger* and beyond, appears to be even more persistent than these hopeless dreams of settling in an alternative Nordic *Heimat*. Katja (later Katt), who experiences a powerful personal realisation in Sweden is neither the first nor likely the last character in contemporary German fiction to draw on the epistemological power that has frequently been attributed to the North.

Hermann's protagonist's conviction that "coincidence had swept me up and dropped me [here] so that I would find out something about myself" (Hermann 2004, 233) is shared by a number of Strubel's characters who display a continuing trust in Nordic locations as places of enlightenment – even if this is also drawn into question. Hermann's protagonist does not actually "find out something about" herself but she considers a sighting of the Northern Lights at the end of her story as an indicator of Nordic nature's ability to create epistemological experiences.

René, Strubel's most enthusiastic Nordic traveller, also hopes to experience some sort of revelation about herself or about life in general during her stay in Scandinavia. She finds inspiration for her book, which will be set in Northern Europe, and shares her insight with Ute, a doctor who is staying at the same sports training camp in Finland: "All certainties that you have painfully reached will be suspended. That's what it is" (Strubel 2016, 142). Ute's immediate sceptical reaction underlines that even though this is a pivotal moment for René which finally helps her to understand Katt and his transition, the actual intellectual value of this realisation is debatable.

In conclusion, German contemporary women authors are very conscious of the historical heritage and the current power dynamic in German-Scandinavian relations. They reject the notion that the role of the Nordic countries as a popular German travel destination should be extended into a new *Heimat* and recognise German attitudes towards Scandinavia as still shaped by colonialist tendencies which are incompatible with allowing Germans to create a place of home and belonging in the North. At the same time, the stereotypical notion of the Nordic countries as a paradise of sexual acceptance is rejected in favour of a more differentiated assessment. As the texts argue, creating safe spaces for a variety of gender expressions and sexual relationships remains an unfinished project for both German society and its Northern neighbours. |

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