

Sounding repercussions: reflections on Post-1989 and Postmigration

Does the fact of migrating, or rather: of being migrated during childhood have repercussions in later adult life? It doesn't seem difficult to answer this question. But what is the *sound* of postmigration? Is it an echo? A sweet melody? A diffuse mumbling? And what about people who were under ten years old when the Berlin wall fell? What they heard, was definitely not a loud “bang” but rather, maybe, a switch of frequencies. And today, how does 1989 seep through life-courses and navigations? Is it a distant rumbling, or more some kind of a particular *vibe*?

Throughout our presentation we will *sound out* specific biographic “*tunings*” which are linked to two very different turnabouts: 1989 and migration. Katharina will draw from her field research among Polish-German artists in Berlin while Elisabeth examines narratives and agencies of young returnees, born around the 80ies, in a town in Eastern Germany which has undergone massive transformations before and after the fall of the Berlin wall.

We will at first shed light on the theoretical perspective of 'postmigration' in order to frame our ethnographic inputs. Then, in a second step, we will – in an exemplary manner – let some of our interview partners and their doings set the tone. In our résumé and final discussion, we will elaborate on why, from our point of view, the concept of 'integration' is *not* suitable in order to grasp the societal processes woven around and by our informants.

1) Postmigration: Tuned in ambiguity

“For a society, it is difficult to bear that something cannot be reduced to one term. For artists, however, it is an extremely productive gift – a liminal situation [...]. Something lies beyond definition: Can there be anything better?”
(Hilje 2013, own translation)

The term ‘postmigration’ has been first launched by artists and activists involved in “Ballhaus Naunynstraße”, a theatre in Berlin-Kreuzberg conducted then by Shermin Langhoff. This experimental notion, according to her, expresses “stories and perspectives of those who have not migrated themselves, who bring this background of migration though as personal knowledge and collective memory” (Langhoff in BpB 2011, own translation). “The core of postmigration”, as Kijan Espahangizi states, is “the ambivalent relationship to migration as lived experience on the one hand and discursive impertinence on the other hand” (Espahangizi 2016). As analytical term, ‘postmigration’ bears (at least) three nuances: it is used as *critical tool* (see for instance Labor Migration of HU Berlin, Liebig 2015, Espahangizi 2016?), a more *strategical, policy-oriented concept* (Foroutan et al. 2015), and a *subjective-biographical perspective* (Yildiz/Hill 2015). What we strive to emphasize within this article is the ambiguous simultaneity of settledness and

migrancy, of attachment and looseness – in accordance to the concepts’ virtue to inspire thinking and writing beyond dichotomies. By doing so, we assume to irritate and query ongoing contentions around migration and integration.

2) Katharina Blumberg-Stankiewicz: Configurations of Postmigration – *tensions on stage*

- 1) a hymn (adapting and acting eccentrically)
- 2) an experiment, indeterminate (composing and unresolving)

In my fieldwork among Berlin-based artists who all had migrated in their early childhood from Poland to Germany – within the time period between 1980-1989 – I figured out that postmigration in the sense of being both Polish *and* German is being brought ‘on stage’. The artists include biographic elements into their works and make them ‘sing’ and ‘sound’ in very different ways, challenging their discursively attributed invisibility. Configurations of postmigration appear in different lights, yet always tension-filled. A quite well-known and most of all ironic example of Polish migrant biographies within the city of Berlin is the “Club of Polish Underachievers / Slouches”. This Club has offered a relevant space where I have met or met again my interviewees. I will present two of them, Monika and Katrin, who both were about five years old when their parents migrated to Germany in the early 1980s. While Monika was one among the first children who received asylum status independently in Germany, Katrin hold the status of foreigner (Ausländer) for many years until she became German citizen. Both were raised within artist families and both have followed the artistic tracks of their parents in some way: acting and directing in the case of Monika, making music in the case of Katrin. Their narratives reveal how migrancy and Polishness is central and telling to their lives without dominating them and how corresponding tensions inspire their cultural productions.

A hymn, or a serenade of love: vibrant, glimmering, and romantic

Monika describes her first movie “Polska Love Serenade” as her “emotional business card”. Anna and Max, two German students with very different attitudes and styles are the main characters in the freaky road-movie; they maybe fall in love with each other while travelling through Poland. When directing and presenting this movie, Monika imagines herself as the odd couple and celebrates her own “re-migration to Poland”. By stylistically oversubscribing clichés it is her motive to go “extremely back to the roots” and to present a “lullaby of (her) love to Poland, or of Germany’s love to Poland, or of the contention”. Her hymn entails some fairytail-style sequences playing with a nostalgic perspective on her childhood, but the theme is an urging question of the presence: how to lead an adequate professional life with all of the love received in excess („although there actually cannot be love in excess“)? Monika explains metaphorically that she acts on purpose like a

determined “child of divorced parents”, yielding the need of unifying the two countries she was raised in. In her narration, she portrays her parents – activists, actors, and caring parents alike – as encompassing loving ones. Standing together – within her family and beyond – and the boundlessness of love are the virtues of her childhood. It was “a really great experience” for her to observe and be part of the Solidarity opposition, to feel that something had to be done against injustice. As actress and movie director, she acknowledges, it is beneficial for her to have access to such “deep, exaggerated, and theatrical emotionality”, but she thinks she still needs adapting more to the requirements of her profession, which includes a great dose of self-assurance. Moreover, translating into German the migrant experiences made by her father that he had summed up in Polish lyrics would finally prove her maturity. These lyrics entail “so many layers” that it seems almost unachievable to grasp their “intelligence and beauty”. Monika seemingly yearns for unachievable glory; adapting, as she confronts, cannot be full and precise enough, and exaggerating is not in vain, she suggests – it is her style laying aside the fear of love’s labour’s lost.

Deep vanguard tune: miraculously bizarre, energizing, and enriching

Katrin begins her narration, unexpectedly, with a scene in a sauna: After sports, recently, she went to the sauna and there was this guy, a musician like herself, with whom she used to small-talk, but this time, unexpectedly, it turned out that he speaks Polish, and that “he is a Pole”. For her – and this is what she upholds, reflects and discusses during the whole narration – this kind of accidental ‘coming out’ changed everything, as if all distance had faded instantly and revealed a kind of nakedness, in a sense of precious vulnerability. Katrin seems quite impressed and fascinated by the intensity of her own emotional reaction, triggering on her curiosity: “we are completely at home in German socialisation, and very suddenly, unexpectedly, it turns out that there is an aspect of difference, and of added value. (...) It is a scurrility that accompanies us permanently, and from time to time it pops up and becomes clear.” Katrin describes this moment in the sauna as “spacing out”. It makes her feel “almost afraid”, but she enjoys the peculiarity of the moment. She also refers to other comparable moments and she speaks of an “interesting energy”, and of “something miraculously”. These “intersections” shared with other postmigrants from Poland are something “unexplicable” to her, something that is “neither just great nor bad”: “It’s like having a sibling or not.” Today, she traces, and embraces the kind “nonverbal consonance” she experiences, acknowledging that it makes a difference when it is being reflected. Polishness and migrancy, especially when she looks back, do not at all stand for ‘la vie en rose’. She disliked elementary school when being a foreigner (“Ausländer”); it was hard for her to observe that her parents were treated badly at the registration office (“Ausländerbehörde”). And then, as a grown-up and mother, she finds it stressful to speak Polish with her children (“exhausting”, “awkward”, “artificial”). Now,

for her, especially when she listens to and makes music, it is “touching” to have access to the deep archival layers “of where one comes from”. Despite all enrichment of “the facet more”, Katrin is, however, far from being one-sided positive about dealing with her Polishness in her life and in her profession. What makes her careful is the intensity involved. On the one hand there is fascination, on the other there is the fear that this intensity will limit her choices. Her music reflects this ambiguity: When listening to her singing combined with simultaneous-polyphonic Viola play, and to her poetic lyrics in German, Polish and English, the complexity and emotionality involved go beyond what we might call a ‘collage’ of styles and sounds. Sequences of high intensity and acceleration appear, overlap, and interchange with smooth and melodic ones. They give insights into processes of story-telling, while leaving space for improvisation, as if some search, or some part of a story is being detected.

Sounds of postmigration

Monika proudly presents: “my reality is German, but my heart is Polish!” She does not, however, get lost like an ‘emotional junky’ in a vicious circle of upholding some old status quo. Her pathos and use of cliché are purposefully exaggerated, and as such, they serve better in reflecting upon adapting and acting eccentrically. Monika’s hymnic romanticism appears as the key to gain a new full picture after rupture: if love was intense before, it is not less but eventually even more so today. Katrin performs *experimental and indeterminate* music, making sound elements that are composed and unresolved. Instead of falling into commitments like within kinship relationships, Katrin is – metaphorically speaking – standing like a DJ at the mixer and is turning buttons: she opens up for being emotionally overwhelmed, and instantly, she controls the tunes, while revealing their scurrility. She immerses into moments of intensity and upholds a distance, not a cold but an empathetic one. Moments of Polishness, this way, appear as a facet more, as miraculous and bizarre alike, exhausting and energizing alike, as enriching at the end.

3) Elisabeth Kirndörfer: Configurations of post-1989-vibes

- 1) a gap (challenging and defying)
- 2) a flow (enchancing and connecting)

Drawing from my PhD-thesis on the biographical navigations of a generation born between 1975 and 1985 in Schwedt/Oder¹ – those, who have left their city throughout the 90ies westwards and returned only recently – I will sound out two post-1989-configurations in which the *being-born-into-transition*, into *liminality*, entails a very particular biographic dynamism which I grasp here

¹ Schwedt ranked among the main industrial bases in the GDR, selected in the late 50ies to host the oil pipeline „Druschba“ from Russia and thus to provide East German regions with fuel. Simultaneously to the installation of the refinery, paper industry was established.

with the term “vibe”. In contrast to Katharinas narratives, the negotiation of the “after” (migration, 1989), in my case, doesn't stimulate a particular *tension*, energizing artistic processes, but manifold figures of time-space-vibration, of aftershocks – of a certain *rhythm*.

Both of the two protagonists on whose narratives I base my reflections, are somehow 'children of the opposition': Andreas was born in '83 and grew up in the colourful, political, musical spaces of the church-based resistance movement. With much emphasis he tells me his memories about the long and heated political discussions which took place in the always-crowded kitchen, the sociability, the revolutionary spirit – and *music*. He was not in the age to experience 1989 like a “breaking-free-of”, his narrative bears more of a gritty continuation of the oppressive structures from before: Schools get fused, his class moves to a new building, but the teacher stays the same, still requires the socialist morning ritual. He is still “the other” in the classroom. His narrative and the “biographic walk” we undertake after his return breathes a *gap* – a figure, I will develop in the next section.

Sandra, born in '85, grew up in a “Hippie”-family, improvising around arts-and-crafts-experimentations. 1989 sets her life in movement: her father is eager to leave Schwedt at once and migrates his family in a zig-zag-modus through Europe until her mother, some years later, rushes back, in order to save the family from chaos. This “being set in motion” resonates in Sandras biographical navigations until today. It is a certain *flow* I perceive while listening to her story, spending time with her, visiting one of her parties, participating in her activities.

Challenging and defying, or: humming the songs of the opposition

So what about this *gap* now? This figure, which permeates Andreas' narrative, is illustrated wonderfully in a depiction I later describe in my fieldnotes as “symbolically strong”: Throughout our walk, we come to the halt in front of the apartment block, where Andreas, his parents and siblings have spent several years. He describes very precisely and in detail the partition of the rooms and paces off realm by realm. His room was the rear one. Painted on the glass window, there was a huge, colourful clown. Surrounded by what Andreas describes with the terms “grey” and “ugly”, I identify here some kind of a “colourful filter”, a “caleidoscope”, or “rampart” his parents have “conjured” in order to shield the child from the hostile environment. His narrative, his relation to Schwedt, still bear this rupture between a – while not uncomplicated – jolly, melodic, resisting “inner world” and a harsh, unisono, inhospitable “outer world” – manifested in endless rows of panel houses. “Schwedt”, in Andreas' return life-script, still appears as an opponent², is still not a

2 My fieldnotes contain another ethnographic scene illustrating this divergence: I witness a conflict, escalating towards a sturdy fight, between my interview partner and one of the important local press representatives, concerning the announcement of Andreas' bible-reading event for children. The non-verbal dimension of the argument tells the continuation of an “old story”, a dispute between institutions, a structural tension.

place of “being”, but of “being contested”. He can't sing in one tongue with his home-town. Andreas still hums the songs of the opposition.

Enchanting and connecting or: tuning herself in with Schwedt

Sandra needs quite a while in order to tune herself in with Schwedt after her return: Schwedt is the place you *leave*, little to offer, peripheral, static, in short: a counter-force to her dynamism, her particular *flow*. Today though, she describes Schwedt as being her “central point”. The strategy she adopts in order *not* to lose the beat, the vibe of movement, is – to put it shortly – *to set Schwedt in motion* (while at the same time enjoying the city's soothing, rhythmic melodies). The most dense impression I get around *her* negotiations of Post-1989, are woven around a youthwork project initiated – on behalf of the city's mayor – by cultural managers and urbanists from Berlin. Their mission was to implant subcultural spaces. Their strategy: to strive from their own youthful rebellions, echoing tunes from '68. In short: to punk up Schwedt. Or rather: to infiltrate Berlin sounds. Sandra and others listen to their booming basses for a while and then resist, eager to perform *their own sound*. The soundmasters from the capital withdraw: they have failed to perceive the sensitivities of a post-1989-terrain. The end of the story: POTY – passion of the young – , a vibrant youth festival which now runs in the third edition. Sandra uses the controller – interlinks, fine-tunes, balances. Schwedt gets enchanted.

Sounds of post-1989

The repercussions of 1989 as enacted by the “turnabout-generation” are as manifold as the contexts and lifeworlds which had to reorder themselves after the fall of the Berlin wall. Andreas' narrative is marked by confrontation, challenge and claims in regards to space. He is still performing resistance – without singing the old tunes though. His message seems to be: “Listen, Schwedt! You won't drive me away again with your same-old-songs.” What he creates, are alternative life-worlds, intimate spaces, private zones, in which all the places he visited and discovered throughout his travels, resonate (Klezmer concerts, jam sessions, folk music). His agency doesn't appear as a revitalizing, dedicated participation, but rather as a *triumph*: being able to play a part, to critique, to claim – after a long family history of oppression. Performing, creating, acting *in spite of Schwedt*, not for the *love* of 'home'.

Sandra's investments do not constitute *love songs* neither, they are rather expression of solidarity, companionship, responsibility with and for Schwedt. She *cares about* her home-town, as if she'd claim: “If WE (returnees, the youth) do not make some noise here, nobody will. This place will fall into silence.” She and other activists seem to be aware of the danger that the stories, voices and noises weaving themselves through the city's caesuras, socio-political ups and downs, are to be

muffled by consumption, neglect, historical unease. The POTY festival is one way of counteracting this dynamic: Its specific *tuning* intertwines east-frequencies to the rustle of the capital, mixes local voices to urban beats, pulsates through a location thick with memories – the old public swimming pool in the forest, in the shadow of the papermill, so dear to many generations, laying abandoned since the late 90ies. It's the 1989-related “being-set-in-motion” which is constitutive for this contagious *vibe* Sandra induces, this particular *flow* which permeates her narration and action.

4) Résumé

First, what we can both state, there is not *one* sound of post-1989 and of postmigration: our informants speak in many different tongues. Polyphony is a characteristic which applies to both of our Post-variations. Second, studying Post-1989 configurations through return narratives, yields *sound collages* rather than structured, classical compositions. Schwedt, after remigration, reveals as an experimental field beyond classical repertoires of what is “foreign” and what is “own”. The turnabout-generation overcomes or rather confronts these dichotomies, as their background music is *transition*, the “not-anymore-and-not-yet”. Similarly, German-Polish postmigrants do not enter stages in order to overcome or to cope with past migrant experiences, they rather challenge their audiences by presenting themselves as migrants and not-migrants alike. Post-1989 and Postmigration are thus tuned in ambiguity. Moreover, the postmigrant configurations displayed above reveal a certain assertiveness in respect to migrancy and Polishness, cutting across with dominant discourses that are either pointing to the closure of integration (‘successful integration’, ‘invisibility’) or to the need of acknowledging settledness and Germanness (‘new Germans’). This leads to our third point, namely a specific *coolness* in sounds and styles. Attachments to origin, feelings of belonging, archival layers of language and culture, nostalgia – the postmigrants setting the tone above do not shrink back from any of these allegedly ‘hot’, or ‘thick’, or ‘loaded’ orientations: self-consciously, not in a bold but rather in a reflective way, they refrain from being ‘lost’ in any of these. Deliberately, they describe and detect – provokingly or experimentally – intensity, or “a facet more”. The sound of Post-1989 also can be called *cool*, as standing in contrast to the effusive, nostalgic, even pathetic songs of the parents generation – yet far from bearing indifference: The turnabout generation, as do postmigrant life-scripts, reveal of a certain lassitude, an experimental composing, decomposing, attaching and distancing, sounding out new instruments, while at the same time tuning in childhood melodies. What they create, are manifold versions of fragile balancing, of a tuning which is not a “mix” – in the case of the turnabout generation from East and West, out and in, here and there, foreign and own – but a specific *style*, or *vibe* or rhythm which underlies the compositions.

5) Beyond integration

The critique of the *integration paradigm* is inherent to the concept of postmigration. This analytical lens helped us to focus on spaces-in-between, on transition and liminality, on negotiations which precisely are not about 'overcoming differences', or a sort of 'merging' (East and West, here and there, before and after). While 'integration' and 'assimilation' focus on processes (step-by-step, container plus container, circular, accumulative, goal-oriented) – we sound out the ambiguous simultaneity of attachment and looseness, the translocal reality of poly-connectedness – or, in Homi Bhabhas words – “the migrant’s double vision” (Homi Bhabha 2004: 7f). The tensions on stage and vibes in the city expressed by Post-1989 and Postmigration are vital and stunning; they are not to be laid aside simply as lived experiences of the past but they rather critically need to inform how migration and integration discourses bypass the question of ambiguity and liminality.

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