

## **Sewing an Account of Oneself: Materiality, Femininity, and German Identity in Larissa Boehning's *Lichte Stoffe***

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This article investigates Larissa Boehning's 2007 novel, *Lichte Stoffe*, arguing that it offers a valuable intervention into debates about contemporary Germanness and about the meaning of 'Heimat'. The novel's chief protagonist is Nele, a young German woman whose grandfather was an African-American GI. The text depicts Germanness as a site of nomadism (Braidotti) and hybridity (Bhabha). It also offers a meditation on the importance of history, which is of necessity constructed and imagined. Narratives, here, are woven by women and shaped by material as well as discursive forces. The novel can thus be seen as proposing and practising a form of 'material feminism' (Alaimo and Hekman). It also highlights the disruptive potential of the figure of the girl.

Larissa Boehning admirably fits the description 'emerging writer'. She first attracted widespread attention in 2003 with the publication of her well-received short-story collection, *Schwalbensommer*,<sup>1</sup> which, in its subtlety and restraint, reminded several critics of the work of Judith Hermann.<sup>2</sup> Boehning's first novel, *Lichte Stoffe*, appeared in 2007; it was nominated for the Deutscher Buchpreis, and received an award for best German-language debut novel.<sup>3</sup> Boehning has been termed a 'Fräuleinwunder', and this belittling label, together with the comparisons to Hermann, has arguably hindered her emergence as a writer with a distinct aesthetic and set of concerns.<sup>4</sup> However, the appearance of Boehning's second novel, *Das Glück der Zikaden* (2011),<sup>5</sup> and her developing profile as a novelist, signal her emergence and establishment; Boehning has by now won numerous awards, and been both anthologised and translated into English.<sup>6</sup> This article will focus on Boehning's first novel, *Lichte Stoffe*, identifying in that work an important contribution to debates about (black) Germanness and about (feminine) identities and narratives.

Boehning (b. 1971) has described how growing up, she felt devoid of history; she was, she claims, 'sehr westdeutsch sozialisiert', a process she associates with Americanisation.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, the

questions of history and Germanness are pertinent for an understanding of *Lichte Stoffe*. Boehning – who studied philosophy, cultural studies, and art history – spent several years in the American Midwest while in her twenties; her time there was characterised by longing for Europe. She has also lived, with her family, in Palma de Mallorca.<sup>8</sup> Boehning is, or has often been, a (partial) outsider, then, her double vision finding expression in her layered and opaque work, which points up Germanness as always-already fragmented and constructed.

Boehning's work, frequently concerned with history and identity, offers a useful intervention into debates about the uniquely vexed question of contemporary Germanness.<sup>9</sup> The self-consciousness of 'the Germans' as far as nationality is concerned has only been exacerbated in recent years, with Angela Merkel's comments on the failure of multiculturalism in Germany and Thilo Sarrazin's othering pronouncements regarding Turkish Germans in particular.<sup>10</sup> The exclusionary vision of Germanness that the subsequent media debates have both exposed and propagated is uncomfortable, triggering shameful associations. Given the (post)memory of the Holocaust, post-war German national identity is fraught with problems.<sup>11</sup> The post-war division of Germany and its subsequent reunification, along with the forces of globalisation, only add to the uncertainty that 'being German' involves, an insecurity that has prompted in some cases a renewed adherence to the dream of 'Heimat'.<sup>12</sup>

The chief protagonist of *Lichte Stoffe* is Nele, a thirty-year-old German woman whose grandfather was an African-American GI. In the course of the novel, Nele tracks down her grandfather, Harold, partly with the aim of retrieving a valuable painting that she knows to be in his possession. The novel thus depicts a black German subjectivity that would challenge such hegemonic assumptions as Sarrazin's, revealing Germanness as contested and as a site of nomadism and hybridity.<sup>13</sup> The novel's complex understandings of the issues of history and of 'Heimat' mark it out as particularly valuable. The text offers a meditation on the importance of history (and of narrative more broadly) for the black, female, German subject in particular, where this history is of necessity constructed and imagined. The novel highlights the collaborative nature of accounts of the past, with Nele and her mother Evi patching together a 'Geschichte' that is enabling. Nele and Evi are aided in this project by Nele's

grandmother's recorded account of her experiences in the 1940s. The novel's emphasis upon a female genealogy is significant, and welcome, from a feminist point of view. History here is woven by women and shaped by material as well as discursive forces. The novel's concern with 'Stofflichkeit', indicated by its title, ties in with the contemporary feminist stress on materialism.<sup>14</sup> Its hints as to 'girlish' subversions make it all the more suggestive.

### Black Germanness

In recent decades, the question of black German identity has been explored, notably, by the poet, academic, and activist May Ayim (1960–1996). Along with the co-editors of the 1986 volume *Farbe bekennen*, Ayim developed the term 'Afro-deutsch' as a way of countering the racist terminology to which black Germans were, or are, habitually subjected.<sup>15</sup> In its exposure of and challenge to white German racism, Boehning's novel accords with Ayim's project. It also bears comparison with the work of Ika Hügel-Marshall, whose memoir *Daheim, unterwegs* painfully details the racism which its mixed-race author endured while growing up.<sup>16</sup> Hügel-Marshall was a so-called 'Besatzungskind', the child of a white German mother and a black father, a soldier of the occupying forces. In the novel, Nele's mother Evi has a similar background, and has to endure prejudice and hostility.<sup>17</sup> The thematisation of black Germanness undertaken by this novel by a white German writer is at once strikingly ambitious, as an act of imaginative engagement, and muted; questions of race appear and then recede in a manner that will be explored further shortly.

*Farbe bekennen* was ground-breaking in its assertion of an Afro-German subjectivity. In the book, a number of Afro-German women recount their stories. The women have diverse parentage, for example fathers from Cameroon and Ghana, African-American fathers, or an Afro-German or Afro-European parent or parents. May Opitz, as she called herself then, contributes an essay that provides the context for these stories.<sup>18</sup> Her text traces a black presence in German history and also analyses German colonial activities in Africa, as well as racism in the Weimar Republic and during the Nazi period. Another essay by Ayim offers a critical analysis of material concerning mixed-race

‘Besatzungskinder’.<sup>19</sup> The literature written about these children was full of racist assumptions, as Ayim demonstrates.

Ayim’s writings and activism – she co-founded the ‘Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland’ – have been important in highlighting and countering German racism.<sup>20</sup> Ayim’s anti-racist campaigning was bound up with her feminism. In its emphasis on female collective agency, *Farbe bekennen* contributes to the Black feminist project. The term ‘Afro-deutsch’ was indeed devised in collaboration with the Black feminist Audre Lorde, to whom Ayim pays tribute in a poem, ‘soul sister’.<sup>21</sup> As Ayim has demonstrated, sexism and racism are often intertwined.<sup>22</sup> Black feminism is therefore concerned to point up the links between these forms of domination, also challenging the white subject of much feminist discourse.<sup>23</sup> Ayim’s poems assert a black, female Germanness that refuses to toe the line; that is ‘grenzenlos und unverschämt’, as the title of one poem puts it.<sup>24</sup> Her poetry also reflects insistently on the racism and xenophobia of post-unification Germany.<sup>25</sup>

Ayim’s work offers a useful starting-point for a consideration of contemporary black German identities and for an investigation of blackness (and whiteness) in Boehning’s novel. *Lichte Stoffe* begins with Nele returning from her stay in the United States, and her unsuccessful encounter with her grandfather, interweaving its account of her experiences in the U.S. with the story of Nele’s parents Evi and Bernhard back at home in Germany. Evi, born to a white German mother, Gudrun, and a black American father, is ‘[ein] sogenanntes Besatzungskind’, as the narration has it, with ‘sogenannt’ drawing attention to the labelling of such children. The question of perspective is also pointed up by what follows: ‘Ein Kind vom Befreier, Besatzer oder Feind, je nachdem, wie man es sah’.<sup>26</sup> The constructedness of experience is indicated in a way that challenges essentialist, reductive accounts of the subject. The potential violence involved in defining the other is underlined by this novel, which is concerned with the question of narrativising, or ‘giving an account of’, the self and the other.<sup>27</sup>

Evi’s experience of non-belonging bears comparison with the reports gathered in *Farbe bekennen*, and with the autobiographical account of ‘sogenanntes Besatzungskind’ Hügel-Marshall. Evi’s status is abject; she is ‘eine allgemein sichtbare Verfehlung’ (LS 34). The psychological effects are severe, involving a desire to disappear: ‘Früh

schon hatte Evi gespürt, daß sie höchstens durch demütige Mädchenhaftigkeit verschwinden konnte, so unauffällig wurde, daß das, womit sie ständig aneckte, weniger auffiel. Ihre Hautfarbe' (LS 34–35). 'Mädchenhaftigkeit' here connotes docility and self-effacement. Gender and race are thus shown to interact and intersect with each other; both are at work in the construction, or indeed quashing, of the subject. Evi performs an unthreatening form of girlishness, in an attempt to fit in and be acceptable. The idea of girlishness recurs later in the novel, as we will see, taking on more positive and powerful associations. When Evi becomes a woman, with a nubile body, girlish demureness is no longer tenable, and she must develop another way of defending herself, namely 'eine trotzige Borstigkeit' p35).

Such descriptions evoke the marginal subject's painful, ongoing negotiation with a dominant culture that does not accept her. Evi recognises in others a certain look, 'in dem die Frage steckte: Wo kommt sie her, wer waren denn ihre Eltern' (LS 72).<sup>28</sup> Evi reacts to such questioning of her status with angry refusal, for: 'Sie wollte nicht die Andere sein, die Außergewöhnliche, die sich erklären sollte [...] Warum mußte sich nie jemand anderes erklären?' (LS 72).<sup>29</sup> The absence of her father, combined with her uncertain position in German society, leads Evi to compulsive hoarding in adulthood, which provides her with a form of anchorage. Evi's decision to move her mother Gudrun's remains closer to her home, and her frequent visits to the new grave, suggest a similar compulsion to secure her origins and surround herself with material reminders of her identity. Nele also becomes aware of her mother's 'Verschwiegenheit' and 'Abgewandtheit' as strategies she has developed to fit in and counter her lack of a secure base (LS 94). While studying fashion design and art history, Nele writes a thesis on camouflage and mimicry, topics that suggest her own sharpened awareness of the questions of visibility and belonging (LS 112).

In white-dominated German society, blackness is understood as a flaw that cannot be removed; Gudrun's mother's friends whisper: 'Wenn das nur abwaschbar wäre!' (LS 35). A comparable understanding of blackness is shared by Gudrun, who fears being stained by contact with her black lover's skin, and who is surprised that he does not shed black tears (LS 240, 242). The black body is understood as fluid and unstable, then, in contrast to whiteness, which

'just is'. In fact, as Ruth Frankenberg notes, whiteness is itself a construct: 'a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed'.<sup>30</sup> In post-war West Germany, racism persists, as Bernhard's father's outraged reaction to his mixed-race daughter-in-law implies. The negative connotations of blackness are made clear by a slogan Evi sees: '*To me, black is meaningless, to society, black is a problem*' (LS 168).

The relationship between Gudrun and Harold, handled differently, might have constituted a celebration of encounters between subjects belonging to distinct 'races'; or indeed a challenge to the highly suspect category of 'race' itself. However, Gudrun's perception of Harold as a source of food means that their union is anything but romanticised. This is no doomed love affair; the novel eschews a sepia-coloured sentimentalisation of this interracial wartime encounter. Gudrun's othering view of Harold's blackness, already hinted at, also counters any suggestion that racism might be easily overcome. Gudrun's recorded suggestion that Germans and blacks were both, at that time, 'der letzte Dreck' (LS 241) suggests instead an uneasy, and highly problematic, alliance or elision of concerns. Harold's own narrative of his wartime experiences stresses the victory involved: over fascist Germany, and over racism in the military (LS 291). Thus the novel refuses both a totalising view of the past and a facile take on race and racism.

It also refuses to fetishise race or racism, broadening its understanding of otherness to encompass other forms of difference. Gail, the American who hitches a ride with Nele, tells of a German exchange student whom she had known at school. The girl had failed to fit in, and Gail had advised her about the dangers of being 'anders': 'Wenn du anders als die anderen [sic] bist, hast du eben ein Problem' (LS 238). One has to adapt to others' expectations and blend in. This dissimulation results, paradoxically, in isolation, but for Gail, this is simply a fact of life. The text's avoidance of a fetishisation of blackness is on the one hand admirable. On the other, the novel might appear to raise the question of blackness only to fail to integrate and develop it sufficiently. Nele's own self-perception as a black German is not addressed; and while this omission may suggest that for Nele, 'black is meaningless', it might also constitute a problematic lacuna in the novel's account of her. The question of race is both addressed and sidelined by the novel, then, perhaps the result of a failure of nerve, or

of the necessary limits of the author's knowledge. In addition, the appearance of black characters is described from the point of view of white Germans in a manner that verges on exoticisation (LS 38, 118). While the novel might at such points be seen to give voice to and thereby *expose* white German racism, it also risks appearing tacitly to endorse it. While Boehning's particular subject position perhaps grants her special awareness of rootlessness and alienation, as suggested, it also precludes certain modes of knowing and being; we can never give a full account of the other.

### Narrative, Origin, Identity

The relationship between self and narrative/history ('Geschichte') is indeed a concern of the novel, which, as implied, refuses any neat or totalising explanations of identity; the reunion between Nele and her grandfather leads to no joyous discoveries, offering no closure. This very lack of closure can be seen as emblematic of the novel's self-conscious failure (or refusal) to offer an 'answer' to the question of (racial) identity. And yet the importance of narrative is affirmed within the text, as we will see; although there might be no clear resolution on offer, the project of seeking one is still worth engaging in.<sup>31</sup> Narratives may always be fictitious and partial, but they are both vital and unavoidable.

In line with poststructuralist/postmodernist theories, the novel is aware of, and consistently concerned with, the construction, or simulation, of experience, as already indicated by Nele's thesis topic. The man Nele sits next to on the plane muses on the questions of authenticity and mimicry, noting that dyeing one's hair, for example, is a form of dishonesty (LS 81). Boehning thus points to the 'simulacra' central to the postmodern condition.<sup>32</sup> Nele is a designer who must negotiate with (satirised) marketing types concerned with the creation of a brand so subtle that it conceals itself. The text thus exposes the profit-driven nature of certain simulacra, sounding a warning note about the insidiousness of global capitalism. It also asserts materiality in opposition to an excessive focus on constructedness. Nele's grandmother fabricates hats; the man on the plane, significantly labelled 'der Tweedmann', refers to 'die Stofflichkeit einer Idee' (LS 20). The novel thus accords with recent

feminist challenges to an arid constructivism that fails to account for things, such as that posed by Karen Barad.<sup>33</sup>

In a similarly complex gesture, heritage or origin are both affirmed and deconstructed *here*. Bernhard and his neighbour Ade discuss the matter, with Ade wondering at Evi's failure to trace her origins and attempt to meet her father: 'Ist eben ein Teil von ihr', he comments (LS 210). Bernhard counters hotly that 'es spielt keine Rolle' but he then falters and the exchange ends in silence. The term 'Geschichte' indeed emerges towards the end of the work as both crucial and contested, suggesting Boehning's ambivalence towards narratives of origin. There is no unmediated access to the past. Nele wonders if everything her grandmother reports is 'gelogen' (LS 235). The man on the plane advises Nele to invent a story about her visit to Harold: 'Wiederholen Sie eine Geschichte. Das ist sie dann: ihre [Evi's] Geschichte' (LS 280). Nele asks her grandfather for 'ein Wort. Ein Ende für die Geschichte' (LS 299), but he refuses to supply one, even denying he has a daughter in Germany. Nele thus resolves that she will tell her mother a lie: 'eine Geschichte, einen Trost' (LS 301). In a dream, she wonders: 'Was kann ich erzählen, wenn da keine Geschichte mehr ist, wenn die Sprache versiegt, in der ich sie erzählen kann [...] Wessen Geschichte erzähle ich dann, wenn mir meine abhanden gekommen ist?' (LS 306). But soon after, she resolves that she will assert herself, even though she does not belong to any story; she will not disappear, simply because she is 'die Fremde' (LS 307).

Nele's avowal to her mother that her grandfather has not forgotten 'eure Geschichte' can be linked to this resolution (LS 319). Her mother's wondering response, 'unsere Geschichte', points to the consolatory function of the words. She avers that even if Nele's narrative were a fabrication, she would believe it (LS 322). Thus the need for a story/history, however made-up, is affirmed. The text demonstrates the constructed nature of the self and of memory. Nele's border-crossings also expose the transnational quality of memory, in opposition to 'nationally bounded' accounts.<sup>34</sup>

### **Home/‘Heimat’**

Boehning's emphasis on made-up stories/histories has implications for understanding of nationality, and is in line with analyses of the nation

that point to its ‘imagined’ quality.<sup>35</sup> In the German context, such discussions inevitably invoke the dream of ‘Heimat’.<sup>36</sup> As Peter Bickle has demonstrated, ‘Heimat’ is ‘everywhere’ in Germany; it is a powerful fantasy connoting security and fixity.<sup>37</sup> Through its mobile protagonist, Boehning’s novel challenges such conservative fantasies, offering instead a ‘nomadic’ figuration of (German) subjectivity. Nele is deterritorialised; her reflections on her hometown, with its drab streets and motorways, imply alienation, reminiscent of Boehning’s own apparent sense of detachment from her place of origin (LS 19).

In its exposure of German racism, *Lichte Stoffe* also undermines persistent myths of a German homeland that is a site of safety and contentment. In fact, as the text suggests, the nation rests on paranoia, at least in the U.S. context. Nele muses explicitly on the question of ‘Heimat’, but her reflections are interrupted by a headline; the Homeland Security Office reports a raised ‘threat level’, leading Nele to consider: ‘Was war schon Heimat? Etwas in Verteidigungshaltung, vom Aussterben bedroht. Das war, was es so dringlich machte, es finden zu wollen’ (LS 234). ‘Heimat’, then, is always-already under threat, inherently fragile: a powerful insight in the context of the German preoccupation with this dream. The man on the plane asks rhetorically: ‘wer hat schon noch eine Heimat?’ (LS 279). Thus, ‘Heimat’ is revealed as an absent referent.<sup>38</sup> As mentioned, the German attachment to a ‘homeland’ is especially problematic and suspect, given the horror of Holocaust. Bernhard and Evi’s neighbour is called Adolf, but he goes by the name of Ade – a hint as to the German discomfort with recent history (LS 56).

Nele’s connection to America points up global interconnection and interdependence, and especially the widespread influence of U.S. culture. Boehning’s observations about the Americanised nature of post-war West Germany are echoed in the novel. Following her grandfather’s stories about giving sweets to German children, Nele notes: ‘so sind wir [Germans] Amerikaner geworden’ (LS 295). America is understood in the novel as a site of both attraction and repulsion, with its bigness seeming exaggerated and obscene (LS 166).<sup>39</sup> The exercises carried out by U.S. military in a remote location in Germany, in which Bernhard and Ade take part, point to sinister American ambitions. The references to paranoid fears of terrorism highlight a vision of the U.S. as a volatile force, unstable and almost childlike, as Gail’s personification has it. Gail contends that America

is plagued by hunger and is nice to those who satisfy it – that is, until sated, when it drops the supplier or threatens them if they refuse to leave. She comments: ‘Je mehr wir uns als Opfer fühlen, desto unnachgiebiger führen wir Krieg’ (LS 243). This characterisation of America points to the dangerous potential of nationalism, as paranoid and aggressive.

The question of home is thus complex and ambivalent, especially since the nation does not serve as a desirable or trustworthy base. Homes, here, are ‘made and remade as grounds and conditions [...] change’.<sup>40</sup> The idea of home is indeed questioned in the novel. When Nele and her mother are finally reunited, and Nele asks her mother if she feels herself to be at home where she is, Evi answers after a pause that she does. But she goes on to qualify this assertion with a question: ‘aber was ist das schon. Ein Ort, an dem andere sind, denen man sich nahe fühlt, die, vielleicht, auf einen warten’ (LS 322). This tentative definition gains power from what precedes it. Earlier on in the narrative Evi left her home for an ill-advised and brief affair, but returned. Bernhard, meanwhile, has gone into business with his neighbour, thus moving on from the humiliating fact of his redundancy, which he had kept secret from his wife. The novel ends with the promise of ‘ein neuer Anfang’, and of a new openness and optimism.

Evi’s description of home bears comparison with Boehning’s own:

Heimat ist etwas, das nicht an einen bestimmten Ort gebunden ist. Sie setzt sich – für mich – aus ein paar wenigen Menschen zusammen, die man sehr gut kennt und denen man vertraut, bei denen man sich aufgehoben fühlt. Ich merke das daran, dass ich im Moment nicht mehr als das an meine Kinder weitergeben kann, weil ich zurzeit ein Vagabundenleben führe. Wir ziehen oft um, und was man mitnimmt ist die Familie. Sie ist meine Heimat.<sup>41</sup>

Thus relationships are defined by Evi and by Boehning as key to the feeling of being at home, although it emphasised that relationships are not easy to maintain. Evi’s cautious answer to Nele (‘vielleicht’), and the fact that the family members are for most of the narrative apart and not in dialogue, means that the novel fails to give easy answers about the nature of family or of connection. The question of the knowability of the other is posed, recalling Judith Butler. Nele wonders: ‘Ließ sich ein Mensch überhaupt wirklich kennenzulernen?’ (LS 268). And yet as Butler suggests, the difficulty of knowing the

other does not mean that one should give up trying. Indeed for Butler, the ethical stance involves a continuous questioning of the other: asking repeatedly ‘Who are you?’ without expecting a full or final answer.<sup>42</sup> Boehning’s novel also asserts the difficulty and the necessity of establishing, or ‘sewing’, connections to the other, and of fabricating cohesive narratives. Such connective fabrication is performed, in the novel, by women.

### Family and Femininity

Evi’s relationship with her own mother, marred by the racism that pervades their milieu, perhaps explains her own less than close relationship with her daughter; Evi and Nele are (literally and figuratively) distant until the end of the novel. It is significant that Nele’s quest to track down her grandfather is motivated by her grandmother’s recorded account of her experiences, not by conversation with her mother.<sup>43</sup> The grandmother’s voice interposes in the relationship between Nele and Evi, allowing a confrontation by both of the issues that have haunted them: racism and a sense of homelessness. The ‘resolution’ of the novel involves a stress on connectivity, and especially on a female genealogy. The grandmother’s voice constructs history here, furnishing a new connection between mother and daughter. The mother-daughter bond is thus depicted as crucial to the construction of identity. Evi comments that mothers are ‘das Selbstverständlichste der Welt’; and yet maternal love is ‘so kompliziert’ (LS 94), so that family relations are presented as both emphatically there and difficult to access.

The novel does not remain bound to biologistic conceptions of family. Both Evi’s lack of a connection with Harold and Bernhard’s estrangement from his father suggest that family relationships are in no way guaranteed, but must be worked at. The idea of family, and of female connections in particular, is usefully broadened out, especially in the intimate encounter between Nele and the hitchhiker Gail. Gail listens along with Nele to the tape of Gudrun speaking, thus becoming implicated in the dialogue between grandmother and granddaughter. When Gail is mistaken for Nele’s sister, Nele at first does not correct the assumption. She later does so, however, terming Gail ‘meine Freundin’, to which her interlocutor responds that friends are as

important as family (LS 270, 272). Thus, the idea of family is expanded. While intimacy may be problematic, there is in the fleeting encounter between the two girls – who are marked as ‘Mädchen’ – the promise of a closeness, albeit one that can only be experienced ‘im Fremden und in der Nacht’ (LS 261). Nele senses ‘etwas Mädchenhaftes’ in the motel room she shares with Gail; girlishness comes now to be associated with a specifically feminine form of connection (LS 257). Gail ultimately refuses such connectivity, fleeing Nele’s intensity. The novel points up the complexity and difficulty of (feminine) intimacy.

If ‘girl’ signifies ‘the contested status of young women, no longer children, and their unstable and sometimes subversive relationship to social norms relating to heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood’,<sup>44</sup> then the young women in the novel are, in their ‘girlish’ refusal to settle down and couple with men, potentially ‘unstable and [...] subversive’ figures. The ‘mädchenhaft’ encounter between Nele and Gail highlights, and tentatively celebrates, female ‘same-sex’ relations, recalling Adrienne Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’. Rich’s term denotes a series of close, meaningful relationships between women that has its origin in the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>45</sup> In the novel, the distant mother-daughter relationship that finally finds expression at the end is perhaps one reason why Nele seeks a close, even quasi-familial, attachment to Gail. The novel’s rather tentative depiction of lesbian desire – the encounter between Nele and Gail is described as an ‘awkward fumble’ by Helen Finch,<sup>46</sup> and an ‘awkward fumble’ is perhaps what the novel itself performs – again suggests the situatedness of the writing subject; the inevitable limits of all narrative. But Boehning’s novel does make a powerful feminist statement in asserting female relations, and its emphasis on women’s constructions of history and of ‘Heimat’ offers a productive counterweight to traditional, male-authored versions of both.

### **Female Fabrications**

At the end of the novel, when Evi and Nele are reunited, they are described as ‘sewing’ themselves close to each other:

Mit feinen Stichen nähten Evi und Nele sich aneinander fest, fügten lose Teile zusammen, schlossen Nähte [...] Mit jedem Faden versuchten die Frauen

festzuzurren, was im Begriff war, sich hierhin und dorthin aufzulösen. Heimat war ein Stoff, gedehnt, dünn gewaschen und ausgefranst, längst ganz licht. Vielleicht, dachte Nele dann, geht es nicht mehr um den Stoff, sondern nur um die Nähte. Sie waren wie die Wörter, die es brauchte, um aus einer Lüge eine Geschichte zu machen, wie der Tweedman gesagt hatte, eine Legendenlügengeschichte, die wahr wurde, weil jemand sie glaubte (LS 324).

This complex web of associations highlights female, intergenerational story-telling as a crucial, formative activity. The women actively work on their relationship, to fabricate an account of themselves and each other. Boehning has explained her focus on three generations of women thus:

Mich interessieren die Fäden, die von einer Frauengeneration zur nächsten weitergegeben werden, weil das sehr unsichtbare Fäden sind. Nicht gelebte Hoffnungen, Sehnsüchte, Verletzungen. Gutes wie Schlimmes, das weitergegeben wird, das verändert von einer Generation zur nächsten wandert. Familienmitglieder sind miteinander verknüpft.<sup>47</sup>

It is the invisibility of the threads between women that interests Boehning, an idea that recalls Luce Irigaray's investigation of mothers as 'the silent substratum of the social order'.<sup>48</sup> The reference to female fabrication also recalls radical feminist Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, which uses the metaphors of spinning and weaving to suggest ways out of the patriarchal mind-set.<sup>49</sup>

In Boehning's novel, 'Heimat' is likened to a material that is 'licht'; it is a fragile construction, here mended and (re)constructed by women: a significant detail in the light of the traditional, male-authored 'Heimat' narrative. Bickle notes that traditional conceptions of 'Heimat' are closely linked to the interests of a male ego, with 'Heimat' offering a refuge to the masculine subject, the promise of escape from self-conscious, alienated adulthood.<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman refer comparably to the 'womb-like security and warmth' that 'Heimat' offers, and observe that according to most 'Heimat' narratives, women are merely 'part of the package of hearth and home'.<sup>51</sup> In opposition to such narratives, which stress fixity and security, Boehning's figuration points up the active construction of 'Heimat'. As we have seen, 'home' here is a matter of relationships, which are constantly shifting. This conception can be likened to philosopher Iris Marion Young's understanding of home as a dynamic site of 'materialization'; Young claims: 'Home as the materialization of identity does not fix identity but anchors it in physical being that

makes a continuity between past and present'.<sup>52</sup> The novel's association of the material, the feminine, and 'home' is highly suggestive and productive, especially in the light of the new material feminisms, and of the ongoing feminist challenge to, or reconfiguration of, the public/private divide. As Young points out in her reclaiming of the domestic or private, it is not a matter of public and private being at odds with each other, as some feminist accounts have suggested; rather, the private makes the public possible.<sup>53</sup> Boehning's novel encourages and performs a similar celebration of (feminine) home-making.

### Conclusion

*Lichte Stoffe* sets Germany in the context of a globalised, or Americanised, world, emphasising Germanness as racialised and as gendered.<sup>54</sup> Through its mobile, questioning protagonist, it undermines exclusionary and totalising visions of the nation and the self. The text's emphasis on materiality challenges a sterile constructivism that would ignore 'Stofflichkeit'. Its assertion of relationships between women, and of 'girlishness', opens up fruitful lines of enquiry, especially in connection with the emerging field of girls' studies.<sup>55</sup> In light of descriptions of contemporary German-speaking women writers as 'Fräulein', and Iris Radisch's recently expressed view of the German literary establishment as 'eine Männerwelt' that dismisses or objectifies girls and young women,<sup>56</sup> the novel's investigation of youthful femininity gains particular piquancy. The references to sewing in the novel, and the symbol of the painting, point to the fabricated and material nature of representation itself. The novel thus implicitly situates itself in the (material *and* discursive) circumstances of its production and reception. This novel by an emerging woman writer both thematises and performs a valuable 'transition' from 'private' to 'public', then, offering a materialist-discursive challenge to a public arena that would exclude the so-called private and the feminine.

**Notes**

- 1 Larissa Boehning, *Schwalbensommer*, Berlin: Eichborn, 2003.
- 2 See the reviews gathered here: <http://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/15130.html> (accessed 18 April 2011). All three mention Hermann.
- 3 Larissa Boehning, *Lichte Stoffe*, Berlin: Eichborn, 2007. See here the Deutscher Buchpreis website, at: [http://www.deutscher-buchpreis.de/de/135020?valid=true&meldungs\\_id=153142](http://www.deutscher-buchpreis.de/de/135020?valid=true&meldungs_id=153142) (accessed 20 April 2011). Boehning was awarded the Mara-Cassens-Preis for first novels. See <http://www.literaturhaus-hamburg.de/lit/page/86/index.html> (accessed 18 April 2011).
- 4 Anne Haeming, ‘Gewebte Geschichte – die junge Autorin Larissa Boehning’, at: <http://www.goethe.de/kue/lit/aug/de3950869.htm> (accessed 18 April 2011). According to Haeming, Boehning has been viewed as ‘die neue Judith Hermann’ and as ‘ein Fräuleinwunder’. The term ‘literarisches Fräuleinwunder’ was put forward in a now notorious article in *Der Spiegel*, where it was used to denote a group of emerging women writers: Volker Hage, ‘Ganz schön abgedreht’, *Der Spiegel*, 12 (1999), pp. 244–246, here p. 245. See also Peter Graves, ‘Karen Duve, Kathrin Schmidt, Judith Hermann: “Ein literarisches Fräuleinwunder”?’; *German Life and Letters*, 55: 2 (2002), 196–207.
- 5 Larissa Boehning, *Das Glück der Zikaden*, Cologne: KiWi, 2011.
- 6 Haeming notes Boehning’s success in gaining awards: Haeming, ‘Gewebte Geschichte’. Boehning has a piece in *Smoke. Geschichten vom Blauen Dunst*, Cadolzburg: Ars Vivendi, 2008. A story from *Schwalbensommer*, ‘Zaungäste’, appears as: Larissa Boehning, ‘Something for Nothing’ in: Helen Constantine, ed., *Berlin Tales*, trans. Lyn Marven, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 145–169.
- 7 Haeming, ‘Gewebte Geschichte’. Boehning also states an interview: ‘Ich bin nicht im Besitz meiner eigenen Geschichte. Vielleicht, weil ich in der Bewegungslosigkeit der achtziger Jahre groß geworden bin, immer nur Kanzler Kohl, immer diese Käseglocke, unter der man damals hockte. Ich habe außerdem nie meine Großeltern kennengelernt und bin dadurch von meiner eigenen Familiengeschichte abgeschnitten.’ See Simone Miesner, ‘Unter der Käseglocke’, *Die Zeit*, 14 January 2008, at: <http://www.zeit.de/online/2008/03/interview-boehning> (accessed 18 April 2011).
- 8 Haeming, ‘Gewebte Geschichte’. Since 2007, Boehning has lived in Berlin.
- 9 Emily Jeremiah, ‘Sibylle Berg, *Die Fahrt*: Literature, Germanness, and Globalization’, in: Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner, eds., *Emerging German Novelists*, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011, pp. 133–147.

- 10 Merkel's statement to the effect that multiculturalism in Germany has failed is defined by one observer as 'Merkels globales PR-Desaster', *Die Zeit*, 27 October 2010, at: <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2010-10/multikulti-westen-ansehen> (accessed 18 April 2011). The so-called 'Sarrazin-Debatte' around migration and integration was triggered by the publication of Thilo Sarrazin's *Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wir wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, Munich: Deutscher Verlags-Anstalt, 2010.
- 11 Mary Fulbrook notes that following the Holocaust, any notion of a German national identity has been 'uniquely problematic, uniquely tortured'. Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, p. 19.
- 12 Jeremiah, 'Sibylle Berg, *Die Fahrt*'.
- 13 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 5; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 277.
- 14 Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory', in: Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 1–19.
- 15 Katharina Oguntoye, May Ayim/Opitz and Dagmar Schultz, eds., *Farbe bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 2006, p. 18.
- 16 Ika Hügel-Marshall, *Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben*, Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1998.
- 17 It is noteworthy that Hügel-Marshall was removed from her family and sent to a children's home, whilst in Boehning's novel Evi remains with her mother.
- 18 May Opitz, 'Rassismus, Sexismus und vorkoloniales Afrikabild in Deutschland', in: Oguntoye, Ayim/Opitz and Schultz, eds., *Farbe bekennen*, pp. 25–72.
- 19 Between 1945 and 1955, c. 67, 770 children were born to soldiers of the occupying forces and German women in the Federal Republic of Germany. Of those, 4776 were the children of African-American or Moroccan soldiers. See Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria, "'Germany's 'Brown Babies' Must Be Helped! Will You?': U.S. Adoption Plans for Afro-German Children", *Callaloo*, 26:2 (2003), 342–362 (here: p. 344). May Opitz, 'Afro-Deutsche nach 1945 – Die sogenannten "Besatzungskinder"', in: Oguntoye, Ayim/Opitz and Schultz, eds., *Farbe bekennen*, pp. 93–110.
- 20 See the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland website: <http://www.isdonline.de/> (accessed 18 April 2011).

- 21 May Ayim, ‘soul sister’, *blues in schwarz weiss*, Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 2005, pp. 56–7. For a good introduction to Lorde’s writings, see: Audre Lorde, *The Audre Lorde Compendium: Essays, Speeches and Journals*, London: Harper Collins, 1996.
- 22 Opitz, ‘Rassismus, Sexismus und vorkoloniales Afrikabild in Deutschland’, pp. 32–35.
- 23 Patricia Hill Collins refers to the ‘intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender’, also pointing out the sidelining of Black feminists by their white counterparts: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2009, pp. 11, 8. See also Bell Hooks’s critique of white, middle-class feminism, in Bell Hooks, ‘Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory’, in: Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 131–145 (here: pp. 131–133).
- 24 May Ayim, ‘grenzenlos und unverschämt’, *blues in schwarz weiss*, p. 61.
- 25 See, for example, May Ayim, ‘blues in schwarz weiss’, *blues in schwarz weiss*, pp. 82–83. Note also the subtitle of ‘grenzenlos und unverschämt’: ‘ein gedicht gegen die deutsche sch-einheit’, *blues in schwarz weiss*, p. 61.
- 26 Boehning, *Lichte Stoffe*, p. 94. Further references are given in parentheses in the body of the article in the form (LS page number).
- 27 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. This work forms a contribution to moral philosophy, asking how the subject, which can never give a full or final account of itself, can still be held accountable. As one reviewer summarises: ‘Butler contends that by rethinking the self as always already interrupted by the other and as always embedded within prior social structures, we are actually able to reconceive the conditions upon which responsibility is possible and moral life required.’ J. Aaron Simmons, ‘Review of *Giving an Account of Oneself*’, *JCRT*, 7:2 (2006), 85–90 (here: p. 85).
- 28 This question is also encountered by Ayim in her dealings with white Germans. See May Ayim, ‘afro-deutsch I’, *blues in schwarz weiss*, pp. 18–19.
- 29 On the anger of black women, see Audre Lorde, ‘The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism’, in: Lorde, *The Audre Lorde Compendium*, pp. 172–180.
- 30 Ruth Frankenberg, *White Woman, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 1. Frankenberg also refers to ‘an older racist discourse wherein it was thought that color “rubs off”’ (p. 40).

- 31 Compare Butler, *Giving an Account*, p. 46.
- 32 See here Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- 33 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. See also Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory', in: Alaimo, Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; which explains; 'Barad's goal is to articulate "how matter comes to matter" and to define what she calls "posthumanist performativity". Her concept incorporates the material and the discursive, the human and the nonhuman, the natural and the cultural, while challenging these dichotomies and the givenness of the categories'. *Ibid.* (p. 11).
- 34 Margaret Littler, 'Cultural Memory and Identity Formation in the Berlin Republic', in: Stuart Taberner, ed., *Contemporary German Fiction: Writing in the Berlin Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 177–195 (here: p. 193).
- 35 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.
- 36 Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat – A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890–1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 37 Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002, pp. 4, 17.
- 38 Compare Jeremiah, 'Sibylle Berg, *Die Fahrt*'.
- 39 Compare Sibylle Berg, *Amerika*, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1999.
- 40 Sara Ahmed et al., 'Introduction', in: Sara Ahmed et al., eds., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, Oxford: Berg, 2003, pp. 1–19 (here: p. 9). See Emily Jeremiah, 'Seeing Strangely: Migration and Gender in the Work of Birgit Vanderbeke', in: David Clarke and Renate Rechtien, eds., *The Politics of Place in Post-War Germany: Essays in Literary Criticism*, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009, pp. 67–84 (here: p. 68).
- 41 Miesner, 'Unter der Käseglocke'.
- 42 Butler, *Giving an Account*, p. 43.
- 43 As Boehning observes, 'Die Enkel haben es oft leichter, zu den Großeltern Kontakt aufzunehmen als die Töchter und Söhne. Da sind die Verletzungen und Geheimnisse oft zu groß, als dass man sie aussprechen könnte.' Miesner, 'Unter

der Käseglocke'. In the novel, Gudrun gives her tapes to Nele, even though they are addressed to Evi; the difficulty, even impossibility, of communication between mothers and daughters is thus suggested.

- 44 The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, p. 9.
- 45 Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5: 4 (1980), pp. 631–660, here p. 637. The term 'lesbian continuum' denotes 'a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience' (p. 648).
- 46 Helen Finch, 'Transnationalism, Memory and Virtual Spaces: Larissa Boehning and the Berlin Generation'. Paper delivered at a symposium entitled 'Larissa Boehning and Contemporary Literature', University of Liverpool, 9 April 2011. Many thanks to Lyn Marven for organising this stimulating event, and to all the participants for their very helpful feedback.
- 47 Miesner, 'Unter der Käseglocke'.
- 48 Luce Irigaray, 'Women-mothers, the silent substratum of the social order', trans. David Macey, in: Margaret Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, pp. 33–46.
- 49 For example: 'Gyn/Ecology is weaving the way past the dead past and the dry places, weaving our world tapestry out of genesis and demise.' Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, London: The Women's Press, 1991.
- 50 Blickle, *Heimat*, pp. 71, 130.
- 51 Boa and Palfreyman, *Heimat*, p. 26.
- 52 Iris Marion Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme', in: Iris Marion Young, ed., *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 123–154 (here: p. 140).
- 53 Young, 'House and Home', p. 149.
- 54 Jackie Hogan, *Gender, Race and National Identity: Nations of Flesh and Blood*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 6: 'Discourses of national identity are gendered and racialized in ways that reflect and reinforce hierarchies of power.'
- 55 See here The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World*; see also Barbara Mennel, 'Alina Bronsky, Scherbenpark: Global Ghetto Girl', in: Marven and Taberner, eds., *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 162–178. Mennel's chapter refers to a

range of relevant texts, for example: Anita Harris, ed., *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

- 56 Iris Radisch, 'Die alten Männer und das junge Mädchen', *Die Zeit*, 19 February 2010, at: <http://www.zeit.de/2010/08/Helene-Hegemann-Medien> (accessed 20 April 2011). The article deals with the responses to the young writer Helene Hegemann. During the symposium entitled 'Larissa Boehning and Contemporary Literature', Boehning expressed her frustration at the continued obsession with the concept of 'Genie' in German literary culture, a term applied exclusively to male authors.