

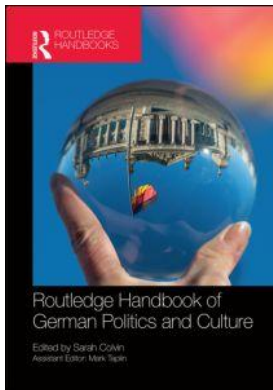
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Sarah Colvin, Mark Taplin

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Stuart Taberner

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'Grey' culture

Stuart Taberner

This chapter focuses on the unprecedented demographic ageing of the German population in the present day. It first sets this rapid demographic transformation in the context of the global trend towards older populations, before turning to some of the specific social and political ramifications of the 'ageing society' in the Federal Republic. Subsequently it looks in detail at the ways in which ageing is being debated and represented in film, literature, and other media.

In their landmark report ahead of the 2002 'World Assembly on Ageing', researchers from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the United Nations (UN) began by placing the greying of the world's population in its historical perspective:

Population ageing is unprecedented, without parallel in the history of humanity. Increases in the proportions of older persons (60 years or older) are being accompanied by declines in the proportions of the young (under age 15). By 2050, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history. Moreover, by 1998 this historic reversal in relative proportions of young and old had already taken place in the more developed regions.

In order to illustrate the dramatic shift in the globe's demographic profile that would – quite soon – result, the authors of the report offered a series of eye-catching numbers: 'The proportion of older persons was 8 per cent in 1950 and 10 per cent in 2000, and is projected to reach 21 per cent in 2050'; by the middle of the 21st century just over a fifth of the world's projected 9 billion inhabitants — one in five of all living individuals — would be over 60; and more people than ever before would survive some way beyond this: 'The older population is itself ageing. The fastest growing age group in the world is the oldest-old, those aged 80 years or older. By the middle of the century, one fifth of older persons will be 80 years or older' (United Nations 2002: xxviii–ix).

The trend towards ageing populations is neither entirely uniform nor equally advanced everywhere. It is nevertheless, as Jürgen Kocka suggests, not a national but rather a transnational and, increasingly, global phenomenon (Kocka 2008: 219). For all the West's anxieties about its own evident senectitude, no region of the world is unaffected, including the emerging economic giants in Asia (China) and Latin America (Brazil), around which many of these anxieties ultimately

coalesce. The 2012 Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reiterates that a fifth of the world's population will be over 60 by 2050 – an increase from today's 700 million to 2 billion persons – but notes that the fastest increase will take place in Africa. The report adds that in western Asia the population of those aged over 60 will quadruple by 2050; that the proportion of older people in the Asia-Pacific region will rise from 10 per cent today to 24 per cent over the same period; and that a similar profile will become visible in Latin America, which will witness a rise to 25 per cent. It is true that Europe will 'continue to have the oldest population in the world' (OHCHR 2012: 3). But it is by no means *uniquely* predestined for old age and decline, even if that is the fear that seems to motivate much of the public (and popular) debate on the subject of the 'ageing society' across the continent. Sarah Harper, Professor of Gerontology at the Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford, testifies in her report for the International Social Security Association entitled 'Demographic challenges and social security':

While the predicted increase by 2025 in the per cent of people over 60 for the EU 15 is around 33 per cent, it is a staggering 400 per cent for Indonesia, 350 per cent for Thailand, Kenya and Mexico, 280 per cent for Zimbabwe and up to 250 per cent for India, China and Brazil. It is this rapidity of demographic ageing which will be one of the greatest institutional challenges for less developed and transitional economies.

(Harper 2010: 2)

We are witnessing (in Harper's words) 'a globalisation of population ageing' (Harper 2010: 4) that is generating dramatic challenges not only for Western societies but also for the newly dynamic economies of the East that have only recently reaped the demographic bonus of large numbers of young people combined with low elderly dependency ratios (EDR), that is, relatively few older people to be supported by workers. In the case of China, in particular, *The Economist* claimed in 2012 that 'over the past 30 years, China's total fertility rate – the number of children a woman can expect to have during her lifetime – has fallen from 2.6, well above the rate needed to hold a population steady, to 1.56, well below that rate' and that the country now 'faces a long period of ultra-low fertility, regardless of what happens to its one-child policy' (*The Economist* 2012). One of the primary consequences of this will be that by 2050 China will have a much higher EDR than the United States, where high levels of immigration will continue to depress the country's median age. China will face pressures on its (as yet comparatively undeveloped) social security system similar to those faced in the US, the nation that appears most fearful of its rise.

That population ageing is a global phenomenon does not prevent it from being apprehended first and foremost in relation to national contexts. In the 2012 American presidential elections, for instance, the security of Medicare was once again one of the most controversial issues contested by the Democratic incumbent Barack Obama and his Republican rival Mitt Romney, against the background of President Obama's Affordable Care Act ('Obamacare'), the eligibility of the baby-boomer generation from 2011, and a projected massive rise in costs from 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011 to between 6.7 and 10.4 per cent in 2086 (Medicare Trustees 2012). And it was, of course, no accident that the other key theme of that election was China, typically perceived to be America's chief economic and (potential) military rival and frequently presented as a youthful, more dynamic competitor benefiting from the USA's relative decline. Britain, too, faces the challenges of paying for long-term residential care for the elderly, 'fuel poverty' amongst retirees, and the sustainability of the National Health Service; for example, the number of over-75s admitted to hospital for treatment increased by 66 per cent in the 10 years up to 2010 (NHS 2009).

In Germany, population ageing is debated principally in relation to its supposed significance for the continued strength, and even survival, of the nation.¹ Thus the growing older of the 'native' German population specifically is powerfully associated with a widespread anxiety about the country's low total fertility rate (TFR): 1.39 in 2010, compared with Britain's 1.98, France's 1.98, and America's 1.93 (all below the 'replacement rate' for industrialised countries of 2.1, according to the Population Reference Bureau). And it feeds into a set of concerns relating to the high levels of immigration that Germany has been experiencing in recent years. In the popular imagination (or popular newspapers, at least), ideas about non-white immigration in particular and the supposed danger of *Überfremdung* (the swamping of German society with 'alien' cultures) abound. 'Kinder statt Inder' (children not Indians), the slogan coined by Jürgen Rüttgers during an election campaign in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia in 2000, continued to resonate more than a decade later,² as did the occasional calls from the right (but not only the right) to defend a German *Leitkultur* (a preeminent 'German' culture) against the supposedly Anglo-American ideology of multiculturalism.³ In his book *Das Methusalem-Komplott* (2004; *The Methuselah Conspiracy*), Frank Schirrmacher, co-editor of a respected broadsheet, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, argued that Germany was facing a crisis of social cohesion arising from rapid ageing, mass (Muslim) immigration, and a loss of confidence on the part of the 'natives'. And in 2010 onetime Social Democrat (SPD) politician Thilo Sarrazin went even further in *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (*Germany Does Away with Itself*), declaring that the supposed replacement of an ageing and dwindling 'German' population by (non-white) immigrants was leading to a 'dumbing-down' of German society and the collapse of its economy. Sarrazin's book achieved sales of more than 1.5 million within a year.

Certainly, Germany is ageing somewhat more quickly than comparable nations, and this will have a dramatic impact on its public finances. Correlating with a high level of 'income adequacy' for pensioners (i.e. high pensions, generally around 66 per cent of pre-retirement earnings, and generous benefits) is the country's poor outlook with regard to its fiscal sustainability. As the Global Aging Initiative of the Center for Strategic and International Studies concludes in its Global Aging Preparedness Index: 'Four of the seven highest-ranking countries on the income adequacy index (the Netherlands, Brazil, Germany, and the UK) are among the seven lowest-ranking countries on the fiscal sustainability index' (CSIS Global Aging Initiative 2010: v). A rapidly ageing population will undoubtedly bring down the size of the labour force, raise the old-age dependency ratio, and reduce economic growth and the country's ability to resource rising living standards (Börsch-Supan 2005). As things stand, by 2050 the number of people of working age in Germany is predicted to decline from 50 to 40 million people – by 20 per cent, that is – and the ratio of over 65s to workers is forecast to rise to around 55 per cent, implying a dependency ratio of just under two workers for every senior (OECD 2005).

In sum, as Helmut Seitz and Martin Werding argue, the German case is 'particularly severe':

By international standards, the German baby boom was rather late, peaking in the mid-1960s, and also weak. On the other hand, the subsequent decline in fertility was fast and very pronounced. For more than three decades now, the country has had one of the lowest fertility rates in the industrialised world. At the same time, life expectancy has increased, and continues to do so, quite as much as it does elsewhere. As a result, a massive change in the age structure of the German population is already under way that will become fully visible in the period between 2015 and 2035. Unlike many other countries, Germany is actually faced with the prospect of a declining population and, with even higher certainty, a shrinking labour force, processes that will start from now on and probably last until 2050 and even beyond. (Seitz and Werding 2008: 2)

Others emphasise the catastrophic collapse in fertility in eastern Germany in the years following unification as well as the out-migration of younger people from the territory of the former GDR (Höhn *et al.* 2008), or point to 'significant labour supply disincentives for married women' and the poor availability of childcare, which combine to push women 'to decide "either" "or" in respect of paid work and starting a family' (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2008: 170). To be sure, fertility and female labour force participation – along with the reforms to retirement age, pensions, and labour force participation rates amongst older people that are already in train – must be addressed if Germany is to adapt to a demographic shift that is as inevitable as it is momentous.

For all of these reasons, and for others relating to the particular social and political context of population ageing in Germany,⁴ the discussion in the Federal Republic is characterised by a greater degree of urgency (and contention) than in other countries. At the same time, even if the challenges of population ageing are not (yet) being dealt with as effectively as they might be, they are certainly not being ignored. On the one hand, German government commissions have addressed the issue, most notably the Commission of Inquiry into Demographic Change (*Enquête-Kommission 'Demographischer Wandel'*), which delivered its final report in 2002. The Federal Statistical Service has attempted to assess Germany's ageing in comparison with other EU countries, for example, in its report on older people in Germany and the EU (Statistisches Bundesamt 2009). On the other hand, major research foundations have sponsored studies on Germany's demographic challenges and quality of life issues.⁵ University institutes in Munich (the Center for the Economics of Ageing), Jena (the Leibniz Institute for Age Research), Heidelberg (*Deutsches Zentrum für Altersforschung*, which closed in 2005), and Cologne (the Max Planck Institute for Biology of Ageing) have been exploring the theme. In 1994, the Federal Government finally added seniors to the portfolio of the Ministry for Families (Bundesministerium für Familie), created in 1953 – young people had been specified in 1957, and women three decades later in 1986. A federal umbrella association of older people's groups (*Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen*) had been supported by the ministry since 1989, with the task of coordinating the lobbying and outreach efforts of more than 100 organisations.

More generally, each of the major political parties has a special section for older people, and Germany's federal organisation for social equality, the *Sozialverband Deutschland*, with over half a million members and 3,000 local branches, campaigns actively on issues affecting older people, such as poverty and social isolation. Groups such as the *Senior Experten Service* seek to re-engage retirees by matching their experience with younger people starting their own businesses or to promote 'active ageing' ('aktives Altern').

Ageing in German culture

Of course, ageing is not only a social or economic issue – it resonates culturally, too. To an even greater extent than in other Western countries, the shelves of German bookshops are filled with volumes on ageing and what it means both for society as a whole and for the individual in particular, ranging from the serious to the decidedly middle-brow. For the most part, the authors of these books are concerned to challenge the prejudice that older people have little to contribute to society, or even that they present a 'burden'.

Most immediately striking is the extent to which businesspeople and politicians have rushed to publish policy solutions to the interaction between Germany's supposedly negative demographic profile and the growing perception that its economy faces a crisis of competitiveness. In *Der Generationen-Pakt: Warum die Alten nicht das Problem, sondern die Lösung sind* (2011, *The Generational Contract: Why Old People are not the Problem but the Solution*), senior manager

Herbert Henzler and CDU (Christian Democrat) politician Lothar Späth outline suggestions for increasing the participation rate of older people in the workforce and for making pensions and welfare more flexible so that retirees might continue to make a valuable contribution to the economy and to the vibrancy of society more generally. From the other end of the political spectrum, the former SPD (Social Democrat) spokesperson, diplomat, and journalist Uwe-Karsten Heye makes a similar case in *Gewonnene Jahre: oder Die revolutionäre Kraft der alternden Gesellschaft* (2008; *Extra Years: Or The Revolutionary Power of the Ageing Society*), albeit with a greater emphasis on the social benefits that might accrue from better integration of older people.

Professor Ernst Pöppel and Dr Beatrice Wagner contribute to a body of ‘popular science’ books on the subject with *Je älter desto besser* (2012; *The Older, the Better*), whereas Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen (famous for her 1967 book *The Inability to Mourn/Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, co-written with Alexander Mitscherlich) offers a psychoanalyst’s perspective in *Die Radikalität des Alters. Einsichten einer Psychoanalytikerin* (2010; *The Radicalism of Old Age. A Psychoanalyst’s Insights*), which was published just before her death, aged 94, in 2012. And Elisabeth Niejahr in *Alt sind nur die anderen* (2004; *Only Other People are Old*) and Claudius Seidl in *Schöne junge Welt* (2005; *Beautiful Young World*) serve up wide-ranging, if rather generalised, sociological analyses. In all three cases, the emphasis once again is on the prejudice suffered by older people in a society obsessed with youth and productivity, and on promoting an alternative vision of old age as a ‘transformative’ experience, as a life stage in which the individual can draw on decades of experience in order to re-present or even reinvent themselves.

Silvia Bovenschen, a well-known feminist academic, essayist, and author, presents a more philosophical approach in her *Älter werden: Notizen* (2006; *Growing Older: Notes*), thus contributing to a large body of texts dedicated to self-reflection in old age, particularly amongst a generation that, born towards the end of the war or in the first years after 1945, ‘grew up’ with, and did so much to shape, the two German states that emerged from the ruins of Nazi Germany. Former student activists of the ‘68 era, intellectuals, and politicians are especially prominent here. More broadly, and as is common in other ‘ageing societies’, ‘ordinary’ old people are given the opportunity to speak for themselves in collections of their stories such as Sabine Bode’s *Wir Alten: Porträts einer lebenserfahrenen Generation* (2008; *We Old People: Portraits of a Generation with Life Experience*).

Above all, however, the market is dominated by more ‘popular’ texts. Men might receive guidance from Eckart Hammer’s *Männer altern anders: Eine Gebrauchsanweisung* (2007; *Men Age Differently: An Instruction Manual*), whereas women might opt for any number of self-help books, including *Selbstbestimmt und solidarisch. Frauen und das Alter* (2005; *Independent and in Solidarity. Women and Old Age*) by Hanna Habermann, Ute Wannig, and Barbara Heun; Christine Swientek’s *Mit 40 depressiv, mit 70 um die Welt: Wie Frauen älter werden* (1991; *Depressed at 40, Around the World at 70: How Women Age*), or Barbara Dribbusch’s *Älter werden ist viel schöner, als Sie vorhin in der Umkleidekabine noch dachten* (2012; *Growing Older is much more Beautiful than You just Thought in the Fitting Room*). Both sexes might choose Peter Gross and Karin Fagetti’s *Glücksfall Alter: Alte Menschen sind gefährlich, weil sie keine Angst vor der Zukunft haben* (2008; *Lucky in Old Age: Old People are Dangerous because They aren’t Afraid of the Future*); Henning Scherf’s *Grau ist bunt: Was im Alter möglich ist* (2006; *Grey is Multicoloured: What’s Possible in Old Age*); Matthias Irle’s *Älterwerden für Anfänger* (2009; *Growing Old for Beginners*), or one of many other comparable books.

On the screen, too, old age is a theme – and here we glimpse the concerns of a cinema-going audience that is itself ageing. Piet Eekmann’s 1998 film *Die Männer meiner Oma (My Grandma’s Men)* addresses the discomfort that younger people often experience with regard

to old-age sexuality (and particularly older women's sexuality), as the filmmaker listens to his 78-year-old grandmother's account of her love life, including her most recent fantasies. Similar, but far better known, is Andreas Dresen's *Cloud 9* (*Wolke 9*, 2008), in which Inge (in her mid-60s) cheats on her husband Werner during a highly physical affair with Karl (in his mid-70s). Some members of Dresen's audience were scandalised by the explicit sexual scenes in the first 15 minutes, which show Inge with Karl and then Werner naked and having intercourse, and walked out. (In the United States, HBO's 2007 television series *Tell Me You Love Me* provoked a similar debate.)

Katrin Bühlig's film *Kribbeln im Bauch* (2001; *Butterflies in My Stomach*) examines the reactions of grown-up children to a love affair between a man in his 90s and a woman in her late 80s. In Bühlig's film, the retirement home is a theme, and the implied question of whether there can be a new lease of life in old age. Christoph Englert's *Nebeneinander* (2010; *Next to One Another*) focuses on Alzheimer's disease – a condition that afflicts around 1.2 million of the 16.5 million Germans over 60, according to the German Alzheimer's research institute (Alzheimer Forschung Initiative) – in a moving depiction of Walther's ever less successful efforts to get through to his wife; while Michael Haneke's *Love* (*Liebe/Amour*, 2012), which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes following its première there and an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2013, explores a husband's inability to cope with his wife's partial paralysis and dementia following a stroke and refuses to offer any prospect that old age might encourage reconciliation, understanding, or even renewed affection. Growing old and ill simply causes his characters to reveal the dissatisfaction with one another they have harboured for many years. And in Sophie Heldman's *Satte Farben vor Schwarz* (2010; *Rich Colours before Black*), the mood is still darker as the film depicts an older couple's struggle to adjust to the husband's debilitating illness and their decision to commit suicide together. Suicide, particularly assisted suicide – *Sterbehilfe* – is, of course, a topic that may be even more controversial in Germany than elsewhere on account of the historical memory of the Nazis' euthanasia programme. Tilmann Jens's book *Demenz* dealing with his father's dementia launched a ferocious debate in 2009 owing to Walter Jens's standing as a leading intellectual of the wartime generation and his previous support for the individual's right to choose the manner of his or her ending.

The French-German co-production *Et si on vivait tous ensemble?/Und wenn wir alle zusammenziehen?* (2011; *All Together*) also thematises dementia, but in a comedy starring Daniel Brühl as the much younger fifth member of a household of oldtimers and occasional object of their (sexual) fantasies. This film, which was a minor international success, illustrates a more recent trend in aesthetic representations of ageing both in Germany and elsewhere, namely the attempt to depict the humorous aspects of growing old, as a means of demonstrating both its everyday normality and older people's humanity.

Ageing is now an increasingly prominent topic on television, in the theatre, and in the visual arts as well. In 2007 Jörg Lühdorff's three-part TV thriller *2030: Aufstand der Alten* (*2030: Uprising of The Old People*) presented a dystopian vision of future solutions to the 'problem' of caring for the elderly: barracks, eerily reminiscent of Hitler's concentration camps, are erected to which old people are sent to die (Germany's social concerns, in this case the treatment of the elderly, are often compressed into the country's ongoing confrontation with its Nazi past). Less elaborate, and more saccharine, is the soap *Rote Rosen* (*Red Roses*), aimed at an older audience, which achieved a market share of 10.1 per cent of viewers in its time slot in 2011, according to the TV station *Das Erste*. In 2011, moreover, the first 'Theaterfestival 60plus' took place in Rudolstadt, featuring 15 productions on old age by nine amateur and professional theatre groups. And visual artists are also engaging with the theme. The photo competition *Neue Bilder vom Alter(n)* (*New Images of Age and Ageing*) sponsored by the academic collaboration 'Altern in



Figure 17.1. Ursula and Siegfried M.

Reprinted with kind permission of Gerhard Weber

Deutschland' attracted more than 400 entries, and an exhibition of 80 images toured Germany through 2012. Gerhard Weber was the winner with his 'Ursula and Siegfried M.', an erotic picture of the elderly couple in their underwear in which their attire contrasts with the old-fashioned setting of their bedroom (Figure 17.1).

Ageing in contemporary German-language literature

Old age is a major theme in contemporary German-language literature. Recent texts build on a tradition that reaches back to classical times — notably Plato, Pindar, Cicero, and Seneca — and was reanimated by writers as diverse as Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Theodor Storm (1817–88), E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), Wilhelm Raabe (1831–1910), Adalbert Stifter (1805–68), Theodor Fontane (1819–98), and Thomas Mann (1875–1955).

For the most part, the extensive engagement with growing old that is manifest in recent German-language fiction is issue-driven rather than reflexive. The major concerns are: care and caring for older people, sex and love, gender and old age, family relationships, and physical and mental decline. At the same time, however, there exists a smaller body of writing that is less directly concerned with growing old as a biological and sociological phenomenon and more focused on the broader implications of the fading of the wartime generation and of the generation born towards the end of the war and in its immediate aftermath that did so much to shape German society and politics. This writing *by* older authors (as opposed to more issue-focused writing *about* old age, often in fact by younger authors) is generally more philosophically inclined, featuring a more intensive engagement with the way memory functions, the choices the individual made under Nazism, communist East Germany, or the capitalist West, and the question of what it means to have lived through such historical disruptions for the older person now facing his or her imminent demise.

As far as the larger number of issue-driven texts *about* old age is concerned, we might point first to a very particular genre of 'retirement home' narratives – almost all of them by younger authors – such as Tanja Dücker's short story 'Lux Aeterna' ('Eternal Light', in the collection *Café Brazil*, 2001), Annette Peht's *Haus der Schildkröten* (2006; *House of Tortoises*), and Leonie Ossowski's *Die schöne Gegenwart* (2001; *The Beautiful Present*). These texts use the retirement home as a setting to explore a range of social and psychological issues, including dignity in old age, the dissolution of the nuclear family, what happens when parents become dependent and children become carers, and how, in advanced years, lifelong relationships may begin to dissolve as new ties and new ways of living evolve.

A further set of texts deal with love and sex in old age, for example Barbara Bronnen's *Am Ende ein Anfang* (2006; *At the End, a Beginning*), which tells of how former lovers, now aged, glimpse one another at a railway station and begin a correspondence inflected by reminiscence and desire. Frequently the issue at stake in these books is whether children can come to terms with their parents' flowering of sexuality. Or such texts may challenge social expectations, and stereotypes, of older people's sexual desire more generally. Thus we find a striking number of novels featuring older men who are beset by anxiety with regard to their sexual function yet also correspondingly lustful, including many by established older male writers such as Botho Strauß (2003), Günter Grass (2006), Martin Walser (2004, 2006, 2009 [2008]), and Christoph Hein (2011). What is usually also at stake in these intentionally provocative, even outrageous expressions of *Altherrenerotik* (old men's lust), however, is not only an anxiety about growing old, or even about impotence, but rather a more general reluctance to withdraw – the innuendo here is quite deliberate – from the limelight and from the significance, and influence, that these male writers have for decades enjoyed in postwar Germany's rather patriarchal public sphere. For women writers, lust is almost never a central theme – there is no female Philip Roth – though the loss of attractiveness, as society defines it for women, that comes with ageing often bothers female protagonists, such as Christa Wolf's alter ego in *Stadt der Engel* (2010), published in English as *City of Angels* in 2013. An exception here is *Nacktbadestrand* (2010; *Nudists' Beach*) by the elderly Austrian writer Elfriede Vavrik, which was inspired by the adventures that followed her placement of a personal ad.

There is also a set of texts that thematises older people's apparent disengagement from a society that has moved beyond them, as it were. In some of these, the focus is on the psychological interiority of the ageing individual, as in Gerhard Köpf's *Ein alter Herr* (2007; *An Elderly Gentleman*), which portrays the increasing detachment of an elderly male professor, whereas in others disengagement is framed as social critique. For example, Monika Maron's *Endmoränen* (2002; *End Moraines*) and *Ach Glück* (2007; *O Fortune*) ruminate on the sense of

redundancy frequently experienced by older east Germans as they confront a post-unification devaluation of their GDR biographies. And finally, a large number of books deal with illness, especially Alzheimer's disease. Georg Diez's *Der Tod meiner Mutter* (2009; *The Death of My Mother*) and Arno Geiger's *Der alte König in seinem Exil* (2011; *The Old King in Exile*), for instance, present autobiographical accounts of a parent's drawn-out death and of the difficulties children have in coming to terms with this process. Harriet Köhler's *Und dann diese Stille* (2010; *And then this Silence*) confronts the same issue in the form of a novel, and dementia is a key theme in Katharina Hacker's *Die Erdbeeren von Antons Mutter* (2010; *The Strawberries of Anton's Mother*), in which a son, a doctor, finds it difficult to deal with the reality that he is unable to help his mother.

As far as texts by older writers dealing less with old age as a biological reality than with reflection on the individual's biographical involvement in German history are concerned, we find a recent abundance of texts in which growing old prompts reflection on the importance of generation in a country in which a powerful sense of belonging to a particular historical cohort has been created by dramatic historical caesurae.

First and foremost, we have a series of novels by authors born in the 1940s who would later, in West Germany, become members of the 'generation of '68' – student radicals challenging their parents' complicity in Nazism – and who would have such a powerful influence on reshaping the postwar Federal Republic into a progressive, self-critical democracy. Uwe Timm's *Rot* (2001; *Red*), Peter Schneider's *Skylla* (2005), and F.C. Delius's *Mein Jahr als Mörder* (2004; *My Year as a Murderer*), for example, reassess the revolutionary fervour of the late 1960s, whether their actions were justified in the fight against a West German state that was quick to suppress dissent, and their narrators'/authors' mellowing into old age in the decades that followed 1968. For Monika Maron, a writer of the same generation who grew up in the GDR (she left for West Germany in 1988), the focus is rather on psychological deformation, the feeling of having lived a wasted life, and disorientation in the new (post-unification) present. In Maron's 1996 novel *Animal Triste*, a woman from the former GDR, aged around 50, appears prematurely redundant and withdraws into self-stupefying reminiscences of a love affair with a West German following the fall of the Wall. And in *Endmoränen*, a woman growing into late middle age feels herself to be both sexually and socially redundant as she casts her mind back to her career as a writer of (mildly) subversive biographies during the GDR and wonders what purpose her life might serve after the end of that state. In contrast, the Austrian writer Peter Handke, whose mother was an ethnic Slovenian from Carinthia, sets German and Austrian history, and specifically the Nazi past that was so formative for this generation, within the broader transnational history of violence and ethnic conflict in central and southern Europe that continues into the present day with the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. In Handke's quasi-mystical *Die Morawische Nacht* (2008; *The Night on The Morava*) the author's alter ego journeys on the river Morava, conjuring up the voices of those he has known, and looking back on who he has become within the memory landscape of war and genocide into which he was born.

Other writers of the same generation present quite different perspectives on the same historical timespan. The Jewish writer Rafael Seligmann's autobiography, *Deutschland wird dir gefallen* (2010; *You'll Like Germany*) thus reflects on the 'unexpectedness' of a Jew growing old in Germany after Auschwitz. Edgar Hilsenrath, a generation older than Seligmann and an inmate of the ghetto into which the Nazis forced Jews in Czernowitz (Chernivtsi in present-day Ukraine; then in Romania), does the same in *Berlin . . . Endstation* (2006; *End of the Line . . . Berlin*). Ruth Klüger looks back to her childhood in different ghettos and concentration camps, including Auschwitz, in *weiter leben* (1992; Klüger translated the text into English as *Still Alive*,

2001), and in *untenwegs verloren* (2008; *Lost on The Way*) to the discrimination she continued to experience as a Jew and a woman following her departure for the United States after 1945.

Hilsenrath and Klüger, in fact, belong to the generation of German-language authors born from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s – and now in their mid-80s – who are writing memoirs, reflections, and autobiographically inspired texts, acutely conscious that they are now inescapably nearing the end of their lives. Hilsenrath and Klüger, self-evidently and understandably, focus on their experiences as Jews and on the persecution they endured during the Nazi period. Some of their non-Jewish peers, on the other hand, tend towards abstraction and a certain timelessness, or perhaps ahistoricity. The work of Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker, for example, presents a determined, even stubborn rebellion against the passing of time. Thus her 1992 collection *Das besessene Alter* (*Possessed Old Age*) initiated a non-representational, if not abstruse lyrical confrontation with old age, death, and the loss of her partner, the poet Ernst Jandl, that continues to the present. Not quite as involved, but similarly timeless, is Peter Rühmkorf's cycle of poems *Paradiesvogelschiff* (2008; *Fear of the Bird of Paradise*), written while he had terminal cancer.

For the large majority of authors of this generation, however, there is no getting away from 'history'. And here history almost always means National Socialism and the way in which adolescent experiences of the Hitler era shaped the choices made in the postwar period: to opt for communist East Germany (the GDR) over capitalist West Germany (the FRG), with its supposed continuity with the Nazi past; or to prefer West Germany, for all its faults, as a state that had consciously made a democratic break with totalitarianism. Ludwig Harig's *Weh dem, der aus der Reihe tanzt* (1990; *Woe to Him who Dances Out of Line*) and *Wer mit den Wölfen heult, wird Wolf* (1996; *He who Howls with the Wolf Becomes a Wolf*) thus reflect on the author's early indoctrination and involvement in Nazism as a member of the Hitler Youth and army conscript; Günter Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* caused an intense debate, even scandal, when it was published in German in 2006 (the English translation, *Peeling The Onion*, appeared in 2007), on account of its very belated revelation that the author – for many decades the proponent of the need for Germans to confront their past openly and honestly – had briefly served with the notorious Waffen SS towards the end of the war. In *Zwischenbilanz* (1992; *Taking Stock*) and *Vierzig Jahre* (1996; *Forty Years*), by contrast, Günter de Bruyn describes growing up under National Socialism and how this prompted his resolve to support the GDR, with its insistence that it was the only authentic choice for true anti-fascists. Christa Wolf does something similar in *Stadt der Engel*, though the focus is on the postwar period and even more so on the post-unification period, when she was widely vilified for her decision to remain in East Germany even once it was obvious that the regime had failed to fulfil its promise to break with the past and to create a better, more equal society. Wolf's text, in fact, may be considered to be a very late example of the wave of autobiographical works by members of her generation that appeared immediately after 1990 seeking to justify or defend the choices this generation had made after 1945.

Ageing into the post-postwar?

In these generational texts, we may glimpse, indirectly, something of the *epochal* significance of 'the ageing society' for the way Germany sees itself today. Certainly, the extent to which these two generations – the wartime generation and the generation born from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s – are looking back over the country's Nazi and postwar past most likely suggests a generalised sense of an approaching historical caesura. Books such as Günter Grass's 'old-age trilogy' *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006), *Die Box* (2008; *The Box*, 2010), and *Grimms Wörter* of 2010 (*Grimms' Words*), which look back over 80 or so years of German history, or Christa

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Wolf's *Stadt der Engel*, which reviews the author's life in the GDR and post-unification, are thus infused with a sense of the past-ness of Germany's tumultuous 20th century. And it is likely that as Germany ages, and leaves behind its difficult past, its self-understanding will change. The extensive and unprecedented diversity of its population as a result of decades of immigration, especially the arrival of refugees, asylum seekers, Jews, and 'ethnic Germans' from eastern Europe over the last 20 years, will be one factor in bringing about this change, as writers of these backgrounds begin to look back in old age on different histories, and especially different displacements and disruptions, rather than on the Nazi past, the GDR, and postwar West Germany. There has been much talk about German 'normalisation' since unification – that is, of the imminent passing of the wartime generation coinciding with a lesser emphasis on the legacy of Nazism and postwar division. But it may be that for Germany, as it enters 'the post-postwar' period, normality will in fact mean that its increasingly elderly population's sense of what it *is*, and of its past, becomes more disparate, even as its concerns become more mundane and future-oriented: namely, how to ensure active and fulfilling lives while remaining open to the world.

Notes

- 1 Austria and Switzerland face similar demographic pressures; see IMF (2002).
- 2 In 2013, for example, the *Tagesschau* registered a low level of interest amongst highly qualified Indian students in working in Germany, partly on account of a negative view of Germans' attitudes towards immigrants in general and Indians in particular. See *Tagesschau* (2013).
- 3 Age and ethnicity are intimately related in the Federal Republic. In 2010, 19.3 per cent of the population had a migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*), that is to say, were immigrants or children of recent immigrants, with a median age of 35 as compared with 45.9 for all other residents (Statistisches Bundesamt 2011). In 2009, conversely, only 4 per cent of people over 65 were not German nationals (Statistisches Bundesamt 2009). (This figure also reflects the fact that very few older immigrants, especially Turks, have been able, or have wanted, to acquire German citizenship).
- 4 Specifically, public intergenerational transfers that are especially generous to older people, notwithstanding the incremental raising of the retirement age to 67 by 2029.
- 5 See Roman Herzog Institute (2004); Robert Bosch Foundation (2010); Jacobs Foundation (2006–08).

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