

Uncovering the Trauma Narrative in Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Coils of Fear*

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Introduction

With her debut novel, *1000 Coils of Fear*, Olivia Wenzel addresses the reality of living in Germany as a Black woman, whose life is shaped by experiences of racialization she struggles to deal with. Through a multilayered first-person account, the protagonist takes the reader through an entangled narration of her life as an adult. The text itself might best be described as a collage in the form of a novel, made up of narrative parts, recollections of memories, and descriptions of pictures in a nonchronological order. Therein, the narrative voice is divided into a partnership¹ that is only visually discernable (capitalized vs. lower case) and actively disrupts the text on an orthographical level. Through this partnership, the author sets up a dialogic situation which reflects the protagonist's fears and intrusive thoughts. Its function goes far beyond what Wenzel's publisher CATAPULT² among others has described as "witty"³ and "humorous." By analyzing this text, I am hoping to revise these public receptions of the novel that have failed to understand the text on its most basic level. Instead, I argue that the unconventional structure of the narrative and the separation of the narrator into multiple dialogic voices reflect the protagonist's experiences of racialization in the country she was born and grew up in.

For the analysis of the text, I am extending Sarah Colvin's concept of *Transtemporality* "where meaning emerges out of temporal dissensus."⁴ Therein, she explores the shifts in moods to uncover mechanisms of oppression by juxtaposing the indicative as a manifestation of an unchangeable present with the subjunctive as a proposition of an alternate future.⁵ She argues that Wenzel "create[s] [a] narrative[] whose progression is not linear but moves in loops or

¹ Sarah Colvin, "Freedom Time: Temporal Insurrections in Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Serpentine Angst* and Sharon Dodua Otoo's *Adas Raum*," *German Life and Letters* 75, no. 1 (2022): 138–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glal.12323>, p. 138.

² CATAPULT is the publisher of the English translation of the novel.

³ "1,000 Coils of Fear," accessed March 2, 2023, <https://books.catapult.co/books/1000-coils-of-fear/>.

⁴ Colvin, "Freedom Time," p. 143.

⁵ cf. Colvin, "Freedom Time," p. 141.

coils, like a spiral,”⁶ thereby forming a subversive narrative structure that follows a long tradition of Black experimental writing. Even though this reading is important in understanding how Wenzel incorporates a critique of oppressive structures in contemporary Germany, I argue here that the key to reading this novel and thereby countering those misreadings mentioned before lies rather in theorizing the recurrence of *spaces* as opposed to times whose importance is highlighted through the unconventional structure of the narrative. To understand this, it is helpful to consider the original German title of the novel; the word *Serpentine* means *switchback* in a road. And while the bends in a road do not ever touch again, the closeness of the turning points to each other almost gives the illusion of a reconnection of those parts of the road, a return to the same place. The movement in *switchbacks* through the narrative mirrors the protagonist’s return to places of trauma, depicting how she is forced to relive these experiences and thereby exemplifying the overwhelming impact they have on her life.

Platforms

One of these spaces is the train platform, to which the protagonist returns repeatedly over the course of the story. Opening the narrative, the protagonist stands in front of a vending machine “on some random train platform, in some random city.”⁷ The non-specificity of the place lends the scene an almost dreamlike quality, which is further intensified by the character’s questions about who invented the machine and why it is standing there alone, thereby almost personifying the vending machine (“Why does it stand alone? Who created it?”⁸). While she is thinking about which snack to buy, the scenery suddenly gets disrupted; the floor starts moving and everything around her starts spinning, until she finally faints. This first moment on the platform is followed by a temporal recourse. Therein, the narrative continues its main thread with a short description of the protagonist’s travels to the US, opened by the question: “WHERE ARE YOU NOW?”⁹—only to be interrupted by another sudden change of setting, in the form of a return to the train

⁶ Colvin, “Freedom Time,” p. 143.

⁷ Olivia Wenzel, *1,000 Coils of Fear*, trans. Priscilla Layne (New York: Catapult, 2022), p. 5. The analysis was done based on the original novel in German, but the Layne-translation is the version I used for the references in the paper. In the rest of the notes, I will refer to the book as “Wenzel, page.”

⁸ Wenzel, p. 5.

⁹ Wenzel, p. 8

platform. But this time, there are more people present alongside the protagonist. A group of young girls who are listening to rap music on their phone catches her attention. Rolling her curls “between thumb and forefinger,”¹⁰ she observes that the girls all have blond hair. Although this distinction is only secondarily hinted at, it is obviously of significance for the protagonist and hints at a complex literary discourse surrounding hair as a point of identification.¹¹ This first part of the narration is interrupted four times in total by similar episodes on the platform, which disrupt the continuity of the narrative, triggering abrupt switches in space and time, and thereby bringing the narrative again and again to what the reader will later discover is a site of trauma. Each time, the reader is confronted with the same objects on the platform: the foil wrap, the vending machine, the glass on the machine, the gurgling of the protagonist’s stomach, a melody that she is hearing, and a countdown of minutes until “the train will come,”¹² turning the train into an object the protagonist is subconsciously longing for but cannot attain. The alienation of the train is then transferred to the platform itself: It no longer functions as a stopover but turns into an infinite halt that the protagonist cannot escape from and is forced to return to repeatedly. Both the train and the platform are removed from the linearity of a train track and integrated into the coils of the trauma narrative.

The narrative insertions of the platform episodes always dwell on the same key elements whose recurrence signal on the one hand stagnation and, on the other hand, progression through the minor changes that are made to the setting. In the second return to the platform, the protagonist is still surrounded by a couple of people. She now indicates that the train is supposed to arrive in four minutes, setting a time limit that will actually never expire. She is again standing in front of the vending machine, now observing her own reflection in the glass instead of the girls’: “I’d rather watch myself in the glass pane of the snack machine.”¹³ Suddenly she hears a melody coming from said vending machine that she picks up and continues to hum quietly to herself: “So quietly that no one on the platform can hear [her], not even the small

¹⁰ Wenzel, p.16.

¹¹ I will not go deeper into the topic of hair in this paper as it provides enough material to be a topic on its own. The discourse around hair is highly charged and has often been reflected on in literature. Popular examples here span from writings by German authors like Anna Seghers or Paul Celan, through Arab American author Randa Jarrar to Asian American author Cathy Hong Kingston.

¹² Wenzel, p. 16.

¹³ Wenzel, p. 27.

mice running between the tracks,”¹⁴ thus creating a moment of intimacy with herself in the middle of the public platform. Through descriptions like these, which situate the episodes in a “dreamlike and magical-realist”¹⁵ state, it becomes clear that the insertions are somehow detached in time and space from the rest of the narrative—forming, instead, a multilayered diegesis whose levels are interrupted but also intermixed at times via the same recurring interjections.

When the protagonist arrives back in Berlin, a moment again marked by the obligatory “WHERE ARE YOU NOW?”¹⁶, she is confronted with all the reminders of her trauma at once. Her return to Germany unsettles her, which is reflected in the drastically intrusive voice that keeps pressing her to recollect her memories of trauma. This time, the return to the platform is initiated within the main thread of the narrative. The protagonist opens her eyes, thereby fully moving over to the platform, finally letting the reader in on why that place holds such significance for her. What follows is a repetition of the same episode eight times, culminating in a confrontation with her dead brother who is covered tightly with cellophane wrap, reminding one of a body bag but also of the foil that is used to pack the candy from the vending machine. While she engages in a dialogue with him, it is revealed to the reader for the first time that he committed suicide twelve years ago. Each one of these repetitions is initialized by a restatement in the form of a homodiegetic narration of her whereabouts, the train platform. All these statements are arranged in a similar manner, made up of the same elements that were present on the platform before: The platform is situated in a small-town; there is the vending machine, the gurgling of her stomach, the countdown, and the people around her. These elements function as signals of trauma-induced repetition-compulsion wherein the return to certain spaces become—and I am quoting trauma scholar Teresa Clare Ludden here— “[an] attempt[] to return to the original event in the face of the impossibility of doing so.”¹⁷ That means that the return to the site of trauma in the narrative is never a return to an “original experience” but

¹⁴ Wenzel, p. 27.

¹⁵ Colvin, “Freedom Time,” p. 139.

¹⁶ Wenzel, p. 28.

¹⁷ Teresa Clare Ludden, *Trauma Narratives and Theories: New Readings in Contemporary German, Austrian, and Transnational Contexts : A Special Number* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), p. 10.

rather an interaction between “retrieval and erasure.”¹⁸ Wenzel incorporates this mechanism by changing of details that happen in the context of the train platforms. While the protagonist is faced with the same arrangement of objects, minor changes—such as which, the people who are present on the platform—signal this exact mechanism. These returns can be referred to with what trauma theorist Cathy Caruth specifies as “the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination,”¹⁹ a texture Wenzel incorporates through certain elements that retain the episodes on the platform in a dreamlike state. Here, the initializing “where am i” question, now printed in lower case, resembles a grounding technique used to cope with anxiety or panic attacks.²⁰ But the technique does not work here; she is not able to answer the question which suggests that this confrontation with her brother troubles her immensely. The protagonist is not able to recognize where she is, which distinguishes this return from all the others while directing the focus on the importance of space itself. Finally, the dialogue is clearly marked by the Italics as internal and helps in identifying the return to the platform as a product of her subconscious, a means for her to deal with his suicide.

As is later uncovered in the narrative, the platform is also the site of another, earlier racist assault against the protagonist and her brother, and the recollection of such becomes her last return to the platform in the narrative.²¹ Therein, the twins are attacked by an older man who repeatedly performs the Nazi salute and then goes on to verbally abuse the two of them in ways, saying “[they] belong in a concentration camp, that [they] will be gassed there properly, and that soon the right train will come for [them].”²² The direct reference to the Shoah through its connection to trains as described by Todd Samuel Presner in *Mobile Modernity* cannot be disregarded here.²³ Wenzel is addressing this interrelation through the figure of the old man who functions as a link between Germany’s past and present; he acts as a remnant of Nazi ideology that is prevalent to this day. As literary scholar Denise Henschel correctly points out,

¹⁸ Ludden, *Trauma Narratives and Theories*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421421650>, p. 11.

²⁰ Sara Smith, “5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique for Anxiety,” April 10, 2018, <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/behavioral-health-partners/bhp-blog/april-2018/5-4-3-2-1-coping-technique-for-anxiety.aspx>.

²¹ Wenzel, *1000 Coils of Fear*, p. 214ff.

²² Wenzel, p. 215.

²³ Todd Presner, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

the passage “highlights a double form of violation,” first through the assault of the perpetrator, and second through the bystanders “who either condone or ignore his actions.”²⁴ The scene lends itself to critique Germany’s failed dealings with the past while reflecting on the consequences that derive thereby for targets of racialization. It refers to a system in which white people do not feel the need to even account for racist perpetration and go by unscathed. Not incidental, it seems, is the brother’s choice to commit suicide by throwing himself on the tracks. As a matter of course, this is directly connected to the constant return of the protagonist to the platform which holds significance in the story as a site of trauma. Unable to cope with and grieve the death of her brother, the protagonist loses herself in a seemingly never-ending series of switchbacks.

Conclusion

By extending Priscilla Layne’s reading of the coils as a metaphor for the uncontrollable spiraling of the narrator’s anxiety,²⁵ the periodical recurrence of certain spaces becomes a poetic strategy that not only structures the narrative but reflects trauma-induced repetition-compulsion.²⁶ The inner dialogue in which the protagonist is constantly engaging changes perspectives over the course of the narrative, reflecting on the haunting and intrusive thoughts that have arisen as a consequence of trauma. Priscilla Layne identifies this inner voice as a “survival tactic,”²⁷ an important observation that contributes to the understanding of its function in the story. Through these dialogues, the narrative voice portrays the compulsivity with which individuals reproduce moments of trauma. Overarching questions like “WHERE ARE YOU NOW?” serve as grounding techniques and exemplify the importance of *space* within the story. It is not only the “temporal dissensus”²⁸ that structures the story but rather a dissensus in space, which is marked first and foremost through the seemingly never-ending returns to places of trauma.

²⁴ Henschel, “Valences of the Human,” p. 282.

²⁵ *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel’s 1000 Serpentine Angst* (Zoom Webinar, 2022), https://www.brandeis.edu/cges/news-events/fall-2020/201026_layne_priscilla.html.

²⁶ Ludden, *Trauma Narratives and Theories.*, p. 3.

²⁷ Priscilla Layne, “‘That’s How It Is’: Quotidian Violence and Resistance in Olivia Wenzel’s 1000 Coils of Fear,” *Novel* 55, no. 1 (May 1, 2022): 38–60, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-9614973>, p. 39.

²⁸ Colvin, “Freedom Time,” p. 143.

The novel itself is embedded in a larger context of minoritized writing of which the notion of challenging normative literary practices becomes a crucial part.²⁹ Contemporary German literature has in the last couple of years been influenced significantly by a growing number of specifically female authors of color,³⁰ like Olivia Wenzel, Sharon Dodua Otoo, Fatma Aydemir, Mithu Sanyal, and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, to name just a few of them, whose works not only continue to challenge literary norms but point out the precarious living conditions of racialized people in their country. In this context the novel contributes to a blossoming literature of the margins in Germany. Not only does it present a very intimate perspective on the influence of ostracization by an affected person but it openly thematizes racism by directly naming it, therefore claiming a visible and very political position in the German literary sphere.

When at the end of the narrative, the protagonist again arrives at the airport in Berlin, the voice, now no longer capitalized, asks the same old question: “Where am I now?”³¹ But this time, something has changed. The protagonist is able to answer the question and the irregularity of the typeface is resolved, hinting at the fact that she has left this coping mechanism behind and instead is able to deal with her trauma. Coming back to the idea of switchbacks, the turns in the road may be close to each other, making the returns seem infinite and impenetrable at times, but as is shown in this last episode there is still a development, a movement forward. If anything, this should clarify that a novel that has been received as “humorous” is nothing short of a trauma narrative that—instead of simply talking about said trauma—attempts to communicate these issues in a way that breaks with conventions of narratology.

²⁹ Colvin, “Freedom Time,” p. 138.

³⁰ Jeannette Oholi, “Literaturgeschichte Stören. BPoC Literatur in Deutschland Relational Lesen,” *The German Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (2022): 414–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12301>.

³¹ Wenzel, p. 273.

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