MOTHERS AND OTHERS IN FICTION BY SHARON DODUA OTOO AND OLIVIA WENZEL

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A WHO report published in late 2019 reported that around 300,000 women die every year from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, 94% of them in poorer countries (economics play a huge role in women’s chance of surviving a pregnancy).1 Women who survive childbirth then face the labour of raising their children, which again impacts heavily on their life chances.2 It is no wonder, then, that some literary writers have eschewed conventional narratives of women as ideal or wicked mothers to focus on maternity as a threat to women’s wellbeing, engaging critically with the ideologies that define women as destined for ‘a life of child-rearing and constrained sexuality’.3

Recently, however, some aesthetically sophisticated, socially critical prose fiction has re-engaged the trope of motherhood in a more emancipatory context. Olivia Wenzel’s 1000 Serpentin Angst, and Sharon Dodua Otoo’s Synchronicity and Adas Raum all end with the birth, or anticipated birth, of a baby.4 All three fictional babies will be born in contemporary Germany, and Wenzel’s and Otoo’s protagonists implicitly expect excellent medical care, sufficient financial means and minimal social stigma as ‘unmarried mothers’. One could argue, therefore, that in a liberal culture and generous welfare state, motherhood simply does not need to appear as a threatening constraint. I am going to argue that there is more to it than that, however. In each of the novels (or novellas, in the case of Synchronicity), the birth of a baby is associated with a moment of possible change or futurity: the anticipation of – perhaps
– doing things differently. And in each of them doing things differently depends on the recognition of what Michelle Wright, in her examination of the trope of the Black mother in Black diasporic women’s writing, calls intersubjectivity. In Wright’s definition, subjects are intersubjective ‘in that they come into being through other subjects, not apart from them’. It is a structure that resists the dialectical model: ‘because all subjects are intersubjective, subjectivity cannot be produced dialectically, as thetical and antithetical relations do not exist.’

Otoo’s *Synchronicity* was first published in the German translation by Mirjam Nuenning in 2014, then in the original English in 2015. Its protagonist, Charlie or Cee, belongs to a fictional Ghanaian people: the Ejis, who are always female (even though Cee and her daughter Sam have androgenous names). Cee has grown up with the belief that the Ejis are essentially solitary: ‘a people who were born to live alone, love alone and die alone. We were to rely on no other living person’ (p. 14). They reproduce by parthenogenesis. Young Ejis women traditionally leave their mothers as soon as they are old enough to have children themselves, and never see them again. By the end of the novella, however, a process of change, or choice, has been initiated, and the story ends with the anticipated reunion of Cee and her daughter Sam, in the context of the arrival of Sam’s own baby daughter.

*Adas Raum*, Otoo’s first full-length novel, appeared in the original German in 2021. It involves four protagonists – or four versions of a protagonist – called Ada, living across different centuries. Each Ada becomes pregnant, although according to a 15th-century prophecy only one of the babies is destined to survive. The novel ends with the birth of that baby in Berlin in 2019. By the time of the birth a community of care has fallen into place to support both mother and child, opening out possibilities beyond the conventional Western ‘nuclear’ parent-child relation.
Wenzel’s *1000 Serpintinen Angst* (2020) also plays in 21st-century Berlin, where the unnamed protagonist becomes pregnant after a breaking up with her girlfriend and having occasional sex with her flatmate. In the course of the novel the protagonist addresses the trauma of racism, her twin brother’s suicide, and the problem of their white German mother’s emotional and physical absence. In a moment that marks something perhaps transformative in her process of working-through, she decides to carry her baby to term and raise it with her former girlfriend, Kim. The problems of a violent, racist world are not thereby solved, but within this possible queer utopia there is a sense that loving-care is in the balance, which might trigger processes of individual and societal change.

How are readers to understand these literary associations of maternity with hope for the future? (Wenzel narratively destabilises the moment of hope at the end of her novel – WÄRST DU ENTTÄUSCHT, WENN SICH MEINE SCHWANGERSCHAFT UND MUTTERSCHAFT ALS ECHTE, VÖLLIG “UNAMBIVALENTE” LÖSUNG FÜR ALL MEINE PROBLEME HERAUSSTELLEN WÜRDE?’ asks one of the dialogic narrative voices provocatively; p. 341). The issue of maternity is already complicated; words and images associated with the mother-child relation have been harnessed by a powerfully controlling, dominant narrative that coerces women who do have children and excludes, or sometimes demonises, women who do not. Hegemonic narratives are not unshakeable, however. Anthony Reed has remarked how Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *Venus* (1996) ‘plays on the gaps in what is only imagined to be total’, and in the memorable words of the insurrectionary egg-narrator in Otoo’s *Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin*, imagined categories have cracks: they are ‘nicht ganz dicht’. Otoo and Wenzel infiltrate and subvert dominant narratives. Specifically, they both depict mothering as a plural activity that is tied neither to biology nor to nuclear family structures. Wright observes how, in the poetry of Audre Lorde, ‘biology is not the deciding factor in the identity of motherhood’; and in that context
‘mother-attitude’ (to borrow John Mason’s term) is something accessible to all human beings; it ‘does not depend on how many children one has given birth to’.12

REINScribing motherHOOD

Wright describes cogently how motherhood has been erased in the Western philosophical tradition. ‘Nationalist discourse, whether white or Black, relies on certain strategic exclusions’, she explains: ‘By excluding the role of the mother, nationalist discourse can grant its male citizens fantastic powers, albeit ones wholly located within the ideal, or discursive, realm rather than the material, or realm of praxis’. In that fantastical realm, mothers are erased as agents, so that men can be granted ‘the power to determine the race of their offspring and the ability to establish finite origins and ends to the national narrative’. This is a discourse in which ‘men beget men’: where white thinkers (such as G.W.F. Hegel) ‘beget their Black antithesis’, and Black male thinkers ‘beget other Black men’.13

The trope of the mother has the potential to subvert the controlling, excluding temporality of linear time: in Wright’s terms, it ‘speaks to circularity, connecting peoples not only to future generations but to previous ones’14 (and it is worth recalling that women’s time, in Julia Kristeva’s essay of that title, is not linear but cyclical, and bound up with the symbolic of maternity).15 That stands in radical contradistinction to linear time, which enables the heroic narratives in which men ‘beget men’ along a timeline that can be cut to size, because it ‘starts and stops when they want’.16 Linear time supports the management of memory in ways that contain and reduce what is possible or thinkable, where Charles W. Mills has observed that hegemony – the management/maintenance of difference – depends on the management of memory.17
It is also worth recalling that motherhood is not erased in all traditions of thought. Theresa N. Washington has explored the West African concept of Àjé, where Àjé is both the name of a womb-based metaphysical force and a term for human beings who are gifted with it (who often, but do not need to, have wombs). In Yoruba culture, Àjé is thought to endow women in particular with special powers, and to give access to ‘the secret of life itself’. As a force, Àjé originates in Oòduà, who is ‘Mother of all the órisà [gods] and all living things’. Washington explores Àjé in US American Africana literature. In a similar vein, Jean Wyatt has recently observed how the British writer Helen Oyeyemi, in her award-winning novel White is for Witching (2009), creates mother-figures ‘imbued with Aje [sic], a spiritual force that enables some older Yoruba women to use magic maternally, so to speak—to protect and guide those who come within their circle of care’. In her PhD dissertation on Àjé in Yoruba thought, Annette Lyn Williams points to a ‘traditional belief that the Yorùbá sway once extended as far as Ashanti and included the Gas of Accra’. Otoo’s first Ada in Adas Raum is a Ga speaker and her village in Totope, where she is raised by multiple mothers, lies just a little northeast of Accra, on the Ada Foah peninsular, after which the villagers name the refugee girl. The fourth, British-Ghanaian Ada is born to a mother with an Igbo name, Ijemma: the West African language Igbo uses the term Amasu to describe Àjé. While they are flat-hunting in Berlin, Ada and her sister Elle meet two older West African women with mother-attitude, who have a mysterious connection with Ada’s mother and seem to embody Àjé or Amasu.

Cultural production regularly imagines father-son relationships (and occasionally mother-son relationships) as fraught with meaning. That imaginary is racialised as well as gendered: Wright draws on the work of Mae G. Henderson, who in 1989 had observed how literary criticism liked to focus on adversity between fathers and sons in white men’s writing, how that approach had been extended to address Black men’s writing, and how white
feminist critics had begun to explore a white female ‘anxiety of authorship’ under white patriarchy.24 In all of this, Henderson argues, the elision of Black women writers left Black women curiously free to develop writing with ‘an emancipatory impulse’.25 ‘Only black women writers were not interested in writing about white men and therefore they freed literature to take on other concerns’, Andrea Stuart summarized Toni Morrison’s perspective in an interview with Morrison in 1988, a year before Henderson’s essay was published.26

Using the poetry of Lorde and Carolyn Rodgers to illustrate her argument, Wright shows how the Black mother as trope recentres the mother as a generative agent—the ‘subject who literally produces other subjects’.27 As a trope, she explains,

the Black mother can accomplish many things at once: it can subvert the nationalist myth of discretely bounded subjects produced from the one; subvert the nationalist myth of discretely bounded racial groups in which Black subjects only produce Black subjects and white subjects only produce white subjects; and, finally, subvert the nationalist construction of the mother as a heterosexual, passive conduit for active male seed that will (re)produce other heterosexual male subjects.28

Working in the European context, both Otoo and Wenzel portray mothers who are generative agents, and not (in Wright’s words) ‘conduit[s] for active male seed’. The Ejis women in Synchronicity reproduce asexually, without recourse to male gametes. And all of Otoo’s protagonists give birth not to heterosexual male subjects but (where the child survives)29 to daughters. While her four Adas are apparently all heterosexual, the child who is destined to survive is not going to be raised in a heteronormative family structure. Cash, the child’s father, is not excluded from parenting; but more importantly, in an echo of the first Ada’s upbringing in 15th-century West Africa, the 21st-century Ada’s daughter will be co-parented by Ada’s sister, Elle, and embedded in a broader community of care that includes the two
older women who are not ‘blood’ relations but seem to embody mother-attitude or
Ájé/Amasu.

Readers of Adas Raum encounter the four protagonists as daughters and mothers.
Three of the four Adas are separated from their mothers in circumstances that can be called –
borrowing from Achille Mbembe – necropolitical.\textsuperscript{30} The 15th-century Ada’s mother escapes
an attack on her village by men who rape and kill the women and abduct the children in order
to sell them to European slavers. Ada Marianska’s 20th-century mother dies at the hands of
Nazi soldiers who are rounding up ‘undesirables’ in their Polish village. She draws gunfire to
herself in order to give her children time to run away (and her daughter Ada will later
perform a similar act of self-sacrifice, when she deliberately draws fire in a concentration
camp to protect her friend Linde). The 21st-century Ada Lamptey’s mother is killed in an
implicitly racist arson attack on her home in London’s Battersea Road. The second Ada, Ada
King, does not lose her mother to physical violence; but as an upper-class child in Victorian
Britain they are separated by the patriarchal convention that denies a child access to its
mother’s body (as the property of the father), and demands a nursemaid (‘Sie weigerte sich,
mich in den Arm zu nehmen, […]. Lieber kontrollierte sie, wie ich von der Amme in den
Schlaf gestillt wurde. Folglich nannte ich sie selten “Mama”; p. 159). In the patriarchal
mode described by Wright, in which men are the true begetters, Ada King will come to
understand herself as ‘bis zum Schluss durch und durch die Tochter meines Vaters’ (p.
163).\textsuperscript{31} And nonetheless her mother, Annabella, is named in the striking series of statements
that reinscribes Ada’s four mothers into centuries of history that has overlooked or erased
them:

Meine Mutter hieß Farida. […]

Meine Mutter hieß Annabella. […]

Meine Mutter hieß Ila. […]

Meine Mutter hieß Farida. […]

Meine Mutter hieß Annabella. […]

Meine Mutter hieß Ila. […]
Meine Mutter hieß Ijemma.32

‘[U]nlike the trope of the founding father,’ Wright explains, ‘mothers point to the endless line of ancestry that precedes and overlaps with each subject’.33 Wright describes how masculinist nationalist discourse erases the agency of the mother; but here Otoo literally reinscribes mothers into discourse across space-time, subverting both nationalist and chronological notions of separateness. Annabella and Ila (who is mother to Ada Marianska) both engage in individual acts of courageous loving-care for their daughters. Annabella, who initially acquiesced in the upper-class convention of using a wet-nurse, painfully learns to breastfeed in order to escape with her child from the drunken brutality of her husband (Lord Byron); and Ila provokes the Nazi soldiers to shoot at her so that her children can escape (although Ada looks back, like Persephone, and is dragged into the Hades of a concentration camp). Farida and Ijemma, mothers to the first and last Adas, offer loving-care that is less dependent on individual actions: both enable their daughters to be embraced by communities of care in the West African tradition. Understanding the importance of community or connectedness as a guiding structuring principle is at the heart of the lesson the Adas learn over their four lifetimes: ‘dass alle Wesen […] in Verbindung miteinander sind, dass wir es immer waren und immer sein werden’ (p. 127).

Like Ada, Wenzel’s protagonist in 1000 Serpentinien plans to raise her child neither with its biological father, nor in the context of a sexual pair-bond. In Wenzel’s as in Otoo’s narrative, nurturing intersubjectivity attaches to ‘mother-attitude’ rather than to biological maternity. During her visit to the United States, described early in the novel, the protagonist (who struggles in her relationship with her birth mother) reports experiencing an empathic connection with a maternal African American woman: ‘Dass ich joggen gehe und eine ältere, schwarze Frau ruft mir hinterher: Keep up the good work, baby! Dass ich diesen Satz noch Monate mit mir herumtrage’ (p. 51). Her eventual choice of her former girlfriend Kim as
primary co-parent for her child is made without the precondition that this will or should rekindle their romantic relationship.

Both Otoo and Wenzel thus subvert or transcend the Western normative vision of mother-attitude driven by biology, women as isolated childcarers, or sexual pair-bonding or nuclear family (whether hetero- or homosexual) as a condition of childrearing. Their protagonists model other ways of being-in-relation. Building on both Wright’s and Washington’s work on the erasure of mother-agency in Western culture and its reinscription in African American women’s writing, I will now explore motherhood in the work of these African European women writers as a literary figuration of the paradox of emancipatory constraint: the freedom or release that inheres in accepting our inextricable bound-up-ness with everything that is.

FIGURING A PARADOX: THE CONSTRAINING FREEDOM OF BEING-IN-RELATION


At the structural centre of Adas Raum the mysterious narrating being offers this summary of the lesson Ada must learn. It is a lesson about connectedness or being-in-relation. Ada expresses her understanding of it after giving birth, near the end of the novel, when she wakes up to find not only her sleeping baby next to her but her sister sleeping in a chair, covered by a pullover that belongs to the baby’s father. That moment of multiple connectedness enables new self-recognition in her: ‘endlich hatte ich verstanden, wer ich bin’ (p. 317). She is now
not only Adanna (her full name, which, readers learn, means daughter of the mother) but mother of a daughter: a chiastic double relation that spans past, present and future. She looks to the baby that is not ‘mine’ but ‘ours’ (‘ich […] richtete mein Blick auf unsern Schatz’; p. 317, my emphasis). The novel’s action has been driven by the ‘Schatz’ that is a centuries-old gold bracelet; but now the treasure is a human being, and Ada has understood that she and her baby do not exist in an exclusive mother-child binary, but are multiply in relation.

Wyatt identifies a ‘chiasmus structure’ in Oyeyemi’s novel *White is for Witching*, ‘in which the second half of the structural sequence repeats in reverse the first half’. She calls this a ‘circular structure’.34 I have shown elsewhere that Otoo’s *Adas Raum* has a looping structure that is similarly chiastic; and both Ada’s name and the name of her sister, Elle, are palindromes that point like signposts to the chiastic structures that shape the novel.35 In Wenzel’s *1000 Serpentinen*, the plural narrative voice – YOU/i, I/you – is chiastically arranged.36 Otoo’s *Synchronicity* does not have a chiastic narrative shape, but the mother-daughter relation that drives the story is chiastic: Cee muses that the loss of her daughter means ‘no one to hold or have been held by’ (p. 76). In the context of these three recent narratives that reinscribe the trope of the mother within chiastic structures, it becomes noteworthy that the cultural anthropologist Francine Wynn has conceptualised the relationship of mother and infant as a form of being-in-relation that is itself chiastic.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Wynn observes, engaged the figure of chiasmus to describe embodied relationships as ‘*simultaneously* holding and being held’.37 Building on Merleau-Ponty’s model, she describes ‘a mutual holding and being-held’ that is ‘formed as much by the infant’s holding of the mother as it is by the mother’s holding of her infant.’38 The mother-baby relation is thus ‘a mutually reciprocated, actively co-constituted, creative relationship’, and mother and infant are (in Wynn’s terms) chiastically *intervolved*, in a relationship of ‘touching-being touched, feeling-being felt, seeing-being seen, hearing-being
heard, moving-being moved’.\textsuperscript{39} Intervolvement is transformative: it figures ‘a transforming contact with the other that brings one to a turning point or takes one to the limit of oneself’.\textsuperscript{40}

Wynn’s conception of intervolvement resonates with Wright’s intersubjectivity: it is an inextricable, non-dialectical relation. In Wright’s analysis of the trope of motherhood, mother-child intersubjectivity or intervolvement is both unavoidable and constraining: ‘the daughter cannot sever ties with her mother, because her mother is part of who she is’.\textsuperscript{41} Otoo’s Cee (in \textit{Synchronicity}) believes she has been taught the opposite, namely that daughters can and must sever ties with their mothers. She reads connectedness as vulnerability (‘I don’t do love’, p. 71). Separated from her daughter Sam, and suffering ‘the loss of all hope’ (p. 65), Cee makes her way to a bridge in a narrative foreshadowing of suicide (‘the water called me and I was tempted’, p. 74). But something transformative happens in an encounter with the dream-spirit of her mother. Her mother’s presence immediately returns her to connectedness: ‘I instantly felt warmer and cradled’ (p. 75). Challenged by her dream-mother to question her beliefs about being-in-relation, Cee breaks from being ‘chained to tradition and custom’ and loosens ‘the metaphorical strings’ around her neck (pp. 75-76). She is momentarily returned to the womb (‘I curled up into the foetal position’, p. 76). That foetal moment seems to enable her choice to accept the chiastic connection with her daughter Sam (‘to hold or have been held by’, p. 76) and implicitly her choice of life over death (she will not commit suicide). The novella ends as she sends her daughter a letter – a symbol of futurity, a message that has yet to be read – and draws strength from the possibility of being-in-relation: ‘three days later I could be holding my daughter again’ (p. 80). The constraint and vulnerability of connectedness – which Cee previously rejected – now emerges paradoxically as a form, or perhaps \textit{the} form, of emancipatory strength.
Wenzel’s *1000 Serpentinien* similarly ends with a message sent, but also with a message received. The message received is a text message, from Kim: ‘I’m all in’ – a pointer to specific connectedness in the context of future co-parenting. The message that is sent takes the form of a bubble-gum bubble released into the sky, and evokes a less specific or bounded connectedness. The bubble transports the narrator’s breath, and she muses on whether it might connect her with her dead brother, or perhaps her absent mother; or whether it might just support a travelling ladybug, offering it a moment’s rest. The bubble offers interrelated support (a breath of life) to any being, implicitly. Carried away on the wind, it simultaneously connotes freedom in the context of, or as the outcome of, unconditional connectedness.

In the imaginative world of the novel, the soft bubble of gum, filled with the breath of life, is anticipated by an earlier scene involving the soft life-filled bubble that is the protagonist’s amniotic sac. A puddle of water on the floor of an airport foreshadows the breaking of her waters and causes the protagonist (who is still undecided about keeping the baby) to slip and fall. It is a transformative moment: ‘während des Sturzes wirst du dich für einen glühenden Moment so sehr um alles in deinem Bauch sorgen, dass es keinen Sauerstoff mehr gibt. […] Du wirst in diesem Moment […] wissen, dass du das Kind bekommen wirst’ (p. 336). Similarly to Cee’s experience in *Synchronicity*, that acceptance of interrelated being-in-relation, modelled by but not limited to the mother-child relation, is emancipatory. In this case it releases Wenzel’s protagonist somewhat from the coils of fear produced by the long-term trauma of violence, racism, and the difficulty of grieving. She still feels fear, but a fear that has been transformed into a kind of life force of loving-care (*Sorge*): ‘eine Angst, tiefer, wärmer und zerreißender als jede Angst um dich selbst, dein Leben, deine identitären Befindlichkeiten es je sein könnte: eine Angst, gebunden an eine Liebe, so stark wie alles, was du bisher kanntest, mal 1000’ (p. 337). In neither Otoo’s nor Wenzel’s story does connectedness eradicate the problems of a violent, racist world; but in both cases the literal or
metaphorical umbilical cord is a life force that permits the protagonist to resist that world’s necropolitical impetus.

MOTHERHOOD AND MAYONNAISE: FIGURING DIFFERENCE COLLOIDALLY

Otoo’s narrator describes the white European imaginary as hierarchical and proprietary, resting on a logic of separateness that justifies avarice and theft:


The multiple Ada/s embody something that (recalling Wright’s terms) subverts the myth of discretely bounded subjects. Simultaneously they (again, in Wright’s terms) subvert the notion of discretely bounded racial groups: the first and last Adas are Black, the two middle Adas white – together they represent a structural chiasmus, where chiasmus signals profound being-in-relation.43

Chiasmus is often represented as a symmetrically mirroring X figure. But Stephen Tyler, in his philosophical exploration of chiasmi and difference, figures chiasmus not as an X shape, but as two (or more) spirals that intersect and expand. The dynamic spirals represent ‘a dialectic of becoming that does not necessarily imply the overcoming of difference’ – like Wright in her conception of intersubjectivity, Tyler is explicitly looking to go beyond the Hegelian dialectic, and beyond Heidegger.44 His attempt to model difference differently appeared two years after Jean-Luc Nancy’s radical rethink of Hegel and Heidegger in Being Singular Plural (Être singulier pluriel). Nancy describes being-in-relation in terms that
resonate with Tyler’s multiply intersecting spirals: ‘All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation; moreover, it is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other’.\textsuperscript{45} John Mbiti had identified singular plurality as a theme in African philosophy in 1969 – ‘I am because we are’\textsuperscript{46} – and Nancy develops that thought when he insists on human beings ‘saying ‘we’, […] \textit{saying we to themselves} in all possible senses of that expression, and by saying we for the totality of all being.’\textsuperscript{47}

Beyond its three-section, chiastic structure, \textit{Adas Raum} has an epilogue, headed ‘\textit{Mir. Wir}’. In this final short section of the novel, the fourth Ada gives birth to her daughter, and event that both circles back to and spirals forwards from the death of the first Ada’s newborn baby that opens the novel. With the birth of a child who is destined to live, Ada’s existence as an ‘I’ is tangibly shifted into an existence as a ‘we’. In Nancy’s conception, being \textit{is} being-with, and to express that he reaches (like Otoo and Wenzel, Wynn and Tyler) for chiasmus: the ‘meaning of Being’, he writes, is represented ‘not only as the ‘meaning of with’, but also, and above all, as the ‘with’ of meaning.’\textsuperscript{48}

Chiasmus explicitly drives Simon Critchley’s account of Levinas’s critique of dialectics. For Levinas, philosophy that seeks to overcome the otherness of the Other performs ‘alchemy whereby the Other is transmuted into the Same’.\textsuperscript{49} Alchemy is historically part of a masculine imaginary and describes a desire for purity (‘pure’ gold, the unadulterated self). The philosopher María Lugones addresses the problem of the encounter of Other and Same differently, using the everyday metaphor of mayonnaise. Mayonnaise, in Lugones’ terms, is not ‘an exercise in purity’; instead it represents ‘separation as curdling, an exercise in impurity’. It is a culinary success because it embraces colloidality: the emulsion or suspension of elements that exist in relation while their difference nonetheless persists. Lugones calls colloidality ‘curdling’. She advocates for ‘curdled logic’, which permits a colloidal relation of difference that offers a vital alternative to the alchemical (and
tendentially necropolitical) ‘logic of purity’. Lugones represents curdled thinking using a double-headed arrow (‘oppressing ⇔ resisting’, e.g.), which is chiastic. Like the chiastic mother-child relation it represents *intervolved* difference.

Wright and Henderson both struggle with the insufficiency of Hegelian dialectics to describe the models for relationality articulated by African American women writers. Henderson rejects Bakhtin’s ‘dialogics of discourse’ as competitive and looks instead to Hans-Georg Gadamer for ‘a language of consensus, communality, and even identification’. Gadamer’s dialectics, she argues, do provide a ‘model for articulating a relation of mutuality and reciprocity with the “thou”—or intimate other(s)’. Accepting the spirit of Henderson’s argument, Wright nonetheless reverts to the term *dialogic* because of the problematic association of the *dialectical* with Hegel’s adversarial philosophy of difference. The trope of the Black mother figures ‘a dialogic structure for subjectivity’, she argues, not a Hegelian overcoming of the Other. Mothers and daughters in African American women’s writing are, she insists, in a ‘dialogic rather than oppositional relation’. Even when it is fraught the relation is chiastic, and colloidal; it is not a matter of overcoming.

**Intersubjectivity (intervolvement, colloidal)
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Intersubjectivity (intervolvement, colloidal) transcends interpersonal sympathy. It is ‘not necessarily based on shared ideology’, and nor is it necessarily based on shared experience: quite early in Wenzel’s novel, the protagonist questions her white grandmother’s capacity to comprehend her experience as a young Black woman in contemporary Germany: ‘Was soll mir meine weiße Großmutter antworten auf die Frage, ob sie eine Ahnung hat, was es bedeutet, keinen Ort zu kennen, an dem man selbst die Norm ist?’ (p. 82). She finds herself similarly unable to imagine what it means to be her grandmother:

Ich weiß nicht, was es bedeutet, seine Jugend in Anwesenheit sowjetischer Soldaten zu verbringen, welche Spuren das hinterlassen kann, welche Ungerechtigkeiten
geschehen sind, wie viele Vergewaltigungen es tatsächlich gab. […] Ich weiß nur, dass es Verletzungen gab, zu allen Zeiten. (p. 184)

Intervolvement, intersubjectivity, colloidality describe an essential state of being-with that includes being-with difficulties. Wenzel’s protagonist negotiates intersubjectivity with her dead brother, her anti-racist white German mother, and her racist white German grandmother. Radical mother/daughter connectedness is also connectedness to difficult history: ‘SO VIEL SCHEITERN AUF DER MÜTTERLICHEN LINIE’ observes the DU-narrator (p. 45). Ájè and Amasu may be present in the older women of Otoo’s novel, and in the maternal African American woman of Wenzel’s, but older women by no means always appear as incarnations of mother-attitude: towards the end of 1000 Serpentinen an older white woman in a bus is strikingly non-maternal and implicitly racist when she hits a young man in the face (pp. 285-86).

As Wright observes, not all ‘biological’ mothers have mother-attitude – some are ‘far from embracing their status as mothers and/or do not possess that sacrificial and often self-negating love’ (p. 171). Wenzel’s protagonist has a vision of her mother, Susanne, as a ‘Horrorclown’ (p. 207). The vision is a response not least to narrative abuse, as her mother repeatedly forces stories on her that are too personal, too sexual, and always factually questionable: ‘Ich weiß nicht, ob diese Sachen stimmen oder ob sie sie erfindet’ (p. 258). Susanne has an unstable and extreme personality (‘Zu jedem Weihnachtsfest ein anderer Körper, zu jedem Geburtstag eine neue Haarfarbe’, p. 240) and on one occasion describes being sexually and physically abused by men who might have been neo-Nazis; but then confounds her shaken daughter with the coda, ‘Du glaubst einem echt alles’ (p. 297). At the same time the protagonist feels a certain gratitude to the mother who first tried unsuccessfully to transfer care of her twins to their father or grandparents, but then dedicated years of her life to protecting the children in a racist society, among other things keeping a gas pistol under
In the latter part of the novel (narrated by an upper-case ICH and a lower-case du), the question of gratitude is negotiated by the double-voiced, dialogic narrator. ‘WOFÜR?’ demands ICH, and du responds, ‘Für alles, was sie für dich und deinen Bruder getan und ausgehalten hat’ (p. 275). Unsurprisingly, the protagonist struggles with the relationship: ‘ich habe kein Gefühl dafür, was für ein Mutter-Tochter-Verhältnis angemessen wäre und was nicht’ (p. 258). It drains her sense of self: ‘Ich weiß in ihrer Gegenwart einfach nicht, wer ich bin’ (p. 255). While her mother has a name, the protagonist does not.

CONCLUSIONS

I have suggested that maternity as a trope in the writing of Wenzel and Otoo has an emancipatory dynamic that is paradoxically in relation with the constraints of connectedness. Borrowing the chiastic double-headed arrow from Lugones, one could describe it as emancipatory ⇔ constraining. Building on Michelle Wright’s work, I have also tried to illustrate how the radical reciprocity of ‘mother-attitude’ subverts nationalist, patriarchal, and/or (hetero)normative fantasies which (like the children’s question in Morrison’s story) serve necropolitical systems of control. In the fictional texts discussed, motherhood is reinscribed in ways that depart from Western expectations of an idealised one-on-one relation (often depicted in visual and verbal images that show or recall the Christian figures of Mary and baby Jesus). Even dominant cultural arrangements are, to borrow Otoo’s phrase, ‘nicht ganz dicht’. When, in Adas Raum, the fourth Ada arrives from Ghana, where she has grown up in a traditional extended family or community of care, a microcosmic alternative world begins to form that shakes open new possibilities. Ada and her sister Elle form a mini-community of care which expands to include the Ájé-embinding West African women they meet while flat-hunting, potentially the baby’s father Cash, and (most strikingly) the elderly son of an SS-man, Herr Wilhelm, whose rental home provides a safe space for the now very-
pregnant Ada. Herr Wilhelm will later demand her presence in the hospital, claiming that she is his daughter. A diverse, curiously inclusive community of care has thus infiltrated neoliberal Berlin – and it is growing.

There are reasons not to associate motherhood with hope for the future, not least in the German context. Hitler notoriously rewarded white non-disabled mothers for producing white non-disabled children; and Wright observes how racism, nationalism, and white supremacy have historically been ‘tied to an unethical form of mothering, in which love for one’s own children depends on the exclusion of others, and more specifically racial others, from care.’ In 1000 Serpentinen, Wenzel’s unnamed Black German protagonist conceives her baby (who appears in a future moment as a little boy) with her white German lover, Henning. During her pregnancy she faces the question of how she will relate to her own child if it is white (pp. 317-18). It is therefore important that the trope of the mother, as it is engaged in the recent works of German-language fiction I have discussed, subverts the gendered and racializing mythologies that divide and separate (as Michelle Wright has also observed in her reading of African American women’s writing). Privileging mother-attitude over ‘biological’ motherhood subverts limiting, controlling assumptions about deserves nurturing and who can provide it.

In Wright’s argument, the trope of the mother evokes a necessary, inevitable connectedness that does not lend itself to constructions of a past or an Other that can be managed or overcome. I would argue that the trope of motherhood is not only subversive but (perhaps appropriately) epistemically generative. Like chiasmus, motherhood figures a mode of being-in-relation that unbuilds separateness without overcoming the Other – its essence is difference-in-relation. It could be read as a foundational image for a different epistemological discourse that does not depend on the ‘mastery’ of difference. Mastery uses categories as a tool for control (‘Sprachen und ihre Kategorien, o! Menschen und ihre Kategorien, o!’,
laments the narrating egg in Otoo’s ‘Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin’). Tyler sets chiasmi – which figure difference – in contradistinction to categories, which suppress difference: ‘Categories create sames by an act of forgetting – the forgetting of differences.’ Chiasmus, by contrast, reinvigorates difference, where difference (Tyler reminds us, referencing Foucault), ‘can only be liberated through the intervention of a-categorial thought’. Difference, then, can be liberated by form: aesthetics can be emancipatory. Nancy contends that ethics makes a project of what actually already is, namely being-with-one-another: ‘the ‘ethical’ exposes what the ‘ontological’ disposes’. The aesthetic, I suggest, exemplified in the works of literary fiction discussed here, represents what the ethical exposes and the ontological disposes: that is, art represents both the necessity and the already-is-ness of being-with-one-another.

Otoo and Wenzel engage chiastic structures alongside the trope of motherhood to figure the inevitable, constraining reality of being-in-relation as potentially emancipatory. To borrow a phrase from Ivo Strecker’s reading of chiasmus, the trope of motherhood as engaged in these novels has (like chiasmus) the ‘potential to shatter expectations and conventions (and establish new ones)’. My purpose in rehearsing variants of philosophical thinking about chiastic and intervolved models of difference has been to illuminate the possibilities that inhere in the use of chiastic structures as part of the aesthetic trope of motherhood. In Wynn’s chiastic mother-baby relation, two singularities ‘come close and simultaneously spread away into their own particularity’. That relation is intervolved or intersubjective, and one-on-one. Tyler’s spirals resonate with it but expand it to be plural, so that multiple singularities are in relation, as they are in Otoo’s and Wenzel’s use of the trope of motherhood in the context of communities of care. Nancy, in Being Singular Plural, pushed for the recognition that a basic, essential bond connects ‘all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate,
stones, plants nails, gods’. And Otoo’s narrating Being in Adas Raum expresses that as a knowledge to be learned (or more precisely a knowledge we need to be reminded of): ‘dass alle Wesen – vergangene, gegenwärtige und zukünftige – in Verbindung miteinander sind, dass wir es immer waren und immer sein werden’ (p. 127).

The mother-child relation offers (I have argued) a microcosmic figuring of intersubjective connectedness, where intersubjectivity inheres in all relations. In Adas Raum, Otoo offers a striking reminder that connectedness is a fact of life (and death) in the image of Ada Marianska’s shadow, as it falls through the window of her room in the concentration camp and overlays the body of a dead man lying outside (p. 90). When Ada is shot dead by camp guards soon afterwards, the narrating Being observes how intervolvement leaves the men who killed her spiritually wounded: ‘ihre Zersplitterung sprengte ein Loch in die Würde all ihrer Folterer – einschließlich der sprichwörtlichen Guten, die nichts getan haben wollten’ (p. 262). Intersubjectivity means that doing harm does harm to the doer.

In her Nobel Prize speech of 1993 Toni Morrison told the story of an old, blind African American woman who was challenged by children to say whether the bird one of them claims to be holding is alive or dead. ‘It is in your hands’, the old woman replies. She thus asserts for herself, and offers them (and perhaps the bird), the paradoxical freedom that comes from acknowledging being-in-relation.


4 Olivia Wenzel, 1000 Serpentinen Angst. Frankfurt a.M. 2020. Sharon Dodua Otoo, Adas Raum. Frankfurt a.M. 2021; and Synchronicity, Münster 2014 (German, in the translation by Mirjam Nuenning), 2015 (English original). I am citing from the English original. Further references to these works of fiction will be given in the text.


Sharon Dodua Otoo has linked the fictional Ejis to the historical Queen Mother of Ejisu, Yaa Asantewaa, who was Commander in Chief of the Ashanti army against the British during the war that became known as the Yaa Asantewaa War of Independence in 1900. Thanks to Sharon Dodua Otoo for making this point during the Cambridge colloquium on her writing in March 2022; and see Racquel West, ‘Yaa Asantewaa (mid-1800s-1921), Black Past (8 February 2019), https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/yaa-asantewaa-mid-1800s-1921/, accessed 31 August 2022.


Wright, Becoming Black, p.171.


Wright, Becoming Black, pp. 141 and 125.

Wright, Becoming Black, p. 141.


18 Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, cited in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, p. 13


22 Thanks to Sharon Dodua Otoo for telling me about the provenance of the name.


27 Wright, *Becoming Black*, p.143.


29 The first Ada has a son who dies shortly after birth; the second has an abortion; the third has a newborn who is murdered. In the latter two cases the baby is not gendered.


31 The historical Lady Ada King, on whom Otoo’s second Ada is based, was outlived by her mother, Lady Byron; where Otoo’s Ada King is shot dead by her husband in another necropolitical moment, her historical counterpart died of uterine cancer in 1852, aged 36.

32 In an email, Sharon Dodua Otoo kindly explained the significance of the individual names: Farida is Arabic, meaning unique, precious; Annabella is a Latin name meaning beautiful, graceful, loveable; Ila is an invention of Otoo’s, ‘sort of a combination of “Ida” from “Farida” and “Ella” from “Annabella”; and Ijemma - is an Igbo name meaning “a good journey”’. Thanks to Sharon Dodua Otoo.


34 Wyatt, ‘Reinventing the Gothic’, p. 255.

Wenzel’s highly original narrative voice represents an I/you relation. Chiasmus structures the intervolvement of two narrative voices, an ich/DU or du/ICH partnership, through the three parts of the novel; see Colvin, ‘Narrative Pilgrimage and Chiastic Justice’, and Colvin, ‘Freedom time’.


Wright, *Becoming Black*, pp. 149, 147.

The question of grievability is persuasively addressed by Henschel, ‘Valences of the Human’.


52 Wright, *Becoming Black*, p. 147.

53 Wright, *Becoming Black*, p. 268


