



Multilingual Autofiction: Mobilizing Language(s)?

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This chapter argues that multilingualism is a key autofictional strategy in transcultural autobiographical literature. My research on recent transcultural literature points to the increasing importance of multilingualism, which I interpret in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyglossia: the playful mixture of a multitude of national languages within the same text (Bakhtin 1981, 65). This multilingualism could—potentially—be seen as an expression of polyphony, a concept coined by Bakhtin to describe how life and literature are fundamentally structured by a diversity of voices and points of view (Bakhtin 1981). Multilingualism, used in this particular sense of the word, has the potential to become a powerful aesthetic strategy in multicultural literature. In this chapter, I will argue that in postmigrant literature published between 1990 and 2020, a new mode of multilingual autofiction can be identified.

The autofictional multilingual mode thrives across borders and cultures and seems to be independent of the geographical places of publication. In

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this chapter, I will explore the works of three authors from Germany, Sweden, and Denmark: *Kanak Sprak: 24 Misstöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (*Kanak Sprak: 24 Discordant Notes from the Margin of Society*) (1995) by the German-Turkish author Feridun Zaimoğlu, *Ett öga rött* (*One Eye Red*) (2003) by the Swedish-Tunisian author Jonas Hassen Khemiri, and *Yahya Hassan* (2013) by the Danish-Palestinian author Yahya Hassan. What I refer to as multilingual autofiction emerges in each of these works in different guises, but to similarly powerful effect.¹ Their subtle play with the multi-layered and hybrid character of languages has a subversive impact on their respective political and historical contexts, giving each of the authors a penetrating voice in polemical contemporary debates. This chapter explores both the aesthetic scope and the political potential that these authors' multilingual autofictional strategies afford.

The elements of multilingualism and polyglossia have received little attention so far in research on autofiction.² Although several critics have considered the relationship between autobiography, autofiction, and multilingualism, including Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (2006), Mirjam Gebauer (2009), Michaela Holdenried (2012), Wolfgang Behschnitt and An Willems (2012), and Marion Acker and Anne Fleig (2018), it is striking that the question and importance of multilingual autofictional literature is not mentioned in the recent overviews of autofiction provided by Iversen (2020) and Gronemann (2019). Owing to a combination of globalization, war, poverty, and natural disasters, the past thirty years have seen a significant increase in migration and thus in the prevalence of transcultural backgrounds.³ Transcultural autofictional writing, as a result, is a rapidly expanding field.

TRANSCULTURAL AUTHORS AND THE APPEAL OF THE AUTOFICTIONAL

Since Serge Doubrovsky coined the term “autofiction” in 1977, there has been a notable affinity between transcultural writers and autofictional modes. Acker and Fleig (2018) argue that one reason for this affinity is that, temporally, the growth of migrant literature and of autofiction coincided. Additionally, they state that:

[a]part from this temporal coincidence, autofiction seems to appeal to many multilingual authors “in between,” because of its constitutional ambiguity and its transgressing character of noticeable self-positioning. The

ambivalences and fractions of multilingual, transcultural affiliation meet an adequate expression in the ambivalence and inconsistency of autofictional texts between theory and practice, novel and autobiography, fact and fiction. (Acker and Fleig 2018, 22)⁴

As Acker and Fleig suggest, the oscillating structure of this postmodernist genre offers a space for negotiations of multicultural identity. A key component of a multicultural identity is the experience of living with more than one language. Mirjam Gebauer (2009, 114), Yildiz (2012, 10–13), and Acker and Fleig (2018, 20) describe such multilingual writers as experiencing a “double exclusion from the literary tradition.” As early as the nineteenth century, German philosophers Johann Gottfried von Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher were among those who advocated the idea that only “mother tongue” literature would be capable of creating masterpieces. Consequently, writings by transcultural authors would be excluded from the Parnassus of recognized literature, and, according to Gebauer, a tendency can be observed to consider these writings as “autobiographical” in the traditional, non-fictional sense of the word, and more specifically as “documents on cultural alterity.” However, as classic autobiography is attached to the fundamental idea that expressions of “undisguised subjectivity” could only be expressed with authenticity by the mother tongue, these multilingual writers face an “autobiographical paradox,” which also banishes them from the classic autobiographical genre (Gebauer 2009, 14). It is in the face of this generic no man’s land that transcultural writers turn to autofiction. Whereas traditional autobiography is bound to the “exclusive intimacy of the mother tongue,” autofiction operates with “the option of the playful rejection of cultural identification” and an open mind toward plural cultural and lingual relations (Acker and Fleig 2018, 23). The flexibility and variety of this autofictional play affords authors multiple ways in which to express and negotiate their multilingual identities.

FROM EXPERIENCE TO EXPERIMENT: TOWARD A POLITICAL STRATEGY IN MULTILINGUALISM

Over the past twenty years, a shift of interest from *experience* to *experiment* seems to have taken place in transcultural literature.⁵ According to Esther Kilchmann “[f]ocus is transferred from the author’s lingual biography as well from the sociolinguistic context of the text production to the performed unique dynamic(s) and the constant movement of languages and

language in general” (2017, 185). While the interest in communicating the autobiographical *experience* of multiculturalism, migration, marginalization, racism, and social inequality would dominate the early stages of transcultural literature, *experiments* with multilingualism and language increasingly characterize more recent stages of postmigrant literature. I argue that this shift moves the focus away from the autobiographical dimension of the literary works and toward language and style, a move that is symptomatic of the general “linguistic turn” of the period.

According to Kilchmann, the new generation of transcultural authors explores national languages in terms of code switching or code mixing. They play with the syntactic, grammatical, and lexical levels of the language and invent alternative criteria for lingual combination. Kilchmann refers to Austrian author Wolf Haas who, in his novel *Die Verteidigung der Missionarsstellung* (*The Defense of the Missionary Position*) (2012), includes long passages of Chinese in the otherwise German text. She also mentions the Swiss author Heike Fiedler, who writes in German, French, and English, but makes use additionally of Spanish and Cyrillic characters. Material aspects of language such as orthographic and phonological features become a kind of playground for these authors, pointing to the performative potential of this particular mode of multilingual literature. These multilingual experiments, which reveal the *homo ludens* of the authors, are a recurrent feature of avant-garde approaches to public poetry events, as well as of later forms such as *Spoken Word* or intermedial performances such as *Digital Poetry* (Kilchmann 2017, 184–185). However, the apparently playful ways of working with a variety of national languages that are found in multilingual literature differ from these other kinds of experimental art. The aim of mixing together national languages is not solely to mirror the heterogeneity of a standard language by pointing to the existence of sociolects, dialects, and multiethnolects, but to question the monolingualistic and monocultural norms of the social and historical context of the work.

Multilingual literature has existed for many centuries, visible in the mixture of Latin and Roman vernacular languages in so-called macaronic literature. With the increasing globalization and migration of recent decades, however, multicultural and multilingual texts now make up a much larger segment of literary output, and their provocative political effect reaches further than ever. The reasons behind the highly subversive effect of polyglossia are located in a specific historical context, as Yasemin Yildiz points out in her ground-breaking study *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The*

Postmonolingual Condition (2012). Yildiz states that the mere existence of multilingualism challenges the so-called monolingual paradigm, which has prescribed *one* national language and *one* mother tongue since emerging in late eighteenth-century Europe. Yildiz emphasizes that:

monolingualism is much more than a simple quantitative term designating the presence of just one language. Instead, it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one “true” language only, their “mother tongue,” and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation. (Yildiz 2012, 2)

Here, Yildiz addresses the ways in which a mother tongue was instrumentalized in the service of nation-building and the shaping of a homogeneous and monolingual state. Set against this monolingual status, which remains the dominant paradigm of most European nations, the political function of multilingual writing is clear. Transgressing the ideal of monocultural and monolingual society, it becomes a powerful instrument with which to critique the establishment. As the case studies I will explore demonstrate, autofictional multilingual writing has proven particularly effective as an aesthetic strategy which enables authors to showcase and mobilize their multilingual capacity and to address political discourses on migration, transculturality, and racism.

The claim that multilingualism is a key autofictional strategy in trans-cultural autobiographical literature raises important questions in terms of genre and narratological description. Given that the explicit multilingual traits act as strong referential signposts, they bear witness to the authors’ multilingual and multicultural biographical background. What kind of relationship does this autofictional, multilingual mode thus establish between fiction and fact, author and narrator, in these texts? Acker and Fleig (2018, 19) comment on this issue: “Multilingual narration dissolves the strict distinction between author and narrator, as multilingual texts always refer to the lingual-cultural multiple affiliation, and thus to the lifeworld of its authors. Consequently, the narratological distinction between factual and fictional narration, which goes hand in hand with the distinction between author and narrator, is questioned.” As a central aim

of the texts I will examine is to spark an extratextual dialogue, how does the autofictional serve in multilingual literature to reshape the relationship between author and reader?

To explore these theoretical questions, I will turn now to works by Zaimoğlu, Khemiri, and Hassan. I will compare the autobiographical backgrounds of the authors before analyzing the different ways in which their multicultural and multilingual backgrounds emerge in aesthetic terms. These texts do not only address transcultural life experience as a theme; their multifocal narrative structure and interweaving of languages also bear witness to the multicultural and multilingual lifeworld of the authors. Finally, I will evaluate the political impact of these three works with specific reference to their reception.

VOICES FROM GERMANY, SWEDEN, AND DENMARK

While Zaimoğlu, Khemiri, and Hassan's multilingual works are situated somewhere between experience and experiment, the autofictional status of these works enables all three authors to privilege the obsessive experimentation with language over the elements of autobiographical experience. The three works differ with respect to national origin, time period, and genre, but what they share is the authors' endeavor to fight with words, by mobilizing multilingualism as an aesthetic strategy. Feridun Zaimoğlu is German-Turkish, born in 1964 in Bolu; Jonas Hassen Khemiri is Swedish-Arabic-French, born in 1978 in Stockholm; and Yahya Hassan, who was Swedish and Danish-Arabic, was born in 1995 in Aarhus and died in 2020, at the age of twenty-four. Zaimoğlu's *Kanak Sprak: 24 Mistöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (1995) comprises a collection of interviews with young Turkish migrants who respond to the question: "What is life as a Kanak like in Germany?" Khemiri's *Ett öga rött* (2003) takes the form of a novel in which fifteen-year-old Halim gives an account of his life as the son of Moroccan parents, who migrated to Stockholm, where Halim was later born. Hassan writes a volume of poetry that bears his own name, *Yahya Hassan* (2013), in which he describes the life of a young migrant in the Gellerup ghetto in Denmark. The similarities between the three texts, however, testify to a transcultural mode of multilingual autofiction, which cuts across differences in nation, language, and form. All three authors give an account of the issues they faced first-hand with respect to integration and racism. When Zaimoğlu wrote *Kanak Sprak*, xenophobia had increased dramatically after many years of a relatively liberal migration

policy in Germany. In the 1990s, Germany was hit by a wave of violent attacks on so-called foreigners, which provoked mass protests and new social movements. According to Yildiz, “*Kanak Sprak* comes out of this moment and gives literary form to social assertion in the face of exclusion” (Yildiz 2012, 174). Khemiri, for his part, wrote *Ett öga rött* in 2003, almost ten years after Zaimoğlu but in similarly tense conditions. After centuries of a relatively liberal attitude toward immigration in Sweden, the political discourse changed drastically around 2000 and outbursts of xenophobia became a serious problem. Writing his volume of poetry in 2013, Yahya Hassan also confronted an inflamed discourse on marginalization, structural racism, and freedom of speech in Denmark in the wake of the 2005–2006 Cartoon Crisis. The right-wing party, “Dansk Folkeparti,” with its overt anti-foreigner policy, was highly influential in the political landscape between 2006 and 2013, an influence which explains at least in part the virtual absence of postmigrant literature in Denmark prior to Hassan’s debut. Hassan’s was the first major voice of the second generation of migrants in Denmark, and the first to seriously challenge the political discourse.

In these three texts, the “multicultural, autofictional strategy” works in part thematically, through the authors’ indignant descriptions of multicultural experience, and in part stylistically, through the ways in which the authors experiment with narrative structures and hybrid language. Each one bears witness to a strong emotional response, primarily anger, and gives voice to the ghetto, the very symbol of failed integration and a typical heterotopia. In this space, a multitude of languages co-exist, but multilingualism is considered a stigmatizing indicator of social and economic inferiority as opposed to a lingual resource. Zaimoğlu, Khemiri, and Hassan, on the other hand, take advantage of their multilingual capacity, drawing on it as cultural capital in the Bourdieusian sense and thus using it as part of a subversive aesthetic strategy.⁶ At the heart of this aesthetic strategy is the authors’ use of polyphony. In Bakhtin’s discussion of polyglossia and heteroglossia, he addresses the subversive energy in marginalized social groups and the potential power of a multi-layered use of language and languages. These concepts provide an important way into understanding the structural choices in these texts, particularly the interrelation of biography and fiction that will now be explored.

BAKHTIN'S VOICES AND LANGUAGES

According to Bakhtin, literature and life are fundamentally based on a dialogical principle which always leaves space for the other's voice (Bakhtin 1984). This concept is rooted in his ideological and political thinking as a subversive writer under Stalin's totalitarian regime. For Bakhtin, monologue in literature, where the story is told through one dominant voice, is symptomatic of social homogenization, whereas dialogical and polyphonic literature testify to a diversity of opinions. When he argues that the subversive power of literature derives its force from a diversity of voices (Bakhtin 1981, 65), he points to the ability of literature to instigate dialogues through its aesthetic form. It is on this basis that I propose understanding polyglossia as a strategy of particular importance for transcultural authors as they broach social and political issues through their autofictional works.

What form, then, does this dialogical principle take in literary works? On a textual level, the narrative organization is polyphonic, which, in Bakhtin's writing, means that it includes a multitude of voices, making utterances and expressing their points of view (Bakhtin 1981). The substitution of the classical sovereign narrator by this multifocal orchestration not only questions conventional ways of writing but also more generally a monologic attitude to life. Furthermore, the texts also have a strong focus on multilingualism on a linguistic level, in the shape of heteroglossia as well as polyglossia (Clark and Holquist 1984, 289). While the concept of polyglossia refers to "interlanguage differences," heteroglossia covers the concept of "intra-language differences" (Clark and Holquist 1984, 289). Whereas polyglossia implies "the interaction with other national languages" (Clark and Holquist 1984, 289), heteroglossia implies interaction between all varieties within a national language including regional dialects, social dialects, ethnolects, and styles (König and Pfister 2017, 236). In the case studies on which I focus in this chapter, polyglossia is best understood as a subcategory of heteroglossia and appears as a distinct linguistic manifestation of Bakhtin's idea of polyphony. Starting at the level of narrative, I will consider the different ways in which Zaimoğlu, Khemiri, and Hassan establish a multitude of voices in their texts. I will then analyze the consequences of the play with the multi-layered structure of language in the three texts, with particular reference to polyglossia. Finally, I will turn to the extratextual question as to how far "the subversive power of the diversity of voices" succeeds in having an impact on political discourse. In pursuing this question, I set out to shed light on a

largely unexplored dimension of Bakhtin's theory. Other studies on multicultural and multilingual literature based on Bakhtin's ideas include Holdenried (2014) and Acker and Fleig (2018). My investigation intends to draw more attention to the concrete historical and political dimension of the aesthetics of Bakhtin's literary theories than is the case in either of these studies.

POLYPHONY ON THE NARRATIVE LEVEL

From its very title, Zaimoğlu's *Kanak Sprak: 24 Misstöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* indicates the enormous importance of polyphony in this work, positing no less than twenty-four different voices. In the foreword, itself a significant part of the fictional work, the author presents the project of this book in the same vein as a conductor would introduce a piece of music, in this case a choir of twenty-four discordant voices. These voices belong to young men from a German-Turkish background, who live on the margins of society. All the characters are, on the face of it, subversive figures, ranging from rappers, dealers, and hip-hop artists to drug addicts, and together they form a chorus of angry voices from the ghetto. From a Bakhtinian point of view, the text is a piece of polyphonic documentary.

The narrator of Khemiri's *Ett öga rött* is the fifteen-year-old Halim, who is the child of migrants from Morocco. His mother is dead, and Halim is left alone with his father, who insists that they move out of the ghetto into a more socially respectable part of Stockholm. The novel takes the form of a diary, which principally describes the communication between the father and Halim. The father's remarks, as well as those of the other characters, are all spoken through the mouth of Halim. At first glance, Halim thus appears to be an autonomous first-person narrator, who exerts complete control over the narration. How, then, can we refer to Khemiri's *Ett öga rött* as a polyphonic work? First and foremost, because of the characterization of Halim: he is bicultural and bilingual, and constantly seeks to establish his identity between Swedish and Arabic cultures. Furthermore, he is young, very bright, and full of imagination, giving rise to a narrator who thinks both creatively and unorthodoxically. He refers to himself as "Tankesultan," meaning "Sultan of Thoughts," and this neologism concisely conveys the multicultural background of Halim: he performs not only as a European intellectual *à la Sartre* but also proudly refers to his Arabic roots. The construction of this ambiguous and multifaceted character underpins the polyphonic organization of the text, as his

narrative perspective straddles various positions and discourses and thereby denies the reader any singular or fixed point of view from which to observe the unfolding of events. What unsettles the position of the reader still further is that at the end of the story, a young author by the name of Khemiri enters the narrative (Khemiri 2003, 184). His appearance calls into question the identity and authority of the narrator, Halim, as this *mise en abyme* reminds the reader that Halim is just a textual construction by the grace of the author. Just as in Zaimoğlu's *Kanak Sprak*, therefore, in *Ett öga rött*, we encounter a polyphonic narrative structure and the emergence of the empirical author inside the fiction.

Hassan's poetry collection, too, is written in the first person. The fact that the collection bears Hassan's name points to a sovereign author and narrator figure, and to fundamentally monological narrative dynamics. But what if this "I" is heterogeneous to the extreme, positioned on the edge of schizophrenia? In a self-reflexive nod to the ongoing discussion around autofiction, Hassan affirmed in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel* that the person speaking in the poem is Yahya Hassan himself: "What I write, that's my identity, that's who I am ... But that doesn't mean I am the way my readers think I am. The reading depends on the individual reader, the reader's reality. I am not responsible for the interpretation" (Rapp 2014). Who, then, is Yahya Hassan? Certainly not just *one* person. The collection of poems showcases the multitude of roles and positions of Yahya Hassan: he is at once son, brother, grandchild, schoolboy, psychiatric patient, violent criminal, drug dealer, the lover of a married woman, celebrated author, and the darling of social media. Added to these multiple positions is the fact that Hassan is bicultural and bilingual, with more than one homeland and mother tongue. His poetry broaches numerous polemical discourses in Denmark, including the devastating conditions of the Danish ghettos, the hypocritical way in which Islam is practiced by his family, the weaknesses of the highly praised welfare state, the right-wing populism, and the self-satisfied cultural establishment, all of which are addressed from different roles and positions. The multiple angles from which these issues are addressed in the collection provide strong grounds from which to consider this work to be polyphonic.

POLYGLOSSIA ON A LINGUISTIC LEVEL

Having established that polyphony is a key structuring principle in each of these works, I will now consider how the multiple voices they present are characterized by language. How does polyglossia manifest itself on a linguistic level in these three texts? In Zaimoğlu's work, at least two languages or varieties of language are spoken: standard German and the so-called Kanak Sprak. Kanak Sprak is spoken by the twenty-four "Kanakters," a pejorative expression for young migrants in Germany of Turkish origin. Standard German is spoken by the apparently empiric author, Zaimoğlu, in the foreword. It is here that he gives an introduction to Kanak Sprak:

A long time ago, they created an underground-codex and now speak their own jargon, "Kanak-Sprak," a kind of creol or Rotwelsch⁷ with secret codes and signs.

[...]

The Kanake speaks his mother tongue only erroneously, and only masters "alemannisch" to a certain degree. His vocabulary consists of a gibberished glossary and idioms that do not exist in any language.⁸

In this multiethnolect, which could be interpreted as a sociolect on the basis that it is also the language of the precariat, these young German-Turkish men give aggressive expression to their negative experience of Germany, or as they call it, the country of the "Alemannen." This designation, which is just as pejorative as that of the "Kanakster," underlines the tensions between these two social groups. It is important to note, however, that Zaimoğlu's "Kanak Sprak" is not in fact an authentic multiethnolect. Zaimoğlu informs us in the foreword that he has recorded his interviews with these young men, and then re-told their mini-autobiographies in his version of Kanak Sprak, a version which he says should be more intelligible for the intended reader than the original. The text had a significant impact on youth language in Germany in the 1990s, and today Kanak Sprak is a general term for a multiethnolect: the mixture of German, Arabic, and Turkish spoken by young second- and third-generation migrants. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the importance of the fact that Kanak Sprak is a linguistic construction rather than an authentic language of the ghetto cannot be overstated.

Khemiri's work, too, features multiple languages and language varieties. Alongside Swedish, the matrix language, a multiethnolect is spoken in which linguistic features of Arabic and Turkish are mixed with Swedish. The impact of Arabic is visible on a lexical level in Halim's frequent recourse to words like "Walla" (Khemiri 2003, 12) and "Inshallah" (Khemiri 2003, 13), and even more so on a syntactical level, where Halim uses inversions that are atypical in Swedish. Interestingly, Halim also demonstrates from time to time that he can speak perfect Swedish, but much to the regret of his Moroccan father, he opts for the multiethnolect, which is strongly reminiscent of Rinkebysvenska. This hybrid youth language is spoken by young Swedes from migrant backgrounds, a "cool" multiethnolect that has nothing in common with the clumsy, broken Swedish of Halim's father. But the question of authenticity arises once again when we consider the conflict between critical reviews of *Ett öga rött* in 2003, which deemed Halim's narration an "authentic representation of Rinkeby-Swedish" (Behschnitt and Willems 2012, 11), and interviews of Khemiri, in which he maintains that this is a fallacy, arguing instead that Halim speaks his own language. Khemiri insists that he attempted to create a main character who spoke a language that reflected the desperate search for his identity (Behschnitt and Willems 2012, 12). Halim's multiethnolect, in other words, is just as contrived as Zaimoğlu's *Kanak Sprak*.

In Hassan's volume of poetry, we see the same multilingual pattern: standard Danish is used in conjunction with a multiethnolect, which Hassan dubs "perkerdansk." "Perkerdansk"—another example of pejorative expression—is a hybrid principally composed of elements from Arabic, Turkish, and Danish.⁹ The variations of standard Danish are manifest in the presence of Arabic words, mixed metaphors, and the "false" use of genus, as well as in atypical inversions, as was the case in *Ett öga rött*. In addition, Hassan experiments with the phonetic dimension of his texts, by performing his poems in the mesmerizing manner of an imam and thereby indicating the underlying impact of Arabic culture. The orthography of the text also varies from standard Danish in that all letters are capitalized and no punctuation is used, as in the following example:

THEN YOUR FATHER WAS BORN IN A REFUGEE CAMP
 AND THEN MY FATHER WAS BORN IN A REFUGEE CAMP
 THEN YOUR FATHER FLEES FROM A REFUGEE CAMP
 THEN MY FATHER FLEES FROM A REFUGEE CAMP
 AND THEN OUR FATHERS THEY CHANGE

DANISH APARTMENT BLOCKS INTO REFUGEE CAMPS
 THEY BRING OUR GRANDPARENTS
 OUR UNCLES AND AUNTS
 AND ALL OF THEM THEY RECEIVE CASH BENEFITS
 THEY BRING THEIR COUSINS
 AND THEN THEY START THEIR
 INBREEDING INDOCTRICATION
 FITTING IN INSHA'ALLAH
 AND YOU YOU TURN INTO A DONKEY
 A WASH GENUINE DONKEY
 YOU YOU TURN INTO A HIPHOP AND CRIMINAL AND MUSLIM
 YOU YOU TALK A BROKEN DANISH
 AND A BROKEN ARABIC¹⁰

The syntax is characterized throughout by repetition, indicating a limited capability of varying the language, and morphologically, in the original Danish, articles are often left out or the wrong article has been chosen. These lingual strategies together produce a highly expressionistic form, the capitalized writing indicating that the lines should be screamed out in an accusatory manner.

Parts of the collection of poems are written, by contrast, in a high standard Danish that bears the stamp of Yahya Hassan's life outside the ghetto, namely, as an intellectual, a student at the Danish Author's School (Forfatterskolen), and a celebrated writer. It is noteworthy, however, that in the final and explosive thirty-three-page poem "LANGDIGT" ("Long Poem"), the most comprehensive autobiographical account in the collection, Hassan chooses to express himself in the multiethnolect (Hassan 2013, 135–169). In this poem, he compiles events from his life and his opinions, writing in "perkerdansk," and through this multiethnolect immersion he foregrounds the "perkerdansk" version of his existence. As the reader is aware from the earlier poems in the collection that he masters an elegant Danish style perfectly, the "perkerdansk" of the final poem appears to be something of a caricature. As in Khemiri's and Zaimoğlu's texts, the mixture of languages is not simply a matter of multilingualism but also a matter of the deliberate construction of multiethnolects.¹¹

By hybridizing language and referring to these languages by their pejorative names, the three authors make their texts a performative act in the sense of Judith Butler's "resignification" (Butler 1990). The conventional power relations between the national matrix languages and the subversive multiethnolects are turned on their head in a way that exposes a *mundus*

pravus. This maneuver is perhaps best interpreted in terms of a Bakhtinian carnivalesque scene, in which the very notion of a national language is deconstructed through the use of polyglossia. Khemiri and Hassan both refer explicitly to the immense power of language inside their texts, conceiving of words as a weapon. Halim states that “words are like the most powerful weapons which will never be blunt or run out of bullets” (2003, 89) and Yahya Hassan ends his “LANGDIGT” with the line: “ME, I FIGHT AGAINST YOU WITH WORDS” (2013, 169).

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE AUTHOR IN HIS SOCIAL FIELD

Kanak Sprak: 24 Misstöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft, Ett öga rött, and *Yahya Hassan* all comment on the existing discourses on migrant-related matters in their respective historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. They are landmark texts in light of the challenge that they pose to the “monolingual paradigm” (Yildiz 2012, 2), and the ways in which they showcase the subversive power of polyphony. Yildiz comments that Zaimoğlu “almost single-handedly propelled young postmigrants’ linguistic practices into the public sphere of post-unification Germany with his book *Kanak Sprak* [...]” (Yildiz 2012, 172). With respect to Khemiri, Yildiz states: “Khemiri’s manipulations of Swedish transpose the country’s newly globalized linguascape into literature for the first time” (Yildiz 2012, 180). And in 2015, the editorial of the Danish newspaper *Politiken* gave the following account of Yahya Hassan: “There is no reason to underestimate the nineteen-year-old poet. He has already turned upside down what the role of poetry and literature could be in a modern society” (*Politiken* 2015, 1).

In the final section of this chapter, I will move from the abstract conception of subversive power that is typically drawn from Bakhtin’s work to the concrete impact of these texts, focusing on their successful intervention in contemporary political and social discourses. All three authors have had a significant influence in this respect: in the wake of *Kanak Sprak*, Zaimoğlu instigated the anti-racist movement “Kanak Attak,” which comprises “a community of different people from diverse backgrounds who share a commitment to eradicate racism from German society” (Kanak Attak 1998). Zaimoğlu’s highly public profile has played a crucial role in the extratextual impact of his work: he has appeared on talk shows, given book tours, contributed to newspaper and magazine features, and even turned *Kanak Sprak* into a stage production. He uses all of these public

appearances to radically call into question conventional interpretations of German society and “to turn the dominant discourse on migration upside down” (Gürsel 2012).

Khemiri is a similarly prominent personality in Swedish culture, a regular participant in talk shows and an active contributor on social media. Yet, while *Ett öga rött* secured him a place in the cultural establishment, he uses this position to interrogate embedded injustice and racism. In 2013, he wrote an open letter to the Swedish Justice Minister, Beatrice Ask, criticizing the policy of the Swedish government with reference to his own experiences of racial prejudice. This letter (Khemiri [2013]), in which he accuses Sweden of “constant, low-intensity oppression,” is the most widely read open letter in Swedish public history, and it was re-published in the *New York Times*, thus securing Khemiri’s international recognition.

Yahya Hassan, for its part, is the most successful collection of poetry in the history of Danish literature: to date, more than 120,000 copies have been sold and it has been translated into over ten different languages. Hassan was already well known prior to this publication, having first come to prominence when he was interviewed for an article in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in 2013 entitled “I Am Fucking Angry with My Parents’ Generation” (Omar 2013). Right up to his death in 2020, his provocative statements and actions made him a permanent fixture of both social media and public life. His oeuvre is best described as a “total work of art,” in which writing is inextricably linked to public performance. It is by way of this fusion that Hassan succeeded in sparking highly influential discussions about political, religious, ethnic, and aesthetic discourses in Denmark, his social impact outstripping that of any other author or politician.

A GENRE IN-BETWEEN

The impact of these three works on the political discourse in their respective countries is indisputable: it demonstrates the successful implementation of Bakhtin’s dialogical principle in society. It is on this basis that I propose that these three works exemplify a new autofictional multicultural mode, characterized by: (1) a polyphonic narrative structure; (2) the author’s explicit appearance in the fiction; (3) different languages spoken by the various “voices” in play, the dominant one being a constructed multiethnolect; and (4) the author appearing on an extratextual level in a performative capacity. By making a multitude of voices the basis of the narrative structure, the authors mirror the conditions and perceptions of

human beings in a modern world, whose perspective is becoming ever more multifocalized as a result of increasing numbers of transcultural crossings. In this way, the works attain a mimetic function, communicating the life experience not only of the multicultural author but of a whole segment of people from transcultural backgrounds. As they strive toward narrative plurality, the authors challenge the singular perspective of traditional autobiography, since the voices represent a collective “we” rather than an “I.”¹² By presenting themselves on the same level as the other voices in the texts, the authors posit an anti-hierarchic, dialogical way of thinking. Rather than adopting the sovereign stance of the autobiographer, the in-between position that autofiction affords these writers allows them to invite other voices into the discourse.

Despite positioning themselves in this way as one voice among others, the authors are nonetheless the principal orchestrators in these texts. They use their multilingual capacity to organize language, narration, and dialogue. Author and polyglossia are inextricably linked, as the multilingual author inevitably leaves lingual and thus biographical footprints. But multilingualism is not only a crucial tool for representing the multicultural experience of living in-between; it also functions as a key strategy through which the authors instigate and attempt to reshape extratextual dialogues. By way of their strongly performative dimension, these works aspire unapologetically to effect political and social change.

With respect to the generic categorization of their works, the appearance of the authors inside the fiction and the fusion of fiction and referentiality at the heart of the artificial multiethnolects certainly invites comparison with Doubrovsky’s conception of autofiction. Yet, as we have seen, these works diverge palpably from the game of hide-and-seek between author and reader that is also characteristic of autofiction, and which lies at the center of accusations of the genre’s lack of social engagement.¹³ *Kanak Sprak*, *Ett öga rött*, and *Yahya Hassan* have their playful moments, but these are put in the service of racial and cultural responsibility and testify to the authors’ concerns with contemporary social conditions. It is for this reason that I propose the term “multilingual autofiction,” which accounts for the powerful role that language plays in enabling these literary works to question social norms and power relations. These examples of a multilingual autofictional mode invite a different theoretical focus, one which gives less attention to the play between author and narrator, fact and fiction, and more to the potential affordances of autofiction beyond the text.

NOTES

1. The term is used in my PhD project “Against a Multilingual Autofictional Mode in Literature: Studies of Aesthetic Expressions and Political Impacts in Three Multilingual and Transcultural Literary Works.”
2. For research in the field of multilingual literature in general, see Dembeck and Parr (2017), Schmitz-Emans (2004), Arnold Knauth (2004), Radaelli (2011), Yildiz (2012), and Zemanek and Willms (2014).
3. According to their respective websites for national statistics, in 2020, 14% of the Danish population had a migrant background compared to 22% of the Swedish population in 2019 and 26% of the German population in 2020.
4. Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own.
5. For studies on this tendency, see Kilchmann (2017), Richter (2017), and Acker and Fleig (2018).
6. In his work *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that language should be considered as a kind of symbolic capital.
7. Rotwelsch was a secret language, spoken primarily by marginalized groups in Southern Germany or Switzerland in the nineteenth century.
8. “Längst haben sie einen Untergrund-Kodex entwickelt und sprechen einen eigenen Jargon, die ‘Kanak-Sprak,’ eine Art Creol oder Rotwelsch mit geheimen Codes und Zeichen. [...] Der Kanake spricht seine Muttersprache nur fehlerhaft, auch das ‘alemannisch’ ist ihm nur bedingt geläufig. Sein Sprachschatz setzt sich aus ‘verkaunderwelschten’ Vokabeln und Redewendungen zusammen, die so in keiner der Sprachen vorkommen” (Zaimoğlu 1995, 13).
9. For studies on bilingualism in Denmark, see Quist and Jørgensen 2009.
10. SÅ DIN FAR BLEV FØDT I FLYGTNINGEJER
OG SÅ MIN FAR BLEV FØDT I FLYGTNINGEJER
SÅ DIN FAR FLYGTER FRA FLYGTNINGEJER
SÅ MIN FAR FLYGTER FRA FLYGTNINGEJER
OG SÅ VORES FÆDRE DE FORVANDLER
DANSKE BLOKKE TIL FLYGTNINGEJERE
DE HENTER VORES BEDSTEFORÆLDRE
VORES ONKLER OG TANTER
OG ALLE SAMMEN FÅR DE KONTANTHJÆLP
DE HENTER DERES KUSINER OG DERES FÆTRE
OG SÅ GÅR DE I GANG MED DERES
INDAVL INDOKTRINERING
INDPASNING INSHA’ALLAH
OG DIG DU BLIVER EN ÆSEL

EN VASKEÆGTE ÆSEL
 DIG DU BLIVER EN HIPHOP OG KRIMINEL OG MUSLIM
 DIG DU TALER EN GEBROKKEN DANSK
 OG EN GEBROKKEN ARABISK (2013, 146–147).

11. One of the few Danish critics who pay attention to the effect of multilingualism in Yahya Hassan's work is Lilian Munk-Rösing (2020).
12. Astrid Erll (2005, 187–188) specifically refers to Bakhtin in a paragraph on “Multiperspektivität” in her study on collective memory.
13. Criticism of the insincerity of autofiction has been made by Arnaud Schmitt and Marie Darrieussecq, among others. See Acker and Fleig (2018, 24–26).

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