Abstract

This paper examines the role of the child narrator in Herta Müller’s early story, “Nadirs” (“Niederungen,” 1982/84). Arguing that the child serves as both a point of entry for the reader and a means of defamiliarizing mundane aspects of village life, it analyzes the ways in which the figure of the child works with Müller’s political concerns. The child’s perspective allows Müller to develop an aesthetic based on concrete detail and discontinuous narration; defamiliarization also works against the idealization both of rural life and children. In developing its reading, this paper puts Müller in dialogue with recent scholarship on the figure of the child, particularly Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2008). Stockton’s analysis of the child and her concept of “growing sideways” illuminate aspects of the narrative strategies at work in “Nadirs.” Her work also highlights the changing social position of children, and the role these changes play in the narrative. At the same time, Müller’s work diverges from Stockton: whereas Stockton understands children to be adept with metaphor and imaginative play, Müller’s child narrator is decidedly anti-metaphorical. This paper argues that Müller’s child narrator can be used productively to build upon Stockton’s theoretical framework.

NB for IRWGS Colloquium

The following is a conference paper reading the work of Herta Müller through the lens of queer and feminist theory. A Romanian-born woman writing in German, Müller was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature for her depictions of “the landscape of the dispossessed.” I am planning to submit this paper for the next meeting of the conference of Women in German. Endnotes indicate where I would like to expand upon my reading and argument in a longer-form piece (article or chapter). The ideas developed here have come to heavily inform my work for my MPhil degree, and will likely comprise a major part of my dissertation research. From the colloquium, I am looking for feedback on my arguments on the figure of the child, particularly with regard to my use of feminist and queer theory.
Refusing Innocence: Narrating Strange Children in Hera Müller’s “Nadirs”

In her 2010 Hoffmann-von-Fallersleben Preis acceptance speech, Herta Müller characterized childhood as “probably the most confusing part of life. Like no other time, so much is simultaneously built up and torn down in the tiny details, which we describe with the slick two-syllable word CHILDHOOD” (Müller, “Denk nicht dorthin” 27). Childhood, for Müller, is not a magical time; rather, it is here that she locates the origins of repressive social structures. The uncanny and frequently grotesque aspects of growing up in an ethnic German village in Romania form the basis of “Nadirs” (“Niederungen,” 1982/84), a story from Müller’s debut collection of the same name. Significantly, the story’s narrator is herself a child. What I would like to do today is to put Müller’s political and aesthetic concerns in dialogue with recent scholarship on the figure of the child. In particular, I would like to examine the child narrator of “Nadirs” through the conceptual framework offered by Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2008). Stockton analyzes the various psychological, social, and economic assumptions projected onto the figure of the child; in her readings of film and fiction, she develops an understanding of how children grow “sideways”—that is, use metaphor to both explore their adult futures and to delay entry into that future. Her insights contribute to understanding Müller’s narrative strategies, and how the child narrator connects her aesthetics to the political and ethical dimensions of her writing. In turn, reading Müller’s child narrator can build productively on theoretical work on the figure of the child, supplementing Stockton’s already substantial analysis.

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1 Quotes from Herta Müller have been freely translated by me unless otherwise noted.
2 See for example Müller, *Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel* 11 – 5; and “Denke nicht dorthin” 27 – 34.
3 On the publication history of *Niederungen* in Romania (1982) and in the Federal Republic of Germany (1984), see Brandt and Glajar 1 – 2.
“Nadirs” is comprised of a number of vignettes of life in a rural Banat village narrated by an unnamed child of an indeterminate age. This narrator does not offer these scenes in chronological order, nor does she connect them through any overarching plot. In fact, it is unclear exactly what length of time the narration spans. Nonetheless, several recurring themes tie the text together: portraits of village and family life, encounters with death, and interactions with animals and nature. One of the most striking of these pertains to animals—specifically, violence done to animals (birds, mice, pigs, cats) often at the hands of the child narrator’s own family members. In many instances, she simply reports these occurrences without much commentary or mention of her own feelings.\textsuperscript{4} There is one significant exception to this apparent detachment: the story of the slaughter of the family’s calf.

This story illustrates the child’s place in her family and community and family; moreover, it helps shed light on formal aspects of the narration. Located at the center of the text, it is also the most detailed of any of the narrator’s encounters with animals. Slaughtering calves is officially forbidden by the Communist state, and so the narrator’s father looks for a way to obtain permission:

In the morning father had hacked through the calf’s leg with a hoe. Then he went to get the veterinarian. […] He explained to the vet in Romanian, how the calf had caught its leg in the chain in the manger, how it couldn’t get itself untangled again, how its whole body fell over the rod and tore off its leg (Müller, “Niederungen” 61)

Her father bribes the veterinarian, who then grants him a Notschlachtgenehmigung [Emergency permission to slaughter the calf] (62). The community itself is implicated in his actions; not only does the narrator call her father a liar, but says, “everyone who stood there lied through their silence” (62). The narrator must then be present as the family prepares to slaughter the calf; though she runs away at the actual moment of slaughter, she later finds its eyes, and her parents make her a bedside rug out of its hide (63 – 4).\textsuperscript{iii} When her mother brings the “cow-warm milk”

\textsuperscript{4} See for example Müller, “Niederungen” 29 – 30, 34, 76, 81, and 87 – 8.
into the house, the narrator can only think of the cow’s grief at the loss of her young: “I asked her [mother], if she too would be sad if someone took me away from her and slaughtered me. I fell against the cupboard door, I had a swollen upper lip and a purple spot on my arm. All of that from her boxing my ears” (65). The narrator’s own parents seem incapable of a cow’s empathy and emotion.

The calf story is a loss-of-innocence narrative, but not only one about the child discovering the extent of her parents’ brutality, or the complicity of the community in this violence. Her parents are in no way idealized before this – her father is an alcoholic, and beatings from her mother are fairly commonplace. Nor is this her first experience of death: in fact, because of its ubiquity in the village, death is something she intuitively understands even before she learns the word itself: “I understood it without ever before having heard it. I carried it around with me all day long, and I saw it in every piece of chicken in the soup a corpse” (27). While she describes the thought of dead chicken in matter-of-fact terms, the milk evokes feelings of guilt and mistrust. When looking into a pail of fresh milk after the slaughtering of the calf, she thinks, “there must have been blood in it” (65). What the narrator learns here—and what upsets her—is the nature of the adult life into which she is growing: brutality and death are intimately entangled with the economic order and the sustenance of life. Unlike the chicken, obtaining milk requires the cow to be alive and to have offspring. The obvious grief of the cow for her calf builds a stark contrast to her own mother’s lack of feeling.

The calf story is illustrative of “Nadirs” as a whole; the first-person child narrator provides a point of entry for the reader, and at the same time defamiliarizes what would otherwise be banal aspects of rural life. The text is an assemblage of such small confrontations with the hostile adult world: the everyday violence of family and village life; the uncanny

5 See for example Müller, “Niederungen” 38, 49.
experience of witnessing one’s caregivers destroy the young of other species; and the beginnings of the child’s entry into adulthood. The text relies on the reader’s associations with the figure of the child, particularly ideas about innocence and naïveté. Stockton argues that innocence renders children “strange” to adults: “innocence is alien, since it is ‘lost’ to the very adults who assign it to children. [...] [Children] are seen as normative but also not like us at the same time” (30 – 1).

The narrator’s innocence estranges her from her family. When, later, the narrator imagines her mother in a labor camp in Siberia, “transparent with hunger, emaciated and wrinkled like a tired, unconscious girl,” she implicitly offers another perspective on her mother’s earlier lack of empathy for the cow (Müller, “Niederungen” 102). The mother’s experience of starvation makes her angry with the child who cannot appreciate fresh milk. Because the story is only offered from the perspective of the inexperienced child, the text dwells more on the suffering of animals, with whom the narrator has daily contact, than on her mother’s experiences of exile, torture, and terror, for which the child has no frame of reference. The vast differences in adult and child life experiences leave them unable to understand or communicate with one another.

As theorized by Stockton and others, the modern concept of innocence is a product of changing cultural ideas about the child during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One aspect of this innocence, according to Stockton, has to do with children’s changing economic role in the twentieth century – namely, that they no longer work as wage-laborers (38, 46). While Stockton deals with Anglo-American and primarily urban and suburban contexts, her insights are also applicable to “Nadirs.” In fact, the text itself alludes to changing social structures. In previous generations, families had large numbers of children:

In winter they went individually into the village and alternately to school, because there weren’t enough shoes for all the feet in the house. In the house your absence would never be noticed. If one wasn’t there, many others were. (Müller, “Niederungen” 92)
Children worked to sustain the family, and – like unskilled laborers – seemed replaceable. The narrator, growing up in the postwar period, does not perform any labor, nor does she appear to have any siblings. She is also more protected from the environment around her:

Today they just have one child in the house [...]. The house is empty, the shoes just stand there, and they’re always spic and span, because the child is no longer allowed to walk in the mud, and when it rains, the child is picked up and carried. (92) This protection in fact estranges her from the world around her. The contrast with the calf story is in this regard instructive: the child who was once not even permitted to walk through mud not only witnesses bribery and slaughter, but realizes that these literally sustain her. The experience furthermore implicates her in this adult order: though she accuses the others of lying by omission, she herself acts no differently. For all of her discomfort, the text indicates that she will gradually grow into her place in her world. Towards the end of the story, she says, “there were many times when I wanted to die, but it didn’t work back then. […] [N]ow I’ve gotten used to myself and can’t lose myself ” (98 – 9). She continues almost out of a sense of resignation – of getting used to the way things are.

As is evident in “Nadirs,” Müller’s aesthetic is not one of fantasy. The narrator describes events, impressions, and dreams as they occur, and generally without embellishment. But neither can this narration be completely accurately described as realism – realism is for Müller too much associated with the Socialist Realism of the Eastern Bloc and with the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Instead, she renders the world in concrete impressions, or, to come back to her own words, “in the tiny details.” In “Nadirs,” these details are not rendered in a continuous temporal logic—they are closer to fragments of a village life. For Müller, this kind of disrupted narration better approximates one’s perception of everyday life: one takes in the concrete elements of the

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6 No specific time period is given, but the text does refer to a radio address given by Konrad Adenauer. See Müller, “Niederungen” 73 – 4.
7 See Müller, “Gespräch mit Herta Müller” 18 – 9; and interview in Herta Müller: Writing Against Terror; see also Haines 109 – 10.
world through discrete, lived experiences, and makes sense of them in hindsight. Disruption is crucial to this sense-making process: “Only that which is interrupted can continue. Only so are our actions chronologically, that is, consecutively, comprehensible” (Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel 81).\(^8\) In her writing, Müller concentrates on details and impressions, and leaves the construction of the larger narrative to the reader.

The child narrator fits into this aesthetic program in two ways. Firstly, Müller understands the child’s perception of the world in terms similar to those just outlined:

Because one is so small as a child, one looks for the broadest strokes in order to understand the world. And, because they’re the broadest strokes, they’re also the finest. It’s a foreshortening of things that don’t have any standards, and also don’t need any. A paradoxical authenticity that makes the world into that which happens in your head. Later, one is rarely capable of this authenticity, and only conditionally.\(^11\)

The child is less, if at all, capable of abstract thought, and as such, cannot impose a larger narrative on the story—she can only present a collection of impressions, observations, and feelings. “Nadirs” relies on its reader to understand the text as a whole, inviting the reader to participate in sense-making rather than supplying meaning. Secondly, as we have seen, the child narrator works as a means of defamiliarization. Because she is simultaneously familiar with the world around her and at the same time not yet fully integrated into the social order, she is able to make it strange, or unheimlich [uncanny]: both home and not-home.\(^9\) She transports the reader to a point before adult perspective had made sense of childhood experiences; before, for instance, a more detached understanding of the origins of meat and milk.

Defamiliarization also works to resist nostalgia and idealization. These are commonplaces in works which take children or rural life as their subject matter; both,

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\(^8\) See also Müller, “Gespräch” 18.
furthermore, are subjects often taken up for political purposes. In postwar Romania, literature about the countryside either idealized the peasantry, or else stressed the improvement of peasant life under Communism and collectivization (Petrescu 61). This is precisely the kind of writing that Müller deliberately spurns when she focuses on concrete detail. This strategy also helps the text to evade the more general tendency to use children as stand-ins for a kind of universal subjectivity. Lee Edelman has written extensively about the uses of the figure of the child and the promise of the future as a means of denying political rights in the present. In No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004), he describes how the figure of the child “serves to regulate political discourse – to prescribe what will count as political discourse” and “determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up” (Edelman 11, 21). “Nadirs” avoids both of these tropes, presenting the village in unromantic, critical terms. The child narrator, moreover, is not a figure imbued with hope for a better future, but one who is trapped in a village that seems stuck in its way of life, sustained by little more than inertia: “[t]he village is everywhere finished. Its true end is the cemetery.” (Müller, “Niederungen” 103). The story thus ends with the sense that the prospect of any future seems dismal; this is a sense continually reinforced by the deaths of young animals. In the story of the calf, the child witnesses the potential for new life and affective familial ties violently destroyed by her own family and the community around her. The village is neither a place imbued with hope, nor a starting point for a promising life – it is a graveyard, a dead end.

The sense of estrangement created by the child narrator renders her growing into the adult world all the more unsettling. At both the beginning and the end of the story, the narrator and

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10 On depictions of rural life, see Petrescu 61 – 3; on the idealization of children, see Edelman, especially 10 – 21; and Stockton, especially Introduction.
another child play “mother and father” (17 – 8, 97 – 102). The first game seems like simple mimicry – children playing at, without truly understanding, domestic life. When the game is repeated at the end of “Nadirs,” specific aspects of what the reader now understands to be everyday life in the village creep into the game: “I insult him, because he’s drunk, because there’s no money in the house, because the cow has no food, I call [him] lazy bones and dirty swine and vagabond and drunkard and good-for-nothing and useless and whoremonger and bastard. That’s how the game goes.” (97). While the first game is cut short by the narrator’s grandfather, the second game ‘ends’ altogether differently: “We don’t finish our game. It is evening, Mother and Father take over our game” (99). Since the beginning of the story, the narrator has begun to take on the language of the adults around her, learning to play their ‘game.’

These games are reminiscent of what Stockton describes as growing “sideways:” instead of growing “up” until a fixed point, sideways growth “suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (11). Stockton understands sideways growth in metaphorical terms. Children, in her reading, have a knack for metaphor and figurative substitution; their use of metaphor is a means of delaying their entry into (heterosexual, reproductive) adulthood (15 – 6). These metaphors allow children to explore aspects of adulthood while still children. For instance, in the fiction of Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, and Virginia Woolf, she argues that proto-lesbian children treat their dogs as substitute spouses; in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, children use candy as a substitute fetish objects in economies of pleasure.¹¹

However, it is precisely in this emphasis on metaphor that Herta Müller’s text diverges from Stockton, and as such might productively build on her theoretical framework. “Nadirs”’s

¹¹ See especially Stockton, Introduction, Chapter Two, and Conclusion.
child narrator rarely operates this way – even her descriptive language is largely devoid of metaphor. In fact, the narrator at times questions whether the distinctions between what adults do and what children do are anything but linguistic, asking “[w]hy we call everything mothers do ‘work’ and everything children do ‘play’” (Müller, “Niederungen” 50). Her play is a replication of the world she knows, the same world her mother, father, and grandparents know. While the child characters analyzed by Stockton fancifully try on adulthood and imagine alternative worlds through their play, Müller’s narrator doesn’t imagine such alternatives. Indeed, Müller herself has said, “I don’t think much of the magical side of childhood, it’s nothing more than the earliest form of adulthood, if there is even such a thing as an adult” (Der Teufel 12). The narrator’s childhood ‘games’ are in fact the tasks which will presumably preoccupy her for the rest of her life, not avenues through which she might escape that life, even temporarily.

Significantly, too, none of the children read by Stockton are the narrators of their own story; they are characters in larger narratives, one told implicitly or explicitly from an adult perspective. “Nadirs” attempts to allow the child to speak, not from a standpoint of retrospection – the adult making sense of childhood experiences – but from a point prior to adult consciousness. Müller doesn’t idealize her narrator by imbuing her with what adults imagine to be childlike wonderment at the world. Whereas Stockton reads “growing sideways” in terms of the adult construction of childhood innocence, Müller strips away the innocence associated with childhood. Any seeming moments of hope prove untenable; in the case of the calf, the potential for new life is destroyed and literally consumed by the village, the family, and ultimately the narrator herself. The child narrator of “Nadirs” might therefore rather be understood as anti-metaphorical. Her ‘play’ is not a means of delaying adulthood, because it is comprised of the same actions undertaken by the adults around her, day in and day out. She denies the distinction
between adults and children, and therefore ideas about the special quality of childhood and children. Her attention to and repetition of concrete detail rather than imaginative play in turn allows Müller to portray village life in postwar Romania without turning to the idealized narratives so misused under the Communist dictatorship.

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i For the purposes of the conference paper, I am focusing solely on this story. In a longer version, I would briefly discuss the form of the collection as a whole. In particular, I would like to discuss the progression of the stories in the collection, beginning with child narrators in rural settings and ending with stories that take place in the city and deal more directly with the Communist regime. Because my argument will focus on the child narrator’s entry into the adult economy, the final story is significant: it is called “Arbeitstag,” but the narrator’s actions occur in a warped, backwards fashion.

ii In expanding this paper, I would make Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) a more significant component of the theoretical framework in order to discuss the child narrator’s family situation and life in the village. There are ways in which the family seems non-reproductive (her parents’ apparently sexless marriage [19 – 20, 74], as well as the destruction of animal young [29 – 30, 34, 61 – 5, 76, 81, and 87 – 8]). At the same time, the village seems in a way frozen in time, repeating its traditions and customs out of inertia.

iii Significantly, the narrator is not allowed to be present at the calf’s birth (“Niederungen” 46). So while she is often confronted with death, reproductive sexuality remains strange. Adult bodies are also grotesque or horrifying – during the slaughter, the narrator fixates on the hair on the adults’ arms (63). She fixates on the post-reproductive bodies of her mother (20) and grandmother (53, 87, 90), and relates the apparent lack of sexuality in her own parents’ marriage (19 – 20, 74). In expanding this paper, I think it would make sense to connect this seeming non-reproduction to the destruction of animal young.

iv This also echoes the seeming non- or reduced reproductivity of the family.

v This includes playing at sexuality and at parenthood, with both dolls and kittens (18).

vi It is worth pointing out that the animals Stockton discusses are exclusively companion animals, which is not the case in “Niederungen.” Müller’s animals are either wild or livestock. Even the cats’ primary function is hunting, not companionship.
Works Cited


