

## Eternal Interns: Kathrin Röggla's Literary Treatment of Gendered Capitalism

Florence Feiereisen  
*Middlebury College*

In twenty-first century Germany, starting a career with all the benefits of Germany's social market economy, a given for the previous generation, has slipped out of reach; even members of the well-educated middle class have trouble carving out a life for themselves in these financially insecure times. The characteristics of today's society, "excessive work and scarcity of employment" (von Dirke 155), create a difficult situation for young people: many enter the loop of underpaid internships to boost their résumés, a phenomenon so widespread since the late 1990s that the newspaper *Die Zeit* coined the term "Generation Praktikum" 'generation internship' in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Companies, praised for providing their interns with "valuable experience," tease them with the possibility of regular employment, exploiting them all the while. This essay examines how Kathrin Röggla (b. Austria 1971) deals with the insecure economic times since the new millennium in her literary works. I look at how sex and gender are implicated in the New Economy and in globalization processes, and how they are reflected in Röggla's texts.<sup>2</sup> How are jobs gendered, and what are the resulting effects for both men and women? Has an unsustainable model of business masculinity forced the entire economy into a process of feminization? Does Röggla offer a solution?

In *Wir schlafen nicht* 'We Never Sleep' (2004), as well as in her earlier novels *Abrauschen* 'Zooming Off' (1997), *Irres Wetter* 'Crazy Weather' (2000), and *Really Ground Zero* (2001), Röggla puts urban society at the turn of the twenty-first century under the literary magnifying glass. She criticizes a world whose inhabitants are in-

capable of creating bonds and who live alongside each other rather than together in big, anonymous, urban environments—Berlin in *Irres Wetter*, Salzburg in *Abrauschen*, and New York City in *Really Ground Zero*.<sup>3</sup> For *Wir schlafen nicht*, the author returned to Germany to investigate how current society is fighting the unhealthy side-effects of the New Economy, created through computer and information technology, biotechnological innovation, and global finance, and resulting in the globalized super-capitalism that created astronomical gains for some while putting others out on the streets. In the specific context of post-unification Germany, the blind trust in the social safety net instilled in young Germans by their parents' generation has only recently started to fade. Presenting *Wir schlafen nicht* as a mosaic of the new economic structures and their effects on her fictional characters, I examine the way Röggl's feminist writing contributes to the discussion of the current economic times by revealing gender-based grievances with our ever-changing society.

#### Gender and the Economy

In his essay "Narrating (New) Economy," Christoph Deupmann predicts, "The modern living environment will be determined by incisive economic changes that have been discussed under the keyword 'globalization' since the 1990s in the context of world-spanning media and information, adapted permissive life styles, open markets and the world-wide circulation of financial flows" (151).<sup>4</sup> The fact that these changing economic frameworks are reflected in literature is hardly surprising and generally not new; Sabine von Dirke describes literature as a "seismograph of the human toll brought about by these socio-economic transformations" (142). Yet the focus shifts with the new millennium. Deupmann suggests that literature after 2000 does not revolve around the *homo oeconomicus* alone; rather, a description of the economic system and its implications begins to take center stage (151f.).<sup>5</sup> In Röggl's case, the focus is on the effects of the New Economy on its active and passive participants. It is therefore not surprising that Röggl shifts from a specific protagonist in *Irres Wetter* and *Abrauschen* to an entire armada of co-protagonists in *Wir schlafen nicht*. After having conducted 24 long and 20 shorter interviews with members of the IT-sector, consulting companies, and other parts of the New Economy, Röggl assembled six fictional characters: Silke Mertens (aged 37), key ac-

count manager; Nicole Damaschke (24), intern; Andrea Bülow (42), online-journalist; Sven, “nein, nicht IT-supporter” ‘no, not IT support’ (34); Oliver Hannes Bender (32), senior associate; and Herr Gehringer (48), partner in a large, prestigious consulting firm.

With job descriptions in the *lingua franca* of the New Economy, English, they are positioned as active members of the economic system—yet it remains unclear what they actually do. Rögglä is intentionally ambiguous: by presenting blurred characters, she enables them to stand for the many thousands of others in similar situations. What is not blurred, however, is their specific gender assignment: men and women have unambiguous names; personal pronouns describing their actions leave no doubt that Rögglä crafted three men and three women to lead the readers through the dense fabric of her documentary-style novel.<sup>6</sup> The setting is a booth at a large IT fair that functions as the novel’s stage, complete with stage directions: “ja, jetzt könne man anfangen, er sei bereit, er sei zu allem bereit (*lacht*), naja, zu fast allem (*lacht*)” ‘yes, one could start now, he is ready, he is up for anything (*laughs*), ok, for almost anything (*laughs*)’ (9).

The sound bites of Rögglä’s forty-four interviews are thus synthesized into six characters and form the ‘plot’ of the novel. In this way, Rögglä retreats from the action to let her characters speak for themselves. This form deviates from our expectations of a traditional novel; instead, the style, resembling verbatim transcriptions of oral interviews, evokes the deceptive feeling of immediacy, momentousness and authenticity. Rögglä criticizes society through her language: filler words, interjections, ellipses and repetitions give a sense of spontaneous speech, yet complicated impersonal passive constructions remind the readers that these are not spontaneous conversations within a private space; rather, the interviews are given upon request and everything is staged. Moreover, by describing her characters’ accounts in indirect speech and the subjunctive mood, and by not always making clear who is speaking, Rögglä denies her characters agency and renders them mere objects. The novel emerges from the speakers’ thoughts about themselves and their colleagues, in the end outing these “subjects” as objects of the New Economy and its ups and downs, thereby emulating the dictatorship of the economy on the level of language.

Sociologist Joan Acker defines gender “as inequalities, divisions, and differences socially constructed around assumed distinctions between female and male” (3). These social constructs function as principles “for allocation of duties, rights, rewards, and power” (3)—they are basic organizing principles of the labor market and society at large. In “Gender, Capitalism and Globalization,” Acker observes: “The new dominant growth sectors, information technology, biotech innovation, and global finance, are all heavily male-dominated, although women fill some of the jobs in the middle and at the bottom, as is usual in many old economy sectors” (15). A distinct historical feature of capitalism is that it is sexed—stereotyping of jobs is based on biological sex—and this sexing can be observed both vertically and horizontally: “Vertical segregation refers to the underrepresentation of women in high-status occupations, such as managers, and their overrepresentation in low-status occupations such as clerical jobs. Horizontal segregation, in turn, refers to the underrepresentation of women in manufacturing and crafts jobs and their overrepresentation in service sector jobs” (Estévez-Abe 183). In the New Economy, there is evidence of both kinds of sexing: “[H]orizontal segregation occurs when certain jobs are stereotyped as being either feminine or masculine. Vertical segregation in turn, occurs because of cultural norms defining authority as a masculine quality” (Estévez-Abe 185).

Viewing Röggl’s text through gendered glasses, I observe the two concepts of ‘business masculinity’ (with ‘hyper-masculinity’ in the extreme) and ‘business femininity.’ To succeed in the New Economy, men and women have to perform according to the script of business masculinity, yet as a general trend, we see the entire economic system undergoing a process of feminization. Especially in Germany, where more and more people find themselves in precarious employment situations, the division between business masculinity and femininity increases daily. In *Wir schlafen nicht*, several characters are placed into the lower end of the power hierarchy, including the intern Damaschke, the prime female example for the feminization of the New Economy; the IT-support Sven, an example of a man who holds a feminized job; and the online journalist Bülow. By contrast, Herr Gehringer’s hyper-masculine, authoritative position is not only signaled by his title (“partner”), but also by

the omission of his first name.

### Hyper-Masculinities and Grim Reapers

Acker defines masculinities in global capitalism as “aggressive, ruthless, competitive, and adversarial” (13). The hyper-masculine individual has the desire to control and the power to make decisions with far-reaching consequences. Rögglä’s literary representation of this performance of masculinity is Herr Gehringer, partner at what seems to be the consulting company McKinsey. “The transnational business masculinity,” Acker writes, “does not need to be openly violent because the means of violence are institutionalized in seemingly neutral, rational business practices.... Conceptualized through accounting and strategic planning, no human bodies appear on the books” (15). For example, Herr Gehringer sends his employees, such as senior associate Bender, out to tighten budgets and lay off workers. It is Bender, not Gehringer, who compares himself with the Grim Reaper: his job, he says condescendingly, consists of “durch pissdörfer fahren” ‘driving through hicksville’ (*schlafen* 36) to pick up people for death.<sup>7</sup> In her novel, Rögglä equates death with the sudden loss of employment, a view that sociological studies support. Indeed, human bodies do appear on the books, as Paul Michael Lützeler explains: “Being removed from work, the doom of unemployment...comes close to what in archaic societies could be equated with expulsion from the community; it can be compared to exile and banishment in authoritarian societies of modern times” (911). Although he does not do the dirty work himself, but instead delegates his consultants to collect data and discuss strategies with upper management, Gehringer is the one who eventually makes decisions, performing hyper-masculinity. Notably, he decides everything abstractly—he even decides the fate of his “assistants of death,” for example decreeing Bender’s promotion and/or lay-off.

In this hyper-masculine position, Herr Gehringer and his associates spread fear, which further enforces hyper-masculinity. The employees of companies threatened by insolvency in *Wir schlafen nicht* describe the consultants as “herumschleichende Gespenster” ‘ghosts sneaking about’ (63), recalling the beginning of Marx’s “Communist Manifesto”: “A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism.” What is haunting the world today (and Rögglä’s novel), however, is the ghost of super capitalism, here personi-

fied by a consultant who demands sacrifices. Online editor Bülow speaks from her own experience of having been laid off when she emphasizes the spookiness of the consultants: one would see “seltsame Leute raus- und reingehen” ‘strange people going in and out’ (66). Those at the consultants’ mercy sense their end early on. Once the “McKinsey-King” has set foot in the company’s premises, heads will roll:

„brrrt, der mckinsey-king geht wieder einmal über die flure, brrrt“, da schüttelt es einen, da spürt man doch gleich, „der macht aus allen fluren gleich mckinsey-flure, schneller, als man schauen kann“, seien sie alle in dem mckinsey-ding drin. alle stunden sie da und schüttelten sich, bis sie an der reihe wären, man könnte direkt vermuten, sie stellten sich darum an.

“brrr, the McKinsey king is strolling in the halls again, brrr,” you get the shivers from that, you immediately feel, “he will transform those hallways into McKinsey hallways, faster than one can think,” they are part of this McKinsey thing. Everyone stands there and gets the shivers until it’s their turn, one could almost think that people stand in line for that. (42)<sup>8</sup>

The onomatopoetic ‘brrrt’ to express shivers shows that the imminent threat of the insecure job situation, and the fear it induces, enters the realm of physical sensations.

This fear for one’s job, a threat to life, has transformed business practices today by demanding the utmost flexibility: “heute müsse man eben für alles offen sein, heute müsse man sich auf alles einstellen können” ‘today, one has to be open to anything, today, one has to be able to adjust to everything’ (*schlafen* 87). In order to keep their positions, modern employees have to give their all, sacrifice private life, risk massive sleep deprivation, and still find themselves in the ejector seat. This includes both regular employees and those whose livelihood depends on their business. Similar to ferryman Charon, the taxi drivers in *Wir schlafen nicht* ferry ghosts (consultants) to the insolvent company. As they depend on the taxi fare, they are left with no other choice than to support business masculinity.

The only woman Rögglä presents in a masculine position is key account manager Silke Mertens. What happens to women when

they encounter hyper-masculinities? At first, Mertens is successful, for she performs according to the script of business masculinity. Yet, though in a good position, she still feels subordinate to her male colleagues. She describes how many men in her branch utilize her sexuality almost as if they needed proof of being alive,

ja, sie habe nicht selten das gefühl gehabt, als lebedigkeitsfaktor benutzt zu werden, eine lebedigkeitscreme, die man auf den körper auftrage. dazu habe sie aber nach und nach die lust verloren: als lebedigkeitssschmiere zu dienen, als lebedigkeitsgel den männern in die haut zu wachsen.

yes, she got the feeling quite often to be used as a vitality factor, a vitality lotion that one applies to the body. Bit by bit she did not feel like doing this any longer: to serve as the vitality grease, to be the vitality gel that grows into men's skin (198).

Here, even the woman who tries to perform business masculinity only reinforces the masculinity of others. Rögglä leaves open whether Mertens just 'does not feel like' serving male masculinity any more, or if she decides to withdraw from these power games to break the cycle of male dominance.

It is boundaries between the public (male) and the private (female) spheres that maintain the dominance of certain men. Acker observes:

As European and American capital established dominance through colonization, empire, and today's globalization, one of the cultural/structural forms embedded in that dominance has been the identification of the male/masculine with production in the money economy and the identification of the female/feminine with reproduction and the domestic. This ideological construction starkly contrasts with the actual organization of production and reproduction, as women were often as much "producers" as "reproducers." (8)

Rögglä, too, observes the gender-coded separation between production and reproduction and presents her readers with myriad constellations. The masculine (and mostly male) consulting circles in the novel, for instance, stick to traditional family structures. Whereas the partner's wife is supposed to take care of private

life, the consultants not only leave private life behind during the day, but seem to give it up altogether. The more masculine their business practices get, the less they are involved in maintaining a home, as Bender's example shows. They live in hotels and return to their official residences only on the weekend. Aside from hotels, the consultants frequent conference centers, fairs, airports, and train stations, anonymous spaces of permanent transition. Representative of today's economy in which everyone is only concerned about reaching the top, the cover of *Wir schlafen nicht* contains the blurred photograph of suit-wearing business people riding up an escalator. At first, this public space boasts of lively people, yet upon closer inspection, individual loneliness among the masses becomes evident; communication between neighbors only happens as a part of business.

This business mentality carries over to the private sphere as well. Business masculinity is dependent on domestic femininity in which the stay-at-home wife has her consultant-husband's back. "Es ist ganz klassisch," Rögglä said in an interview, "die Frau arbeitet dann auch nicht, das Modell Gattin." 'It is very traditional ... the woman also does not work, [she is] the model 'wife' (Kaiser). In the text, the partner claims, "seine Kinder würde er durchaus sehen—" 'he would definitely see his kids—' (*schlafen* 71). The hyphen at the end of the phrase, the visual marker for a pause of hesitation, points to a lack of explanation or justification. The *durchaus* is only his defensive insistence on seeing his own kids; "er rufe durchaus unter der woche immer mal wieder an und erkundige sich" 'he would definitely call every now and then during the week and get information' (71).

Sociologist R.W. Cornell sees hyper-masculinity as "marked by increasing egocentrism ... and a declining sense of responsibility for others (except for purposes of image making)" (Acker 14). In *Wir schlafen nicht*, raising the kids has been successfully outsourced to the wife; the contact within the family resembles a business contact—yet, the partner is able to maintain the status of family man/father. This configuration, the partner claims, works out nicely; later, however, he is in the process of *abwickeln* 'handling' his divorce. He carries his business practices and even vocabulary into his private life; what loses its efficiency and effectiveness in either

world is let go. Acknowledgement or even appreciation for the work done in the private sphere is nowhere to be found; this attitude is also demonstrated by senior associate Bender who contemplates a break from exhausting business life by taking some time off to write a book or “mal ein Kind aufziehen oder so” ‘raise a kid or something like that’ (169). Whatever is not on the track to hyper-masculinity, however, is of no serious value for him.

Yet, even the performer of hyper-masculinity is not spared fear. Despite being aware of the ejector seat, some characters in Röggl’s novel consider themselves, for now, to be on the right side: one feels honored to be offered a job at McKinsey, “da ist man natürlich geadelt” ‘one is ennobled, of course’ (44); the masculine job descriptions lure with power and money. The concept of the free market reinforces these masculinities, in that only the fittest survive. Yet these masculinities are in flux: whoever may be at the controls today is sitting in the ejector seat all the while, and will soon be among those in hicksville waiting for death. To work at McKinsey (or any other consulting company), therefore, is only an illusion of being at the controls, a short performance of masculinity that points to the hierarchical ladder at all times. Even the partner in *Wir schlafen nicht*, at the top of the hierarchy, recalls hearing: “den müssen wir langsam aufs altenteil hieven, ohne dass er es merkt. wir müssen den langsam abservieren, ohne dass er es richtig mitkriegt” ‘we have to slowly haul him to the marshalling yards without him noticing it. We have to slowly polish him off without him realizing it’ (134). One sees here that job security is a myth; the performance of masculinity (even hyper-masculinity) does not bring security. Herr Gehringer, partner at age 48, has reached a certain historical level of successful business masculinity and would presumably find new employment, even in the case of death. Röggl’s younger employees, however, did not live through the prosperous decades before; they start their working life in precarious positions filled with both hope and fear.

#### Feminization of the Labor Market: Eternal Interns as Posterchildren of Business Femininity

Business masculinity creates, and ultimately depends on, the feminization of the economy. Sociologist Martha E. Gimenez defines the “feminization of poverty” as “capitalist relations of pro-

duction that systematically deny access to well-paid employment to a substantial proportion of the propertyless population, male and female” (22). Feminized jobs are marked by insecurity and low or non-existent salaries; they are temporary and/or part-time and include routine tasks or repetitive work, lack of promotion, and lack of benefits. The face of the old economy was the (male) factory worker without any access to the means of production, alienated from the fruits of his labor. The face of the new economic structure in Germany is the intern, male and female, in Röggl’s novel personified by Nicole Damaschke. Sociologists have coined the term “precariat,” a combination of ‘precarious,’ existence with neither predictability nor security, affecting material or psychological welfare, and ‘proletariat.’ Similar to Marx’s argument, this new precariat does not own anything and is dependent on its employers. As opposed to Marx’s model of capitalism that exploited the workers yet gave them at least some compensation, many of today’s internships lie beneath the subsistence minimum or are completely unpaid. The biggest difference to Marx’s proletariat lies in the fact that many interns in Germany today hold advanced university degrees and are still not able to find a permanent job.<sup>9</sup> One of the “pillars of the social market economy’s credo—upward social mobility through education” (von Dirke 142) is no longer valid.

Doing internships and working in otherwise precarious situations is a widespread phenomenon today. In a 2007 study that interviewed 2002-3 university graduates in a vast array of subjects including majors pertaining to jobs in the New Economy sectors, the results showed that three years after graduation, only 39% had found a non-temporary job (Grün and Hecht).<sup>10</sup> The rest were working in temporary jobs or, as was the case for 40% of their cohort, doing internships (typically lasting six months) to increase their chances on the job market. The study showed that this system of internships affects women even more strongly than men. The numbers confirmed that more women did internships after graduating (44% in comparison to 23%), and that they were much more likely to do a second or even third internship thereafter. In other words, they entered the merciless loop as eternal interns.

In *Wir schlafen nicht*, it remains unclear what intern Damaschke actually does other than assisting her boss at the fair (“saft-

holen, standorganisation und so kram” ‘getting juice, organizing the booth and stuff like that’ (12)), which is yet another symptom of the precariat: working for others without a defined job description. Following Marx, this leads to alienation from the product and culminates in social alienation. Damaschke sacrifices herself to please her boss, key account manager Mertens, without ever coming closer to her dream of a permanent job. Instead of showing solidarity among women and offering coaching, Mertens even ridicules her intern: “jetzt mal im ernst: was würde die nicht alles machen, wenn es nötig ist?” ‘I mean seriously: what wouldn’t she do to advance?’ (141). Mertens thereby elevates her masculine position to one of hyper-masculinity, reinforcing the gender-division even more: to adopt business masculinity is to dominate; if one does not do this, then one faces “death.”

Another aspect of Damaschke’s powerless situation—and this seems ironic at first, yet tragic upon closer inspection—is that the intern fears being fired from her already unpaid und unchallenging position. Like Damaschke in Röggl’s novel, half of all interns in Germany today are unpaid. Interns work as many hours as the regularly employed and in most cases would not have the time to work a second job to support themselves. Only those who get support from the state and/or their parents (61% stated they were dependent on their parents’ financial assistance) can even afford an internship.<sup>11</sup> Röggl’s Damaschke analyzes the situation thus: “richtige Eltern sind wichtiger denn je” ‘the right parents are more important than ever’ (89). Unfortunately, she does not have the “right” ones, who could provide her with connections or money:

die anderen hätten alle ihre steuerberatereltern und wirtschaftsprüfereltern, bei denen sie ein und aus gingen und die ihnen bezahlte praktikumsplätze und volontariate verschafften. Die anderen hätten eltern, so besorgende, besorgte und überbesorgte, und sie habe eben keine eltern. Zumindest nicht in dem sinn... kleinbürgerseltern, das ja, das könne man schon sagen, also praktisch nicht existierende.

the others would have their accountant-parents and their CPA-parents whom they could visit all the time and they provide them with paid internships and traineeships. The others would have

parents, the caring, the concerned and overly concerned kind and she did not have parents. At least not in that sense... small town bourgeois parents, yes, one could say so, so basically non-existent parents. (89)

In financially insecure times, one would assume being embedded in society and/or stable family structures would play a prominent role in an individual's life. Yet whereas the parents' generation could rely on assistance from above (state) and below (family), these securities are becoming more and more porous. CDU-economist Friedrich Merz proclaims, "The family is becoming more and more important. Especially when the job world is asking so much, it is important to have a place to come back to to relax. If that did not work out, the product 'family' would be a lousy product" (Kurbjuweit 36). Note the word choice "product," which alludes to its economic value. But it is not only the economic resources families offer that are becoming more and more meager, it is the emotional stability, or lack thereof that Rögglä foregrounds: her characters in *Abrauschen* and *Irres Wetter* never completely mature and always feel unloved by their parents, while not being able to love their own kids either. They feel alienated from everything and everyone.<sup>12</sup> Only the overwhelming chaos of the city takes over the parental function, giving these characters a home. In *Wir schlafen nicht*, the protagonists do not even have this home, but are always at work, uprooted.

In today's Germany, then, the traditional concept of family is no longer effective as a source of revenue or as an emotional safety net, and it is being dropped by more and more people. Yet the state is not picking up the slack—on the contrary, with *Arbeitslosengeld I und II* 'unemployment assistance I and II,' also known as "Hartz IV," society is introduced to new terminology to distract from the fact that the resources for unemployment and social security are massively decreasing. Members of the precariat, according to von Dirke, are "aware that unbroken professional careers and corresponding financial security typical for the parents' generation have become a dream of the past" (144). Whether the parents had grown up in the East or the West, they came of age in a time when jobs were not as scarce as they are today and these parents often see their unemployed offspring as guilty of a failure that they do not understand. Society fails as a support network. This, Rögglä says in an interview,

only leads to more individual fighting: “Alte Sicherheiten und auch sozialpartnerschaftliche Lösungen sind nicht mehr vorhanden. Jeder kämpft für sich selbst” ‘Old securities and solutions according to social partnerships do not exist anymore. Everyone fights for himself’ (Tollmann and Wurster).

Grün and Hecht show that escaping the loop of eternal internships or other precarious jobs is difficult in itself, yet once members of the precariat, especially interns, do get jobs, women are paid less than their male counterparts. Though women historically have always been on the bottom of the economic hierarchy, the political and societal structures that make the phenomenon of the eternal internship possible in Germany today make it even easier for young women to be exploited. In an interview, Röggl points to the fact that interns are predominantly female and makes an explicit connection to their gendered upbringing in society: “Mädchen werden dazu erzogen. Als Frau lernst du vor allem sozial zu handeln und nicht dein Ego-Ding durchzuziehen. Dabei besteht natürlich immer die Hoffnung: Wenn ich brav bin, dann kriege ich eine Belohnung dafür” ‘That is the way girls are raised. As a woman, you learn how to act socially before anything else and not to push your ego thing through. There is always the hope: if I do what is being asked, I will be rewarded’ (Jöller and Springer). In other words, passivity—synonymous with traditional femininity—has been deeply encoded in women. Tragically, Röggl’s Damaschke has always followed what had worked for the generation before her: she graduated from the university (presumably in Germany) and gained experience in the United States—a résumé that would have placed her in a desirable career in the 1990s. Yet upon her return to Germany, her experience abroad is not valued anymore. She ends in the eternal loop of internships and is left with nothing but her dream of a job, already knowing that this is only a dream: “von einer pressestelle könne man heute nur noch träumen, so von einer fixanstellung mit vernünftigen gehalt. nur noch träumen könne man von einer stelle in einer agentur..., von einem volontariat, ... von einem bezahlten praktikum, ... und einem bestehenden arbeitsvertrag” ‘one can only dream of a position in the press office, of a permanent job with reasonable salary. One could only dream of a position in an ad agency ... of a traineeship, ... of a paid internship ... and an existing em-

ployment agreement' (87f.). Note the impersonal pronoun "man" 'one' instead of "ich" 'I'. Here, Damaschke already linguistically alienates herself from the possibility of secure employment both by declaring it a dream and by her choice of pronoun.

### Precarious Realities

Today, everything is in flux, as Rögglä has acknowledged: "Wir befinden uns ja in einer Phase, in der sich das Bild von Arbeit extrem gewandelt hat: von der Vorstellung eines Angestellten-Daseins am sicheren Arbeitsplatz hin zum flexiblen Arbeitnehmer" 'We are currently in a phase in which the image of labor is changing: from the notion of being an employee in a secure position to the flexible job holder' (Tollmann and Wuster). This has led to an increasing feminization of the labor market. Yet, does Rögglä offer an exit strategy from this downward spiral? An exit from the eternal loop of internships? It is the youngest link in the chain of the economic power hierarchy with the most precarious job situation, Damaschke, who tries to exit the vicious cycle. Tired of being patronized as an eternal intern with the wrong parents and the wrong pasts, she wants to quit the game: "sie habe keine lust auf diese scheinsituationen, diese bewerbungsspielchen" 'she does not feel like enduring these illusion situations, these little application games anymore' (*schlafen* 156f.). She wants "raus aus diesen hallen und hinein in eine andere bewegungsart" '[to get] away from these halls and into a completely new way of movement' (158). What sounds like an attempt to break the cycle—rejecting the need to perform according to a script and quitting the unpaid internship in an economic sector that she starts to see in a new light—does not manifest itself as such in a consequent step. One more question by the invisible interviewer reveals that Damaschke has not learned from her experience: "ob sie wisse, wo sie landen werde? keine ahnung, vermutlich 'zurück auf start!'" 'if she knew where she would end up? No idea, presumably 'back to start!'" (158). In other words: there is no real option for escape in this game.

This situation could have offered a moment for two people to connect or even reflect upon the New Economy. Instead, key account manager Mertens misses yet another opportunity for mentoring: "aber so einfach gehe das nicht. sie könne jetzt nicht mir nichts dir nichts abhauen. Außerdem hätten sie eben gesagt, man solle an

ort und stelle bleiben” ‘it would not be that easy. She couldn’t just leave on the spur of the moment. Besides, they said we should stay put’ (*schlafen* 159). Instead of encouraging her for the right reasons, Mertens deliberately positions herself in the eternal loop of followers. If she stood up for herself and her intern, both Mertens and Damaschke would face “death”—breaking out of the system would mean for Mertens to fall into the void of unemployment. She only urges Damaschke not to quit because she is afraid her own job would be at stake as well. By positioning herself as a follower, she deliberately feminizes her position and deprives herself of agency. “They said we should stay put” refers to the male colleagues with whom they are staffing the company’s booth at the fair. By presenting Mertens’s failure to demonstrate solidarity, Rögglä poses the question: Why does solidarity among women no longer exist as women advance in rank?

Whereas Rögglä’s women struggle to make ends meet privately and publicly, Rögglä’s men face an easier situation.<sup>13</sup> Yet even though they have well-paid jobs, they feel uprooted. They, too, perform to the script of masculinity that demands they reach the apex of their careers through a willingness to sacrifice everything else. Though not giving himself the chance for a private life on his fast career track, senior associate Bender dreams of his ideal life as one with regular hours, a small nuclear family (two kids), a house in the suburbs, a *Spießbürgerlichkeit* ‘middle-class conformity’ that Rögglä has described as “eine pseudo-bürgerliche Existenz, einen Ort... , an de[m die Berater] wie Seemänner zurückkommen und andocken können” ‘a pseudo-middle class existence, a place to return to, like seamen return and dock’ (Kaiser).

Stripped of support structures from below (family) and above (state) that were previously taken for granted, young people today and especially women are offered only a few (non-)exit strategies: quitting altogether or continuing to be exploited as eternal interns, and/or retreating into German *Spießbürgerlichkeit*, as in Bender’s dream.<sup>14</sup> This depiction of *Spießbürgerlichkeit* presents only the male version, assuming that a wife takes care of the private sphere. Bender’s dream therefore only works when the traditional dichotomy men/masculine/public and women/feminine/private is maintained. With financial crises all over the world, the economic

structure of today only provides the illusion that young women have exactly the same chances as men. Even when they perfectly perform the masculine script, both the statistics and Rögglä's literary treatment of those statistics demonstrate that women are left with less room for agency.

Rögglä paints a dark picture. How can developing weak female characters qualify as feminist writing? By personifying the New Economy and presenting her female characters as the losers of the globalized economic system, Rögglä reveals that the entire economy is undergoing a feminization process which affects women disproportionately. In the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*, Rögglä said,

wir leben immer noch in patriarchalen verhältnissen, und ich verstehe oft nicht, warum so getan wird, als sei feminismus schnee von gestern, nur weil es nichts absolut neues ist. hipness und politik befinden sich (nicht nur da) in einem schwierigen zusammenhang. z.b. wenn es um alleinerziehende mütter geht oder um verschiedene bezahlungen

we still live in patriarchal conditions, and I do not understand why people pretend that feminism is all water under the bridge now, only because it is nothing completely new anymore. Hipness and politics find themselves (and not only there) in a tricky relationship with each other, for example when we are talking about single mothers or different compensations for labor ("Früher").

By interrogating gender roles in Germany's economy and representing fictional characters on the continuum between the hyper-masculinity of Herr Gehringer and the feminized precariat of intern Nicole Damaschke, Rögglä brings current economic discussions into art and shows that contemporary German writing can and should engage with the public discourse. Disguising this discourse of gendered capitalism as a novel—or so the publisher suggests on the cover—Rögglä can reach more people to raise awareness for the rising precariat. Completed in 2004, *Wir schlafen nicht* is visionary—since its publication, economic structures have deteriorated even further, the precariat has grown, and Rögglä's work is more relevant than ever.

## Notes

1 See Stolz's autobiographical account in "Generation Praktikum." Other terms describing the dire economic situation for young graduates include "Generation Prekär" 'generation precarious'; "Krisenkinder" 'children of the crisis'; and "Generation Quarterlife-Crisis."

2 Though globalization is a highly contested concept, I will not discuss it here at length. See for example Acker 2003.

3 *Really Ground Zero* was a literary ethnography of New York shortly after 9/11 when the author spent several months there. She describes the reactions of individuals on the streets and in the media, and comments on the relationship between American politics and media.

4 All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

5 Other literary examples include: Georg M. Oswald's *Alles was zählt* 'All That Counts' (2000); John von Düffel's *EGO* (2001); and plays such as Urs Widmer's *Top Dogs* (1996) and Rolf Hochhuth's *McKinsey kommt* 'McKinsey is Coming' (2003).

6 Unlike in Italy, Andrea is unmistakably taken as a female name in Germany.

7 A signature of Röggl's writing and her homage to other schools of experimental writing such as the Wiener Gruppe is that all of her published texts are written in lower case.

8 McKinsey is the most prominent example among strategic consulting companies. Kurbjuweit writes: "Even for those not consulted and directly affected by them, their way of thinking is already in our heads. McKinsey has become the symbol of the dictatorship of efficiency" (7).

9 I acknowledge that people without academic degrees today face even worse struggles.

10 Several studies have been published about post-graduate internships. I chose Grün and Hecht's study because the surveyed graduates of 2002-3 would be the same age as Röggl's intern in *Wir schlafen nicht*, published in 2004.

11 Financial aid given by the state such as *BaFÖG* (during college and apprenticeship) and *Arbeitslosengeld I und II* 'unemployment assistance I and II' is usually insufficient to subsidize an unpaid internship.

12 This is a trend in contemporary women's writing. For a detailed discussion of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary women's writing, see Alexandra Merley Hill's essay in this issue.

13 Sven, who is not given a last name, forms an exception: though in a permanent job, he grows increasingly frustrated that the people performing business

masculinity around him do not acknowledge his intellectual and/or creative work. The readers do not learn his exact job description, only that it is not IT support. He assists everyone, and the entire booth at the fair depends on his computer skills, yet he does not receive praise and his job does not come with a chance of promotion. He, too, finds himself in a loop.

14 This last coping strategy is illustrated by authors of the *Generation Golf*, who escaped into consumerism to distract themselves from fear for their own future. See for example Illies and Bessing. Bender's dream of a wife and two kids stands in stark contrast to German reality: the birth rate is not high enough (in 2010: 1.4 per woman) to continue the *Generationenvertrag* 'intergenerational contract,' in which the working population pays for the pensions of the retired. To honor the contract, Germans statistically need to produce 2.1 children. The so-called demography debate has discussed issues such as increasing the retirement age, lowering pensions, and allowing for longer and more flexible leave policies for working parents. For more on Germany's demographic shift see Schilling. The growing precariat, an obstacle to the *Generationenvertrag*, is of political concern: petitions have been signed to restrict internships to three months and to pay interns a minimum salary—decisions are pending.

#### Works Cited

- Acker, Joan. "Gender, Capitalism, and Globalization." *Critical Sociology* 30.1 (2004): 17-41.
- Bessing, Joachim, et al. *Tristesse Royale: Das popkulturelle Quintett*. Berlin: Ullstein, 1999.
- Deupmann, Christoph. "Narrating (New) Economy: Literatur und Wirtschaft um 2000." *Literatur der Jahrtausendwende. Themen, Schreibverfahren und Buchmarkt um 2000*. Ed. Evi Zemanek und Susanne Krones. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008. 151-61.
- Dirke, Sabine von. "Sleepless in the New Economy: Money, Unemployment and Identity in the Literature of Generation Golf." *Über Gegenwartsliteratur. Interpretationen und Interventionen*. Ed. Mark W. Rectanus. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008. 141-56.
- Estévez-Abe, Margarita. "Gender Bias in Skills and Social Policies: The Varieties of Capitalism Perspective on Sex Segregation." *Social Politics* 12 (Summer 2005): 180-215.
- "Früher mussten Autoren 'subversiv' sein, heute 'erfolgreich.'" Interview at *Standard.at*. 5 Oct. 2007. Web. 8 Apr. 2008. <[http://derstandard.at/fs/3059466?\\_forum=2&\\_all=0](http://derstandard.at/fs/3059466?_forum=2&_all=0)>.

- Gimenez, Martha. "Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited." *Science & Society* 69:1 (January 2005): 11-32.
- Grün, Dieter, and Heidemarie Hecht. "Generation Praktikum? Prekäre Beschäftigungsformen von Hochschulabsolventinnen und-absolventen." *Hans Böckler Stiftung*. Web. 6 May 2009. <[http://www.boeckler.de/pdf/fof\\_praktikum\\_2007.pdf](http://www.boeckler.de/pdf/fof_praktikum_2007.pdf)>.
- Illies, Florian. *Generation Golf: Eine Inspektion*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001.
- Jöllner, Gudrun and Ute Springer. "Immer nur Quickies, das ist öde!" *fiber. werkstoff für feminismus und popkultur*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009. <[http://www.fibrig.net/wordpress/?page\\_id=180](http://www.fibrig.net/wordpress/?page_id=180)>.
- Kaiser, Céline, and Alexander Böhnke. "Navigationen." *kathrin röggla texte bühne äther*. Web. 8 Oct. 2008. <[www.kathrin-roeggla.de/text/schlafen\\_interview.htm](http://www.kathrin-roeggla.de/text/schlafen_interview.htm)>.
- Kurbjuweit, Dirk. *Unser effizientes Leben*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2003.
- Lützel, Paul Michael. "Nomadentum und Arbeitslosigkeit. Identität in der Postmoderne." *Merkur* 52. 9/10 (1998): 908-18.
- Röggla, Kathrin. *Abrauschen*. 1997. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001.
- . *Irres Wetter*. 2000. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002.
- . *Really Ground Zero*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001.
- . *Wir schlafen nicht*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004.
- Schilling, Torsten, ed. "Demografischer Wandel in Deutschland." *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, 2006. Web. 27 Dec. 2009. <[http://www.bpb.de/themen/OTVK4U,0,0,Demografischer\\_Wandel\\_in\\_Deutschland.html](http://www.bpb.de/themen/OTVK4U,0,0,Demografischer_Wandel_in_Deutschland.html)>.
- Stolz, Matthias. "Generation Praktikum." *Die Zeit* 31 Mar. 2005.
- Tollmann, Vera, and Stephanie Wurster. "Dreifache Verpflichtung: Arbeiten im neoliberalen Wertekorsett." *Fluter.de*. 19 Apr. 2004. Web. 10 Jan. 2009. <<http://www.fluter.de/de/wirtschaft/lesen/2851?tpl=162>>.