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In Pursuit of Happiness: Gay Intimacy and Relationships in Peter Rehberg's "American" novels *Play, Fag Love, and Boy Men*

Peter Rehberg is a German writer and academic. He formerly was the editor of gay magazine *Männer* (2006–11) and DAAD Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin (2011–16). He is now a curator at Schwules Museum in Berlin. His three novels *Play* (2002), *Fag Love* (2005), and *Boy Men* (2011) were inspired by his extended stays in the USA as a PhD student and a visiting professor of German Studies. They map out the fictional life story and relationship history of a gay man from his late twenties to his fortieth birthday. There is strictly speaking no single main character but the main characters at different points in their biographies follow each other chronologically and conceptually. The first novel traces four young gay men in New York City whose characters are fused in one narrative perspective. The second and third novels share the main character Felix who is in a relationship with Jack and has a best friend called Sven. However, the plots of the second and third book don't quite link up. This lacuna does not take away from the overall project to present a longitudinal view of gay life in Germany and the USA from the perspective of men born in the late 1960s. The kaleidoscopic character of the material adds value to the reading of all three books, as it does not lock reader expectations into a single trajectory but keeps open alternative life paths in the way the main characters lead lives rich in opportunity and poor in terms of stability with protagonists who are in between jobs, countries, and relationships. Their life stories illustrate the concept of Queer Time in the way in which they are set in opposition to heteronormative and emerging homonormative patterns. Reading the three novels together also allows us to trace Rehberg's sustained engagement with US-American gay culture and some of its most iconic mediated models of gay lifestyles.

This article combines close readings of the three novels with an exploration of the tension between the concept of Queer Time and patterns of gay men's lives approaching middle age. The close reading highlights the themes of gay hypermas-

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culinity, gay appropriations of mainstream pop music, pornographic imagination, and issues around promiscuity and bourgeois respectability. These findings support the view that in Rehberg's fictional world gay characters approach their middle years in ways which differ significantly from straight men's life trajectories. Rehberg's novels challenge heteronormative as well as emerging homonormative expectations towards aging but they do not conceal the psychological burden of Queer Time. Rehberg's main characters are consequently judgmental, discontent, and they frequently express their anger. The targets of their aggression include the dominant heterosexual mainstream, other gay men, and lesbians. The author uses the term "Hassmaschinen" to describe his narrators.¹ They are mean-spirited gay separatists in pursuit of the happiness projected by consumer capitalism through its various channels such as pop music, pornography, and what Eva Illouz describes as the "romantic utopia." The romantic utopia is a product of the capitalist market of love (and sex) which came into existence in the nineteenth century and flourished in the twentieth century. It projects a fate-governed, timeless realm beyond consumer choices and thus raises consumer aspirations. Lauren Berlant coined the term "cruel optimism" to describe this era. Illouz also speaks of "cold intimacies." Rehberg's characters are angry but they are also good consumers who employ psychological resources, time, and money on perfecting themselves and having fun. They use the "technologies of choice" (Illouz, *Why Love hurts* 160–77) available in the 1990s and early 2000s, and they drive these pursuits to excess. When Felix returns to live in Berlin in the final part of the third novel, he appears to dismiss intimacy altogether. He has become a harassed worker of consumption in the digital age who does not have a boyfriend but a colleague with whom he performs sex acts in front of a webcam. From his state of nervous exhaustion, middle-aged Felix may recover by an act of defiance which surprisingly is to reinstate the romantic promise.

My argument here is that the romantic utopia contains an overpromise which potentially undermines the logic of transaction and consumption. The imaginary timelessness of romantic love thus queers time in the lives of Rehberg's characters. Queer Time is a concept which was popularized by Judith (Jack) Halberstam and has since been deployed to analyze a wide range of cultural artifacts. Elizabeth Freeman, for example, made a notable contribution with her 2010 book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* in which she differentiates between a "ludic queer theory" aligned with deconstruction and a "more somber queer theory" which "tends to align itself with Marxism, with social conflict and sufferings inflicted by powerful groups" (9). In this article, I explore the tensions which Rehberg's gay characters experience between attempts to game life and to negotiate real social conflict. However, this conflict is not expressed in class struggle but in the ways in which junior academics battle with precarity.

In contrast to the idea of ludic Queer Time, a considerable body of sociological research identifies clear biographical patterns in the gay-male lifespan which appear to contradict the notion of queering time (Nachtwey, Stümke). As a rule of thumb, a gay man ceases to be considered as young by his thirtieth birthday. After

a grace period until his mid-thirties, he will be considered old by his younger peers. Gay middle age not only sets in slightly earlier than straight male middle age, it often also follows directly from a period of experimentation and excess. The onset of middle age is perceived by some gay men as sudden (Nachtwey 90). In the era before equal marriage and gay men's adoption rights some gay men found it more difficult to conceptualize gay adulthood and gay middle age. Their lives were not and many still are not structured by heteronormative patterns of pair bonding and parenting. Rehberg's literary character Felix serves here as a case in point.

Furthermore, gay scenes around the globe are prone to foster a focus on youth and corporeality. Gay men with the financial means to do so may very well attend the gym regularly and have liposuction or plastic surgery in an attempt to appear younger than they are (Nachtwey 89). Research suggests that some gay men suffer from depression caused by internalized gay ageism (Wight et al.). On the other hand, there is some research into gay "ageing capital" (Simpson 11, 26, 33, 134–36).

Background

Peter Rehberg started publishing creative writing in 1995. His works were introduced to a wider gay and gay-friendly readership through anthologies drawing from the entries to the literature prize of Germany's leading gay bookstores. It was the editor of the anthologies and director of *Männerschwarm* publishers in Hamburg, Joachim Bartholomae, who suggested bundling Rehberg's writing together in the format of a novel. Eventually this would become the novel *Play* (2002). Although published by a gay publishing house for a largely gay readership, this debut novel fitted in well with trends in mainstream, straight-dominated literature and literary debates at the time. These were concerned with the rise and fall of *popliteratur*. The term had been in use since the 1960s to denote literary texts and modes of literary dissemination inspired by various popular cultures and their musical expressions such as beat music, rock music, punk rock and electronic dance music. Rehberg cites pop author and techno DJ Rainald Goetz as an inspiration (FL 189–90), specifically for the hateful attitude. By the mid 1990s *popliteratur* took on a slightly different meaning. Counter-cultural rebellion was replaced by affirmation of consumerism on the levels of everyday culture and high-end luxury. Millennial *popliteratur* was characterized by representations of hedonism and connoisseurship. It positioned itself with gestures appropriated from previous fin-de-siècle dandyism against the moral stance of the *littérature engagée*. In German cultural discourse and literary scholarship, the inception of this mode of pop writing is often attributed to British author Nick Hornby, specifically his successful novel *High Fidelity* from 1995 (Degler and Paulokat).

Rehberg's novels *Play* and *Fag Love* explicitly address Hornby and pop music. Towards the end of *Play*, the main narrator Martin reads Hornby and reluctantly acknowledges the esteem in which he holds this straight author. Reading Hornby and discussing "heterosexueller Sozialisationszwang" (96), Martin differentiates between gay-male and straight attitudes towards relationships. Where straight

people seek “Dauerromantik” (97), gay men, or at least Martin, experience transitory excitement with a variety of sex partners. Martin wants to blend the emotions of falling in love, the sensations of sex, and the thrill of flaunting his homosexuality in heterosexual public to create an emotionally charged life “story” full of terror and happiness (101, 113, 115–16). The more mature narrator of *Boy Men* struggles with what he calls a gay “dumpfe Dauerpubertät” (70). The concepts of *Dauerromantik* and *Dauerpubertät* obviously share the idea of continuity which in turn highlights how the narrators are concurrently drawn towards transience (promiscuity, three-minute sexual encounters, pop songs) and the promised constancy of “perfect” romantic relationships which is advertised in many pop songs.

The middle novel *Fag Love* ends with an annotated play list of all the songs mentioned in the book. In this list Felix’s intellectual and slightly nerdy friend Sven sketches out an international gay canon of pop music. The message here is that each ephemeral three-minute song adds to a shared living canon of gay communities across the globe. The novel claims that there is potential to build a durable community on the basis of repeated fleeting experiences.

Apart from commenting on millennial *popliteratur* discourses, Rehberg’s novels also refer to a gay tradition of *popliteratur* which reaches back to Hamburg writer Hubert Fichte. Fichte (1935–86) wrote in his novels and travelogues extensively about gay cruising, sex, and BDSM alongside many other experiences of alterity such as his childhood memories of being a “half-Jewish” boy in Nazi Germany, psychiatric patients in Senegal, and followers of Afro-Brazilian syncretic religions. Fichte’s novel *Die Palette* from 1968 portrays the clientele of a Hamburg bar which welcomed bohemians, beatniks, runaways, and sexual minorities alongside prostitutes, sailors, and other working-class people from the *Neustadt* quarter of Hamburg. His part documentary, part poetic way of relaying the habitus and stories of marginalized people resonates in Rehberg’s books. There are many traces of Fichte’s sound and linguistic experimentation present in Rehberg’s writing, most notably in *Play*. Both authors also experiment with narrator figures. In interview, Rehberg likens his approach to Fichte’s who distributed his life experiences in complex ways full of meta-reflection over a childhood self called Detlev, an adult self called Jäcki, and unnamed first-person narrators who are often co-present on the same pages of his books (Gillett). Rehberg’s main characters, four in *Play*, and the two versions of Felix in the second and third books can be read in a similar way as a disseminated yet interconnected exploration of gay male subjectivity over the span of several books.

Some of the more philosophical ideas in Rehberg’s writing have a precedent in Fichte such as the following passage from Fichte’s novel *Detlevs Imitationen* “*Grünspan*” from 1971:

Der Hunger ist so groß, daß man mit dem einzigen geht, der noch am leeren Bahnhof steht. Nur sieht, ob er schöne Eier im Sack hat.
 Ach, diese Befriedigung!
 Zur Sättigung tritt ein älterer Hunger ein. Der Hunger nach Reiz, wenn der nach Brutalität gestillt ist.

Nach der Stillung der noch ältere Hunger nach Zärtlichkeit, der noch ältere nach Leidenschaft, nach Oberschulbildung, nach Ausschließlichkeit.
Die Gewöhnung an der Verrat des Tieferliegenden an das Größere. (82)

The different layers of appetite for sex and intimacy reaching from quick release to a desire for an exclusive relationship intersect but never reach equilibrium, constantly interfering with each other. Another intellectual similarity between Rehberg and Fichte is Jäcki's famous quip that liberation can only come from a "Verschwulung der Welt" (221). Jäcki rejects in *Grünspan* the discourse of armed struggle and revolution which in the early 1970s was widely adopted by the political left. "Tourism," he goes on, would be the best way to turn the world gay. At first sight, this appears to be a rather problematic post-colonial stance. The educated European white gay man travels the world and has sex with a variety of local men with darker skin tones. Still, Fichte/Jäcki was not a mere tourist. He immersed himself in ethnopoetic research based on physical experiences as well as archival work. When Jäcki uses the term "tourism," his use of language is polemical.

The need for a "Verschwulung der Welt" stems in Fichte's eyes from the continuing marginalization and victimization of gay men within emancipatory movements. In *Die Palette*, Jäcki ridicules the popular Easter marches for nuclear disarmament because he is convinced that even after their unlikely success nothing would have changed for gay men: "dann würden die Tunten immer noch ausgelacht, wenn sie im Regen im Gebüsch stehen am Dammtorbahnhof und sich gegenseitig die Uhr aufziehen" (110).

The gaying of the world is a strong theme of Rehberg's writing. His characters imagine life in worlds from which women have all but disappeared, and where men's social, sexual, and emotional needs are met by men. Fichte's axis between Europe and the global South in times of anti-imperialist struggle is moved in Rehberg's writing to European encounters with the USA in the era of early digital consumer capitalism. Rehberg's German characters negotiate their alterity on the US marketplace easily. They do not represent subalterns to US cultural hegemony but perform to a certain degree colonial mimicry (Bhabha).

Play: Angry Young Men cruising

Play does not have a single narrative perspective but is held together by the identity of the location which is NYC in the late 1990s and specifically its gay scene. In the view of the characters, NYC as the most vibrant city on the planet overpromises compared to the actual experiences available to gay men. Every gym is more exciting than any of the gay bars (40). This negative attitude is not specifically targeted at NYC or the US. The hatred machine is in full swing in Berlin, when the narrator mercilessly mocks people for being ugly, stupid, or even for having a stutter (8). He hates "fags" (44), straight people (59), fat people (78), and disabled people (20, 33). He reserves the right to judge everyone based on their taste in music, films, and books.

The characters' "dandyhafte Arroganz" (Rehberg in interview) is punctuated throughout the three novels by their engagements with pop music. The men can

present as cold and distant because they relocate their emotionality into sentimental song lyrics. *Play* has a motto attributed to Madonna: “Love isn’t true, it’s just something that we do” (5), which is taken from her track “Don’t tell me” which has the actual lyrics “Tell me love isn’t true/it’s just something that we do.” The equivocation of this quote illustrates the ambiguous attitude the characters have towards love and romance. Further into the narrative of *Play*, song titles by U2, Simple Minds, and Laura Brannigan illustrate growing up queer in a straight environment which entails falling in love with straight boys (85). This compartmentalization of coldness and sentimentality is mirrored in the characters’ attitudes towards intimacy and relationships. Three-minute pop songs are the equivalent of three-minute (anonymous) sexual encounters (*Fag Love* 70).

Rehberg’s younger characters in *Play* are particularly suspicious of any human connection and especially of romantic relationships. They seek and find some release in taking recreational drugs and having casual sex. Sex may lack passion and as a direct consequence there may not be an orgasm (24). Where sex brings release, there is the risk of falling in love:

Das ist doch der Fehler, dass aus jedem Fick gleich Verliebtheit wird, das muss nicht sein, das kann man doch verhindern, also lernen, lernt mans nicht, ists leider ein Beweis für Dummheit, denk ich noch beim Pissen/bisschen Wichsen und auf dem Weg zurück zur Bar. Denn die Dummheit, die Verliebtheit immer *ist*, kann man bei sich selbst gerade noch ertragen, auch nur selten, bei andern erst mal gar nicht, bei *fremden* Menschen schließlich überhaupt nicht, oder eigentlich grundsätzlich nie. (40)

This indictment of falling in love as stupidity is seamlessly followed by the character’s concession that he has been flirting with another guest in the bar for two years without ever exchanging any words. He has no intention of approaching him now because rejection would cost him five days of recovery (41). It is obviously not language which escapes him but readiness to engage with another man in a face-to-face conversation. Instead he calls the sex-chat phone lines which were popular in the period (59–61). He appears to be particularly suited to using the medium of phone sex, as it allows him to remain within his imaginary world and to mitigate against the risk of rejection by removing physical co-presence.

When he has physical sex with someone else, the narrator wants to connect emotionally with his teenage self and the sensations of falling in love (101), but he does not want to do any “Beziehungsarbeit” (112). When ecstatically in love, he wants to be addressed as “boy” and “my boy” (114). His idea of happiness would be to experience a flamboyantly gay lifestyle which blends infatuation and sexual release (113, 115–16). At the end of *Play*, the risk of falling in love, which is earlier labelled as a stupid risk to take, seems to have transformed into a promise. This change of attitude leads in the next two books to a more sustained interrogation of love and consumerist gay utopias.

Regarding the physicality of Rehberg’s four characters in *Play*, there is some tension between dismissing and embracing the contemporary gay focus on muscular bodies and the fashions of shaved heads, tattoos, and piercings. The voice

of Martin remains skeptical compared to his peers (29, 30, 45, 84). It is possible that working on one's physical appearance has not yet become a priority for Martin because he is still young enough in terms of gay-scene standards not to worry too much. However, the next two books with Felix at the center unequivocally champion the gym-pumped and shaved look as an ideal for the self and for sexual partners. One dimension here is a gay experiment with hypermasculinity, one of the looks disseminated by contemporary US gay media. Another one may be an attempt to slow down the approach of middle age. By developing a strong physique and shaving off any grey hair on their heads and bodies, gay men create a level playing field populated with ageless, well defined, hairless bodies. Furthermore, the more specific skinhead look inspired by UK youth culture, on which Rehberg has worked as an academic, reproduces a form of gay hypermasculinity which is not readily compatible with liberal straight culture or the inclusivist queering of LGBT+ communities (Rehberg, "Homoskin").

Fag Love: Sexuality & Mortality

In the second novel, the narrator Felix is thirty-six years old. *Fag Love* sets a different tone from *Play* by introducing what Felix considers positive relationship models such as the UK version of the TV series *Queer as Folk*. Felix sees a relationship model in which two gay men consciously do not have casual sex with each other in order not to preclude the possibility of entering a romantic relationship later in life (8, 70, 105). This is a slightly unusual take on *Queer as Folk*, as this TV series highlighted hedonism and promiscuity (Davies). Felix explicitly wants to live a love story (10) which appears to be different from the story of terror and happiness advertised in *Play*. His friend Sven warns him that love stories usually end in death (10, 40). Felix is quick to fall in love after sex (17), which is a motif known from *Play*, but claims not to be sure whether he believes in love (19). To him, the problem with NYC is that there is too much sex and not enough intimacy. He argues that gay men mitigate against the risk of rejection by gathering too much information about each other online (32, 35). In *Fag Love*, sex, relationships and romance take on a fateful character which is not present in *Play*. This is partly caused by his failing relationship with Anton in Berlin. The reader learns in analepsis that falling in love with Anton Felix imagines a completely gay world in which gay men will finally be liberated (22). When this trope was introduced by Hubert Fichte, it was about a global alliance of marginalized men. For Felix, this is a hedonistic, suitably self-ironic pop-culture fantasy which looks like a James Bond movie without women and is accompanied by a soundtrack mostly by the Pet Shop Boys (116). His other musical heroes are Kylie Minogue, ABBA, Donna Summer, and Madonna, but also Fleetwood Mac, who don't quite seem to fit the international gay repertoire. According to Rehberg, the inclusion of Fleetwood Mac is an autobiographical element. The author encountered their music at a time when he was discovering his sexuality aged twelve. This biographical information is supported by the observation that, in the final novel, *Boy Men*,

Fleetwood Mac are associated with the boyfriend of Felix's sister on whom young Felix had a crush (104).

Behind Felix's separatist pop fantasy of a gay world we discover a proto-political assertion that straight allies to gay men are their worst oppressors. Their ostentatious endorsement of queerness does not entail any personal risk (116) and leaves their straight privilege intact. This harks back to Fichte's claim that after political liberation, the "Tunten" (effeminate gay men) would still be ridiculed. Felix condemns the notion that anything about gay communities could be subversive (Eppendorfer). He is particularly scathing about the gay leather community which Sven and other friends are exploring (140). Ultimately Felix's separatism is non-political and consumerist. It collapses back into an apolitical individualism. How readers judge this depends on their relationship with the implicit author. To perceive Felix and the implicit author as distinct opens a space in which one can read an authorial indictment of Felix's attitudes and behaviors.

When Felix arrives in Berlin to move into a new flat with Anton, his boyfriend has not made any space for Felix or his possessions in the home they are meant to share (29–30). Felix also suspects that Anton has been deceitful about his HIV status (31). They soon break up with each other. Rootless in Germany's capital city, Felix is introduced to gay cruising locations and protocols by a straight-presenting US diplomat (53). This is a far cry from the liberated gay utopia Felix so desires. Home and domesticity become sources of anxiety and ridicule for Felix who sarcastically recalls that Anton like Felix's mother wears an apron while cooking (59). As an antidote, Felix finds sex with two other shaven-headed muscular men in the basement of a gay bar:

Ganz fix stellte sich sone große breite Glatze neben mich. Schon an meinem Arm dran, vorsichtig noch, Nippel drücken, weiter runter fassen, los gings, voreinander, aneinander stehen. Glatzen streicheln, den Restkörper runter. Restlos glücklich. Sex von der Glatze aus vornehmen. Von der Glatze her sich den Sex vorstellen. Glatzenliebe. Nach zwei, drei Minuten stellt sich noch 'ne Glatze links daneben. Nicht so supersexy wie der andere, die andere Glatze, aber, soweit ich sah, ein schöner Mann. Dreierkuss und Dreierwicks. Machte noch mal glücklicher. Glücklicher für drei Minuten. Wie ein perfekter Popsong. So sollte mein Leben sein. (70)

The tone of this passage is breathless as sentences are short and many phrases lack a verb. Reduction also works on a more abstract level, when the men are identified metonymically by their shared identity marker of a shaved head. Anything else is subsumed under "Restkörper." They become a triad which shares a kiss *à trois* and performs mutual masturbation *à trois*. Any sex in this situation, one may argue, would be masturbatory, as there is for a short moment no differentiation between the three men. A second triad of immaterial concepts closes the passage addressing happiness, pop music, and life. The modal verb (*sollen*) indicates that the narrator has awareness of the utopian potential inherent in this encounter. The element of Queer Time is expressed in the consciously absurd equation of three minutes and a lifetime.

This moment of eternal bliss is fast superseded by images of a beautiful death (73) and of disgust (78). Felix moves back to the US where he meets Jack. He suspects that Jack is making him fall in love before revealing that he is HIV positive, a suspicion which is soon confirmed (117–19). The two men have rough sex with each other in which there are few disgust barriers (120–21). This release appears to facilitate the only moment of full emotional intimacy: they cry together, when Jack finally discloses that he is HIV positive (133). For Felix, who was not permitted to settle down peacefully with domestic Anton in Berlin, another relationship model becomes dominant in which love and death form a fateful conglomerate. He wants to spend the rest of his life with Jack and somehow overcome death in an immortal love (134–35, 147). Gay love stories, in Felix's mind, start with sex and end with finding someone with whom you want to die—but not yet (153–54). Gay love in this suspended queer moment is for Felix incompatible with fighting for equal marriage (155). Tellingly Felix also does not consider how advances in the treatment of HIV infections render the condition chronic rather than lethal for those who can afford medication. Duration is irrelevant in Felix's notion of immortal love beyond the grave. He rejects futurity in a fashion which resembles Lee Edelman's theoretical views.

The suspended period of bliss that is the relationship between Felix and Jack begins to crumble when they visit Bruce in California. Bruce is a former boyfriend of Jack's. He is very wealthy, and body obsessed in ways Felix has not encountered before. To Bruce plastic surgery and liposuction are routine. He frequents less trendy gay venues so that with his social and corporeal capital he may stand out more (163–64). In Bruce's gay California, consumer capitalism reaches into every social interaction, and it even shapes bodies via surgical procedures. Felix's and Bruce's body practices are based on the shared idea of perfectibility, but they differ significantly in that Felix has been working out over a long period of time, whereas Bruce pays to have work done quickly.

Adding to Felix's doubtful mindset following this trip west, his mother calls him on the phone and enquires what his plans are now that he is approaching his forties (173). Felix appears to be trapped between an extreme American gay lifestyle which alienates him and German heteronormative expectations he has been trying to evade all his adult life. The only solace lies in listening to pop music:

Dann hörten wir für fünf Minuten Madonna und für fünf Minuten war alles O.K. Durchkommen. Weiterkommen. Dass Weiterkommen was wert war. Avril Lavigne mochten wir alle beide. Im Auto sitzen und *Complicated* hören. Vierzigjährige, die Musik für vierzehnjährige hörten. Du bist bald vierzig und was dann? Weiterkommen. Popwissen als Basis von Beziehung reicht nicht, sagte Sven. Das Leben war kompliziert. Das Leben durfte nicht kompliziert sein. Konnte nicht immer alles gut sein, musste aber darum gehen. So sprachen Erwachsene. Wir wussten noch nicht, wie wir erwachsen werden sollten. Wir mussten noch lernen, wie wir erwachsen werden. (179–80)

This passage responds to the three-men sex scene discussed above. The moment lasts five minutes, not three, and the narrator feels o.k. rather than happy. The

dyad of the couple in a committed relationship is mirrored in a pair of concepts, rather than three concepts, which here are “Durchkommen” and “Weiterkommen.” The latter is repeated for emphasis. The passage ends with a series of modal verbs: *dürfen*, *können*, and *müssen*. The earlier utopian *sollen* has been discarded. Life has become a matter for adults, in this case adults who have the necessary insight but lack the skills to act like grown-ups.

In the last part of the story, covered in a few pages, Jack and Felix begin to speak to each other about their emotions. They experience moments of bliss listening to “Running” by No Doubt on the road to Laguna Beach. This chapter ends with a traffic accident. However, in the next chapter Felix and Jack are planning their wedding. As this section is set in a different typeface previously reserved for Felix’s death fantasies, one can assume that this is the life fantasy of a dead person, Felix. This would also explain why Sven curates the annotated pop-music playlist at the back of the book like a posthumous fictional editor. Felix, who was just about to learn how to grow up and still to lead a fun-filled gay life, has been killed off by his author. This narrative intervention suspends closure and promotes equivocation. It queers narrative time.

Boy Men: Growing up is not growing up.

The reader meets Felix again in Ithaca, where he is starting a job as a visiting professor in the German department. He has moved to New York State with Jack, but Jack has already left to take up a better position at Yale. Felix’s surroundings are bleak. The university is described as depressing and decaying (16). The large “Familienhaus” (19) in which Jack and Felix were supposed to live as a couple is empty and lonely (18, 21, 33). Felix is at a loss because he can imagine life only as a couple. The catastrophe of a relationship breakdown has hit him at the very point in his biography at which he has accepted a homonormative lifestyle largely compatible with straight life patterns.

Felix is writing a book about aging, and, although Madonna is still a role model for him, he states: “Ich glaube nicht mehr an die Lösungen der Popkultur” (22). Felix’s new mediated identity comes from a top-ten list of good books (24–25). His relationship with Jack was cemented through liking the same books and films but unlike Jack, who wanted their “Partnerschaft” to be based on “Kameradschaft,” Felix was still looking for romantic adventure (26). It was a “postromantische, ironische Erwachsenenbeziehung” (36). However, Felix also wants to escape the “Sentimentalitätsfalle” (37). He hates the expression “mein Mann” that heterosexuals use (57), but that is because he felt that Jack was “wie mein Mann” (73).

Felix thinks of heterosexual men, even straight men with disabilities, as having innate self-confidence (61). He is both appalled by and attracted to the way in which Marco, a fellow German academic, flirts with young women (62). Felix convinces himself they are eighteen or even younger, but it turns out that they have job interviews booked at the annual conference of the Modern Languages Association which Marco and Felix attend in San Diego (76).

Large parts of *Boy Men* are concerned with Felix's struggle with his academic career which he feels comes with unreasonable demands to conform with bourgeois and heteronormative expectations. He is angry at his fellow academics who claim to lead transitory lives but are in fact settled and bourgeois in their lifestyle and attitudes. Felix complains that he neither has a bourgeois lifestyle nor freedom, that he only has an empty house (41). Loss of love, emotional homelessness, and his disinterest in his work drive Felix to drink (38 and throughout). He seeks distraction on the GayRomeo website (42, 112). His philosophical stance is that life is a "struggle" and a "game" (44). Consequently, he focusses on his gym routine to steel himself as an individual for both (48).

In terms of human connections, Felix trusts and likes Anna from the German department. She does not fit into Felix's expectation of a "fag hag" but in the course of the novel she will take up the role of the female confidante. Anna differs from the model of "fag hag" (Fackler and Salvato, Thompson) in that she is not in love with the gay community, and openly criticizes Felix's separatism accusing him of a secret "Heteroneid" (58). Anna is married to Marco and the narrator drops hints that there is some flirting between Marco and Felix, although Marco is too straight and too much of an "Ossi" to be attractive to Felix. The reader learns that Marco is bisexual, and that his marriage with Anna was a marriage of convenience to provide him with a green card (42, 46, 62, 76–81).

As can be seen from his comments on Marco, Felix has not lost the judgmental attitude we know from earlier protagonists in Rehberg's books. He opines that NYC is the only place to be for a gay man (64). He very rudely attacks a lesbian academic at the MLA reception of a queer organization (66–70). Her choice of clothes riles him, and he is impervious to her explanation that as a lesbian and a feminist she is free of fashion constraints (66–67). Felix still insists that he can tell good people from bad people by their musical and fashion preferences (69). Unlike in earlier books, we here get more of a feeling that the protagonist makes these nasty remarks because he is lost in life. To make matters worse, he runs into Jack right after the MLA incident. Felix begins to understand that he needs to overcome his "dumpfe Dauerpubertät" (70). Still, he wallows in self pity that his "Liebesgeschichten" always turn into "Liebeskummergeschichten" (71).

Where *Fag Love* is interspersed with death fantasies set in a different typeface, *Boy Men* features short paragraphs set in italics on philosophical truths Felix wants the reader to consider. In the first one he insists on the importance of aesthetic over moral judgment which is the essence of camp according to Susan Sontag (72). Anna engages with Felix in philosophical discussions in the course of which Felix realizes that he needs to grow up, that waiting for happiness is a privilege of youth (76). She writes a letter about the more contemplative, less corporeal life after forty (88). She calls him a "romantic" (95) who has too many unrealistic expectations. Jack used to say the same things, that Felix needed to stop being a boy and to start becoming a man (83, 85). Felix's reaction is to use GayRomeo for more hook-ups (87, 92–93, 96–97). Interestingly, as a writer he carries his

notepad around and takes notes on his actions which he perceives as addictive behavior (99). Felix's earlier queer rejection of futurity is now framed in a normative discourse of mental health.

Through GayRomeo, while still in San Diego, Felix meets Clay who is rich, handsome and has great taste in clothes, body styling, interior design, and cars. Clay pays Felix for their first, blissful sexual encounter which surprisingly chimes with Felix's "Unschuldsewigjungseinfantasien" (102). Clay's perfect cocaine kisses trigger the right memories in Felix of being twelve or thirteen and in love with Olli who also liked Fleetwood Mac (104). Clay is nearly too perfect (103, 106). He knows how to choose the right drugs and the right porn videos to watch. In fact, the affair with Clay is a realization of Martin's gay utopia in *Play*. It entails great sex, an emotional connection with one's pubescent self, and a life of luxury. This episode ends badly, as the reader learns, again in analepsis. Leaving the West Coast on a plane, Felix has difficulties coming to terms with his new "postromantisches Leben" because Clay has killed himself (149, 152, 153). Felix spent three days with the corpse, tending to him, before getting Clay's name tattooed on his chest, and leaving San Diego (149–51). Clay killed himself because he did not want to grow older than forty (153). He paid Felix for a last hurrah which Felix thought was a playful gesture rather than an economic transaction. Felix's post-romantic life appears to be based on a realization that the romantic utopia does not transcend consumer capitalism. Back on the East Coast, Felix experiences a breakdown in an Abercrombie & Fitch store where the loud pop music, choice of trendy clothes, and presence of young attractive sales staff become overwhelming. He ends up sitting naked and bloodied amongst broken glass (156–58).

Having exhausted himself in gay versions of US consumer capitalism, Felix returns to Berlin where he intends to put the romantic folly behind him. He ridicules his Californian experience as "Stichwort Liebestod" (168). In Berlin, Felix lives with Marco who has caught up on the body building and deals in steroids and cocaine. The men live and have sex together, but they are not a couple. Their only shared goal is "absolute Körperfokussierung" (169) which marks another attempt to stop the progress of time. The time with Clay is now dismissed as an "Urlaubsflirt" (179) gone wrong. Felix asserts that Clay abused him for his death wish. Still Felix is not yet at ease with himself. He often feels nauseous. He finds his body fat, old, and unattractive (179–80). He frequents gay and mixed sex clubs and takes drugs, but he cannot find release: a cocaine kiss from Marco feels disgusting (185). Nevertheless, Felix obtains a prescription for Viagra, engages in chemsex, and spends 500 euros a month on the drug (187). He even contemplates plastic surgery to have his penis elongated (193) which could earn him more money through the webcam shows he delivers with Marco (194). He starts to forget Clay and contemplates whether he has reached a new and stable balance. In Berlin, sex and drugs are "Volkssport" (187) for gay and straight people alike. There are mixed dark rooms in which the barriers between the communities have been removed. Felix in his obsessions has become mainstream. His life and

work with Marco are predictable: “Wir sind ein Team, kein Liebespaar, Trainingspartner. Wir verstehen uns stumm wie LKW-Fahrer oder Männer im Darkroom. War das die Männerfreundschaft, die ich mir immer gewünscht habe?” (194) Although earlier darkroom sex was described as containing the secret to happiness, the answer is that there is still something missing; he experiences an absence of feeling “verliebt” (196). Furthermore, Felix still cannot accept being comforted (199).

The book ends with an act of equivocation. Felix turns forty and receives a job offer from Anna in Ithaca but declines because it is time to leave school (204). This does not mean that he will now focus on growing up. On the contrary, he immerses himself further in Berlin life. In Berlin, he reasons, no-one has a job. Everyone has projects. This is the time of the “poor but sexy” trope introduced to describe Berlin by Klaus Wowereit, the first openly gay mayor of a major Germany city. Felix’s decision is to continue living like a man in his twenties with the self-awareness that this is silly. This expresses Felix’s reconciliation of gay middle age with Queer Time:

Doch was Besseres gibt es nicht. Das habe ich von Marco gelernt. Was Besseres war nicht in Sicht. Mehr als die Jugend kommt nicht. Also einfach mitspielen solange es geht. Wie mit der Liebe. Auch wenn man nicht mehr wirklich dran glauben kann. Eine Runde geht noch. (206)

Felix’s lived queer theory is ludic (“mitspielen”). He has dropped the notion of struggle and has added ironic distance, a very conditional faith in life and love which is “nicht mehr wirklich.” The book ends with another opportunity to play the game which Felix does not seize and which, crucially, does not need to be realized. He sees a man in the street he likes, and he decides that his next boyfriend should look like him. Then he sets off on his bicycle with no intention of speaking to the stranger (207). While in the first novel not speaking to an attractive man was framed as the mitigation of the risk of rejection, at the end of the third novel it marks the fullness of unrealized potential.

Conclusion: “Letzten Endes sind das auch Liebesromane, finde ich”

In my interview, Peter Rehberg summarizes the main questions behind his three novels: How do you find happiness as a gay man? How do you sustain the desire for intensities? How do sex and love go together? Rehberg speaks of a “jugendlicher Trotz der Bücher” which by the end of the third book had run its course. The final Berlin episodes he sees under the signs of “Erschlaffung” and “Orientierungslosigkeit.” The three novels have in the author’s hindsight a particular tone and an edge of anger which by the third book was no longer sustainable.

In the course of Rehberg’s books, the reader learns about the main characters’ underlying experiences and emotions. They feel fundamentally lonely, have done so since childhood, and find it difficult to connect emotionally with other men outside sentimental moments expressed in shared appreciation of pop music and

ecstatic moments experienced during (casual) sex. The relationships they enter offer only the appearance of a long-term perspective, as they are flawed from the start in that the dream partner is dishonest, for example about his HIV status or about his intentions entering the relationship. When there is an opportunity to grow into a more mature relationship, new obstacles appear. These are Felix's unwillingness to have an unadventurous, every-day relationship with Jack, and Jack's not fully explained prioritization of his career over their relationship.

However, contrary to Rehberg's view, my analysis leads to a slightly more hopeful conclusion. When Felix at the end of *Boy Men* decides to grow up (not to return to Ithaca to teach) and not to grow up (to play another round of the life game), he suspends closure in a playful manner (as if he were young). This is similar but also stands in contrast to the suspended death and wedding at the end of *Fag Love*.

The three books discussed here cover the life experiences of the author in a fictionalized manner, but they do this as fiction which invites layered and complex readings. There is no narratological imperative to end a story with clarity. Equivocation is a virtue in this context—and has even been proposed by a contemporary of Rehberg's, the German philosopher Antke Engel, as a viable strategy for queer politics. Rehberg's books certainly show how the promises of consumer capitalism remain unfulfilled, but they also preserve the desire for a happy life filled with love in acts of Hegelian *Aufhebung*. The narrative of *Play* ends with the protagonist suspended in an undated list of things he likes doing with his unnamed lover in NYC (115–16). The narrative of *Fag Love* ends with the protagonist planning his wedding suspended between life and death (185–87). The narrative of *Boy Men* ends with the protagonist hypothetically picking a new boyfriend before cycling off (207). These gestures of denied closure effectively constitute Queer Time in the reading experience. What is significant here is the difference between queer anti-normative life choices and the lives of gay middle-aged men who battle with ageism in the gay scene as well as internalized ageism. In his three books, Rehberg interrogates several lifestyle choices and sets of imageries offered to gay men in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Having played through these choices to the extremes and at great personal cost, his composite protagonist appears to change his attitude. He will continue to play the game, but there is a sense that he may take it more lightly. He has moved from anger and cynicism via depression and grief to acceptance. He accepts that he is too old and that his continuing scene participation is inappropriate, but he does not accept that this insight should exclude him from playing the game. If Rehberg were to extend his narrative of Felix up to his fiftieth birthday, one wonders what further ways Felix will find to sidestep heteronormative expectations as well as gay ageism. As an academic, Rehberg has in the meantime worked on imageries of masculinity which go beyond the ones discussed here, namely representations of hipster and Arabic masculinities ("Queering the Spectacle of the Arab Migrant," *Hipster Porn*). It is not unreasonable to assume that such a book would address these, possibly bringing to an end the gay pursuit of American happiness in Rehberg's literary world.²

Notes

¹ Interview with Peter Rehberg, 5 October 2018.

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