More to the Story: Discursive Violence in *Aimée and Jaguar*

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Abstract:
The story of Aimée and Jaguar can be read on multiple levels. Indeed, it comes to us already in two incarnations. Erica Fischer published her novel *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Story*, Berlin 1943 in 1994. In 2001, Max Färberböck's movie, *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Greater than Death* was released. Though these two different representations reveal oppositional and competing sociological, political, and cultural agendas, what emerges is that there is no ultimate, objective 'truth.' This story, as is it is told by Fischer and Färberböck, represents lesbianism as a site of resistance to the National Socialist eugenicist agenda. But finally, this story reinscribes the racist and classist dynamics it sets out to critique. What emerges from close readings of both the novel and the film is that non-heteronormative relationships are not inherently revolutionary, but instead often reproduce (whether consciously or not) hegemonic power relations and discursive violence.

1 The story of Aimée and Jaguar[1] can be read on multiple levels. Indeed, it comes to us already in two incarnations. Erica Fischer published her novel *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Story, Berlin 1943* in 1994. In 2001, Max Färberböck's movie, *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Greater than Death* was released. Though these two different representations reveal oppositional and competing sociological, political, and cultural agendas, what emerges is that there is no ultimate, objective "truth." Instead, it is more productive to analyze the cultural commentary enabled by these texts, situating them within historical context, contemporary politics, and personal investment. This story, as is it is told by Fischer and Färberböck, can be read as a universal "love in the face of adversity" story. It is also a project of recuperating lesbian history. It represents lesbianism as a site of resistance to the National Socialist eugenicist agenda. But finally, this story of resistance is also tainted with the imbalance and inequality of the social context in which it exists. It reinscribes the racist and classist dynamics it sets out to critique. What emerges from close readings of both the novel and the film is that non-heteronormative relationships are not inherently revolutionary, but instead often reproduce (whether consciously or not) hegemonic power relations and discursive violence.

2 The plot of the novel and the film are roughly the same. Elisabeth (Lilly) Wust is a mother of four, married to a Nazi soldier fighting on the front. While her husband is away, she has affairs with various other high-power members of the National Socialist party. Through her domestic assistant, Inge Wolf, she meets Felice, and they fall in love. Felice comes to live with Lilly, and from then on her home is filled with various lesbian and bisexual women and

[1] "Aimée" is Felice's nickname for Lilly, and Lilly calls Felice her "Jaguar."

occasional male friends. Eventually Felice discloses to Lilly that she is Jewish. Lilly is amazed that Felice can love her despite Lilly's history of anti-Semitic remarks. Shortly after they declare their mutual love and exchange rings, Felice is discovered by the Gestapo and sent to a Jewish collection center in the city. Lilly visits her there daily until Felice is sent to a labor camp. When Lilly tries to visit her at the labor camp as well, Felice is sent to a concentration camp. What happens to Felice after that is unclear, but she is not heard from again. In 1948, the municipal court of Berlin-Charlottenburg declares her legally dead as of December 31, 1944.

3 Erica Fischer's novel is based on interviews with Elisabeth Wust (Lilly), excerpts from her diary, letters from Felice Schragenheim and Lilly, as well as interviews with surviving relatives and friends, and historical documents tracing the growing restrictions on Jews during the reign of the National Socialist (Nazi) party in Germany. Because Fischer's story is based to a significant extent on archival documents, it could be read as a closer approximation to the lived realities of its characters than the movie, which minimizes the Holocaust to an interesting backdrop to a lesbian love story. Färberböck's movie leaves out several important historical occurrences, including Lilly's second marriage and her conversion to Judaism after the war.

4 Anna Parkinson describes how the movie was received differently by lesbian feminists and German Jews (147-150). While lesbian feminists predictably interpreted the movie as evidence of a "lesbian history," German Jewish feminists point to the purely narcissistic type of lesbianism embodied by Lilly. Fischer also "deploys a reductive psycho-analytical understanding of lesbianism where she clearly equates Felice's lesbian sexuality with an attachment to the mother's body" and "dismisses the philo-Semitism of Lilly as Lilly's conflation of lesbian love, represented here as a dissolving of boundaries between the self an the other, with Jewish identification" (Parkinson 148-149).

5 Another significant criticism of both the movie and the novel is that they ignore the persecution of homosexuals during the Nazi regime. For example, in her review of the film, Catherine Zimmer states: "The film takes the simpleminded, outdated position that only Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis. The historical moment becomes a backdrop for a love affair, not a moment in queer history" (456). In fact, lesbians were not mentioned in Paragraph 175.[2] Myrna Goldenberg explains this omission:

[2] The vast majority of homosexual victims were males; lesbians were not subjected to systematic persecution. While lesbian bars were closed, few women are believed to have been arrested. Paragraph 175 did not mention female homosexuality. Lesbianism was seen by many Nazi officials as alien to the nature of the Aryan woman. In some cases, the police arrested lesbians as "asocials" or "prostitutes" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, pamphlet)

> While their love for women may have made some of them vulnerable, lesbianism was not illegal and therefore not defined as a category in the concentration camp system of crimes. Lesbians did not wear the pink triangle, as gay men did; instead they wore triangles that designated them as "asocial" or as "political" prisoners. Because "Nazi ideology saw the 'Aryan' woman as predestined to motherhood and marriage as a matter of principle," Nazis regarded lesbians as women who were not fulfilling their biological destiny and as women in need of intercourse (p. 11). Generally, women were commodified and lesbians were victimized as a result of pernicious Nazi misogyny. (678)

6 The extent to which German women were seen as vessels for reproduction of the nation can be seen in the state's response to Lilly's request for divorce from her husband, Günther. Lilly filed for divorce on the grounds that Günther had broken his marriage vows (through extramarital affairs). Günther denied culpability on the basis that Lilly had refused conjugal relations since December 1942 because she did not want to have any more children. The court decided that Lilly's reason (that she already had four children) was not justifiable (Fischer 138). In this instance, the state decided that already having four children was no justification for not wanting more, and that Lilly and Günther were equally culpable for the divorce. The ideology of reproducing the Aryan race becomes codified in the legal system when marital infidelity and the desire to stop having children (after four) are equivalent violations of a marriage contract.

7 The character of Elisabeth Wust provides a rich text for examining the gendered production of the nation. As a dutiful German wife, she reproduces the Aryan race while her husband fights for expanded territory. For her efforts, which produce four blond, blue-eyed sons, she receives the 'Cross of Motherhood' in bronze. She is so efficient in her motherhood that she manages to raise four boys while her husband is away, and still has time to entertain various other high-powered Nazi officials. This extramarital heterosexuality does not really interfere with the Aryan agenda, which focuses more on reproducing racially pure citizens than on the moral structures that inform those relationships.[3] Her extraordinary feats of motherhood also make her eligible for state-provided domestic assistance of an obligatory domestic service worker, in the form of Inge Wolf. Ironically, it is through her connection to Inge Wolf that Lilly meets Felice Schragenheim.

8 Lilly's love for Felice, and her newfound lesbian identity, eventually lead her to seek a divorce from her husband. Felice therefore disrupts the National Socialist agenda for propagation of a pure Aryan race in a way that Lilly's infidelities with other Nazi officials do not. Felice's interruption of the mechanism of race-propagation is complicated by the fact that

[3] This can be seen in the assignment of culpability in Lilly and Günther's divorce, to which I will return in a moment.

she is both female and Jewish. She embodies at once the threat of racial and moral contamination through her ethnicity and her sexuality. Reading Aimée and Jaguar as a commentary on nationalism illustrates the nation's investment, indeed, dependence on, the enforcement of heterosexuality and the exclusion of ethnic others. Lesbianism can be seen therefore, as a site of resistance to nationalism and the nation.

9 Lilly's trajectory from anti- to philo-Semitism follows her conversion to lesbianism. In a true Western "coming-out" narrative, once Lilly falls in love with Felice she finds evidence of her "true" lesbian self in her past, recounting stories of school girl crushes and an obsession with a gym teacher. "Actually, my parents weren't surprised at all. At that moment [when Lilly told them about her love for Felice] they probably thought back to my youth, when they had done everything in their power to suppress that" (Fischer 115). Interestingly, once she finds out that Felice is Jewish, she retraces a similar past affiliation with Jews, by acknowledging the family secret (her brother's Jewish father), Jewish friends in school, and the fact that her parents really weren't convinced by Nazi rhetoric. She also recounts that one of her school-girl crushes was on a Jewish girl, and adds as an aside, "Just as Jews showed a liking for me, I showed a liking for them, that's the way it was" (Fischer 116).

10 Felice and her friends also looked at Lilly as the object of a dual conversion. Elenai Pollack recalls that they "had their own missionary tic, of course. A woman like that can indeed become "different," we thought, maybe we'll do it" (Fischer 110). And Gerd Ehrlich states, "Frau Wust was known in her neighborhood as a true Nazi. It was our (positive) influence that converted her. Of course, in order to be of even greater help to us she remained a loyal follower of the Führer on the outside" (111). Lilly's conversion from heterosexual Nazi to lesbian philo-Semite was thus widely acknowledged and embraced by her new circle of friends, who attributed this enlightenment to their own efforts.

11 Lilly's evolving attitude towards Jews is of key importance in contextualizing the "ordinary German" during the Nazi era. Erica Fischer alludes to this in an interview when she discusses that the film is more than just a love story: "While I was researching, I realised there was another story behind this first one, namely the transformation of a Nazi sympathising anti-Semite into a pro-Semite saviour of four Jewish women, and then the story became even more interesting. It became a very German story, capable of symbolizing the eternal German dilemma" (Interview with Erica Fischer). The resolution of this German dilemma is symbolized by Lilly and Felice's relationship. Specifically, Felice defends Lilly's anti-Semitism in several instances. First, when Inge reports to Felice that Lilly says she can "smell a Jew," Felice takes this as a challenge and it becomes the impetus for Felice and Lilly to

meet. The fact that Felice falls in love with Lilly despite her blatant anti-Semitism enables identification with Lilly (and her anti-Semitism) because she is loved by the object of her supposed hatred. Later, Felice defends Lilly to Inge when Lilly blames the war on the Jews. In the movie, this defense of Lilly is articulated as well. In a conversation with Ilse,[4] Felice defends Lilly by saying "She isn't better or worse than any of us" and in reference to Lilly's lack of political conviction, Felice berates Ilse for judging Lilly, stating that it is not a crime to have no opinion. (Taberner 233). Lilly provides an alibi for the silence of "ordinary" Germans especially because she is defended and forgiven by the very people persecuted in the name of Aryan purity. Stuart Taberner further points out that the conflict of the ordinary German is embodied in the figure of Lilly when her suffering becomes the focus of the film after Felice is taken by the Gestapo (233). The camera focuses on Lilly on the floor of her apartment, curled in the fetal position and screaming, "No!"

12 Further identification with Lilly is enabled through the fact that in both the book and the film, she is constructed as naïve and un-knowing. Lilly's "innocence" is contrasted with the active knowing and constant uncovering of knowledge by Felice and Elenai, as they work as underground spies at a Nazi newspaper. Lilly is unaware that Felice is Jewish until well into their relationship. Her obliviousness operates in defense of her anti-Semitism. The viewer can assume (from Lilly's eventual love for Felice) that had Lilly known Felice and her friends were Jewish, she would not have made anti-Semitic remarks, and furthermore, that she would have questioned and revised her attitude towards Jews. Lilly's anti-Semitism becomes part of her general naïveté and simple-mindedness, an inherited and unquestioned political compliance rather than malicious intent.

13 Furthermore, Felice defends Lilly's anti-Semitism. For example, after one particularly violent air raid, Lilly says to Inge and Felice: "It's all the fault of the Jews." Felice defends this remark to the furious Inge, yelling: "Leave her alone, Inge! She doesn't know what she's saying!" (Fischer 37-38) Here Lilly's anti-Semitism is excused through either political naïveté or the fact that Lilly is not aware that Felice is Jewish. Lilly stands in here for an entire post-Holocaust Germany. The rhetoric of "not knowing" was repeated endlessly by German citizens when the atrocities of the Nazi regime came to light after the war. Even after Felice "comes out" to her as Jewish, Lilly claims ignorance or incomprehension of Felice's underground activities: "I knew that she worked for the underground, but didn't know the what or how of it…what it all means is a mystery to me. I never found out" (Fischer 155).

[4] The character of Ilse in the movie seems to be a composite of several individuals from the novel, most notably Inge, the domestic service worker, and Elenai, another friend of Felice's that Lilly stayed close with throughout the war.

This ignorance was also perpetuated by Felice, who refused to disclose her underground activities in order to protect Lilly (according to Lilly). Friends of Felice tried to impress upon Lilly the degree of danger that Felice faced as a Jew, and to explain to her what exactly a concentration camp was. "Lilly often gave Elenai and Gregor the impression that she didn't really comprehend that Felice's situation fundamentally differed from hers…" (153). Again, Lilly's naïveté prevents her from understanding the danger to Felice and other Jews. Lilly's love for Felice blinds her to their differences, which will ultimately cost Felice her life. The willing German viewers are able to deduce that it was innocence, naïveté, or color-blind love that obscured the reality of ethnic cleansing in their midst.

14 Erica Fischer also documents instances where "not knowing" is impossible. After Felice has been taken to a collection camp, Lilly writes in her diary:

> I had a terrible experience…Waiting at the stop for the number 41 streetcar, I saw a procession coming toward me. A procession of women prisoners was coming along Osloer Strasse. They were from a branch of the Oranienburg prison and were dressed in striped clothing, with shaved heads, and barefoot. Felice, I wanted to scream, I wanted to rush into their midst. But I didn't move, I couldn't utter a sound. It was as if I had turned to stone…Tears streamed from my eyes…It was so horrible…How am I to bear this? (Fischer 185)

Here Lilly can no longer deny the reality of Jewish persecution in Berlin, but it is too late. Felice has already been taken from her when she finally understands the gravity of the situation. Her inability to act is also rendered understandable through her grief. Further, in a manner quite consistent with her character, she personalizes the experience and projects the suffering onto herself: "*I* had a terrible experience." "How am *I* to bear this?"

15 While Lilly and Felice's relationship can be read as an instance of lesbianism as a site of resistance to heteronormative ideals of nationhood, it also becomes an example of how hegemonic power relations are reproduced in non-heteronormative relationships. At the same time that Lilly foils the Nazi agenda by refusing to have any more children and removing her body from the Aryan propagation machine, she also contributes to a history of discursive violence against Jews. This happens through Lilly's over-identification with Felice, first as a woman, then as a lesbian, and finally, after Felice's death, as a Jew. Finally, it is through the vehicle of the lesbian relationship and at the hands of Lilly's love for her that Felice's fate is sealed.

16 After Felice had been sent from the collection camp in Berlin to Theresienstadt, Lilly was determined to visit her. Theresienstadt was a labor camp that at that point did not have a reputation for extermination of Jews. It was however, unheard of for an Aryan to visit a Jew at a labor camp. Elenai remembers trying to talk Lilly out of her plan. In addition to

endangering herself, it could be harmful to Felice, and have unforeseen consequences (Fischer 192). In effect, when Lilly made it to Theresienstadt, she was thrown out with threats from the camp leader, and Felice was sent to Gross-Rosen concentration camp shortly thereafter. In this way, Lilly facilitated Felice's transfer from a labor camp to a concentration camp, which is where Felice presumably was killed.

17 Lilly also faced consequences from her visit to Theresienstadt, in the form of a official summons from the Gestapo. She was interrogated as to her relationship with Felice. The possibility of a romantic relationship between the two women was seen as unlikely and dismissed in order to focus on the real crime: having "aided and abetted" a Jew (Fischer 222). At the end of the interrogation, Lilly was forced to sign a document stating that because she had aided and abetted a Jew, she belonged in a concentration camp, but was spared because her four children depended on her. Once again, Lilly's status as mother of the Aryan race protected her.

18 Both in the novel and in the movie, it is clear that Lilly goes to see Felice because she cannot help herself. She goes at risk to herself and Felice, overcome by the desire to see her loved one. Lilly ignores the risk differential to herself and Felice, despite cautions from her friends. As an Aryan German citizen and mother of four sons, Lilly enjoyed social and political protections that were never available to Felice. Lilly's visit to Felice at Theresienstadt is what likely sealed Felice's fate. This act of selfish love reveals how Lilly's unexamined privilege is directly harmful to Felice. This first act of ostensible murder is followed by further discursive erasure of Felice's reality by Lilly.

19 Because of Lilly's conflation of herself with Felice, what is described by Anna Parkinson as the narcissistic model of lesbian identification, Lilly cannibalistically takes on Felice's identity: "[Felice] was my counterpart, my complement, literally. I felt I was both myself and Felice. We were a mirror image" (Fischer 34). After Felice's death, Lilly enters melancholic identification. This is minimalized in the movie in a final scene where Lilly and Ilse meet in a home for the aged, and they compare notes on their lives after they lost touch. Lilly declares that she never loved anyone else. "I only thought of her…Fifty years - one thought - one face - one name." Here Lilly represents the tragic figure of the survivor of a lost love. When Lilly states that fate has betrayed her, Ilse prevents the seamless reading of Lilly as the abstinent heroine by saying, "First it was the Führer, now fate. It's always something, preferably something big. You betrayed yourself, Lilly, no one else." Ilse clearly returns responsibility for Lilly's own life (and maybe Felice's) to Lilly, alluding to the choices that she made during and after the war.

20 The book allows a much more explicit reading of Lilly's melancholic incorporation of Felice through her attempted conversion to Judaism, what Parkinson refers to as an interiorization of an idealized Jewishness (160). Lilly disassociates herself from her German past before the war is even over. When the Russians arrive at Berlin, Lilly sews Felice's Star of David to her coat and told Russian soldiers "We nix Nazis, we Jews. War over, you our liberators" (Fischer 241). While this could have been a survival strategy, it also presents the beginning of Lilly's assumption of a Jewish identity. Her sons report how she imposed herself on a Jewish community in Berlin, enrolled them in Jewish schools, and unsuccessfully attempted to convert to Judaism herself. Thus Lilly never properly mourned Felice, or the Holocaust.[5] She distances herself from her German/Aryan identity through a cannibalistic/melancholic identification with Felice, the lost object of her love. But through this identification with Jewishness, Lilly denies her own responsibility in both the relationship between her and Felice and the larger context of the Nazi regime. Under the cover of the tragic heroine, she assumes victim status and erases her role in history. And finally, she relates her love story to the world, while Felice is forever silenced and accessible only through poems, letters, and the memory of others.

21 Authorship becomes a confounded subject in this instance, where the story of Lilly and Felice is narrated by Lilly, through Erica Fischer, who is Jewish and not German.[6] While a reductive reading of the story would have Felice be the unheard and oppressed voice that comes to us through Lilly's memories of her, Fischer reclaims Felice from Lilly's narration. In her epilogue, Fischer declares of Lilly: "I do not grant her the status of victim. I guard the line that runs between her and Felice, my Jewish mother, and myself obdurately, protective of my small piece of identity. She tried again and again to cross that line [...] as if she had nothing to do with her own land of Germany" (271). She continues, "I don't believe Jaguar would have stayed with Aimée. I don't think Lilly did either - and she found cold comfort in the suspicion that she would be spared this lot" (Fischer 272).

22 Finally, completing the circle of oppressor and oppressed, victim and perpetrator, Fischer discloses that she wrote the story of Aimée and Jaguar during the Bosnian war, while

[5] Anna Parkinson addresses the cultural phenomenon of melancholia described by Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich, who posit that "the relentless work of the German Wiederaufbau was a deflection from the necessary forms of national and individual mourning that should have occurred after the devastating events of the Second World War…Instead of the necessary mourning that usually takes place after significant and traumatic loss, post-war German society was riddled with melancholic identifications that were collectively disavowed through the obsession with manically and frenetically rebuilding Germany. Thus the necessary act of confronting and working through their interiorized ideals of the 'Vaterland' and the 'Führer myth', and the mass crimes of the National Socialist regime never really took place on a collective, or often even individual level" (159).

[6] Erica Fischer is claimed as "one of Vienna's foremost feminist writers and journals" who currently resides in Berlin, Germany. (Back cover of Aimée and Jaguar). In her epilogue, she identifies herself as Jewish.

her Austrian husband, in an effort to undo some of the "looking the other way" of his own parents, devoted himself to finding homes for Muslim refugees in Germany. Fischer describes having to choose between advancing the story of Felice Schragenheim and intervening in the ethnic cleansing that Bosnian Serbs had learned from the Third Reich. Her women friends encouraged her to continue with her writing. In the end, she passes the judgment that she has not withheld from others: "During the time it took me to complete this book, living without the benefit of his love, Martin [her husband], the moralist, saved the lives of fifteen hundred people" (274). This last sentence of her epilogue to *Aimée and Jaguar* attests to the multiple identifications inhabited by all of us. As oppressed, we are also oppressors, and in liberating or giving voice to some, we sacrifice others. Every action, in any name, has benefactors and those that pay the price.

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